

# They Meet in Dreams



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Cover design by Piotr Tokarz

First paperback edition, 2025

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ISBN: 9798275036824





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## THE STARS LOOK VERY DIFFERENT TODAY



The plate slipped from my soapy fingers and clattered against the sink with a hollow clang.

“If anyone saw this, they’d think I never taught you anything.” My mom’s tense silhouette appeared beside me as the plate wobbled in the basin, foam and spaghetti sauce swirling into the drain.

It was the summer before senior year, one of those nights when the air in my house was too thick to breathe. Mom was in full rampage mode, slamming cupboard doors, ranting about her migraine, and blaming me for everything wrong in her life. Her outbursts were so random; I could never find a pattern. Dinner that night was okay, if you can call okay sitting in the silence, with everyone avoiding any kind of conversation. Dad bailed early to hide in his office with his sad little glass of Johnnie Walker, pretending to work and ducking any ricochets that might come his way.

“Sorry,” I said, rolling my eyes. Mom hated that tone, but I just didn’t know how to apologize to her without being sarcastic.

“I’m the only one who does anything in this house!” She snatched the plate from the sink and held it up. “There’s still food on it! Would you eat from that?”

I bit my tongue, resisting the urge to argue. “Jesus, chill. I’ll redo it.”

The second I said it, her acrylic claws gripped my arm, dragging me away as if I were a misbehaving toddler. My face flushed with shame and frustration, barely able to suppress the burning in my skin.

“Don’t bother,” she hissed. She slammed the plate back into the sink, sending foam splattering across the counter. With a long, bitter sigh, she added, “You act just like your father.”

Her words cut deep, though the sting had dulled with time, like an old wound you stopped noticing until it was pressed.

“Whatever,” I mumbled.

I slipped out of the kitchen and headed upstairs, passing the shelf that used to hold the trophies my older brother, Marcus, and I won in our junior baseball league days. They were gone now, replaced by a weird ceramic figurine, a fake plant, and some fancy plates we never used. That shelf used to mean something. Now, it just reminded me how little anyone seemed to care.

Past the second floor and up to the attic, the air grew warmer and stiller. Being well over six feet tall had its perks; I could reach the small skylight easily. I pushed it open and climbed out, using the frame to hoist myself. Cool night air slapped my face as I slid into my usual spot behind the dormer window—my own demilitarized zone—and lay back against the shingles. The last of the sunlight still warmed them, its heat seeping through my hoodie. Up here, it felt like I could hit pause on whatever mess was left inside.

It was the perfect night to disappear for a while. Stars scattered like spilled glitter over black velvet, bringing me a strange peace. I imagined what it would be like to be one—far, far away from everything. Marcus managed

to escape this hellhole by running off to college, leaving all of Mom's venom aimed at me.

A flicker of movement caught my eye. Dad slipped out the back door, shoulders hunched like he was sneaking past enemy lines, and lit a cigarette in the dark, smoke curling around him. I wondered what he thought about down there—work, my brother, or the fact that he'd long ago stopped trying to fix anything in this family. Maybe nothing at all. Just smoke in, smoke out.

The chaos seemed to settle, like driving through a storm and slipping under an overpass—for a moment, the world goes quiet. But in this house, even the silence was heavy. So when the quiet comes, it doesn't bring relief. It's a warning. Like something is about to explode.

Yeah, peace never lasts long. Quiet just means your guard's already up.

I closed my eyes and let go just a little. Not sleep, just that weightless, in-between space where your brain starts poking at you. Like, *Oh, are you calm now? Here, have a flashback.* Your thoughts are no longer your own. Memories you buried sneak forward, regrets you thought were gone rise up, and fears you never named twist themselves into every corner of your mind. You're in the front row at the premiere of your worst-case scenarios. Faces you wish you could forget appear, and every misstep you've made suddenly feels massive. Logic isn't there. You try to follow one thought, but another drags you somewhere darker, until you realize your own brain has turned into a trap you can't leave. Your mind hunts you in the quietest, loneliest way.

And sometimes, it doesn't stop when you fall asleep.

When I was little, I used to have these nightmares. Not the kind with monsters or darkness, though. Mine were trickier. I'd dream of towering shelves stacked with identical objects I had to sort, or of sand slipping through my fingers, faster than I could scoop it back into enormous containers. Absurd, right? But to me, they were terrifying. I felt this compulsion, this intense, crushing need to finish the impossible task, or something terrible would happen. And I always knew, deep down, that I couldn't do it. I screamed and cried in the dream, gasping for breath, fully aware it couldn't

be done. In real life, I screamed just as stubbornly in my bed, eyes wide open, staring into the void, but still trapped in my head. My mom would yell at me to calm down, not realizing I wasn't actually awake. I don't know if it was anger or helplessness. Maybe both. But it always ended the same: I'd jolt awake, choking on air and soaked in sweat. My dad would just stand in the doorway, staring down at me like I was someone he didn't recognize.

It was around the time we learned about space in school. My mind couldn't handle the concept of infinity—something so impossibly vast, with no beginning and no end. No edges. Nothing to hold onto. How could something exist like that? How do you even picture it without going crazy? At least the universe had a starting point—a boom, an origin. I can't imagine my nightmares if I'd known then the universe started from nothing. Literally nothing. It's the kind of thing our brains can't grasp. NASA people must be from another planet, the way they just get it.

Looking at it now, and knowing what was about to happen, I realize something just as overwhelming: infinity isn't just out there in the stars. It can be that quiet pressure in your chest when everything feels too much. When it consumes you, it's boundless. Terrifying. Entirely out of control.

I'm terrible with dates, so I never remember if the Big Bang happened thirteen or fourteen billion years ago. But I could never forget that night—when my own universe was about to begin. Instead of a cosmos with billions of stars, a single, radiant star would light up my entire sky. One that burned brighter than anything I'd ever known, and made my world orbit around it, held together by its gravity. Unfortunately, stars don't live forever. They eventually run out of fuel. A brilliance that once lit up your world can collapse into a black hole behind your ribs, pulling everything into its emptiness. And when they're gone, you are left in the dark, reaching for something that's no longer there.

I opened my eyes just as a shooting star sliced across the sky. For a second, I almost wanted to believe that maybe the universe tossed me a little sign, a little scrap of hope to keep me going. But I didn't bother making a

wish. I used to, when I was little, but wishes don't do shit. If birthday candles couldn't make them come true, why would a piece of burning space junk?

The streak faded into darkness, like it had never been there at all. And maybe that was the real truth: everything bright burns out eventually. The sky stilled, the crickets hummed, and the house below me seemed miles away. My eyelids grew heavier, and I finally let go.

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I knew right away I was dreaming. It hit me with this weird, sharp clarity I'd never felt before.

One second, I was half-asleep on the roof of my house; the next, I was standing on a beach. Cliffs rose around me. They were massive and jagged, boxing the place in like a wall. The water stretched past the shore, almost like a lake, with blurry and unfinished edges, like a video game world that hadn't yet fully loaded. Faint light hovered at the horizon, hinting at dawn. Everything was quiet, except for the gentle clatter of pebbles rolling with the soft waves.

I mean, it had to be a dream. Unless I'd suddenly learned how to teleport.

I'd had lucid dreams before—kind of. I couldn't reshape entire worlds, but I could nudge the dream just enough to feel a spark of power. It's strange and exhilarating, like being a puppet master of your subconscious, but only for a moment before the dream yanks the strings back.

But this? This was too clear, too present. It felt less like a dream and more like stepping into some alternate version of reality.

I looked down at myself, confused. I could actually see my body. Usually, my dreams were flashes between first- and third-person perspectives, like watching and acting in a film at the same time. Now everything was sharply in focus, as real as reality. A gray long-sleeve under my old The Offspring's *Smash* T-shirt—Marcus's first, then mine, before Mom turned it into cleaning rags—cargo shorts I hadn't seen in ages, and green Vans looking as fresh as

the day I got them. They fit perfectly, even though I'd outgrown them long ago.

Mickey Mouse socks, though? Definitely not mine.

I walked to the water, each step in total control. It was strange to think about walking, to consciously make each step rather than passively moving through the scene. I crouched and dipped my hand in, curious to see if it felt as real as it looked. I scooped some into my hand and brought it to my lips, letting it trickle onto my tongue. Sweet. The coolness lingered as if it were actual water and not something conjured by my imagination. I tried to peer into its depths, but all I got was my own reflection—wild, blond hair sticking up like I'd just rolled out of bed, and green eyes. I half-expected my reflection to blur into obscurity as it often did in dreams, but my face remained clear, as if I were looking in a mirror.

I was about to test the water again—just to see if dreams could stay consistent—when a weird prickle crawled up my spine. A whisper of wind brushed against my back, but deeper, heavier than air.

I turned slowly.

A boy stood under the cliffs, staring at me.

He looked about my age, with black hair falling into his eyes. He wore a white T-shirt showing a guy with a red lightning bolt across his face, washed-out jeans, and classic Chuck Taylors. Ordinary yet surreal, he stood still, his dark eyes fixed on me.

I raised a hand and waved, awkward as hell. To my surprise, he waved back.

Who could he be? I often wondered about the faces that appeared in my dreams. Were they people I once knew, now faded from memory? Or just fragments of quick encounters, random glimpses of strangers?

Whoever he was, this didn't feel like any dream I'd had before.

Curiosity got the better of me. I pushed myself up and started walking toward him. Step by step, I got closer, and it was weird how nothing moved, not even the wind.

When I finally reached him, we just stood there, staring at each other. My stomach twisted a little.

Then he spoke. "Is this a dream?"

*What?* I blinked, caught off guard. My mind scrambled for something clever to say, but all I could do was stare. No one in my dreams had ever asked me that.

"I... guess so."

He didn't move, just tilted his head and watched me as if he, too, was trying to make sense of everything. His eyes were pitch-black, and for some reason, I couldn't look away.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He smirked. "Shouldn't *I* be the one asking you that?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are in my dream."

"No way. It's *my* dream."

"*Your* dream? And what makes you so sure it's yours?"

*What?* "I just... know. What the hell? Isn't it obvious?"

"Well, maybe it's *my* dream—and you're the one intruding."

His smirk was annoyingly confident. I wanted to argue, but maybe that's just how he was made.

"How does it feel to you?" I asked instead.

He looked around. "It feels like... like I know I'm dreaming."

"Anyone in my dream could say that."

"Maybe... but anyone could say what you're saying, too."

"Yeah, right..." I muttered, rubbing my neck. It was weird. Super weird. The weirdest dream I've ever had. Was my dad smoking weed, and I caught the fumes while lying on the roof, making me dream of an annoying guy stuck with me in my dream?

My voice grew firmer as I asked again, "Who are you?"

He shrugged, his expression not cracking a bit. "Who are *you*?"

It was all so strange. And if he really thought he was in charge... well, there had to be a way to test it. I just needed something small, something dreams always mess up.

"Count your fingers," I said.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

He spread his fingers, and I watched, waiting for them to warp or multiply. Counting fingers was a go-to test for lucid dreams. You'd get more or fewer than five.

"Okay, and?" he asked.

"Count out loud."

With a sigh, he did. "One, two, three, four, five." Perfectly normal fingers. His eyes snapped back to me, smug. "Happy?"

I stared at his hands, my foolproof test crumbling in front of my eyes, then checked my own, expecting them to blur. One... two... three... four... five...

"That's not supposed to happen. In dreams, you're not supposed to be able to count your fingers like that. But if we both can do it..."

"Told you," he said. "It's *my* dream."

I groaned. The thought was both unsettling and strangely thrilling. I tried to shake off the weird sense of balance. *It's a dream. We know that. I know that.*

But then, why did everything feel so stable? Why did his fingers count out as if the dream was holding itself together better than it should? How could we both be certain this dream belonged to us individually? It was like trying to answer a single-choice question with all the correct answers to choose from.

"Or maybe," I said, "I'm bending the rules."

"Or maybe," he countered, "we're *both* bending the rules."

I crossed my arms. He was so convinced this dream belonged to him that I had to prove him wrong. Dreams were shaped by whoever controlled them after all. "If you are so sure this is your dream, change something."



“Like what?”

“Anything. If it’s your dream, prove it.”

“You think I can’t?”

“I don’t know... can you?”

His face fell, and I felt a quiet satisfaction. I wasn’t a kid anymore—I wasn’t going to let dreams push me around.

“But how?” His brows furrowed.

“You said it’s *your* dream, so force some changes.”

He looked around before fixing his gaze on me, and squinted like he was about to bend a spoon with his mind. For a moment, I thought steam might shoot out of his ears, but then, as if obeying his silent command, an invisible force slammed into me, and I crashed backward onto the stones.

I groaned, getting up. “I said change the dream, not attack me.”

“You *are* the dream.” He smiled, clearly pleased with himself.

“Whatever. My turn.” I took a deep breath, focusing on the surrounding landscape. I needed to prove it was *my* dream. Not only to him, but to myself. But what if I was only dreaming that I could prove it was my dream? Or worse, dreaming I was proving it was *his*? Possibilities swirled, just adding to the confusion.

I focused on the cliffs, trying to make them tremble, hoping a few rocks would come crashing down. The ground shivered under my feet, but that was it. Nothing else.

He raised his brows, like he already knew the answer. “Well?”

I tried again, focusing harder, trying to loosen even a single rock. Still nothing. Whenever I had lucid dreams before, I could bend reality to my will, even if only a little. But now, nothing worked.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Can’t handle a little competition?”

“It’s still just a dream, no matter what happens,” I muttered, resigned.

“What if it’s not just a dream? What if it’s something else?”

“Something else? Like what? A cosmic glitch?”

He shrugged, his eyes not leaving mine even for a second. “Why not?”

The clarity was unsettling, as if the line between imagination and reality had blurred, leaving me stranded in a world both familiar and foreign.

I wanted to throw something back at him, but a distant sound cut through the silence.

At first, it was faint, almost easy to ignore. I thought it was just one of those random rings you get in your ear for no reason. But it didn't go away, just got steadier instead. Footsteps? Something tapping against stone? I turned my head, trying to figure it out. The sound was familiar, but I just couldn't place it.

It snapped into focus. A sharp, insistent barking—

I jolted awake on the roof, heart hammering, as the neighbor's dog barked furiously. It took me a few seconds to gather my bearings after the abrupt transition.

"What the fuck?" I whispered, rubbing my temples.

What a weird dream. It was the weirdest shit that had ever happened to me—and that's saying something, because my dreams were usually on the wild side. But this one? This was a whole different league. I could still feel the sting of the stones on my back.

And that boy... his face lingered in my mind, clear and unsettling. Why did I even dream of him?

I shook it off, telling myself it didn't mean anything. Just a dream.

I pushed myself back and slipped back into the house and my room, relieved by its normalcy after the dream's surreal clarity. The walls were covered with band posters, while the desk by the window and the floor were buried under half-finished projects, comics, and clothes. It wasn't the biggest mess you'd ever see in a teenager's room, but it did make finding things a challenge sometimes, not that it bothered me in the slightest. Mom's routine was to order me to clean it all up whenever she passed by or came in for something, but she didn't actually care much about my environment. She just couldn't help herself. It would eat her alive if she didn't impose something

on me now and then, even though she knew her words didn't carry much weight when it came to me.

Tossing on a fresh shirt and shorts, I sank onto my bed, too drained to bother with a shower. I stared up at the ceiling, where a very naked lady grinned down at me from an obscene photograph. I had swiped it from one of Dad's old magazines, more out of curiosity than anything else, of course. She wasn't even my type, with tits as big as her head, but she was helping me with my little act of defiance—I wanted to test how long it would take my mom to notice. So far, it had been almost a year.

I let out a long sigh and closed my eyes, willing myself to drift back to sleep. It didn't take me long; the mattress was much more comfortable than the hard roof tiles.

But as soon as I drifted off, I was back on the beach.

Yep... the same beach again.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said.

"You disappeared."

I turned to see the same guy squatting by the water's edge.

"Yeah, well, I woke up. People tend to do that."

He stood up, brushing off his jeans. "Woke up? You vanished. One second you were here, and then... poof. Like you were never real."

"You're the one who's not real."

A flicker of something passed through his eyes before the cocky smile returned. "Right. Why did you come back? Couldn't stay away?"

I scoffed, but questioned the same thing. *Why* was I back here?

For now, I wasn't about to get into that.

"You haven't told me your name," I said.

"You haven't asked."

"Well, I'm asking now."

"Andy. You?"

"Max," I said, then sighed, "Actually, Maximus—but just Max is fine. I prefer Max."

“Maximus? That sounds like you should be leading an army in ancient Rome.”

I shrugged. People always reacted like that, and honestly, I never knew what to tell them.

When I didn’t elaborate, he tried another angle. “Where are you from?”

“Wisconsin.”

“Oh...”

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly, though the look on his face said *something*.

I looked at him a little closer. His features were sharp in the soft light. Something about him felt familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

“Hey... are you Asian?”

“Half Chinese. Why?”

“No reason,” I said quickly, realizing how weird it sounded. “Just wondering.”

Discussing ordinary things in such a surreal place felt strange, more like meeting someone at a bus stop instead of inside my own mind.

“So... what were you doing while I was gone?”

He looked at the ground. “Waiting, I guess. After a while, I didn’t know if you’d come back.”

“It was only, like, ten minutes.”

“Felt like hours here.”

“So time works differently here. Whatever ‘here’ means.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I shrugged. “You know... it still doesn’t prove it’s not just one of my weird dreams.”

“I don’t feel like there’s a point in proving anything,” Andy said. “I just know it’s mine.”

He stared at the water a second too long, like he was trying to see something underneath it. “Unless...” His voice softened. “Do you think maybe this place isn’t in one of our heads at all, but somewhere... in between?”

“In between what?” I asked. “You mean a shared hallucination? Is that even a thing?”

“No, more like... another dimension?”

“Or maybe,” I said as I picked up a pebble and tossed it into the water, “we’re both completely losing it.”

The second the words left my mouth, I knew something was wrong.

Andy’s face shut down. His eyes went flat and way too bright, and his whole body tensed as if someone had flipped a switch.

“I want to wake up,” he said.

“What? Why?”

He didn’t answer. Just dug his nails into his forearm and pinched. Hard. Then again, harder, frustration flashing across his face.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Why doesn’t it work?”

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to wake up.”

“Well... sometimes blinking helps. At least for me, when I get lucid dreams. Not like this, but...”

Andy shot me a look—surprised, almost desperate. “Blinking?”

“Yeah. Just blink. Really fast.”

He held my gaze for a second, and before I could say anything else, he started blinking rapidly.

Had I really just explained to someone in my dream how to wake up?

I took a step toward him—

And he vanished.

The space where he’d stood shimmered faintly, like heat rising from pavement.

“Wow, okay...” I muttered to myself.

The lucidity of the place made his disappearance hit even harder. I kicked at some pebbles, sending them clattering across the beach. He was just a dream—I reminded myself—but the feeling didn’t go away. Why did it feel like something had been ripped away?

I let out a breath and turned toward the shoreline. Maybe if I kept moving, I'd find some answers. Or I'd wake up, and this whole thing would fade into the fog of forgotten dreams.

Much to my disappointment, the dream offered little in the way of entertainment or revelation. I walked for what felt like hours, checking the cliffs, scanning the lake, hoping for any break in the monotony. But it all stayed the same. It reminded me of those old cartoons where the background loops over and over. Eventually, I gave up and flopped down onto the stones. Time bent weirdly after that, stretching and compressing all at once, each minute dissolving so smoothly it felt like a blink.

Gradually, the edges of the world began to blur. The colors softened. The sound of the waves faded. The beach dissolved.

And I was back in my bed.

Warm morning light streamed through the window, so different from the gray expanse of the dream. My body felt weightless, as though I'd been cradled all night in the world's most perfect bed. Dreams, huh? Can't trust them for a second.

## MY LIFE IS PRETTY PLAIN



**M**ikey bounced around me like he'd just downed a six-pack of Surge, that dumb grin glued to his face.  
“So, what’s the plan?”

“With what?”

“Don’t play dumb. Jenny!”

I rolled my eyes. We’d bumped into Jenny Hagen earlier that day, and she’d slipped me a note—her number in a pink glitter heart. Very subtle. She’d just dumped her boyfriend right before summer break, after catching him making out with her best friend.

“Whatever, man.”

Mikey threw his hands up. “Whatever?” Dude, she *banded* you her *number*. In *sparkles*. That’s not a ‘whatever,’ that’s destiny.”

I snorted. “You’ve officially lost it.”

The day after the dream, I met my best friend, Mikey, to grab some greasy takeout and later headed to the beach in the local park in his pickup. There were a few kids messing around in the water, but with gloomy clouds threatening, most people were probably hanging out at the mall. We sat on the sand and as we munched on our burgers and fries, I told Mikey about my dream. He kept interrupting with “Dude...” and “Whaaat...” but as soon as I finished, he switched the topic to Jenny.

I glanced out at the lake, half-expecting it to glitch at the edges. The dream was already slipping away, but something about it still felt off, like it hadn’t just been a dream, but I couldn’t explain why. Because, of course, a dream was just a dream. Jenny, on the other hand, was real. And for some people, *she* was the dream.

Mikey leaned in, eyes wide. “You cannot blow this, Max. Do you even realize what’s at stake?”

“What, the fate of humanity?”

“Yes! Exactly! If Jenny’s into you and you bail, it’s like—man, it’s like spitting in the face of the gods.”

“Jesus, calm down, drama queen.”

“I’m dead serious.” He grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “Everyone’s been drooling over her forever. She’s finally single, and she picked you. *You*. You’re the Chosen One!”

I shoved him off. “Chosen to what, exactly?”

“To not screw this up!” He jabbed a fry at me, a blob of ketchup flying off and splattering onto the sand. “Do it for the boys. For the gang.”

“You’re seriously asking me to date Jenny so you can live through me?”

“No—Yes! And you don’t have to date her. Just, you know... seal the deal.”

“You’ve got a girlfriend, dumbass. How would Naya feel if she heard you?”

“Relax, she knows Jenny’s hot. It’s practically public record.”

“You’re not gonna let this go, are you?”



“Absolutely not.” Mikey grinned from ear to ear. When he smiled, his mouth took up half of his face.

“Fine. I’ll think about it,” I lied.

I’d spent my whole life jumping from one girlfriend to the next, and I seriously needed a breather.

It started with Abby Davis in kindergarten. I didn’t ask her—one day, I just announced it, and that was that. It lasted a week. After Abby, there was a parade of girlfriends. I started out shorter than all of them, but by middle school, I shot up past everyone else, finding myself the tallest kid in the room and the king of the dating scene. Girls flocked to me like it was Black Friday, but after a while, I realized they liked the idea of me, not the actual me. I still enjoyed the perks, though. Kissing, attention... the usual. It made me feel proud of myself when other guys looked green with envy, watching me with this mix of admiration and jealousy, like I’d cracked some secret code to preteen romance.

I wasn’t trying to date; girls just kept showing up, like stray cats. It was easier to go along with it than to say no. And it was just what a guy like me was *supposed* to do, you know? The universe decided my role: the tall guy with a girlfriend. And for a long time, I didn’t question it. When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade. Or in my case, when life gives you girlfriends, you keep dating.

High school dating is another level, though. Girls want emotional commitment and constant attention. It’s a full-time job. I spent hours on the phone, every missed call turning into an interrogation, “Why didn’t you call?”; “Are you with someone else?”

*Yes, I am cheating on you with my algebra homework.*

But that’s the thing when you’re tall and vaguely decent-looking. Everyone projects something onto you. The guy with the girlfriend. The guy with the charm. The athlete—the nerd-athlete? That’s *exotic*. I was a weird combination—athletic enough to get picked first in gym class, but also the kind of guy who read comics, knew way too much about superhero lore, and spent

weekends leveling up my characters. A nerd in disguise. But hey, I could've had the hottest cheerleaders fawning over me anyway, while I blissfully day-dreamed about kicking Mikey's ass in *Mortal Kombat*.

Another thing about high school girls is that they want *more*—yeah, sex. Try telling me it's the boys who can't stop thinking about sex. No, it's *definitely* girls. And the worst part is, they want to *talk* about it. To *analyze*. To blow things out of proportion and throw in emotions for good measure. And don't even get me started on the allusions to my name.

*Wait, was that the reason they were so into me? Not my height or my handsome face? Damn, you learn something new every day.*

Anyway, I did it a few times, so I wouldn't have to keep hearing I must be over them or I've got my eye on someone else. It was awkward and over-hyped, and they seemed way more into it than I was, but it was fine... I guess. They were all pretty and hot, after all. But it was mechanical. As if I were on autopilot, my head somewhere else entirely.

Girls came and went, but I felt nothing real. So by the summer before senior year, I'd decided I was done with dating.

"Hey, guys!" a voice called out, and we both turned. Mikey's girlfriend and my second-best friend, Naya, approached on her blue bike, looking as gorgeous as always, with her dark braids bouncing against her shoulders. She was petite, but her confidence made her feel bigger than Mikey and me combined. She hopped off her bike, her jewelry jingling (the entire collection must've taken forever to put on). I stifled a grin as Mikey immediately dropped his pervert persona.

"Hey, Naya," I said, hiding the piece of paper from Jenny back in my pocket.

Naya kissed Mikey on the cheek. "What's going on here? You guys look like you're plotting something."

"N-nothing," Mikey said. "Just hanging out, you know."

Naya's smile widened knowingly. "Mmm-hmm... Well, don't let me interrupt."

Mikey opened his mouth, just to shut it, opting for a sheepish smile instead.

“Alright, boys, check this out.” Naya dropped onto the sand and pulled out a small, rectangular box from her bead-studded purse. “New tarot cards!” She held up the deck. “Aren’t they pretty?”

Mikey sighed. Naya was deep into all that mystical bullshit. Zodiac signs, moon phases, tarot readings—you name it; she was into it, using us as her guinea pigs.

“Okay, Max, it’s your turn today,” she said.

“You know I don’t believe in any of this.”

“You don’t have to believe in it for it to work. Come on, it’ll be fun!”

I looked at Mikey, begging with my eyes for backup, but he was suddenly very fascinated by the clouds. “Fine,” I said, giving in. Just cards, after all.

Naya sat cross-legged in front of me and shuffled the cards. She divided them into three piles and spread them out in a semicircle with a single smooth motion, oblivious to Mikey’s eye-rolling.

“Pick three cards and place them in front of you. Then flip each one over with your left hand.”

“Why the left?”

“It’s closer to your heart,” she explained.

Mikey rolled his eyes again, this time so hard I thought they might get stuck. “Yeah, Max, put your whole heart into it.”

I picked three cards with my left hand and flipped them over, barely glancing at them. They were just cards after all.

“You better tell me something good.”

The first card showed a man and a woman standing beneath some angel thing. Naya’s eyes lit up. “The Lovers.”

Mikey wiggled his eyebrows at me.

I shot him a look. “Don’t even start.”

On the second card, a woman poured water from a jug into a pond, and on the third, an old man held a lantern. The last card was upside down.

"Alright," Naya began, studying the cards. "So you've got The Lovers, The Star, and The Hermit. The Hermit is reversed... which isn't ideal."

"Why?" I asked, half-skeptical, half-curious.

"No reversed card is good."

"Will he die?" Mikey sniggered.

"Oh, shut up, Michael." Naya flicked him on the shoulder and pointed at the first card with two people on it. "So... The Lovers. This card is about love and relationships. A deep connection between two people. It could be about someone you know or someone new."

Mikey was smirking behind her back while his girlfriend moved on to the next card. "The Star's about healing, trusting your journey and having hope, you know, like a Northern Star pointing north. So whatever is going on, trust it's gonna be okay and that it's happening for your own good."

"Okay, and what about the grandpa?" I snorted.

"The Hermit reversed is all about isolation and loneliness. You isolate yourself sometimes, don't you, Max?"

"Yeah, like when you're hiding in your room," Mikey said.

"It's called enjoying your time alone in some peace. You should try it sometimes, *Michael*."

Naya didn't even look up. She just kept her eyes on the cards, like she hadn't heard us at all. "This card can also mean loneliness... or being lost."

Something about that word caught me off guard. "Lost?"

"Yeah. Or... closing yourself off from people, even if you don't mean to. Pushing them away. It can also mean being stuck. Stuck in the past, or some kind of... emotional darkness."

I was about to laugh it off, but Naya's expression stopped me.

"These cards kind of contradict each other," she said. "Especially The Star and The Hermit—they don't really fit together. The Lovers' about connection, and The Star's about healing and hope, but The Hermit reversed? That's loneliness and shutting people out. It's like you're being pulled in two directions."

A twinge of something unsettled ran through me. Maybe I was pushing people away. But what was the alternative? Letting them get too close?

“So, either I’m finding love soon or ending up forever alone?” I asked, trying to sound indifferent.

“Well, they’re mostly positive cards. Maybe it means you have chances at love, but you can’t withdraw so much. That makes sense. You won’t find true love hiding in your room.”

“Max doesn’t have a problem finding love,” Mikey said with resentment as if he were taking it personally. Sometimes he acted like he was hosting *Singled Out*, with me as the unwilling main contestant. “He’s had plenty of girls. And more waiting in line.”

Naya packed up her cards, glancing at me apologetically. “Sorry, Max. If Mikey let me practice on him, maybe I’d be better at this.”

“Hey, woman, I’m all for supporting your hobbies,” Mikey said, hands up in surrender. “I just don’t need to know when I’m gonna die.”

Naya chuckled. “So, anyone special in your life, Max? Someone... outside school?”

“Nope, and I’d like to keep it that way, thanks.”

“Whyyyy?” Mikey moaned. I couldn’t help but laugh at the look on his face. “What’s going on with you? This is exactly what the cards are saying! Call Jenny!”

“Jenny? As Jenny Hagen?” Naya asked, looking between us.

“Jenny *no one*,” I said, and as if the heavens wanted to save me, I felt wet drops on my skin. “Let’s go. It’s raining.”

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When Mikey dropped me off at my house, Naya’s bike rattling in the cargo bed of his car, I didn’t ask them to come in, and they didn’t invite themselves either. No hard feelings. My friends knew the drill.

The reason? My mom, *obviously*. Whenever my friends—or any girl I was dating at the time—were around, she'd switch into her “cool mom” mode, acting like she was still a teenager. It drove me nuts. She'd throw around slang she didn't understand, laugh too loudly, and try way too hard to relate. My friends seemed to ignore it, but for me, it was painfully obvious how forced it was.

The aftermath was me tossing out snarky comments, knowing full well guilt would catch up with me later because no matter what, I always felt wrong. Somehow, I would get these intrusive thoughts: her storming out of the house, getting hit by a car, and dying, and my stupid, hurtful words would be the last thing I ever said to her. But seeing her straining to be cool and fun just for a show made my skin crawl. And when I called her out in front of my friends, she'd made this wounded face, like I was the worst kid on the planet. “*I’m just being myself, Maxim,*” she'd say—as if we both didn't know it was an act.

So, I'd stopped inviting anyone over whenever she was home.

Dinner was quiet as usual, filled only with the clink of cutlery and the occasional scrape of a fork against a plate. But when I was separating the peas from the carrots, Mom's monologue broke the silence—something about her friend who was off on some extravagant, all-expenses-paid trip around the world, courtesy of a “thoughtful husband.”

And somehow I found myself in the firing range.

“If I didn't have to pay for new basketball gear every year, I could afford that trip to Santa Monica. I can't remember the last time I had a proper vacation,” Mom said, slicing into her roast with exaggerated precision.

“I play baseball, Mom.” I clenched my fork. “Not basketball.”

“I know. I'm not stupid.”

“You said basket—”

“Stop it!” She slammed her hand on the table. “You and your dad love to put words in my mouth. I know what I said.”

“If you say so,” I muttered, pushing my chair back and carrying my plate to the kitchen. I started to clean it in the sink when I heard Mom’s annoyed voice from the dining room. “Clean the plate!”

I rolled my eyes. She didn’t need to say it, because it was never about the plate. I wondered when I’d finally snap and throw a dish across the room.

I retreated to my room, hoping for some peace. I grabbed *The Sandman* comic from my nightstand and flopped onto my bed. It was ironic to read about dreams after what happened to me last night. Suddenly, all that weird dream logic—shifting realities, people getting lost in their heads—didn’t feel so far off. I flipped through pages, not really following the story. My brain kept drifting. Maybe dreams weren’t just random shit after all.

I shifted, feeling something in my pocket. Reaching inside, I pulled out The Hermit card. I’d asked Naya if I could take it, as a joke, of course, but when I got out of the car, she’d handed it over, maybe appreciating someone was taking her “magic stuff” seriously. Not that I did. But the card clicked with me in a way I couldn’t quite explain. Maybe it was just a cool drawing. Or maybe the idea of being some loner in the shadows hit a little too close to home. The loner with a different girl every month. Talk about irony.

I looked at the card for a moment and decided to make a statement. I took down the poster of the lovely, naked lady from the ceiling and taped the tarot card in its place.

Call it leveling up: from edgy prankster to... I don’t know, maybe a tortured soul.

Mikey would piss himself if he saw it.

I lay back, staring at the comic without reading. It was summer; I could do much more interesting things than flipping through pages with pictures. But everything felt pointless. Why bother?

I glanced at the card on the ceiling one last time. The old man’s face stared down at me in the dim light, looking like he was waiting for something. For what, I had no clue. I shook off the weird feeling, flipping onto my side, and closed my eyes. One mystical step at a time, I guess.

## TAKE ME TO THE PLACE I KNOW



One mystical step later, and I was back on the beach. The same dream three times in a row? It was getting ridiculous. Andy stood with his back to me, staring at the horizon. He was so still he could've blended into the landscape. The scene's familiarity only made it stranger.

I crept closer, planning to startle him, hoping my sudden move would disrupt the dream somehow. But as soon as I stepped forward, pebbles clattered under my shoe, the sound enough to make Andy turn.

When he faced me, the horizon behind him flickered.

"It's you," he said, looking almost relieved.

"Yeah, it's me."

"I wasn't sure you were gonna show up."



“Well, here I am. Not like I had much say,” I said, forcing a light tone to cover my mounting confusion. I wandered over, kicking a few stones on my way. “So, what’s the deal? Why do I keep ending up here with you?”

“How’d I know? Maybe it’s something we need to figure out together.”

“Some great dream wisdom there, oh wise wizard. Happened to you before?”

“I usually don’t dream.”

“Lucky you.”

He smiled faintly, shrugging. “Yeah, maybe. But if I did, I doubt they’d be as interesting as this one.”

“Interesting isn’t exactly the word I’d use. Maybe... creepy?”

“You think it’s creepy? This place?”

“More like the whole experience, don’t you think?”

Andy gave me a long, searching look. Just as I was about to ask if there was something on my face, he said, “No. I kinda like it,” and without another word, he turned and started walking down the beach.

I shot him a sidelong glance as I caught up, falling into step beside him. “So... any bright ideas on what we’re supposed to do now?”

“I don’t know—not much to do here. Why do I have to dream about the water out of everything? I can’t even swim.”

“It’s my—wait, you can’t swim?”

“No.”

“How come? It’s a basic human skill, like riding a bike.”

He stood well back from the lake, like the water might reach out and pull him in. Was he actually afraid?

I studied him for a moment, weighing the situation. It didn’t seem dangerous—just unfamiliar. And honestly... I wanted to see him try.

“I’ll teach you,” I said, crouching down to touch the water. It was warm and inviting. Same as last time.

Andy’s confidence vanished. “What?”

“Come on, I’ll teach you how to swim. It’s not like we have anything else to do.”

He took a step back, his face showing absolute disgust. “I’m not going in there.”

“Why not? It’s just a lake.” To prove my point, I waved my hand over it, and this time, I didn’t see myself staring back. The water cleared, revealing the rocks below.

“What if there’s something in the water? Like a shark. Or a Kraken.”

“Sharks live in salt water. And I promise, we’re staying close to shore. No Kraken’s gonna drag you down.”

“It’s a dream, Max. Anything can happen.”

It was still super weird to hear someone else say it was a dream. In *my* dream.

I smiled anyway. “You’re right! So maybe *here*, you can actually swim? We have to check!”

“I don’t know... It’s weird.”

“Look,” I said as I kicked off my shoes and socks, then waded into the water up to my knees without thinking twice about the rest of my clothes. Who cares in a dream? “It’s totally safe. If anything happens, I’m here. No harm, no foul.”

Andy still looked skeptical, but he took a tentative step toward the water. “You sure about this?”

“Positive.” I gave him a thumbs-up. “You can trust me.”

“Trust you?” he scoffed. “I don’t know you.”

“Well, we met twice, so you know me now. Now shut up and come in. The water’s nice.”

He hovered at the edge, biting his lip. Eventually, he took off his shoes and stuck his toes in. He winced, glanced at me, then took a hesitant step so the water rose around his ankles. “Feels... okay, I guess.”

“See? It’s not bad.” I splashed a bit of water in his direction.

He flinched but then laughed. “Okay, fine. What do I do?”

“Come in deeper.”

Andy was shorter than me—his head barely came up to my chin—so when the water reached his waist, it came up just to my hips. His white T-shirt got soaked and clung to his frame, outlining lean muscle...

Realizing I was staring, I quickly looked away. I cleared my throat. “Lean back and relax. I’ll hold you up.”

He took a shaky breath and did as I said, his body stiff under my hands. I tried to tell myself this was only a dream, but I felt the full weight of him, the locked tension in his muscles, the stutter of his breath when he finally let go, and the quick tremor running through his shoulders.

“You’re doing fine. Just breathe and let the water hold you.”

To my surprise, he eased into it, his body relaxing against my hands. I kept them there, steadying him, feeling the small adjustments he made as he tested the water beneath him.

“This isn’t so bad,” he said, almost to himself, eyes fixed somewhere beyond me.

“I told you,” I said with a strange sense of accomplishment. “You’re getting the hang of it.”

I stayed with him a few more seconds, letting him float. Then, ever so carefully, I drew my hands back...

And in the instant my hands left, Andy’s arms and legs snapped open; he thrashed, splashing wildly before tipping under, even though he could have easily just stood up.

I lunged, grabbing him and pulling him up.

“Calm down!” I shouted, gripping his arm.

He tried to catch his breath, his hair sticking to his face. “I—I can’t—”

“Breath,” I said, keeping my voice steady.

“No! I’m done!” he gasped. His eyes were wide, like he saw something far worse than water. “I want out.”

“Let’s try again—”

“No! I don’t want to!”

“Fine. Let’s get out.”

We waded back, dripping wet, and sank onto the sand. Andy hunched over for a moment, shaking slightly, letting the rhythm of the waves calm him.

After a beat, he lifted his head and stared at the water, still wary. “Sorry... about that.”

“No worries. You did pretty well for a first time.”

“Thanks for trying, though.” He gave me a faint smile.

I looked at him, then the water. “Yeah, well... Next time’ll be better.”

*Next time?*

We sat quietly, staring at the lake. I picked up one pebble and tossed it in to the waves. We both watched it skip. The air felt peaceful.

Eventually, Andy spoke. “Why is your name Maximus?”

*Oh my god...* “I don’t know. Why is your name Andy?”

“Because my parents thought it sounded cool.”

I rolled my eyes.

“But Maximus... that sounds like some big, tough-guy name.”

“Maybe.”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“A tough guy?”

“Uh, no? I don’t think so. But I play baseball.”

“Doesn’t make you tough.”

“No,” I admitted. “But it’s pretty cool. You play anything?”

“I know kung fu.”

I whipped my head toward him so fast my neck twinged. “Ow. Wait—what?”

“I practice Wing Chun,” he said casually.

“The hell is that?”

“Style of Shaolin Kung Fu.”

“You’re kidding. And who’s the tough guy now?”

“I’m not—”

“Sure, sure. Half Chinese and kung fu? That’s not suspiciously on-brand at all.”

“You calling me a stereotype?”

“Just saying.” I shrugged. “All you need now is a bamboo staff and a wise old master.”

“Coming from Captain America with a bat.”

“Okay, Bruce Lee.” I nudged him.

“It’s Andrew Lee.”

“What?”

“My full name. Andrew Lee.”

“Huh. Well, just so you know, Andrew Lee is way less intimidating than Bruce Lee.”

He smirked. “Good thing I don’t have to impress you, *Maximus*.”

## SMALL THINGS



I wasn't sure at what point I had woken up. One minute, Andy and I were strolling the beach and talking about the dumbest stuff; the next, I was back in my room with the sun stabbing through the blinds.

But I couldn't shake the fuzzy, disconnected feeling. Like half of me hadn't made it back yet.

The day dragged on forever, and I thought about the dream the entire time. I tried to enjoy the vacation—especially since my parents were out—but whatever I did, whether reading a comic, playing PlayStation, or watching TV, my thoughts kept drifting back to that strange place, like a song stuck in my head I couldn't turn off.

It was impossible to focus on anything.

By the time eleven p.m. rolled around, I was more than ready to get back to the dream world. But when I lay down, I was too restless to sleep, excitement and swirling thoughts keeping me wide awake. I tossed and turned, kicked the comforter onto the floor, punched my pillow a few times, because why not. Nothing worked.

When I checked the alarm clock again, it was midnight. Was Andy already asleep? Was he waiting for me?

*Oh my god, Max? Seriously?* I was getting way too into this. Yeah, at this point, I must have already been turning into a hermit. Next step? Living in the woods with a beard down to my chest and talking to squirrels.

I glanced up at the card on my ceiling, lit by the moonlight streaming through the window as if The Hermit's lantern was casting the glow. The old fucker was definitely mocking me right now.

I sighed and closed my eyes again, trying to clear my head. Just breathe. Relax. Think about anything but the beach.

Eventually—somewhere between another toss and a sigh—I felt myself drifting. The weight of my body loosened, the feeling of my sheets faded, and...

There it was again: the endless stretch of beach, the towering cliffs, the comforting silence. It was like coming home after a long and weird day.

Not *my* home. But a place that felt like one.

"Max!"

Andy was jogging toward me, a grin spreading across his face.

"Oh. Hi..."

"Where have you been?" He stopped in front of me, arms crossed.

"Missed me that much?"

"In your dreams." His eyes widened as he realized what he'd just said.

"Okay, well... you know what I mean."

"Ha! So you admit—"

“Not so fast,” he interrupted, holding up a finger. “I’ve got something to show you first.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“You’ll see. Just follow my lead.” He took a few steps toward the cliffs, glancing back to make sure I was coming. “Trust me. You’re gonna like this.”

I shrugged and followed, curious despite myself. “You better not be trying to knock me down again,” I muttered, eyeing him suspiciously.

He reached the base of the cliffs and gestured dramatically. “Ready?”

I nodded. “Sure... why not?”

He pointed toward the cliffs, beaming like he’d just handed me a gift he couldn’t wait for me to open.

I hadn’t noticed it at first, but the cliffs had changed. What used to be bare gray stone was now covered in trees and bushes, full of color and texture, as if the place had upgraded, adding new layers.

Andy smirked. “You’re welcome.”

“For what?”

“For improving the landscape, of course. Today I decided this place needed more greenery.”

“So you thought about it, and the dream just changed?”

“Yeah.”

Yeah, sure. Let him believe that. I’d already figured there was no point explaining to my own dream that it was just a dream.

But... could *I* imagine this place any way I wanted? I hadn’t even tried since all this started. For some reason, an amusement park popped into my head. Roller coasters in a dream would be insane. Or an anime-style arcade, with neon lights and endless rows of games. We could play forever, and the games would never end. Or a skate park with ramps that launch you into the clouds.

So I tried. I squinted, focused, said it out loud like a spell. I did everything that had always worked in my dreams. But nothing happened. The next



night, I tried again. And again the night after that. I tried every night, over and over, until my brain felt like it might explode, and the stupid beach still refused to cooperate. Andy, on the other hand, had no problem changing the dream. He was part of it, after all. But all he ever did was make the waves a bit taller and toss a few extra trees onto the cliffs. Tiny tweaks. Nothing worth bragging about. Total party pooper.

Eventually, I got tired of banging my head against the dream's walls. After nights of fruitless effort, I gave up trying to reshape the beach and started just... being there. Nights blurred together, each one folding into the next. Andy was there every time, and I still wasn't sure what to make of him. I kept telling myself it was just my brain being weird. That he wasn't real. Couldn't be.

Still, each dream became routine. We wandered along the pebbles, stared at the cliffs, skipped stones across the lake, and filled the silence with questions, jokes, and whatever came to mind. Sure, the beach never changed, but the conversations were anything but boring. At first, spending every dream the same way with some random guy had freaked me out, but after a handful of nights, it felt almost comforting. I knew what to expect. I knew he'd be there. And I couldn't wait to get back.

Real or not, this eerie corner of my subconscious had become a secret clubhouse. And while Andy could sometimes be a pain in the ass with his I-know-everything attitude, I'd grown to appreciate his company. Like we were in some weird summer camp, bound by dream logic that didn't make sense but felt natural all the same.

I often caught myself wondering what Andy would be like outside the dream if he was real. Would he be lying in bed somewhere, staring at the ceiling, thinking about the dreams the same way I was? Pathetic, much? I didn't actually believe he was real. Not really.

But something about him felt different. Too solid. Too *there*.

Hell, maybe my brain had just decided to invent the perfect dream companion with better banter than most real people.

Who knew?

Under that hazy, unchanging sky, none of it mattered. What mattered was, for a few hours each night, neither of us felt alone.

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“So... you’re Chinese,” I said one night, still trying to piece Andy together.

“On my dad’s side.”

“What about your mom?”

“She’s white.”

“So how come you sound like you’re from the Midwest?”

He shrugged. “Just how I talk.”

I rolled my eyes. “C’mon, man. I told you I’m from Wisconsin. Least you can do is meet me halfway.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“You don’t either, but why wouldn’t you? Oh, right—because you are not real.”

“What if you’re some creep?”

“A *creep*?! This isn’t a chat room. You’ve literally seen my face.”

“Yeah, and you still act like a stalker.”

“God, you’re impossible.”

He gave another shrug. “It’s not personal. I just don’t like sharing too much.”

“Fine,” I muttered. “Keep your secrets.”

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“New jacket?” I asked. It looked cool—leather, heavy zipper, kind of effortless.

Andy ran a hand down the sleeve. “Always wanted one.”

“And you just conjured it?”

“Why not?”

“You look like you’re about to start a biker gang.”

“Wanna join?”

“Maybe. You’ll need a name, though.”

“For the gang?”

“Yeah. Something tough. *Mysterious*.” I wiggled my eyebrows. “Like... I don’t know. Dream Riders.”

“That’s awful.”

“Oh, really? Do better then.”

He glanced at my socks. “How about Mickey’s Disappointments?”

I groaned. “That’s not a gang name.”

“You just need a mouse-ear helmet and a tragic backstory.”

“They’re just socks, dude.”

“They are very... you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He grinned. “A little tragic, trying really hard not to be.”

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“Who’s that on your shirt?” I asked, nodding at the guy with the lightning bolt.

“You don’t know David Bowie?”

“Oh. I mean... I’ve heard some songs. They’re kinda weird.”

Andy stared like I just kicked his dog. “Kinda weird? That’s like calling Picasso a doodler. Bowie’s not weird. He’s *genius* weird. And he looks amazing. He’d totally approve your socks.”

“My socks?”

“Yeah. ‘Life on Mars?’”

I blinked. “... Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Mickey Mouse has grown up a cow?”

“The hell are you talking about?”

He groaned. “The *lyric*, Max! God...”

“Ohhh.” I nodded, grinning. “Mickey Mouse... a cow? Alright, Bowie, sure.”

Andy covered his face. “Unbelievable.”

“Okay, okay!” I laughed. “I’ll give him another shot. Happy?”

“Not until you *get it*.”

“Wow. So dramatic.”

“He’s Bowie. He *invented* dramatic.”

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“You into books or anything?” Andy asked.

“More into comics, actually.”

“Figures. Which ones?”

“*Hellboy*, *The Crow*, *Spawn*, and all the superhero stuff, you know. Oh, and *The Sandman*. That one’s sick.”

“What’s that? Bedtime stories?”

“Not even close.” I smirked. “It’s about Dream—this god guy who rules over the dream world.”

“So... basically what you think you’re doing here?”

“Yeah, except he’s tall and creepy.”

Andy gave me a mock-serious look. “Sound familiar?”

I groaned. “Oh, come on. You don’t even know the comic.”

“Don’t have to. You just described yourself.”

“Right. Well, if Dream shows up, we’re screwed.”

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“Show me some kung fu moves,” I said, nudging Andy’s arm.

“No.”

“Come on. You’ll be like Neo from *The Matrix*. All you’re missing is the slow-mo bullet dodge.”

“What’s *The Matrix*?”

I stared at him. “A movie... Do you live under a rock?”

“Been kind of... out of the loop.”

“Let me just say you’re missing out, big time. There’s this one fight scene—I won’t spoil it. You’ve gotta see it yourself.”

“Okay...”

“So? Let’s see what you’ve got. Just a little move. One.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Don’t be shy. I promise I won’t laugh. *Please?*”

Andy sighed. Deep and theatrical. “Fine.”

I lunged at him, aiming to grab him in some kind of dumb gym-class tackle. But before I could reach him, his hand shot out, caught my wrist, and yanked me forward. His palm met my chest—not hard, but with just enough force to make a point—while his foot swept behind my ankle, tripping me.

I landed on my back, stunned.

“Dude,” I groaned. “That was cheap.”

He smirked. “But you’re down. You have to be faster if you want to stand a chance.”

“Okay, Bruce Lee. I will get you next time.”

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“What’s your cereal of choice? Like, if you had to eat one for the rest of your life.”

“Frosted Flakes,” Andy said. “Simple, classic. What about you?”

“French Toast Crunch. It’s like dessert for breakfast.”

“That’s basically just a dessert, Max.”

“Exactly. If I’m gonna wake up, I want it to be worth it. Cornflakes are just cardboard flakes. They’re like cereal’s way of saying, ‘I’m here, but I’m not really trying.’”

“No, Max. Cornflakes are like vintage rock bands. Timeless and always satisfying.”

“Then French Toast Crunch is like a metal concert. Sweet, loud, and guaranteed to keep you up.”

He chuckled. “Alright. You win this one.”

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“What do you wanna do when you grow up?” I asked.

“Grow up?” Andy made a face. “What is this—career planning days?”

Andy made a face.

“Dunno... I always had a problem with that question.”

“Why?”

“It just feels... far.”

“It is far. That’s the point.”

“Yeah. That’s why it feels fake. Like something you make up just so adults stop asking.”

He gave a small shrug. “I used to think maybe I’d be a writer. Or do something with music. I don’t know... make things. Stuff that lasts.”

“Like books?”

“Or retellings of old stories. Myths. Things that already matter.”

“So why not go for it?”

“Hard to imagine getting there sometimes.”

I didn’t answer right away. “Yeah. I get that.”

He glanced over. “What about you?”

“Honestly? No idea.”

“Nothing?”

“I don’t really think about it. Feels like making plans for someone else.”

“That’s kind of bleak.”

I half-smiled. “So is everything else.”

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“Greek mythology, huh? There’s like a million stories.”

“Same with comics,” Andy said.

“True. So what’s your favorite?”

“Orpheus and Eurydice.”

“I know that one! It was in *The Sandman*.”

Andy smiled a little at that.

I cleared my throat for no reason at all. “So, Orpheus... he’s the guy who went to the Underworld for his dead wife, right?”

“Yeah. Loves her so much, he’s like, ‘I’ll stroll into Hell if I have to.’”

“Extreme love language...”

“But then he looks back. One job. He had *one job*.”

“Like someone telling you not to push a big red button and then you do it anyway.”

“Right? Eurydice was probably like, ‘Seriously? You couldn’t wait five more seconds?’”

I snorted. “She must’ve been thinking, ‘I died for this guy?’ Kids, don’t be like Orpheus. Focus on the road.”

“Yeah, he’s basically the poster kid for ‘keep your eyes on the prize.’”

“But can you imagine going that far, only to blow it right before the end? I’d never forgive myself.”

“Sometimes love just screws you over.”

“It’s way too sad, man.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “But the sad ones hit hardest.”

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"Got any siblings?" Andy asked.

"Yeah. Older brother, Marcus. "

"You guys close?"

I hesitated. "We used to be."

"What happened?"

"He went to college. We don't really talk much now."

"Why not?"

"It's... complicated."

Andy looked at me. "Can't you just call him?"

"I could." I paused, then added, "I think I remind him of home too much."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Depends on the home, I guess... What about you?"

He shook his head. "Just me."

"That must be kind of lonely."

"Sometimes. But you get used to it."

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"What do you think happens after we die?" Andy asked, balancing another pebble into a shaky tower.

"I dunno." I watched the stack wobble. "I try not to think about it."

"Why not?"

"Freaks me out."

"You're scared of dying?"

"Aren't you?" I shot back.

"Not really."

"Why not?"

Andy looked out toward the water. "Can't be worse than it is right now."

"Oh, okay... You don't like your life?"



"I don't... I don't like it *right now*. What if after death, it's like this? Like this dream?"

"Endless beach? That would get boring fast."

Andy gave a faint smile. "Not for me."

We sat in silence for a moment. The water lapped quietly at the shore, soft and steady.

"Yikes," I said. "Okay, new topic. Favorite superhero. Go."

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"So... you seeing anyone?" Andy asked, side-eyeing me.

I sighed. "Nah. Sworn off dating for a while."

"Really? You seem like someone who's never not dating someone."

"I've had my share. But it's always the same—fun at first, then just... dunno. Feels kind of pointless after a while."

"Pointless?" He raised an eyebrow. "That's harsh."

"Maybe. It's not even about them, I think."

Andy was quiet for a second. "So what would make it not feel empty?"

"Something real, maybe. Not just messing around. But who knows."

"Yeah. I get that," he said. "How many girlfriends have you even had, anyway?"

"Uh... I don't know. A few, I guess."

"You don't know?"

I shrugged. "Never counted."

Andy let out a low laugh. "Wow. Must be nice, being so wildly in demand you lose track."

"Yeah, that's me," I said dryly. "What about you? Anyone?"

He looked away. "Not really. I'm still waiting."

"For?"

"The right person."

"Yeah," I said. "Same here."

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One night, I found Andy skipping stones across the water.

He smiled when he noticed me. "Back again?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I said, sitting on the cool ground.

He dropped the last stone and dropped cross-legged, his knee brushing mine.

"Ever think about how dreams are like a mirror?" Andy asked out of nowhere, like he always did—starting our nightly routine of talking about everything and nothing. "Like they reflect parts of us we don't show."

"Yeah," I said, watching the waves roll in.

"But maybe that's the point. To push us. To make us question."

"You think dreams are more than just random images?"

"Absolutely." He nodded slowly. "They are fragments, you know? Pieces of us."

I let that sit for a second. "So you think that's what this dream is?"

"Maybe."

His knee was still against mine, sending a warm pulse through me. That's when I noticed a tiny freckle under his left eye, standing out against his fair complexion. One of those little details you only see when you're really looking.

Suddenly, I was too aware of how quiet it had gotten.

I leaned a little closer. "Um... do you think this is the only place where we can be ourselves?"

"... Yeah, I think so."

## COZY IN MY MIND



Two weeks had passed since I started meeting Andy in dreams. Ever since, I'd divided my life into "real" and "unreal," and it was the unreal one I looked forward to each day.

Remember being a kid, when the next day was your birthday, and you couldn't wait to go to bed to make tomorrow come faster? That's exactly how I felt.

Yeah, I was *that* excited about meeting a friend inside my head.

It's not like I was some loner. Or a fucking hermit like my friends suggested. But this time, I felt like someone actually cared about what I had to say. Andy seemed genuinely interested, not just nodding along, half-distracted, or waiting to jump in with his own story. He'd listen to me as if the things I was saying mattered. Not out of politeness. Not because he felt obligated. Just... because he wanted to. And that did something to me. May-

be it was pathetic, but when someone finally looks at you like that—like you're worth the space you take up—it's hard not to want more of it.

Our talks felt raw, as if we were peeling back something. I'd tell him things I'd never shared with anyone, like how I felt suffocated by my mother and wished I understood why she was the way she was, or how I'd sometimes feel lonely even when surrounded by people. And somehow, he'd meet me there, sharing his own doubts and frustrations. No judgment, no fake sympathy. He never mocked or dismissed anything I said—at least not seriously. If he teased me, it was to pull me out of my head, not to shut me down.

The real world didn't disappear—it just started feeling like the space between things, like a commercial break. Reality became a pause in the middle of a play, while the dream was the main act, the place where—despite not existing at all—we were building this strange, fragile trust. Every evening, as the sun went down, I couldn't wait to close my eyes and slip back into it. My friends were great, but with Andy, everything was unfiltered, like the difference between a painting and the sunset itself.

We could talk for hours about everything and nothing, and it felt effortless, like sliding into a rhythm that belonged only to us. And yet... every now and then, I'd hit a wall. When I asked about his life, his words would stumble, his gaze drift, and he'd just shrug, closing off some secret corner I couldn't reach. Sometimes he would disappear in his thoughts for a beat, as if stepping behind a veil I wasn't meant to pass through. But each time, he'd come back, and I'd pretend like nothing had happened—

"Man, where the fuck are you?" Mikey snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"... What?" I blinked, trying to focus.

"You drifted away again."

"Sorry..."

"Were you thinking about Jenny? Did you call her?"

I sighed. "No, Mikey, I didn't call her. Give me a break."

“Dude... she probably forgot about you anyway.”

I hoped she did. But at the same time, the thought of her moving on still kinda stung.

It was Friday, which meant barbecue at Mikey's. His whole massive family gathered in the backyard every week of summer, each person showing up with a casserole dish or a foil-wrapped something. Mikey's dad manned the grill like a pro, churning out meat that could make you forget you were a vegetarian, while his mom turned side dishes into literal works of art. We always ate until we couldn't move, then collapsed into lawn chairs afterward, bellies stretched to their limits, eyes half-closed, the world fuzzy with that special kind of food coma you only get after surviving three types of mac and cheese.

The food was amazing, but it was the family that made it something else. They were close, bonded, and one of the few Black families in the neighborhood; they always treated me like one of their own. Mikey's twin sisters—nine-year-old terrors disguised as cherubs—had a knack for dragging me into their chaos, and that evening they managed to sneak a corn into my ear without me noticing. Mikey's aunties, middle-aged church ladies who came at you like a full-court press, were relentless as always: pinching my arm, patting my chest, and gushing, “Oh, look how tall you are!” as if I hadn't been six-foot-five since sophomore year. Naturally, I couldn't dodge the girlfriend questions, followed by offers to set me up with a niece or neighbor's daughter who would “love a tall boy like you, baby.” My face burned redder than the BBQ sauce on Mikey's dad's ribs while Mikey sat back grinning, tossing gasoline on the fire.

Even the uncles joined in, teasing me about my plate-cleaning speed and daring me to try a spicy sausage, and laughing if I had to chug a glass of water after. Their teasing was wrapped in the kind of affection you couldn't fake. The whole backyard buzzed with chatter and laughter, smoky air, and arguments over coleslaw.

Mikey, Naya, and I joined the kids' table, looking like camp counselors among all the younger kids. Jayden—Mikey's seven-year-old cousin—was shooting peas at me, punctuating each throw with a loud "pew." Thankfully, his mom stepped in and pulled him away by the ear just as Mrs. Holloway arrived, carrying a heaping plate of peach cobbler and a bowl of watermelon slices.

I dug in before she even set it down. She smiled, showing the same brilliant teeth as Mikey's, and pushed the desserts toward us. Instantly, all the kids lunged at it, but Mikey and I easily elbowed them aside.

"So, guys," Mrs. Holloway started, settling down across from us, gathering some dirty plates, "senior year, huh? Are you excited?"

"Yhym, yesh, vewy excited," mumbled Mikey through a mouthful of food.

"Yes, Mrs. Holloway," said Naya.

She turned to me. "How about you, Max?"

"Hm?" I swallowed an exceptionally large portion of exceptionally good peach cobbler.

"Are you excited to finish high school? Have you picked a school yet?"

"Maybe UW—Madison. Or MATC." I gave my usual answer. It was the quickest way to deflect without lying. Truth was, I didn't care all that much. My future wasn't about majors or classes anyway, but about what game I was meant for. Given my height, everyone assumed I'd play football or basketball. Coaches and some random dads practically salivated at the prospect of turning me into a star, while mine didn't care if I was a linebacker or a dancer. Basketball made the most sense on paper, but I'd never liked the pace of it; too frantic, and my coordination had a strict limit when it came to dribbling anything.

As for the football—way too much contact. It's sweaty, aggressive, and borderline homicidal, basically an excuse for guys to beat the crap out of each other while pretending it's about "strategy." And way too much armpit-to-face action for my taste. No, thanks.

Baseball though... baseball made sense. Not because I was obsessed with it or anything. I started playing because Marcus did, and I just happened to be good. It didn't demand much drama or bloodshed, and no one expected me to knock anyone out or scream like a drill sergeant. It gave me a spot to land that people seemed to respect, so I stuck with it. And with a bit of luck, maybe I'd even get scouted. MLB Draft wasn't impossible.

"Oh, it'd be fantastic if all of you ended up in Madison!" Mrs. Holloway said. "You could rent a nice place together."

"I don't think Naya would appreciate us both snoring in her ear every night. It'd be like living on a construction site," Mikey said.

"You're way off if you think I'm gonna let you sleep in the same bed with Naya!" Mrs. Holloway said, trying not to smile. "Not even in the same room. I'm not ready to be a grandma yet."

"Mom, you're walking in the dark if you think that—"

"Mikey!" Naya cried, mortified.

I choked on a bite of cobbler, coughing so hard I nearly dropped my fork. Mikey patted me on the back and grinned, while all the kids left at the table became very invested in our conversation.

Mrs. Holloway shook her head, smiling. "I will pretend I didn't hear that." She turned to me. "Now that I think about it, I haven't seen you bring any girls around lately."

It was embarrassing to know Mikey's mother thought I was some kind of Casanova. "No girls, Mrs. Holloway. I'm retired."

Mikey snickered. "Retired? You've been floating around with your head in the clouds for days. Who is she? I bet it's Jen—"

"Michael." Naya shot him a warning look. "Drop it. If he says there's no one, there's no one."

With a grateful smile, I mouthed a silent "thank you" in her direction. It wasn't like I could say, *No, I'm not thinking about Jenny. I'm thinking about falling asleep and seeing a guy in my dreams who is not even real but feels more real than anything else.*

Yeah. That'd go over well.

As the sun set, laughter and chatter filled the air, blending with the distant hum of cicadas. Mikey's cousins were still running around with sticky hands, and Mrs. Holloway's playlist had shifted to some '70s soul that made everyone sway while they cleaned up. But even as I laughed and dodged their questions, a little part of me felt apart, like an outsider watching through a window. Their effortless closeness only reminded me of everything I didn't have and of how quiet my house could be. No matter how kind they were, this wasn't my family.

I didn't belong there.

Not really.

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When I got home, Mom was out. Thank god for that. Once, she'd found out I'd had fried catfish at Mikey's and got it in her head I preferred his parents. She started making catfish every—fucking—day. By the fifth day, I couldn't stand it. "Oh, but you *love* Mrs. Holloway's catfish," she'd said. "I wouldn't want you telling people how *awful* your mother is for not making your favorite dish."

Anyway, I haven't touched fried fish since then.

Dad was in the living room, sipping a drink and watching TV, like a fox emerging from its den once the hounds had left.

"Hey, Dad," I said, heading to the kitchen for a soda.

"Hey," he murmured, not taking his eyes off the screen. On TV, Gillian Anderson was striding through some dim hallway in a blazer. Dad loved *The X-Files*. To me, it was just a grown-up *Scooby-Doo*.

We didn't have much of a relationship. He was there, yet somehow not at all, like furniture you sometimes bumped into. He'd answer if you asked something, sure, but he never started conversations. Never asked about school, about me, about anything. With Marcus, at least, there had been ban-



ter, sports talk, some bond, but since he left for college, Dad had withdrawn completely, just accepting whatever was going on in his life. He let Mom be the dictator and went along with it.

I grabbed a Coke and leaned against the doorway, watching him. I wondered if he even noticed half the time that I'd come home.

"Good episode?" I asked.

"Yeah." This time, he did glance at me briefly. His face lit up a little when the camera cut back to Mulder, and I realized the show got more of him than I ever did. Dad and Marcus shared such a striking resemblance—same brown eyes, same auburn hair. When I stood next to them, I looked like some random tall dude who'd accidentally wandered into the family photo.

"Cool..." I hesitated. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," He said flatly. Obligation.

I still wasn't invested in college talk, but after today's barbecue, I couldn't shake the feeling that everyone else had some direction... I guess I just wanted to feel like I had something solid to grab onto too. Maybe that's why I opened my mouth—just to say something that made me feel like I wasn't drifting.

"I was thinking about colleges—Madison or MATC. What do you think?"

He took another sip of his drink. "Sounds good. Choose whichever one you prefer."

"...That's it?"

"What do you want me to say? They're both good schools. It's up to you."

*Wow, thanks, Dad, for this incredibly detailed and overly exaggerated take on the subject. I'll treasure it forever.*

"Thanks," I said instead, swallowing my sarcasm. Just like that, I was dismissed. There was nothing else to say, really. Conversations with him were always short and detached enough to leave me more unsure than not. Why did I even bother?

I was about to go back to my room when something else came to my mind.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did you guys name me Maximus?”

He put down his drink. “You don’t like your name?”

“No, I do,” I lied quickly. “It’s just... kinda unusual. Marcus is normal. Why couldn’t I get something normal?”

He scratched the side of his neck. “Well, your grandpa was really into Ancient Rome, and I wanted to honor him in some way. Marcus Aurelius was a great emperor and a philosopher—as you know, I hope—so that’s where Marcus’s name came from. And when you were born, I figured Maximus fit really good with that.”

“Fit how?”

He shrugged, almost annoyed at the follow-up. “I don’t know. I just heard it somewhere. Maxim’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Oh... yeah, right,” I managed, feeling a little deflated. It stung, knowing Marcus’s name came with a story, while mine was basically picked off a shelf. A name that sounded like it should’ve belonged to a gladiator. And all I got was Dad saying *‘nice.’*

“Well... I’m gonna go to my room.”

“All right,” he said, already turning back to the TV.

The house felt empty even with the TV blaring or Mom’s constant shouting when she was home. The walls echoed differently without Marcus. He’d always been the one to bridge the gap between me and Dad, the one who took on most of Mom’s dissatisfaction and criticism. The quiet around me only made me realize just how much of the noise he used to carry. I couldn’t help but feel a little abandoned, and, selfish as it was, a little angry. I wished things were different, but wishing alone wouldn’t change a thing.

We used to be inseparable—Marcus and I—spending hours at the skate park or messing around on the street until our stomachs hurt from laughing.

But since he left for college, I hadn't picked up my skateboard. It felt like a betrayal, like skating without him would erase what we had. And it was the same with whatever we used to do together. I left those things abandoned in my memories as if they had left with him for college.

As I walked away, Gillian Anderson's voice filled the room, picking up where the conversation left off.

At least someone in this house knew how to follow a plot.

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Even though I felt comfortable just existing in Andy's company, after almost three weeks of the same damn beach, I started to crawl out of my skin. I already knew every ripple in the water, every jagged line of the cliffs, every pile of pebbles, like my brain was stuck on repeat.

"You've gotta change this up, Andy," I said, pacing the same ten feet of shoreline I'd paced a thousand times. "Anything. A roller coaster. A Walmart. I don't care. We'll lose our minds if we're stuck here forever."

"You are dramatic," he muttered, lying back like he couldn't be bothered. He folded his hands under his head, staring at the sky. "Why are you suddenly so bored?"

"Bored? I've been *bored* since night one. You know how many pebbles I've thrown into the water just to keep my brain from rotting?"

Talking with Andy was anything but boring, and I could've spent years on that same beach if it meant hearing him go off about myths or arguing about which movies didn't deserve sequels, but the beach itself made my stomach twist with the thought that this was it—that maybe this was all dreams could be, and we'd never get out.

"So don't throw rocks. Talk to me."

"I *do* talk to you." I spread my arms. "Nonstop. My family, random facts, and embarrassing stories I shouldn't even be sharing with you. And you? You dodge every question like you're in the goddamn Secret Service."

“Maybe I don’t have answers you’d like.”

“Or maybe you just don’t want to give them. Which is fine, whatever, but don’t act surprised when I get bored staring at the same fake water every night. And you don’t even go in. What’s the point of having a lake if you just sit on the shore? If I wanted to stare at water, I’ve got a pool back home.”

He sat up a little, propping himself on his elbows. “You think I don’t want it to change?”

“Maybe you could try harder!”

That snapped him upright. “You are so sure this is your dream, so do it yourself!”

“I’m just saying! Imagine something else... You just have to concentrate. You said you know kung fu—don’t they teach you meditation or some shit?”

“Yeah, sure. Step one: breathe. Step two: conjure an entire universe out of thin air. Totally covered that in class.”

“So what—you’re only good for kicking imaginary ninjas?”

He rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth betrayed him. I was about to crack another joke when he grabbed my arm.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?” I barely registering his words, too caught up in how his fingers burned against my skin.

But then a low rumble rolled through the ground, like a truck passing under asphalt.

“Probably the dream collapsing out of boredom,” I muttered.

He gave my arm a quick shake and pointed toward the cliffs. “Look!”

I followed his finger, squinting to see what he meant. It took me a moment to spot a narrow path—a ravine—splitting the rock.

“You did that?” I asked, a shiver of excitement running through me.

“I don’t know... You think we should...?”

“Check it out?” I grinned, already moving toward it. “Hell yeah.”

We reached the edge of the path, and my grin died on the spot. Up close, it wasn’t just a crack in the rock, but a deep split, dark and uneven, like it

could swallow us if we got too close. Cliffs rose on both sides, trees leaning over with their leaves rustling even though the air was dead still.

“That looks like the exact place where horror movie idiots go to get murdered.”

“Exactly. Which means it’s perfect.”

I picked up a pebble and tossed it toward the gap. It rattled against the rock and vanished into the dark. “Yeah, no. Hard pass.”

Andy snorted. “You’re scared.”

“I’m cautious,” I corrected. “There’s a difference.”

He gave me a shove toward the opening. Reflex kicked in, and I shot my arms out, palms slamming against the rock on either side to stop myself. “Seriously?” I snapped over my shoulder.

“Go on. Don’t chicken out.”

I hesitated, pretending to think it over and scanning the shadows inside. My stomach tightened, but I didn’t want him to think I was scared.

“Fine,” I muttered. I stepped forward carefully, one foot in front of the other, testing the ground. The pebbled ground gave way to packed earth, and I kept my back straight, trying to act confident. Andy fell in step behind me without a word, his smirk clear even from behind me.

We walked in silence, our footsteps the only sound. It wasn’t long before the passage began to close in. The walls crept closer, the space tightening with every step. Soon we had no choice but to walk in a single file, and the deeper we went, the cooler the air became. I brushed my fingers along the damp rock as I led the way, the surface gritty and uneven. The cliffs blocked out most of the light, casting everything in a heavy, shadowy gloom. Every so often, the path squeezed tighter, forcing me to turn sideways to wedge myself through.

Andy kept quiet. I could only hear his footsteps crunching on the packed earth.

“This really better not be some horror movie setup,” I said.

We took another turn, expecting more of the same narrow corridor, but what lay ahead made me stop dead in my tracks.

Andy walked straight into my back, letting out a surprised grunt.

“What is it?” he asked, straining to see past me as I blocked his view.

I stepped aside, letting him see.

Right in front of us was a scene straight out of a sci-fi movie: an abandoned, post-apocalyptic city beneath a flat gray sky. The buildings still stood, but their windows were dark, some smashed open like empty eye sockets. Cars scattered across the streets, some with doors left hanging wide, sidewalks cracked under weeds, traffic lights and street signs dangled uselessly over the emptiness. The place wasn’t just wrecked, but... left behind. And the silence dragged on, like nobody had set foot there in decades.

Andy let out a low breath. “Whoa...”

It clashed hard with the simple scenery we had just left.

“Is your favorite movie *Escape from New York*?” I asked. If I were in charge of the dream, we’d probably be running from killer robots or something.

He shot me a quick look. “I think it’s Chicago.”

“It’s definitely *Escape from New York*.”

“No, I mean this place. It’s... Chicago.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s my—” He slapped a hand over his mouth, eyes wide.

A grin spread across my face. “Wait, are you saying you’re from Chicago?”

“That’s not what I said!”

“Busted! You totally are!”

“Fine!” He threw his hands up. “I live in Chicago! Happy now?!”

I laughed, but something about it caught in my throat. Chicago. The city my brother had escaped to. My stomach dipped—the same hollow drop I’d felt watching Marcus pack. The coincidence made the dream feel even stranger. What were the odds?

High, probably. It was a dream, after all.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” I asked. “It’s not like it’s a state secret or anything. And you know it’s where my brother lives.”

“Because...” Andy started, but his words trailed off. His gaze shifted past me, and his eyes widened.

“What?” I turned to look over my shoulder.

Where the jagged rocks and trees had been, a sprawling cityscape now stretched out in every direction. The ravine and the beach were gone, as if they’d never existed.

“Figures,” I said, taking in the sudden change. “The second I ask for a change, the dream goes full apocalypse.”

## REVOLUTION FROM MY BED



**W**e had so much fun exploring the city that each time I woke up, I found myself yearning for the next dream even more. The dreams had their own rhythm, sometimes stretching on for what felt like days, other times slipping by in an instant. You couldn't even guess what was next. Time really does fly when you're having fun.

Andy led me through the city like I was a tourist, pointing out places he knew and spots he thought were cool. Even though everything was destroyed and falling apart, I still found it exciting. How many people get to wander through an apocalyptic wasteland? Was it attacked by aliens? A virus? Had people run away because of some threatening natural disaster? Whatever happened, it left the city hollow, silent, and—honestly—fucking awesome. I just kept praying there weren't zombies, though part of me wanted an excuse to see Andy bust out more of his secret kung fu.



But even dead, this place felt limitless. We could wander through the hollowed-out buildings, imagining the lives that used to fill them, climb the skyscrapers, or sneak into corners that in real life would've had NO TRESPASSING signs slapped all over them. Every turn felt like a dare.

One time, we came across a music store, and Andy immediately pressed his face against the dirty glass, squinting to see inside. Overhead, a faded sign hung precariously, held up by nothing but stubbornness.

"Are we in the future?" I asked, scanning the street.

"It's 1997," Andy said, pulling back and wiping the dust off his hands.

"How do you know?"

He pointed into the store. I stepped closer to peer through the window. Among the mess of scattered CDs, vinyl records, and toppled shelves, a display in the center of the shop caught my eye: stacks of *Radiohead's OK Computer* piled high under a cardboard sign that read OUT NOW!

"Not a big fan," I said.

"It came out in '97."

*Smartass.*

We stepped back onto the street.

"But... why '97?" I asked. "I mean, why *this* year?"

Andy shrugged. "Why not?"

"Dreams don't just pick random years. There's gotta be a reason."

"Maybe it's random. Maybe I like Radiohead."

"You don't look like someone who likes Radiohead."

"Oh, really? And what exactly does someone who likes Radiohead look like?"

"I don't know—maybe a little tired and overthinking everything?"

He gestured to himself, deadpan. "Hello?"

"Right, right, a true connoisseur of misery."

Andy rolled his eyes, hands back in his pockets. He kicked a stray soda can, which clattered loudly down the empty street, echoing off the ruined buildings.

I studied him for a moment. "So you really don't know why it's '97?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you."

"Fine," I sighed. "You're so weird sometimes."

"Takes one to know one."

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Some nights, we'd climb to the top of buildings like the John Hancock Center or Willis Tower. The elevators? Obviously out of commission; we had to do it the hard way. I was athletic, but by the time we reached the top of the tallest building in Chicago, I almost passed out. Andy, though, barely broke a sweat. I was sure the dream was giving him an advantage.

On the ninety-something floor, we sat by a shattered window, our legs dangling over the edge. It was a weird, thrilling feeling, knowing we were untouchable. Like we'd found a loophole in reality.

I let my eyes wander across the horizon. The city sprawled out like a blueprint someone kept tracing long after they were finished.

"I wonder what Marcus is doing right now," I said, not really sure why, and mostly to myself.

Andy glanced over, swinging his legs and tapping his heels against the building's wall. "Your brother?"

"Yeah... He's probably out somewhere. He used to walk around with his headphones all the time, like it was the only thing keeping him sane." I paused. "Thing is... I don't really know what he does. Who he hangs out with. If he even still listens to the same music. I used to know all of it."

"He's probably just partying hard," Andy said. "Isn't that what you're supposed to do at college?"

"Yeah," I muttered, but the thought didn't land right, a tightness settling in my chest. I picked at a loose thread on my shorts. "I just... don't know what his life looks like anymore."

Andy didn't say anything.

I got it; I wouldn't have known what to say either.

After a pause, I asked, "Can we see your house from here?"

"Not really," he said.

"Maybe from another building? Or just take me there. I'd like to see it."

He hesitated, his gaze drifting toward the north side of the city. His hand moved almost unconsciously, tightening the collar of his jacket as if warding off a chill. "There's really nothing worth seeing over there," he said.

"Come on..."

"Just trust me, okay? You wouldn't like it. It's... boring."

I opened my mouth to push further, but something unreadable on his face stopped me.

"Okay," I said, forcing the word out and swallowing the rest of the questions even though they burned on my tongue.

"Okay," he said.

\*\*\*

One dream, we ended up at some deep-dish place. My brother used to swear the first thing he'd do in Chicago was inhale one of those cheese bombs, even if it meant clogging his arteries with cheese. The place was a wreck: dust everywhere, menus scattered on the floor, tables still set with crumpled napkins and tipped glasses. I had no idea why we even went inside in the first place.

"I used to come here all the time," Andy said, already wandering off. By the time I turned to comment on the state of the booths, he was gone.

After a moment, I heard his voice coming from the kitchen. "Max! Get over here!"

I found him grinning near the stove. "Look what I did!"

My eyes landed on the counter: a flawless deep-dish pizza, piping hot from the oven, with a golden crust and molten cheese oozing under a thick slab of sauce.

“You... made that?” I asked, intoxicated.

“Guess so. Thought about it really hard, and boom.”

I poked the edge with my finger. Hot. “You realize we’re legally obligated to eat this now, right?”

“Duh.”

One bite and—holy shit. No words. Heat bloomed through my entire body.

“Think it works for more than just pizza?” I licked my fingers, thinking of the possibilities. “We could try everything. And we don’t even have to pay for it.”

“You just want free food.”

“Hell yeah, I do.”

So we launched a full-on food adventure. I threw out wild suggestions just to see what would happen: wedding-cake-sized sushi towers, roasted pigs with apples in their mouths, mountains of chocolate cake. Andy would close his eyes, furrow his brows, and try to will the food into existence. But much to my greatest disappointment, the dream wasn’t exactly cooperative—not that I was surprised. The pig showed up, but it was definitely too alive and *looking* at me. The sushi tower smelled as if it had been sitting out since the ‘80s. And the cake? It was made out of *dark* chocolate. Who even likes that?

I waited in anticipation for my dream buffet, but after a few more tries, it became pretty obvious: the dream only delivered what Andy actually craved. And Andy... well, he didn’t seem to crave much. It seemed like food was just food to him. Nothing fancy. Nothing fun.

Or so I thought.

\*\*\*

I was still mourning my all-you-can-eat, all-you-can-imagine feast when he suggested Chinatown. He had never been to China, but his dad—the Chinese part of his family—used to bring him to this local replica of the

motherland. “It was our thing,” Andy said. They’d dine at this huge Chinese restaurant where servers brought dishes around on trolleys in a kind of buffet parade. He didn’t say much more, but I could tell it mattered. It was the first real thing he had ever shared about his family.

Before I knew it, we were walking through the front doors. The place was massive, packed with hundreds of tables, and somehow smelled like it should be full even though no one was around. Sunlight streamed through dusty windows despite the gray haze outside. Andy grabbed a napkin from the floor, slung it over his arm, and bowed. “Are you ready to order, sir?”

I marked every single thing on the menu. A minute later, he rolled up with a trolley stacked high with bamboo steamers. It was like seeing an angel descending from heaven, serving me the secret to eternal life. Dumplings, buns, egg tarts, cookies—the smell alone almost made me pray. I was ready to crown him my personal Food God. (Still salty about the sushi tower, though).

Andy inhaled half the trolley, and I couldn’t figure out where the hell he was putting it. “You eat like a pig,” I said, not even joking.

He shot me a look over his chopsticks. “Excuse me? Have you seen your pile?”

“Well, I’m twice your size. I can eat twice as much.”

“That’s not how it works. It’s science.”

By the end, we were stuffed, wrecked over the table, and completely satisfied. It even beat Mikey’s barbecues. And Mikey’s barbecues were already unbeatable.

\*\*\*

Another time, we ended up in a blues club, messing around on stage. I sat at the drums, ready to unleash my inner Tré Cool, but it came out sounding more like a raccoon rummaging through trash cans. Andy grabbed a trumpet—aiming high—but all he managed were sad, squeaky honks. After about

thirty seconds, he was basically just spitting into it in frustration. I told him he should've gone for the piano instead, given those stupidly long fingers.

I caught myself staring again, so to distract myself, I twirled a drumstick—and immediately sent it flying straight into Andy's head.

He raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "Really?"

"Sorry. Hey, speaking of unforgivable mistakes, if you were on death row, what would be your last meal?"

"Don't you have enough food yet?"

"The food got me inspired. I know exactly what I'd like," I said, looking at him expectantly.

"Oh, please." He rolled his eyes and sat cross-legged on the floor. "Enlighten me."

"Well, since you are asking," I did a dramatic drumroll with the one stick I had left. "First up: my mom's potato salad. Best thing on Earth—not that I'd ever tell her that. Then a grilled cheese. Double cheese. No, triple."

"Mayo or mustard?"

"Andy! Don't make my life harder! I already have a death sentence."

"Fine. What's for dessert?"

"Easy. Mint chip ice cream."

Andy gagged. "Mint chip? It's like eating toothpaste."

"Judging by your boring and unsophisticated taste that ruined my food festival, you're probably a vanilla guy."

"Nothing wrong with vanilla!"

"Yeah, right. The most exciting thing about vanilla is how it goes with every other flavor." I laughed. "What about you? What's your grand finale?"

"Hot pot," he said instantly. "Extra spicy. My dad makes it whenever we have people over."

"Of course. Anything to set your ass on fire before you go."

"And a vanilla milkshake with whipped cream and a cherry."

"Called it."

"Oh, and chocolate lava cake with vanilla ice cream," he added, smug.

“Bold choice.”

He just shrugged. “You can’t go wrong with a classic.”

\*\*\*

In another dream, we found ourselves in a half-collapsed subway tunnel, where a long stretch of wall was covered in faded graffiti and ancient ads.

Andy handed me a can of spray paint with a grin. “Ever vandalized something?”

“Does sharpie on a locker count?”

“Nope. That’s baby stuff.”

We got to work, shaking the cans. The smell of paint and old rust hung in the air. We took turns tagging the wall with nonsense—song lyrics, fake sports club names, dumb quotes. I drew a misshapen, extra-ugly Batman symbol, while Andy sprayed LIKING MINT CHIP IS NOT A PERSONALITY TRAIT over a cracked ad for laundry detergent.

“Excuse me? You’re attacking me in my own dream now?” I said, already writing my counter right beneath it: NEITHER IS LISTENING TO DAVID BOWIE.

Andy gasped and leveled the spray can at me. “Take that back.”

Holding back a smile, I stayed silent. He shook his head and finished with one last tag in big bubble letters: WE WERE HERE.

I looked at it, something tightening in my chest.

“Think anyone will see it?” I asked.

Andy didn’t answer right away. He leaned against the wall, wiped his hands on his jeans, and looked at me.

“Probably not,” he said. “But still counts.”

\*\*\*

We were sitting on yet another half-collapsed rooftop, legs swinging over the edge like usual. I'd decided this was my favorite thing to do in the dreams besides eating.

Andy tilted his head, watching the distant skyline. "Do you ever miss anyone?"

The question caught me off guard. I hesitated. "I dunno... maybe."

He nodded but didn't say anything.

"What about you?" I asked. "You barely talk about your parents... or friends."

Andy shrugged. "I have a few. You know, here and there."

"Like who?"

"Just some people," he said vaguely. "People I used to know."

"Used to? You don't hang out with them anymore?"

"Not really. Things change."

"What things?"

"Just... life, I guess. People move on."

"But you don't?"

"I guess..."

I sensed there was more to Andy's story than he was letting on, but for now, I was willing to let it go.

"I'm sorry," I said after a while, seeing his gloomy face. "I didn't mean to upset you."

He sighed. "It's not your fault. It's just complicated."

We sat there quietly, the air between us a little heavier than before. Andy stared out at the ruined city, his expression unreadable. I followed his gaze, but wasn't really seeing anything. I was too focused on him—how he pulled back every time I got too close, how he never quite gave me the full story.

"You don't talk like a dream," I finally said.

Andy looked over at me. "What do you mean?"

To be honest, I had no idea.



After so many nights talking, exploring, and laughing together, I'd come to quite an impossible conclusion: there was this microscopic chance that Andy was actually real. No matter how absurd it sounded, something about him felt too present and specific to be just part of me and not a person out there... somewhere.

No. I was being ridiculous. He was just a character my subconscious created—someone I trusted and someone who kept pulling back whenever I tried to get closer. It would explain why our bond felt both real and out of reach, like something I could never fully grasp. He wasn't meant to exist outside the dream. The resistance I kept running into wasn't about him at all, but a figment of my own imagination. Andy wasn't avoiding the real world. He didn't have one. My mind was just protecting me by creating someone who *had* to stay distant.

Still... fuck that. Meeting the same dude, whom I had never met before, every night in my dreams, couldn't... *not* be real, right? As strange as it sounded, I couldn't let go. Not yet.

Hit or miss.

"Do you think we could meet?"

Andy's head turned slowly. "What?"

"In real life," I said, heart in my throat. "We could meet. In Chicago"

He stared at me as if I was an alien.

"You want to meet? Like, *actually* meet?"

"Yeah, why not?" I tried to sound casual. "If *you're* real."

Andy blinked. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah..."

He shook his head, foot scraping against the edge of the building, buying time. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" I asked again, sharper than I meant.

"It's just not, okay?"

That got under my skin. "How can it *not* be a good idea? Two random guys sharing dreams—don't you think that's a little insane? Doesn't that feel

like... I don't know, destiny or something? And we're close. At least, that's what you said."

"Don't you like it here?"

"I mean... sure. It's fun."

*Come on, Andy!*

"No, Max." His eyes searched mine. "Don't you like it here *with me*? In this messed-up way, but also... magical."

"But we could be friends in real life, Andy! If this isn't just some crazy ass dream... I know! Just give me your number! We can talk on the phone."

He looked away. "We couldn't talk whenever we wanted. There's school. Life. Stuff."

"Yeah, being seventeen is so busy. What are you afraid of?"

*Why are you so reluctant?*

I mean... the answer was staring me in the face. And yet I kept doubting as something in me refused to let go. Dreams or not, he felt too persistent. And the more he resisted, the more I needed to reach him.

I swallowed my hesitation. *Fine. Maybe he's not real. But if he is... I need to know.*

"Please..." I said, the words barely a whisper.

Andy looked up with a sigh. "It's been only a few weeks. We can still explore and find new places. There's so much more to see and do. It's special."

I watched as he absentmindedly tugged at the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Be honest," I said. "Why are you hiding so much? Why don't you want to meet me? You're not real, are you?"

Andy exhaled slowly, like the question had knocked something loose in him.

"I am real, Max..." he said quietly.

"Then why do you act like that? I don't get it. Why can't you prove it? If you're real, why not just give me your number? Or I can give you mine. Just call me whenever you feel like it." I hesitated, hearing how ridiculous I

sounded. But wasn't this whole thing ridiculous? What did I have to lose? "Please..." I added again, trying one last time.

He sighed. "You don't quit, do you?"

"Not really."

"Fine. Give me the number."

It took me a second to realize he wasn't joking. I hadn't expected him to say yes. I thought maybe the dream would glitch out, he'd laugh it off, or I'd wake up before anything happened. It felt like some kind of trick. Like the dream itself was giving me hope it didn't intend to keep.

And yet, there I was—actually giving my number to a guy I only knew from dreams.

I scrambled to find something to write with, because dreams aren't exactly full of pens and paper. Andy rolled his eyes again and held up his hand, palm open.

"Just tell me. I'll remember," he said, miming writing on his skin with an invisible pen.

I recited the number, still half expecting something to interrupt us. After I finished, he shoved his hand into his jeans pocket. "There. Happy now?" he muttered.

"Ecstatic."

He met my gaze for a long moment before turning away. "Don't wait by the phone or anything."

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But of course I waited by the phone.

When I woke up, I spent the whole day waiting. I stayed inside the house the entire time to make sure I wouldn't miss it. In my head, I kept imagining what Andy would say: "*Hey Max, it's Andy, your dream buddy.*" Or maybe, "*Hello from the other side.*" Would Andy sound the same as in the dreams? Would he be shy? He could be shy sometimes when we talked. Would *I* be shy? Oh

god, this was starting to feel like a first date. My mind raced with possibilities—would he laugh? Be confused? Won't speak a word?

Each time the phone rang, my heart nearly shot out of my chest. But instead of Andy's voice teasing me for waiting by the phone, it was always a letdown. First, Naya called to ask if I wanted to go to the beach (of course not—I couldn't!). Then our neighbor complained about the sprinklers soaking her laundry. *Seriously, people?* What if Andy had been calling at that exact moment?

By evening, I was on edge. Had he changed his mind? Thought this whole thing was stupid?

Maybe I was the stupid one.

Because... there was no one to call me.

I mean, how does that even sound? Getting a call from a guy you meet in dreams?

Night fell, and Andy never called. When I asked him about it later, he said he couldn't remember the number. I *wanted* to believe him. Dreams and numbers never seemed to mix well, after all. But a part of me couldn't help feeling like Andy was keeping something from me. I needed to hear him outside my head—to hold onto a piece of him in the real world. To prove this wasn't just some elaborate trick of my subconscious.

In the end, we let go of the idea of calling each other. For now, at least. But sometimes, when the house was quiet and the phone hadn't rung for hours, I'd still glance at it... just in case.

## ALL I WANT



I woke up at noon, which had basically become my summer routine. Each day felt like another chance slipping through my fingers. While the rest of the world was going outside and living actual lives, I was holed up in my room like Count Dracula, avoiding daylight and real people. My days had turned into a blur of cereal for lunch, lying on the floor listening to mixtapes, imagining what Andy and I might do in the next dream, and pretending to be productive anytime my parents asked.

Not that napping would help—I'd tried, once or twice, but I never found Andy in the daytime dreams, and I'd just end up wide awake all night, which meant even less time with him.

Really, I was just killing time until I could fall asleep again. That was it: the only part of my day that actually felt like living. And the longer it went

on, the more I found myself leaning toward the dream side. Days were just filler.

But of course, guilt had to show up eventually—mostly because of Mikey. He kept calling, spamming my inbox. He even climbed the gutter one night just to knock on my window (I nearly shit myself when I woke up to his face pressed against the glass.) He was working shifts at a café, saving for college, while I couldn't be bothered to drag myself out to see him, too busy perfecting the art of doing nothing. And I kept making excuses. Too tired. Too busy. Too something.

I'd been neglecting our friendship, spending more time hiding in my room thinking about Andy, the friend in my head, than with the one who was right there. I even started skipping Mikey's barbecues, which was practically a felony. His mom once caught me on the street and asked if everything was okay at home, like she thought I was being abused or held hostage. I told her I was just tired. She didn't look convinced.

I wasn't lying, exactly. I *was* tired. Tired of pretending I was living when really I was just waiting to fall asleep again. But Mikey wasn't just some guy. I owed him better than excuses.

So when my parents went out, I figured it was finally time to stop being the worst and hang out with my *real* friend.

As soon as he showed up, we flopped onto the floor and played *Final Fantasy VII* for a while, arguing over limit breaks and whether Sephiroth was the tragic masterpiece or just a giant diva with a sword. It felt good, like old times. But even as I mashed buttons and laughed at Mikey's terrible voice impressions, thoughts of Andy kept sneaking in, like a background noise I couldn't mute.

I wanted to tell Mikey about the dreams. Maybe to share the whole surreal mess with someone, or just to say it out loud, like that would make it real. Mikey was the one person I'd always told everything to; we'd been through it all. Now, I was holding back something huge. But how could I even start? "Hey, there's this guy I meet in my dreams, and I think he's real." At best,

I'd get a laugh. At worst, I'd get a bunch of questions I've got no answers for. And how the hell would I prove it? All I had were conversations that stayed trapped in the dark. The whole thing sounded so crazy that even I doubted it all the time.

Maybe I could've told him I met someone online. That would've been easier. But Mikey knew me too well. He'd push for details, and if I started down that road, it would be lie after lie, and eventually, the truth would snap. So I kept quiet.

We played a few more rounds. Talked about nothing. Laughed at nothing. But I could tell he was watching me more closely than usual. I wasn't giving him much to work with. I laughed when I was supposed to, made snarky comments about the game, but underneath it all, I was half-elsewhere.

"Have you called Jenny yet?"

It snapped me out of my thoughts. His eyes were glued to the screen, fingers pounding the buttons. I propped up on my elbows.

"...Not yet," I mumbled. "I've been busy."

"Busy?" He raised an eyebrow, still not looking away from the game. "With what? Doing *nothing*?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Man, you're hopeless."

The words hit more than they should have. But I wasn't in the mood to dig into it. So instead I just laughed and said, "Yeah, yeah. What else is new?"

He let it go for about three seconds. "Seriously though, what's your deal? Jenny's hot, she's into you, and you're just... what? Ignoring her?"

I sighed, already regretting where this was going. "It's not a big deal. She's just... I don't know. She's not really my type."

Mikey immediately paused the game, turning to face me like I'd just said I wasn't into pizza or something equally ridiculous. "Not your type? Since when do you have a 'type'? I thought you just went for the prettiest girls. She's not pretty enough for you?"

“No, it’s not that,” I said. Jenny was beautiful—everyone thought so. But when I pictured her, there just wasn’t... anything. No spark. I don’t think I’d ever really felt it with anyone I’d dated. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just not that into it.”

He squinted at me. “Then what *is* your type, Mr. Picky? I swear it used to be ‘hot and breathing.’ Now you’re suddenly a connoisseur?”

“Maybe I want something different. Like... someone I actually connect with? Wild concept, right?”

“Oh god, you’re looking for a ‘connection’ now? Dude, that’s deep. You’re gonna start writing poetry next?”

“Shut up.” I shoved him. “I’m serious.”

“If Jenny’s not your type, who is? Give me something to work with here. Are you into, like artsy girls now? Nerdy girls? Goth chicks?”

“Dunno, man. I don’t know what I’m looking for yet.”

“That’s a first. Usually, you’ve got it all figured out.”

I shrugged.

“No, seriously,” he said. “It’s just a phone call. What’s the worst that could happen? You’re acting like calling her is the same as proposing.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have to deal with all the awkward small talk.”

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s *so* hard for Mr. Handsome to talk with a hot girl. I’m sure it’ll be torture.” He snorted. “Just call her.”

I didn’t answer. Mikey leaned forward. “You’ve got nothing to lose.”

“I don’t see the point if it’s not gonna lead anywhere. I don’t wanna waste my time.”

“Dude, you sound ancient. ‘I don’t wanna waste my time’... What happened to Max who just wanted to have fun?”

“He grew up, maybe.”

“Well, grown-up Max—or should I call you Maximus from now on?” I shot him a look. “Here’s some advice from someone who hasn’t ‘grown up’ yet: call her, hang out, and see what happens.”



He wasn't wrong. It was just a phone call. Not a wedding, not a contract—just a call. Maybe it could even drag me out of my own head.

When I didn't object, he jumped up, grabbed my hand, and yanked me to my feet. "Come on! We're doing this now. You still have her number?"

"Yeah..."

"Then no more excuses."

I rolled my eyes and started digging through the pile of clothes in the corner of my room. The scrap of paper was crumpled but still legible.

"Found it," I muttered, flipping it between my fingers as I headed downstairs, Mikey skipping behind me.

And you know what? It wasn't the worst idea. If Jenny didn't end up blowing me off for ignoring her these past few weeks, maybe a date would help ground me a bit in the here and now. It was time to give the real world another chance.

I dialed Jenny's number, and after a few rings, a woman's voice picked up.

"Hello?"

I cleared my throat. "Hi, this is Max Reid. Is Jenny home?"

I heard her call Jenny's name, and Mikey, ever the opportunist, leaned in trying to press his ear against the receiver. I shot him a glare and shoved him back, but he just grinned, mouthing, *"Is that her mom? Ask her out, too."*

I managed to hold him at arm's length just as I heard the click on the line.

"Yes?" Jenny's voice came through.

I shot Mikey one last death glare. "Hey, Jenny. Um... It's Max Reid. How's it going?"

"Oh, Max! Wow, you finally remembered I exist?"

"I—I was going to call sooner, but—"

Mikey clutched his chest in fake agony. "Ooooh, *finally remembered I exist!* Burn!"

Jenny laughed at whatever pathetic noise I made trying to cover him. "Relax, I'm messing with you. But seriously, it took you long enough."

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve been... busy,” I said, dragging Mikey away by his shirt when he leaned in again.

“It’s fine! I just got back from Europe with my parents, so I wasn’t around much anyway.”

“Oh, cool... You know, I was actually about to ask—”

“Hey, perfect timing! My sister and I are throwing a party on Monday. You should come! Everyone’s gonna be there—it’ll be fun to do something before school starts.”

By “everyone” she meant her circle of cheerleaders, football players, and other kids at the top of the high school food chain. But maybe it was exactly what I needed. Something to break up the spiral. Maybe if I forced myself to be around people, I’d stop obsessing over... things.

“Sure, sounds fun,” I said, while Mikey whispered, “What, what, what?” like an overexcited pigeon.

“Awesome! Come by around eight. Bring friends if you want.”

“Yeah, see you then.” I hung up just in time for Mikey to practically pounce on me.

“So? When’s the date?”

“It’s not a date,” I sighed. “We’re going to a party.”

Mikey threw his fist in the air. “That’s my man!”

\*\*\*

We’d just turned on MTV and were about to grab some ice cream and call it a dinner when the worst possible thing happened.

My mom came home earlier.

I tried to shove Mikey out through the back doors, but I wasn’t fast enough. As soon as she saw Mikey sitting in the living room, she slipped into her “cool mom” persona, plastering on the too-bright smile. Without missing a beat, she headed for the kitchen, loudly announcing how “big boys like

us” needed proper food and how she’d whip up something “fun and filling” in no time.

Mikey, because he’s a menace to society, responded with over-the-top politeness: “Of course, Mrs. Reid.” He even bowed and she laughed, because of course she did. I pinched his arm, but he just flinched and grinned like an idiot.

When Mom reappeared, she turned to me with one of her dramatic fake-whispers: “Did you offer Michael anything to drink?” All wide-eyed and wounded, like my lack of hospitality was the real tragedy here.

She always tried so hard. The first time Naya met her, she said my mom was “so sweet.” Just like that. So sweet. I wanted to explode. Because she didn’t see the slammed doors, the pointed looks that pierced you, or the silence that lasted for days. Sometimes I wondered if that version of her—the smiling, glittery one—was the real her, while we, her family, were stuck with some other Mom from a parallel universe. She was like a wolf in Grandma’s skin. Only, instead of eating Grandma, she’d eaten Little Red Riding Hood and sat at the cool kids’ table, pretending to belong.

“I’m not five,” I muttered.

All I could do was grab Mickey by the wrist and drag him outside. As the door closed behind us, we heard her classic send-off: “Well, I’ll just never speak again if my concern is so awful.”

Mikey leaned in, whispering in a terrible British accent, “Would you care for a refreshment, my lord?”

I was about to fire back when he lunged at me, pretending to shove me into the pool. I dodged, pushed him back, and before long, we were both cracking up. We collapsed on the patio, staring up at the sky and trying to name clouds after Pokémon. Mikey pointed at one that looked vaguely like a giant fist and dubbed it “Fistachu.” I told him that one “Fistachu” was about to end up in his face.

“Can you go home?” I grumbled.

“Why would I? I’m the guest of honor. Plus, I bet she’s making taco salad. Wanna guess how many times she’s gonna ask if I like it?”

I rolled my eyes. “Three. Minimum.”

“I’m saying five. With bonus points if she says it’s my favorite.”

We were still laughing and tossing dumb insults back and forth when my mom called us in for dinner.

Predictably, she sat down with us, all charm and forced cheer, immediately zeroing in on Mikey. I tried to focus on chewing lettuce, even as the metallic scrape of her fork against the plate grated on my nerves. The taco salad was good, but the dressing came with an aftertaste of venom. Mom kept talking, asking Mikey if he still liked tomatoes and if he remembered how she made “that famous lemon cake” and how she bet other moms don’t let their kids eat so many sweets. Her voice was way too chipper, her laughs a beat too loud. Mikey played along like a pro—nodding, smiling, “Yes, Mrs. Reid”—ing. But I could see the corners of his mouth twitching.

“Michael,” she beamed. “You don’t come over much anymore.”

“Why sit at home all summer?” Mikey shot me a knowing glance.

She leaned in. “Remember when you two were little, and Michael basically lived here? I used to take you boys out for ice cream all the time. And when I once sneaked up behind the counter and scared you? Maxim dropped his cone!”

I remembered the rest of that story. The part she never mentioned. How she’d yelled at me for crying when she wouldn’t buy me another ice cream, and how she’d pulled the car over on the way home, ordering me to walk alone when I wouldn’t stop sobbing.

She’d come back after five minutes, but as a six-year-old, I was convinced she’d left me there for good. I still remember Mikey’s wide-eyed look, like he might start crying too.

But of course, none of that made it into her cute little story.

I wasn’t sure if she really didn’t remember the stuff the way I did, or if she just needed to rewrite it to believe she’d been the kind of mom she

wanted to be. The kind she thought she deserved credit for. Sometimes it felt like she didn't just hate the things I did. She hated something *about* me. Like I came out wrong. When no one was around, I'd sometimes find myself wondering if she was right, if something inside me was defective.

Mikey gave a nervous chuckle. "Yeah... Pretty sure I dropped mine too—"

"Oh, those were the days," she said with a theatrical sigh. "I was just trying to create memories." She smiled at Mikey. "Hope you still like taco salad. I remembered it was your favorite."

Mikey stuffed his mouth with food to avoid saying anything, though I could see him squirming. He was doing his best to play along, but even he looked like he wanted to merge with the taco salad and disappear.

Mom turned to me. "You've been so quiet, Maxim. You okay?"

I didn't answer right away. Mostly because I didn't trust my mouth not to say something like, *You mean besides being dragged through a highlight reel of fictional childhood joy?*

I just nodded.

"Boys," she said with a sigh, shaking her head fondly. "So hard to get a full sentence out of you."

So she kept going, and just when I thought the performance would stretch on forever, the TV stole her spotlight.

The sultry wail of a sax filled the room, soon joined by breathy, suggestive moans. Naya was oppressed with George Michael's "Outside." But Mom was totally not a fan.

Her smile twitched. Then dropped altogether. "Oh, for heaven's sake," she muttered. "Do they really have to put this kind of thing on in the middle of the day? Don't kids watch this channel?"

Here we go. The "cool mom" mask was peeling off, one eye-roll at a time.

I stared at the TV, pretending I didn't hear her. But Mikey, who had balls of steel, said, "It's just a music video, Mrs. Reid."

She scoffed. “That’s what they want you to think. But it’s not just a video. It’s a message. They act like it’s something to be proud of.”

I clenched my fists under the table. I’d heard this kind of crap before, but somehow this time it hit me somewhere deep inside.

It didn’t make sense.

Mikey shifted in his seat, clearly regretting all his life choices. I couldn’t blame him. The tension in the room was thick enough to choke on, and the look on her face said she’d long stopped pretending—but it felt nothing compared to the way the air shifted the second the two cops onscreen started kissing.

Mom froze mid-chew, and her eyes went wide. For a second, it looked like she might scream, but instead she hissed, “That’s enough.” She yanked the remote and turned off the TV, then threw it onto the couch. It bounced off, hit the floor, and popped open, the batteries rolling out. She didn’t even glance at it. “Serves him right,” she said. “Getting arrested for that kind of filth.”

I blinked while Mikey leaned back in his chair, hands in the air, as if trying to ward off the tension radiating from Mom.

“Honestly, Maxim,” she snapped, “I would expect you not to laugh at your own mother in front of your friends.”

...Had I said anything? My mouth didn’t even move!

She pressed her fingers to her temples. “Perfect. Just perfect. I can’t believe this! Michael, I hope you don’t treat your mom like that.” Then she stormed out.

Mikey and I just sat in stunned silence for a moment. He looked at me, stuck between disbelief and confusion, and as if nothing had happened, he leaned over and whispered, “Guess your mom’s not into doing it outdoors?”

I snorted, not sure whether to laugh or cry. It was all too much.

But even as I tried to shrug it off, her words echoed in my mind, and I could feel something larger looming, something I wasn’t ready to confront yet.

\*\*\*

That night, Andy and I were walking by the Chicago River. The weather was the same as always—neither sunny nor cloudy, just neutral, like the city was stuck in some gray limbo. It might have been dull in the waking world, but here, everything felt different. That was the thing about the dreams: all the sharp edges of the waking world softened. No walking on eggshells around my mom’s moods. No Mikey poking me about girls. No “what the hell am I even doing with my life” cloud hanging over my head. On the outside, I played it cool—cracked jokes, kept things moving—but inside, it was like juggling knives. Here, though, all of that just calmed down.

Which meant my brain had room for dumber things—like bothering Andy.

“What if the dream shifts to the underworld next?” I asked, nudging him with my elbow. “You’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

He gave me a look. “Sure. Nothing screams vacation like a trip on the Styx.”

“Do we get a tour guide for that? Like—‘on your left, endless suffering. On your right, more endless suffering.’”

“Depends,” he said. “If you tip Charon enough, maybe he throws in some snacks.”

“Like what? Flamin’ Hot Cheetos?”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mister Potato-flavored potato chips.”

“You’re such an idiot.”

I grinned at him. I could just toss out the dumbest joke I wanted, and Andy would roll with it. It felt good, like stretching after sitting too long. I hadn’t realized how heavy things had gotten until the weight wasn’t there anymore.

That rush of ease spilled out of me before I could stop it. I snorted. “But just so you know, I’ll just run the hell out of there, so you better keep up. Get it? Run *the hell* out.”

“Please,” Andy said, deadpan. “I was born for dramatic exits.”

“Oh yeah?” I spotted a stop sign at the end of the street. “Last one there’s a rotten egg!” I shouted and took off, not waiting for his response.

I bolted forward like I was stealing home plate. The street stretched out ahead, wide and empty, nothing but streetlights and shadows flickering across the asphalt.

Behind me, Andy yelled, “Those legs aren’t saving you now!”

“Dream on!” I yelled back.

Our laughter carried through the air, bouncing between the buildings. I pushed harder, determined to keep the lead. My breath came fast, but the adrenaline made me feel invincible. This was *my* race. *My* win.

Out of nowhere, the sound of Andy’s footsteps disappeared and I risked a glance over my shoulder.

But he was right there, with that smug grin plastered on his face like he’d been planning this all along.

I snapped my eyes forward, tried to put on another burst of speed, but my foot caught on a crack in the street, and before I could react, I was flying. Just not in the graceful, slow-motion way it happens in dreams.

I kissed the ground, hands and knees scraping against the asphalt.

“A—!” Andy barely had time to register before his weight slammed down on top of me, knocking every bit of air out of my lungs, his bony knee digging straight into my butt cheek.

He rolled off, groaning, then burst out laughing so hard it hurt just to hear it. “That was smooth,” he managed between gasps, his laughter echoing down the street.

I let out a dramatic sigh and flopped onto my back, propping myself up on my elbows. Andy was doubled over on the ground, clutching his stomach and wiping tears from the corners of his eyes.



"I think that makes you a rotten egg," he said, still catching his breath.

"Well, it wasn't exactly the best-prepared track. I'm filing a complaint with the organizers."

He laughed some more, then planted a hand on my thigh to steady himself while getting to his feet.

Except his fingers didn't lift. They pressed a little tighter, warm even through the material. My breath snagged, and a wave of warmth washed over me, mixed with something way too much like excitement. The world seemed to shrink down to that one spot, like every nerve I had decided to tune in at once.

By the time I realized I was straight-up staring, his eyes flicked up and caught mine. For half a second, neither of us moved. Then his eyes went wide. He yanked his hand back, cheeks red, and coughed awkwardly.

It was just a hand. Just a touch. So why was my chest buzzing like it had a helicopter trapped inside?

"Um... Let's go," he said, brushing dirt off his jeans and avoiding my eyes too obviously.

"Right," I managed, though my voice came out weird. I rubbed the spot where his hand had been, trying to shake off the feeling still lingering there. My heart wouldn't calm down, and I wasn't sure if it was from the fall or... something else.

I stood up as the awkwardness settled between us. Andy met my eyes for half a second before looking away.

"I have an idea," he said lightly, but not quite convincingly.

"Yeah?" I rubbed my arm.

His lips twitched into a small, almost hesitant smile. "Let's check a museum."

## IN YOUR CITY BY THE LAKE



When Andy said “museum,” I pictured dinosaur bones, giant taxidermy bears, and maybe a mummy or two. Instead, we ended up in front of a building guarded by two stone lions.

“Art Institute?” I said, already disappointed.

“Why not?” he said, bounding up the steps like it was the coolest place on earth.

“I was hoping for something more exciting.”

“You read comics. Isn’t that art?”

“Of course it is. But I don’t know much about, you know, ‘art’ art.”

He grinned at me over his shoulder. “Art is art, Max.”

I muttered something under my breath, but followed him inside anyway.

The peace hit me the second we stepped through the doors—no broken glass, no overturned furniture like everywhere else in the city. Just this soft

light of an unknown source spilling down through the tall windows, instantly softening my nerves. It felt like the dream had handed us some kind of after-hours VIP pass, all courtesy included. Andy walked ahead, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, moving with an easy confidence, like he'd been here a hundred times. Meanwhile, I was still wound tight from his hand on my thigh earlier, my chest fluttering like an idiot. Every time he glanced back, even for a second, it set me off all over again.

We climbed straight to the second floor, surrounded by paintings that probably cost more than my entire neighborhood. I tried to look like I belonged, reading the little plaques, but honestly, I felt like a kid sneaking into the wrong class.

We turned a corner into a large gallery, where some of the paintings were so massive that they seemed to swallow entire walls.

Andy slowed down, scanning the room. Suddenly, he froze.

"What?" I whispered.

His whole face lit up, brighter than I'd ever seen him. "No way. I can't believe it's here."

He didn't answer right away, just stared at the canvas. I leaned in to read the plaque. *Hercules and Omphale*.

"My mom showed me a picture once," Andy said. "I never thought I'd see it in person. It's supposed to be in the Louvre."

I tried to focus on the painting, telling myself the tightness in my chest was just from being here, not from anything Andy had just done or said. But the knot of confusion still twisted tighter, no matter how hard I stared at Hercules's face.

"I thought Hercules would look more... I dunno. Heroic? That beard's pure lumberjack."

Andy chuckled. "At least he can grow one."

"Rude."

There was a moment of quiet where we just looked at it together. Andy leaned closer, absorbed, and I tried to see what he saw.

“You usually see Hercules all tough and invincible,” he said. “But here he’s stuck doing this domestic stuff, and Omphale’s basically in his hero outfit. It’s weird seeing a guy like that.” He paused. “Comforting, too...”

I wondered if he always got this intense over paintings, or if this was some “dream magic” thing. Either way, it was weirdly captivating.

“My mom used to tell me that even heroes have tough times. That they are not always in control. It helped. If Hercules could get through stuff, maybe I could too.” He shrugged. “Even if I was, like, ten times smaller.”

“Your mom sounds nice,” I said quietly, feeling a little bit jealous.

“She is.”

I focused on the painting again just to give my brain something to do. “Well, Omphale definitely seems into him.”

Andy tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. “Guess so. Wanna see more?”

“Sure.”

So I followed him, like the world’s worst art student trailing the too-cool teacher.

We drifted through a few more rooms—landscapes, saints, people in old-timey clothes. One painting was just a bowl of fruit. I muttered something about how the grapes were so shiny they looked fake, like the ones Mikey once tried to eat off a craft store display. Andy rolled his eyes, but I caught the little smile before he turned away.

And okay... I didn’t get most of the art. But watching Andy tilt his head, lean closer, smile like he was piecing together a puzzle—that part I liked. He lit up over brush strokes and obscure artists, and rambled about things I barely understood. It reminded me of being a kid, sitting on the floor of Marcus’s room while he introduced me to new bands or superheroes. Except Andy never made me feel like I was behind. He was excited to share, not to show off. Even though he knew so much more, I could tell he actually liked explaining things, and I... I liked that he liked it.

A few galleries later, we stopped in front of a painting of two stone-faced people with a pitchfork.

“Oh!” I blurted. “I know this one.”

“Do you, now?”

“It’s from *The Simpsons*.”

He blinked. Then cracked up.

“Don’t laugh. That’s literally where I’ve seen it!”

“It’s also called *American Gothic*. Kind of a big deal.”

“Okay, *professor*. I don’t exactly ace art class.”

What I didn’t say was: *I could destroy you at baseball trivia. Drop me in Comiskey, and I’d wipe the floor with you.*

Andy just shrugged. “Everyone has their thing.”

“Yeah, and yours is making me feel like a moron.”

He shot me a look, softer than I expected. “Nah. You’re refreshingly honest.”

“Sure. Let’s call it that,” I said. “But you know what? Art, I may not know. Dinosaurs, though? Dinosaurs, I *do* know.”

“That so?”

“Oh yeah. I could tell a brachiosaurus from a brontosaurus before I could even spell my own name. Had this plastic stegosaurus that snapped a leg once, so I taped a crayon on as a peg-leg. He lasted about a week before *somehow* dive-bombing straight into Mom’s chicken soup.”

Andy laughed, sharp and surprised, and my stomach instantly noticed. I forced myself to glance away, trying not to smile too much.

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah. But hey—next time we check out that bones-and-stuffed-animals museum and I’ll give you the full Discovery Channel tour.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

We moved on. More halls, more faces staring down from their gold frames like a fancy yearbook for people who hated smiling. A guy in armor

who definitely wanted everyone to know he had muscles. Some kid who looked like he'd had enough of sitting still for his portrait. I tossed out dumb comments here and there, but mostly I let Andy talk.

When we stepped into another room, I had to take a step back.

The painting on the partition wall looked like somebody had eaten a pack of Skittles and barfed it all out. Right in the middle was this pale guy who had definitely seen better days.

"Okay... now this one's nightmare fuel."

"That's Dorian Gray."

"Cool. Who's he, some rich guy who couldn't stop staring at himself... rotting?"

Andy laughed. "Pretty much. He's from a novel. His portrait ages and rots while he stays young and perfect."

"So it's like guilt on canvas?"

"Exactly," he said. "It's one of my favorites."

Something about his tone made me glance at him instead of the painting. "You're into this?"

"Yeah," he said simply. "Wilde wrote it. He was brilliant. And..." He hesitated, just long enough for me to notice. "They locked him up for being... queer."

The word just sat there. Not whispered, not hidden, just... *said*. Like it was as normal as mentioning the weather.

I slipped my hands in my pockets, pretending to study the brushstrokes, pretending I didn't feel something twist in me—sharp and stupid and impossible to name. It wasn't like Andy was even talking about himself. Just some writer. So why did it feel like the air had shifted?

"That's... really messed up," I muttered just to say something.

My eyes stayed on the canvas, but my head was already dragging me backward—outside, his hand on my thigh. The squeeze. The way he'd yanked back...

*Wait.*

*Is Andy...?*

*I mean, even if...*

I shoved the thought away before it could go anywhere, feeling heat rise to my cheeks, embarrassed for even wondering. I told myself I was just making things up, not wanting to dwell on the confusion Andy's words had stirred up.

"Yeah," Andy said. "Makes you realize how unfair people can be."

The silence after wasn't awkward, exactly, but it wasn't comfortable either. I traced the edge of the frame with my finger, as if feeling the rough texture of the paint might somehow ground me. Andy didn't move or look at me. He just stood there, lost in whatever I couldn't read.

"Let's keep moving," I said, desperate to do something. Anything.

Andy gave a quiet nod, and we fell into step. Neither of us said much after that.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Just processing. My brain's slow."

I could tell he was waiting for me to tell him what was really on my mind. But I wasn't sure *what* was on my mind. Instead, I forced a small smile, hoping he'd let it slide.

Upstairs was a whole other world. Modern stuff. Squares inside squares, random lines everywhere, sculptures so trippy I couldn't tell if they were part of the exhibit or just dream junk the place had coughed up. Mikey's sisters could've knocked out most of it during a sugar crash. But hey, what do I know?

I muttered something about "my kid made this in kindergarten" energy, Andy told me to hush, and somehow we were both laughing again.

Near the back, we stopped in front of yet another painting that didn't leave me any room for jokes. It was strange—two people kissing, their faces completely covered in white sheets. Andy's eyes traced every line like he was trying to figure something out.

"They're together but... not really," he said. "Like they're close, but something's still in the way."

"Andy..." I started, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to say. I just sensed it wasn't just about the painting.

"Sorry. I'm... overthinking."

"Hey." I bumped his arm lightly. "Don't apologize for that. Thinking's your thing, remember?"

He laughed under his breath. "Right. But sometimes my brain could just give me a break."

I was about to respond, but my eyes drifted down to the small plaque beneath the painting and my brain just stalled.

*The Lovers.*

I stared, pulse skipping, a little dizzy with the absurdity. The tarot card. The one I'd drawn. I mean, it was a dream but...

No way. Coincidence. That's all it was.

But still, seeing it here, written under *this* painting, with Andy standing right beside me...

I tried to shake it off, but the unease clung anyway, sticky and uncomfortable.

And I wasn't even like *that*.

...Was I?

I risked a glance at Andy. He was studying the painting, calm as ever. Like none of this was hitting him the way it was hitting me. And that only made it worse.

He shifted, catching my face for a second.

"What?" I asked too fast.

He looked away immediately. "Nothing." He bit his lip—those lips I shouldn't have been noticing. "Do you like the painting?"

"Yeah, I guess..."

He dropped his head. Then swallowed. "Look... about earlier..."

My chest tightened again.



“What about it?”

“Back in the city. When you fell. I didn’t mean to make things weird or—”

“It wasn’t,” I said quickly and forced a shrug. “I mean, I didn’t think it was weird. Don’t worry about it.”

But the flash of his fingers pressing into my thigh ambushed me again.

“It’s really okay,” I added, maybe trying to convince myself more than him. “It just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

I tried to focus on the artwork in front of us, but Andy’s hand on my thigh replayed in my head again. And again. It was just balance, just a touch, just—Yeah. I’d already told myself that. So why was I still reliving it over and over?

I wanted to scream.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. Was I misreading something? Or worse—was I *wanting* to?

“I just... I don’t want things to be weird between us,” he said. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

I tried for the most honest smile I could manage. “It’s fine. We’re good.”

He nodded slowly. “Good,” he said, almost under his breath. “I like that we can be honest, you know? About everything. Even stupid stuff...”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to match his tone. But I couldn’t stop my eyes from drifting to him, from noticing the curve of his shoulder, the way his hair caught the light. My pulse went up again. I cleared my throat.

Andy sat on a bench facing the painting. I followed, leaving just enough space—close, but not too close. Normal. Whatever *normal* was.

“You know...” he said. “All this surrealism, all these paintings... It’s a bit like this dream. Don’t you think?”

“You’re asking the wrong guy.”

He gave this almost-laugh, but there wasn’t much sound in it. “I wish we didn’t have to wake up at all.”

The words came out low. Like maybe he hadn't meant to say them out loud.

I didn't know how to respond.

So I didn't. I just looked down at my feet.

Andy shifted slightly, leaning just a little closer. Our knees touched. Not much, but enough for me to feel the space between us shrink.

For a brief moment, I forgot about the painting, the museum, even the dream itself. His hand twitched against his leg, almost moving toward me before he thought better of it. His eyes caught mine, and something unsaid hovered between us. I opened my mouth, but my throat went dry. My fingers clenched the edge of the bench, and it felt like I couldn't move—or breathe—or... no clue, but the dream didn't even give me a chance to figure this out.

My stomach dropped, like I'd missed a stair in the dark and—

I shot upright in bed, wide awake.

The Hermit card lay on my lap. I stared at it, heart pounding as dawn crept through my window, and shoved it to the floor. *Shit*. It must've fallen from the ceiling, smacked me in the face, and woke me up.

I fell back against the pillow and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to get back into the dream. I flipped onto my side, then my back, then buried my face in the pillow, but every position felt wrong. After what felt like forever, I gave up. My brain was doing laps, and my body wouldn't stay still. A groan slipped out as I dragged my hands down my face. I hadn't meant to leave, but here I was, stuck in my stupid room while Andy was probably thinking I'm an asshole.

I punched the pillow.

Awesome. A whole day to kill. Ten bucks says I chew through half the fridge just to keep from climbing the walls.

## IT'S JUST A SILLY PHASE



The whole day—as predicted—I was a mess. Not the usual waiting-to-fall-asleep-again kind of. This was different. Heaviness-in-your-stomach kind of different.

Time didn't move so much as slump forward. I wandered from the living room to the kitchen and back, opening the fridge every ten minutes like something new might've appeared. I tried flipping through channels, but after a while, the shows all blurred into the same noise. I picked up Marcus's old Game Boy, lost a battle, and set it down again. I stacked a few CDs, reshuffled them, dug through the junk drawer. Three pens, no caps. I clicked them a few times, tossed them back. No matter what I did, I ended up staring at the clock.

Every so often, I caught myself thinking about last night, that stupid touch, and the way my chest had felt like it might explode. I told myself I

was overreacting—massive drama queen, Max—but that didn’t stop the loop in my head. I paced a little, kicked at the carpet, stared out the window at the street below.

Maybe I wasn’t a very touchy guy, but I’d held hands with girls, cuddled when asked, done all the stuff. With *girls*. With guys, it was different: quick shoulder punches, half-hugs, patting backs, or some dumb locker-room ass-slapping. Nothing you thought about twice. Not... *that*. No accidental leg touch ever made me lose my mind.

Thank god Dad told me to help him with the car, because I was pretty sure I was about to crawl out of my skin.

He was already under the hood when I joined him on the driveway, his silhouette hunched over the engine. He didn’t look up.

“Pass me the ratchet,” he said. That was it.

I grabbed the tool, handed it over, and watched him tighten bolts with that slow, methodical twist he used on everything: the mower, the bikes, me. He muttered something that might have been a joke if I didn’t know him, and then fell silent again.

We changed the tire, checked the oil, and did some other things. I just followed his instructions. He muttered a few dry comments; I shot a couple back. Lovely afternoon with my father. But for a little while, grease on my hands quieted my head just enough.

By the time we finished, the light had gone soft and gold. Dad backed the car into the garage just as the chimera—I mean Mom—returned to her lair—I mean pulled into the driveway, back from the market. She popped the trunk, already mid-talk with our neighbor, Mrs. Shaw, and waved at me to start unloading bags.

On my way back for the second round, I slowed when I heard my name.

“...oh, he can be helpful,” she said with a laugh that sounded more like a sigh, “when he wants to be.”

Mrs. Shaw chuckled like it was a joke. I didn’t. Mom noticed me, and her smile sharpened. “Most of the time, he never lifts a finger unless forced,” she

added, still all sweetness. Her words stung like a thorn hidden beneath a rose. I felt my shoulders stiffen, and my face went hot, while the two bags cut into my fingers, but I forced a smile and walked past them like I hadn't heard a thing. Back in the kitchen, I dumped the groceries on the counter harder than I meant to. An apple rolled out and thudded to the floor.

The house felt too small again, too alive. I shoved all the frozen food into the freezer as fast as I could and decided I needed some space. I needed a moment to just exist, without anyone watching.

I made my way to the attic, climbed through the window, and finally onto the roof. The air was still warm, wrapping around me as I sat with my knees up, trying to unspin myself. Usually, thinking about Andy was enough to take the edge off. But tonight, it wasn't.

Perched like a gargoyle, I watched the neighborhood carry on below. From up here, it all looked far away and annoyingly easy. I wondered what Andy was doing—if he was real, of course—if he was somewhere waiting to fall asleep too. Maybe he had his own hideout. I pictured him lying in bed, thinking about me the way I was thinking about him, with that same quiet urgency neither of us could explain.

Mom came into the backyard to pick up the laundry. For half a second, guilt pricked at me for thinking of her as some kind of monster. But sometimes it was easier to imagine her as something monstrous than to admit how much her words actually hurt.

I knew I wasn't perfect. I made smartass comments, talked back all the time, pushed Mom's buttons. Some days, I didn't want to hate her. But it was hard not to, when even silence felt like a trap. Sometimes pretending she was a monster made it easier to cope—but it didn't change anything. When the anger faded, it wasn't the chimera I was left with. It was my mom. And no matter what she did, part of me still wanted her to love me back.

I slid further behind the dormer to get out of her vision and caught my hand on the sharp edge of a shingle. I pressed my palm to my side and hissed, hoping she hadn't noticed. That would just earn me a lecture about

destroying the roof—and a warning that she wouldn't be my servant if I broke a leg.

Once Mom went back inside, I crawled through the attic window and shut it behind me. My hand throbbed, so I headed downstairs to the bathroom, tore off some toilet paper, and pressed it to the cut until the bleeding slowed. The sting was sharp, but nothing serious.

The mirror cabinet was a chaos of Mom's makeup, cosmetics, and amber pill bottles—too much of everything as always. I nudged a few things aside, hunting for a Band-Aid and careful not to start an avalanche, when one bottle caught my eye.

Her sleeping pills.

I'd seen it before—a boring, little bottle tucked behind moisturizer. Today, though, it read differently, and the sight made my fingers itch.

Was this my express ticket to Andy? It felt wrong and a little brilliant. But the idea had teeth now.

I closed the cabinet and stood there for a long moment, watching my reflection watching me. I took out a single red-and-blue pill and rolled it in my fingers, which instantly made me think of *The Matrix*. What would happen if I only took the red half? Would I have some revelation? Would I “wake up” and realize real life was an illusion? Was I Neo, and he was Trinity? Or perhaps the other way around. No—Andy had to be Neo since he knew kung fu. Or Morpheus showing me the truth? Jesus, I needed a different kind of pill.

Back in my room, I swallowed it dry. I didn't know what would happen next—if it would knock me out cold like a chloroform rag or do nothing at all—so I just grabbed the first comic off my nightstand and started flipping. At first, it made sense, but then the panels started to blur. Words repeated themselves, and I realized I'd read the same sentence several times.

I let my eyes drift shut, just for a second. The comic slipped from my hands, forgotten, and the heaviness pulled me under before I even knew it.

When I blinked open, I was back on the bench in the Art Institute. I scanned the empty room looking for Andy. He was always first in the dreams. He was always waiting.

I hadn't noticed how loud the silence was when Andy had been with me. Now it pressed in from all sides, thick and unnatural.

"Andy?" I called, expecting him to show up.

Nothing.

My stomach did a small, traitorous flip, one of those "this isn't right" flips that make your skin go prickly. I tried again, louder, and started walking, sure he was just in the next room.

Checking room after room, I half-expected him to be absorbed in some weird, unexplainable painting—so wrapped up he didn't hear me. But the deeper I went, the more the place felt off. At first, they were tiny things: a paint catching light like a real eye, a cheekbone that threw a shadow a hair too deep, or brushstrokes that looked more like veins under skin. But the longer I looked, the stranger they became. A man in a top hat had a smirk that seemed to twitch whenever I looked away, like it wanted to spread but couldn't. One Victorian woman's mouth looked wetter than paint had any right to be, as if she'd just licked her lips. When I walked into the next gallery, the faces in the frames looked like they'd just finished laughing—smiles still tugging at the corners of their mouths, eyes too bright, too knowing. Like I'd walked in on the joke a second too late and now they were all daring me to ask what was so funny. Their eyes tracked me, but not in the sleepy, spooky way paintings do. These moved with intent. When I held still, the corner of a painted mouth still looked like it wanted to move. My palms went slick.

Finding Dorian Gray felt like a relief. For about ten seconds before his cheek started peeling, like he knew I'd let my guard down. I swear I smelled something damp and rotten, but after a blink, it was back to normal. I still picked up the pace.

"Andy! Where the fuck are you..."

The statues were the worst. They didn't actually move—at least I couldn't see them move—but they felt different, like someone had shifted their weight just out of sight. I was sure they hadn't been like that last night. Every time I turned my back, a soft pressure settled at the base of my neck, the hairs on my shoulders standing up like they knew something I didn't. I'd spin around as quickly as I could to catch them in the act, but they'd be stone-still and innocent. Though that pressure stayed—heavy and knowing.

My footsteps echoed, but when I stopped, the sound didn't. It kept going, like someone else was following a beat behind me. I looked over my shoulder, but there was nothing, just polished floor and empty air.

I felt like I had enough. For a moment, I wanted to wake up. If Andy was here, he'd have shown up already—he always waited, always hung around. Horror movies taught me to run from places that watch you, not poke around like the idiot who always dies first. The sensible thing was to wake up. The stubborn, stupid thing was to keep going.

Well, I *was* stubborn. And stupid. And also slightly nauseous.

I took the stairs up. At least they were supposed to go up. Instead, they dumped me into the same hallway I'd just left. I turned a corner and the same portraits stared back. I went down a corridor that should've opened onto another gallery and instead spat me back to a door I'd passed five minutes ago. My heartbeat felt loud enough that anything in the museum could hear it.

Every time I pushed through a doorway thinking Andy had to be right there, I landed back in the grand hall. Like it wanted me out and wouldn't let me go at the same time. I wanted to scream something witty and defiant, but all I managed was “Andy” like a kid who lost his favorite toy. I called his name again and again, more desperate every minute, but after yet another eyeless bust somehow staring straight into my soul, I stopped, afraid I was just making them angry.



Then something changed, just a shift in the air, as if the building had taken a breath. I heard my name—the exact tone Andy used when he wanted me to stop being an idiot.

“Andy—?”

I turned fast as a cold weight hit my shoulder. I slapped at it hard, but my fingers found nothing, only a chill and the memory of pressure where something had been touching me a second ago.

The voice said my name again, closer.

*Oh, hell no.*

That was the last straw. I didn’t hang around to figure out if the statues were about to step down and chase me. I shoved through the nearest set of doors, shoulder-first—

—and nearly crashed into something.

“Andy!” The word burst out of me before I even thought.

He stumbled backward, almost tripping over a display case, but caught himself on the edge. Wide-eyed, he let out a long breath. “Max...”

“Where were you?! I’ve been yelling my lungs out!”

“I was looking for you! I kept hearing you, but every time I followed it, you weren’t there!” He gestured wildly, almost knocking over another sculpture.

I exhaled, the sound breaking into a laugh. “Well, I found you.”

“I thought you weren’t coming back...”

I took another step. “I thought I was going to be stuck here by myself. This place is pretty creepy when you’re alone—”

Andy closed the few steps between us and wrapped his arms around me. My body froze. I didn’t know whether to hug back or pull away. But he didn’t let go. He just held on like he didn’t need anything from me at all.

I breathed in the worn leather of his jacket, the warmth sinking through every layer and settling into my bones. It felt steady, solid—a reassurance that melted some of the hesitation inside me. My hands finally lifted, settling against his back. For a moment, I almost forgot it was just a dream. His arms

stayed steady around me, loosening some knot in my chest I hadn't even realized I'd been carrying.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed every painted face in the room staring straight at us.

"Nope. I'm out of here." I pulled free, ignoring the flicker of surprise that crossed Andy's face, and made a break for the exit.

"Max—wait!" Andy's voice chased me as fast as his footsteps.

I shoved through the museum doors and stumbled onto the street. Andy caught up a second later, grinning like a jerk.

"You nearly took the doors off their hinges."

"Better the doors than me."

He barked a laugh. "New record for fastest freak-out."

"If you make another joke, I'm haunting you in your sleep."

"Well, technically..."

"Shut up," I muttered, rubbing my arms, blaming the goosebumps on the museum's creepy halls, not the fact that my brain was still replaying how solid and warm Andy had felt when he hugged me. I was annoyingly good at hanging onto things I didn't ask for.

I shook myself like a wet dog, which only made Andy give me a look.

"Cold," I muttered. Totally convincing.

That's when I felt eyes on me *again*. My head jerked that way, but it was just a life-sized cardboard cutout of Michael Jordan in a souvenir shop window across the street, forever mid-dunk.

Andy bumped my shoulder. "See? Perfect. You really need a distraction."

"A distraction?"

"You're jumpy as hell tonight," he said, already crossing the street.

A little bell jingled when we pushed into the shop. It looked like most places in dream-Chicago: half-ransacked, shelves crooked, dust hanging in the air. It was overstuffed with keychains, way too many mugs, and foam fingers, everything covered in skyline prints or Chicago Bulls logo.

Andy threw a foam finger at me. "'#1 Tourist.' That's you."

“Finally, some recognition,” I said, throwing it back at him.

He caught it with his kung fu reflex, smirked, and drifted toward a rack of T-shirts. I trailed after him, mostly because the idea of Andy picking me an outfit sounded like a nightmare. And I wasn’t wrong as he yanked out a neon green one plastered with a giant winking hot dog.

“This one’s... eye-catching.”

“I would rather go butt naked.”

He held it up to my chest anyway. “Honestly? You could pull it off. Might even distract the monsters.”

I sighed and dug until I found a plain black shirt with “Chicago” in red. Tight, but at least there was no fucking hot dog.

I tugged my long-sleeve and Offspring shirt over my head and shrugged into the Chicago one, just to joke around. But when I saw Andy smiling, putting my favorite shirt back on felt suddenly... pointless.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “You look like a true Chicagoan.”

I snorted, about to fire back when my eyes landed on a toppled postcard stand near the gift shop’s entrance. I crouched and grabbed one off the cards with the gray Chicago skyline on it.

I stared at it while my brain hummed and sputtered.

*Ding-ding!*

“Andy.”

He looked up, still smiling.

“Postcard,” I said, holding it up.

“You planning to write yourself a letter?”

“No. *You* are.”

That wiped the grin right off his face.

“You said you live in Chicago,” I said. “You don’t want to call me or give me your number—fine. But if you’re real—*really* real—send me this. No return address.” I held the card out for him to take, but he just stared. I needed something solid to cling to in this surreal experience that always felt

on the edge of slipping away. “It’s just a postcard. Just... something that proves you exist outside of this.”

His whole posture stiffened. “I told you—I couldn’t remember your number,” he said flatly. “And I thought we already agreed we are both real.”

“I want to believe that,” I said, heartbeat rising. “But it’s hard, okay? You won’t tell me anything. And I’m out here telling you my life, my problems, my mom’s full résumé of trauma—and you keep hiding.”

“I’m not hiding.”

“You’re hiding in *here*. And it only makes me feel like maybe I just made you up.”

Andy’s eyes darkened; the light, playful energy from moments ago gone. He stepped back, putting more distance between us. “Well, I didn’t make *you* up. I don’t need to prove anything.”

I stepped toward him. “I just... If these dreams disappear tomorrow, I’ll have nothing left.” I said, softer now. “Not even a goodbye. I need it, Andy. I need to know for one hundred percent that it’s not just in my head. Because if it’s not real—if you’re not real—what does that say about me? I don’t think I could handle that.”

“Well, it *is* in your head. And mine.”

“You know what I mean!”

“No, I *don’t*! I don’t need any proof. I *know* you’re real—”

“Then please, just do this one thing! I just... I need *something*.”

“And what if I don’t?”

I hesitated. Yeah... what then? “I... I dunno.”

He stared at me for a long time, jaw tight, fingers picking at the edge of a shelf lined with snow globes. The silence dragged on until I had to look away.

I exhaled, already rehearsing my apology, trying to figure out how to take it all back as my hand dropped with the postcard still in it. Of course, he wasn’t going to do it. Why would he? He couldn’t. He wasn’t real.

“Forget it,” I muttered. “It’s stupid anyway. Forget I asked—”

"Fine," he said quietly. "I'll do it."

I blinked, not believing what I'd just heard. "You will?"

"Yeah. Just don't get your hopes up too much. It's only a postcard."

It wasn't *only* a postcard. It was a connection, a thread tying our two worlds together. And in this strange place, it was everything I needed. The postcard wasn't just proof; it was a promise.

I forced a smile, trying to lighten the air between us. "Good. Then I'm cashing in my end of the deal. Time for the great Jurassic Park experience."

That at least got a huff out of him, the corner of his mouth twitching before he looked away.

For the rest of the dream, we wandered through the Field Museum, drifting from exhibit to exhibit like kids on a school trip, laughing at the creepy stuffed animals and pretending everything was fine. Andy laughed with me, but he was quieter, more careful with his words. His usual teasing was gone. And I knew why. I'd pushed him. I'd crossed a line. Again.

I couldn't help it—I wanted to make this as real as possible. I knew I should've left it alone; let things stay soft and dreamy and simple. But I wanted more than dream-world fragments and maybes. What if the dreams ended, out of nowhere, and I lost contact with Andy for good? We were facing so many unknowns, and I only wanted to be sure of one thing: that he was real.

It didn't help when I mentioned I was going to a party the next day, and he said he wished he could come with me.

*You can, Andy. Just tell me where to find you. Meet me. And then maybe I wouldn't feel stuck between two worlds, always waiting for night to come, always wondering where you are when I can't reach you.*

## YOU CAN SAY WHAT YOU WANT



Andy said my address was easy to remember, so I was counting on him to keep his promise about the postcard. I didn't know when—or even if—I'd receive it, since the dream could just make him forget the address, but I was already picturing myself camping out by the mailbox like a lunatic, waiting for something that might never come.

At this point, there were only two possibilities: Andy wouldn't send the postcard, or he wasn't real. And if the second option were true, well... I'd have to deal with it.

The day dragged on as always, but somehow the party was already here. Mikey was waiting outside his house when I rolled up on my bike. After a quick hello, we told his parents the usual excuse about a movie marathon before heading out (my parents never asked questions—as long as I wasn't arrested or missing by morning, they called it good parenting). I let Mikey do

the pedaling, balancing on the back pegs and holding his shoulders as we cruised through the neighborhood. It was smooth sailing until we passed a car full of girls from school, in outfits that made Mikey nearly forget how to steer. One girl—Bonnie, whom I'd dated earlier this year—pointedly ignored us, even as her friends waved with too much enthusiasm.

After picking up Naya on our way, we headed for Jenny's house. Naya hopped on behind me, while Mikey got stuck riding her way-too-small bike. Watching him wobble along, knees practically hitting the handlebars, had me laughing so hard I almost crashed myself.

When we reached Jenny's place, the street was packed. Cars lined the driveway, the lawn was littered with abandoned bikes, and the muffled bass of music thumped from inside the house.

"This is crazy. Do her parents not care about this?" Naya hopped off the bike and smoothed her skirt.

Mikey shrugged, letting Naya's bike fall on the grass alongside the others. "Maybe they're one of those cool parents. Or the neighbors don't snitch."

"Do you think all the parties during senior year will be like that?" I asked as we made our way up the driveway.

"Hell yeah! Tonight, we are getting *waaasteed!* And yes, I *might* regret it at work tomorrow."

Naya snorted. "Yeah, good luck with that hangover."

"Hey, I pace myself... sometimes." He grinned. "Besides, it's senior year! We gotta make it count. This is the start of our legacy, people!"

"Your legacy is going to be a bunch of tragic tattoos and bad decisions," I added.

Mikey elbowed me lightly. "You say that now, but just wait. In twenty years, we'll look back on this night and be like, *that's when it all started.*"

Naya raised an eyebrow. "Started what? Mid-life crisis?"

"Promise me you won't get too wasted to remember it," I said, though I knew better than to expect it.

Mikey threw an arm around my shoulder, his grin as wide as ever. “No promises, Maxie. No promises.”

Jenny’s house was a full-blown mansion. Her parents were surgeons or something equally overachieving, and it showed. The lawn was huge and perfectly trimmed, with towering hedges that practically screamed, *Stay out, you pathetic peasants*. The house was modern and sleek, with giant windows that made it feel more like an art gallery than a home. The walkway had tiny lights leading to the door, almost like a red carpet. The place reeked of serious money.

I’d been to Jenny’s place a couple of times while dating her cheerleader friends. The house was kind of the default hangout for that whole squad—probably because it was huge and fancy and her parents didn’t seem to care who came over. Jenny was usually busy, glued to her then-boyfriend, so we never talked much, just the occasional “hey” in the kitchen or fake-smile nod from across the room. But I knew the place: the biggest bedroom at the end of the hall, a fridge stocked like a corner store, and—no joke—a full-on private movie theater in the basement. Actual theater seats. Popcorn machine. Rich kid perks.

As we got closer, the front door kept swinging open and shut, letting out clouds of smoke, and judging by the skunky smell, no one was lighting Marlboros. It swung open again with a bang, and a guy I didn’t recognize stumbled out. His pupils were huge, swallowing up the color. He gave us both a once-over, his stare lingering a little too long on Naya, who blushed and looked away.

Mikey clocked it instantly and, without missing a beat, grabbed her hand and guided her past him. “Excuse us,” he said, bumping the guy’s shoulder just enough to make a point. He looked back at me. “You coming, Max?”

“Yeah,” I said as the guy reached out and grabbed my shoulder.

He smiled crookedly and held out his palm, revealing a few bright, candy-like pills. “Want some?”

“Uh, no thanks.” I cringed, slipping past him as quickly as I could.



Inside, it wasn't exactly what I'd pictured.

The place was packed—and not with the usual high school crowd. Older faces, louder voices, people who didn't care about curfews. College kids filled the foyer and stairs, some high, others dancing like they couldn't even hear the music. Beer bottles and red cups covered every surface. In one corner, a couple was basically eating each other's faces; in another, a shirtless guy mixed drinks at a folding table while a few girls cheered him on, already wobbling in their heels. By the staircase, a group of frat-looking guys played some drinking game until one tripped and took out their cup pyramid. A few football guys hovered near the stairs, laughing too loudly, like maybe that would make them fit in.

And it wasn't even nine p.m.

"Dude," Mikey said, wide-eyed. "You didn't say this was gonna be a frat party."

I shrugged. "Still free booze."

For the first hour or so, we stuck together in the backyard. We played a couple of drinking games, raided the snack table, and watched some guy try—and fail—to backflip into the pool. Mikey kept trying to convince Naya to shotgun a beer, and she kept trying to pretend she didn't know either of us. It was chaotic in a fun way. For a little while, it actually felt like summer.

Eventually, I split up, not even sure when or how. Jenny was nowhere to be found, which was kind of funny, considering she was the reason I was even here. Not that it was weird; this was basically how I always ended up spending time in her house—without her. I ducked back inside, beer in hand. I recognized a few faces, but none I cared to talk to.

I was halfway through my drink, debating if I should go find Mikey again, when a voice cut through the music.

"Yo! Reid!"

Speaking of people I didn't want to talk to.

Kyle Silva blocked my path like he owned the place. Captain of the football team. Jenny's ex. The guy who cheated on her with the girl now draped

over him—Tanya, who should’ve been Jenny’s ex-best friend by now, but I never really got how girl code worked.

Silva was built like a defensive lineman’s nightmare. Thick arms, chest like a damn fridge, and louder-than-you arrogance. He flashed me the cocky grin he always wore, the kind that made you want to knock it right off his face. We weren’t exactly enemies, but some unspoken tension always hung between us. Mikey suggested Silva was jealous of the girls I’d dated, while he stuck with just one, but ever since the football coach approached me two years ago, asking me to join as a quarterback—Silva’s famous spot—he’s been giving me death stares. I usually avoided him, except when I had no choice.

Like right now.

He leaned in, shouting over the music, “What are you doing here, Reid?”

“What do you mean, Silva? I was invited.” I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction of knowing that if I hadn’t called Jenny at the last minute, I probably wouldn’t have been here. “I’m surprised *you’re* here,” I shot back, nodding toward Tanya. “And her.”

Tanya didn’t seem to catch my meaning—either too drunk or too high to notice—but Silva bristled. His arm dropped from her shoulders, as well as his smile. “Jenny’s still crazy about me,” he said, puckering his lips like there wasn’t another girl clinging to him. “But I don’t know what she was thinking, inviting you. Stick to your little league, Reid. This is where the real athletes hang out.”

God, he really said that out loud. What was next? Calling me a cupcake? I couldn’t stand this guy. He was just so damn full of himself.

“You’re right, Silva. You seem at home here, with all the trash lying around.”

His glare burned into me, sharp and unflinching, and I swore he was about to lunge, but someone grabbed my arm and yanked me back, cutting him off.

“Hi, Max!” Jenny beamed.

Silva and Tanya froze like deer in headlights. Unlike most people here, Jenny at least looked sober. I usually didn't drink much myself since I never liked the taste and never understood why my dad enjoyed it so much. But I had to admit, when I did drink, I could disappear for a little while.

"Hey." I smiled back at her awkwardly. It wasn't like I had a crush on Jenny. I was always smooth with girls, but she had this overwhelming presence. Her extra-long blonde hair, usually tied in a high ponytail, was down tonight, cascading to her hips like something out of a shampoo commercial. Her lashes were impossibly long, almost cartoonish, but somehow they worked for her. And the dress was tight enough to give guys whiplash.

"What the fuck, Jenny?" Silva grumbled, standing taller. "Why'd you invite this troll?"

"If he's a troll, he's a damn handsome one." Jenny rested her cheek on my arm like we were closer than we actually were. She was tall for a girl. She was about the same height as Andy...

And just like that, he was in my head again.

I shoved the thought aside, trying to gently pull away from Jenny, but she just clung to me like we were in on some inside joke I didn't quite get. Was she trying to make Silva jealous?

"Anyway, Kyle, I can invite whoever I want," Jenny said. "This is my house, after all."

Silva's face darkened, and I thought he might blow up. But he just scoffed, muttering, "Whatever," before spinning on his heel like some diva and stalking deeper into the house, Tanya stumbling after him.

Jenny tugged me toward the kitchen, unbothered. "Let's get a drink!"

I tried to focus on the moment, but it all felt thin. Like I was supposed to be enjoying this, but part of me had checked out the second Silva left. Or maybe the second Andy entered my thoughts.

In the kitchen, it was a little less deafening. Some guy poured me a drink that looked like it had been brewed in someone's bathtub, while Jenny grabbed a Zima.

“You okay?” she asked, leaning against the counter.

“Yeah,” I said. “Silva’s just a pain in the ass.”

She laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. *Just like Andy*—“Don’t let him get to you. He’s bitter because you don’t care what he thinks.”

Or maybe he was just bitter she’d picked me to play jealousy-bait for the night.

I took a sip of my drink and winced. It tasted like gasoline with a sugar chaser. “I wasn’t expecting... this.” I waved my cup vaguely toward the living room.

Jenny giggled, but she kept glancing toward the living room. Probably looking for her ex.

So I just asked, “Did you invite me to make Silva jealous?”

“What? No. Of course not.” She shook her head. “Does it look like that?”

“Kinda, yeah. And Tanya? Thought you were done with both of them.”

She tilted her head and gave me this coy, almost flirty look. “Max, you’re cute when you’re worried.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Don’t worry about it.”

I noticed a group of girls whispering in the kitchen’s corner. My ex Bonnie was one of them, and when she saw me looking, she practically sprinted out of the room. All I’d said when we broke up was that it “wasn’t working” and called her “nice.” I wasn’t great at breakups. I preferred when girls dumped me. It saved a lot of trouble.

Jenny leaned in. “You’ve got quite the effect on the ladies, Max.”

I smirked reflexively but leaned back just enough to put some space between us. “What can I say? It’s a blessing and a curse.”

She took another sip—longer this time as her fingers skimmed down my arm. I used to be okay with stuff like that, but now it felt like I was being

steered somewhere I didn't wanna go. And I didn't even know where this new feeling was coming from.

"A curse, huh? You sure it's not just a blessing?"

"Um... maybe?" I chugged the rest of my drink, already reaching for a beer.

It was clear where she was heading, but all I felt was discomfort. Her touch lacked warmth or steadiness. It was heavy, like I was being cornered.

Jenny nudged me, still grinning, but before she could say more, her gaze snapped toward the door. A girl walked in who looked just like her—same confidence, same sharp features—but with shorter hair and way more presence. She didn't just enter the room; she *arrived*.

"Hey, Max. Haven't seen you in forever," Jenny's sister said, leaning on the counter, eyes locked on mine like I was the only person in the room. "You got taller—and cuter."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Get lost, Jessie. You have your friends."

"But yours are way more interesting," Jessie said, still laser-focused on me.

My head felt fuzzy, like I couldn't quite track everything at once.

"How's your brother?" Jessie asked, ignoring her sister's glare.

"Good. He—"

"Might wanna check on your people, sis. I saw that redhead smoking Daddy's cigars again."

Jessie's smirk faltered as she shot Jenny a glare. "You're such a snitch." She flicked her hair, eyes darting toward the door. "Whatever. I'll deal with it." Her smile snapped back into place as she turned to me. "Nice to see you, Max. If you want real fun, come find me later." With a wink and a blown kiss, she swayed out of the kitchen, her hips moving way too much.

For a few seconds, Jenny just stared after her, knuckles white around her bottle.

"I hate her," Jenny spat.

I blinked, shaking my head as my brain tried to catch up.

“She was always hitting on Kyle when we were together. I’m surprised he didn’t fuck her instead of Tanya. Actually, maybe he did. Who knows.”

She took another sip. Her eyes flicked toward the hallway. “I told her—some of these people are just punks. They won’t last in college. But no, she’s always dragging them here. Always pushing Daddy’s buttons. And now that she’s in college, I only see her when our parents aren’t around, and she’s bringing these... types into our house.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. Something about Jenny’s reaction felt uncomfortably familiar. And Jessie walking out like that—it reminded me of Marcus. The way he left. The way he reached out half-assed, like checking a box. It wasn’t enough. Though I hadn’t exactly tried either.

Maybe that’s just how it goes with siblings. You grow up together and still end up on different planets.

Jenny exhaled sharply and took another sip of her drink, her gaze drifting over the party. For a moment, she seemed done venting, lost in thought, before she turned back to me like she’d just remembered I was still there.

“Be honest, Max. Why didn’t you call me?”

The question came so fast I nearly inhaled my drink.

God. Was this what I sounded like when I grilled Andy?

“I—”

“You don’t think I’m pretty? Is that it? Or do you think Jessie’s prettier?”

I scrambled. “Of course, you’re pretty, Jenny.”

Her smile came back, but her eyes were all business. “Still didn’t call, though.”

I took a long sip, trying to buy some time. I hated this part. The tiptoe part. Where you try not to say something that’ll blow everything up. Where nothing feels honest, because everything’s too carefully worded. It wasn’t like I had any bad intentions. I just didn’t feel the same way she did. But how to say it without making everything worse?

Jenny tossed back her drink, her cheeks redder now. “Guys like you...” she slurred a little. “You always think you’re too cool for girls like me. Am I just another option, Max?”

“I—no. It’s not that.”

Her smile faded, and I couldn’t tell if she was genuinely upset or just drunk. She put her empty bottle down and fixed her eyes on the floor. “I just... thought we had something.”

*We had something?* This was getting way too heavy, way too fast. My eyes darted over the crowd, desperate to find anyone who could swoop in and rescue me from this. It was a stupid idea to come here, stupid to even call her in the first place. A party’s a party, but now I was mixed up in things I definitely didn’t want to be involved in.

Jenny grabbed another Zima, her movements looser now. We stood there for a second—her sipping, me pretending not to drown in the awkward silence. Probably just awkward for me, though. She was buzzed enough not to notice the weight in the air.

Then, like none of that had happened, she perked up as a new song started.

“Oh my god, I love this song!” she shouted, all smiles again, and grabbed my arm.

I barely had time to react before she was dragging me out of the kitchen. I downed the rest of my drink in one go—it burned like hell, but if I was going to survive this night, I needed something to take the edge off—and tossed the empty bottle onto the counter as she pulled me back into the chaos of the living room.

The next thing I knew, we were swallowed up by the crowd. The bass thudded in my chest as Jenny dove into the dance. She threw her arms around my neck and pressed herself against me, her hips swaying to the beat of Third Eye Blind’s “New Girl.” The room was thick with the overwhelming smell of weed and too many sweaty bodies crammed together, heat rose off the crowd, and the whole thing was losing its appeal fast.

I wasn't dancing so much as trying to keep Jenny upright. She was all over the place—wild, sloppy, completely lost in the music. Over the heads of the crowd, I spotted Mikey and Naya tearing up the dance floor. Mikey caught my eye and shot me a grin, wiggling his eyebrows, and just to really drive it home, he made a subtle-as-a-brick-to-the-face gesture with his fist and tongue in his cheek.

"You go, tiger!" he shouted.

I shot him a desperate look, silently begging for help, but he ignored it and just spun Naya around in a dramatic twirl.

Jenny leaned closer, assaulting my ear as her grip around my neck tightened, and all I could think was: *Why the hell did I come here?*

Oh, right—so I wouldn't think about my dreams. Not like they didn't creep into my mind anyway, slipping in when I least expected them.

Jenny draped herself over me, swaying unsteadily as she sang, "You! You! You!" Everyone around us was trashed, and it felt like I was the only one trying to hold things together. But alcohol clouded my head too, and Jenny's weight on me wasn't helping.

Across the room, Kyle Silva was sprawled on a couch with Tanya perched on his lap. They were laughing, but the second Silva noticed me with Jenny, his smile vanished, and he shoved Tanya off his lap like she was just some pillow. She didn't even seem to care as she leaned on the guy next to her, who was too busy taking a hit from a bong to notice. My gaze must've lingered too long because Silva's face darkened with drunken fury. He shoved his way off the couch and into the crowd, heading straight for us, his massive shoulders parting the sea of people like a battering ram.

"Shit," I muttered. I grabbed Jenny's arm and started pulling her out of the crowd. She hardly noticed, still laughing and mumbling incoherently as I steered her through the crush of bodies. Silva was a few feet behind us, shouting Jenny's name, and I wasn't in the mood to deal with an angry, drunk football player tonight. Or ever, really.



The song's beat pounded through the house, rattling the walls. Jenny, oblivious to her ex's rampage, giggled as I led her. "Where are we going?" she asked, her voice almost drowned out by the music.

I was scanning the room for her sister, hoping she could take Jenny off my hands and spare me from whatever this was turning into. But her sister was nowhere to be found.

*"And then she gets in bed with you!"*

"Away," I said, eyes darting around for an escape route.

I guided her upstairs—it helped that I could navigate the place easily. Jenny giggled and tripped over her own feet, leaning on me, but we managed to make it to her room. I practically shoved her inside, slammed the door shut, and locked it behind us. Almost immediately, Silva banged on the door with all his might.

"JENNY, OPEN UP! WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?" His voice boomed through the thin wood as he yanked at the handle like a man possessed. The whole doorframe shuddered, and for a second, I half-expected him to go full *The Shining* and burst through the door with an axe.

Jenny flipped him off through the door, grinning wildly like this was all a game. "FUCK OFF, YOU ASSHOLE!"

Silva's pounding grew more violent, and I pressed my weight against the door just in case. "You think you can replace me with this little shit? Huh?! Is that what this is? Is this what you want now?!"

Jenny laughed, stumbling backward into the dresser as she pointed at the door. "Replace you? Kyle, honey, I'm *upgrading*."

I shot her a wide-eyed look. "Jenny, stop! You're making it worse."

"You scared of big, bad Kyle?"

"No, I'm scared he's going to break this goddamn door down."

As if to prove my point, Silva slammed into the door again, and it bowed inward under his weight. "YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY? I'LL FUCK-ING KILL YOU, REID!"

I threw my shoulder into the door, yelling, “GO SUCK A DICK!”

The banging stopped, but Silva’s muffled voice came through, dripping with venom. “You’re dead, Reid. Just wait.”

Silva was usually all bark and no bite. But this time, something about him seemed unhinged.

There was a tense pause. I could hear his heavy breathing on the other side of the door, like a bull ready to charge, and one last loud thud hit the door before his footsteps stomped down the hall, fading into the party.

I let out a shaky breath, stepping away from the door. Jenny gave me a goofy smile.

“Sheesh. Don’t have a cow,” she muttered.

“Jenny, you should lie down.” I wasn’t sure how to handle her, but I knew I had to get her to stop moving before she hurt herself or decided to unlock the door and let the dog in.

“You wanna get me into bed?”

“No, Jenny,” I said firmly. “For fuck’s sake, you’re drunk. Lie down or puke or something.”

She pouted like a child and flopped onto her bed, covered in a violet canopy with silver stars, like nobody had redecorated it since she was a kid.

From behind the closed door, the muffled sounds of music filtered in, the lyrics of a new song echoing faintly. I checked the room, taking in the cheerleading medals on the walls and the framed photos of Jenny with her friends. On her desk was a photo of her and Tanya together, smiling like nothing had ever come between them.

Jenny lay sprawled across the bed, her hair fanned out like a halo. She looked peaceful, and I thought she’d passed out. I stepped closer to check if she was out, hoping I could make my escape and go home.

As soon as I stood by the bed, she opened her eyes and smiled lazily.

“Wanna join me?”

“Jenny, I really don’t—” I began, but she sat up and grabbed her head, wincing.

"I've never drunk this much," she said, giggling.

"Yeah, I can tell."

She looked at me with pleading eyes. "Just lie with me for a bit. Pleease?"

Reluctantly, I sighed and lay down beside her, keeping a safe distance. But she immediately snuggled up against me, resting her head on my chest. I stiffened, but let her stay there.

"You're really warm, Max," she mumbled.

"Right..." I stared at the ceiling, counting the stars on her canopy.

Out of nowhere, a different warmth crept into my thoughts. Andy's warmth. The way his body had felt against mine when I found him at the museum, and he hugged me, and—

"You know..." Jenny lifted her head, gazing at me through half-lidded eyes. "You have this way about you... Like I could tell you anything. All my secrets."

"Um, you really don't have to," I said as her fingers started tracing slow circles on my chest.

"I haven't been feeling great this summer," she went on anyway. "Everyone thinks it's because of Kyle... and yeah, kind of—but not for the reasons they think."

I shifted, suddenly hyperaware of how small the space between us was. "I'm... sorry to hear that."

"It's not just Kyle. It's Tanya." She paused. "I mean, I thought we were friends. *Best* friends. But now she's with him, and I just..." Her words trailed off, her voice thickening. "I don't know. It's messing me up, Max."

"Honestly, you shouldn't even be talking to her."

"I know, right? But it's not that simple." She blinked slowly, her fingers knotted in my shirt, while her voice dropped to a near-whisper. "God, you must think I'm pathetic."

"I don't," I said, and I meant it. But she didn't seem to hear me.

“It’s not even about Kyle at all. Everyone thinks I’m heartbroken over him, but the truth is... I never really cared about him.”

I frowned. “Then why were you with him?”

She let go of my shirt, leaving it wrinkled, and sat up. She wrapped her arms around her knees and started to rock slightly. “Because it was easier,” she mumbled. “He was... there, you know? Everyone liked him. Everyone thought we were, like, cute or whatever.” She laughed, a sharp, messy sound. “I didn’t even like him that much. I just... it was easy. No one asked questions.”

Her voice dropped. “But it wasn’t really about him.”

She stared at the floor for a second, then looked up at me. Her eyes were glassy, shining in that way where you couldn’t tell if she was about to cry or scream or run out of the room.

“It was her,” she said quietly. “Tanya... It’s always been her.”

My mind scrambled to keep up.

Jenny’s lip trembled. “I love her, okay? I always did.” She sniffed. “I don’t know what the hell to do.” She buried her face in her hands. “God, I shouldn’t have said that. I’m disgusting. I shouldn’t have said anything. Just—don’t tell anyone, okay?”

My brain couldn’t seem to catch up with what she’d said. I wasn’t judging her or anything—I just hadn’t seen it coming. Tanya? That was the last thing I’d expected.

She looked so small all of a sudden. All that attitude, all that noise—it was gone. Just a girl falling apart on her own bed.

I gently pried her hands away, pushing past my own discomfort. “Hey,” I said, keeping my voice soft. “You’re not disgusting.”

Her tear-streaked face met mine, and for a second, it felt like I was staring into a mirror. I didn’t see the confident girl who flirted with everyone or cracked jokes at the expense of others. I saw someone completely lost. Someone trying to play a part that they thought fit but didn’t. I knew that

kind of confusion. That stuck feeling between what you're supposed to want and what you actually want, but can't say out loud.

When you struggle to figure yourself out.

"I... I think you're brave for saying it." *Not like others who keep faking it because it's easier*, I almost added.

Jenny stared at me, her doe-like eyes searching mine, desperate for something—reassurance, validation, maybe just someone to tell her she wasn't broken. "It was always Tanya," she whispered. "I—I just... I dated Kyle because... that's what I thought I had to do, you know? And my parents like him... But I'd think about her even when I was with him. I still do. I can't stop."

I couldn't look at her anymore. Each word she spoke rang with a familiar ache. Yeah, the way someone could *literally* live in your head rent-free, no matter how hard you tried to shake them. I wanted to say something, to promise her it would all make sense one day, that she *wasn't* broken...

But then she leaned in and her lips pressed against mine, big and soft.

Instinct took over, as always, my body moving before I could stop it. I kissed her back—not because I wanted to, not because I felt anything—but because this was what I was supposed to do. Just like Jenny had dated Silva, just like I'd dated all those girls, as if I was trying to break some record. It was automatic. Familiar. Like muscle memory kicking in. Her hands gripped my shoulders, pulling me closer, and I let her, like this was just another moment I didn't have to think too much about.

But then—like a flash of light piercing a dark sky—Andy was there.

The freckle under his left eye. The way his sarcasm softened when he said something genuine. The effortless way his hair fell in messy strands, like he never cared how he looked, but somehow always did. His hands, which were softer than I'd ever expected for a guy. And his smile, which felt like some kind of secret just between us...

The warmth drained from my body.

I jerked back.

H. B. WASIAK

Breathless. Stunned. My heart beating frantically for all the wrong reasons.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

## I LIKE THE ABUSE



The moment I pushed open the door, the pounding bass of the party hit me like a wave. Laughter and music filled the air, but my mind was miles away. I could still hear my own voice ringing in my ears: “I’m sorry... I can’t...” as I backed away from Jenny, her face hurt and confused.

I hadn’t meant for it to go like that. It wasn’t fair to Jenny, and I knew it. The look on her face, like she didn’t understand what went wrong, twisted my gut. It wasn’t about her. She wasn’t the problem. The problem was my own head messing with me when her lips touched mine. Something shifted inside, pulling me away. Her face wasn’t the one I saw, and the realization hit harder than I could explain.

God.

I just wanted to see Andy.

But at the same time... I didn't. Not like this. Not after what just happened. What if it meant something? What if he could see it on my face?

I tore down the stairs, barely registering the people around me as I searched for Mikey and Naya through the crowd.

The old grandfather clock in the living room loomed over the partygoers like some silent witness. It was later than I thought. Andy must've been waiting for me. The sour knot in my chest pulled tight, twisting everything up again. I had to leave.

I finally found them outside by the massive pool. Mikey was draped across a lounge chair like a forgotten beach towel, completely hammered. His eyes were half-lidded and unfocused, yet he still had that stupid grin glued to his face. Meanwhile, Naya was mid-wrestle with him, trying to drag him upright by one limp arm.

"There you are!" she snapped when she spotted me. "Where the hell have you been?! This idiot took something, and I don't know what!"

"He's just wasted, Naya," I muttered, leaning over Mikey. I gave him a light slap on the cheek, which just made him giggle. The alcohol buzzing in me wasn't helping. Everything felt off balance, though I wasn't as far gone as Mikey. The situation with Jenny had sobered me up—if only a little—but the haze was still there, making the weight of the night heavier than it should have been. "I need to go."

"Yes! *We* need to go!" Naya barked. "But first, you have to help me get this dumbass to my house. If his dad sees him like this, he'll kill him. And you, too."

"What the fuck did *I* do?" I crouched down next to Mikey, knowing full well I didn't have much of a choice. Mikey's dad, an ex-army man, was known for his strict discipline. Most days, he was all sweetness and light. But if we screwed up, General Holloway made an appearance, and facing him was a death sentence.

"Because you're part of the deal! And besides, he can't go home looking like this after a 'movie marathon!'"



“You were with him all night! Why did you let him take anything? You know how he is!” All I wanted was to be home, curled up in bed. Or, more ideally, in some abandoned building in Chicago.

“Don’t even *try* to weasel out of this, Maximus!”

“Oh my god! Okay, *Mom!*” I growled, standing up and looping one of Mikey’s arms over my shoulder and lifting him. His dead weight sagged against me, his 190 pounds feeling like 500 as my knees wobbled under the strain. His head lolled to the side as he mumbled incoherently, lost in his delusional haze.

Naya marched ahead, and I gritted my teeth, trying to keep Mikey upright as he melted further into me with every step on his spaghetti noodles legs.

“C’mon, man,” I muttered through clenched teeth. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

I dragged Mikey across the villa, weaving through a crowd of people too far gone to notice or care about our struggle. Thankfully, there was no sign of Kyle Silva because my only defense would have been to use Mikey as a human shield and make a run for it.

By the time we reached the bikes, it was obvious riding together wasn’t an option. One wrong move and we’d wipe out spectacularly.

“Why do I even put up with you?” I muttered. Mikey just let out another giggle.

Naya took over the bikes, steering both awkwardly, one in each hand. They wobbled and nearly tipped, but she somehow kept them on course. I hoisted Mikey onto my back like a sack of potatoes, gripping his thighs to keep him from sliding off. His arms dangled limply over my shoulders. I could practically feel the soreness setting in, the dull ache spreading through my body like I’d spent the night lifting weights instead of lugging my idiot friend around. I couldn’t wait to collapse into bed and let sheer exhaustion knock me out. Andy must’ve been annoyed by now that I wasn’t already there.

Despite carrying Mikey like a limp, giggling boulder—seriously, how does he weigh this much?—I kept picturing the way he looked at me, like I was something *he* couldn't quite name either. It didn't make sense. But it felt more real than anything else had lately. I've been going to bed earlier and earlier to spend more time with him. It was a stupid little ritual I looked forward to, one that made all the other bullshit in my life a little less heavy. But after tonight... Would I even be able to look him in the eye?

The way Jenny looked at me, how her lips felt like someone had handed me a script for a part I couldn't play anymore, and the truth of why it didn't feel right? That was somehow the hardest to swallow.

The thing was, no matter what, I couldn't stop thinking about Andy. He was always there, inside my head, day and night. The more I thought about it, the more obvious it was that I needed to talk to someone. Mikey wasn't an option, and Andy *definitely* wasn't. But how are you supposed to start a conversation like that without sounding like a total lunatic?

I glanced over at Naya maneuvering our bikes. If the whole situation with Jenny wasn't a sign from the universe, I didn't know what was. Maybe, while the air was still thick with truth, I could get some of mine out too. My head was still buzzed enough for this to sound like a good idea, which meant it probably wasn't.

I spoke before I could talk myself out of it.

"So, um, Naya..." I started as I checked if Mikey wasn't somehow suddenly sober and eavesdropping. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

I hesitated, wiping a hand over my brow as if it could clear the jumble of thoughts. My eyes darted to the ground "Have you ever thought about... um... whether you find... um... girls attractive?"

She shot me a sideways glance. "Where's this coming from?"

"Well..." I tried to sound casual, like I wasn't actively dying inside. "I've just been thinking about... stuff lately."

"What stuff?"

I adjusted Mikey's dead weight on my back. He mumbled something unintelligible against my shoulder. "I, um... met this person. Online."

"Okay..."

"And... It's a guy," I said, already cringing at how loud my voice sounded in the quiet street.

"Oh."

That was it. Just "Oh." Her tone didn't change, but the silence after stretched too long.

Mikey let out a soft snore.

"Yeah," I muttered, eyes glued to the ground as we walked.

"What's his name?"

"Doesn't matter. He's just... someone I talk to. And that's not even the point."

"Is that why you've been so off with girls lately? I mean, you haven't dated anyone in a while, and you always used to, but I saw you with Jenny..."

"No. Well—yeah—uh, I don't know!" I blurted. "I don't know what's going on in my head, okay? Can you just answer my question? Please?"

She stopped walking. I grunted, keeping Mikey upright. He was starting to slide, and I wasn't about to scrape his face off the street.

"Yeah, I've thought about it," Naya said. "I find girls attractive. I can admit it. I could kiss one too. But a relationship? I'm not sure. I think about it sometimes, but it doesn't feel like me."

I nodded slowly, trying to process what she said. The word "*kiss*" was a keyword. So, you can want to kiss someone, and it wouldn't automatically mean something? Or... make you... gay?

No. Even considering the word in connection with myself felt strange. It didn't fit. I mean, I wasn't like *that*. How could I be? The guy who couldn't shake off girls? This had to be something else.

"I still find girls attractive," I said, almost to convince myself. "I always have. But... sometimes it feels so forced. Like, I want to be with them, and at the same time, I don't. If they're there, fine. If not... I'm fine too."

“Maybe you haven’t found the right person yet. You don’t have to force yourself to like someone just because everyone else expects you to. You can find different people attractive, you know? You don’t have to prove you’re ‘normal.’ Who’s even normal these days?”

I nodded, like that answered something. It didn’t, really.

“Can I ask something else? And you have to promise not to psychoanalyze me with your crystals or whatever.”

“Sure, Max.”

“Have you ever had someone... like, it’s not a crush exactly, but they are always in your head. You can’t stop thinking about them, even when it doesn’t make any sense?”

Naya didn’t say anything at first. Just walked beside me, our bikes creaking under her hands.

“You ever think maybe you’re just figuring stuff out?” she finally said. “You don’t have to make it make sense right now.”

“Yeah, but what if I never figure it out?”

“Well, welcome to life. Where everything’s confusing and everyone’s pretending they’ve got it figured out.”

I let out something between a snort and a groan. “That’s comforting.”

“It should be.”

We walked in silence for a bit. My back was damp with Mikey’s and mine sweat, and I felt like a very sad, very confused turtle carrying a drunken shell.

“I feel like there’s this... piece missing,” I mumbled. “Like there’s a puzzle, and I keep forcing the wrong shapes into it.”

Naya nodded. “I could do a tarot reading for you. Maybe the cards know what the piece is.” I shot her a glare. “Okay, maybe not.”

“If I get The Lovers card again, I’m walking straight into that street lamp.”

Her laugh pulled me back down to earth a bit. Just hearing someone else say there wasn’t anything wrong with me—even if I didn’t fully believe it—made it feel a little less like I was losing my mind.

I was relieved when we finally reached Naya's house. I didn't want to talk anymore.

"You got him from here?" I asked, sliding Mikey off my back. He curled into a ball on the grass like a passed-out garden gnome, mumbling something about pancakes. I stretched my shoulder and winced. "If I never carry this man again, it'll be too soon."

Naya rolled her eyes. "If he doesn't cooperate, he can sleep on the lawn. The sprinklers will wake him up in the morning."

I hesitated. "Um, Naya?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you, um... not tell Mikey about what we talked about?"

She sighed, giving me a long look. "I won't if you don't want me to. But, Max... he's your best friend. You should talk to him. Not me."

"I can't," I said, staring at the sidewalk like it had answers. "You don't get it. He jokes about everything—what if *I* become the joke? Or he starts treating me differently. I don't want to be... *that* guy to him, you know?"

"You think he'd do that?"

"I don't know. But what if he does? What if I ruin everything?"

Naya crossed her arms. "You give him less credit than he deserves. He's your ride-or-die, Max. He'd get it."

"If you say so," I said, not really believing it.

She patted my chest. "Good night, Max. And stop getting stuck in your head so much, okay?"

"Sure," I mumbled, knowing well I'd fail.

I grabbed my bike and rode off, my path home anything but straight. By the time I finally got back, it was already one a.m.

Before entering the house, I couldn't resist the urge to check the mailbox. I knew it was stupid to expect anything the same day—or anything at all, for that matter—but this persistent "what if" lurked in the back of my head. What if it somehow traveled at the speed of light? What if it showed up by

magic? What if I didn't check, and the mailbox caught fire, and I'd never know if something was in there?

Call me crazy. I don't care.

The mailbox was empty, of course. I let out a humorless laugh, my chest tight with disappointment, as if one postcard could somehow fix everything. Still, I kept the door open a second longer than necessary before closing it with a soft clang.

I collapsed face-first onto my bed but sleep didn't come. Instead, the sounds from the night—the music, drunken laughter, Jenny's confession, Naya's words—hung in my mind like a distorted soundtrack on repeat. I shut my eyes, and it got worse. Silva's sneer. Jenny's gloss-slick lips. Mikey's weight crushing my back. My brain was on a roller coaster that wouldn't stop.

I needed something to shut it all off.

Dragging myself out of bed, I crept into the hallway. The house creaked under my weight, each step louder than I wanted it to be as I headed for the pills, hoping they'd blissfully knock me out as always.

I slipped into the bathroom and reached for the mirror cabinet, expecting to find Mom's sleeping pills in their usual spot.

But the bottle wasn't there.

The door flew open. I spun around, my hand still on the cabinet. Mom stood in the doorway holding the bottle, her face blank in that way that made it worse than yelling.

"This what you're looking for?" she said flatly.

"No—"

"Don't lie!" She threw the bottle at me. It hit my arm and then the floor, popping open. Pills skittered everywhere, bouncing across the tiles like tiny accusations.

I stood stunned, not sure whether to pick them up or run.

She stepped into the bathroom. "You think I'm stupid? You think I don't notice you sneaking around? You have *no* respect for me. None!"

"I wasn't trying to—" I started, but the words tangled in my throat.

"You don't care! All you do is take, take, take. You're selfish and ungrateful. I do everything for you, and this is what I get? You sneaking around like some addict?"

"I just couldn't sleep..."

"Oh, *poor baby*. You think *I* can sleep? You think I don't lie awake wondering how the hell I ended up with this?"

My fists clenched. "It's not like I'm trying to get high, Mom."

From down the hall, a groggy voice cut through the tension. "What's going on?"

Dad. Of course. Great sense of timing as always.

"We have a thief and addict for a son," she called without looking back. "And you're too checked out to care!"

"I wasn't stealing. I just—"

"You think I don't notice how you look at me?" Her voice rose again. "Like I'm the enemy. You're not the victim here, Maxim. You're just selfish."

My hands trembled, but it wasn't fear. It was anger. Hot, suffocating anger.

I bit the inside of my cheek, tried to breathe, tried not to say something I'd regret. But she sounded just like she did that night with Marcus, and something snapped loose inside me.

"Well, maybe if you didn't act like a psycho, I wouldn't need to knock myself out just to get some peace!"

Her hand shot out, slapping me across the face. My cheek burned in an instant, the sting radiating up to my temple. I reeled, one hand covering the burn.

If a stare could kill, I'd be six feet under already. "Oh, right, I forgot," she said. "I'm the worst mother ever."

Dad stood in the doorway behind her, blinking like he didn't know what year it was.

“You gonna say something?” I asked him, hand still on my face.

He shook his head. “We all need to calm down.”

“Yeah, great input. Really helpful.”

Mom took a step closer, and I straightened instinctively. Her presence towered over me, despite her being a foot shorter. “You’re too *special* to appreciate me, huh? You repay me by throwing childish tantrums?”

“What the hell are you even talking about? You’re insane.”

“Watch your tone,” Dad said weakly, almost on autopilot.

“Oh, now you care? You let her rip me to pieces, and now you’re gonna play peacemaker?”

Mom wouldn’t let him speak anyway. “All I do is try to keep things together, and you’re a spoiled little egoist who thinks the world revolves around him! You have *zero* empathy for your own mother!”

I barked out a laugh. “Jesus. You’re unbelievable.”

“I sacrificed *everything* for this family! And you think I don’t deserve some credit?!”

The argument had stopped being about the pills a long time ago—obviously—but I wasn’t going to be the first to back down. “Maybe I don’t care anymore,” I shot back. “Maybe I’m done being your emotional punching bag. You want someone to blame? *Try a mirror.*”

Her eyes widened, and I thought she’d slap me again. Instead, she did something worse.

“If you’re so miserable here, why don’t you run off like your brother?” She spun around and stormed off toward her bedroom. “Oh, and you’re grounded for a month!” she called over her shoulder just before the door slammed so hard the walls shook.

I just stood there, the weight of her words pressing down on me like a ton of bricks. Dad sighed and shook his head, like I was nothing more than another problem he was too tired to deal with.

I bent to pick up a pill, but his hand closed tight around my wrist.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked.



I stared up at him, my vision blurring with tears I refused to let fall. At this point, I wasn't even sure what they were—anger, frustration, exhaustion? Maybe all of it.

I looked at this man who was supposed to be my father. The one who was supposed to care and protect me. But all I saw was someone who didn't seem to give a single fuck about anything. Not about me. Not about Marcus. Not about himself.

"Why are you like this?" The words slipped out before I could stop them as I jerked my arm free and stood up. "Why don't you care about anything? Why don't you ever do anything? You just let her destroy everything."

Dad opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out. Of course, he didn't have an answer. He never did.

The lump in my throat grew bigger, but I pressed on, needing to get it all out before I exploded. "Why are you still with her if you hate each other so much? Why don't you just get divorced and give everyone a break? You know it would be better for everyone!"

"You'll understand when you're older, Maxim," he muttered, then added under his breath, "Just don't cry like some fag."

The words hit like a punch to the gut.

Heat surged through me, my stomach knotting with a sick, queasy twist. I didn't even spare him a look, just pushed past him. Said nothing. What was the point?

Back in my room, I kicked some clothes aside and dropped onto the bed like dead weight. I didn't even bother to close the door. Usually, I'd sneak up to the roof and let the air cool me down, clear my head. But even that didn't feel far enough away right now. The house was silent now, but the argument still rang in my ears. I buried my face in the pillow, but it didn't stop my father's voice from echoing in my head, cutting in all the places I didn't want to admit existed. And Mom with her constant noise, her anger, her guilt trips. No matter what she said or did, no matter how much she hurt me, I

couldn't stop questioning myself. *Maybe I overreacted. Maybe I shouldn't have yelled. Maybe I went too far.*

I *hated* caring, still wanting her approval, and hoping she'd look at me and see something good. I wondered what was more unlikely: her saying something nice or her admitting she was wrong.

But no matter how much I hated them, I hated *needing* them even more.

Hard to feel independent when you can't even buy a burger without using your parents' money. Naya had told me to get a summer job, but I knew how that would go. The last time I worked—after sophomore year, mowing lawns and cleaning pools—Mom had taken every dollar I earned. “You live under my roof,” she'd said, “you owe me.” Or something equally motivating. The little money I had—gifts from family, mostly—I kept hidden in one of my shoes in the closet. Dad sometimes slipped me a few bucks, but it felt like a bribe.

I flipped onto my back and stared at the ceiling. Even now, in the middle of all this, Andy managed to creep into my mind. Especially the way he made me feel like someone worth listening to. Mikey and Naya were my friends—I knew I could rely on them for anything. But they were part of the real world, the one where all my problems loomed close and unrelenting.

Andy existed in a place no one else could reach.

Turns out, I didn't need the sleeping pills at all. The screams and arguments had sobered me up, draining me of whatever energy I had left. I curled in on myself, pressing my face into the pillow. Shadows danced across the wall as my breathing slowed, and my body gave in to exhaustion.

## YOU'RE JUST LIKE A DREAM



Rain smacked me in the face the second I burst out of the building. Actually, it was a full-on downpour. Thunder growled overhead, and lightning tore the clouds open into jagged streaks. I ducked back under the building's awning, already soaked, the cold rain sticking to my skin, uncomfortable even in a dream.

Andy stood there too, arms crossed, his damp hair plastered to his forehead. His posture was stiff, like he'd been waiting a while—which I knew he did.

"Took you long enough," he said.

It stung, and still in a fight mode, I was ready to fire back. But then I saw the way he was looking at me—like he didn't trust I'd show up—and the guilt hit hard. Not that it was new. It had already settled in.

“Sorry,” I said quietly. “A lot happened tonight, and I just... couldn’t sleep.”

Andy didn’t answer right away. His shoulders eased a little, but his jaw stayed tense, like he wasn’t done being upset.

“I didn’t mean to make you wait,” I added. “I swear.”

I must’ve looked pathetic, because the tension drained out of him.

He sighed. “What happened?”

His presence settled something in me, made the world feel less like it was about to collapse under its own weight. But there was so much I still couldn’t say. So I picked the closest thing to the truth.

“It’s my mom. Sometimes it feels like she doesn’t want me around. Like I’m... in the way.”

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s fine,” I muttered. “Not really, but it’s not like I can do anything about it. Maybe when school’s over, I’ll move in with Marcus in Chicago. Get out of her way.”

He went still—not dramatically, but enough for me to notice.

Did I say the wrong thing again?

“...You’d want to live with your brother?” he asked.

“Yeah. He got out. Maybe I can too.”

Andy nodded, but his eyes stayed somewhere else. Something tightened in my chest.

“And maybe one day, in Chicago... you’ll want to meet me?” I said. “Like, for real. If you *are* real. I mean, I know—ugh, just... forget it.”

His eyes flicked to mine, then dropped. The rain softened into a misty haze, drifting instead of falling. Like even the dream had paused, waiting for his answer.

“Yeah, maybe,” he finally said.

It wasn’t a no. But it didn’t feel like a yes either. I forced a shrug. Pretending not to care was easier.

Andy gave me a small, worn-out smile. “Why your brother, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why with him? Why not somewhere else?”

“I dunno... it just feels like the right place.”

He didn’t respond, and I couldn’t tell if he was thinking or just gone somewhere far away again.

“And my mom... I think she wouldn’t care if I was gone,” I added, trying to fill in the silence.

His head turned sharply, and he locked eyes with me. “I would.”

My heart fluttered. It wasn’t much, but for all his distance, this was as close as he’d come to letting me in.

“Well,” I said, not breaking eye contact. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He stepped closer, our arms barely touching but enough to make my face warm.

I nudged him with my shoulder. “Don’t stay mad at me, okay? I might get struck by lightning or something.”

“If I had that kind of control, you’d already be in the lake,” he said, deadpan,

“Oh, thanks, Andy. That’s very sweet of you.”

“And I wasn’t mad,” he said after a moment. “I just thought maybe you wouldn’t come back.

“That’s the last thing I’d do.”

I could’ve sworn he was closer than a second ago, but before I could really think about it, a low growl-like rumble rolled in under the rain.

Instinctively, I grabbed Andy’s arm as if I could shield him from whatever it was.

“What are you—?”

“You didn’t hear that?”

“No...”

The sound came again. Louder. Closer. Andy’s expression shifted to pure shock, his eyes locking on something ahead.

I followed his gaze.

A figure was dragging itself out of the trees, limping into the parking lot with jerky, uncoordinated steps. Its limbs hung too loosely, like it couldn't decide what to do with them.

A freaking zombie.

The stormy sky darkened as more tension seeped into the air, the abandoned streets humming like the dream was shifting gears.

"Is that—?" Andy started, sounding almost excited.

"Yeah," I said, *not so excited*. "It is."

The zombie hadn't noticed us yet, stumbling aimlessly. It looked more like a parody of the old-school kind—the slow, clumsy *Night of the Living Dead* undead—not the super-fast kind able to ruin your day.

"Why now?" Andy asked. "We've been walking around forever. Why is it showing up *now*?"

"I don't know," I said, my voice higher than I wanted. I cleared my throat. "But I really wish it wasn't here."

"Don't you want to kick some zombie ass?"

"What if we get bit? Do we turn?"

He smirked. "Wanna find out?"

"Absolutely not."

But the low growl deepened, and more shapes shuffled out of the shadows.

"They're multiplying!"

"Relax," Andy said casually. "They're slow."

"Slow doesn't mean harmless!"

"Then stop whining and run!" He grabbed my arm and pulled me forward.

We bolted from the awning as the storm came back with a vengeance, rain hammering down in cold, heavy sheets. Within seconds, we were soaked again and half-blind, splashing through mud and slick grass that sucked at our shoes.

The ground blurred under our feet. My sneakers slipped once—then again—and before I could regain balance, Andy stumbled beside me, dragging me down with him.

We hit the ground hard, mud splattering up my arms and legs. “Fucking fuck.” I pushed myself up quickly, shaking my hands free of the sticky muck.

“You okay?” Andy asked, hauling himself up.

“Yeah. Just wet and gross.”

The rain made everything worse. It muffled the sound of our footsteps, which was good, but the slippery grass was as much of an enemy as the zombies.

The groans grew louder. We pressed ourselves against the side of the museum wall, listening through the downpour.

“I thought you liked video games,” Andy said.

“I do. When I’m not starring in one.” I mean, sure—I used to think fighting zombies in an abandoned Chicago would be badass. Turns out, when your dream has jump-scares and mud in your socks, you’re a lot less heroic.

“They’re slow,” he said, peeking around the corner.

“They’re closer.”

A groan rose near us. One of the zombies was wobbling across the pavement. It wasn’t sprinting, but it was heading right for us.

Andy snorted. “Yeah. It’s coming.”

“Congratulations.”

“Okay, so maybe now they’re doing something.”

“No kidding.”

“Come on—weapon time.” He led toward the park.

We dashed across the open grass. Behind us, the zombies shuffled and slipped, their feet dragging through the wet ground. The rain blurred their outlines, but I could still make out the sagging skin and hollow expressions. Their stiff limbs jerked unnaturally, like marionettes controlled by a drunken puppeteer.

Andy was drenched and grinning like a maniac, like he'd been waiting for this his whole life.

"Why are you smiling?!"

"When else do you get to live out a zombie apocalypse?"

I wanted to respond with something clever when I realized we weren't running toward the city, but heading deeper into the park. I skidded to a stop, grabbing Andy by his sleeve.

"Whoa!" Andy staggered, his arms flailing to keep his balance. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"We need to go the other way! We need a shop—or a gas station!"

"And then what?"

I rolled my eyes. "There might be a gun behind the counter."

Andy rolled his eyes even more. "Oh, please. Are you a zombie expert now?" He didn't wait for me to answer. He picked up speed again, his shoes kicking up wet clumps of grass.

"Andy!" I shouted. He glanced back with a crooked grin and yelled back, "You're doing it all wrong!"

The zombies were too slow and uncoordinated to catch us outright, though the wet grass made it harder to dodge them. Some flailed wildly as they slipped, while others wobbled dangerously close before regaining their jerky footing on the pavement. One stumbled within arm's reach, its features horribly reminding me of my mom. I quickly shoved the thought away, my stomach twisting uncomfortably.

We sprinted past the park and into a sprawling open field. My heart leaped at the sight of the softball diamonds. Abandoned gear was scattered everywhere, as if someone had dropped everything during practice and fled.

"You're a genius, Andy!" I spotted a bat lying near a dugout. I scooped it up, grinning. "Look at this!"

"Now we're talking!"

I handed him another bat. "Here—take it."



“Nah. I’ve always wanted to try kung fu moves on something that deserved it.”

“...You’re not serious.”

He winked. “Watch and learn.”

The zombies were much closer now. Andy let out a shout and charged. He ducked under one zombie’s arms, spun, and kicked it in the back. The thing crumpled like a cheap lawn chair, flailing helplessly.

Andy turned to me, smiling triumphantly. “Did you *see* that?”

I blinked. “You’re actually serious.”

“Dead serious.” He beamed. “No pun intended.”

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I’ve got to admit—I’d never felt so alive in my entire life. I doubted anything could top the thrill of zombie heads cracking open like overripe pumpkins under my bat, splattering with a wet, squelching splat. Shards of bones, decayed flesh, and black, oozing blood flew everywhere, turning the scene into something straight out of a slasher movie. I must’ve looked like a serial killer grinning ear to ear, drenched in gore, lost in something that felt way too wrong and way too satisfying.

When the first zombie stumbled out of the shadows, I’d thought our dream had turned into a nightmare. But it was the exact opposite. These weren’t terrifying, brain-eating monsters. They were clumsy morons who could only shuffle, practically begging to get knocked over. Instead of dread, I felt a pure, unfiltered rush.

While I dove headfirst into the chaos, Andy stuck to the outskirts, his movements measured and deliberate. He didn’t flail or panic; he moved like he’d done this a million times. Every time a zombie tried to sneak up on us, he was there in a flash, his body a blur of precise strikes. He didn’t need a weapon. *His body* was the weapon. A deadly mix of speed and focus. The Fist of Fury.

Bruce Lee would've been proud.

While he darted around like a kung fu final boss—knocking heads clean off, sending them sailing through the air before they hit the ground and rolled across the field like bowling balls—I played cleanup crew, swooping in right after to finish the job. Together, we were like a well-oiled zombie-killing machine, in sync without a single word. It was teamwork in its purest, bloodiest form.

There was something raw and honest in it. Just instinct and motion and chaos. As I swung my bat again and again, sending another zombie crashing to the ground, I realized how much I needed this. Every swing, every splatter of blood felt like it was purging something buried deep inside me.

It was cathartic.

I was smashing and stomping on these mindless zombies, but really, I was smashing everything I couldn't escape in real life. My mom, who seemed to hate me for no reason. My dad, who just didn't care. My brother, who'd bailed on all of us and couldn't be bothered to call more than once a year, usually just to say "happy birthday." Every crack of the bat brought those frustrations to the surface, and with every bone-crunching impact, I felt a little lighter, a little more in control.

Andy wasn't holding back either. At first, he was methodical, every movement calculated. But then, something shifted. Something dark flickered in his expression. I watched as he stomped on a downed zombie's head again and again, his boot reducing its skull to a pulpy mush. "Fuck you!" he yelled. "Fuck! You! Fucking DIE!"

I couldn't help but wonder whose face he was seeing in that mess of rotting flesh.

Unfortunately, we were wearing down. My arms were heavy, each swing slower and more labored than the one before. The rain, now a drizzle, left us drenched in rainwater and zombie guts.

"I think they're still coming," I panted as I hurled a softball at a nearby zombie. It smashed into its skull and got stuck, but it wasn't enough to stop

the thing. More zombies kept shambling toward us, their numbers seemingly endless. No matter how many we took down, there were always more. Mangled corpses littered the field around us into a huge garbage dump of death, yet the horde kept growing.

"There's no end to them." Andy wiped his bloody hands on his jacket, which didn't help much.

"We've got to head back to the city." I gripped my bat tighter. "We need walls." With one last satisfying blow to a zombie's skull, I turned to Andy. "Go!"

We sprinted ahead, weaving between the zombies and dodging their sluggish grabs. Occasionally, Andy tripped one or shoved another aside. The horde's moans filled the park, humming like broken lawnmowers. Chicagoans, even undead, were as relentless as ever. Despite the carnage we'd left behind, they didn't slow down, dead-set (pun intended) on their brain-munching mission.

We were actually pulling it off—until the universe spotted me having a good time and went, "*Oh hell no.*"

One zombie lunged, grabbed Andy's jacket with its decayed hands, and yanked him off balance. Andy toppled backward, hitting with a heavy thud. The zombies shuffling toward me instantly turned, refocusing their hunger. With a guttural groan, they swarmed Andy like a beacon of fresh meat.

He thrashed against the thing's grip, but another zombie stumbled forward, clawing at his legs. Their fingers clamped down on his jeans, dragging him closer to their gnashing teeth. "Max!"

My heart slammed against my ribs.

I didn't think. I charged forward, swinging my bat like a lunatic. One after another, I slammed the zombies down, each hit crunching through bone and rot. Andy yanked his arm free from one of them, but another grabbed his sleeve, dragging him to the ground. He went down, the breath knocked out of him, and looked up at me like he wasn't sure he'd make it.

I was about to throw myself at the horde—full sacrifice—when Andy kicked out, wild and desperate. With a final wrench, he twisted out of his jacket, letting it get torn to shreds, and scrambled to his feet.

I grabbed his arm and pulled, only giving him a moment to catch his balance before we took off running. We didn't stop, my grip on Andy's wrist iron-tight. The zombies groaned behind us, and with horror, I realized they were picking up speed, spilling from side streets and tripping over one another in their mindless pursuit.

A corner bar caught my eye, and I yanked Andy toward it.

We crashed through the doors, slamming them shut behind us. Andy threw his weight against them, while I grabbed the nearest wooden table and shoved it in front to barricade it. The zombies pounded and scratched from the other side, their snarls muffled by the thick wood, but thankfully, they were too dumb to try the handle.

For a long moment, neither of us moved. Our breaths came loud and ragged in the stillness, and I just leaned against the table, trying to catch mine.

Then Andy let out a breathless, disbelieving laugh.

I turned to him, startled. He was half-collapsed against the wall, rain dripping from his hair, chest rising and falling—but his eyes met mine, and just like that, I felt it too.

The sheer absurdity of the fact that we'd just fought our way through a zombie horde.

Before I knew it, we were both laughing. It wasn't even funny. It was ridiculous. Surreal.

I stumbled, wiping rain from my face, and Andy pushed off the wall, smiling through his exhaustion. The warmth of his laughter settled in my chest, something light and unspoken passing between us. I stepped closer, drawn in by the way he was looking at me, like the world outside this dim bar didn't exist.

I don't know if it was my brain, my heart, or the adrenaline. But I did the first thing that came to mind.

I closed the gap between us with a few quick steps, cupped his face, and kissed him.

The world faded.

The snarls of zombies and the pounding of fists against the door dissolved, like someone had pressed mute on the apocalypse. His lips were chapped and clumsy, but none of this mattered as every inch of me buzzed with electricity, my heartbeat thundering so loud I thought it might shake the walls.

Andy's hands slid up to my forearms, tentative at first, then firmer—

I jerked back. Panic and disbelief swelled in my chest, ready to explode. "I—I'm so sorry!" My hands flew to my face, as if I could somehow hide the fact that I'd just kissed him. "I thought—I mean—I shouldn't have—"

Andy didn't let me finish. He fisted my shirt and slammed me into the wall.

I barely had time to gasp before his mouth crashed back into mine.

No hesitation this time. If the first kiss had been a question, this one was the answer. Fierce. Raw. All-consuming. His breath tangled with mine, his fingers twisting into my shirt. He held me pinned to the wall, urgency radiating off him, short-circuiting every thought in my head. I'd always known Andy was stronger than he looked, but *damn*.

One hand fisted in my hair, the other gripped my shirt, pulling me down like he couldn't get close enough. He tilted his head, deepening the kiss, his heartbeat pounding as wildly as mine. My arms wrapped around him without thinking and I slid my hands down his waist. The shirt was slick with zombie guts, but I didn't care, and slipped my fingers underneath, brushing the curve of his lower back. His muscles tensed under my touch, and I gripped him tighter. I wanted to leave bruises, something real, something that said this happened. In return, Andy pressed into me like he wanted to crawl under my skin. His grip on my hair tightened, hard enough to sting. Every part of him

was there—his chest against mine, his hips pinning me to the wall, his mouth devouring every inch of space between us. Part of me screamed to stop, to back off, to wake up. But the louder part—the one that had been waiting quietly in some locked-up corner of me—finally took over. It wasn't like kissing girls. This was something else entirely.

Andy's fingers flexed against my shirt, and for a moment longer, he lingered close, lips brushing mine like he couldn't quite let go. Eventually, he stepped back, gasping like he'd just surfaced from deep water.

A stunned silence followed, broken only by our heavy breathing. Andy's expression shifted to something unreadable. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. My back stayed pressed against the wall, pulse still erratic.

"I—" His voice broke off. He exhaled, then let out a faint chuckle. "You, um... have zombie guts on your hands."

I blinked. "...What?"

He gestured vaguely to my hands, which were still holding his bare waist.

Oh. *Oh.*

I instantly dropped my hands, wiping them on my already-filthy jeans, the sheer *humiliation* sinking in all at once.

"Well," I croaked. "That's one way to kill the mood."

Andy huffed a laugh, biting his swollen lips. "Yeah..."

Neither of us moved. Neither of us said what we were really thinking. Not that I even *knew* what I was thinking. The adrenaline fueling the kiss started to dissolve, leaving me feeling exposed and awkward.

"I wasn't sure you were..." Andy whispered.

"Me neither," I admitted instantly.

*Was I, though?*

Excitement and panic spiraled in my head, crashing into each other. But a voice cut through the moment.

"Maxim! Get up!"

I froze, torn between the dream and the voice, reaching for Andy as his face blurred.

“No—wait—”

The dream snapped like a rubber band.

“Maximus!” my mom screamed. “It’s seven! You think you’re going to sleep all day? Not happening!”

My whole body felt tense. My heart was still racing like I hadn’t left the dream. And—shit. Of course.

I yanked the comforter tighter over my hips, face burning. Seriously? A boner? Like I wasn’t already confused enough.

“I mean it!” Her footsteps stomped down the hall. “You’re grounded, not on vacation!”

I groaned and rolled onto my side, willing my body to calm down. Tried to breathe through the static in my brain. The door creaked open just as I was pulling the comforter a little higher.

“Do you think I have nothing better to do than wash your stuff every day?”

“Mom, please. Just give me a second.”

“Yeah, clean your room, and come downstairs,” she huffed, already storming off.

The moment she was gone, I flipped onto my stomach and buried my face in the pillow. My pulse still hadn’t slowed. My lips still tingled like they remembered everything too vividly.

I kissed Andy.

I kissed a *guy*.

And it wasn’t just a quick peck. We kissed like we were trying to eat each other.

Like the goddamn zombies.

Something twisted beneath my ribs. Not in a bad way. Just... tight. Unsettled.

*No.*

I wasn't gay. I liked girls. I'd hooked up with enough of them to know that. I'd never felt grossed out. If I were gay, wouldn't I have felt *wrong* doing anything with them?

Had I just been faking it this whole time?

I'd never felt anything like this for a guy. Not Mikey. Not anyone. Locker room showers never did anything for me. I'd never wanted to kiss any of my teammates.

But Andy? No girl had ever made my heart stutter the way he did. No one had sent electricity through me with just a look. And no one had ever terrified me like this. With girls, I knew the script. With Andy, it was like setting the script on fire before even reading it, then trying to write it all over again.

Maybe I wasn't gay. Or straight.

Maybe I was just... Andysexual.

*God, what a mess.*

My brain was about to overheat, tangled in doubt, adrenaline, and the taste of his lips.

And the worst part?

He was all I could think about.

And I would never forgive him for that.



## EVERYTHING FEELS LIKE THE MOVIES



The whole day felt like being a kid on Christmas morning. Except before you can open your present, your mom hands you a list of chores longer than Santa's naughty list. And I was buzzing. Not with excitement. More like that awful, nervous hum in your chest when the most real thing you've felt all summer—or in your entire life, to be precise—only happened in your sleep.

Which was insane, right? I kissed a guy, and now I couldn't wait to fall asleep and do it again.

Mom turned into a chore dictator. I mean, fair. I'd screwed up, and she was well within her rights to make me pay in sweat. The house was already clean. Immaculate. And she made me clean it *again*. I vacuumed carpets that had already been vacuumed, skimmed what felt like an entire entomology exhibit out of the pool, scrubbed countertops you could eat off of, and

scoured the bathrooms even though she'd Cloroxed them herself yesterday. She made me polish the baseboards. *Polish them*. Who even does that? I even reorganized the spice rack *twice* because I hadn't alphabetized it the first time. Every time I finished one task, she found another, like she was pulling them from a magical Mary Poppins bag of passive-aggressive revenge.

The punishment wasn't about cleaning. It was about making me work for *nothing*. A way to wear me down without ever saying a word.

She barely looked at me. Just pointed. Ordered. Walked past me like I was radioactive. Standard post-fight protocol in our house. Silent treatment with a side of labor camp. She didn't yell. That would've made things clear. Whether with me or Marcus, she kept the conflict alive without ever addressing it directly. She liked to save it, tucking it away like ammunition to use later. She had a way of hoarding grievances, stashing them in some mental drawer only to throw them at you out of nowhere. And she never stayed on topic. It didn't matter what we were fighting about. She'd dig into that drawer and take out whatever she felt like, usually some bullshit you didn't even know she was keeping score on and half of it aimed at Dad just because.

"What's the fucking point?" I muttered, dragging the vacuum over already-clean floors for the second time. My head wasn't even in the house. It was in that bar. Still tasting the adrenaline and the rain and I-kissed-a-fucking-dude.

Even when I was scrubbing the toilet, I couldn't stop thinking about him (sorry Andy). Not in a "he's hot" kind of way—though, yeah, maybe—but in that terrifying, magnetic, brain-scrambling way where you start questioning every version of yourself you thought was solid. I've never thought about anything this much. Not even when I read *Watchmen* and spent the next week wondering if I'd ever be normal again.

I wasn't even sure if I wanted to see him again because I missed him or because I wanted to prove to myself that I didn't. That I could face him and not completely unravel.

Or if I just wanted to escape into the place where everything felt clearer.

Real life was throwing a curveball, but the dream was simple. Waking up was like I was dragged out of somewhere I actually belonged. In the dream, even when gray and gloomy, everything was sharper, brighter, and more alive. Every touch, every look, every word mattered more.

The second I opened my eyes, everything felt wrong, dull, and drained. It was as if someone had swapped my life for a knockoff version and hoped I wouldn't notice. Conversations blurred, meals were tasteless, and hours crawled by. The sunlight streamed oddly through my window, muted and flat, reality just imitating something that was supposed to be real.

Or was it just Andy?

Andy wasn't real. Not like Mikey. Not like Marcus. Not like the rest of the people in my actual life. But somehow, every look, every breath between us felt more real than anything I'd had with anyone.

God. That kiss.

My stomach twisted just thinking about it. Not in a gross way. Just... a bit panicky. Like I didn't know where to file it in my brain. There wasn't a folder labeled "Accidental Dream Kisses" or "Confusing Hot Apocalypse Make-Outs." There should be.

I wanted to go back. I wanted to see him again. Feel that thing again. But at the same time, I was scared shitless of what that meant. Because what if it wasn't just a dream? What if it was some part of me trying to say, *Hey, dumbass, this is who you are?*

And what if I didn't like the answer?

I couldn't shake it. I needed someone to tell me I wasn't completely losing it. Keeping it inside was driving me insane.

I'd already talked to Naya—sort of. I'd asked questions without saying what I was really asking. And of course, she'd handled it like it was no big deal, because that's just who she is. Cool, calm, crystal-loving Naya. Nothing rattles her. She's the kind of person who'd meet a ghost and ask for its star sign.

But that was the problem. To her, it *wasn't* a big deal. Just “figuring stuff out.” Just a phase, or a question, or some vibe you throw a tarot spread at and move on. Except it *was* a big deal. HUGE one. Because Andy wasn't just some what-if. He was *Andy*. *Andy* I met *in my dreams*. And I couldn't stop thinking about him. And that was the part Naya couldn't help me with.

And then there was Mikey. He was always my go-to when it came to girl problems. When some girl started acting weird, when I couldn't tell if a note meant “I like you” or “you're fucked,” he was there, inhaling Doritos and offering garbage advice that somehow still helped. He knew how I ticked.

Except Andy wasn't a girl.

And that made everything even more complicated.

Just thinking about saying the words out loud made me sick. But I couldn't keep this inside forever. It was pressing against my ribs, clawing its way up my throat, desperate to be let out.

I was still scrubbing dried ketchup stains out of the fridge when the phone rang. A second later, I heard my mom's voice — and, of course, it was Mikey. As if he'd somehow heard my thoughts.

“No, Michael, Maxim can't come to the phone,” she said loud enough for me to hear.

I scrubbed harder at the shelf. Then, as if she couldn't make it worse, she added, “Don't call again, Michael. He's reflecting on his choices right now.”

I groaned inwardly, wiping my hands on my jersey. Really?

She lingered for a while after that, pacing the house and slamming cabinets, making sure I remembered I was being punished.

Eventually, she left the house.

The moment I heard the doors being slammed, I bolted into my room. Still in yellow rubber gloves, I hit the power button on my PC and watched the screen come to life. After what felt like an eternity, I logged into AIM, praying Mikey was online.

He must've known me too well. I hadn't even checked if the green icon was lit up next to his nick before a message popped up:

**xXNotMickeyXx:** sup

**xXNotMickeyXx:** welcome to the house arrest squad

**SmashItMax:** what happened? I left your corpse at Naya's. BTW, go on a diet, you're fat

**xXNotMickeyXx:** screw you

**xXNotMickeyXx:** she hid me in the playroom

**xXNotMickeyXx:** but when I got home this morning... I barfed all over my dad :/

**SmashItMax:** wtf

**xXNotMickeyXx:** seriously, it was like a very disgusting horror movie. Sir Holloway was not impressed

**SmashItMax:** ...

**xXNotMickeyXx:** yeah... I can still smell it. It's like it's burned into my soul

**xXNotMickeyXx:** and my brain's a potato. What the hell did I drink last night?

**SmashItMax:** no idea but I'm surprised you're still alive

**xXNotMickeyXx:** I'm a survivor. Dad took my car keys, and I have to clean the twins' room for a month

**xXNotMickeyXx:** how's your house arrest going?

**SmashItMax:** torture

I glanced over my shoulder, listening for any sign my mom was back home. It was now or never. And it was easier to ask what I wanted to in the chat, since I didn't have to face him.

**SmashItMax:** can I ask you something?

**xXNotMickeyXx:** sure, but make it quick 'cause I gotta go deliver the sentence

I wasn't sure how to start. My leg bounced nervously, and I chewed on my rubber-covered thumb, typing and deleting the message a few times before finally settling on sending it.

**SmashItMax:** how do you know you're not gay?

**xXNotMickeyXx:** ???

Great. Now I had to spell it out. Like this wasn't already embarrassing enough.

**SmashItMax:** like, how do you know you're not into dudes?

**xXNotMickeyXx:** idk man, I just know. Why?

**SmashItMax:** just asking

**SmashItMax:** hypothetically

**xXNotMickeyXx:** you in love with me, Maxie? <3

**SmashItMax:** oh my god, shut up

**xXNotMickeyXx:** but for real, I think you just know. I mean, I see a chick and I'm like "damn"

**xXNotMickeyXx:** but when I see a dude, I'm like "hell nah"

**SmashItMax:** but what if you don't know?

**xXNotMickeyXx:** LOL bro, you high?

**SmashItMax:** I'm serious

**xXNotMickeyXx:** wait

**xXNotMickeyXx:** you mean you're not sure?

I sighed, fingers hovering over the keys, my thoughts a tangled mess. How could I explain it? I couldn't tell him about Andy. He'd call me nuts for falling for someone in a dream. And I definitely couldn't tell him it was a guy in the first place.

**SmashItMax:** It's not about me. Just in general

**xXNotMickeyXx:** well, it's 100% not about me 'cause I know for a fact I love me some BIG boobs

**SmashItMax:** ...

**xXNotMickeyXx:** c'mon, dude. It's not that hard. You either like the front row at the boob concert or you don't

My leg bounced harder as I stared at the screen. Remind me—why was I asking him?

**SmashItMax:** it's not always that simple

**xXNotMickeyXx:** what, you worried you're into dudes or something?

**SmashItMax:** no. It's not like that. Forget it

**xXNotMickeyXx:** lol bro, you know I'm messing with you. You're not gay. You'd know if you were

**SmashItMax:** idk, okay?

**xXNotMickeyXx:** just don't think too hard about it. You like girls. You've kissed enough of them and done other stuff

**SmashItMax:** yeah, I guess

**xXNotMickeyXx:** see? You're good

**xXNotMickeyXx:** what about Jenny? Naya told me you disappeared for a while, but I don't remember much from the party, haha

**xXNotMickeyXx:** did you do it?

**xXNotMickeyXx:** ???

**SmashItMax:** no

**xXNotMickeyXx:** whaaat? Why not?

That's what we were supposed to talk about. Girls, parties, dumb stuff. But nothing mattered compared to Andy.

**SmashItMax:** I didn't feel like it

**xXNotMickeyXx:** dude, what's up with you lately? You're weird

**SmashItMax:** I'm not weird

**xXNotMickeyXx:** sure, whatever

**xXNotMickeyXx:** gotta go. Twin slave duty :(

**SmashItMax:** yeah, go clean up your vomit kingdom

**xXNotMickeyXx:** shut up. Later, dude

**SmashItMax:** later

After Mikey logged off, I sat there staring at the screen and feeling stupid. Now that the rush had worn off, I realized I'd fucked up. School was starting in less than a week. How was I supposed to look Mikey in the eye? It's not like I'd told him I was gay or anything, but I'd planted the seed of doubt. What if he started avoiding me? What if he couldn't sit next to me anymore without cracking some lame joke, like, "Don't fall in love with me, Maxie"? What if he told someone else? It wouldn't be malicious. He'd just blurt it out. And then the entire school would know in a matter of seconds.

Mikey was so simple, so sure about everything. I wished I could be as confident about who I was and what I wanted. But I wasn't.

Everything was slipping out of my control, pulling me in two directions at once. Part of me wanted to yell at Mikey, to make him understand that what I was feeling was bigger than some dumb hypothetical. But the other part? The other part couldn't even admit it to myself.

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By the time I finished being Cinderella, it was already evening. The second I was done, I wanted to face-plant straight into my pillow, but somehow my mind still raced ahead, desperate to see what the dream with Andy might bring next. Would we hug? Would we kiss? Would we...? I didn't even have the energy to stress about it.

I thought about sleeping pills. Not like I knew where Mom had hidden them after last night's chaos. I was surprised she didn't force me to crawl



around and pick them up off the floor while she stood over me with a whip in her hand, thinking I'd pocket a few if given the chance. But thankfully, I felt like one of the zombies we fought, because all it took to leave this world behind was closing my eyes.

I was the first one in the dream, which didn't happen often. I started pacing back and forth in the pub, the worn floorboards creaking under my boots. The place was dimly lit by some unseen source, casting long shadows across dusty tables and cracked leather seats. Were the zombies still out there, or had they moved on? The windows were covered in old newspapers, yellowed and brittle with age, blocking any view of what might be lurking outside.

As I waited for Andy, I started fixating. *Should I kiss him when he shows up? Would that seem desperate? Would it be better to hug him? Or let him make the first move?* Last night, everything felt so easy, as if the dream knew exactly what to do for us. Now, my brain was spiraling through questions and self-doubt.

I paced another lap around the pub before realizing that my clothes—previously torn and splattered with blood and zombie guts—were perfectly fine now. Even my hands and face were spotless, with no trace of the chaos we'd fought through last time.

“Hey.”

I jumped, spinning around so fast I almost tripped over my own feet. Andy was sitting on the counter, looking effortlessly cool, and when he smiled at me, shy yet warm, my heart did this annoying lurch thing.

“You scared the shit out of me,” I stammered. “Hi.”

He hopped off the counter, and we stood there like the two idiots we were. He looked like he might say something. I looked like I might run. The awkward energy was radiating off both of us, and it was clear he was just as unsure about what to do next as I was. His hands twitched at his sides, as if he wasn't sure whether to shove them in his pockets or reach out.

“Um...” I started, desperate to break the silence, but Andy blurted out at the same time, “You first tonight—”

We both laughed, the awkwardness easing just enough to make room for something softer. I didn't know what the hell I was waiting for. A sign? Some cosmic green light that said, "It's okay now"?

Screw it. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around his waist. He hugged me back without hesitation, and I buried my face in his neck, heat crawling up my nape, hoping he couldn't feel how warm I'd gotten.

After a way-too-short moment, we let go of each other, and I wished we hadn't. Like, ever.

Andy exhaled. "God, today sucked. I was seriously thinking about knocking myself out."

"Yeah, same," I said. "Though my mom would just dump a bucket of ice water on me to make sure I kept doing the crap she ordered me to."

"Oh, poor you—had to clean your room?"

"More like the entire neighborhood." I huffed, tugging at the hem of my shirt. "At least we don't have to go scavenging for new clothes."

He glanced down at himself. "Oh, right. Guess the apocalypse decided to cut us some slack. You're really rocking that shirt, by the way."

"I'm surprised I have *anything* on."

His cheeks turned red as he cleared his throat. "Anyway... should we go out? Do you think there are still zombies outside?"

"I mean, probably?" I headed to the table and slowly shoved it aside. "But I'm not about to sit here waiting for them to knock."

Andy hesitated for a second, then joined me at the door. He cracked it open just enough to peek through.

"Anything?" I whispered.

He didn't answer right away, just stood there, squinting outside. His hand tightened on the edge of the door.

"What is it?" I asked.

He pushed it open a little farther. "I don't think we have to worry about zombies anymore."

I moved to stand beside him, blinking as the light hit my eyes.

Chicago was gone. In its place stretched an open field, glowing in the soft light of sunset. A dirt path started right outside the door and disappeared into the tall grass. The air smelled clean, like wildflowers after rain.

Andy stepped out first.

“Where are we?” I asked, following him right after.

“I don’t know, but... it’s beautiful.”

I stared, but not at the picture in front of us. The warm light softened Andy’s features, making his hair glow in a way that made me want to stare just a little longer. *Yeah, beautiful.*

The path stretched ahead, mysterious but inviting. There wasn’t much else to do but walk.

And in the calm stillness of the moment, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to reach out and take his hand.

So, I did.

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We followed the path with no destination. Time seemed to stop, the world around us unchanging, as if giving us a break. All I felt was omnipresent peace, like the weight I carried every day had melted into the golden light around us.

But it wasn’t just the place.

I kept sneaking glances at Andy. He looked more at ease than I’d ever seen him, and being near him made me feel the same. Two months ago, I’d never have believed any of this was possible. Not the dreams, not how close we’d become, and definitely not how my world started to revolve around a guy. A guy I met in my dreams.

Now, I didn’t know how I’d ever go back.

I wanted to tell him. To say out loud that I wanted this in the real world too. To hold his hand, to be close without it being some fragile, secret thing. But the thought of what he’d say made my chest tighten, and at this point,

ignorance felt like bliss. Because what if I was the only one feeling this connection so strongly? What if, for him, this was just a temporary escape, while for me, it was starting to mean so much more?

What if this thing we had could never exist outside of these dreams? Because... yeah.

The next few nights blurred together, each slipping into the next, making it a dream you don't quite wake up from. Time lost all meaning, a whole week slipping by just like that.

During the day, I slogged through my new role as Mom's unpaid, emotionally blackmailed house elf, but weirdly, it was almost a relief. Being too exhausted to think gave me a break from myself. From the questions. From the what-ifs.

All I had energy for was Andy here and now. Wondering what we'd talk about that night, what he'd say. Knowing he was waiting made everything bearable. I didn't even need the sleeping pills. The second I shut my eyes, I was there.

And he was always waiting.

Every morning, I checked the mailbox like some desperate loser. Just to see if, *maybe*, there was a postcard. A sign. A real-world breadcrumb that said he wasn't just something I made up. But the mailbox stayed empty.

The disappointment always punched harder than I expected, but when night would come and I saw Andy—waiting for me like he never left—every doubt would melt away.

We let ourselves sink into the dream, taking it for what it was, no more questions asked. We'd sit on the grass, side by side, thinking aloud how different life could be if it were this simple, surrounded by nature, no rules, no parents, no pressure. We didn't talk about what we were. We didn't need to. Life in the dream was simple. Just this weird version of the world that let us exist without having to explain ourselves.

One night, Andy asked, "You ever wonder what it'd be like to just... stay here forever?"

I thought about it all the time.

Would it last forever, though? Would something between us eventually change?

In those moments, none of it mattered.

We'd lie side by side, sometimes kissing, sometimes more. But it wasn't about what we were doing. It was about the way everything was so natural, so unhurried, like there was nothing to be afraid of. No games. No masks. It just was.

After a few nights, when the sunset eventually shifted into a star-filled sky, we'd still hold hands. In real life, we could be in different towns, in different beds, different lives. But in the dream, we were under the same sky, and that was enough. We were like twin stars, shining brighter only when we orbited each other closely, creating our own universe. And I realized I didn't want to just exist in his orbit. I wanted to collide.

So I'd kiss him deep and certain, and he'd always kissed me back right away. His hands would find my back, my neck, my chest, pulling me closer like he couldn't stand the space between us. Everything else would disappear. Just him and the way he held me like I was something worth holding onto.

When we finally broke apart, he'd press his forehead against mine, his breath warm and uneven.

"Max," he'd say.

"Yeah?"

He never followed it with anything. Just smiled. And I knew—whatever this was, whatever it was becoming—it wasn't just mine. It was ours.

## FALLING FROM THE STARS



““**M**aximus the Conqueror! Where’s your harem?” I heard as I hopped off my bike in front of the school. Mikey was already there, with Erik and Joe waiting in the parking lot. They were both on my baseball team—loud, barely separable, and with too much testosterone.

“What happened to ‘hello, how are you?’” I walked over and locked my bike next to theirs. Usually, Mikey would’ve picked me up in his car, but since his dad had taken the keys away, I was stuck with pedaling like a medieval peasant.

We exchanged quick handshakes and back pats. “Who cares about ‘good morning’ when someone’s scoring with Jenny Hagen?” Erik grinned.

I shot Mikey a glare. “What did you tell them?”

“Don’t look at me. News travels fast.”

“Nothing happened, so there’s no news.”

“Why so shy, Max?” Joe asked as we walked toward the entrance. “Not like it’s your first rodeo.”

“Don’t let your guard down, though,” Erik said. “Kyle Silva was boiling, man. If looks could kill, the whole parking lot would’ve gone up in flames.”

As they kept teasing me, I couldn’t help but appreciate how Mikey ignored the whole “gay chat” we’d had. Maybe he didn’t take it seriously, or maybe he decided to let it go. Either way, I was glad he didn’t make it awkward. He was acting normal, and that’s all I wanted.

We pushed through the school’s double doors, dodging clusters of freshmen and shouting quick hellos to people we passed in the halls.

Still... I glanced at the guys. Why Andy? Why not someone like Mikey? He was good-looking—objectively. Joe and Erik weren’t exactly sewer goblins either. But the idea of kissing any of them made me gag.

Mikey, unaware of my thoughts, grinned. “You know you’re gonna have to deal with Silva sooner or later, right?” he said, way too casually for someone who was poking at a hornet’s nest.

“I don’t get why this is even a thing,” I shoved the homeroom door open. “I didn’t sleep with her.”

Joe gave me a sympathetic look. “Welcome back to high school, man.”

As the bell rang, Joe and Erik peeled off toward their homerooms, leaving Mikey and me to slide into our usual seats in the back. I dropped my bag on the floor and leaned back. The first day and I was already caught in some drama.

Just as I started to zone out, I caught Jenny glancing at me from the front row. When our eyes met, she whipped her head around like I’d caught her doing something illegal.

Why did I even care? Gossip burned bright and fast, but it always died down, eventually. This would blow over. There were way more important things going on in my life, things I couldn’t stop thinking about.

And not like I had a choice. It was like Andy had moved into my head and thrown away the key. I was surprised Mikey couldn't see the giant neon sign flashing ANDREW LEE in my eyes every time he looked at me. Everything was much more manageable when I could disappear into my thoughts of Andy. Did it even matter if Andy was *real* real? Lately, he was the only thing real for me anyway.

The teacher droned on about something, but it was all background noise. I'd already drifted away, imagining these ridiculous scenarios. *The teacher announces a new student, and it's Andy. He walks into the class and takes the seat next to me. I freeze, not able to admit I know him, and then, during the break, he drags me into the janitor's closet... Or I see him in the hallway, like he'd been a student here all along, and time slows down as we lock eyes. He casually grabs my hand and tugs me into some dark storage room, and—*

I shook myself, cutting off the thought before it got out of hand. God, if I didn't stop letting my mind wander, I'd have to wait for everyone to clear out before I could stand up.

I was so lost in my own head that I didn't register the teacher calling my name.

"Dude, what the hell?" Mikey hissed into my ear, grabbing my shoulder.

I jerked in surprise—and the delicate balance I'd been holding, leaning back on two chair legs like the overconfident dumbass I was—vanished.

THUD!

I ended up on the floor. The sound bounced off the walls like an explosion, and the whole class erupted into laughter. Heat rushed up my nape in an instant as Mikey doubled over, laughing too.

"Oh my god, Max!" someone called, but I was too busy trying to crawl out of my humiliation to figure out who. I scrambled to my feet, my face burning hot.

Mikey snickered as he offered me a hand. "You alright, man?" he managed between wheezes, reveling in every second of my embarrassment.



"Thanks." I brushed off imaginary dust as if that would somehow restore my dignity. The entire class was still giggling, including the teacher, who was trying to suppress a grin.

"Good thing we're not freshmen or you'd be toast for life."

"Shut up," I said, though I couldn't stop a small smile from tugging at the corner of my mouth.

"So I'll take that as your attendance, Maxim," the teacher called from the front of the class.

"Yes, Mr. Bautista," I mumbled, sitting back down.

I leaned forward, resting my chin on my palm, watching as Mikey mouthed, "*You need to stop daydreaming.*" If only he knew what I was daydreaming about.

At lunch, we met up with Joe, Erik, and a few of the other baseball guys at our usual table in the cafeteria. I had just dropped into my seat when Adam—always sunburned and half-distracted out in right field—leaned in, lowering his voice.

"Hey, Max. Look at Silva. Dude looks like he's about to murder you."

Sure enough, across the room Silva was sitting with his football entourage, looking like he wanted to throw me through a wall. Now and then, his goons looked my way, probably just waiting for him to give the signal to charge. I kept my eyes on my mashed potatoes, trying to appear unbothered. "What's his problem? I didn't do anything."

Erik snorted. "Yeah, sure."

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

"Doesn't matter what we know." Joe took a bite of his pizza. "He looks like he's out for blood."

"Dude, chill," I muttered, stabbing at my food. "He's not going to do anything."

"That's what they say." Erik wiggled his eyebrows. "Until someone gets a fist to the face."

Adam leaned back. "It's not just about Jenny. Ever since the Hawks lost last year, Silva's had this chip on his shoulder."

"Yeah," Mikey agreed. "He's got something to prove."

"Which makes no sense," Joe said. "The guy's already locked in a scholarship. What's he got to be so stressed about?"

"Maybe it's 'cause his daddy doesn't love him," Erik said, earning a few laughs.

Adam shrugged. "Maybe the guy just needs a hug."

Eric nudged me. "Relax, Max. If he starts something, dodge fast. I'll hold your tray."

"Will you guys shut up already?"

We all glanced up at Naya standing at the end of the table, arms crossed and eyebrows raised like a very disapproving mom. "God, you're like a bunch of cackling hens."

"What's your problem, Naya?" Erik teased. "Jealous of our henhouse?"

She rolled her eyes and plopped into the empty seat beside Mikey. "Nah, I'm just tired of hearing you all whine about Kyle Silva. Either you're secretly in love with him, or you're just bored because Max is hogging all the drama already."

Joe snorted. "Drama? Max is the star of Silva's mental playlist."

"Half the school's either convinced he's stealing their girl or planning his next conquest," Erik said, nudging Joe.

"He doesn't even have to try," Mikey said.

"Leave some for the rest of us," Adam added.

"Lock up your moms!" someone shouted.

I chuckled along with them, but the jokes weren't funny anymore. They were boring and repetitive. The same assumptions about who I was, the same shallow image of me, which didn't really fit. Why couldn't they see I was more than just "the guy who gets the girls"?

A bitter thought crossed my mind: what would they think if they knew the truth? If they found out it wasn't Jenny occupying my thoughts, but

Andy? Would they still be so quick to laugh with me? Would they still be my friends?

I forced myself to smile as the conversation shifted to the new season, but the humor had drained out of me. Naya might've saved me from the teasing, but knowing she knew even just part of the truth was like a rope tightening around my neck. Did she think about it every time she looked at me? And what if that thread snapped, unraveling everything, if she said the wrong thing to the wrong person? I shoved the thought away, telling myself I was overthinking. Again.

After lunch, I got to my locker to switch out books and a group of girls caught my eye. They huddled together, whispering and glancing my way, and I knew exactly what that meant. I'd seen that look plenty of times. One of them—a sophomore I vaguely recognized—approached me, her face redder than a fire hydrant.

“Hey, um... is it true? About you and Hagen?”

I almost laughed. Not because it was funny, but because I couldn't believe how fast the rumor spread. “No, it's not true,” I said, already bracing for her to run back to her friends with the denial.

Instead, her face lit up like Christmas morning. “Oh! Well, in that case, do you maybe... wanna see a movie sometime?”

There it was. The question I used to hear all the time. The one that would've made me smirk, lean against the lockers, and say something smooth like, *Sure, why not?* Few months ago, I would've most likely said yes. It was just what I did.

But now, the idea of saying yes sounded very exhausting. I couldn't pretend to be interested anymore.

“Um, sorry, I'm... kind of swamped with training,” I said.

Her smile faltered, and she nodded, mumbling something polite before retreating to her group. They ushered her back into their whispering little huddle, shooting glances my way that weren't so sympathetic anymore.

I cringed and shut my locker. Rejection wasn't my strong suit—it never had been—but the truth was, I didn't know why I just couldn't care. It didn't matter how cute they were or how much they liked me. I'd always end up feeling nothing.

Practice gave me something else to focus on. Even though it was out of season, most of the team still hung around after classes. Mikey had already decided for both of us that we weren't skipping fall conditioning this year, and I figured it was the least I could do for him after ditching him all summer. Last year, after Coach tried to murder us with what had to be a two hundred push-ups (probably more, but I blacked out around one hundred), I'd pulled a disappearing act until spring.

As I swung my bat during warm-ups, I found myself thinking back to the zombie dreams with Andy. Every swing brought me back to that scene. Except instead of smashing skulls, I was trying to knock a ball out of the park. Baseball was one of the few things I actually enjoyed in life. Pitching, especially. Standing on the mound, with everything revolving around you, was its own kind of thrill. You're the one pulling the strings, the one deciding whether the batter swings and misses or walks back to the dugout cursing himself.

After warm-ups, I grabbed a ball and joined Mikey who was already behind the plate, his glove up and ready for a pitch. "Yo, Maxie, you sure you don't need a break?" he called, his mask tilted up just enough for me to see his grin.

I flipped him off. "Do *you*?"

The thing about pitching is you need to find a rhythm. My first few throws were shaky, like my body was waking up to the idea of playing again. But once I locked in, it all came back—fastball, curveball, slider—each one smacking into Mikey's glove with a satisfying pop. Muscle memory doesn't forget, and there's nothing better than the sound of a perfect pitch hitting leather.

“Maximus ‘Strikeout King’ Reid!” Brandon, the shortstop, shouted from the outfield.

I snorted. “Damn right!”

For a while, everything felt normal—until, like an addict, I started thinking about Andy again. His smile, his laugh, his dark eyes—

A sharp pain shot through my side. I folded forward, clutching the spot as the ball landed on the ground.

“You okay?” Mikey called out from his spot as someone yelled, “Sorry, Max!”

I waved them off, trying to laugh, though it came out more like a cough. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Just... lost focus for a second.”

Coach Garcia stormed over, clipboard in hand, and irritation written all over his face. “Reid! Get your head in the game! You don’t have to be here—so if you’re gonna daydream, do it off my field!”

“Yes, Coach,” I straightened up. Mikey gave me one last look, but his concern lingered behind me like a shadow.

The rest of the practice went by in a blur. I tried to refocus, but Andy kept creeping into my thoughts. On top of that, I felt Mikey’s eyes on me constantly—and not in a catcher kind of way. He wasn’t stupid. He knew something was up, and it was only a matter of time before he asked outright.

By the time Coach finally called it, I was drenched in sweat, my arm aching in a satisfying, post-practice kind of way, the kind that told me I’d earned it. Mikey, Adam, and I were the last ones left in the locker room. Mikey was dragging his feet as usual, cracking jokes and bragging to Adam about some stupid dive he made over the summer. I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t help chuckling at his antics. At least the Jenny topic was over.

Which was dumb, because I should’ve known better.

As we stepped out from the locker room into the field house hallway, the football team was finishing up their practice. Walking toward us were none other than Kyle Silva and his usual sidekick, Nick Miller, both still in their gear and laughing about something.

“Fucking fantastic,” Mikey muttered.

They noticed us, and Silva’s eyes locked onto me immediately. “Well, well, look who it is. The baseball prodigies gracing us with their presence,” he sneered. “What’s up? Took a little extra time to cry in the showers?”

Miller laughed. “What’s your strategy this time, Reid? Just stand there and look pretty?”

I was about to ignore them, but Mikey wasn’t having it. “Pretty enough for Jenny to notice.”

*Oh my god...*

Silva’s face twisted with rage in an instant. “You better shut your mouth, Holloway, before I do it for you.”

“Oh yeah?” Mikey bounced on his heels like he was itching for a reason to get involved.

Silva might’ve been big, but that didn’t mean he was dumb. Three against two weren’t odds he’d risk, especially with Miller at his side—loud-mouthed but basically a bulked-up Chihuahua.

“You think you can just take what’s mine and not get hit for it, Reid?”

I sighed, already tired of the whole thing. “Wow. So we’re still doing the ‘she’s mine’ caveman thing?”

Mikey and Adam let out a loud “oooh,” but Silva didn’t flinch. “You think it’s funny?”

“I think you need to get over yourself. And over Jenny. She’s your ex, remember? That means not your problem anymore.”

Silva clenched his fists so tightly I could see the veins straining in his forearms.

“You think you’re better than me, don’t you? The star pitcher. Everyone loves Maximus fucking Reid.” He stepped closer. “But newsflash, Reid: you’re nothing. You hear me?”

For some reason, my mom’s voice rang in my head—how she’d called me selfish, an egoist. But I swallowed the thought.

Mikey took a step closer as well. “Why don’t you two go work on your passing game instead of your trash talk? Then you might actually win this year.”

Miller tugged at Silva’s arm, muttering something I couldn’t hear. Silva took a deep breath. “Keep talking, and we’ll see who’s laughing at the end of the season.”

He shot me one last death glare and spat on the ground before turning and stalking off, his kiss-ass trailing behind him.

Mikey let out a low whistle. “Dude, you might wanna watch your back.”

“Nah,” Adam added with a laugh. “The guy’s a joke.”

I rubbed my temples. “Can you guys not stir the pot next time?”

“C’mon, Max, you know we’re just having some fun.”

“Yeah, well, Silva’s not. He’s just looking for an excuse.”

“Let him,” Adam said with a shrug. “If he wants to go, we’re ready.”

As we left the school, the air seemed to become heavier. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Silva wasn’t going to let this go. He wasn’t just angry. He was jealous. And jealousy, mixed with pride, made guys like him dangerous.

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“How was your first day back at school?” I asked Andy later in the dream. The sky was a pale blue now, the sun hanging low like it couldn’t decide if it was setting. It was daytime, though it didn’t mean much. Sometimes the sky would darken, stars blinking into existence out of nowhere, and other times the sun seemed to linger for hours. We’d given up trying to figure it out. It was just the way things worked.

We’d decided to follow the path again. It was more defined now, rough dirt and stones, like a trail cutting through the countryside. You’d think in a place like this—with nothing but open sky and fields for miles—we’d get bored. And maybe we’d, if this were the real world. But it wasn’t. It was so

freaking peaceful. Filled with the kind of peace that made you forget the other life even existed.

"It was fine," Andy said. His hand was wrapped around mine, warm and familiar. "Same as always."

"Same as always? You're telling me nothing happened? No fights? No drama? No villain challenging you to a kung fu duel in the middle of the hallway?"

He laughed, but it felt a little forced. "Nah, nothing like that. You know, just school. Sit through the boring stuff, pretend to care, then leave. You know the drill."

I eyed him, sensing something was off. "I guess. Except my first day was nothing but drama. People think I'm out there collecting girls like baseball cards."

Andy raised an eyebrow, his expression sharpening. "Didn't know you were such a lady-killer, Max. Guess I should be taking notes."

"Please. You know I'm not like that. Not anymore."

He didn't respond. Instead, his fingers went slack until I was the only one holding on.

I rubbed the back of my neck with my free hand. "People think I hooked up with Jenny Hagen."

Andy's hand slipped from mine completely. "Did you?"

"No, of course not!" I flexed my fingers. "But you know how it is.... Now her ex, Kyle Silva, is ready to knock me out."

"Sounds... fun."

"Yeah, it's great. Everyone thinks they know who I am, but they don't know shit."

Andy was silent for a moment before he asked, "Do you ever feel like... you don't really know who you are, either?"

I slowed my pace, glancing at him. He was looking up at the sky, squinting into the sunlight.



"I don't know," I said slowly. "Sometimes, I guess. But not here. Here, everything feels simpler."

He nodded. "Yeah. Like nothing can touch us."

He was right. In this strange, timeless place, we could be whoever we wanted. Maybe that's why I was so comfortable kissing Andy.

Because kissing and touching him had become... normal. It didn't feel awkward. It didn't come with the uncertainty I would expect. I didn't hesitate, didn't question if it was okay.

"You know," Andy said after a long pause, "I wish we could just stay here and not have to deal with anything out there."

"Yeah," I said. "Same."

We walked in silence for a while, the only sound the crunch of stones beneath our feet. I was about to let the quiet settle when Andy's hand brushed mine, his fingers finding their way between mine again. The gesture was softer this time, but at least he was reaching out, trying to close the distance.

I gave his hand a slight squeeze. "Actually," I said. "Jenny kissed me at that party."

Andy's head snapped toward me. "...What?"

"Yeah, she was pretty drunk, but I don't think that was the reason. She told me she's in love with her friend Tanya." I noticed Andy's shoulders loosen up a bit. "I guess she just panicked. Maybe kissing me was a way to prove something to herself." I hesitated. "But then I saw your face."

"You... what?"

I shrugged, my face heating up. "I dunno. It just happened. My brain flashed to you, and... I couldn't make myself do it."

"That's..." He smiled a little. "Embarrassing."

"For me or you?"

"Both, I guess. I mean... I don't know."

Before I could say anything else, Andy leaned in and gave me a peck on the cheek. Just a brush, soft and fleeting, but it felt like getting hit with a defibrillator. Then he kept walking as if nothing had happened.

I blinked, a bit stunned, but smiled. It made my heart race in the best way. I followed him, still smiling, making sure not to let him slip from my hand again.

## GRASPING TO CONTROL



The next day, the rumors had already fizzled out. High school gossip had a shelf life of however long it took for something juicier to come along. Someone probably farted in chemistry class or got caught making out behind the gym, and now *that* was the new headline.

And Kyle Silva? He wasn't avoiding me, but he wasn't coming for me either. It felt like he was circling—waiting for me to make the first move. Or the first mistake. Whatever game he thought we were playing, I wasn't biting. Of course, he couldn't help himself entirely. During math class, he made a half-hearted attempt at getting under my skin by trying to trip me with his leg when I passed his desk. I hopped over it and shot him a part “Nice try, loser,” part “Are you seriously this predictable?” look. Silva and his fan club snickered to themselves. It pissed me off more than I wanted to admit.

At home, things weren't better. Mom still wasn't speaking to me unless she needed something, and even then, her tone was clipped and sharp, like I was a temp she wanted to fire, but at least she'd stopped making me her personal errand boy. The problem was, now that she wasn't working me to death, I had too much energy by the end of the day. I'd lie there, eyes on the ceiling, flipping my pillow to the cool side every five minutes, wide awake. And, since Mom had cut off my shortcut to the dream world, I had to find another way in.

Which is how I ended up talking to Frankie White. He was the most low-key drug dealer you could imagine. No black hoodie, no cigarette dangling from his lips. He looked more like a debate team captain than someone supplying half the senior class. He actually was the student council president. And the school's pharmaceutical kingpin. ADHD pills for finals week, Xanax for the overachievers, painkillers for the sports guys—just name it, Frankie could get it.

When I approached him, I tried to act casual. Frankie saw right through me.

"What do you need?" he asked, deadpan, like I was ordering fries.

"Sleeping pills. Enough to... you know, last a while."

Frankie wasn't the judgmental type. He told me the price—a small fortune—and walked away like this was just another Tuesday.

The price stung, but what choice did I have? The idea of lying awake for hours while Andy waited for me was unbearable. I would hand over every cent I'd saved and told myself it was worth it.

Frankie came through faster than I expected. After school the next day, he caught me by the lockers, casually handing over a small bottle like a pack of gum.

"You're a miracle worker," I said, pocketing the pills.

"Don't get used to it," he said with a poker face. "Next time, you're paying double."

"How do you even get these?"

“My dad’s a doctor. Let’s just say his prescription pad has a lot of creative uses.”

When I got home, I didn’t waste time. I heated some leftover lasagna, rushed through my homework, and took a quick shower. Usually, I’d let the heat wash the day off me, but tonight everything felt like a distraction. After climbing into bed, the weight of the day lifted, replaced by the soft embrace of the comforter. The pills worked fast, making the world dissolve into nothingness—and I let it. I let it all go.

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The cold struck me like a sharp fist.

I sank into something cold and thick. Panic hit instantly. I kicked out, but it was like swimming through wet cement. The air tore from my lungs as I twisted, desperate to figure out what was happening.

“Max!” Andy’s voice rang out, distant and panicked. My head jerked toward the sound, but the liquid made even a small move impossible.

“Hang on!” I shouted, not that it mattered. My voice disappeared into the blackness.

The peaceful fields were gone. The ground had turned to dark, swirling sludge, dragging me deeper with every second. The moon hung weakly behind thick clouds, barely throwing any light.

The freezing filth crept higher, biting at my chest before reaching my chin. Then, without warning, the muck gave way—and before I could take a breath, I was under freezing water. I kicked hard and broke through the surface an instant later, spitting out water and gasping for air. I spun around, searching through the nightmare for Andy, and finally spotted him thrashing about sixty feet away.

“Keep your head up, Andy!” I yelled, but it only made him struggle harder. His head dipped, bobbed back up, then—

He vanished.

“Andy!”

I dove. The cold punched into me again like a thousand needles. Everything was black. My arms pushed blindly through, hoping I was going the right way. I couldn’t think. I just reached.

My fingers brushed the fabric. I latched onto it and pulled, but the water was dragging him down, and my own body screamed with exhaustion as I fought to yank him toward the surface.

With one last, desperate pull, I surged upward, breaking through the surface and hauling him with me.

He coughed violently.

“Spit it out!”

“I can’t—I can’t swim!” His hands grabbed at me, eyes wild.

I flipped him onto his back and held his head above water, locking my arms around his chest.

A small shape appeared in the distance. “There!” I choked out, already pushing us toward it. A wooden boat bobbed gently on the surface.

“Keep kicking, Andy. We’re almost there!”

The boat grew closer, the oars resting inside clearly visible now. With one last burst of strength, I shoved Andy toward it. “Grab the side!”

He clawed at it, his fingers slipping once before I gave him another push. He tumbled over the edge, collapsing into the bottom of the boat, then turned around and extended a hand to haul me in after him. We collapsed onto the floor, breathless, water dripping from our clothes and pooling around us as we lay shivering.

Andy sat up first, coughing hard. His hair was a wet mess, strands sticking to his face like they’d melted.

“What the hell just happened?” he rasped.

“I don’t know.” I sat up slowly, trying to catch my breath. “Did you find a door or something?”

“No! I was sitting on the grass. Then you showed up, and everything disappeared!”

A chill ran down my spine. When something this extreme happens in a dream—something terrifying like drowning—you'd wake up. But I didn't wake up. Shouldn't I have snapped awake the second I went under?

I scanned the horizon, but saw nothing except the vast black water, blending into the dark sky. "So now what?"

Andy grabbed one of the oars, still shaking. "I guess we use this."

"Give me that," I said, sliding onto the bench.

"I can row."

"You almost drowned. Let me—"

"You think I could've drowned? In a dream?"

"It's not like we're gonna test it out again."

"But I didn't wake up, Max! That's what's supposed to happen, right?!"

"I don't know!" I snapped. "I don't know what's going on anymore. Let's just keep moving..." I dipped the oars into the water. The rhythmic motion of rowing gave me something to focus on, but my head worked on its own anyway. What if we could've drowned for real? What if this place was more dangerous than we ever realized?

Andy pulled his knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around them.

"We can always wake up," I said after a while. "Force it, I mean."

He shook his head. "No. I don't want to wake up."

"Okay. Just... let's keep going."

We sat in silence. The night surrounded us like a living thing, watching and waiting, and I hated how small and fragile the boat felt in the middle of it all. I was rowing like I could steer this world back into place, but it was far from control. It was just panic with a good grip.

I had no idea how long we'd been swimming. My arms burned, but I kept it to myself. Andy needed to know he could rely on me. He kept glancing around, avoiding eye contact. I wanted to break the tension somehow, so I joked about kissing him for comfort. To my surprise, he said yes. I leaned in and kissed him gently. It seemed to lift his spirits a bit.

Time got weird after that. With every stroke, the darkness pressed in, growing more oppressive. Clouds thickened above, smothering what little moonlight remained, and soon we were rowing blind.

“I don’t like this,” Andy whispered.

“Me neither,” I said. “You okay?”

He mumbled something that sounded like yes, but I didn’t believe it. “Wanna switch places?” I asked.

“No—”

The boat jolted, slamming into something solid.

Andy yelped, grabbing the side. My hands tightened around the oars as I squinted into the dark. The clouds parted, and a sliver of moonlight pierced the dark, just enough to reveal what we’d crashed into.

A house. Half-submerged. Floating like a forgotten ghost on the water.



## SOMETHING HAPPENS



The house looked like it had only just started to sink. The waterline reached the top floor, submerging everything below, but the upper windows and roof were intact. We floated toward one of the windows, but instead of seeing inside, all we saw was our own not-so-eager faces reflected in the glass.

“Is that your house?” I asked. It definitely wasn’t mine.

Andy shook his head.

I set the oars down and turned to get a better look. Andy stepped closer, and the boat wobbled under us as we both leaned toward the window.

“I can’t see anything,” he muttered, his breath fogging the glass.

“Should we try to get inside?”

“What if it’s haunted?”

“We’ve already fought zombies,” I said. “What’s worse than that?”

“Ghosts.”

“Okay, fine. Ghosts or not, we’re here. Dream wants us to go in, so I guess we don’t get a choice.”

I tried to open the window, but it wouldn’t budge. Before I could suggest anything else, Andy hauled off and kicked straight through the glass, the pieces scattering inside and splashing into the water below.

“... Okay...” I blinked at him, half-startled, half-impressed.

“You were taking too long.”

I almost laughed, but the mood didn’t quite let me. The house felt strangely aware, like it was waiting for us to go inside.

“Well, you broke it. You go first.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I knocked. You talk.”

“Oh my god, fine...” I hoisted myself up onto the ledge, carefully avoiding the broken edges. I turned back and offered him a hand.

He didn’t need it, but he took it anyway.

We climbed in. Instantly, a strange, oppressive air hit me, and the dark swallowed us completely. I couldn’t see my own hands, let alone Andy, but somehow my fingers found his, and tightened around them. More for my own comfort than his.

“Let’s go slow,” I whispered. “I don’t wanna walk face-first into something.”

“Good plan,” he whispered back, his grip tightening in return.

We moved one step at a time, every creak of the floorboards echoing way too loudly. I stretched my free arm forward, fumbling through the dark. The space inside felt much bigger than the house looked from the outside.

“Ooo, spooky,” I tried to joke, but my cracking voice betrayed me.

Andy snorted. “You scared?”

“Dude, I’m scared as fuck. What if there’s, like, a creepy ghost kid standing in the corner?”

“If there is, I’m launching it out the window.”

“Oh, yeah? If you’re so tough, you go first.”

“Nice try. Everyone knows the *first* one in dies first.”

“Yeah? Well, the one in the back gets dragged off screaming.”

“So we’re screwed either way.”

My hand brushed something thin and rough. I followed it slowly with my fingers. “Oh! Found—”

A light snapped on overhead.

Two green eyes stared back at me.

I screamed, stumbling backward and nearly taking Andy down with me. It took me a second to realize it was just my reflection.

Dozens of mirrors lined the walls, all different shapes and sizes, like they’d been yanked from random yard sales and thrown together.

Andy jerked back a step. “What—”

Each mirror reflected us, yet somehow, they didn’t. In one, my limbs stretched too long, thin as wires. Another squashed my face almost cartoonishly flat. A few grinned back at me, their smiles too wide and toothy. Andy’s reflections weren’t any better—eyes too big and bulging, body impossibly small. Some even lagged behind, as if they were still deciding whether to copy us or not.

One reflection caught my eye. Not because it looked different, but because it looked too *normal*. Nothing warped or stretched. Just... me.

For a second, I thought it was the only one that got it right—same eyes, same hair sticking up in every direction, same jaw. Then I noticed the smirk.

I wasn’t smiling.

But it was me, yeah. The version everyone saw. Max with the effortless grin. The guy who tossed baseballs like he had the world in his glove. The one who had friends, decent grades, and all the prettiest girls. The version I knew how to play.

The longer I stared, the more it felt like the reflection was staring *through* me. Like it knew something I didn’t. The smile was there, but it didn’t reach the eyes. The posture was relaxed, but *too* relaxed, like no tension was hold-

ing him up in the first place. Like that Max didn't feel anything at all. Like nothing could get to him, because nothing really mattered.

I blinked and shook my head.

It was just a mirror.

Right?

"Shit," I muttered. "This feels wrong."

The mirrors stretched into the distance, warping the space until I couldn't tell where the corridor ended.

"We should get out of here," I whispered, glancing over my shoulder. The window we'd climbed through earlier disappeared.

I turned back to Andy, but he hadn't moved, his eyes fixed on a mirror standing apart from the others. It was massive—easily twice my height—fitting inside the house with only dream logic, its frame ornate and golden, swirling with intricate carvings. Unlike the others, its glass was perfectly clean. But my reflection wasn't there.

Only Andy's.

But it wasn't *him* exactly. His face was pale, with deep shadows under his eyes and hollow cheeks. He looked... exhausted. Like he hadn't slept in weeks, which I knew was far from the truth. And behind him was just a black void.

He didn't move, his eyes glued to the reflection.

I took a shaky breath. "What's wrong?"

"It's... me," he said quietly.

Something in the mirror caught my attention, and I looked at his forearms. Then back at the reflection.

There were marks on his skin—faint and pale, like remnants of old scars.

I looked back at his actual arms. Smooth. Unmarked.

My heart sank as my mind raced to make sense of what I was seeing.

"Andy... is that what I think it is?" I asked, pointing at the scars in the reflection.

"It's nothing." He tried to step back, but I grabbed his wrist.

“Don’t do this. Don’t shut me out.”

Andy twisted as the reflection’s scars darkened, spreading like ink. “Let me go.”

He yanked his arm free—and the mirror exploded.

A deafening crack split the air as shards burst outward, flying straight at me. I barely had time to throw my arms up before pain seared across my palms. Warm blood welled between my fingers as I staggered back, hissing through my teeth.

“Max!” Andy shouted, staring at my hands like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “I didn’t—Max, I’m sorry—It wasn’t...I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” I mumbled, even though the sting was anything but. Blood welled in the lines of my fingers as I checked my palms. *It’s fine...*

Andy looked like he might be sick. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

I watched the blood drip onto the floor. The pain was so vivid, so tangible. This should have been just a dream, yet it felt like I’d been cut for real.

He took a step forward, his hand reaching out, but he stopped himself. “I...”

I looked down at his arms. The scars were there now, clear, fresh, and stark. Like the glass had drawn them out, etched them onto his skin for me to see.

Andy noticed where I was looking and shoved his arms behind his back. “Don’t,” he said. “Don’t say anything. Please.”

But I couldn’t. The mirror hadn’t lied. “Andy...”

His jaw tightened. “I told you. It’s nothing.”

I wanted to tell him it *wasn’t* nothing. That I wasn’t blind. I saw him. I cared. But the words caught in my throat. I reached for his hands, slowly, giving him time to pull away. He flinched as my fingers brushed his skin before he yanked his arm back like I’d burned him.

“Drop it,” he said sharply, meeting my eyes.

Something in me snapped. “You can’t just keep pushing me away! This—this isn’t enough!”

He looked like a scolded kid, his eyes instantly fixing on the floor. But it didn't do it for me.

"You don't get it! I want *you*. Not this... half-version. I want to kiss you for real. Laugh with you when we're not about to wake up!" I exhaled hard and barely above a whisper, added, "Let me meet you... For real."

Andy looked up at me, fear flickering for a heartbeat before his expression hardened and the panic drained into something colder.

"You still think this isn't real?" He asked, weirdly calm.

I ignored his question. "Aren't you scared? This place—it's getting worse. You almost drowned!" I gestured toward the shattered glass around us. "And now—this!"

His face stayed blank, distant. "You can't drown in a dream..."

"Come on, Andy. If we meet... it'd be better than this. So much better."

"This is just one bad dream, okay? We just have to leave this place. It's the house. It's messing with us. If we get out, things will go back to normal. We'll have good dreams again, I promise."

"What if we don't? What if it keeps getting worse?"

Andy reached out, taking my hands. His thumbs moved across the cuts like he could erase them.

"We'll figure it out," he said. "It's just a nightmare. We just need to get out."

His voice was full of hope. Desperate hope. He wanted to believe that it could last. That it was enough.

But it wasn't enough for me.

"It's because you're not real, right?" I said hesitantly, each thump of my heartbeat echoing my doubts like a distant drum. "You don't exist."

"I *am* real. You know I am."

But it wasn't enough for me.

"No, I don't. And I won't until you meet me. In the real world."

He let go of my hands and folded his arms around himself.

"I can't."

I should've hugged him, let him curl into me until the moment passed. But not this time. For the first time since we'd met, I felt something sharp and bitter rise in my chest.

Why did he have to be so damn stubborn?

I stared at the scars, the lines etched into his skin like a message I didn't understand. "Andy, why are you holding onto this so hard? What are you so afraid of? Whatever you've been through, it doesn't change the fact that I like you. Don't you get it? I never thought I'd feel anything for a guy. *Ever*. And now I'm here, trying to prove you're real and not just some dream I made up... but you won't let me!"

He flinched. "It's not even about the scars, Max. It's about..." He cut himself off, shaking his head.

"About what?" I pressed. I clenched my fists, not caring about the ache from the cuts. He wasn't just dodging the question. He was hiding something, something big. And the tighter he shut me out, the harder I wanted to fight my way in. "What are you so afraid of me seeing?"

I thought he might break, but his walls slammed back into place as he turned away.

"I'm sorry, Max."

That wasn't what I needed.

I stared at him, hoping for anything. But nothing came. He just stood there, distant and unreachable.

My hands throbbed. "I need more than this, Andy."

He didn't respond. He didn't even look at me.

I squeezed my eyes, fighting back the wetness. "Fine," I muttered, throat tight. The word tasted bitter.

I started blinking rapidly.

Andy noticed, and his hand reached for me, his face twisted in panic. His lips moved, forming my name, but the sound dissolved the second I woke up.

I sat up, breathing hard, my eyes darting to my hands. I flexed my fingers, half-expecting to see blood coming from somewhere. But there was nothing. A wave of relief washed over me, but confusion followed instantly. The pain was so vivid. It burned into my senses, leaving a ghost of itself as if the dream refused to let me go.

And yet, Andy's touch had been just as real. The way his hand had brushed against mine still lingered, warm and electric. It was strange how both the pain and his touch could coexist—one harsh, the other gentle—but both cutting through the dream with the same intensity.

I sighed loudly, hiding my face in my hands. I wasn't sure how much longer I could take it. This constant blur between reality and illusion, between wanting more and knowing I couldn't have it.



## I'M WIDE AWAKE



**T**he red glow of two a.m. stabbed at my eyes. Normally, I'd do anything to knock myself out again, just so I don't leave Andy waiting. But after what he said—or more like what he didn't—I wasn't in the mood to deal with whatever my brain might throw at me. Let him stay in that crazy dream world by himself. If he wanted to keep pushing me away, fine. He could sit there alone and miss me for a change.

I had to stay awake. I grabbed my Discman, threw on my headphones, and blasted Limp Bizkit. It rattled around in my skull like a CIA torture playlist. “Nobody Loves Me”? Yeah. Full pity party, table for one. I flipped through crappy late-night cable, skipped through a stack of Marcus's scratched-up CDs, and even did push-ups until my arms gave up. After that, I climbed out of the attic window onto the roof and just sat with headphones

on, staring up at the sky like maybe it'd give me answers if I glared at it long enough.

I stayed up there until night started bleeding into the morning. The stars faded out, the sky turned bluish-gray, and the first threads of light started creeping over the neighborhood. Mr. Moore from two houses down shuffled out in his bathrobe and socks to get the paper, like he always did. The paperboy on his bike came flying down the street, chucking newspapers. He spotted me and skidded across someone's lawn, then gave me the most confused "what-the-hell" look I've ever seen in my life before scrambling back onto his bike and tearing off.

The world was waking up. And I was feeling like a leftover.

When I stepped into the kitchen, Mom was already on me.

"Finally decided to join the living?" she asked, stirring her coffee.

I grunted, rubbing my eyes as I made my way to the fridge. I grabbed the milk carton, popped the cap off, and nearly gagged at the sour stench that hit me.

"Jesus. The milk's bad."

"And whose fault is that?"

"What?"

"You were supposed to finish it days ago. But no, you let it sit there and rot. Do you think food just magically replaces itself?"

I let out a short, bitter laugh and shook my head. "Right, 'cause I should've chugged the whole thing just to impress the evil queen."

I knew instantly that I had crossed the line.

And fairly, I earned myself some very unpleasant comments about my character. I would've preferred another slap instead because, unlike the insults, they didn't stay with me as much. They stung and sometimes caught me off guard, but I guess I'd grown used to them.

I'd been eight the first time she hit me. I told her I couldn't finish dinner because the meat was too tough to chew and tasted weird. She called me ungrateful, said kids in Africa were starving, then slapped me. It hurt, but the

guilt she planted hurt worse. For years after that, I forced myself to clean my plate, no matter what.

The whole day I was running on fumes. I kept zoning out in class—my head nodding, eyes burning, every minute dragging like I'd been up for days, not just one night. Everything rubbed me the wrong way. I couldn't get my locker open on the first try and nearly kicked it off. Someone bumped into me in the hallway, and I growled out a "Watch it" that came out way too shove-your-head-in-the-toilet bully. In English, I nearly dozed off twice. My eyelids felt like bricks, and Erik's goddamn pen tapping was the only thing keeping me from slamming my head onto the desk. But after forty minutes, I seriously considered snapping it in half and feeding it to him.

By practice, I was one bad pitch away from going nuclear. I could barely keep my eyes open, but my body was buzzing like it was wired and dead at the same time. I couldn't focus. Every throw missed. My whole body felt off.

Mikey pulled his mask off and shouted, "Max! What the hell? You look like a damn zombie!"

"I'm just tired," I muttered.

"No shit! What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, my ass! You're acting like a bitch!"

"Takes one to know one!"

He stormed toward me. "I swear, if you don't tell me what's going on, I'm gonna beat the shit out of you right here."

"Fuck off." I pushed past him, and when he grabbed my arm, I yanked it away. "Just leave me alone," I said, walking off the field.

By the time I got home, I was ready to throw a chair through a window. I hated how easily Andy got under my skin. It wasn't normal. None of it.

I've always had a short fuse. But this wasn't just my typical firecracker temper. This was worse. This was *him*. The way Andy made everything feel unhinged. One second, I missed him; the next, I wanted to scream at him.

And beneath all that, I was just pissed at myself. Because I'd told him *everything*. Or at least as much as I could. As much as I knew *how*.

And what did he do?

He clammed up. Clung to his little secrets like they mattered more than *me*.

What could possibly be so bad that he couldn't meet me? A second head? A criminal record? A massive pimple in the center of his stubborn forehead?

Oh, right—maybe it was that he didn't exist at all.

I stormed into the house, wanting nothing more than to get to my room. I wanted to be alone, away from school and everyone. Still running on autopilot, my feet carried me through the hallway. On my way to the stairs I hit the edge of the console table, knocking over a pile of mail. Cursing under my breath, I crouched down to pick it all up, swiping at the scattered envelopes without much thought.

But my hand froze midair.

Everything around me blurred into the background. One envelope caught my eye—I swear it was almost glowing. I reached out slowly, like it might disappear if I wasn't careful. When my fingers closed around it, I finally let out a breath.

My name written in neat, careful handwriting. No return address. A postmark from Chicago.

I stared at it in disbelief, my fingers shaking as I held it.

I ripped the envelope open.

Bold, colorful letters stared back at me: "*Greetings from CHICAGO, Illinois.*"

For a second, all I could do was stare. I'd pictured this moment a thousand times, but now that it was in my hand, it felt almost too heavy to hold. I flipped it over.

"Max,

*Figured I owed you, so here's a piece of where I am. But don't go digging too deep, OK? Let's keep things how they are. Either way, I'll see you in our usual spot.*

*P.S. Got you a little something.*

*—A.”*

I read it twice. Then again. The words sank in slowly, my pulse quickening with every syllable.

I let out a quiet, stunned laugh.

After all the doubts. After all the nights I told myself I was crazy. After every time I'd stared at my ceiling, wondering if I'd made him up... this.

A real postcard. From Andy. With my name written like it meant something.

I just sat there staring at it, afraid that if I blinked too hard, it would vanish. But it didn't. It stayed. Solid. *Real*.

I pressed the card to my chest for a second, trying to keep my heart from flying out.

It didn't make sense. None of it made sense. This shouldn't be possible.

The first time I saw him came to mind. He just... showed up, with this easy smirk, trying to convince me that it was his dream or that we both shared it.

And I wrote it off.

Just a dream, I told myself. Nothing real. Nothing important. I'd wake up and forget him like I did every other weird, half-melted dream face.

Except, I didn't.

Dream after dream, he kept showing up. And the more he appeared, the more he felt real, not like a character, but like a person. I never would've guessed—never in a million years—that we'd end up kissing. Or that I'd fall asleep every night needing to see him again. I never thought I'd need him the way I did now, like he'd carved out a space in my chest I hadn't even known was empty.

I thought I'd lost it. That Andy was just a coping mechanism my brain built to trick me. That I was just lonely and desperate, and this was how my mind coped.

But Andy was real.

I noticed a small bump at the bottom of the envelope and flipped it over. Something small slid out into my palm. A pendant: teardrop-shaped, pale white with a black dot in the center, hanging from a thin black string.

I held it up to the light, turning it in my fingers. I had no clue what it was supposed to mean, but I didn't care. Andy had touched it. Thought of me. Sent it.

He'd really sent it.

He was real.

"You're back?" Mom's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. She was standing in the hallway, arms crossed, looking at the scattered mail.

"Yeah. As you can see."

"Why is this on the floor? Clean it up."

I scooped the mail with one hand and tossed it onto the console table. "Sorry," I muttered and bolted to my room.

"Excuse me?!" she called after me. "Who do you think I am?! A maid?!"

I slammed the door behind me and stared down at the postcard, my fingers tracing the letters on the front. He'd sent this. Andy had sent this. I wasn't imagining things.

And yet... it wasn't enough. I didn't want a piece of Andy. I didn't want a souvenir. Now I wanted even more. I wanted *him*. Not miles away. Not stuck in ink and paper.

I flipped the card over and over again, rereading the words, a stupid smile tugging at my lips as my thumb brushed the ink. "*A piece of where I am.*" The Chicago zip code on the stamp was faded but still easy to make out.

He was there, somewhere in the massive city.

I always believed. At least, I told myself I did, despite the whispers in my mind telling me I was crazy. And now he was real.

So why did I still feel so unsure?

He said not to go digging.

He had to know I would.

But all that could wait. I couldn't keep pacing the room like a caged animal. I needed to see him. Even in that fucked up place that showed things we didn't want to see.

I sighed, pulled the sleeping pills out of the drawer, and swallowed one dry. I sank into bed, tugging the covers over my head and hiding from the world.

When sleep finally took over, the first thing I noticed was the fresh, crisp air, a sharp contrast to the claustrophobic hallway I'd been expecting. And instead of standing among a thousand mirrors in the sinking house, I was in the middle of an amusement park. Carousels spun in slow circles. Roller coasters clattered along their tracks. Arcade games blinked and whirred, their lights flashing in rhythm. But there were no screams, no laughter. Just the low, constant hum of machinery. Towering above it all was the Ferris wheel, its massive frame groaning as it turned, each empty carriage swaying gently. The air reeked of popcorn and cotton candy, but it was too sweet, like the park was trying way too hard to pretend it was alive.

I turned to see I was in front of the sinking house, now turned into a house of mirrors. Its walls twisted and bulged like the warped reflections it hid inside. The entrance spiraled outward, summoning me back with a silent dare.

I glared at it for a second before giving it the middle finger and turning away.

I started walking, eyes peeled for Andy. The sound of rides followed me, mechanical and lifeless. I expected to see him playing one of the games or climbing onto a carousel, but every corner I turned was more of the same: rides moving on their own, stalls standing empty, a ghost town pretending it wasn't.

Finally, I saw him. His legs dangled from the top seat of the Ferris wheel, swinging lazily as the wheel turned. The rest of him came into view as he neared the bottom, and we locked eyes. He didn't say anything. There was an unspoken understanding as he hesitated slightly, then shifted over in his seat, inviting me to join him.

I climbed in, locking the safety bar into place just as the wheel started turning again. We sat in silence, the sprawling amusement park below us stretching out forever under the familiar gray sky.

Andy's shoulders slumped a little more with every second as he kept his eyes locked on the horizon.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. I couldn't tell if he meant for the fight or for the things he was keeping from me, but the vulnerability in his voice made it impossible to stay angry.

I brushed his hand with my little finger. "I'm sorry too."

A shy smile flickered across his face as he finally looked at me. "I told you the dream will get better."

"Yeah..." The fake cheeriness weirded me out, but I wasn't about to kill the moment. "It looks fun."

"I tried to win a prize at one of the games, but I suck at aiming."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. "You know you can just take whatever you want, right?"

"That's no fun."

"I'll win you something," I said, finally letting a smile creep onto my face. "Which one do you want?"

He pointed toward a distant game stall. "The zombie plush."

Of course, it had to be the zombie plush.

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After three perfect throws, I smugly handed the zombie plush to Andy.



"Thanks," he said, tucking it under his arm and smiling at me with that unguarded look of his.

I couldn't help feeling a little proud. I'd won it on the first try, though I tried extra hard not to embarrass myself. And hey, I was a pitcher for a reason.

Andy was apparently a big fan of carnival food, so we found a picnic table nearby, surrounded by the park's noise and smells, and he made the food appear—massive corn dogs, roasted turkey legs, caramel popcorn, and the sweetest lemonade I'd ever had. We dug in, no hesitation. No manners, either. Grease and all.

Everything felt stupidly simple. The sound of rides in the distance, bells dinging from nearby games, the air full of sugar. If you ignored the fact that the place was completely empty, you could almost believe it wasn't a dream at all.

I wiped my hands with a napkin. "I got your postcard. And the gift."

"Oh..." His eyes widened a little. "I was wondering if it'd get lost. Do you... do you like it?"

"Yes, but... I'm not sure what it is."

Andy reached under his collar and pulled out his own necklace in the same shape as mine, but inverted—a black teardrop with a white dot. He wasn't wearing it before.

I reached for mine, realizing it was already around my neck.

He leaned across the table and pressed the two pendants together. They clicked. Just a soft sound, but it felt weirdly huge. His black, my white. Together, they made a full circle.

"Yin and yang," he said. "Light and dark... good and bad. They're connected and depend on each other. There's some black in the white, and some white in the black. And one can't exist without the other."

"Why do you have the black one?"

He shrugged. "I thought it matched better..."

“Matched better?” I shook my head, “You’re not dark, Andy. You’re... I don’t know. Bright. Warm. You are definitely the good part, and whatever you’re scared of showing me won’t change it.”

He looked down at the pendants again, twisting them between his fingers. “It would change a lot.”

“Not how I feel about you.”

“I really like you, Max. I don’t want to screw this up.”

“You won’t.”

His lips parted like he wanted to argue, but instead, he separated the pendants, his fingers brushing against his own. “I wouldn’t be so sure,” he whispered.

With all the questions swirling around us, with the strange, fragile dream holding us together, I knew deep down that there was so much we hadn’t said, so much we hadn’t asked. When would reality—and all its secrets—come crashing back in?

“Look, we’ve fought zombies together,” I said. “How many people can say that? We’re sharing a freaking dream world. Nothing you tell me is gonna scare me off.”

A single tear slipped down his cheek. He quickly wiped it away with a crooked smile. “So... do you finally believe I’m real?” he asked quietly.

I let out a breathy laugh. “I mean... how could I not?”

“Good,” he said, exhaling in relief. “I thought you’d never trust me.”

“But now that I think about it... We’ve never tried to figure out *why* we’re having these dreams. And how any of these even work.”

“Maybe there’s nothing to figure out? Maybe we are just... connected?”

I smirked. “Like yin and yang?”

“Exactly.”

I snorted. Typical Andy.

He bit his lip. “Hey, wanna check out the big roller coasters?”

“After all that food? Are you trying to kill us?”

“You think we can throw up in a dream?”

“Only one way to find out.”

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward the ride. His hand was warm. Steady. And I let myself believe we were just two guys at a carnival.

That was the thing about dreams.

You could ignore the reality for a little while.

## SOMEONE THAT UNDERSTANDS



On Monday, I decided to eat lunch alone on the bleachers. They were mostly empty, except for a couple of kids at the far end. I sank onto the cold metal bench, dropped my tray beside me, and poked at what I thought was supposed to be meat, drowned in gravy. One whiff and I decided I wasn't that hungry after all.

I sighed and leaned back. Things with Andy were good. Or, like, better. We laughed again. We'd found that weird rhythm that felt like it only existed for the two of us. It was easy. Too easy. No fight really stuck, like we could hit reset just by smiling at each other. I guess I had a soft spot for him. A big, obvious one.

But beneath the laughter, there was still something I couldn't ignore. No matter how whole I felt with him, a part of him—the part he kept locked away—always stood between us. It was like dancing under a storm cloud.

Sooner or later, someone gets soaked. Probably me. Could I keep leaving this to chance forever? He'd given me enough to prove he existed, but not enough to find him. And the postcard made me realize how much I wanted to close the gap. But what was I supposed to do—knock on every door in Chicago?

I dragged my hands down my face, staring at the field. The world felt too big, and Chicago felt even bigger.

A few minutes later, Naya and Mikey climbed onto the bleachers beside me, both looking too serious.

"Hey," Naya said, settling down next to me. She folded her arms and looked me over. "We need to talk."

"Yeah, it's intervention," Mikey added, flopping onto the bench on my other side.

"For what?"

"Come on, Max. You've been off. And don't give me that 'nothing's wrong' crap."

"You're weird and distant," Naya said matter-of-factly. "Like, more than usual. And I get it—you're not the 'pour your heart out' type. But Mikey's right. You've been off."

I stared at the field. "I'm fine. Really."

"Bullshit," Mikey said. "You think we don't notice when you're acting weird? You played like crap yesterday, man. You never play like crap."

I opened my mouth to argue but Naya cut me off. "We're not trying to gang up on you, okay? We're just worried and—" Naya's gaze snapped to the necklace that had slipped from beneath my shirt. "Is that... a yin-yang necklace?" She reached out to touch it. "Who has the other half?"

I jerked back, but she grabbed the pendant. "Don't tell me—this is from that guy?"

I pulled away, my hand curling around the necklace protectively.

"Wait, what guy?" Mikey frowned, looking between us. "What's going on?"

Naya ignored him. “Don’t try to wiggle out of this, Max. Just tell me. Is it him?”

“Who?” Mikey asked again, before his frown deepened. “Hold on. *Him*? Who the hell is *him*? Someone gonna clue me in here?!”

Naya sighed. “Max told me—”

“Naya!”

“—that he met someone online. And I’m guessing this is from him, isn’t it?”

The postcard in my pocket suddenly weighed, like, ten pounds.

The words were stuck in my throat, and for a second, I thought about lying or saying it was no big deal. But I was so damn tired of holding it in. “Okay. There’s... something I need to tell you guys.”

Naya and Mikey leaned in, their expressions shifting to something very serious.

“Go on,” Naya said softly.

“I...” I run a hand through my hair. “That guy I mentioned? The one I told you I ‘met online’? That wasn’t... exactly true.”

Mikey raised an eyebrow, while Naya stayed quiet, watching me closely.

“Okay, this might sound crazy, but just stay with me, okay?”

They nodded.

“I’ve been having these dreams. They started about two months ago—you remember the first one I told you about, Mikey? No? I mean, yeah, obviously. Anyway... there’s this guy in them. His name’s Andy. And it’s not like a normal dream. It’s the same guy, every time. He’s... real.”

Mikey snorted. “Real? Max, come on—”

“Shut up, Mikey,” Naya snapped. “Keep going, Max.”

“At first, I thought it was just... I don’t know. Some weird, recurring, vivid dream. But it’s not. Every night, he’s there. And it’s like he’s... alive. Like, really existing.”

Mikey opened his mouth again, but Naya held up a hand. “Max,” she said slowly, “are you saying... You think this guy is real? That it’s not just a dream?”

I groaned and rubbed my face. “Yes, okay? Yes! He’s real. And I didn’t think you guys would believe me if I told you the truth.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Mikey muttered.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I have proof.” I reached into my pocket, pulling out the postcard. “I asked Andy to send me something to prove I wasn’t losing my mind. And I’ve got it. From Chicago.” I handed the card to Naya and touched the pendant. “And this. He sent me these too.”

Naya studied the postcard before passing it to Mikey, who frowned deeply as he examined it. Finally, he handed it back to me. “I don’t know what to say, man.”

“This is... something, Max,” Naya said. “I don’t know if I get it, but it’s... something.”

“I knew you wouldn’t believe me. But I *know* he’s real. I don’t know why this is happening to me, but it is.” I paused, glancing at the postcard in my hand. “And I think I need to find him. Even if he doesn’t want me to.”

Mikey shook his head. “Dude, this is nuts.”

“I *knew* you’d think that! That’s why I didn’t tell you guys!”

“I mean... you know how it sounds, right?”

“Yes, Mikey, I know. But I’m telling you, with all due respect, I don’t care if you believe me or not. I know I’m not crazy.”

“Okay, but... what is it exactly? Some kind of magic?” He glanced at Naya, who only shrugged. “How does it work? These—what? Shared dreams?”

“I don’t know! It’s not like there’s an instruction manual. I just fall asleep and end up there—with him. The places change from time to time, but he is always there. He remembers what I say, I remember what he says. It’s real. I swear.”

“So you’re both aware of it?” Naya asked. “Like, he knows he’s dreaming too?”

"Yeah," I said quickly. "He talks to me. We... we do things. He can imagine stuff. And when I wake up, it feels like I've actually been there."

Naya frowned slightly. "Maybe it's some kind of lucid dreaming thing? Or like—shared consciousness?"

"Sure," Mikey said dryly. "Because that's totally a normal thing that happens."

I shot him a look. "You got a better explanation?"

"No. Just... this is freaky, man."

"Yeah," I said, exhaling. "You're telling me."

He leaned back, studying me for a long second. "Then why do you care about him so much?"

No turning back now. I'd opened a Pandora's box.

I gripped the pendant tightly in my hand, hoping some ancient Chinese spirits would guide me. "It's because... I think I like him."

There it was. Out loud. I couldn't tell if I wanted to cry or throw up. I'd never said it out loud before. Not even to myself. And now it was out there.

"Like... *like like* him?" Mikey asked, his eyebrows shooting up.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I think so."

Naya gently put her hand on mine. Mikey, meanwhile, leaned back even further, his hands fidgeting in his lap like he didn't know where to put them.

My throat tightened. I could've stopped there. Could've left it vague. But I didn't want *vague*.

"I kissed him," I blurted.

Mikey's eyes went wide. "You *what*?"

My face burned, but the words were out. "I kissed him. I don't even know how I found the guts to do it. It just... happened. And he kissed me back."

Naya's eyes lit up. "Oh my gosh! You kissed him? That's—"

"It just happened," I interrupted, trying to deflate her enthusiasm before it made me combust. "I wasn't thinking. I just..." I swallowed hard. "I just wanted to. And it felt... it didn't feel like it was something wrong."



I risked a glance at Mikey. He was staring at the ground, lips pressed tight. I didn't expect it to sting as much as it did.

Naya must've noticed because she gave my hand another squeeze, bringing my focus back to her. "That's not a bad thing."

Maybe not, but if it wasn't, why did it still feel so terrifying?

Mikey cleared his throat. "So, uh... you kissed him, huh?" He forced out a laugh, but it sounded awkward.

"Yeah," I said cautiously.

He nodded once, but it felt more like a reflex than a real response. "Well, uh... cool. That's cool."

I searched Mikey's face, trying to read between the lines. Was he actually okay with it? His eyes flicked to Naya for half a second, as if she might have the right thing to say, before he shifted his weight and exhaled sharply.

For a moment, I thought that was it. We were going to sit in that awkward silence forever. But then he asked, "Are you gonna tell people?"

"Tell what?"

"You know..." He gestured vaguely. "That you like guys?"

I shook my head quickly. "I like Andy, not guys."

"Andy's a guy—"

"It has to be his decision," Naya said as she clung to my arm. "We won't say anything."

Mikey nodded, finally glancing at me briefly. "Yeah. Whatever you want, man."

The tension finally started to ease, and I let out a shaky breath.

But of course, Mikey couldn't help himself:

"So... no more Jenny, then?"

I groaned and threw my hands up. "Jesus, can you not?"

"What? I'm just saying! No wonder he's always ready to pass out the second we hang out—sleeping beauty over here!"

Naya smacked his arm. "Michael. Seriously."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Wow. Thanks, man. That's really supportive."

“Sorry...” he muttered, barely loud enough to hear.

“It’s fine. I get it. This is... a lot. Believe me, I know it sounds crazy. I’m figuring things out, alright?”

Out of nowhere, Naya gasped. “Wait! Guys, I can’t believe I didn’t connect this earlier!”

“What?” Mikey and I said at the same time.

“Remember when I did that tarot reading for Max? He got *The Lovers!*”

“It’s just a card,” I said. “Not exactly the universe talking.”

It was stupid, really. A coincidence. Just a dumb card.

And it wasn’t like I’d recognize love if I felt it. I had no idea what it meant to be in love, what it was supposed to feel like. I mean, I knew I loved my brother like you’re supposed to love family, but it was different. And I thought I’d loved two or three girls back in elementary school, but those crushes didn’t even last two days. Just thinking about it left me awkward and out of place. How do you even know when you love someone for real? Is there a moment when everything just makes sense, and you know who you are, or is everything always going to be confusing?

“It’s just a card,” I repeated, half to her, half to myself.

“Look,” Naya said, “liking Andy, or guys in general—it’s about feeling *something*. And there’s nothing wrong with that, alright?”

“I’m not gay!” I protested, the words coming out louder than I intended. I quickly looked around to make sure no one had heard me, but everyone was busy with their own stuff. “I mean... I like girls too.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Okay, so maybe you’re bi?”

“Do you like dudes more, or girls?” Mikey asked.

“I don’t know!” I snapped, heat rushing to my face.

Naya squeezed my hand again. “It doesn’t matter, Max. Whether these dreams are real—” I gave her a look. “Okay, fine. If he’s real, I think you need to find him. Even if he doesn’t want to be found, like you said, there’s probably a reason. Maybe he’s just shy, or... embarrassed about something. But it’s too magical to just leave it like that.”

I wanted to believe her. But belief wasn't enough. I needed a way to actually do it.

I sighed, shaking my head and ignoring her "magic" comment. "But how? He's not living in some small village where everyone knows everyone. Chicago's massive."

"Have you tried 411?" Mikey asked.

"There must be hundreds of Andrew Lees in Chicago."

"Fair point," he admitted, scratching the back of his head.

"But you've got the zip code," Naya said.

"Yeah, so what?" I shrugged. "It's not like the zip code gives me a teleport to his doorstep."

She rolled her eyes. "You're not acting like you really want to find him, Max. The zip code gives you a city area. That's something."

"It's just... there are too many unknowns. He didn't give me much to work with."

"Doesn't your brother study journalism in Chicago?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, maybe he could help. He might know how to track things down—city records, databases, that kind of thing. Journalism students learn all this detective stuff, right?"

The thought of calling my brother, just like that, was a strange one. Most people would call their sibling without a second thought, but our relationship wasn't... conventional. And I'd always felt like he didn't want to deal with anything back home.

"You know I don't talk to him that much."

"But he's still your brother," Naya said. "Why not try?"

"What do you have to lose?" Mikey added.

I guess they were right. A glimmer of hope woke up inside me. Like something warm cracking through all the ice I'd been holding in. A wild goose chase? Maybe. "Don't go digging too deep," Andy had written. *Yeah, don't go digging too deep, my ass.*

As we got up and started heading back to class, the weight on my shoulders seemed lighter than it had in a long time. I'd laid it all out there and my friends had taken it in stride, like nothing had changed. There was no judgment, no disgust, no weirdness. Just understanding. Mikey was a bit off, but his reaction was better than I thought. Naya was right, back when we were coming back from the party. I should give Mikey more credit from now on.

Mikey threw an arm over my shoulder, flashing his trademark grin. "So, Max," he said, "do you think I'm hot?"

I snorted, rolling my eyes. "Bro, if I ever see you in my dreams, it's because I fell asleep watching *A Nightmare on Elm Street*."

He gasped, slapping his chest. "Ouch! So harsh! And here I thought I was your type."

Naya smacked his arm again. "Don't flatter yourself, Mikey. I'm the only one who'd ever fall for that."

## KISS ME



I barely remembered getting home. My mind was already at Andy's door, picturing myself standing there, waiting to ring the bell. He'd open it, see me, and just throw his arms around me—forgetting every time he'd been dismissive or pushed me away. And then we'd finally get our own happily-ever-after and ride off into the sunset.

But as I held the phone, ready to call Marcus, my excitement shifted to a growing sense of doubt. A wave of anxiety rolled through me with questions I hadn't considered: What if Marcus doesn't answer? What if he tells me I'm wasting his time? What if he acts like he has better things to do than helping with my crazy request?

And what would I even say? I'd only just told Naya and Mikey the full story, and now I was supposed to lay it all out for Marcus? It was one thing

to confide in friends, but it was another to expose that part of myself to my brother.

I waited until Mom was engrossed in her soap opera, her face blank with the hypnotized stare she got when the characters fought over a man. If she found out I was calling Marcus, there'd be hell to pay. In this house, speaking to him was an act of treason.

Why? Who knows.

No one ever told me what happened, but one day, Mom stopped talking to Marcus, and he stopped talking back. She gave him the silent treatment, and Marcus returned it. And after he left for college, she took all the resentment she used to split between us and dumped it all on me.

Still, I had Marcus's frat house phone number and address "in case of an emergency." I figured this was as close as it got. He called on my birthdays, but that was about it. No check-ins, no "You hanging in there?" Just one yearly call and silence the rest of the time.

I cracked my knuckles, dialed, and spun in my chair, hoping dizziness would blur the anxiety buzzing in my head. No luck.

The phone clicked, and someone picked up. "What's up?" a guy's voice said, but it wasn't Marcus. In the background, the muffled sounds of a party blended in a chaotic symphony.

"Hey, is Marcus there?" I asked, picturing the scene: a messy house, beer cans scattered everywhere, and some guy passed out on a couch. I wondered if this was Marcus's life now. Just one endless party.

"Yeah, hang on," the guy said, stepping away from the phone. I heard him shouting for Marcus, followed by someone laughing in the background.

My grip tightened on the phone as I waited and fought the urge to hang up and pretend I'd never called.

Finally, Marcus's voice came through. "Hello?"

It had been so long since I'd heard his voice—warm and easygoing, with just enough sharpness to remind me he could be serious when it mattered. It was so... him.

"Hey, Marcus," I said.

"Oh! Hey, bud! What's up?" He used that tone he reserved just for me, like I was still a little kid. Sometimes it bugged me, but today I was just glad he picked up.

I hesitated for a second. "Can you talk? Sounds like you've got a party going on."

"Yeah, pretty much the usual, man. I swear, I don't know how any of us get to stay in school with all this going on. It's like trying to study in a carnival."

"Sounds fun."

"Yeah, if you're majoring in alcoholism. Anyway, what's up? Everything okay?"

My mouth went dry. How do you ask someone to help you find a guy from your dreams? Literal dreams. But I was losing myself without answers. I had to know I wasn't just chasing ghosts. My sanity was on the line.

"Yeah, no—I mean... kinda."

"Is Mom a total psycho, or just a bit?"

"She's the same as always," I said with a hollow laugh. "But this isn't about her."

"Alright, go ahead, then."

I sat up straighter, trying to muster up the courage to say it. "It's... complicated. Um... Can you go somewhere quiet? I don't want you shouting over a keg stand."

"Yeah, hold on." I heard footsteps. My leg bounced, my fingers picking at the edge of the desk. Was this a mistake? Should I hang up?

Marcus's voice came back, clearer now. "Alright, I'm good. So, what's going on?"

"It's... well, it's kinda a long story." I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath to collect my thoughts. "I need to find someone, and I don't really know how to do it. So I thought I would ask you..."

"Find someone? Who are you looking for?"

“He’s a... friend,” I said, my cheeks heating up even though Marcus couldn’t see me. “I don’t have much—just a name and Chicago’s zip code. And he’s half Chinese—his dad’s Chinese. And... he practices kung fu.”

“Kung fu, huh? That’s... random. What’s this about, Max?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I muttered. “He doesn’t want me to find him, but I... I need to.”

“If he doesn’t want to be found, why are you trying?”

“Look, can you just help me? No questions right now. I promise I’ll explain it all at some point.”

He sighed. “Alright. I’ll try, but with just a name and zip code... that’s not much, Maxie.”

“I know. But anything you can find would help. Maybe some local martial arts clubs. I don’t know...”

“Alright. So what’s his name?”

“Andrew Lee. I got a postcard from him. It was postmarked 60660.”

“60660? That’s my neighborhood. But it’s still a huge area, Max. It’s not going to be easy.”

My heart lurched upward like it was trying to reach the phone. He was there? And close?

“Wait—are you serious? He might actually be near you?”

“Yeah, but like I said, it’s a big area. Finding one person won’t be easy.”

But I barely heard him.

Andy had always felt like a dream. I mean, he basically was one. Untouchable and out of reach. Even with the postcard in my hands, Chicago had felt like an impossible distance, too massive to mean anything real.

What if Andy had walked through the same coffee shop Marcus stopped by? Had seen a movie at the same theater? Had bought his bland cornflakes from the same shelf where Marcus grabbed his Lucky Charms?

Andy wasn’t just some distant mystery anymore. He was *there* in the same zip code.

And that meant finding him wasn’t impossible.



"So do you think you can look into it?"

"I'll try, Maxie. I'm heading to the archives this weekend—maybe I'll find something. But no promises."

"Thank you, Marcus. Really." I couldn't hide the grin spreading across my face. The idea that Andy might be somewhere close to my brother was almost too much to believe.

He chuckled. "Haven't found him yet, so don't get your hopes up too high. Everything else okay?"

I hesitated. I could've left it at that, kept the conversation focused on Andy. But Marcus was there, and I wanted to hold on to that a little longer.

"Yeah..." I paused, struggling to find the words. "I just... miss you," I blurted out before I chickened out.

Silence.

Then, "I miss you too, buddy."

I took a breath. "Will you come home for Thanksgiving this time? Please? I can't do another year alone with Mom and Grandma."

I could almost see him rubbing the back of his neck, just like I did when I didn't know what to say.

"Um... I dunno, Max. I'll try. I really will. But... I gotta go, alright?"

And there it was. The familiar dodge. The warmth slipping away. I knew this routine too well.

"Marcus?" I said quickly, before he could hang up.

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you ever call me?"

Another pause.

"You know why."

"No, I don't. You never tell me anything. You just left me with her."

"I didn't leave you," he said with a sigh. "It's complicated."

"You did. And the least you could've done is call me more than once a year."

"I don't want her picking up the phone. You wouldn't understand."

“So what if she does? Just say you’re calling me, not her.”

“Max—”

“You could at least try! Write me one fucking email—is that so hard?”

I knew sounded like a little kid begging for attention.

“Max, I’ve got a lot going on.”

“You always have a lot going on.”

He sighed, and I thought he was about to hang up. But instead, his voice softened. “It’s not an excuse, Max. I just... I don’t know how to explain it. Things aren’t that simple.”

“Yeah, well... they never are, are they?” I muttered. “You left. You left me with her. And you’ve hardly called since. Do you even care?”

The line went quiet. I could only hear a party in the background—muffled voices, laughter.

Another sigh. “Don’t call me if you’re gonna whine. I didn’t leave *you*. I left the house. It was suffocating me. But I should’ve... I should’ve tried harder to stay in touch with you. I know that.”

A lump caught in my throat, but I forced it down.

“Yeah. You should’ve.”

“I know, bud. I’ll do better. I promise.”

The tension hung there, heavy and familiar. I didn’t want another fight. Not now.

So I shifted gears. “Hey... remember the summer I finally got taller than you?”

He hesitated for a beat before letting out a short laugh. “Oh, shut up. You never let that go.”

I smiled. “Well, it’s not every day your older brother gets knocked off his pedestal.”

“Pedestal? Please—I let you have that one.”

We both laughed, and for a while, it felt like things used to be. Simple. Light. But the feeling was fragile; I knew it wouldn’t last. Not until we talked about everything gone unsaid.

Marcus cleared his throat, his tone shifting back to business. “Alright, Maxie, I really have to go. I’ll see what I can find out about your friend, and I’ll try to catch you if I get anything. Maybe when Mom’s out at her... whatever she does.”

I nodded to myself. “Just... try,” I said. “Please.”

“No problem, bud. Later.”

I hung up and stared at the phone. The faint spark of hope from earlier lingered, but now it wasn’t just about Andy. It was about Marcus too. Maybe something was still left between us. Something not completely lost.

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The next few dreams couldn’t have been more perfect. Every second was packed with flashing lights, the thrill of rides, and all the ridiculous joy the park had to offer. The moment the real world melted away, replaced by the hum of carnival rides, we found ourselves back in our private paradise. We raced from one ride to the next, daring each other to go faster, higher, dumber. We grinned like idiots, caught up in the pure, stupid joy of being together.

We tackled every roller coaster. The wooden ones that groaned around every turn, the modern ones where our legs dangled, and the kind that launched forward so fast it stole your breath before you could scream. Andy would throw his hands up and scream with laughter, his voice blending into the rattle of the tracks, while I gripped the bar as we dropped again and again. We rode so many times that even after I woke up, I could still feel the drops in my gut, like my body hadn’t figured out we’d stopped.

On the teacups, we spun so fast we were practically horizontal. Andy would shout, “Faster!” like he had a death wish, while I tried not to throw up from laughing too hard. We’d stumble out afterward like baby deer on ice, bumping into each other and grabbing whatever we could to stay upright.

On the bumper cars, Andy made it his personal mission to trap me, slamming into me from the side and grinning like a maniac every time I tried to steer away. “You think you’re getting away?” he shouted, ramming me again, the impact jolting me sideways. I’d be sore when I woke up, like my ribs remembered the impact, but it was the closest I could feel him in the real world.

There were nights when we did the sky swings—those long chains that lifted us into the air and spun us in huge circles. I hated how high we got, but Andy loved it. He’d throw his arms out like he was flying, while I clutched the chains like my life depended on it. Our swings would drift close, and he’d reach for my hand midair, and yeah... I’d let him. Even if it scared the hell out of me.

And then there was the Tunnel of Terror.

At first, I hated it. Andy had to literally drag me in. “It’s not even scary,” he said as he yanked me toward the blacked-out entrance. I’d flinch at every bad animatronic, cheap screams, skeletons on wires, and Andy would laugh at how jumpy I was.

But the more dreams we had, the more the ride started to change. The monsters didn’t scare me anymore. The flashing lights faded into the background. The dark didn’t feel threatening. It felt like something else. Something quieter. Private.

The car would lurch and jolt, sliding us closer until our knees bumped and our arms brushed against each other. Every bit of contact felt... electric. Too much and not enough at the same time.

Eventually, the Tunnel stopped being about scares at all.

Andy would reach for my hand in the dark, fingers tangling with mine. Some nights, we’d kiss before the first glowing-eyed monster even popped out. I didn’t care about the rubber bats or the fake blood or whatever dumb vampire jumped out at us. I only cared about how much clothing I could get off Andy before the ride ended. You’d think a horror ride would be the least romantic place in the world.

The dreams filled me with a kind of happiness I didn't think was possible.

But no matter how many times we rode or laughed or kissed or touched,  
I still woke up alone. Still faced the same silence.

The dream always faded.

The wanting never did.

As much as I never wanted those nights to end, they made something  
else painfully clear.

I couldn't keep floating between two worlds. Because now that I knew he  
was out there, pretending this was enough just wasn't going to cut it any-  
more.

I needed to find him.

For real.

## WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?



**A**lmost the entire week blurred past in a fog of monotony. Days bled into each other, indistinct and weightless, like I was watching my life play out through a dirty window.

School was background noise—assignments, lectures, half-hearted attempts at paying attention. Even baseball had started to feel like a side quest I couldn't bring myself to finish. I was still playing and showing up, still throwing pitches. But it was more like just going through the motions. The fire wasn't there anymore. That rush I used to get—the snap of the ball in my glove, the perfect arc of a home run—none of it compared to the electric pulse that ran through me whenever Andy was close.

Every day, Naya would ask if I'd heard back from Marcus or found anything new about Andy. Every day, I shook my head and muttered, "Not yet," hope slipping further through my fingers. The thought of hitting a dead end

terrified me, but I refused to believe all I'd ever have of Andy were the dreams.

Thursday evening, I sprawled on my bed with a volume of *Master of Kung Fu*, but instead of Shang-Chi, all I could picture was Andy kicking ass in those sleek red trousers, moving with the same effortless grace he had in the dreams.

Would Andy be able to take on someone like Kyle Silva? Scratch that—he'd *destroy* Silva and his idiot friends, like Jason Scott Lee in *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*. And I'd be there in the background, clapping.

Yeah. I'd give anything to see that.

My eyes drifted to the nightstand, where Andy's postcard sat half-buried under comics and random papers. It looked out of place, like it belonged to a different life.

I reached over, running my fingers along the edge, my thumb grazing the faded postmark.

Chicago.

Was he out there right now? Training at his martial arts studio? Biking through the city? Sitting in a café, sipping his basic vanilla shake, completely unaware I was losing my mind thinking about him?

I let out a soft breath, flipping another page absently.

The sound of the phone yanked me out of my thoughts.

I jogged downstairs, expecting an empty house. Mom was supposed to be at Pilates—de-stressing from her life, which she no doubt considered the burden of the century—but there she was, standing stiffly by the phone, the receiver pressed to her ear.

She wasn't talking. Just listening.

Without a word, she slammed the receiver back onto the cradle.

"Who was that?" I asked.

She didn't even look at me. "Wrong number."

Too fast. Too dismissive.

My gut said it was Marcus.

“Why aren’t you at your class?” I asked, eyes flicking to the phone.

“And since when do I report to you, Maxim?”

“Just wondering. Are you going to bed soon?”

She sighed, her glare sharpening. “What’s your problem? Do you need something?”

“No,” I mumbled, stepping back. But I knew I’d have to wait it out. Wait until the coast was clear.

As soon as I heard the water running in the bathroom, I grabbed the phone and sprinted to my room, shutting the door behind me.

Marcus picked up almost immediately. Call it brotherly intuition.

“Hey, Marcus.”

“Oh, hey! I called, but Mom—”

“Yeah, I know. Did you find Andy?”

“You mean Andrew?”

“Yeah, yeah—Andrew. So?”

“Sort of...”

I gripped the receiver tighter. “What do you mean, ‘sort of’? Did you find him or not?!”

“Hey, hey, calm down. I’m doing you a favor here.”

“Right, sorry...” I took a breath, realizing I sounded way too desperate.

“I’m not a detective, Max. Don’t expect me to hand over his address.”

“I know. I just...” My fingers flexed around the phone. “I just need something. Anything.”

I could practically hear him smirking. “You really care about this guy, huh?”

“Marcus, please. Just tell me what you’ve got.”

“Okay, okay. Chill. I’m just teasing. So, I talked to this girl in my group—she’s actually Chinese-American—and she mentioned—”

Someone snatched the phone out of my hand.

I looked up to see Mom, clutching the receiver like she was about to throw it across the room. “Are you talking to Marcus?!”



“Why do you care?” I tried to grab it, but she yanked it out of reach.

“Marcus?!” she barked into the phone.

But he’d already hung up.

*Shit.*

“He’s my brother! I can talk to him if I want to!”

Her face darkened. “You don’t get to decide who comes and goes in this family.”

“He’s gone because of you! You drove him away with all your crap! You won’t let me talk to him because you know he hates you!”

“Go ahead, throw another tantrum. Maybe you’ll wash it down with a pill this time, since that’s your thing now.”

That hit harder than she probably meant it to. Or maybe she meant every word. With her, it was hard to tell.

Before I could even fire back, she added, “You’re just like him, you know. Always sneaking around. Always slipping away behind people’s backs.”

There it was. The Marcus or Dad comparison. Her favorite weapon.

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes. “You mean the only person in this house who ever gave a damn about me?”

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that, Maximus. You have no idea how much I’ve sacrificed for this family.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Here we go again—sacrifice, sacrifice. What exactly did you give up, Mom? No one asked you to have us!”

“Don’t act like an ungrateful brat who thinks he knows everything!”

“Jesus... Ungrateful? For what? For growing up in a house where I can’t even breathe without you making it about you? For tiptoeing around your moods, never knowing when you’re gonna snap? I can’t even talk to my own brother without it turning into a fight!”

“Oh, so *you* are the victim now? You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

"Then maybe enlighten me! I didn't ask to be here! You act like I owe you just for existing!"

Her nostrils flared. "You have no idea the things I've put up with! You think life is just basketball games—"

"OH MY GOD!" I threw my hands in the air. *Unbelievable*. "It's baseball! I play *baseball*! Is it really that hard to care?!"

"Hey."

I turned to see Dad standing in the doorway, rubbing his temples. "You two are at it again?"

"Don't interfere, Julian!" Mom snapped.

He sighed, running a hand down his face. "Some of us actually have work to do in this house."

Mom scoffed. "Oh, you always do, don't you?"

"I don't need to be dragged into every single one of your fights," he muttered, already backing off.

"You're the one breaking in!" I shouted.

Dad's eyes narrowed. "Breaking in? You're in *my* house, Maximus. Be grateful you have a roof over your head."

"Wow. Thanks, Dad. Like that's not your actual job or anything."

His face twitched with irritation. I felt a twisted satisfaction—maybe I could still get to him, make him feel as raw and exposed as I did. Some part of me wanted to cause just enough damage to even things out.

"Don't be dramatic. You've had it better than most kids."

Mom let out a hollow laugh. She crossed her arms so tightly that it looked like she was holding herself together by sheer force. "A roof over his head, Julian? That's rich. You're both exactly the same, you know?"

Dad's eyes snapped to her. "Nancy. Enough."

"Don't you dare talk to me with that patronizing tone. Like I haven't held this family together with duct tape and spit."

"It's not always about you," I said through gritted teeth. "You don't get to control every second of my life just because you're mad at yours."

Mom's fingers twitched against her arms, gripping herself even tighter.

"If you only knew—"

"Knew what?"

Dad quickly stepped forward. "That's enough," he said, way sharper than before. "Let's just... not do this right now."

"Why not?"

"Because this isn't the time," he said, his eyes flicking sideways toward Mom.

She didn't say anything, but the tension in the room snapped tighter, like something invisible just pulled taut. And I just knew something was off.

"...For what?"

Silence.

"Time for what? What do you mean?" I looked between them, pulse pounding in my ears. "What's going on?"

Mom pressed two fingers to her temple. Her voice dropped, quiet and frayed. "Oh, come on, Julian. You think we can just pretend forever—"

Dad's whole body tensed.

I frowned, a sick feeling curling inside me. *Pretend what?*

Mom pressed her lips together, looking away. But something about the way she stood all tense, the way Dad looked like he'd rather be *anywhere else*, made my skin prickle.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I turned to Dad, searching his face for answers. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Jesus, just say it!"

Mom let out a sharp exhale, shaking her head like she was finally done holding it all in.

"Why do you think you look nothing like him?"

I forced out a laugh. "What?"

I looked at Dad, waiting—*begging*—for him to roll his eyes, call her crazy, tell me she was just being cruel.

But he just stood there.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked hoarsely.

Mom’s face smoothed into something eerily unreadable. Then, too casually—like it was nothing—she said, “He’s not your father.”

I was sure I’d misheard.

Dad closed his eyes, resignation etched into every line of his face. He didn’t argue. He didn’t refute it.

And that silence was worse than any confirmation.

“What?” I whispered, barely able to get the word out. “Why... Where is this even coming from?”

Mom pierced me with her eyes. “Julian isn’t your biological father.”

I just stared at her. The words made no sense. Like they didn’t fit inside my head, didn’t belong in reality. I laughed awkwardly because I didn’t know what else to do. “What—what do you mean? Why would you say that?”

Dad—*Dad?*—finally spoke. “We didn’t want you to find out. I’ve been here for you, done my best—”

“Your best?! Is that what this is? A charity project?” He opened his mouth, but I wouldn’t let him speak. “You’ve never treated me like a son, and now I know why!”

Mom stayed quiet. Dad shook his head. “Maxim, calm down. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“You had no right to keep this from me.”

Dad turned to Mom, like he was waiting for her to step in and explain. But she just stood there, cold and unyielding.

“Tell me,” I said, teeth clenched. “Who is he?”

“You don’t know him—”

“No shit, I don’t!”

Dad opened his mouth like he might finally say something, but nothing came.

Of course not.

My body moved before my brain caught up. I shoved him, his eyes widening in disbelief, but I didn't care. For a split second, regret shot through me, but it vanished as fast as it came, buried by my burning need for answers. "Who is my real father?!" I demanded, letting my anger take over.

He grabbed my arms, but I twisted out of his grip. "You better calm down right now!"

His words were empty. He wasn't in control anymore.

I shoved him again. He staggered back a step, his expression somewhere between rage and regret.

I turned on Mom. "And you—don't act like you're some noble martyr. You lied. You both did!"

"Don't you dare put this all on me. I did what I had to do. You wouldn't understand."

"Wow. Unreal!"

"Max—" Dad took a step toward me.

"You know what? Forget it. I don't fucking care. Just get out of my room."

"Maxim!"

"Get out!" I yelled. "Get the fuck out of my room!"

I grabbed the nearest thing—an old textbook—and slammed it onto the floor, making both of them flinch. I pointed to the door. "Out!"

"You don't get to talk to me like that!"

"OUT!"

I was shaking. I would've literally fought them if I had to.

Dad raised his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright, we're going," he muttered, backing toward the door.

Mom glared at him. "Julian—"

He grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the room.

I followed them to the door and slammed it shut behind them so hard the old baseballs on the shelf came tumbling down, bouncing across the floor.

All my life, I'd been standing on shaky ground, like nothing in this house was solid, like nothing could be trusted. But this? This was the earthquake that finally split the ground open beneath me.

They didn't care. Not about me, not about the truth, not about each other. They just wanted to keep throwing grenades and pretending it wasn't their fault when they exploded.

Fuck them.

My hands shook as I tore a backpack from the floor, shoving clothes into it at random. A pair of jeans, a hoodie, some socks—none of it mattered. I was done. Done with them. Done with this house. Done with the lies

I yanked open my nightstand drawer, grabbed the pills, and shoved them into the side pocket. My vision blurred as I zipped the bag shut, anger hollowing into something colder.

From the hallway, their voices rose again, the argument picking up right where it had left off.

"You can't keep shielding him from everything, Julian! This is your fault too!"

"Don't even start. You think screaming at him helps? That's worked so well so far, hasn't it?"

I threw the backpack over my shoulder and stormed to the door, wrenching it open. It slammed against the wall, making both of them freeze, eyes snapping to me.

"What now?" Mom snapped.

I didn't answer. I pushed past them, shoving Dad's arm away when he tried to stop me.

"Maxim—"

I was already on the stairs. Their footsteps followed behind, voices chasing me down.

"Don't just let him walk out!"

"What do you want me to do, Nancy? Tackle him?"

I reached the bottom first, wiping my face with the back of my hand as I made for the door. Their words were just static. I no longer cared what they said. Their words meant nothing.

“Where are you going?” Dad called.

“You know exactly where I’m going,” I muttered, gripping the doorknob.

“Maxim, you can’t just leave—”

“Watch me.” I yanked the door.

“Maximus, you come back here this instant! You are grounded!”

I laughed bitterly, stepping out into the night.

The door slammed shut behind me like a final verdict.

I guess here’s your *emergency*, Marcus.

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There was only one thing I hadn’t thought through when I stormed out. I didn’t have any money. For a split second, I considered going back. But no. I wasn’t about to face them again. I needed to be as far away as humanly possible.

Unfortunately, even another galaxy wouldn’t be far enough.

I did the first thing that came to mind: grabbed the bike from the porch and tore down the street toward Mikey’s house. I pedaled hard, the sting of the night air sharp against my face—but not sharp enough to cut through the noise in my head. Tonight was supposed to be about Andy. Instead, I found out... what? That Dad—Julian, whatever—wasn’t even my dad?

Not only was I apparently into dudes now, but also a bastard? *Fucking amazing.*

It was too big to wrap my head around. Sure, Dad ignored me sometimes—more than sometimes—but this? I couldn’t stop the pieces from snapping into place. The awkward distance. The way he’d sometimes look at me like I was a stranger.

When I got to Mikey's house, the light in his room—the one facing the front yard—was on, a faint glow spilling out onto the lawn. I grabbed a handful of small rocks from the flower beds and started tossing them up, not even caring if I might break the glass.

Mikey opened the window almost immediately, just in time to catch a pebble right between his eyes.

"Hey, what the—?" He squinted down at me.

"Mikey!" I hissed up at him, trying to keep my voice down. "I need to borrow some cash."

He blinked. "What the hell, Max?"

"Please. I'll pay you back."

"Just come in."

"But your parents..."

"Okay, come around back," he said, disappearing from the window.

I ducked through the dark yard, slipping in through the kitchen door. The faint sound of laughter and the murmur of a TV drifted from the living room, warm and comforting, filling me with a bittersweet warmth. Mikey appeared a second later, wearing Ninja Turtles pajama pants that didn't quite make it to his ankles.

"Nice outfit," I said, managing a weak smile.

"Oh, shut up." He motioned for me to follow him downstairs, where he clicked on a small lamp and turned to face me. "Alright, man. What's up?"

I sank into the nearest beanbag chair, my knees bouncing with nervous energy. "I need some money. Enough to get to Chicago. I'm going to Marcus."

"What?" He frowned. "Can't this wait till tomorrow? You could've told me at school."

"No. I need to go now."

"What? Why? What the hell happened?"

I ran a hand over my face. The stickiness from my tears was still there, drying on my cheeks. "I had a massive fight with my parents."



His frown deepened, and he sank into the couch across from me. “Was it that bad?”

I nodded, and the words spilled out on their own. I told him about the fight, about what my mom said, about Dad not being my dad. I tried joking about how I looked more like the mailman, but the humor didn’t land, and I ended up feeling even worse.

Mikey was quiet for a moment, processing everything. “Dude, that’s insane,” he finally said. “I knew your mom could be, like extra, but this? Do you know who your real dad—sorry, I mean, who that guy might be?”

“They didn’t tell me,” I said. “And I think I don’t really want to know since he didn’t care about me. Not that Julian ‘The Great’ Reid ever did either.”

Mikey smirked. “Maybe your real dad’s in the NBA? It’d explain why you’re so damn tall. You could be the son of someone famous!”

I forced a chuckle. “You think he’s Black? Maybe I’m secretly your cousin.”

“Shut up.” He gave me a light punch on the shoulder. “But seriously, you’re going to Marcus? That’s the plan?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I don’t know what else to do. I can’t go back home. Not tonight.”

“You could crash here. You know my parents won’t mind.”

“Nah. I need to be far away from here.”

“Max, c’mon. It’s ten o’clock. There’s no bus to Chicago this late.”

“Then I’ll wait for the first one in the morning.”

He sighed. “At least stay here till then, alright? I’ll drive you tomorrow. My parents won’t even know.”

“You think this is a bad idea?”

Mikey shrugged, leaning back in his chair. “If I were you? I’d probably do the same thing.” He smiled, unusually tenderly for Mikey. “But you’re still gonna look for Andy? Should I be worried about you running off to Chicago and forgetting all about me?”

“Yeah, Mikey, ‘cause that’s exactly what I’m doing—just running off and leaving my life behind for a guy I meet in dreams.” I knew he meant it as a joke, but the jab hit closer than I wanted to admit.

Mikey’s grin faltered, and he looked away. “Hey, I was just kidding, man. I get it. This is a big deal for you.”

“Do you? I don’t think you *do*. You’re not the one who found out his entire life has been a lie.”

He blinked. I instantly regretted snapping at him, but the frustration bubbling inside me was too much to shove down. He didn’t know what it felt like to carry this, to feel like the ground you’d been standing on your whole life wasn’t even real.

Mikey cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably. “Okay, maybe I don’t get it. But I’m trying. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yeah,” I muttered, looking away. “Just... forget it.”

He sighed, standing up. “I’ll grab you some cash. Just hang tight till morning, alright?”

“Thanks. I’ll pay you back.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll bring you a blanket,” he said, disappearing up the stairs.

I nodded, staring down at the floor. “Okay.”

I didn’t fall asleep until around three a.m. The room was too quiet and I just lay there, staring at the ceiling fan doing slow, lazy turns, waiting for sleep to come. The entire evening kept looping through my mind, but I didn’t bother getting up to take the pills.

I kept wondering how it all went down. Was it the reason my parents couldn’t stand each other? Why had they stayed together so miserably all these years? And did Marcus know? The questions spun in circles, feeding into each other like a tornado I couldn’t escape.

When I finally drifted off, I wasn’t in the mood for the usual amusement park rides with Andy. He was waiting for me, as always, his face softened with concern. I told him everything, apologizing for making him wait, for

being so wrapped up in my own world. Even though he said cliché things like, “Genes don’t matter,” and “Family is who shows up for you,” I could tell he truly meant them. From anyone else, it might’ve sounded like bullshit, but not coming from Andy. They had their own kind of power. And when I ran out of words, drained from spilling everything, he took over so I could lose myself, where just being around him was enough to quiet everything in my head.

That night, the colors in the dream were sharper, the details richer, as if the world understood what I needed. It had turned into a sanctuary, where the jagged pieces of reality couldn’t follow. The worries clawing at me all evening faded, though I wasn’t sure if they were truly gone or if I was shoving them so far down I could pretend they didn’t exist.

I didn’t mention my plan to go to Chicago. I knew he wouldn’t like it. It would only trigger him, make him anxious, and I wasn’t willing to unravel the fragile peace we still had. Besides, the idea of surprising him in the real world was too tempting to resist.

*When we finally meet, I know he’ll understand. He’ll see that I was right all along.*

## LET IT SLIDE



**M**ikey woke me up at five a.m., and for a brief, blissful moment, there was *nothing*. No tangled mess of lies, no anger. Just the warmth of the couch and a blanket draped over me. But then, like a dam breaking, everything came flooding back, hitting me twice as hard.

It was time to get up.

We slipped out of the house while Mikey's parents were still asleep. At the station, he handed me a hundred bucks and I promised to pay him back, and he told me he'd cover for me if my parents asked where I was, though we both knew they wouldn't be too worried. They'd know exactly where I was heading.

I bought my ticket and slumped into a seat at the back of the bus. The engine's low rumble vibrated through me, its steady rhythm the only thing keeping me grounded as my thoughts spiraled.

After the anger faded, all I was left with was a hollow ache, like something essential had been ripped out of me. How was I supposed to look at Dad now and not see the cracks? How was I supposed to look at him without thinking about how nothing was tying us together except years of pretending?

And Marcus. Did he know? Had he left because of it? But why would he? If anyone should've been running, it was me. It was my mess, not his.

I pressed my temple to the cool glass and closed my eyes, hoping the steady motion of the bus would calm the madness in my head, but instead, exhaustion hit me before I even noticed.

I didn't mean to fall asleep, but when I blinked out, I was right back on the horse carousel where Andy and I had been the moment Mikey woke me up. But something was wrong. The park no longer felt alive. Everything looked drained. The music was silent, the lights that lit up the park flickered weakly, and the rides were frozen as if the entire amusement park had shut down for good.

I climbed off the carousel horse. The moment my feet touched the ground, the world shifted. The worn cement paths gave way to damp grass, and the carnival dissolved into shifting shadows, its colors bleeding into the mist. I started walking, the bright neon fading into earthy greens and browns. The rides, the booths, the games all melted into the fog, swallowed by the forest rising around me.

A path twisted through the trees, barely visible under moss and random bits of broken park junk. The shadows played tricks, stretching and twisting, and with every step, the trees loomed closer like gawkers waiting to see what I'd do.

I wished Andy were here. But he was probably in school by now, oblivious that I'd changed the dream without him.

My foot caught on something dense and sticky. I looked down to see a thick, knotted web stretching across the ground like a trap. I jerked back, but

another web brushed my arm, clinging like glue. I froze when I noticed the entire forest was now smothered in them.

Heavy, grotesque tunnels of silk stretched from tree to tree, winding up trunks and disappearing into the canopy. The strands glistened faintly, thick and sticky, some as wide as my finger. They surrounded me, choking the space, wrapping the trees in suffocating layers, making it feel like the forest was just one big cocoon.

A chill crept through my gut. Every direction I turned was clogged with webs, impossible to avoid.

And where there were webs, there could only be one thing.

Dozens of spiders—no, hundreds—swarmed along the silken threads with terrifying speed and purpose. Their legs moved in eerie synchronicity, all heading toward me. I jerked with panic, but the webs stuck to my skin and clothes. My breath came faster as I felt the first spiders crawling onto my arms, my neck, my face. Their legs tickled and scratched, each one sending jolts of revulsion through me. I ripped at the webs like crazy, but the more I fought, the more trapped I became.

The spiders were all over me now, scurrying down my arms, across my chest, wrapping around my legs. I thrashed wildly, trying to shake them off, but they moved faster, the webs tightening around me. A scream built in my throat—

I shot upright, gasping for air. My hand clutched the edge of the bus seat, the other brushing the empty spot beside me. Thankfully, no one was here to witness my freak-out, though some older woman across the aisle gave me a strange look. My heart was still racing, and I rubbed my arms and face, half-expecting to find silk strands clinging to me. My skin itched like they were still there.

When I wiped my face, I realized I'd drooled a little and let out a shaky half-laugh, trying to pull myself together. I slumped back in my seat, breathing hard and toying with the pendant from Andy as I stared out the window at the blur of the highway.

What if the dreams get worse and worse? And what if Andy doesn't care? The worry clawed at me, sharper than any fear of spiders or drowning. Andy would cling to that world no matter how dark it got. He'd already accepted it as his reality.

Andy. Marcus. Dad. They all connected somehow. Marcus had left, Dad had lied, and Andy—Andy was out there... somewhere. It was like trying to play Tetris with pieces that didn't fit, just... everything jammed up and nothing clicking.

The bus slowed as we approached the city. I had to remind myself that this was the real Chicago, not the overgrown, post-apocalyptic version Andy and I had wandered through so many nights. Each skyscraper, each street corner, was just an echo of the twisted, desolate landscape we'd roamed together.

The buildings weren't crumbling or wrapped in vines, but I could almost picture it. In the dreams, Chicago had felt like a husk. Now, as we rolled through the outskirts, it was alive with people hurrying along sidewalks, cars streaming by in morning traffic, and the distant rumble of trains weaving through the skyline. It was surreal seeing the same city bustling. And not with the zombies' groans.

I leaned forward, straining to take it all in. A strange mix of anticipation and dread settled over me. I'd pictured meeting Andy in Chicago a hundred times, but now that I was actually here, it felt more overwhelming than I'd expected. The blurring of reality and fantasy was too obvious.

As the bus eased its way into the city streets, my heartbeat quickened, and I scanned the crowds of people hurrying along the sidewalks as if somehow I might see Andy there. Every shorter guy with dark hair made me double-take. Because what if, by some miracle, he was just another face in the rush of strangers?

It was a ridiculous thought, but not totally impossible. I could see it so clearly: I'd step off the bus, and we'd lock eyes across the street, or we'd bump into each other by sheer chance. Naya's voice popped into my head,

reminding me of all the times she'd gone on about fate and magic and all that crap she believed in so fiercely. I'd always rolled my eyes at her, but now? After everything we'd been through, why shouldn't I believe in the impossible?

The bus turned onto the final road to the terminal. My fingers tightened around the headrest in front of me. *Breathe, Max. Just breathe.*

I kept my eyes locked on the station ahead, the nerves in my chest twisting tighter with every second.

Because maybe, just maybe, he'd be waiting for me all along.

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By the time I got anywhere near Marcus's place, I had already gotten lost. Fumbling with my ticket, a gust of wind snatched it right out of my hand, sending it tumbling down the platform as I chased after it. In the chaos, I hopped onto the wrong train entirely. Chalk it up to nerves, or maybe just the sheer insanity of this whole plan finally catching up to me.

When I finally arrived at the correct stop, I stood at the station for a moment, trying to gather myself. The cool breeze off the lake brushed past, tugging at my hoodie. I pulled out the crumpled scrap of paper where I'd scribbled the address Marcus had given me—the one I'd kept in my drawer like a treasure since he left, and squinted at the faded street signs, trying to figure out which direction to go. When Marcus said he lived in a frat house, I pictured... well, I didn't really know what to picture. Maybe one of those big houses with Greek columns, ivy-covered walls, and beer cans crushed on the lawn.

Instead of mansions full of rowdy frat bros, I found myself wandering past rows of old brick three-flats and small apartment buildings, with stores tucked between them. Nothing flashy, nothing wild. The kind of places you don't notice unless you're walking. A bakery smelling like fresh bread, a corner store with faded posters taped to the windows, a laundromat where



someone inside was loading a machine. Just normal. And at the same time, completely familiar.

Because I *did* know this place. Andy and I had been here in the dreams. We'd walked these streets, pointing out the closed-up houses and imagining who might live behind those doors in the real world. The locked buildings kept us out, but we still made up wild stories. It all looked ordinary, but in our heads, it was the craziest part of Chicago you could imagine.

The sense of *déjà vu* only made me walk faster, my eyes scanning every address on every door. After passing yet another identical street and asking a few strangers for directions, I finally stopped in front of the correct address—a red-brick three-flat at the end of the block. A rusty gate bordered the small front yard, with patches of overgrown grass pushing through the cracks of a few paving stones leading up to the door. It didn't scream 'frat house' at all, but a Loyola flag hung in one of the upstairs windows, so I figured I'd found the place.

I rang the bell, the sound echoing faintly inside. The longer I waited, the heavier my backpack grew, each second adding another pound to its weight. My palms started sweating, and I wiped them on my jeans. Before I could press the buzzer again, the door opened.

The guy who opened the door definitely wasn't Marcus. My brother wouldn't be caught dead in a sweater vest, wire-rimmed glasses, and a mustache that made him look like he graded philosophy papers for fun. He looked like he belonged in some moody indie film or, I don't know, taught Intro to Ethics at a liberal arts college.

"Um, hey," I said. "I'm looking for Marcus Reid?"

"He's not home."

"Oh. Uh... okay."

The guy raised an eyebrow, giving me a once-over. "Wait... aren't you Marcus's brother?"

The question caught me off guard. We didn't look much alike. Definitely not enough for someone to guess just by looking.

“Um, yeah...” I admitted, trying not to let the flood of emotions show. “How’d you know?”

He shrugged, giving a casual grin. “He mentioned his crazy tall younger brother Also, you kinda talk like him.” He held out a hand. “I’m Robin, by the way.”

“Max.” I shook his hand.

“Oh my gosh, Maximus, right? Makes more sense now.” Robin’s smile widened as he leaned casually against the doorframe.

“Cool... um... so do you know when he’ll be back?”

“He’s at City Hall. But he should be back soon. You can wait inside if you want.”

I nodded, and he stepped aside, letting me in.

I was greeted by the faint smell of old wood mixed with something slightly burned—probably the aftermath of someone’s attempt at cooking. The entryway opened into a large common room, which—predictably—looked like it belonged to a group of college guys who prioritized fun over cleaning. Sofas and beanbags lay scattered everywhere, with a pool and foosball tables shoved into opposite corners. Even a piano sat along the far wall, though I doubted anyone played it. Textbooks and empty cans of energy drinks littered the floor, like someone had given up on studying halfway through.

It was messy, sure, but it also felt... lived in. Comfortable. Almost like a real home. The kind of place where everyone knew everyone, where you could crash on the couch with no one questioning it.

Robin gestured toward the room. “Make yourself at home. There’s pizza in the fridge if you’re hungry. It’s day old, but, you know—pizza’s pizza.”

“Thanks,” I said, glancing around. “Marcus told me he lives in a frat house.”

“A bunch of us rent this place together. It’s nothing fancy, but it works.”

“Are you friends with Marcus?” I asked, shoving my hands into my pockets.

“Oh yeah,” Robin said. “Marcus is the best. He’s helped me out more times than I can count. Real solid dude. He comes to my family’s place for Thanksgiving every year. He mentioned your parents travel a lot, so you guys don’t do Thanksgiving at home, right?”

So that was Marcus’s official version of things? “Um... yeah,” I said. “Something like that.”

Robin didn’t seem to notice my hesitation and kept talking. “He mentioned it a while back. I mean, we’re like family here. He’s the kind of guy who’ll stay up all night helping you study or giving you advice about anything. And yeah, he’s a total nerd, but you already know that since you’re brothers. Dude’s got all these projects and extracurriculars—the only guy actually studying in a fifty-mile radius.”

I blinked, struggling to reconcile this image of Marcus with the brother I grew up with. He’d never cared about school, just enough to get by, something we’d always had in common. I guess not anymore.

Robin slung his bag over his shoulder. “Anyway, I’ve got class. Marcus should be back soon.”

“Thanks,” I muttered as he disappeared out the door.

I slumped onto one of the couches, tossing my backpack into its corner. This place—this messy, lively house—had become Marcus’s home. And I didn’t know whether to be proud of him or just... left out. Did he have more fun here, with these guys who seemed like his new family, than he ever did back home with me? Before everything fell apart? Did he even miss me? Or was I just another part of the life he’d left behind?

Hunger finally won out, and I grabbed a slice of cold pepperoni. Standing in the kitchen, I chewed absently, checking out a cluster of old photos pinned up near the doorway. Most were group shots from parties showing people crammed together, holding drinks, laughing at something outside the frame. There were concert tickets, artsy sketches, and even a few inside jokes scrawled in marker. Andy would love that wall.

I wandered back to the couch, the uneaten crust of my pizza in hand, and plopped down. While I waited for Marcus, a few guys came and went. Some gave me a look and said a quick “hey,” others were too busy to notice. Random people must have crashed here all the time, and for now, I was just another face in the crowd.

I wiped my hands on my jeans, realizing with some embarrassment that I’d gotten tomato sauce on them. Good thing I’d packed an extra pair of pants...

“Max?”

I spun around. Marcus stood in the doorway, eyes wide. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey.” I gave him an awkward wave, suddenly having no idea how to act around him.

“Wow, I mean... hey, bud.” He stepped closer, still looking stunned.

He looked different than the last time I’d seen him, three years ago. The slight stubble on his face made him look older, and his hair, which used to be buzzed short, was now much longer, like mine. But neatly styled, not messy, like the good student he apparently was these days. They were auburn, like Dad’s—or, well... like his dad’s.

All the emotions I thought I’d buried at least for a while came rushing back.

“I was hoping I could crash with you for a bit,” I muttered. “And you mentioned you found something about Andy...”

Marcus’s expression shifted from surprise to concern. “Wait—crash with me? Did you run away from home or something?”

“Yeah, kind of.” I shrugged.

“Jesus Christ, Max. You can’t just do that.”

“Why not?”

“You have school! And when Mom finds out—”

“Oh, please. You skipped school all the time. And besides, she knows.”

Before he could answer, two guys and a girl walked into the room, said hello to Marcus, waved at me, and immediately started playing foosball, talking and laughing, as if we weren't still standing there awkwardly.

Marcus sighed. "Let's go to my room."

I grabbed my bag and followed him upstairs. The staircase creaked under our feet, and the railing glowed, likely polished by countless people who couldn't resist sliding down it. The second-floor hallway was narrow, lined with several doors on either side, most of them closed, with the faint murmur of voices and music leaking through.

His room was small, with two beds on opposite sides, two desks cluttered with books and notes, and a couple of closets. Enough space if you spend most of your time out and about.

Marcus gestured for me to sit on his bed, and I dropped my bag and sat down, pushing aside some boring-looking textbooks. My eyes wandered to the poster of Pamela Anderson taped above the desk.

"Seriously? Pamela Anderson?"

Marcus snorted. "Helps me sleep."

"Don't you have a girlfriend or something?" I leaned back against the wall.

He ignored the question and sat on the opposite bed, facing me. "Alright, Max. What happened? Why are you here?"

"Total shitshow. That's what happened."

"Is this about the phone call?"

I chew on my lips, trying to find the right words.

"What did Mom do?" Marcus asked, his tone serious now.

"I'm not sure. You tell me," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you know Dad isn't my biological father?"

The room went dead quiet.

Marcus cleared his throat. "She told you?"

"Yeah, she kinda threw it in my face out of nowhere."

“Oh my god, Max... I’m so sorry,” he said quietly. “You know it doesn’t change anything, right? Dad’s still your dad, no matter what—”

“So you knew?”

He looked away, avoiding my eyes. “Yeah... I knew.”

“We used to tell each other everything! I deserved to know!”

“I thought I was protecting you, okay? I didn’t want to dump this on you when you were a kid. You wouldn’t have understood—”

“Oh, so you just decided for me, huh? Don’t give me that crap. I’m not a kid anymore, Marcus. You are not my father either. You don’t get to decide what I can handle.”

He rolled his eyes. “Who wants to know something like that?”

“Me!” The words tore out of me. “I wanted to know!”

He flinched, but didn’t back down. “Are you happier now that you do?”

“Happier?” I barked out a bitter laugh. “What the hell kind of question is that? Of course, I’m not happier! But at least now I know the truth. At least now I understand what’s been wrong this whole time.”

Marcus’s shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of him. “I guess,” he muttered. “But it doesn’t make it any easier, does it?”

“No,” I admitted. “It doesn’t.”

He sighed, resting his elbows on his knees. “I didn’t know what to do, okay? I didn’t have all the answers. I thought... maybe I was protecting you. I don’t know. But I screwed up, okay? I know I did. I just... I didn’t want you to know how bad it really was. I didn’t want you to look at them the way I do.”

For a moment, neither of us said anything. The anger still stirred inside me, but Marcus looked so tired, so weighed down...

“So... how bad was it?” I finally asked.

Marcus hesitated, then exhaled. “I didn’t just leave because... you know, the way Mom is.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I found something.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He sighed again, leaning forward and staring at the floor. “When I was packing for college, I found these... letters... And that’s basically why I don’t go back home anymore.”

“Letters?”

Marcus ran a hand over his face. “Ugh, Max, this is... hard. Maybe we can talk about it another time—?”

“Don’t start and then bail. Just tell me!”

He stood up and paced for a second before sitting down next to me. “Fine. But you’re not gonna like it,” he said, resigned. “I was looking for that ugly backpack Dad used to take camping, but instead, I found this box. I thought it was just old documents or something, but it turned out to be a bunch of letters. And, of course, I opened them. I *could’ve* left them alone...” His voice trailed off as he shook his head. “Anyway, long story short—they were letters between Mom and some guy. She had an affair with him when I was little. And from those letters, I found out... that he’s your real father. She wanted to leave Dad for him. He promised her he’d leave his wife, but when she got pregnant with you... he backed off.”

My gut twisted.

“And get this—the guy sent the letters back to her when it ended. All of them. Like he wanted her to remember.” He scoffed. “If it were me? I would’ve burned them. But not Mom. She kept them and hid them like some kind of twisted souvenir.”

He looked at me like he was trying to decide if I was okay. I just stared at him, unsure of what to say. When I didn’t respond, he continued.

“When I confronted Mom about it, she freaked out. Told me to stay quiet. And yeah... I might’ve called her a whore. Not my proudest moment.” He winced, but the grimace was quickly gone. “After that, I couldn’t stand it. Couldn’t look at her, or Dad, or you, knowing all of this. It felt like I was the one holding the family together by not saying anything. I couldn’t look at you guys, knowing such a secret.”

His words hit me with a strange, hollow weight. My head spun, a dozen questions screaming over each other, too fast to grasp any of them.

“Do you get what I’m saying?” Marcus asked. “God, I don’t want this to mess you up, okay? None of this is your fault.”

I stared at my hands, barely recognizing my own voice when I finally spoke. “Well, apparently, Dad knows everything.”

His eyes widened. “What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “The way he treats me—you should’ve figured it out by now.”

Marcus raked his fingers through his hair, messing up his neatly styled look. “Wow... I mean, I thought it was Dad being Dad, you know? Like he’s always been.”

“He always treated you better.”

Marcus looked away. “Yeah, I know. I saw it too. I just... didn’t know what to do about it.”

“He went to every one of your games,” I added. “I used to count how many times he showed up for mine.”

Marcus’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t say anything.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry as sandpaper. “You know his name?”

“You mean...”

I raised my eyebrows expectantly.

He nodded. “Just his first name. It’s Greg.”

*Greg. My dad’s name is Greg.* The words felt foreign.

“Did he say anything about me in the letters? Why didn’t he want me?”

Marcus rubbed his hands together. “Not really. Maybe... sort of.”

“Marcus, come on. Just tell me. It can’t be worse than what you’ve already said.”

“I don’t know how to say this without hurting you, Max.”

“Just say it. I don’t care.”

He breathed out sharply. “There was one letter... I guess it was the last one she sent. Mom... she said something like... what if she, you know, got



rid of you? Would he leave his wife then? And some other bullshit. But I think by then, he'd already made up his mind. Either way, he stopped writing, and I think that's when things ended for good."

A cold knot twisted in my stomach.

"I'm sorry, bud," Marcus said. "I know it's a lot to take in..."

"I need a moment," I muttered, grabbing one of the pillows. I walked into his bathroom on autopilot and shut the door behind me.

As soon as the door clicked shut, the pillow caught my scream. It ripped out of me, raw and jagged, like everything inside me had cracked wide open. Years of anger, confusion, and guilt surged out all at once, pouring into the scream until my throat burned. Even when I buried my face deeper into the pillow, muffling the sound, it didn't feel any smaller.

I wasn't shocked. Somehow, the whole situation didn't surprise me.

It made me furious.

For years, I'd fought with Mom without fully understanding why. And now I knew. She hated me because I ruined her fantasy of a perfect life. I was the reason her whole world fell apart.

The thought made me sick.

I stumbled to the sink and gripped the edges, my fingers digging into the cold porcelain. A wave of nausea hit me like a freight train. I bent over, gagging, my body convulsing with dry heaves. Nothing came out, but my throat burned as though I'd just thrown up everything I had.

Reaching for the faucet, I turned it on and cupped my hands beneath the stream, bringing the cool water to my lips. Again and again, I rinsed my mouth, spitting to wash away the bitter taste of nothingness that still clung.

I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes, forcing the burning tears to stay back. I wasn't going to cry over her.

Not now. Not ever.

My hands trembled as I grabbed the towel and dried my face, inhaling sharply before forcing a neutral expression.

Fuck you, Mom.

H. B. WASIAK

And you, *Greg*.

## IT'S NOT MY PROBLEM



“So what did you find out about Andy?” I asked, stepping out of the bathroom like nothing had happened. I tossed the pillow at Marcus as if I hadn’t just screamed my entire soul into it.

“You okay, bud?” Marcus caught it with a sad smile. “TMI?”

“I’m fine!” I snapped, more out of exhaustion than anything else. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Just let me stay here.” I added, softer this time.

Marcus sighed. “You can stay, Max, but just for the weekend. There’s a spare room, but you have to go back to school on Monday.”

Just a weekend? I’d hoped for at least a week.

I pursed my lips. “You’re not my parent, Marcus.”

“Maybe not, but our parents don’t care what we do, so someone has to.”

"And you did that by leaving me behind?" I shot back, unable to stop myself.

"Jesus, Max. I told you what happened."

"You could've told me the moment you found out."

"What would that have changed? I went to college, Max. Not another continent."

"You didn't even try!"

"Max, please... let's not fight because of them."

"Whatever," I muttered, slumping back onto the bed. Shutting him down was easier than confronting the wave of emotions threatening to crash over me again. As much as I wanted to stay mad at him, I couldn't ignore the fear of losing him, too. Our relationship was a mess, but he was still my brother, and I still wanted him to be on my side.

Marcus poked me in the shoulder. "Do you still want to find your friend?"

My heart leaped at that thought instantly. "Yes! I mean—" I cleared my throat. "Yes..."

"Well," He said, settling back. "I tried to tell you when I called. I've been working on this project with a friend—she's Chinese-American. When I mentioned the stuff you told me about, something clicked for her."

I sat up straighter. "Clicked how?"

"She doesn't know him personally, but she said she might recognize him."

"What?! She—she knows him?!" My stomach flipped.

*Oh my god...*

"Not exactly," Marcus said. "I'm not sure... I was planning to meet her tomorrow. You can come with me."

"Oh my god! Yes! Please!"

The rush of hope was almost too much. Was I really about to find a person I met in my dreams? And someone out there—a real person—knew him? It felt too big, too strange, too perfect.

*Where's the catch?*

Marcus leaned forward, watching me. "Now, will you tell me why you're so desperate to find him?"

"I told you. He's a friend," I said quickly.

"You seem to care about him a lot."

"Yeah, well, you promised to help without asking questions, so maybe shut up."

He laughed. It had been a long time since I'd heard him laugh like that.

But the concerned look returned eventually, the same one he'd been giving me since he saw me downstairs. "Are you sure you're okay? You look exhausted. Like a zombie-level."

Exhausted? Not from lack of sleep, that's for sure.

"I'm fine," I lied, forcing a smile.

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Marcus brushed aside the rest of his classes and took me downtown. I tried not to act like I'd been there countless times, because technically, I hadn't. He asked if I wanted to hit Navy Pier, and I went along without thinking much. The whole afternoon carried this weird sense of *déjà vu*. The absurdity of it all—the dreams bleeding into the real city—was almost enough to distract me from the dumpster fire waiting back home. And from the fact that I was about to look for a guy I met in dreams, in a city of nearly three million people.

Standing at the edge of the pier, watching the water ripple under the fading light, I suddenly stopped spiraling, like my brain had finally given up trying to fix everything at once. Maybe it was the weird calm of the city, or the way the real Chicago blurred with the one from my dreams. Or maybe I was just tired.

I wasn't sure what exactly shifted in me, but I knew this much: my family was broken. I couldn't fix it. I'd been dealing with my parents my whole life, and I was done letting it eat me alive.

There was still tension between Marcus and me, an unspoken weight of words left unsaid. But somehow, it seemed lighter now, as if filling in some blanks between us had taken some of the pressure off. Hanging out had been... nice. The first time we'd spent time just the two of us in years. Still, the distance between us wasn't something one afternoon could erase. We barely knew each other anymore. Not like we used to. Not like when Marcus had been my hero and the coolest guy on the planet.

I took a deep breath, letting the crisp, lake-kissed air fill my lungs. For the first time in... forever, I could almost see the next steps. Finish school. Pack. Leave. Start over.

And I wanted that future to include Andy. I meant it when I told him. But some part of me didn't know how to picture it. Not out loud and in daylight. Wanting him felt easy in dreams, but out there, in the real world? It still freaked me out, in ways I hated and didn't fully understand. Like some part of me kept flashing warning lights. Like I wasn't supposed to want this, even though I did.

Later, Marcus showed me a spare bedroom on the top floor. A party was going on downstairs, and Marcus had asked me to join him, saying it might help me relax and distract myself from everything he'd unloaded on me, but I wasn't in the mood to deal with a bunch of random drunk people. It would only remind me how far I'd drifted from normal.

I grabbed the pills almost right away because there was no way I'd fall asleep on my own. The moment no one distracted me, the thoughts started crashing back in. The pills weren't just for sleep but a shortcut to turning everything off. They felt like the only thing that still worked. Like an old friend who never asked questions, and I could count on when nothing else made sense. It was stupid, really—relying on something so small. But it was also the only thing I had control over. I couldn't control what people were

hiding from me. But this—deciding when and how to shut my mind down—this, at least, was in my hands.

Someone yelled my name, and a couple of girls even knocked on my door, trying to drag me to the party, but I dismissed them all. I took the pill, closed my eyes, and prayed for no more spiders. Sleep took me faster than I expected.

When I showed up in the dream, the forest was still there—twisted and dark—but the webs and spiders were gone. I stood on a path, one of many cutting through the trees, vanishing into the darkness and leading who knew where.

“Andy?!” I called, but there was no response. Great. Another lost-in-the-dream maze situation.

Without a plan, I picked a random path, each turn a desperate gamble. Every few steps, I called Andy’s name, hoping to hear him call mine in return. The forest was too dark to feel real; no sky above, just a shadowy dome. The deathly quiet only deepened the sense of unease.

I heard a faint sound.

“Andy?”

Then I heard something again. It didn’t seem to come from any specific direction. I froze, straining to listen.

The whispers grew louder, layering over one another until they turned into a full-on, haunting chorus. Another muffled voice cut through, like someone talking from inside a closet. That’s when I realized they weren’t coming from the air around me.

They were coming from the trees.

The trees were whispering.

I stepped closer to one of the trunks and pressed my ear against the bark. The voices sharpened, quick and urgent, like they were trying to get out. As I focused, they began to separate. First, I swore I heard my mom’s voice. Then my dad’s. And Marcus’s. And... fucking Kyle Silva’s. They were all talking at once, overlapping, the words warped and distorted, impossible to make out.

It was like eavesdropping on an argument behind a closed door, only louder and more chaotic.

The voices grew harsher. I didn't understand them, but somehow, deep down, I knew they were talking about me. Whispering every awful thing I was afraid to hear. I tried to block them out, willing the dream to stop, the same way I'd silenced nightmares when I was a kid. But the dream wasn't listening. It forced me to listen instead.

I jerked away from the tree, but the voices didn't stop. They were louder now, sharper, rising like a siren in my head. I spun around like an idiot, trying to escape, but the noise followed me, suffocating. I dropped to my knees, clamping my hands over my ears and squeezing my eyes shut. The voices didn't stop. They only got even louder, drilling into my skull, until I couldn't take it anymore.

A pair of gentle, steady hands pulled mine away from my ears, and everything went quiet.

I opened my eyes. Andy was crouching in front of me with eyes full of concern.

"You're okay," he said softly. "Just breathe."

I blinked, still disoriented, but Andy's presence was enough to quiet everything. The whispers faded, drowned out by the sound of my breathing.

"Did you hear them?" I asked, my voice cracking. "They were screaming. All of them."

Andy nodded. "I know. It wants us to listen."

"It?"

"The forest."

"How do you know?"

He shrugged and helped me to my feet. "I just do."

Andy threw his arms around my neck and hugged me tight. I hugged him back, burying my face in his hair—and that's when it hit me.

His scent. Not the leather of his jacket, not the museum dust, or the lake water. Just him. Fresh, warm, a little earthy. Real.



I froze, caught off guard by how *there* it was.

Andy started shaking with laughter, stepping back just enough to look me in the eye. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said, hiding my revelation behind a smile. “How did you find me?”

“One path was glowing, so I just followed it. Then I heard the screams and saw you.”

*My screams?*

I frowned. “None of my paths were glowing.”

“No?” He looked genuinely surprised and pointed ahead to one of them. It didn’t stand out from the others at all. “That one. It’s still glowing.”

“I don’t see it.” I squinted, trying to catch a glimpse of any glow. “Wait—aren’t you freaked out? You look weirdly cheerful.”

His face lit up even more, totally out of place. “Nope. I love it.”

Of course he did. Only Andy could look at this haunted forest and smile.

“It’s creepy,” I muttered. “And crawling with spiders, if you missed that part.”

“Spiders?”

“Seriously? They were everywhere.”

He looked around like we were standing in a botanical garden instead of nightmare fuel. “Huh. I didn’t see any.” He grinned, eyes still on the trees. “It’s like in *Alice in Wonderland*.”

I snorted and grabbed his hand, tugging him closer. “The totally unhinged acid-trip cartoon?”

“Exactly. Nothing made sense, and that’s the point. It’s my favorite.” He laughed, the sound bright in the dark backdrop of the forest.

“You’ve never told me.”

“I’m telling you now.”

He led me toward the path. His enthusiasm was so raw that it almost made the forest seem less threatening.

"You're so weird," I said, shaking my head as I followed him. "You like all this creepy and surreal stuff. Like that corpse painting you made me stare at for ten minutes."

"It wasn't creepy, it was art."

"Yeah, sure. Because nothing says art like a decaying body."

He laughed. "You're missing the point. It's about seeing normal things in a different way. Same reason I love *Alice in Wonderland*. It's messed up, but it kind of makes more sense than real life."

"Okay..."

"And maybe I just appreciate a good tea party with talking animals and guys in tailcoats."

"Right, 'cause that's totally normal."

"What is normal, anyway? Besides, sometimes life feels like a mad tea party, doesn't it? I mean, look at us."

"Fair point," I said. "But still—what's so great about hanging out with a bunch of weirdos? And that caterpillar guy? He was, like, perpetually stoned."

Andy shrugged. "It's just a break from reality, you know?"

"Yeah," I said. "We'd know a thing or two about that."

"Sometimes it's nice to drift away into a world where nothing makes sense. You can just... be yourself."

I glanced at him. His words made me realize these dreams weren't about escaping who I was. If anything, they were the only place where I felt like myself.

"So, you're saying you're basically Alice?"

"Please," he said, flashing me a wide grin. "I'm the Cheshire Cat. Obviously."

"Then who am I? The Mad Hatter?"

He shoved me lightly, laughing. "You're Alice. Just without the dress. You'd rip it, like the Hulk."

"Yeah, that's a plot twist I'm not ready for."

"Think about it, though," Andy said, his tone more serious now. "In Wonderland, you can redefine who you are."

"Or maybe you just want to see me in a dress."

"Hey, if you insist! But it better have lots of frills and be very short."

I rolled my eyes, but as we walked on in silence, the weight of real life crept back in. Andy must've noticed because his expression softened.

"You okay?" he asked. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push the dress thing so hard."

I snorted. "It's not that."

"You look tired. I can practically hear your brain overworking."

Part of me wanted to keep the dream light and playful, despite the surroundings, but the words sat heavy on my tongue, pressing against my teeth, waiting.

So I let them out. I told him everything.

Andy didn't interrupt, not once. When I was done, he stared at me with wide eyes. "Holy shit," he whispered. "That's... a lot."

"Yeah," I said, letting out a bitter laugh. "Like a fucking domino of shit."

He laughed softly, gently cupping my cheeks in his hands. "I'm sorry," he said before kissing me. Lightly, at first, but enough to make the weight of everything fade away, even if only for a while.

We kissed for longer than made sense, given the creepy forest circumstances. When we finally broke apart, I felt much lighter.

"You know," I said as we started to walk again, my footsteps less heavy. The path still led nowhere, the surroundings unchanged, but it didn't bother me anymore. "I'm glad we have this place. Not the spider forest, obviously, but... these shared dreams. You were right. It's an escape. And I needed it."

"I needed it too," He admitted and hesitated before asking, "Will you... try to find your biological father?"

*No, Andy. You are the only person I want to find. I don't care about some old jerk who didn't want me in the first place.*

“I don’t give a shit about him. He bailed before I even showed up and didn’t care. So yeah—fuck him.”

Andy’s fingers skimmed mine, barely, like he wasn’t sure he was allowed. “I care about you,” he said.

“I know.” I turned to him. “I care about you, too. Like, a lot.”

He smiled, small and crooked. “Yeah. I know.”

## IT MATTERS WHERE YOU ARE



On Saturday, I was alone until early afternoon. Marcus was working part-time at some indie music newspaper, earning an advanced degree in stapling, fetching lattes, and doing whatever crap no one else wanted to do. Dad had offered to cover his living expenses, but Marcus had refused, determined to make it on his own, of course. Classic Marcus.

I tried to kill time by hanging out with a few of his friends in the common room. They were all draped over furniture like roadkill, nursing hangers, and arguing about some band I'd never heard of. I half-listened, played a few lazy rounds of pool out of boredom, but I couldn't focus. It felt like my whole body was buzzing.

Eventually, I gave up and headed outside. I wandered down to the lake and sat for a while, watching the waves lap against the shore. I tried to zone

out, to let the sound of water do that meditative thing people are always talking about. But no luck. My head wouldn't shut up.

The anticipation was eating me alive.

I kept checking the time. Over and over.

The meeting later that day couldn't come soon enough.

By the time two p.m. rolled around, my heart was pounding like it wanted out of my chest. Marcus told me to meet him in front of a student café he swore had the best cream cheese bagels in the world. Cutting across the quad, I weaved past students lounging on the grass and laughing in groups. Everything around me felt blurry and distant, as if I was watching life happen to someone else.

When I saw Marcus approaching, I started bouncing nervously on the balls of my feet, feeling like he was walking in slow motion just to annoy me.

"Yo, calm down," he laughed, clapping me on the shoulder. "How was your day?"

"Fine. Where's your friend?" I asked as I scanned the area.

He held the door open. "She'll be here, don't worry."

I stepped in, resisting the urge to ask again. The café was much bigger than the ones I was used to back home. It had an open first floor with high ceilings, and the air was rich with the smell of fresh coffee. A few students sat scattered around, some hunched over open textbooks, others typed away on their iBooks.

"Grab a table, I'll get us something. You're definitely trying the bagels," Marcus said, already eyeing the menu.

I headed to a table in the back where I could keep an eye on the door. I dropped into a chair and grabbed the ketchup bottle, flipping it in my hands while my leg bounced like it had a mind of its own. My other hand kept rolling Andy's pendant between my fingers.

"Jesus, Max, you're gonna flip the table." Marcus slid a plate of bagels across to me as he sat down, blocking my view of the door. I scooted my chair to the side to keep the entrance in sight.

We finished the bagels, and Marcus had downed his coffee by the time his friend was officially late. He kept glancing over his shoulder, checking the door, but stayed relaxed, chatting about his job. I wasn't listening. My eyes were glued to the entrance.

I was just about to ask if his friend was even coming when my heart slammed to a stop.

A guy with black hair tied in a loose half-bun stepped up to the counter, sliding a few bills toward the barista. His fingers drummed lazily against the surface as he shifted his weight onto one leg, casual and unhurried.

He turned, stepping out from behind the espresso machine—  
Not him.

For a second, I thought I was about to have a heart attack.

"Hey, you okay?" Marcus asked.

"What? Yeah—"

"Hi! Sorry, I'm late!" a voice interrupted as someone pulled out a chair with a loud squeak.

We both turned to see a short girl with sleek, dark hair that almost reached her hips, wearing an oversized denim jacket. She was catching her breath like she'd just sprinted across campus.

*Jesus, finally.*

"Oh, hey, Tiffany!" Marcus said as she fumbled with her bag, trying to get settled. "We were just catching up with Max."

She turned to me and extended her hand. "Hey, Max! I'm Tiffany. Nice to finally meet you. Marcus talks about you all the time."

I shook her hand, giving Marcus a questioning look. "Really?"

"Yeah! He mentioned you guys don't get to hang out as much as he'd like. That sucks. I try to see my little brother at least once a week so he doesn't forget what I look like," she laughed, oblivious to the tension between us.

Marcus played with the crumbs on his plate, avoiding my eyes.

“Anyway,” Tiffany continued. “Professor Singh stopped me on the way here, and I couldn’t get him to stop talking. So, sorry again for being late. But, about the thing you needed, Marcus—”

“Do you know Andrew Lee?” Small talk wasn’t doing it for me. Not when I was this close.

Tiffany blinked. “Um... no, not personally. My little brother used to take kung fu classes with him when they were kids, but they weren’t, like, close or anything. Just in the same class. And my mom knows someone who knows his dad, so when all that stuff happened, it was all she talked about.”

I stared at her like she’d just told me the guy from my dreams had lived next door this whole time. Because, apparently... he had? I couldn’t believe the connection between me and Andy somehow ran through Marcus, his friend, and her brother. I thought we were total strangers...

“Wait, what stuff?” I asked. The knot in my stomach had turned into a full-on tangle.

“Um... what is this about exactly?” Tiffany looked between us. “Are you guys friends with him or something? Marcus didn’t really say.”

“I don’t know much either,” Marcus muttered.

“Does it matter? Just tell me what happened,” I said. I probably sounded a little unhinged, but I didn’t care.

She shifted in her seat, glancing toward the counter. “Can I get a coffee first? I’m running on fumes here.”

“I’ll get it,” Marcus offered quickly and slipped away.

Tiffany glanced after him before turning to me. Her fingers fidgeted with the edge of the table.

I leaned in as soon as he was gone. “Please,” I said. “Just tell me.”

“Um...” She hesitated, stealing another glance toward where Marcus had disappeared. I could feel the tension in her shoulders, like she wasn’t sure how much of this she wanted to share. “Okay... So, three years ago, there was this *huge* drama in the Chinese-American community. Everyone was talking about it. You know how it is—when something happens to someone



in the community, news spreads fast. And since my brother knew this boy, it felt like it was happening to us too. I know—stupid.”

I stared at her, hypnotized. I didn’t even notice when Marcus came back.

“Anyway,” she continued, “it turned out to be this really serious bullying case. The boys involved got expelled and sent to juvie, so at least the police took it seriously. They didn’t brush it off like they usually do with hate crimes. Those kids used to pick on my brother too, so...”

“Wait, wait.” I shook my head. “This doesn’t make sense. What bullying? What boys? What happened exactly, and what does this have to do with Andy? Did he—did he hurt someone?”

“What? No!” She said quickly, “Just—hang on.” She dug through her bag before pulling out a folded sheet and passing it to me. “I found this old article. Maybe it’s easier if you just read—”

I snatched the paper from her hand.

“Max!” Marcus said sharply. I ignored him, my eyes glued to the paper as I opened it. A moment later, Marcus sighed and sat next to me, leaning in to read over my shoulder.

***Girl nearly drowns in alleged racially motivated attack at Oakwood Beach, 3 teens detained***

*July 25, 1996*

*An incident at Oakwood Beach involving siblings of mixed Chinese descent has raised serious concerns about racial bullying and public safety.*

*Three teenage boys were allegedly harassing the 13-year-old boy on Friday afternoon near the shoreline, taunting and physically intimidating him. The situation escalated when the younger child, a 10-year-old girl, was pushed into the lake and nearly drowned before a nearby adult intervened and pulled her from the water. She was taken to the hospital, and*

*while her condition has not been officially disclosed, family members have described it as “serious.”*

*All three suspects were later detained and are currently under investigation. Formal charges have not yet been filed, and their identities have not been released due to their ages.*

*Prosecutors noted a troubling lack of response from bystanders during the attack, prompting renewed calls for intervention, education, and community accountability. “Where were the parents?” asked Grace Wang, a community organizer with the Chinese-American Civic Council, during a town meeting held days after the incident...*

I couldn't process the rest of the article. The words blurred on the page. *Drowning? Sister? Andy was an only child...*

“What does any of this have to do with Andy?” I asked, looking up at Tiffany.

“I told you. My mom knows someone—”

“But his name isn't even in here! It could be about someone else!”

“Max.” Marcus grabbed my wrist. “You can't put names in the media for cases like this. Not when minors are involved.”

I yanked my hand free, glaring at him. “It doesn't mean it's him.” My thoughts raced, scrambling for any explanation that didn't involve Andy.

“My mom's a huge gossip,” Tiffany said defensively, as if that explained everything. “She said that after this, his parents started homeschooling him. And my brother told me he never returned to kung fu classes either.”

She rummaged in her bag and pulled out another folded newspaper page. “I also brought this. It's about the kung fu club—they made a photo of all the kids in my brother's group, and there's Andrew Lee next to him. Their names are even listed under the photo.”

I looked down. A group of boys in kung fu uniforms, about eight or nine, smiling at the camera. Tiffany pointed at one of them.

I knew those eyes. I knew this smile... but it didn't make any sense.

"But Andy doesn't have a sister," I insisted, shaking my head. None of this added up. It just couldn't be him.

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Um... I mean... I just thought... Marcus mentioned some things, and it kinda fit.... Is it possible he lied to you? Anyway, how do you even know him? I heard he's in a mental health center now."

"...What?" I heard myself say. "You mean, like... for psychos?"

She glanced nervously at Marcus. "No, not like that. It's a private hospital."

"It's not the same thing, Max," Marcus said quickly. "And it doesn't mean he's—"

But I wasn't listening anymore. My mind was already out of my control, thoughts spinning, colliding into one another, faster than I could catch them.

A hospital? For mental health?

Was that why Andy was always so guarded, why he dodged questions about where he lived?

Was he sick? Crazy? Did it have something to do with his scars?

Or was *I* the one losing my mind? Was *he* somehow pulling me into these dreams?

He didn't have a sister.

He *told* me he was an only child.

So... why lie?

Unless...

Maybe it wasn't a lie.

The room felt like it was shrinking.

"I need some air," I gasped, standing abruptly.

I barely heard Marcus say my name as I shoved my way past tables. My shoulder hit a waitress carrying Tiffany's coffee, the tray wobbling dangerously, but I didn't stop to see if anything spilled. My vision tunneled, and all I could think about was getting out.

I pushed the door open and stumbled outside. I crouched in front of the café wall, breathing shallowly. People passing by gave me odd looks, but my head was spinning too fast for me to care.

A moment later, Marcus rushed outside, his eyes scanning the sidewalk until they landed on me. He crouched beside me.

“Will you finally tell me what’s going on, Max? Who is this guy to you?”

I closed my eyes, trying to breathe past the noise in my head. Then I looked at him. “I need to find him, Marcus,” I said. “Why wouldn’t he tell me? Why lie about having a sister? I thought he trusted me.”

Marcus sighed, his face softening. “Max... sometimes people don’t share things because they’re scared or ashamed. It doesn’t mean they don’t trust you.”

“Why would he even be in a mental hospital?!” I wiped my face. “Can you help me find him? It’s really important. If he’s in a mental hospital, I need to see him.”

“Max, we don’t even know for sure where he is. And no hospital is going to hand out this kind of information.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

Before Marcus could answer, Tiffany stepped outside, looking uneasy. “I’m sorry, Max,” she said. “I wish I had better news.”

“It’s not your fault,” I muttered.

“Thanks, Tiffany,” Marcus nodded at her.

She crouched beside us. “But... if it helps, I think I know which facility he’s in.”

My head shot up. “You do?!”

“Yeah,” she said. “I told you—my mom loves to gossip.”

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After Tiffany gave us the name of the place where Andy might be, my first instinct was to bolt. Kick down some doors. Go full SWAT. But Marcus

said I was acting on pure emotion and needed to chill. He promised we'd go tomorrow. Together.

I was grateful that he was helping, but all I could think about was how every second we waited felt wasted. Like if I didn't act right now, the Earth would explode, and it'd be my fault.

For the rest of the day, my thoughts kept looping back to Andy being in a mental facility. Even if it was all true—if he really had been locked up somewhere—it didn't matter. It didn't change how I felt about him. There was still no one else on this planet I'd rather be with. Andy was so... normal. He had weird interests and out-there opinions, but they don't lock people up for liking obscure art or strange, campy musicians.

But even with all the relentless optimism I was force-feeding myself like it was some emotional kale smoothie, the stupid voice in my head wouldn't shut up. It kept whispering that I was being naive. Blind. That something had to be wrong with him. And of course, my brain ran wild with it and started conjuring him trapped in some bleak, padded room, behind walls with no doorknobs, or wandering some sterile hallway in a paper gown or a straitjacket.

Trying to calm me down, Marcus asked if I wanted to check out a museum or two, to as well see something while I was in Chicago. But just hearing the word "museum" made me want to throw something. Being in one would've made it worse. Every painting, every hallway would've just sent me spiraling back to Andy. I'd turn into a full-blown tornado Max—nervous, twitchy, way too hopeful, and not in a good way. So I shot him a look that said I'd rather be buried alive. "I shouldn't be doing this," he said, "but I think you need a drink."

We ended up at some loud bar where people kept shoulder-bumping into me and spilling beer down my back. The place reeked of sweat and regret, and I lasted fifteen minutes before telling Marcus I was out. He didn't argue. We picked a spot closer to his place—a dimly lit dive bar that wasn't trying so hard to be cool. Marcus finally gave up pretending to be the responsible

older sibling, and let's just say that not looking like a total teenager worked in my favor.

It wasn't long until the shots started kicking in. The alcohol loosened some knot inside me, and before I knew it, I was spilling everything. Or at least the version of "everything" I was willing to say out loud because there was no way I could explain the dreams to Marcus. He'd never buy it. Naya and Mikey kind of did, but even with them, I wasn't sure. Maybe they just nodded and smiled because that's what good friends do when you start sounding like you've lost it. I mean, come on—who wouldn't think I was losing it?

So, I stuck to the half-truth I'd practiced already: I'd met Andy online.

I told him how we talked every day, how Andy was smart, funny, and strange in the best way. And how, somewhere along the way, I realized I liked him. Like, actually liked him. And yeah, it messed with my head. I'd never felt this way about a guy before. I told him I needed to find him because no one else had ever made me feel the way Andy did. And maybe that sounded cheesy, but it was true. Marcus, predictably, threw out the "what if he's some forty-five-year-old creep in a basement?" theory. I rolled my eyes and lied that we'd already talked on the phone, and he didn't exactly sound like a pervy fat dude breathing through a tube of Pringles. I admitted—quietly—that maybe I was bi. I just didn't want to slap a label on myself and become *that bi guy*, you know? Especially not after already being *the guy that girls liked just 'cause he was tall*. Though, to be fair, this new label would at least be much shorter. Besides, I wasn't even sure who I was yet. I was still figuring it out.

When I finished, I breathed out and shoved my hands under the table, trying not to fidget.

"So that makes Andy your boyfriend?" Marcus asked, leaning forward with a shit-eating grin.

I scowled at him. It was weird to even think about having a boyfriend as a guy. But on the other hand, Andy never felt weird or wrong, so... "We ha-

ven't really discussed it," I went for the safer answer. And thank god we haven't, because I didn't even know what to call what we were.

Marcus's grin widened as he leaned back like he'd just won some secret bet. "You know. I kinda had my suspicions."

"About what?"

"About you." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Remember when you were obsessed with *Teen Titans*? Especially Nightwing and Starfire."

"Yeah, and?"

"Well, I saw the way you got all weird and red in the face every time either of them showed up—didn't even matter who it was. C'mon—Starfire flying around in basically a bikini? Nightwing in that tight disco suit? They're both hot. Admit it."

I felt the heat creeping up my nape. "What?! They are not... I don't—" I crossed my arms. "Shut up."

"I bet the pages where they're kissing are stuck together—"

"Oh my god, stop!" My eyes nearly bulged out of my skull. "What the fuck, Marcus?!"

"The girls at your school must be devastated. The competition just got bigger."

"No one knows except you, Mikey, and Naya. And I still like girls."

"You don't have to keep defending yourself. It's not a courtroom."

"I don't want people calling me gay when I'm not."

Marcus shrugged. "Why do you care what people call you? Everyone's got their own crap to deal with. No one's keeping tabs on you."

"Easy for you to say," I muttered.

Instead of arguing, Marcus turned to the guy sitting behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

The guy turned around, annoyed. "What?"

"Hey, I'm gay," Marcus said, much to my horror.

The guy blinked, gave him a baffled look, then scoffed. "Good for you, man. Now fuck off," he said and turned back to his drink.

“See?” Marcus smirked. “Nobody cares.”

“He could’ve punched you!”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Maybe don’t try that on drunk people.”

He burst out laughing—one of those contagious laughs that made everything feel normal again, just for a second.

But the weight of Andy’s situation was too heavy for a joke to carry. The past few days had been a marathon of bad news: first my parents, then Marcus with the letters, and now Andy. And sure, I finally had the name of the place he might be, which should’ve felt like hope.

But instead, it just messed me up even more.

Because yeah, maybe I was getting closer.

But apparently, he was in a mental hospital.

And I had no idea what that meant.

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I swallowed the pill. I knew it was like putting a bandage on a bullet wound, but right now, it was all I had. The alcohol blurred the world around me, but the thoughts I tried to suppress still managed to break through, relentless and insistent.

Downstairs, laughter and yelling melted into a distant hum, and I began sinking into the mattress. My limbs grew heavier, while my head floated, as if it were rising away from my body. And just before sleep took me, one last strange thought crossed my mind: there was nowhere I’d rather be than in that dark, obscure forest.

But instead of trees closing in around me, there were white walls, a hard floor, and a ceiling. I found myself in a long, sterile corridor lined with doors, most of them slightly ajar, each one leading into a pitch-black void. Few stood out—chained shut with heavy, rusted chains crisscrossing over them, held fast by massive industrial padlocks. Flickering blue lights cast an unset-



ting glow over everything, and a creeping sense of dread whispered that whatever was locked behind those doors wasn't meant to be seen.

Ahead, a small figure sat slumped against the wall, head bowed.

"Andy?" My voice broke through the dense silence.

No reaction.

I started moving toward him, but no matter how far I walked, he stayed just as distant. My pulse quickened as the creaking doors tugged at the edges of my vision, like they were waiting for me to stumble in.

"Andy!" I called again.

He didn't move.

I tried to run, but my legs wouldn't follow my intentions; every step dragged like I was wading through water.

"Why didn't you tell me?!" I choked out.

Slowly, Andy lifted his head just enough for me to catch a glimpse of his face. His expression was blank, his eyes staring past me. He didn't speak, didn't react at all. It was like he was somewhere else entirely.

I reached out, trying to close the distance between us, but the doors beside me slammed shut, one after another, like a warning. The walk was endless, and each step I took made the ache in my chest deepen with the realization that I couldn't reach him, couldn't change what had happened.

Andy stood up, looked me directly in the eyes for a split second, and walked away, disappearing into one of the rooms. The door swung shut behind him with a final, resounding click.

"Wait!" The dream finally let me sprint the rest of the way. I reached the door, tugging its handle, but it wouldn't budge. I pounded on it, the sound of my fists echoing dully in the hollow silence of the corridor.

I slid to my knees and pressed my forehead to the door. "Andy?"

"Go away," came a muffled voice from the other side. It was close enough for me to know Andy had to be sitting right there. I couldn't see him, but I could feel his presence.

My heart sped up just at the sound of his voice. I pressed my open palm against the door. “C’mon, Andy. Open the door.”

“I can’t,” he sobbed.

“What do you mean you can’t?” I yanked at the handle, almost wrenching it off its hinges, but the door wouldn’t open. “Andy?!”

The light above began to stutter, and the walls seemed to start breathing, swelling and contracting with a slow, ominous rhythm. The air became colder.

Faint, distorted whispers seeped from the rooms. The chains on the shut doors began to rattle, the metallic clatter growing louder, like something inside was straining to break free. Shadows began to slip from under the doors, stretching toward me with long, jagged fingers.

“Andy, please,” I groaned. “Let me in.”

Doors slammed open and shut, the whole corridor shaking like a rabid animal snapping its jaws.

I lowered my head in resignation, but one of the shadows lunged forward and grabbed my ankle. An icy chill crawled up my leg, and I clutched the door handle as the shadows gathered around me, latching onto my legs and arms.

They yanked, trying to drag me backward. I held onto the handle with everything I had, my fingers slipping as their grip tightened around my legs.

“Andy—”

I woke with a violent jolt. The bitter taste of something weird clung to my tongue, and I could still feel the ghostly imprint of Andy’s hand pressed against mine.

He’d been right there. I swear he had.

## ANDY'S SONG



I woke Marcus at seven-thirty a.m., and he looked about ready to murder me. He groaned something that definitely sounded like a curse before dragging himself out of bed and forcing me to eat cereal, despite all my protests. I wasn't hungry at all, and while he was still working through his first few bites, I was already outside, pacing and fidgeting like a kid waiting in line for a slide. I knew I was being a brat, but patience had never exactly been my thing.

Marcus finally emerged, looking only halfway awake, tugging on a hoodie. "You're going to burn a hole in the sidewalk."

"Hurry up, we're wasting time!"

A short ride later—a.k.a. the longest, most torturous ride of my entire existence—we finally got off at the right station, and from there, started walking in silence. I was too wound up to talk, and Marcus knew better than to

push. The city was still waking up: shopkeepers flipping signs, buses and delivery trucks grumbling past, some guy half-sprinting with a coffee cup in his hand. It was that in-between time where everything feels like it could go either way. Normal morning or complete disaster.

We passed a row of small storefronts when something in a display window caught my eye—so quick and so specific it made my heart jump. Without a word, I stepped inside.

When I came out a few minutes later, I was carrying a small paper bag.

“What’s that?” Marcus asked.

I opened it slightly so he could peek inside.

“You changing your style?”

I closed the bag before he could ask more questions. “It’s not for me.”

“Oh, okay.” He shrugged, the smirk softening into something more thoughtful, but he didn’t press me further.

The mental health hospital sat away from the busy streets, not quite in the heart of the city, but close enough that it didn’t feel cut off from the world. The hum of traffic mixed with the sight of city buses pulling in and out of nearby stops. It seemed almost too ordinary for a place holding so many of Andy’s secrets. This must have been part of the city he always avoided when we wandered through the abandoned version of Chicago in the dreams. A five-story brick building blended into the cityscape, indistinguishable from an old office complex. If not for the sign out front, you’d easily mistake it for a standard commercial building, with its neat rows of windows and plain, functional entrance.

When we stepped inside, it wasn’t the creepy, Arkham Asylum vibe I’d been bracing for. There were no long, white corridors with sharp, clinical lights, nurses in starched uniforms, or screams coming from every room. Just a peach-toned lobby with scuffed walls and chairs looking like they’d seen better days. Only the faint scent of antiseptic lingered in the air, reminding you that this was a place for fixing things. Broken bodies. Broken minds.

I didn't know if I was more relieved or more scared. Andy was in a relatively decent place, though, could any place messing with your head be considered "decent"? Decent for a mental institution, maybe.

"Come on," Marcus said, gesturing toward the reception desk. He'd told me earlier not to get my hopes up, that Andy might not even be there, or that they might not let us see him. But I didn't listen. I was clinging to whatever hope I had left.

"This isn't what I expected."

"I told you, these private places are fine." Marcus nodded toward the corridor. "They try to make people feel like they're more on vacation in a hotel than in a hospital here."

"Yeah, maybe," I muttered, but I couldn't picture a mental institution as a vacation spot.

Even though it was still early and a Sunday, a few people were already sitting together in the hallway. They occupied tables and chairs in what looked like a visitor's area, talking in hushed voices. None of them were drooling or acting like they needed straitjackets. None of them looked how I thought they would. Just people. Talking, waiting, like this could be any clinic.

I tried to imagine Andy sitting there, chatting with his parents and sister. Or whatever version of them existed in this world...

We approached the reception desk, where an older woman sat hunched over a computer, her fingers tapping at the keys. She didn't bother to look up when we stopped in front of her. I shifted on my feet, waiting for her to notice us, but she stayed glued to her screen.

"Um... hello," I said, trying not to sound too nervous. "We're here to see Andrew Lee."

I couldn't believe I'd just said that.

"Are you relatives?" she asked, still not looking away from the monitor.

"N—"

"Yes, we're his cousins." I cut Marcus off.

That finally made her look up, giving us a skeptical once-over. “Cousins? What’s your last name?”

“Lee,” I said quickly.

Her eyebrow shot up, and she looked between the two of us. “Sorry, boys, but I can’t let you in unless you’re immediate family.”

“We *are* his *cousins*.” I leaned over the counter. “You want a blood test? Just let us see him!”

Marcus stepped on my foot. I shot him a glare, but he didn’t even look at me.

“Sweetheart, this isn’t my first day on the job,” she said. “Do you have a passcode?”

“Passcode?” I repeated, my heart sinking.

“Please contact the family first if you want to be acknowledged for visits.” She pushed herself away from the desk, rolled toward another workstation, and started shuffling through some papers, clearly done with us.

“I’m sorry, Max,” Marcus muttered, patting my shoulder. “We should go.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. *No, no, no*. We were so close. I couldn’t just give up. If she hadn’t flat-out denied us, that had to mean Andy was here.

“Distract her,” I whispered to him.

“What? Max, no.”

“Please. You owe me this.”

He opened his mouth, but I shot him a look that shut him up. With a heavy sigh, he turned toward the receptionist.

“Excuse me? Ma’am?”

She glanced back. “Yes?”

“I was wondering... do you have any brochures or something? For family members?” He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to look sheepish. “Our mom’s been struggling a lot, and the doctors think she might need a place

like this, but she's freaking out at the idea. If we could show her what it's really like here, it might help."

She narrowed her eyes slightly, still watching him like she hadn't quite decided if he was for real. For a second, I thought it wasn't going to work.

Finally, she sighed—long, tired, and a little exasperated—but something in her expression softened just enough.

"Fine. I think we've got a packet somewhere..." She stood up and scanned the counter. "Might be back in the common room. Let me show you, sugar."

She stepped out from behind the desk, looped her arm through Marcus's, and reached for mine, too.

"Um, I'll wait," I mumbled, stepping back. "I... don't like talking about our mom."

Well, that at least wasn't a lie.

She nodded sympathetically. "Alright, sweetheart."

As they disappeared down the hall, Marcus threw me a quick don't get caught look.

I didn't waste a second.

I slipped behind the desk and dropped into the chair, my pulse hammering so hard my ribs were vibrating. My hands hovered over the mouse. This was insane. What the hell was I doing? What if this wasn't Andy's hospital after all? What if I'd just made it all up, connected dots that didn't even belong together because I needed it to mean something?

But I couldn't back down now.

The desktop was simple, with only a few visible folders. Acting purely on instinct, I clicked through them until I found something that looked like a patient database. My fingers hovered over the keyboard for a second before typing in Andy's full name. Anxiety coiled tight in my gut as the screen loaded.

And then, there it was. Just like that: Andrew Xun Lee, 02-13-1982, Room 305.

I stared at the screen, hypnotized. I kept reading the name, the room number, over and over, unable to believe they were really there. I wanted to laugh. Or cry. Or throw up.

*How...?*

*It had to be him. Right?*

A mix of relief and shock crashed over me at once. It didn't feel real. Like I'd glitched into someone else's story, one where things actually worked out.

I couldn't process what I was seeing, let alone what to do next when the front door opened, and I snapped out of my daze, quickly clicking to close all the windows. Only at the last second did I notice a list of notes next to Andy's name: medical conditions, disorders...

I ducked behind the desk, holding my breath as someone walked past. When the footsteps faded, I peeked around and scrambled to my feet. Half-crouching behind the counter, I slipped into the hallway and headed straight for the stairs, whispering the number to myself like a mantra.

"Three-oh-five. Three-oh-five. Three-oh-five..."

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Soft voices drifted from half-open doors, and a nearby radio murmured low somewhere down the hall, filling the third floor with this weird kind of hushed quiet. A few rooms were closed, while others were partially open, and I caught glimpses of patients sitting quietly or chatting with one another. No screaming, crying, or anything dramatic. The unsettling orderliness made it seem like a sanitized version of a college dorm or motel, with the difference only becoming clear if you looked too closely. A few kids were hanging around in the hallway, and they looked up when I passed, but nothing aggressive, just curious. Most were dressed in sweatpants and baggy T-shirts or sweaters, like they could've come straight from a lazy weekend at home. At first glance, they all looked like regular teenagers. A couple even younger.



Still, something underneath it all made it obvious it was all just an imitation of real life, and if you stood still long enough, you'd start noticing the seams.

I stopped in front of room 305. The number stared back at me, pinning me in place.

*Should I knock?* My knuckles hovered just inches from the wood, shaking.

It all felt too easy. Too perfectly lined up, like the universe had just decided to hand me what I'd been chasing for months. I hadn't even tried that hard—and somehow, here he was. The odds of it happening by chance were microscopic. Which only made it worse. Things like this didn't just *work out*. So yeah, maybe it was fate... or maybe it was just the calm before everything went straight to hell.

"Just do it," I muttered to myself. But my hand wouldn't move.

I forced it. Knocked. Light, too light. I knocked again, harder this time. I had to remind myself to breathe.

A muffled voice called out from inside. "Come in."

*Is that...?*

I took another deep breath, but it didn't help. My hand trembled as I pressed down on the handle and pushed the door open.

For a split second, I thought my brain was playing a cruel trick on me.

Andy was sitting on the bed in black joggers and a loose sweatshirt, a book resting in his lap. His fingers were still curled loosely around the cover, like he'd just stopped mid-sentence.

I couldn't believe it.

He was right here. Not just in my head. Not just a figment of sleep.

I had pictured this moment a thousand times, imagined running into his arms, him smiling, laughing, eyes bright with recognition. But when he lifted his head, a strange feeling passed through me.

It wasn't him. It wasn't *my* Andy. Not the one who filled every corner of my mind, who lit up my dreams with that sharp, effortless energy.

This Andy... wasn't *glowing*. His dark eyes—usually so fierce, so full of something I could never quite name—were flat and hollow, like the light had

been snuffed out. The magnetism that had always pulled me toward him had vanished, replaced by slouched shoulders and a tired curve, as if he wanted to disappear into himself. He looked older somehow, more like Andy from the mirror. The one who never spoke. The one I couldn't reach. The one exhausted with the whole world.

He stared straight at me, like he couldn't believe I was real either.

Slowly, he set the book aside, his eyes never leaving mine. He didn't mark the page. Didn't move. Just stared.

"How—what... what are you doing here?"

I tried to smile, but it came out shaky.

"...Hi." It was all I could manage.

Andy blinked. "I'm dreaming..." His voice wavered. "I must've fallen asleep again."

"No, Andy. Not this time." I tried to smile again, but it felt awkward and too weak to make this less weird.

His eyes searched mine, as if trying to find something familiar in this bizarre reality. Something that didn't even make sense to me. How could it? Meeting here after sharing dreams was purely abstract.

"How's this possible?"

"I don't know. But it's really me." I stepped inside and shut the door softly behind me.

He kept *staring*.

I thought he'd be happy. Or at least relieved. But his expression hadn't changed to anything slightly positive. I told myself it was the shock. It had to be.

The room was small and kind of sad. Just a bed, closet, shelf, and a desk shoved under the window. The walls were the same washed-out peachy color as the rest of the place. There wasn't much in the way of decorations, just a single black-and-white photograph above the bed showing some statue, a solemn face with a strange wing-like shape curling from the side of its head. No Bowie, no Radiohead, no horror movie posters. Not even anything weird

and whimsical, like that Disney *Alice in Wonderland* he liked. Just one moody photo that looked like it belonged in a cemetery.

But the standout was the books. They were everywhere. Lined up on the desk, packed tight on the shelf, a few stacked neatly on the floor like he was mid-reorganizing or just couldn't stop adding more. I didn't think they'd let someone keep this much stuff in a mental hospital, but maybe they figured books were better than whatever else he might be hoarding in his head. This must be how he escaped—how he reached beyond these walls.

And now, here I was, reaching back.

A familiar stack caught my eye—*The Sandman* comics.

"You read these?" I asked, surprised. Somehow, it landed warm and comforting in my chest.

But instead of smiling, Andy's shoulders dropped even further. "Why did you come here?"

"I... I had to," I said, gripping the paper bag tighter. The hope I'd clung to for weeks started to fade, minute by minute. "I needed to see you."

"How did you even—how did they let you in?"

"They didn't exactly... let me in."

Finally—*finally*—he moved. Ran a hand through his hair, tugging at the loose strands like he wanted to pull the whole situation out of his head.

"You're insane," he muttered. For a brief moment, I saw Andy from my dreams. The one who teased me all the time, the one who always knew what to say. But it was gone just as fast. "You could've gotten in trouble."

"I don't care."

"You shouldn't have come. I didn't want you to see me like this."

I clutched the bag against my leg, trying to hide how shaky my hands were. "I just wanted to find you. For real. Not in some dream."

"This is stupid. You don't get it."

"Then explain it to me." I took a step closer. "I'm here, Andy. I'm not leaving."

He let out a hollow laugh. “You say that like you know what’s going on... How did you even find me? I told you not to look for me,” he muttered. His eyes flicked past mine, somewhere far away.

My chest tightened, but I pushed myself to keep going. “Just... luck, I guess,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. “But I know more than you think. Maybe not everything, but enough to be here.”

This wasn’t how I imagined it. Where was the smile? The jokes? There were no arms around me. Just this—Andy, a few feet away and still miles off.

I almost turned around. Almost told myself it was a mistake.

*Well, you really are an idiot for coming here, huh?*

But I wasn’t ready to let go.

“I got you something,” I blurted out before he had the chance to dismiss me again.

I held out the paper bag, hand still shaking slightly. I wanted to cross the room, to close the space between us. But he looked like one wrong move would send him disappearing back into himself. He shifted on the bed, swinging his legs over the edge and letting his bare feet touch the floor. He reached out slowly, almost cautiously, and as he took the bag, our fingers brushed, the brief touch sending a shiver down my entire body. Like my nerves were remembering something my brain hadn’t caught up to yet. It was barely anything. But I felt it everywhere.

He peered inside, his eyes widening, and I could swear I saw the corner of his lips twitch.

“You got me a leather jacket? This must’ve cost a fortune...”

I shrugged awkwardly. “You got me a gift, so I wanted to give you one too. When I saw it... it’s not exactly like the one in the dreams, and it’s secondhand, but...”

He pulled the jacket out of the bag, his hands moving slowly, almost reverently, over the worn leather. It was a classic biker cut with lapels, silver buckles, and zippers. Something lighter flickered in his eyes.

“Lost the old one fighting zombies, huh?” he said quietly, and it hit me right in the chest. The first trace of a joke, an echo of Andy I knew.

I smiled sincerely. “Yeah. Had to pry it off a corpse in the street.”

Andy let out the tiniest huff of a laugh. It wasn’t much, but it was real.

He slipped off his loose sweatshirt, and as he raised his arms, his shirt rode up a bit, revealing a sliver of his stomach. My face heated—*Jesus, seriously, Max?*—but the warmth vanished second later, replaced by a cold twist in my stomach.

He was too thin. Not lean like I’d known him in the dreams. His arms, once subtly muscular, were now more bone than strength. His collarbones stuck out sharply beneath his skin, making him look... wrong. You couldn’t tell me this was the same guy who knew kung fu and kicked zombie ass without breaking a sweat.

And the scars.

I didn’t need to ask about them. I already knew the answer.

Around his neck rested the other half of the necklace he’d given me. The yin to my yang. Seeing him wear it in real life made it feel like we weren’t so far apart, like some part of our connection was still real right here.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Andy slipped his arms into the sleeves. It hung a little loose on his frame.

“Why are you here, Andy?” I asked. The words had been clawing their way out of me since I found out the truth.

He looked up, eyes tired, and said like it was the most normal thing in the world: “I don’t know how to be happy.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “In a nutshell...”

His fingers moved slowly over the leather. “Thank you,” he said. “I love it.”

He looked good. Even like this. Too good, really.

“Can you leave this place?” I asked, my voice stumbling. “I mean, I don’t know how it works, but... you sent me the postcard...”

“It’s not a prison, Max. I can leave if I want. I ask the staff for favors sometimes. They’re not monsters.”

Andy fiddled with the jacket’s sleeves, tugging the cuffs over his fingers. A heavy silence settled between us.

“I saw what they wrote in the paper,” I finally said.

He froze. Not flinched—not blinked—just full stop.

“About the beach,” I went on anyway. “About what happened. And... your sister.”

He just sat there, stiff and staring down at his hands like they weren’t his.

“Oh,” was all he said.

I sat down on the bed next to him, but not too close, fighting the urge to reach out and touch him.

“Why didn’t you tell me about her?” I asked. “You told me you were an only child.”

“I didn’t—” He exhaled slowly. “It’s because of the dreams. They help me. They block stuff away.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just... in the dreams, I don’t have to think about it all the time. In the dreams, there’s nothing inside me tearing me apart. Sometimes, I don’t remember things—things I don’t want to remember. It might’ve looked like I was hiding something on purpose, but in the dreams... sometimes I know there’s something, but I can’t get to it. You know how, when you wake up, and for a moment you don’t remember anything? Just for a second, your head is completely blank?”

I nodded slowly, unable to tear my eyes away from him.

“That’s how the dreams feel for me. You have no idea how peaceful that is. In reality, it’s just... too loud.”

I knew the feeling way too well.

“But other times I do remember,” Andy said. “Just for a second. And yeah, sometimes I lied. I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to think I was messed up... or stop liking me.”

“Andy,” I said, shifting closer. “Even with all this shit, you’re still the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

He gave me a sad smile, his eyes fixed on the jacket’s sleeves. “I look better in the dreams.”

“You look great either way.”

He finally looked up, his eyes searching mine with a mix of sadness and disbelief, like he wanted to believe me but was unsure how. I hoped my face was an open book because I didn’t know how else to convince him.

He nodded once, like he was letting the words sink in, even if he couldn’t fully accept them.

“I can’t believe you are actually here,” he whispered.

“Me neither...”

Andy leaned in, just slightly, and I mirrored him without even thinking. Something invisible was pulling us closer. His exhale skimmed my cheek, sharp and electric, like lightning under my skin—

“Medicine time, open the doors, guys!” came a call from the hallway.

Andy flinched, his head snapping toward the door. “Shit—Hide!”

“What—?”

He was already on his feet, yanking me off the bed and dragging me toward the closet.

“Just get in,” he hissed, practically shoving me inside.

The doors clicked shut, sealing me in darkness. I bumped into hangers, and crouched awkwardly, trying to fit. It smelled like him in here. Faint traces of worn cotton, fabric softener, and something distinctly Andy underneath it all. Without thinking, I grabbed the first piece of clothing within reach and, feeling like a total creep, pressed it to my face, breathing in like it was fresh air after being underwater for too long.

I heard the door to his room open, followed by a nurse’s calm and routine voice. “Time for meds.”

“Okay,” Andy replied, his tone casual, like there wasn’t a guy hiding in his closet.

“You’ve got a nice jacket.”

“Thanks.”

The door clicked shut, and a few seconds later, the closet doors opened. The moment Andy’s face appeared, I grabbed his wrist and pulled him inside, his breath hitching in surprise.

A few hangers clattered to the floor, but Andy shoved them aside and pulled the door shut behind him. He settled across from me, legs crossed, his knees brushing mine. We sat in the dark, but I didn’t need light to see his face. Every detail was already etched into my brain. Every mole, every imperfection, even his eyebrows—one always a little higher than the other.

“I still can’t believe you are actually here,” he whispered.

I found his hands in the dark. They felt thin and fragile between mine.

“Last night... why did you hide? Why didn’t you open the door?”

“That place...the corridor. It reminded me of this. I had no idea you already knew.”

“I wish you’d told me. I could’ve helped.”

“You can’t help me,” he murmured, squeezing my hands.

“Then tell me everything. Everything you’re hiding, Andy—I want to know everything about you.”

“If I tell you... promise you won’t think differently of me? Promise you’ll still like me?”

“I promise.”

Andy was quiet for a moment, just playing with my fingers.

“Okay,” he finally said. “In elementary school, this new kid joined our class. Danny. He had this way of making everyone want to be around him. He formed this... *pack*, and everyone wanted to be his friend. They kissed his ass, and they started picking on everyone. But of course, when it came to me, they went for the Asian kid angle. Mocked my eyes, my name... the fact that I was in a kung fu club just gave them more ammo. Every time I walked by, they’d make those stupid martial arts noises. I fought back when I could,



but it was always me against all of them. And no one else wanted to get involved.”

“It wasn’t *that* bad at first,” he went on, a little faster now. “But when we moved to middle school, things got worse. In sixth grade, I... I had a crush on this boy. Josh. And he really wanted to be friends with Danny. And I guess he noticed me staring too much or whatever, so he told them I was gay.

“After that, it just... it never stopped. They made sure everyone knew. The jokes, the threats, the stuff they’d say in front of everyone. I begged my parents to transfer me, and they did, eventually. But we all lived in the same area, so I still saw them sometimes.” He let out a slow, trembling breath. “I think that’s when I got into books. Books felt like friends. As pathetic as it sounds.”

“It’s not pathetic at all,” I said quickly. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but even though I could hardly see him, he had his head bowed.

“Anyway... ninth grade rolled around. My younger sister, Phoebe—God, the name didn’t do her any favors. Kids at school used to call her ‘Pho’ like the soup, only because someone said her name wrong once and it stuck, and of course, they thought it was hilarious. She loved going to the beach. We both did. She’d play in the sand, and I’d read or listen to music. It was... our thing. One day, Danny and the others showed up. Josh was there too. They spotted us alone, off to the side. The beach was almost empty that day. They couldn’t resist. They started throwing sand at us, calling me names. And then... they told me to strip.”

“Jesus Christ, Andy...”

“Yeah... I thought maybe if I just did it—just got it over with—they’d stop. So... I stripped down to my underwear.” He stopped for a moment. Then swallowed. “They grabbed Phoebe. Dragged her toward the water.”

I was trying really hard to stay calm. To keep my face still. But I had no idea what to do with what he’d just said. All I could do was sit there, completely useless.

“She was so small,” Andy whispered. “They were standing, and she couldn’t touch the ground. She wasn’t screaming—she was too scared. They told me to take off my underwear. And I said no. I said no, and... and they let go of her. I should’ve done something. I should’ve saved her. But I was so fucking terrified. I—I ran toward her, but when it started getting too deep, I just... froze.” His breath hitched, and his hands twisted nervously in his lap. “They were still laughing. None of them even noticed she hadn’t come back up. Not for a long time. Then she... she... she floated up, face down, like she was dead. By the time I started screaming, it was already too late. Some guy ran into the water and saved her. She was unconscious even after they forced all the water from her lungs. They took her to the hospital, and when she woke up, something had changed. She started having seizures and couldn’t walk normally anymore. Still can’t.” His voice cracked, and the dam broke.

He started sobbing so hard it sounded like he might split apart. The sound tore through me like nothing I’d ever felt before. I pulled him close, spreading my legs to make room for him, and wrapped my arms around him as tightly as I could. He buried his face in my shirt, his entire body shaking.

I held him and held him, wishing I could take his pain away. But all I could do was be there and hope it was enough.

After a while, his breathing slowed, his sobs fading. I stroked his hair gently, letting him stay close as long as he needed.

Eventually, he shifted, wiping his face with his sleeve. “Sorry... I got snot all over your shirt.”

“It’s okay.” I tried to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry I pushed you.”

“No. You deserved to know.” His fingers reached for our necklaces, absently connecting and disconnecting the yin and yang pendants. “They ended up in juvie, but that didn’t fix anything,” he said, much calmer. “It didn’t undo what happened to Phoebe or change the fact that I didn’t help her. She never blamed me, at least not out loud. But my dad... he said it was unmanly. And he said... well, he said he wasn’t surprised I turned out to be a ‘fag-

got.’ Though with his thick Chinese accent, the dig kind of got lost in translation.” Andy’s voice faltered. “It just made everything worse, you know? Eventually, my parents put me here.”

He let go of the necklaces and moved back slightly. “I’ve left a few times. Thought I was getting better. But then I’d see my sister and all the guilt would come rushing back, and I’d end up here again... and again. I’ve gone over it so many times, and it never gets easier. I thought it would. I thought I’d get used to it or something, but it hurts the same every time.” He took a shaky breath as he added, “They say I have depression, anxiety disorder, dissociative disorder... and a bunch of other bullshit that changes nothing. Sometimes I talk to one of the counselors here. They’re not bad, I guess. And there are group sessions where everyone shares a bit, although I mostly just listen. But it helps, in a way.”

“Oh god, Andy,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry. About everything.” I pulled him back in and held on, careful not to crush him. “I kept pushing you to go in the water with me, to teach you how to swim. I didn’t know—I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “Those were the moments when I didn’t remember, you know?”

We stayed like that for a moment, just wrapped in each other’s arms. Like the world couldn’t touch us here.

His breath brushed my neck.

“So... do you still like me?”

“Of course,” I said, not even having to think about it. I wanted to say more—how much he meant to me, how long I’d been holding all of it in—but the words got stuck somewhere behind my ribs.

“You should go, Max,” he said, turning away. “It’s almost lunchtime, and if I don’t show up, they’ll come looking for me.” He opened the closet door, and daylight spilled in, harsh and jarring. And with the light, reality returned.

We barely made it out of the closet before I started missing how close we’d been inside it.

"Maybe I can come next weekend," I offered. "Just add me to your guest list or whatever they call it. They asked me for a passcode when I came in, so..."

"Max..." he said quietly, his eyes red. "I don't think you should come again."

"What?"

"We'll see each other at night, right?" He looked down at the floor. "It's better that way. The Andy in the dreams... he's better."

"What?" I said again, sharp with disbelief. "There's no 'better Andy.' Both of them are you!"

He didn't answer.

"I *found* you! What were the odds? We can't just ignore it! I want to—"

"Max—"

"No, please, just let me finish. After school, I can apply to some college nearby—I don't care where. And I've got a good season coming up, maybe I'll get scouted. But even if I don't, I'll get a job, anything. We can figure it out. Just you and me. I don't care how long you need to stay here. I'll wait for you, and when you're ready, I'll be there. We'll get a place and—"

"Max, stop..."

"Please, Andy. Don't push me away..."

He shook his head. "I don't get to just walk out of here and play house. It's not that simple."

"Why can't it be simple? You said it yourself—it's not a prison. You can leave anytime."

"It's not about that. It's about what happens when I do. The real world... it's not like the dreams. Out there, it's loud and complicated, and messy, and I can't... I can't be what you need me to be."

I reached for his hand, gripping it tightly. "I don't need you to be anything, Andy. Just yourself. That's all I want."

He looked at our hands, his fingers curling around mine. "What if I don't know who I am out there? What if I'm just... broken?"

“You’re not broken.” I leaned in, pressing my forehead against his. “You’re just you. And I want that. Just you.”

He pulled back. “You really should go,” he said.

I opened my mouth to protest, to press further, but doubt crept up, heavy and familiar. If I pushed too hard, I might lose everything. The last thing I wanted was to see him close himself off the way he’d done so many times before. So, the question died on my lips.

“Okay,” I muttered, forcing the word out. “Just... don’t shut me out again. Deal?”

He gave me the smallest smile.

“Deal.”

## GUESS I'LL JUST CLOSE MY EYES



I left Andy in his room alone, glancing back at him one last time to make sure it wasn't all just a hallucination, and promised myself this wouldn't be the end. I knew he'd start building those walls back up the second I walked out, adding another brick for every vulnerable second we'd shared. But I wasn't going to let him hide behind them forever. I'd take them down again, brick by brick, no matter how many times he put them up.

Not just for him, but for both of us.

Andy deserved to let go of the weight he'd carried alone for too long. In the dreams, he felt like watching a spark turn into a fire—bright, consuming, impossible to ignore. He was funny and weird and smart, and everything he said sounded like it came from some secret universe only he had access to. He'd roll his eyes at the music or movies I liked, but always with that infectious grin that creased the corners of his eyes and made me forget about the

whole world waiting for me when I woke up. There was this pull between us. Something deep and magnetic I didn't have the words for.

And I wanted to tell him every night—if I'd only had the guts—that he was the best part of my day. That he made me feel something when everything else felt flat.

But in reality, Andy seemed smaller somehow, as if he were trying to take up less space. His sadness hung over him like a heavy storm cloud, following him everywhere. The vibrant, sharp-eyed guy who lit up every room in my mind had been replaced by someone who gave careful, brittle smiles that never really landed, like he was trying not to break apart right in front of me.

My legs moved on autopilot as I stepped outside and joined Marcus, who was waiting for me in front of the building. He glanced up, and whatever he saw on my face made his expression soften. I must've looked wrecked. You wouldn't have guessed I'd just been with someone I'd been so desperate to see. Everything Andy had told me clung to me like those webs I couldn't shake off.

"Hey," he said carefully. "How did it go? You okay?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

My voice sounded hollow, even to me.

I told him I needed a minute, but that "minute" stretched all the way home. I felt like I'd left a part of myself behind in that room. I kept wondering if I'd failed him. If I should've said more, done more, *been* more. And underneath it all, a sharp, humiliating shame twisted in my gut. Because while Andy had been surviving hell, I'd been sulking, consumed by my petty frustrations. Compared to what he went through, what right did I have to complain?

I begged Marcus to let me stay the weekend. Not just to dodge my parents, but because I wanted to be close to Andy. Maybe, if I visited him on Monday, it'd be better. Maybe, he'd be glad I came.

But Marcus didn't budge. "Absolutely not," he said. "You've got school."

"Fine," I muttered. Still, when he promised I could come back next weekend, I held onto that like a lifeline.

The bus ride home felt like a punishment. I slouched in my seat, eyes on the window but not really seeing anything. Everything was a blur—people, streets, noise. All I could picture was Andy's face.

After a while, I noticed music bleeding out from the guy sitting next to me, coming straight from the foam headphones plugged into his Discman. I didn't recognize the song at first, but then Freddie Mercury's voice cut through, clear and impossible to miss. Another voice joined in. Deeper, rougher. I leaned in, my heart starting to race.

Something about it felt familiar.

"Hey." I nudged the guy. He looked over, lifting one side of his headphones.

"Who's that singing with Freddie?"

"That's David Bowie, man."

The crowded, rattling bus disappeared. All I could hear was Bowie's voice. It was like Andy was sitting right beside me, like he'd slipped into the bus. I practically heard him scoff, *What do you mean, you didn't recognize Bowie?*

"Thanks," I mumbled, looking away fast before he could see the tears in my eyes. He just shrugged and turned the volume up.

I pulled my shirt over my nose, breathing in the faint trace of Andy's scent that still clung to it from when he pressed against me in the closet.

*Fuck... I'm fucking screwed.*

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By the time I got off the bus and made it to the house, it was already dark. I stood there for a moment, staring at the windows. My body was heavy, but my mind was a mess, looping over everything Andy had told me, the things he'd begged me not to find out.

*"I don't think you should come again."*



How could I not?

*"We'll see each other at night."*

I tightened my grip on the bag's strap as I climbed the porch steps, dragging each one out as if it could hold back what was coming. And the second I opened the door, Mom's voice rang out like a fire alarm.

"Maxim?! Is that you?!"

She stormed out of the hallway, face already twisted with fury. "Where have you been?!"

The weight I'd carried off the bus morphed instantly into something sharper.

"Why do you care?" I shot back, slamming the door shut behind me.

Her mouth dropped open, disbelief painted across her face. It would've been comical if it weren't so predictable.

"I'm your mother!"

I let out a laugh that didn't sound like me. "Not like you've ever wanted to be one. And don't act like you didn't know where I was."

"That's not the point, Maxim! Do you know how irresponsible it is to take off like that? Will you now run to your brother every time things get hard? You don't just get to walk away whenever you feel like it!"

"Right, 'cause that's *your* job, isn't it?"

Something flickered in her eyes. Guilt maybe? But it vanished quickly. "You don't get to talk to me like that."

"I'll talk to you however I want," I shot back. "Marcus told me everything. You've made it pretty clear how much you don't give a damn, so what do you want from me now?"

"Oh, you think you know everything, don't you?"

"Spare me the sob story," I rolled my eyes. "You've done nothing but lied to me my whole life."

"You think you're so grown up, don't you? Just go to your room."

I paused, but only for a second. Staying here and continuing this wouldn't change anything.

“Fine.” I brushed past her and stomped up the stairs, my bag thudding against my leg.

“You’re all unbelievable,” she muttered under her breath—but loud enough.

I didn’t turn around. “Sure, Mom. Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

I didn’t wait for her reply. It was pointless, like screaming into a void. No matter what I said, no matter how loud I screamed, and how much I tried to make her understand, it was like she couldn’t hear me. She only heard what fit her narrative, twisting my words into whatever let her feel justified. Every accusation and every argument bounced off her like she was a wall, and she never actually responded to what I said. She deflected or acted like I hadn’t spoken at all. It was maddening, this need to keep struggling, even when you knew you couldn’t win the battle.

I entered my room and stood still for a moment. My chest was heaving, each breath sharp and shallow, and I only noticed it when I caught my reflection in the mirror. My shoulders rose and fell like I’d just sprinted a mile. I kicked my bag into the corner of the room just to crouch beside it, tearing through dirty clothes and crumpled papers. Finally, my fingers closed around what I was looking for.

Just one, as always. That’s all I needed.

I opened the box and tossed the pill into my mouth. I gagged on the bitterness, coughing once, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. My eyes stung, and I wasn’t sure if it was the pill or... just everything else.

I collapsed onto my bed and pulled the covers over my head like a shield. Curled into a ball, arms wrapped tight around myself, I squeezed my eyes shut. Every muscle in my body tensed as I muttered a silent plea to whatever higher force might be listening.

*Please, take me to Andy.*

Not the real Andy. Not the one who avoided my questions and shut me out. No. I needed the dream Andy. The one who smiled at me like I was the

only person in the world, said dumb jokes, and dragged me on adventures through our surreal world. The one who made me feel at home.

I begged for the dream to come, for the place that kept us away from everything. The place where it was just the two of us, safe and untouchable. And I wished I could stay there forever.

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The ground beneath me felt soft and warm as I wriggled my toes, grains shifting underfoot. My Mickey Mouse socks—the ones I'd finally started to like—were gone. So were my shoes.

I looked around, and it took me a second to recognize the place. The beach. The beach where it had all started.

But it wasn't exactly the same.

The dull gray pebbles that had once blanketed the ground were replaced by golden sand. The heavy, brooding sky had softened into a vibrant blue, dotted with just enough fluffy clouds to shade the shore from the sun. The water was crystal-clear, rippling and sparkling under the light. Waves rolled in, their white foam dissolving as they kissed the shore. It looked like one of those stock photos travel agencies use to convince you that life will be perfect if you just buy the damn package.

Above me, birds wheeled and chirped—the first living creatures we'd seen in our shared dreams. Not counting zombies, of course. Or spiders. So the first *non-ugly* creatures.

Even the cliffs were different. Where they'd once loomed like jagged walls, they looked softer now, with tufts of grass breaking up the starkness. Less like a fortress. More like a refuge.

I breathed deeply. The whole place felt alive. It felt perfect.

Almost perfect.

Because one thing was still missing.

“Max!”

*Now* it was perfect.

Andy came sprinting barefoot, smiling ear-to-ear, his jeans rolled to his calves and his hair loose and wild, catching the sunlight as it bounced with his steps. He reached me in seconds, leaping toward and wrapping his arms around me, sending us both tumbling to the ground.

We landed on the soft, sun-warmed sand, laughing. His hair fell into his face as he leaned over. His laughter died down, but his smile didn't fade.

I tangled my fingers gently in his black strands and closed the gap between us. The kiss was soft and tentative at first, like testing the water. But it didn't take long for it to deepen. The warmth of him sank into me, as steady and certain as the sun on my skin.

When I leaned back, it was only because I had to say something. But Andy didn't let me. He leaned in and captured my lips again like he couldn't bear the distance.

"Andy," I mumbled against his mouth. "Wait..."

He stopped, pulling back to meet my eyes, his face still so close I could count his eyelashes. For a second, I feared I'd broken the spell. But his expression didn't change.

"You look happy," I whispered.

"Yeah," he said. "I am."

I searched his face, taking in the curve of his lips and the light in his dark eyes. I had to smile back.

"Good."

He drew back slightly, his hand still resting on my neck, his thumb brushing my jaw.

"You know... when I told you I don't know how to be happy—"

"Andy, please..." I interrupted, desperate to stop him before he sank too deep into his head. Tonight wasn't supposed to be about all that. It was supposed to be about forgetting.

He pressed his hand over my mouth. "I'm not pitying myself, I promise. I just... when you left earlier today, it got to me. I said I don't know how to

be happy, but that's not true. I do know." He bit his lip. "It's *here*, Max. In these dreams. I know it sounds stupid, but it's true." He gestured between us. "This. Us. Here. We're happy. When everything out there is—"

"Shit?" I finished for him.

He chuckled. "Yeah. Shit."

"Hey." I brushed his hair out of his face. "I found you."

"You did. Even though I told you not to."

"I'm sorry, Andy. I had to."

"I know. I would've probably done the same thing if I were you."

We kissed again. Despite seeing each other every night, it was never enough.

I didn't bring up the idea of visiting him again. Andy felt too fragile, like the thinnest glass, and I was terrified even the slightest doubt would shatter him. But I'd already made my decision: I was going back to Chicago, whether or not he was ready for it.

I was going to make him feel in the waking world exactly how he did in the dreams—free, alive, and happy.

After what felt like both an eternity and no time at all, we lay together on the sand, clothes scattered carelessly around us. I held Andy's hand with one of mine, while the other sifted through the sand, letting the grains spill between my fingers. I wanted to believe that if we stayed here long enough, the real world would forget about us.

A shadow dimmed the sunlight on my face. Andy leaned over me, his hair catching the golden light like a halo.

And I just stared.

"I have an idea," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Teach me how to swim."

My hand stilled in the sand. "What?"

"Come on." He stood up and reached for my hand. "Please?"

“Andy...” I hesitated, searching his face for any sign of fear or doubt. “The last time I tried to teach you...” The memory caught in my throat. The first dream—the panic in his eyes, how he’d refused to even go near the water afterward. And the other dream—the drowning—and what he’d told me just earlier today...

“I know,” he cut through my thoughts. “But I’ve changed my mind.”

“But... after everything...”

“I trust you.”

Three words. Trust wasn't just something he was giving me; it was something I was giving back every time I let him in. Opening up here, even in a dream, was terrifying. But we were in this together—exposing raw nerves and hoping it wouldn't hurt more than it helped.

I nodded slowly. “Okay.”

We walked to the water’s edge together, hand in hand. The waves lapped at our feet, warm and gentle, their rhythm soothing.

Andy hesitated, but only for a second, before tightening his grip and stepping forward, pulling me with him. His fingers trembled slightly in mine.

“You’re okay,” I said, resting my other hand on his shoulder. “I’ve got you.”

He nodded. Step by step, we waded deeper, the water reaching his chest. I guided him through the motions, my hands never leaving him. “See? You’re doing it.”

“Okay,” he said. “What now?”

I gestured for him to lean back. “Just like the first time. Let the water hold you. I’ll be right here.”

His eyes scanned the surface, and after a deep, shaky breath, he leaned back.

“That’s it,” I said softly, my hands steady against his back. “Just relax. I’ve got you.”

His body was stiff at first, every muscle locked like he was bracing for disaster. But slowly, his shoulders eased, his arms drifted out to his sides, and he let himself float as the gentle waves lifted and carried him.

"This isn't so bad." He let out a quiet breath.

"You're doing it."

"I'm doing it."

"You're amazing."

Andy turned his head, meeting my eyes. He looked proud of himself. Truly proud. Like he'd just proven something he never thought he could.

"Okay, I'm gonna try moving," he said, determination flashing across his face.

"Go for it." I eased back a few steps to give him space, but staying close enough to catch him if he faltered.

Andy paddled forward, arms moving carefully through the water. His strokes were clumsy, almost like a baby bird trying to fly. Not graceful by any stretch, but it worked. He wasn't sinking. More importantly, he wasn't panicking.

"You're swimming, Andy," I said, grinning. "You're actually doing it."

"Don't jinx it!" he shot back, but I could hear the pride in his voice.

I dove in next to him and swam in slow circles around him. He kept going, slower now but steady, and I didn't have to help. He was doing it on his own.

He laughed softly, the sound mingling with the rhythm of the waves. "You were right."

"About what?"

"About swimming," he said. "About everything."

When we finally made our way back to the shore, the waves tugged at our legs like they didn't want to let go. Andy stumbled slightly as he waded onto the sand, and I reached out to steady him, but he shook his head with a quiet laugh, brushing me off. We collapsed onto the beach, the sand clinging stubbornly to our damp skin. I lay on my stomach, propped up on my forearms,

watching Andy as he stretched out on his back. He breathed slowly, his body rising and falling in rhythm, his head tilted toward me. His hair was wet, messy strands sticking to his forehead, and water droplets glistened on his skin like tiny jewels.

For a while, neither of us spoke. The world hung suspended, as if time had paused. I watched Andy smile faintly.

“What?” I asked.

He started tracing lazy patterns in the sand. “Can I say something?”

“Of course,” I chuckled. “Why are you asking for permission?”

“Because...” He trailed off, dragging his fingertip through the sand in slow, looping swirls. “Because what I want to say is... a bit cheesy.”

I smiled, amused by how weirdly shy he got all of a sudden. “Now you have to say it.”

Andy’s hand stilled for a moment before the shapes he drew in the sand became more abstract. “I don’t know why these dreams started. Why they brought us here, to this place. Together. But I just know.... That evening before they started—before I met you—I remember I was... I don’t even know, Max. I don’t believe in God, but I was asking... someone. Anyone. Begging. Just for something to make it easier. For an escape. *Anything*.”

He looked up at me, eyes serious. “And then they gave me you. I think you kinda... saved me. Which sounds dramatic, I know.”

I wasn’t sure why I suddenly felt embarrassed. It wasn’t the first time Andy had said something that nice to me, but it still caught me off guard.

I grabbed a fistful of sand and sprinkled it on his bare chest. “Stop or I’ll blush,” I snorted.

“What I wanted to say is... I love you, Max.”

The words hung between us, leaving me speechless. I think I forgot how to breathe as my brain just stopped. Everything had frozen for a second, except the thudding in my chest. Some pressure inside me was desperately trying to break out.



“Andy, I...” It was the first time anyone had ever said those words to me. And it sounded... strange. Not bad. Not wrong. Just strange.

“I don’t need you to say it back!” He sat up quickly, sand scattering from his skin. “I just... I needed you to know. I needed to say it out loud. For me.” His eyes shifted down, almost embarrassed, before locking onto mine with a quiet determination. “I think I’ve been waiting for you. And... I feel like I’ve finally found something worth holding onto now.”

I wanted to say it back. I really did.

What did I have to lose? *I found him.*

The right words hovered, pressing on the edge of my tongue, so close I could feel their weight pressing against my teeth. But they refused to materialize. Why couldn’t I just say them? Every part of me already knew it, screamed it. But saying it out loud felt impossible. Like trying to speak a language I’d never learned.

Andy dropped his gaze again, and I couldn’t blame him. He didn’t deserve this hesitation. He didn’t deserve me fumbling over three simple words. It didn’t make sense. It wasn’t like I didn’t feel it. I did. I knew I did. Still, the words remained foreign, like they didn’t belong to me, and like saying them would make everything feel less real, like something out of a movie instead of what it was.

I reached out and brushed a strand of wet hair off his forehead. That alone was enough to make him look at me. And the way he looked—like my touch had already told him everything he needed to hear—made me think he understood.

After all, I had forever to say it back.

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## TAKE HIM OUT



I woke up in a noticeably better mood. The past few days had drained me, but after last night, the warmth I used to feel—the same one that tagged along while we wandered post-apocalyptic Chicago, the endless fields, or messed around in the amusement park—was back.

For the first time in a while, I genuinely trusted things might be okay.

But reality kicked in fast, like it always did. And like it or not, I had to play my part.

I didn't remember if I'd turned off the alarm clock half-asleep or forgotten to set it altogether, but either way, I woke up late. To make things worse, my bike was still at Mikey's house from before I ran off, which meant that I had to ask my dad for a ride to school. He could technically drive me every morning—his office wasn't far from school—but I avoided asking him unless I absolutely had to. I hated the awkward silence that always filled the car.

And when he did talk, it felt like the kind of half-hearted chat you'd make with a hitchhiker, like we were two people sharing space for a few miles, nothing more.

The ride was as uncomfortable as I'd expected. I stared out the window while Dad gripped the steering wheel a little too tightly. After a long stretch of nothing, he finally cleared his throat. "So... how's Marcus?"

My jaw tightened instantly. I didn't even bother to look at him. "I don't want to talk to you."

He stiffened, but didn't respond right away. For a while, the only sound in the car was the low hum of the engine.

"Okay," he finally said.

"You're welcome, *Dad*."

He exhaled sharply. "Look... I'm still your dad. That hasn't changed."

"Then act like one."

I thought he might pull over. But instead, he just shook his head. "Maybe I haven't been the dad you needed. But that doesn't mean I don't care about you."

I wasn't sure I believed him. A part of me wanted to keep pushing, to tell him he hadn't cared enough, to let him know how much I resented him. But another part—the tired, worn-out part—just wanted this whole situation to end.

"Whatever." My eyes stayed glued to the window.

When we arrived at the school, I grabbed my bag and muttered, "Thanks," before opening the door.

"You're welcome."

I paused for half a second, his tone catching me off guard. But I didn't look back. Instead, I slammed the door and walked toward the school entrance. As I walked away, I could feel his eyes on me. Maybe he was wondering how we ended up like this. I was wondering the same thing.

When I entered the hallway, I immediately sensed something was wrong. People were staring. Not with casual glances, but full-on, *it's him* looks. A few

people snickered as I walked past, huddling closer like whatever they were saying was too good to share with anyone but their clique.

With everything that had happened, I'd completely forgotten about the Jenny drama. What was it now? Was she pregnant with my child or something? I missed one day of school—one freaking day—and somehow, the whispers had multiplied. The way they looked at me, like they knew something I didn't.

Someone bumped into me, making me stagger, and I almost dropped my bag. "Watch it," they said as they laughed and walked away.

I tried to brush it off, but the way they laughed made my skin crawl.

Whispers, giggles, muffled words I couldn't make out—all of it felt aimed at me.

I gritted my teeth and headed for my locker, determined to get through the day without losing it. I grabbed my notebook, slammed the locker shut, and nearly jumped when I came face to face with my ex, Bonnie. The notebook slipped from my hands and hit the floor.

"You should have told me." She slammed her hand on the locker next to my face. The bang was loud enough to turn a few heads.

"Tell you what?" I crouched to grab the notebook, but Bonnie's sneaker pinned it down.

"Jesus, Bonnie, what the hell?" I stared up, more confused than angry.

She didn't move. Instead, she leaned down, her eyes burning into mine. Her pale skin was turning red, as it always did when she was worked up.

"You really had me questioning myself, Max." She jabbed my forehead. "Turns out, *you* were the problem all along."

I brushed her hand away. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

She let out a bitter laugh. "Oh, please."

I straightened up, towering over her. "If you've got something to say, just say it."

She stepped closer, tilting her chin up to meet my glare. Her voice dropped, low enough only I could hear it: "You could've just told me. In-

stead, you made me think I wasn't good enough—not 'manly' enough, right?"

With a dramatic flip of her hair, she turned on her heel and stormed off, disappearing into her classroom.

I stood stunned, trying to piece together what the fuck had just happened. But before I could process it, I realized the hallway had gone quiet.

Everyone was watching me, some blatantly, some pretending not to, but they were all listening.

And then they started laughing.

"The fuck you laughing at?" I growled at the guy standing closest to me.

He smirked, tilting his head with a smug, mocking expression, but said nothing. Then he turned to his friend, muttering something under his breath, making both of them laugh harder.

I turned away when someone nearby coughed dramatically.

"Ahem—gay—AHEM!"

A ripple of cruel laughter followed, and my chest tightened so much it was hard to breathe. I spun around, searching for the culprit, but no one owned up to it. Just a sea of faces, all staring. The heat crawled up my neck and into my cheeks.

I grabbed my bag and notebook from the floor with shaking hands, my palms slick with sweat as I clenched the straps.

The word boomeranged around my skull. Gay? Me? Why would anyone think that? It wasn't like I went around acting any differently than usual. Hell, last time I checked, I was supposedly banging Jenny, the school's straight-boy fantasy.

I shoved the notebook into my bag and stalked toward class. My pulse pounded in my ears, drowning out the sound of their laughter, but not enough to erase the feeling of their eyes on me.

Halfway down the hall, the bell rang. I was so focused on my own frustration, I didn't notice the hand that emerged from an empty classroom and pulled me inside.

“What—” I stopped short at the sight of Mikey with a panicked face.

“It wasn’t me, Max. I swear. I was going to call, but I don’t have Marcus’s number.”

“What wasn’t you?” I yanked my arm free. “What the hell is going on, Mikey?!”

His eyes went wide. “Wait—you seriously don’t know?”

“Don’t know what?”

He looked nervously at the door. “Silva’s telling everyone Jenny told him you’re gay.”

“What?! Wh—why the hell would she tell him that?!”

“I don’t know, man,” Mikey said, his voice climbing an octave. “Does she know about this guy? You know... Andy, I mean.”

“No! The only people I’ve told are you, Naya, and Marcus.”

“Wait—hold up. You were in Chicago. How’s Marcus? Did you find Andy?”

“He’s fine. And yes—”

“Seriously?! You found him? Like—in real life?”

“Yes.”

“That’s insane! Where? How—”

“Focus, Mikey! Why the hell would Jenny tell Silva something like that?!”

“I don’t know!” He ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up in messy spikes. “But... dude, it’s already everywhere. And the team’s kinda pissed.”

“Pissed?!” I repeated in disbelief. “For what?”

He winced. “They’re just... they’re saying shit. Like, they don’t wanna share showers with you ‘cause they think you’re gonna... you know.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“I know! It’s crazy, but that’s what they’re saying.”

This was insane. Why would Jenny start a rumor like this after everything she’d told me? I kept her secret. Didn’t spill a word. And this is what I get? Was it payback for blowing her off?

I could end this nonsense right there by telling everyone what really happened in her room. But I wasn't going to stoop to her level.

I rubbed my face, letting out a long, frustrated groan. "Fuck..."

"Maybe it'll just, you know... die on its own. People forget about this kind of stuff all the time."

"Did you see these people? I'm like a fucking monkey in a zoo!"

"Okay, yeah, but remember last year when someone spread that rumor about Derek Morgan having herpes? No one even remembers anymore."

"No one?! Still no one wants to sit next to him! And really, Mikey? This isn't the same."

He shrugged helplessly. "Dunno, man..."

"Whatever..." I said, shouldering my bag and rushing out. Mikey trailed behind me, muttering something about people being idiots.

When we walked into class late, the teacher gave us both a glare. "Nice of you to join us, gentlemen," she said, tapping her pen on the desk.

The classroom buzzed with muffled laughter and not-so-subtle snickers. A few people gave me those pitying glances, like I was some sad kitten stranded in the rain.

*Fuck you guys. I don't need your pity.*

We dropped into our seats, and I glared straight ahead so hard I hoped I could make them all disappear. But the whispers didn't stop. They pricked at me, sharp and relentless, like tiny knives stabbing into my body.

Eric turned around in his chair. "Quickie, huh?" he said. "I didn't realize you were batting for the other side too, Mikey."

"You wish," Mikey said, just as I growled through gritted teeth, "Fuck off, would you?"

Eric smirked, turning back to his notes.

I dug my nails into my thighs under the desk. *Don't make a scene. Don't give them more to talk about.* But my blood boiled as I stared at the back of Eric's head, imagining slamming his face into the desk.

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The rest of the day didn't get any better.

In every hallway, every classroom, people laughed as I walked by, smirking and muttering just loud enough for me to catch the tail end of their shitty jokes. It didn't make sense. Why was this such a big deal? Was it about being gay, or was it about me? About the guy who always had the girls—the one they'd seen kiss half the school—now being the one they thought had been using them as cover.

And those same girls? They weren't angry exactly, but their looks had shifted, like they'd been duped. Their glances ranged from confused to judgmental to awkward.

By lunch, I didn't bother trying to sit with Mikey or anyone else. I found a corner near the vending machines and ate in silence, hoping no one would notice me.

Halfway through choking down a sandwich, Naya found me. She plopped down next to me without a word, her tray smacking on the table.

"Max," she said gently, probably wanting to try to fix everything if she could.

I sighed. "Don't."

"I just—"

"Naya. Please. Just... don't."

"You don't want help, or you don't want me?"

I didn't know.

Her expression fell, and I felt like the world's biggest asshole, but I couldn't handle her trying to comfort me.

"Fine," she said after a pause, standing up and grabbing her tray. "But I'm not going to stop caring, Max."

She walked away, and I stared after her, feeling even worse.



I let my head thud lightly on the wall and closed my eyes. No matter where I went, I was still on display. Everyone had something to say. But no one really knew a damn thing.

And the person who set it all off? Jenny was nowhere to be found. Maybe she dropped the bomb and couldn't be bothered to show up for the fallout.

Or didn't care.

Silva was also MIA, thank god. We didn't have any classes together, which was probably the only lucky thing about today.

Classes dragged on, each one worse than the last. When no one was saying anything, I could still feel them thinking it. Like I was under a microscope. By the time the final bell rang, all I wanted was to just disappear. But first, I had to survive baseball practice. And let me tell you. The second I walked into the locker room, I knew it was going to be hell. I didn't have to come, but I'd decided I wasn't about to give the guys the satisfaction. Even after the way they treated me all day. Skipping would've been like handing them a win.

Conversations quieted as I entered. A couple of guys shot me looks, and I knew they couldn't wait to get started.

"Hey, Max!" Joe called out. "How about we take a quick shower together after practice? I'll let you wash my back."

Laughter burst in the room. I threw my bag into my locker with more force than it needed.

"Careful, man." Erik sniggered. "He might take that as an actual invitation."

More laughter, but I bit my tongue.

Mikey tried to have my back. "Shut the hell up, Erik."

"What's the matter, Mikey?" Erik shot back. "You his boyfriend now?"

Mikey glared at him, but I saw the hesitation in his eyes. He didn't know how to fight back without making things worse.

I changed as quickly as possible and got out to the field.

But it didn't stop there. During warm-ups, someone muttered, "Careful—Reid might get the wrong idea if you get too close."

"Yeah, bro, you better watch your ass," someone added, followed by snickering.

Every muscle in my body went rigid. But Mikey jumped in before I could. "Seriously, you guys are pathetic."

They just laughed. The jokes weren't even clever, just tired, recycled crap. But they kept coming. And Mikey kept jumping in, louder each time.

At first, I was grateful. But by the middle of practice, it was starting to piss me off. I wasn't some stupid little kid who couldn't fight his own battles. Every time Mikey spoke up, he was putting more spotlight on me.

At least Adam and Brandon stayed out of it. They hadn't joined in or laughed, keeping their heads down, focusing on the drills. Still, they kept their distance. They didn't stand too close during warm-ups or joke around like they usually would. And I didn't blame them. Knowing the team, anyone who stuck up for me would be called my boyfriend, too, or some other bullshit. It was like I'd turned toxic overnight.

When Erik made another stupid comment during drills, Mikey was right there. "What's your problem, Erik? Seriously, drop it—"

"Shut the fuck up, Mikey!" I barked.

Mikey flinched. Not much, but enough for the guilt to settle like a stone in my gut. He was just trying to help. He always had my back, no matter what. And I'd snapped at him like the piece of shit I was.

"Sorry, just... leave it, okay?" I muttered.

Mikey didn't say anything, just gave me a pat on the shoulder, letting me know we were good, even if I didn't deserve it.

When we were heading back to the locker room, I felt like I'd been chewed up and spit out. This was, without a doubt, the worst practice of my life.

I wanted to run back to the building and change as fast as possible when I heard Coach's sharp whistle.

“Reid!”

I stopped, turning toward him as he gestured for me to follow him into his office.

*Great. What now?*

I stepped inside. Coach settled into his chair, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk. His expression was calm, but something told me this wasn’t going to be some friendly heart-to-heart.

“Sit.” He nodded toward the chair in front of me.

I dropped into it, my legs like lead.

Coach let out a sigh, rubbing his temples. “Listen, Reid. I’m going to cut to the chase. I’ve been hearing some... complaints from the guys.”

“Complaints?”

He nodded. “Some of them aren’t comfortable sharing the locker room with you anymore. They’re saying that there’s... tension.”

“Tension?” My hands gripped the arms of the chair so hard they might break under the pressure. “Are you kidding me? It’s *them* who talk shit!”

Coach sighed again, leaning back in his chair. “Look, I don’t care who puts what in whom. That’s none of my business. But this team doesn’t work with distractions, and right now, this... situation is a distraction.”

“So you mean they’re acting like a bunch of douchebags, and somehow I’m the problem?”

“Reid.” His tone sharpened.

“No, this is absurd. What do they think I’m gonna do? Sneak up behind them in the shower? Jump them if they drop the soap?!”

Coach held up a hand. “That’s enough,” he said and waited until I shut my mouth, though my jaw was still tight. “Here’s the deal. It’s just conditioning right now. You don’t have to be here, but most of the guys are staying after, and I want it to stay that way. You’ve got two options—work this out with them, or take a break until spring and deal with your personal stuff in the meantime. You’re one of the best players we’ve got—you’ll be fine start-

ing in the spring without extra drills, but right now? You're not helping the chemistry. I can't have guys refusing to work together."

I stared at him in disbelief. "So I'm the one who has to back off? You're not gonna tell them to stop acting like assholes?"

"You think *me* yelling at them is going to fix this? No. This isn't something I can solve for you. If you want them to stop, you need to address it. Or step away until you're ready. Either way, I need the rest of the team focused."

"Great," I muttered. "So I'm just supposed to play nice with them while they treat me like a freak?"

"I'm not saying it's right. I'm saying you've got to handle this as a leader. Prove to them it's bullshit, and they'll back off. But you've got to be the one to do it."

I stared at the floor. "Can I go now?"

"Think about what I said, Reid. This team runs on trust."

Trust, my ass. Like I was supposed to trust a bunch of guys who'd rather believe some stupid rumor than actually talk to me.

*Un-fucking-believable.* One damn thing after another. It was like the universe had diarrhea, and my life was the toilet.

Thankfully, when I stepped into the locker room, the guys were gone, and the only person left was Mikey, tying his shoes. He looked up as I walked in.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

He was watching me, obviously waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, he spoke first, "So, uh... what did Coach want?"

I wanted to start ranting about how unfair and ridiculous the whole thing was, about how Coach was just passing the buck. But I couldn't. I didn't trust my voice to hold steady.

"It doesn't matter." I moved to my locker and started pulling out my stuff.

Mikey shifted awkwardly on his feet, crossing his arms like he wasn't sure whether to leave or stay.

I let out a long breath. "I'm sorry."

He frowned. "For what?"

"For snapping at you," I shut my locker with a soft clang. I leaned against it, letting my head drop so I didn't have to meet his eyes. "You were just trying to help, and I..."

"Don't worry about it. I get it."

I looked up at him, surprised. He didn't look annoyed or distant. Just concerned. If anything, more concerned than before.

"You sure you're okay? We can go back to mine. Your bike's still there. We can walk or grab the bus or whatever."

I managed a small, tired smile. "Thanks, but I'm good. I'll grab it another time."

Mikey nodded. "Alright. But if you need anything, just... you know." He gestured vaguely, giving me that lopsided grin of his.

"I know," I said. And I meant it.

He grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder, giving me one last glance before heading toward the exit. The door creaked open, and then I was alone.

I headed to the showers, peeling off my sweat-soaked clothes as I went. The water was scalding hot when I stepped under it, but I let it pour over me, trying to wash away the day. My skin burned, but I scrubbed harder, as if I could wash away the voices, the stares, and the whispers.

No matter how long I stayed there, the knot in my chest wouldn't loosen. The euphoria after last night's dream was long gone, buried under the weight of daily life. I didn't want to think about Andy. Not because I didn't care, but because the thought of him would hurt too much right now. I didn't want to think about how much better things were in the dreams, and what he would think if he saw me like this...

So I just stood there, eyes closed, until the water ran cold.

When I finally stepped out of the locker room, I let myself enjoy the silence of the hallway.

No footsteps. No laughter. No eyes burning into the back of my skull. Just the distant hum of fluorescent lights.

And for once, no one was around—

“Yo! Homo!”

## BRUISES THAT WON'T HEAL



Someone shoved me hard from behind. I slammed into the floor to the sound of loud laughter behind me.

I pushed myself up quickly to see Kyle Silva grinning like he'd just pulled off the funniest prank in the world, while behind him, Nick Miller, Jordan Mathis, and Oscar Fisher laughed like idiots.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I let my bag fall with a thud, already bracing for whatever was coming next.

Silva crossed his arms. "Take a chill pill, Reid. Just messin' with you."

"You shoved me, you fucking asshole!"

Mathis, still laughing, wiped his eyes. "Careful, Kyle, he might think you've got a crush on him."

The others cracked up, their laughter grating against my ears like nails on a chalkboard.

“Maybe you’re the one with the crush, Silva,” I shot back. “That’d explain a lot.”

The second it left my mouth, I knew I’d fucked up.

Silva’s grin disappeared, replaced by a cold glare. The laughter stopped as the others exchanged uneasy glances.

“Take that back,” Silva growled.

“Or what?”

He lunged before I could blink and grabbed my hoodie. The same second my instinct kicked in, and my fist shot up, connecting squarely with his nose. He stumbled back, clutching his face. Blood dripped between his fingers.

“You fucking—”

Everyone froze, stunned.

But Silva recovered fast. His eyes were bloodshot and wild, veins bulging in his neck. “Get him inside,” he barked, nodding at the bathroom door.

My stomach dropped.

The guys each grabbed one of my arms and shoved me through the door. My knees hit the cold tile, sending a sharp pain up my legs.

I scrambled to my feet and backed up until I hit the wall, trying to size up the situation. Four of them. One of me. This wasn’t going to end well.

But if I was going down, I might as well make it entertaining.

“If you guys wanted a blowjob, you could’ve just asked nicely.”

A fist of unknown origin slammed into my cheek. I tasted blood.

Miller spat at my feet. “Jenny told everyone. You’ve been creeping on us for who knows how long. You fucking perv.”

I wiped my lip. “I wouldn’t touch you with a stick, Miller.”

Another punch. This time to my gut. I bent over, the air knocked out of me, but I forced myself upright, gritting my teeth against the pain.

Mathis grabbed my bag and dumped its contents onto the filthy floor—books, pens, and random junk. The pill bottle skittered across the tile, stopping at Silva’s foot.

He picked it up. “What do we have here?”



“Pills for fags?” Fisher snickered.

“Oh, you recognized them?”

Fisher kicked me hard right between my legs.

Pain exploded, radiating up through my stomach like fire. My knees buckled, and I collapsed onto the floor, curling into a ball. Stars burst behind my eyes, my breath stuck between a gasp and a choke.

While I writhed, Fisher crouched over me, close enough that I could see the grease on his forehead. “You sure talk big for someone who takes it up the ass,” he said, standing up and kicking my things across the bathroom.

“Check this out,” Miller said, pulling out my old *Hellblazer* comic, which must have been crumpled at the bottom of my bag for years. He flipped through a few pages and whistled. “Bet he reads it one-handed.”

“Gross,” Mathis muttered, chucking my Discman into the sink with a loud clang.

I spat blood onto the floor. “Fuck you.”

Silva tossed the bottle to the ground, and I nearly cried with relief when it didn’t burst open.

“You’ve been pissing me off since sophomore year,” he said.

“Yeah? Funny. I haven’t thought about you much.”

“Bullshit! You’re always there. Always in my space. Always touching my shit!”

“I told you—me and Jenny—”

“Don’t fucking say her name!” He kicked the wall next to my head, the sound echoing like a gunshot.

He shoved me back. My head cracked on the tile, making the room spin. He leaned in close, his breath hot and sour.

“Think you’re smart? Throwing Jenny into this like she’s gonna save your fruity ass.”

“She’s not gonna save me. But at least she’s too smart to stick around someone like you.”

Miller huffed. “Bet she already caught something from him.”

“Shut up, Miller,” Silva barked. “Go make yourself useful and check the hallway.”

Miller grunted something under his breath but dragged his feet obediently toward the door like a good dog. He shot me one last look before disappearing into the hallway.

My mind raced, trying to figure out my next move. It was three against one now. Not much better, but a little less hopeless.

“Now.” Silva turned back to me. “Back to you, Reid.”

He grabbed a pen from the floor and started scribbling on my forehead. I’d bet a million bucks it was going to be a dick.

I tried to swat his hand away, but it came out weak. He slapped me hard across the face and grabbed my jaw, his grip locking my head in place. I didn’t know why I let him. Maybe because, as humiliating as it was, it still hurt less than another hit.

“You think you’re hot shit, huh?” He squeezed my cheeks until my lips puckered. “Walking around like you’re better than me. You’ve been up my ass so deep it’s pathetic.”

I could feel the drawing’s outline searing into my skin, like he was using a branding iron. I glared at him. “Pretty sure you’re the one obsessed with mine—”

The punch sent me sideways. I just hoped I wouldn’t lose any teeth.

“You think I don’t know you are trying to take my spot on the team?”

“So that’s what this is about?” I gasped. “I don’t care about your spot, Silva. I don’t care about fucking football. Coach came to me, and I said no!”

“Bullshit! Don’t act like you didn’t want it. You’ve been gunning for me since day one.”

“Yeah, Silva. My entire life revolves around you.”

“That’s what I thought. You even want the same pussy!”

“Are you serious right now? Dude, you screwed around, not me—”

“Shut your mouth!” Silva roared with murder in his eyes. “You don’t get to talk about that! Not after you’ve been sniffing around her like some fucking dog!”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Jesus, make up your fucking mind! Do I want your girl or am I gay?!”

His face went crimson as he took a sharp, furious breath. He grabbed my arm and slammed me into the stall doors, rattling the whole thing. Angry Kyle Silva was like a gorilla on cocaine. Why would Coach ever want me over this guy—I had no idea.

“You think you’re tough?!” Silva stalked toward me. “Talk shit and walk away?”

Call me stupid. I knew I should’ve shut my mouth and let him huff and puff until he ran out of steam. I should’ve just taken the verbal crap and walked away. But for some absurd reason, I decided to make it worse.

So, I straightened up, ignoring the throbbing pain in my shoulder, and as calmly as possible said, “No. I think you’re a jealous little boy who can’t handle the fact that he’s not as important as he thinks he is.”

That did it.

Silva’s face twisted with pure rage. His nostrils flared, and for a second, I thought his head might literally explode. His breathing grew heavy, as though he was fighting to keep himself together.

Spoiler alert: he didn’t.

“You piece of shit!” He lunged again, slamming me into the unforgiving wall. My back screamed in pain.

He grabbed the pill bottle he’d tossed earlier, shaking it mockingly. “Look at this. Maxie’s little gay pills. Can’t handle life without these, huh?”

“They’re sleeping pills, you moron.”

“What, you lie awake dreaming of me? How many do you need to knock yourself out? Five? Ten? Or should we find out?” He looked at the others who’d just been watching with mocking smiles until now, then hissed, “Get him.”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” I jerked back as they grabbed my arms.

Silva’s grin widened with cruel amusement. “You’re gonna take these deep, just like you like it, you little bitch.”

My eyes widened. “You’re fucking insane!”

“You’ve been asking for this. Hold him down!”

Mathis and Fisher didn’t hesitate. They shoved me down onto all fours. My face slammed into the cold, sticky tiles, the smell of piss and bleach assaulting my nose, my arms twisted behind my back so hard I thought they might break. A knee pressed down on my head, grinding my cheek into the filthy floor, while another knee shoved my legs apart.

And just like that, my ass was in the air.

“W—What the fuck?!”

Silva yanked at my belt. “Maybe that’ll teach you to stay the hell out of my business.”

Panic rushed through me, raw and all-consuming. I tried to flatten myself on the floor to escape this mortifying position.

“Hold his legs!”

“Dude, this is fucked up.”

“Kyle, seriously, it’s—”

“Shut up or you’re next!”

I twisted harder, but their grips were iron clamps, and someone’s knee dug painfully into my skull. Silva loomed above me, his hands fumbling under my body, trying to undo my belt.

“Fuck you!” I spat. My chest heaved as panic blurred my vision. I kicked out, catching Silva in the thigh.

He hissed, then snarled, his grip tightening on my waistband. With one sharp tug, he ripped the belt free.

The leather made a harsh, grating sound as he flung it aside.

*This is happening. This is fucking happening.*

Silva leaned in close. “Look at you,” he said, his tone almost amused. “Jesus Christ, you’re shaking.”

He burst out laughing.

A full, manic laugh.

The others followed. And all at once, the hands pinning me down disappeared.

I sucked in a sharp breath. For a split second, I was too stunned to move. But then the realization hit, and I jumped to my feet, nearly tripping as I backed away.

“Holy shit! You actually thought we’d do it!” Mathis laughed so hard he could barely breathe.

“Don’t act like you didn’t want it, freak.” Fisher sneered.

Silva tossed the bottle onto the floor, still grinning. “Damn it, Reid. You *really* are fucking pathetic.”

My legs were shaky, but I forced myself to stand tall, fists clenched so hard my nails dug into my palms.

I took a step forward. “You’re a fucking joke,” I gritted out.

The door behind me swung open, slamming against the wall.

“Guys, look what I found!”

I started to turn—

Something swung through the air.

CRACK.

A white-hot pain exploded at the side of my skull. My vision swam, the world tilting into a blur of shapes.

The last thing I heard was someone shouting, “What the fuck did you do?!” before everything went black.

## TAKE ME ON



**A**nd then everything turned white.  
Literally.  
I stood in a place that wasn't a place at all. Just white, endless nowhere. Like walking straight into a goddamn light bulb. The only sound was something faint and muffled like a TV playing in the next room.

*Wait... Why am I sleeping?*

*Oh... right.*

The bathroom. The laughter. The fucking humiliation.

I wanted to hit something, but there was nothing except white stretching forever.

I took a step, my foot meeting resistance that shouldn't have been there, like the ground was nothing but an invisible barrier keeping me from falling into the void.

I noticed a single black dot in the distance. Too small at first, like a speck in my vision. But it wasn't. I could *feel* it before I even processed what I was looking at.

*Who* I was looking at.

I didn't hesitate. My walk turned into a jog, then into a full sprint, my feet slamming against the nothingness as I hurtled toward *him*. His silhouette sharpened with every step, and before I knew it, he was running too.

"Max!"

"Andy!"

We stopped just short of colliding, standing face-to-face, our breaths ragged. He looked beautiful—like he always did in dreams—but...

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Andy frowned. "It's our dream—"

"It's the middle of the day. Why are you asleep?"

"Why are *you*?"

"Andy." I stepped closer. "What's going on?"

His smile faltered, and I knew in an instant something was wrong.

His eyes darted away, his body stiffening like a kid caught sneaking out past curfew. "Nothing," he said quickly. Too quickly. "Nothing's going on."

"Don't lie to me. Why are you here? You never sleep during the day."

"Max. It's okay. I'm okay. This is good."

"Andy, what the fuck did you do?!"

He was shifting his weight from foot to foot like a cornered animal. "I... I had to," he finally said. "I had to, Max. You don't understand. I can't do it anymore."

"What?! *What* can't you do anymore?! It was fine last night! It was perfect! You were fine!"

"I *am* fine!" He grabbed my arms. His grip was firm, almost bruising, his eyes blazing with desperation. "Don't you see? I told you—I know how to be happy now, right? It's here. This is the only place where I get to be normal. I couldn't give that up, Max. I won't give that up..."

My throat tightened. It was like all the air around me had vanished.

“Andy... what did you do?”

“I took some pills... Enough to keep me here.”

“No,” I choked out. My legs felt like they were going to give up. “Andy, no. Tell me you didn’t—tell me you didn’t try to—”

Before I could finish, he wrapped his arms around me. He shoved his face hard into my chest, and his voice came out in a desperate, pleading rush. “No, Max. It’s okay. It’s really okay. Trust me. This is what I needed to do. It’s better this way.”

I didn’t hug him back. I stood frozen, his words sinking deeper into my skin, searing into my brain.

“You—you could’ve killed yourself, Andy! Do you even understand how fucking stupid that was? What if—what if your brain is damaged now? What if you—”

“No! I’m fine!” His hands gripped me like I was the only thing keeping him tethered to this place. “I don’t care what happens to my body, Max. I’m here now. With you. It’s all that matters. Don’t you get it? This is good. This is better. My real life...” Andy pulled back. “My real life isn’t a life. It’s hell.”

“But you can’t just stay here! We were supposed to be together in the real world!”

His hands dropped from my sides as he stepped back. “You know we couldn’t. I told you, Max. I told you so many times. Why can’t you just *listen*? My life out there? It’s nothing. I’m nothing. But here? I get to be happy. I get to be *me*. Here, we can have everything.”

“No.” I shook my head. “This isn’t everything, Andy. This is *nothing*. It’s a *dream*!”

“It’s enough for me,” he whispered.

“It can’t be enough. We have to—you have to try. You have to give it a chance.”

“I’ve already tried! I’ve tried so many fucking times, and it doesn’t *matter*!”



Tears blurred my vision. I wanted to scream, to shake him, to drag him back into the real world by force if I had to. “Andy... You can’t just give up.”

“I’m not giving up! You don’t get it. I’m choosing this, Max. I’m *choosing*! Don’t you see? This is it. This is the *only* way.”

“No, Andy,” I said again, and I would say it again and again as long as he doesn’t understand. “Look at this place! Look what it’s become!”

It was all too much. Everything was too much. I was so tired.

He stared at me like he’d already decided to ignore my arguments. “I love you, Max,” he said calmly, but his eyes glistened, filled with tears. “I love you, and this is the only way I get to have you.” His breath hitched. “Do you know what it’s like? Out there? In the real world? With everything haunting me, every second of every day? If the real world doesn’t want me, I don’t want it either. I would choose this place with you every time, no matter what it looks like—”

“I love you!” The words ripped out of me. My chest felt like it was tearing open as tears poured down my face, out of control. “I love you,” I said again, but my voice broke. And so did I.

It slammed into me like a tidal wave, one that dragged you under before you could even think about running for shore. Not just the words, but everything behind them. Every time I hadn’t said it. Every time no one had said it to me. Saying it didn’t fix anything. But it cracked something open. Something that was locked up for too long.

I grabbed his face in both hands. His dark eyes were warm but unyielding, and I hated that. I hated how sure he was about something so reckless. I hated that he smiled.

“You promise you’re okay?” I asked, hoping it would take even a little weight off.

“Yes,” he said simply.

It didn’t help.

Before I could say anything else, I felt a tugging sensation. The dream was slipping away, reality pulling me back.

“No, not yet!” I curled my fingers around his like we could hold the dream together.

“Don’t worry, Max,” he said gently. The white light around us intensified. His smile was so tender, so heartbreakingly Andy. “I’ll wait here, okay? I’ll wait for you when you fall asleep.”

I clutched at his wrist, at his shirt, anything. But my hands passed through him.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, voice already fading.

The light flared, swallowing him, swallowing everything. My grip on his hand slipped away, and his face blurred, dissolving into the white. I fought with everything I had, but the pull was relentless, dragging me back into the real world.

And then, he was gone.

## THE ANGEL FROM MY NIGHTMARE



When I regained consciousness, harsh light glared down at me, stabbing through my skull. My head throbbed and I struggled to make sense of the voices around me.

“Max! Can you hear me?” a panicked voice asked, sharp enough to slice through the haze.

I blinked, the world slowly coming into focus. Figures hovered over me—Jenny, Bonnie, Tanya, and a few other cheerleaders still in their uniforms crouched around me on the cold tile. Someone was scrubbing my forehead with something wet. For some reason, even Frankie White was there, leaning against the wall by the door, lazily flipping my pill bottle in one hand.

One of the girls leaned in closer. “Max? Oh my gosh. He’s awake.”

Their faces were pale with panic, wide-eyed, and frozen in varying states of shock. Absurdly, one thought crossed my mind: I've kissed at least four of them. And now here they were, staring down at me like I might shatter at any second.

"It's fine, Max," Tanya said. "Frankie saw what happened. Those assholes won't get away with it."

"It's all my fault!" Jenny sobbed, streaked with tears. "I'm so sorry, Max!"

Someone muttered something about a baseball bat.

"Don't try to get up," Bonnie said. "Just stay down."

I didn't care what had happened. I didn't care what they were saying. Only one thought pounded in my head: *I need to go back to sleep.*

*Now.*

I tried to sit up—my entire body screaming in protest—but hands pressed me back down.

"Don't!" Jenny was holding my shoulders now, panicked. "You need to go to a hospital!"

*Hospital?*

*Andy is unconscious. He didn't just take a nap. He has to be in a hospital now...*

"Max, please..." Jenny's face crumpled. "Forgive me. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"What are you talking about?" I mumbled.

She looked nervously at the others. "I... Kyle was saying all this stuff about me and you, and I didn't want everyone to think..." Her voice faltered, her eyes darting briefly toward Tanya before coming back to me. "To think I was... I just... I told him we didn't hook up. But he wouldn't drop it, so I said we didn't because... because you're gay."

She buried her face in her hands. The other girls shifted, exchanging looks like they weren't sure whether to comfort her or me.

I didn't have the energy to follow.

"You... why?"

“I didn’t think it would matter!” she cried. “I didn’t know he’d tell people. I didn’t think it would turn into *this*. I was stupid. I’m so, so, so sorry.”

I looked at her, but I wasn’t really seeing her, my thoughts too sluggish to catch up.

“It’s fine,” I said.

It wasn’t fine. None of it was fine. But not because of Kyle Silva. He hadn’t broken me. Andy, on the other hand... Andy could break me with a single word.

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Someone took me to the hospital. I don’t remember the ride—just the faint sting of something cold pressed against my head.

Next thing I knew, I was under fluorescent lights that buzzed like angry bees. A nurse hovered nearby, muttering something I didn’t catch. Someone else shone a light in my eyes. A doctor asked questions. I think I answered. It all passed in a blur. They said I might have a concussion and needed tests to make sure everything was okay.

But nothing was okay. Nothing *would* be okay until I got back to Andy.

*Did he really do it?*

*Did he actually make himself this way?*

*Will he be stuck there forever?*

*No, he can’t be. It’s just temporary. It has to be.*

The nurses wouldn’t let me sleep. Wouldn’t stop fussing over me, poking and prodding, dragging me through test after test. Every time I closed my eyes and felt that first tug of sleep, someone was shaking me awake, asking me how many fingers they were holding up or if I knew what day it was. I couldn’t give a damn about their fingers or what day it was. All I cared about was the sinking dread in my chest. The fear that Andy might not be waiting for me when I finally fell asleep.

Then my parents showed up.

Mom was frantic, demanding to know what had happened. Dad's eyes kept darting to the bandage on my head. They talked over each other, throwing questions at me—questions I didn't have the answers to or didn't want to answer.

They looked scared. I've never seen that look on their faces before. It didn't suit them. They wanted me to press charges. Go to the police. File a report. I tuned out the second they brought it up. What was the point? Pressing charges wouldn't undo what happened. It wouldn't fix *that*.

They wouldn't let me sleep either. Not until the doctor allowed.

"I'm *fine*! Jesus... why won't anyone listen to me?!"

The whole time, my mind was running wild.

*Andy. He is waiting. He hates waiting.*

I begged my parents to leave me be. To just let me sleep. I begged them, my voice cracking with frustration. I *needed* to sleep.

They weren't themselves, so full of concern that it suffocated me. It wasn't comforting. It just made everything worse.

Eventually, after hours of back and forth, the doctor came in and gave me the green light.

"He's fine," he told my parents. "Let him rest. One night for observation. We'll monitor him, but he's stable."

*Stable.*

Like hell I was.

They said a few more things before finally leaving. The door clicked shut behind them, and the room went quiet.

My body buzzed with leftover adrenaline and ache. Every inch of me felt heavy, like I was sinking into the mattress.

Sleep didn't just come.

It swallowed me whole.

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I woke up.

Sunlight poured through the window, so bright it made me wince. Morning sounds filtered in from the hospital hallway—voices, carts squeaking as they rolled past, and the distant beep of a heart monitor.

I'd fallen asleep.

I'd dreamed of nothing.

I sat up so fast my head spun. "No, no, no," I groaned.

I tried to rationalize. Maybe it was the concussion. Maybe it was the hospital. Maybe it was just stress.

Maybe Andy was fine.

But I could *feel* he wasn't.

That cold panic settled deep inside me like a sickness. No matter what excuses I threw at it, one thought kept rising above the noise: *What if he wasn't waiting anymore?* I tried to sleep again, willed myself back into that white nowhere. But nothing came. When I drifted off again, I woke up what felt like seconds later, yet hours had passed. And the dread only deepened.

After I got home from the hospital, I tried again. But my brain was wide awake. I was too rested. Too alert. And every second I stayed awake stretched into a lifetime.

The pills were gone when I needed them the most. Probably still back at school, along with my bag. Or maybe Frankie White took them and sold them to the next desperate kid. Fuck knows.

I could've cried from the frustration.

Naya and Mikey came by in the afternoon.

"Girls and Frankie told the principal everything," Naya said, sitting cross-legged on my bed. "Silva and his idiot friends are suspended for now."

"For now," Mikey said. "They better expel them. Seriously, those guys are fucking psychos."

I nodded absently. My head felt like it was stuffed with cotton. Even the pain covering my body felt muted, like it was happening to someone else, and I was borrowing their skin.

Naya tilted her head. “Max? You okay?”

I forced a smile. “Yeah. Just tired.”

They hung out for a while. Maybe out of pity. Maybe just to keep my mind busy. I wasn’t much company—just nodding along while my eyes kept drifting to the bag they brought back, sitting on the desk. Turned out the cheerleaders packed it up for me. I kept hoping that at least one of my things was inside.

I wanted Naya and Mikey to leave already, but I was too scared to ask. I knew the second they were gone, the silence would take over, and the thoughts would eat me alive.

They tried to fill the space with talk—asking about my “real dad,” about Chicago. Mikey had already told Naya everything. Then they asked about Andy, and that’s when something in me just shut off. They noticed. The room went quiet in that awkward, heavy way that tells you everyone’s thinking the same thing, but no one wants to say it. Because I bet they thought that I hadn’t find him. That it was just a dream. A minute later, Naya stood up first, and Mikey followed. They said they’d check in later.

The moment the door closed behind them, I ran for the bag. The dizziness hit me, but I ignored it and dumped everything onto the floor.

The pills.

A shiver ran through me. *It’ll work this time*, I told myself. *And even if it won’t? Doesn’t matter. We’ll be together in real life. He wasn’t being serious when he said he wanted to stay in the dream. He was just in a bad mood. Bad place. It’s temporary.*

I took the pill and lay back, waiting.

Waiting for him. Waiting for proof that everything was still okay.

But dreams didn’t come. Not that night and not the ones after.

And no matter how many times I told myself that the next night everything would be fine, my body wouldn’t believe it. Every second of every day, I was teetering on the edge of a panic attack. The necklace Andy gave me felt like it was burning straight through my chest. I didn’t even realize I’d been gripping it nonstop until the string finally snapped, the pendant falling into



my palm. A sharp pang hit me right in the heart at the sight of it. I clenched it so hard the edges bit into my skin, half-hoping it would bleed.

My mom tried to take care of me in her own awkward way. She hovered in the doorway of my room, her voice unusually soft, asking if I wanted to eat something. She never sounded like this unless she thought someone else was listening. I didn't know how to accept the attention or the care. Everything she did was a reminder that it probably wasn't genuine. Maybe she was pretending, trying to convince herself she was a good mom. Trying to make herself feel better. Not me.

I couldn't keep it together. So I did the only thing I could think of: sleep.

I slept whenever I could. Curled up in my bed, on the couch, even on the floor among my clothes and comics, when exhaustion caught up to me mid-afternoon. But sleep wasn't a cure. It was a trap, a false promise that always let me down. No matter how long I slept, no matter how deeply I sank into the darkness of sleep, nothing was waiting for me on the other side.

I never dreamed again.

By the third day, the constant panic hollowed me out. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I was barely functioning. I couldn't take it anymore. So I started making calls.

First I called the facility where Andy was staying.

"I'm sorry, but we can't share any information about our patients," the woman on the phone said, her tone polite but final.

"He's my friend. I just need to know if he's okay. Please."

"I understand, but—"

I hung up.

Next I tried hospitals. I called each one in Chicago whose number I found. Each time, I hit the same wall: no information, no help, just polite refusals.

I tried Marcus, desperate.

"Can you go check on him?" I begged. "You're closer. Or ask that girl—what was her name? The one who helped us—Tiffany! Ask Tiffany, please!"

“I can try, Max, but...”

“But what?”

He sighed. “If he’s not there, it doesn’t mean—”

I hung up once more.

The panic gnawed at me until it gave way to something worse. Anger.

It grew, spreading like wildfire through my chest. It wasn’t fair. He was supposed to be there. He promised me. He promised he would be waiting when I fell asleep. He promised he wouldn’t shut me out again. So why didn’t he keep his promise?

He was *selfish*. That was the only word for it.

He knew how much he meant to me, but he did what he thought was better for him, without ever thinking about how it would make *me* feel. He’d disappeared without warning, leaving me to scramble for answers, to drown in my own fears. And for what? To protect some broken parts of himself that I’d told him, over and over, didn’t make me want him any less?

I paced my room, the pendant clutched in my fist. The anger burned through me, consuming everything in its path. Furious at him for vanishing. Furious at myself for not being able to stop it. The anger burned hot and bright, but underneath it all was the same gnawing fear.

My dad stepped into my room, holding out the phone. “It’s for you.”

My heart sped up and dropped at the same time.

“Who?”

He just shrugged.

I snatched the phone from him and pressed it to my ear. “Hello?”

There was a pause.

Then: “Hi... Is this Max?”

Girl’s voice. Young and unsure.

“Yeah. Who is this?”

Another pause. “Hi Max... This is Phoebe.”

“Phoebe?”

“Andy’s sister.”

The name landed a second too late.

“Oh.”

“I... I found your number in his notebook,” she said. “It was circled. With a heart. So I thought... maybe I should call.”

It was as if a light flicked on in the darkness.

“Is Andy there? Can I talk to him?”

Silence.

“Please,” I said. “Is he okay?”

“No, he... he talked about you. A lot. I thought you should know.”

Something cold and ugly rose in my chest, whatever had been sitting there these past few days now fully awake. “Wait—just tell me where he is. Please.”

“I’m really sorry,” she said. “Andy died a few days ago.”

The window was open. So why couldn’t I breathe?

“You were all he talked about when I visited him. I’m glad he found someone who made him happy. We’re really grateful, Max. But... I think everything was just too much for him, you know?”

She kept talking, but her words started to blur.

“...They think he bought the pills from another patient. No one noticed in time. My parents are talking about suing the facility, but... I don’t know. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

*Doesn’t matter?*

“...We knew this might happen someday. There’s a funeral next week. I think he would’ve wanted you there. To say goodbye.”

*Say goodbye?*

I don’t remember if I hung up or if she did.

Only the silence that followed.

I stood there, staring blankly, still holding the phone, as if maybe the next call would come and undo it all. Then something caught my eye.

Sticking out from under the bed was The Hermit card.

I reached for it, my fingers trembling.

I let out a choked sound, half sob, half laugh, all wrong. The tears followed, messy and sudden and unstoppable. My body folded in on itself, each gasp like broken glass in my lungs. My chest hurt in a way that didn't feel like it came from inside me.

I pressed my fist to my mouth, trying to stop it. It didn't help. It was ugly and all over the place. I wanted to disappear. To stop existing. Shrink into the floor, dissolve into air. Be *anywhere* but here and now.

He told me not to look for him. Not to dig. To leave things the way they were.

But I had.

And now this was all that was left.

We could've had *something*. Maybe not perfect. Maybe just the strange little place in dreams. It was ours. Real in the only way that ever mattered.

But now he was gone.

I fucked up.

I fucked up so bad the guilt crushed me like a slab of concrete.

The next thing I knew, I was on the roof. I didn't even remember climbing out the window. Just... standing there, staring down at the lawn. It didn't seem that far. The night air felt colder than it should've, or maybe I was just numb.

My foot edged toward the gutter, the drop clawing for me, like invisible fingers around my ankle. The pills were in my pocket. I must've grabbed them without realizing it, or maybe I'd been carrying them all along. I dug the bottle out, my hands shaking so hard the lid slipped off and rolled down the shingles, disappearing into the dark. I poured the pills into my palm. My mind screamed at me to stop, but the thought of going back to Andy was louder.

There was still enough left.

*Don't think. Just do it.*

He was probably waiting for me. Irritated that I was late, as always.

I swallowed them fast, one by one, before I could change my mind. Their familiar bitter taste clung to the back of my throat. Minutes passed. Or it could have been seconds. Or decades. Time didn't feel real anymore. My body swayed as the world spun around me. My knees buckled slightly, the roof tilting beneath me like a ship caught in a storm.

*It's okay. Just fall asleep. Just close your eyes and you'll see him again.*

But the spinning didn't stop. My head felt too light, like it was floating away from my body. Dark spots bloomed at the edges of my vision. The edge of the roof scraped against my foot as I lost my balance and slipped.

The Christmas lights my dad refused to ever take down caught around my leg, the wires snapping one by one. But they couldn't hold me forever.

I hit the ground hard.

The grass was cold and wet against my cheek. The neighbor's dog was barking. A door slammed open. Frantic, pounding footsteps thundered across the yard. Dad's shout echoed. Something about the pill bottle.

My thoughts were thick and sluggish, like they were sinking into quicksand. Rough hands yanked my shoulders and rolled me onto my back, before long-nailed fingers shoved into my throat, forcing me to gag. I choked and sputtered as the pills came up in a burning rush, splattering onto the grass. My mom's hands didn't stop, pressing harder, forcing more out of me even as I gasped and coughed and tried to breathe.

I closed my eyes, the cold seeping into my skin. I didn't feel anything except the dull, aching void where Andy used to be.

I was so close. I'd almost made it.

And all I could think about was how much I hated them for pulling me back.

## THE END OF BEGINNING



I'm sitting in the locker room, tying my cleats, when my phone buzzes. Marcus's name lights up the screen. For a second, I think about ignoring it—he always calls at the worst times—but I pick up anyway.

"You good?" he asks. No hello, no small talk.

I tug the laces tight, holding the phone with my shoulder. "Yeah. You?"

"Sorry, bud, I'm not gonna make it to the game. My boss is having a meltdown. But, tomorrow—maybe we can grab some food? Or see a movie?"

"Sure," I say, without much thought.

From across the room, someone yells my name, telling me to hurry up. The noise of the stadium bleeds faintly through the concrete walls—vendors shouting, kids chanting for hot dogs, people finding their seats...

"You sound tired," Marcus says. "Or maybe just old."

I smirk. “You calling to insult me, or was there a point?”

“Tiff wanted me to check on you.”

“Classic Tiffany.”

He hesitates. “You promise you’re okay?”

I stare down at my shoes. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You should come more often, you know?”

“Oh yeah? So your beloved wife can nudge me even more, how I’m all alone in a very empty house with no one to bother me?” I snort as I roll my eyes. “How dare I do what I want?”

“Don’t blame her. She comes from a family tree so big it could’ve shaded a whole neighborhood. She doesn’t get us—sad loners.”

Someone shouts my name again, louder this time.

I sigh. “Yeah... I gotta go. Can’t let the team play without their star.”

Marcus chuckles, says goodbye, and the line goes dead. I shove the phone into my locker and stare down at the cracked leather of my glove, letting the noise of the stadium wash over me. Most guys get hyped before a game, and I try to, but moments like this—when it’s too quiet—make the silence in my head louder. The kind of silence that drags me to places I don’t want to go.

Like the funeral I never went to.

Because I didn’t go to Andy’s funeral. I couldn’t make my legs move. I couldn’t stand the thought of all these people who’d known him his whole life but didn’t really *know* him. Not like I did. Not after three months that felt like a lifetime. I visited his grave later, when the world had gone quiet. Then I went to the Art Institute of Chicago and sat there for hours in front of every painting he liked.

I don’t think my friends or Marcus ever truly believed me about Andy. *Believed*-believed. I think they just went along with the story. After all, they never got the chance to meet him.

They also don’t know that I’d borrowed the Greek mythology book from the library and carried it everywhere for a while, flipping through the same stories, trying to hear his voice in my head. It wasn’t much, but it was

enough to feel like he was still here, tucked in the margins of something he loved. Because when it's too quiet, I think too much. How he'd bite his lower lip, or how his gums showed when he laughed too hard. How the horror movies didn't scare him, but made him feel untouchable, like nothing could hurt him if he stared fear straight in the face. How he made me feel... Small things, but together they feel like a map. Like if I remember them right, I could find my way back to him.

I never returned the book. The fine probably showed up a year later in my mailbox back home. If it did, my parents didn't bother to tell me. I don't talk to them much these days. They got divorced not long after I moved out. Funny right? Yeah, I didn't laugh either. Turns out I was the glue that held us together. It's like they finally had permission to walk away from each other. The mystery of my life.

To be fair, Mom tried. After I fell off the roof—after she literally forced me to stay alive—she made an effort, or at least what she thought was an effort. I think she wanted to fix something between us, though maybe she didn't even know what that “something” was. She wasn't the type to admit she was wrong. Not once. Not ever. And when you can't admit the cracks, how can you ever fix them? She just covered the cracks with wallpaper, pretending the house was still whole.

But maybe not every crack needs fixing. Some you just learn to live with. You get used to them. You stop seeing them. I don't hate her. I don't even blame her anymore. It's just that I don't know how to let her in. And she doesn't know how to knock. She never came to any of my games.

And Dad... it was like he'd finally woken up after all those years, shaking off whatever haze he'd been stuck in. Marcus talks to him sometimes—just enough to keep things steady—but I can't. Just looking at him still makes something twist in my stomach. Like it's my fault. Like I let it happen.

With time, I've realized Dad was lost too. Living this life for the first time, as everyone else. He wasn't cruel. Just... useless. Like he didn't know how to be more than a witness to his own life. He was as broken by that



house as the rest of us. And still, I can't let the anger fully go. It's this strange, twisted knot. I feel sorry for him, too. I really do, not out of pity. Maybe that's stupid. It's not like he was an alcoholic, or beat us, or was the one who cheated and wrecked the family. But he left this hollow space by not interfering, and now there's nothing I can shove into that hole to make it okay.

Sometimes I wonder what I needed from him back then. Did I need him to shield me from the chaos, or just acknowledge it? Could I have asked for more? Could I have understood that his silence wasn't indifference, but uncertainty? Maybe then things would have been better.

Speaking of fathers... I didn't bother to look for my *real* one. I never felt that so-called "urge" people talk about. To find out who he was, how he looked, or whether we had the same voice or smile. None of it mattered. He wasn't there, and Dad was. In his own way.

I finished school and got scouted by the Chicago Cubs during my last semester. Started out in Lansing, Michigan, playing for a lower-level affiliate, grinding it out, and trying to build a future. It was the "normal" path everyone said I should want—buses, motels, cheap meals, endless practice—but it felt like I was living someone else's life, dragging all this weight behind me that no one else could see. A few years later, I moved in with Marcus for some time (and Tiffany, weirdly enough) and eventually made it to the Cubs. Every season felt like proof that I hadn't quit, that I hadn't completely vanished inside myself. It was everything I'd ever worked for. But the success didn't erase what came before. It just gave me more hours on the road to think about it.

Yeah, I kept playing baseball after what happened in the bathroom. I thought I'd never set foot on a field again, but maybe I needed something to hold onto when everything else felt messy. Throwing myself into the game kept my mind off life, and I was too good at it to just throw it away over some assholes. When I finally came back to school a week after I got knocked out, guys from the team found it in themselves to stop being

grossed out by me and actually apologized. They didn't know what to do with me anymore, so "sorry" was the best they had.

You know who else apologized? Kyle fucking Silva. I ran into him years later. They let him finish high school, but he had to transfer. He said he was sorry and admitted that he'd been a stupid, jealous kid. A half-assed apology, but still.

I thanked him. He didn't know why, and his confused face made me laugh right there on the sidewalk. I haven't told him that if he hadn't been that stupid, jealous kid—if he and his friends hadn't dragged me into that bathroom, if Nick Miller hadn't knocked me out—I never would've had the chance to tell Andy I loved him.

I still see Mikey and Naya sometimes. They're still together. They're good people. They never asked me to be anything but myself.

Phoebe wanted to stay in touch. I think she wanted to hold on to some piece of Andy through me. I tried but had to stop.

She had the same eyes as him.

For a long time, I didn't want to live, but didn't want to die either. I was stuck in this gray, aimless space. Almost like the beach where it all started. Existing, but not really living. Going through each day with no plans, no wants, no purpose. Just whatever. Every day felt like I was just killing time. If the world ended, I'd probably just stand there, watching.

It wasn't all because of Andy. I'd felt like this before. Way before him. I'd just gotten good at pushing it down, burying it under sarcasm, girls, games, noise. He didn't cause it. But he was the last blow. The one that cracked what was already fragile.

After him, I couldn't pretend anymore. I was back to the state I was in *before Andy*, but ten times worse. When he was gone, the numbness came back. But stronger. Heavier. Like it had been waiting. Just lurking around the corner. The dreams never returned. That part of my brain just shut down with him.

Would he still be alive if I hadn't gone to see him that day? Would we still be together every night in dreams?

I'll never know.

But I'll wonder about it forever.

Over the years, Andy started to fade. He slipped further and further into the back of my mind, like *the dream* he was. You only remember fragments, disjointed details, vague feelings: being seen, being wanted. Joy. Fear.

Love.

I see him sometimes. In crowds. Across the street. On passing trains. Half a second too late. A flash of his hair, or the curve of his jaw.

Somewhere along the way, Andy stopped being Andy. He became a feeling. A memory of a memory. I couldn't remember the exact sound of his laugh anymore; it used to be my favorite sound.

But I still find him in strange places. In the sounds of the city. In the smell of old books and worn leather. Sometimes I wander into vintage shops and just sit there, surrounded by things that feel like him, until the owner quietly asks if everything's okay. Then I leave.

Goddamn it. Everything brings me back to him.

It wasn't supposed to end like this.

It should've ended with: *And then I woke up.*

Back in the dream. Back with him.

But I didn't.

And I never will.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest thanks to everyone who helped bring this book to life.

To Milo and Jasiu, the first people I run to whenever I start writing something, and who somehow still put up with all my constant questions about... well, everything.

To Asia (MadBlackie), who stayed up until 3 a.m. reading one of my first drafts (and I'm *still* sorry you actually had to read that version).

To Basia, Rinko, and Nicole, for being my beta readers and for helping me make this story slightly less chaotic.

To all my friends who kept asking, "*So, how's the book going?*"

And finally, to my parents, who made me fall in love with books long before I ever tried to write one.