



Boarding School Blues

Boarding School Blues

by

Levi Holland

Chapter 1

Cooper Morrow stretched out a scrawny arm and grasped the tree branch. Grunting as he pulled himself up, the climb left him at peace as the afternoon sun soaked into his skin. The crickets chirped their hellos as he climbed higher and higher until he was side by side with his best friend, Sawyer.

There was enough room for the both of them against the scratchy bark of the honeylocust. Now that they'd made the climb, the only thing left to do was let his feet dangle and appreciate the view.

Cooper loved this spot because of the way he could see bits of Misty Pines peeking its head through the summertime trees. Maybe they could spot more of the town if they climbed higher, but the dangers of a branch snapping were too great. At least, that's what his mom was always saying. Closing his eyes, Cooper breathed in the sweet smell of pine on the wind.

"So, this is it, huh?" Sawyer asked. He gave a halfhearted smile as he rubbed the faded jagged scar running down his cheek.

"The view, or my last day of freedom?"

"Your freedom," Sawyer corrected.

Cooper groaned and chipped away a piece of loose bark on the branch. "Don't remind me."

How was it fair Sawyer got a whole extra week of summer break, while Cooper had to leave early for some uppity boarding school?

Sawyer gently bumped his shoulder. "You know I'm messin', right? I'm sure Blue Ridge is gonna be great."

Rolling his eyes, Cooper said, "Starting middle school without you and the other guys is gonna totally suck. I'm not gonna know anybody there."

"You're telling me Cooper Morrow is afraid of meeting new people? Hello, remember how we met?"

Cooper smiled as he got lost in the daydream. Two years before, during the summer of third grade, Cooper had been cruising the bumpy sidewalks of the neighborhood on his scooter. He was at the right place at the right time when he came across the new kid, his red baseball cap too big for his curly brown locks as he scribbled on the ground with a bucket of chalk at his side.

Neither of them noticed the dog until it was too late. Barking and gnashing its teeth, it lunged towards the kid, one sharpened claw quickly finding a home on the boy's cheek.

Cooper swooped in on the scooter like a madman, barreling into the canine at full force. As he tumbled down to the pavement, the skin on his palms got scraped up, but at least the dog was spooked away.

Just like that, he was Sawyer, he was Cooper, and they were inseparable from that point on.

How many times had Sawyer watched his back, too? Like last year, when Lance Buttface Johnson kept picking on Cooper because he didn't have enough money for extra snacks at lunch. Sawyer spread a rumor around the 5th grade that Lance's farts reeked and his pee smelled like old, smelly cheese.

It wasn't meeting new people that made Cooper afraid. He was afraid of never finding another friend like Sawyer.

"You're gonna be great, Cooper," Sawyer said. "Just promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Promise you won't turn into one of those snobby, rich kids."

Cooper blanched and stuck out his tongue. "Uggh, never."

Sawyer pretended to sip from a cup of tea, extending his pinky as he spoke in a bad English accent. It made Cooper laugh, at least enough to distract him for a little while. This was his last afternoon with his old life. After today, everything would change.

The station wagon rumbled along the misty gray roads of the Virginian mountains.

Buckled in the back seat, Cooper wondered when the never-ending trees would give way to something more exciting. Anything to peak his interest! But ever since his parents drove headlong into the blanket of fog swallowing the mountains around them, trees were all Cooper could see.

The brochure for Blue Ridge Academy sat unopened beside him. He'd give anything to climb in the open trunk, pull out his favorite Detective Dackery book from his suitcase, and get lost in the world of the famous duck detective rather than the one he was on his way to now.

Cooper wasn't super religious, but when his parents first applied for the scholarship, he prayed the school would explode. Or get sucked into a black hole. Or at the very least, maybe his application would be rejected. Cooper didn't care how amazing the school was supposed to be. How did his parents not understand his whole life was about to be uprooted? By June, they received word of his acceptance. By July, the deal was done. His prayers failed. God hated him.

Why did he have to be the one unlucky scholarship kid?

"We're getting close!" his dad announced from behind the wheel. Cooper groaned like he did when he had an upset stomach.

"It's not too late to turn around," Cooper said before clunking his head against the window. It was his mom who twisted around in her seat to stretch her hand.

"Come on," she said and wiggled her fingers towards him. "Give 'em here."

Cooper reached out and slipped into the warm comfort of his mom's hand.

"I know you're nervous," she said. "This is a big change for all of us, but think about the amazing stories you'll get to share when we see you next."

His dad cleared his throat. "I'm sure things are even better than when I was a kid."

Imagining his dad as a kid in the ancient, dusty classrooms of Blue Ridge did little to help him. Those teachers were probably skeletons by this point.

"But Dad, what about my friends at home? What happens when they don't wanna hang out with me because we never see each other?"

“I know it can feel overwhelming,” his dad said, “but the friends I made at Blue Ridge were part of my life for years after I graduated. Remember Oskar?”

Cooper nodded. During his dad’s fortieth birthday party last year, dozens of friends from years past came to wish him well. One of the people who hung around longest was a well-dressed man with tan skin. He and his dad reminisced well into the night. It was only later Cooper discovered his dad and Oskar had been roommates at Blue Ridge.

“I bet you’ll find an even better friend than I did,” his dad said.

That part, Cooper doubted. Sawyer was his ride or die—or at least, that’s the way things had been. What if by the winter break, Sawyer had already moved on and replaced him? Cooper would rather have his knees taken out by a sledgehammer and be crippled for life!

The GPS announced Cooper’s pending doom. Outside the window, iron bars followed the dips and curves of the hills along every twist and turn. Cooper wondered if the entire campus was gated in. What had he read on their site, that Blue Ridge Academy had over a thousand acres of land? The number meant nothing to Cooper, but the top-down drone pictures of the campus were jaw dropping. At least if he hated the place, he could run away and live off the land as a hermit. How hard could it be to survive on his own?

His dad slowed and turned through the first set of gates, where the iron letters of BLUE RIDGE curved over the entrance. Well, Cooper thought, this is it—the end of my life.

More hills, more trees, more fog. It wasn’t until they reached a second set of sealed gates that anything changed. Blocking the path with his arms crossed was a tall security guard dressed in a dark navy suit. The car rolled to a stop in front of him.

“The letter,” his dad said as he rolled down the windows, and Cooper handed the invitation up. The smell of freshly cut grass filled the station wagon as the guard strolled over. A pair of round shades hid the man’s eyes, but Cooper’s skin prickled as the man glanced his way. The guy was

starting to freak him out. Seriously, who in their right mind wore sunglasses on a foggy day? They weren't called fogglasses, after all.

"Hello," his dad called out cheerily as the guard plucked the invitation from his hand. "We're here for the new student drop-off."

While the guard scanned the invitation, Cooper's eyes drifted to the black German Shepherd leashed beside the guard post. Its beady black eyes bore into Cooper as it revealed its white fangs in a snarl. After the run in with the dog that nearly clawed Sawyer's face off, Cooper had taken it upon himself to learn everything he could about canines. It's what Detective Dackery would have done—learned anything and everything he could to prepare for the next case. He knew that depending on the dog, a single bite could snap his bones like a toothpick.

"Go on through," the guard said, his voice like gargled rocks.

The gates groaned as they creaked and wobbled on their hinges, and the station wagon pattered through with a lurch as they crossed the second barrier of gates.

"Dad, did that guy seem a little off to you?" Cooper asked, twisting in his seat to stare at the guard as they drove past. Even with the man's eyes hidden behind his sunglasses, Cooper couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched.

"Guys like him are just doing their job, protecting the school and all that. No need to worry, buddy."

"If you say so," Cooper said, giving one last glance over his shoulder. He'd be fine if he never saw the man at the front gates again.

After following the road a while longer, his mom gasped in her seat as she leaned forward.

"It's beautiful!" she exclaimed. "Cooper, look! Just like Harry Potter."

It was the first image anyone saw when looking online or at Blue Ridge Academy's many brochures: an immense stone castle modeled after 17th century, eastern European architecture. Around the different corners of the castle, eight towering spires stretched high into the fog. Each one

featured one of four different colored banners as they flapped in the breeze. Never in his whole life had Cooper seen a building so enormous.

A few kids were out in the manicured grass, some dribbling a soccer ball with their feet, others throwing a Frisbee back and forth, or simply chatting back and forth in huddles. One was even attempting to scale the trunk of a nearby tree. Cooper smiled. He'd have no problem making it to a low-hanging branch like that.

As the station wagon drove along, Cooper pressed his face to the window. How many of these kids were headed into 6th grade like him?

"This place is way cooler than I thought," Cooper said breathlessly.

"See?" his mom asked. "There's the Cooper I know."

A string of vehicles lined the curb as the station wagon pulled to a stop behind them. Adults dressed in the same navy suits as the guard from earlier helped direct students and their families inside the towering castle. This close to it, Cooper thought his new school might swallow him whole.

Cooper blinked. Both his parents had turned in their seats to look at him. His mom's eyes brimmed with tears, and Cooper doubted his dad's smile had ever been bigger.

This was it. They wanted him to give the final okay. He could still back out, he supposed; pitch a fit like when he was still a little kid. And his parents loved him enough that it would probably work.

But maybe, just maybe, there was a little part of him that wanted this, too. The unknown, the excitement, the nervousness, the anticipation. It wrapped him up like a ball of rubber bands, and he was bouncy thinking about what might come next. Sawyer's voice echoed in the back of his mind: Promise you won't turn into one of those snobby, rich kids.

Taking a steady breath, Cooper closed his eyes before giving his parents a nod.

"I'll give it a shot."

Roman Jacobs nursed the bruise beside his ribs as his mom pulled into Blue Ridge Academy's expansive driveway.

He didn't need to see it to know how ugly the purple stain was on his stomach—Xavier made sure to leave a mark.

Roman cast a glance to his brother, who was too absorbed in his phone to pay him any attention, but that was fine. The last thing Roman needed was another painful reminder about where their relationship stood.

His eyes flicked down to the red Nike sneakers on Xavier's feet. His brother's feet were getting too big for them, but he wore them anyway. Kept them clean no matter what. Roman's last Christmas gift to his brother was pretty much the only sign that Xavier still cared for him. Or maybe Xavier just liked having nice shoes.

Resting his head against the cool window of the Tesla, he tried picturing the last time his entire family had been together. Maybe it was during his eleventh birthday, or was his mom gone for work? He couldn't remember. Even now his dad was off somewhere on one of his movie shoots. When Roman woke up that morning, he hoped his dad would somehow be there to hug him and drive him to his first day of middle school.

But he hadn't. And now after his mom dropped them off, it would be another four months before Roman saw either of his parents again. Already the homesickness was killing him.

His mom stopped the Tesla at the security gate, and Roman immediately recognized the broad stance of Roy Rochester from the other times he'd visited. He knew the professors had to wear special uniforms, but it always creeped Roman out how Roy always wore the exact same clothes, even down to the dark sunglasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

As his mom handed the papers with their updated photographs to Roy, Roman could have sworn the guard's brow furrowed as he swept his gaze over Xavier. Soon after, the gates creaked open, and the Tesla whirred softly as they drove through.

Up ahead, there were hardly any cars parked at the roundabout in front of the castle. It made no sense why they had to get to Blue Ridge so early. The opening ceremonies weren't until dinner, so what was the point? Besides, the moment his mom was gone, there'd be no one to stand in the way of Xavier.

When the Tesla parked, Roman opened the door and winced as a sharp jolt of pain shot through his ribs where Xavier had punched him earlier that morning. He grit his teeth and tried not to show how much it hurt. If he did, it was like letting Xavier win all over again.

"Boys, help me with your bags," his mom said.

Xavier didn't say a word as he stepped beside Roman. There wasn't even a glance. Every time Roman bent down to pull out another suitcase, it was like getting punched a second time. A third. A fourth. He was thankful as he dragged the last of the bags on the curb. Immediately, several adults in blue suits swarmed them and hauled the bags away towards the castle.

By the time Roman turned around, Xavier was already gone, making his way down the green fields to do whatever it was older brothers who didn't want to be around you did.

He flinched as his mom's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Try not to see the worst in him," his mom whispered. "Growing up can be hard for anyone."

"Yeah, except sometimes it feels like Xavier hates me."

"I promise you, he doesn't," his mom said. "He's just figuring things out. One day, you'll understand too as you get older and your body starts going through the same changes."

"Eww, Mom, really? A puberty talk now?"

She gave him a soft pat on the cheek. "Come on, wise guy. Let's get you settled."

Blue Ridge's castle was a great stone beast, and the stairs stretching down from the opening archway was like a forked tongue. Roman and his mom stepped into its mouth as they entered the shade. In an instant, the

amount of directions he could peel off to were overwhelming, and he wondered how people kept from getting lost.

From his last visit, Roman recognized the smooth, cobblestone walls, oddly pristine in their shape and condition. The castle wasn't really built hundreds of years ago—it was only made to appear that way—but Roman still found it impressive. What held it all together? Why didn't it come tumbling down? It must have taken forever to build.

“Do you think anyone ever gets lost here?” Roman asked his mom.

She didn't break stride as they marched to their first destination, wherever that was. “I'm sure it's happened before. Just make sure to ask for help if you do.”

“I'm not a little kid anymore,” Roman grumbled. The last thing he wanted to do was look like a lost child who couldn't find his parents at the store.

Attached to the side of the castle was a long, glass administrative building. Their footsteps echoed off the polished floor as they arrived and picked up a student handbook, Roman's schedule for classes, and his dorm room. All students lived in one of the many named spires around the castle, with the girls separated in their own wing. From there, if he remembered right, students were broken up on each floor based on their year: the seniors had the least stairs to climb, while the new 6th graders had to climb up seven grueling flights. As far as Roman knew, there were no elevators.

Roman pulled the dorm paper from his mom and paled as the purple letters of Fuerza, the same house as Xavier, gleamed on the page.

“Does the universe hate me or something?”

“What? Fuerza is a good home,” his mom said. “It stands for strength, you know. Your father will be so proud to learn both of his boys ended up where he did.”

If his dad really cared, maybe he would have shown up. Roman chewed the inside of his lip. Fuerza was the last place he wanted to be. He wasn't sure what any of the other Houses were called, but Roman would settle for just about any of them if it meant not being near Xavier.

The tears were threatening to build, and Roman shoved them down. “Mom, are you sure I can’t stay home with you? We can get a tutor like we do during the summer!”

His mom pulled him gently to one of the benches outside the office. She smoothed out her blue dress before patting the empty space. As he sat down, the overhead bell chimed as another family walked in. There was another young boy like Roman, but he didn’t pay them any attention. He wasn’t at Blue Ridge to make friends. He didn’t want to be there at all!

“I know this is hard,” his mom said. “The first time Xavier left was really hard for him, too. But I promise you, Roman, the stories you’ll have to share, the memories you’ll make, they’ll all be worth it.”

She leaned in and kissed him on the forehead, the same way she used to do all throughout his childhood. When he was really little and scraped his knee, kisses like that made him feel better. It made him feel like his mom was a superhero who could control all the bad things in the world.

But he knew better now. His mom couldn’t solve any of his problems. She didn’t understand anything at all about what he was going through, about how awful Xavier had been to him over the last year.

No, the only thing that would help Roman was staying as far away from his brother as possible.

Chapter 2

Outside of Blue Ridge's administrative office, Cooper's dad glanced through his scheduling and dorm papers until his bushy eyebrow twitched.

"Forgot your way around here?" Cooper asked.

"Ha ha," his dad said plainly. "One of my old teachers is now the headmaster. We didn't have the...greatest understanding."

"What your father means is that he liked to cause trouble," his mom said as she plucked the scheduling sheet from his dad's hands.

"How'd you get in trouble?" Cooper asked, but his dad was quick to raise his hands in self defense.

"Really, it was nothing. Some light pranks, innocent vandalism, that sort of thing. But maybe try to keep a low profile until you get settled in."

"Cooper," his mom said, "you're in Valentia. How exciting!"

His mom pointed to the red, swirling font of Valentia where the words House of Bravery were inscribed beneath.

Cooper didn't get the big deal. The names didn't mean anything. They were a silly way to figure out where you were in the castle, that's all.

"Well, it's no Ehre," his dad started to say, but an elbow from his mom silenced him. "I mean, Valentia is a great place to end up!"

His mom bent over with her hands on her knees. "Race you to the top?"

As they raced across the castle's corridors to his dorm room, they encountered all sorts of lavish furniture and architecture. Cooper had no way to put a value to it all, but it must have been easily more than a hundred times what his own house was worth. It reminded him of the field trip they took back in fourth grade to some dead guy's fancy estate. Blue Ridge completely dwarfed that building, but its rooms had a lot of similar furniture inside.

By the time they reached the bottom of Valentia's spire, his dad needed to catch his breath, huffing with one hand resting on his knee. He assured them he would die up the long staircase if they didn't wait for him to catch his breath.

They moved slower than Cooper would have liked, but they finally reached the top floor and entered the suite. Inside, sunlight shined through the stained-glass windows and across the cherry hardwood floor. There was a whole bunch of fancy furniture, but Cooper's eyes were drawn to the TV setup in the corner, way bigger and nicer than anything they had at their place. At least he wouldn't be totally bored out of his mind without the internet.

Along the gray, stone walls were towering portraits of old men Cooper didn't recognize. He figured they were probably long dead by now. The room smelled of oranges as Cooper paced around the wide open space.

Past the main suite was the bathroom, Cooper had never seen a place so shiny. His feet squeaked on the marble tiles as he poked his head inside the shower area. There was a shower head on either side. Cooper's stomach squirmed at the idea that he might have to share a shower with another boy he barely knew. At least the toilet had a door for privacy.

Checking his dorm papers again, Cooper headed to the first bedroom, marked with a shiny brass 1 above its door. Giving the door a quick knock, he felt a little silly when no one answered. Of course they wouldn't—he was clearly one of the first to arrive at school.

Walking inside the bedroom, Cooper wondered what his roommate would be like. Hopefully someone funny like Sawyer, or maybe someone who loved to climb like him. Honestly as long as the person wasn't a jerk, Cooper would be happy.

Inside the room, two twin beds faced each other on opposite ends of the room, with a separate nightstand and dresser for each, along with a small joint walk-in closet to share. Cooper could have easily squeezed two or three of his bedrooms inside his new dorm room.

"What do you think?" his dad asked.

“It’s...bigger than I expected,” Cooper offered.

“Needs a little personal touch, doesn’t it?”

Cooper nodded, wondering how he might decorate his side of the room. Or would his new roommate want to do something together?

When Cooper turned around, he was startled to see his parents standing together, smiling as his mom rested her head against his dad’s shoulder.

“My little man,” his mom whispered.

“Mom,” he groaned, “It’s just middle school. Really, I’ll be fine.”

His words trailed off, and before Cooper could put up any more false bravado, he tackled his parents at the same time as they smothered him in a hug.

“You call us if you need anything,” his mom said.

“Anytime at all,” his dad agreed. “But maybe not all the time.”

“Remember what your schedule said—opening ceremony at 6 o’clock.”

“Give yourself plenty of time to get there.”

“Maybe go with a buddy.”

Cooper’s head was spinning with the barrage of his parents’ last minute instructions. “Guys! I love you both, but really. I think I’ll be okay. Dad, if you survived this school, I think I can manage.”

“What does that mean?” his dad asked.

“I think,” his mom said, taking her husband’s hand, “Cooper’s got a good head on his shoulders. He’s smart, brave, friendly. He’s a perfect fit.”

Cooper smiled at his mom, and in the quiet, his dad asked, “And I’m not those things?”

They all turned their heads as someone stomped up the final stairs into the suite.

“Phew, finally! Out of the way! Coming through!”

Cooper's parents parted like clouds on a breezy day as a mousy-faced boy with high, rounded cheeks reached the landing. His brown, styled hair was neatly arranged in a swoop as the ends of each strand curled up. The yellow infinity scarf sitting on the boy's shoulders began a chain of mismatched clothes all the way down. Cooper thought the kid must have chosen them all at random with his eyes closed.

Peering down at the papers in his hands, the boy looked up and seemed to finally notice Cooper standing in the doorway of Room 1. He looked back down, scanned the papers with his finger one last time, and crumpled them in his pocket.

"You must be my roommate," the boy said as he strolled up to Cooper. "The name's Anakin Adams."

Cooper froze, staring at the boy's outstretched hand. This was his new roommate? Definitely not what he was expecting.

"You're supposed to shake it," Anakin said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

When Cooper shook the kid's hand, his arm was nearly rattled from its socket.

"Nice swag, by the way." Anakin walked a circle around Cooper, giving his clothes an appraising glance like he was ready to auction them off. "Very street urban."

"Uhh, thanks?" he said. "I'm Cooper. So, Anakin, like from Star Wars, right?"

Anakin shrugged. "I guess. Star Wars is cool and all, but it's definitely more my parents' thing. I only really like the lightsaber fights. So, this is our room, huh?"

Stepping past Cooper, Anakin inspected their bedroom, while Cooper walked back to give his parents one last hug goodbye. He wasn't convinced Anakin would be the forever friends that his dad and Oskar were, but at least their first conversation hadn't burned up in flames.

One of his dad's knees cracked as he stooped down.

“Remember what I said about your Headmaster,” he said. “He’s a good man, but a strict one. Just keep that in mind.”

“I will, Dad. I love you.”

“And please try not to do anything reckless. No climbing trees!”

After embracing one last time, Cooper fought the urge to chase after his parents as they finally descended the rounding staircase to the base of Valentia’s spire. As their footsteps faded among the growing voices from other students below, Cooper prayed he wasn’t making a terrible mistake.

Roman climbed the seven long flights of Fuerza’s spire alone.

The only way forward was to harden his heart. That was how he would survive. Even still, he nearly cried out as his mom drove away down Blue Ridge’s long driveway. Now it was just him.

Without much to do until the opening ceremonies, Roman figured he might as well see what his home for the next ten months would look like, so he followed the student map in his hands until he reached the boys’ section of housing, and then, Fuerza’s spire.

As he climbed, Roman prayed Xavier wasn’t in his suite. Or if he was, Roman hoped he wouldn’t be seen. The rounded stairs hugged the outside wall of the spire with a small landing at the start of each suite. When he reached the floor for the 8th graders, he paused. He thought he might have heard some snickering from further inside, but after peeking around the entranceway and seeing no one there, Roman dashed up the remaining steps, wincing with each sharp, jabbing pain at his ribs.

At the top, the suite for the 6th graders was identical to the ones he’d passed along the way. Fuerza’s purple colors lined all the carpet and furniture. The silence and warm sunlight pouring through the window was nice. At last no one would bother him here. As expected, his bags hadn’t been brought up yet. He remembered something about the front office lady saying they’d be there after dinner, but it didn’t matter. There was nothing inside that Roman needed right away.

Instead, he went to the bathroom, where his shoes squeaked with every step. The counter top had two sinks beneath a wide, frameless mirror. Lifting the tail of his shirt, Roman winced as the purple-plum bruise appeared. He could almost see the contours of Xavier's knuckles along his ribs. Every deep breath was another painful reminder of who Xavier was.

Roman hated the way the boy in the mirror stared back at him. Hated how much his face, his hair, his eyes were spitting images of Xavier's. Along the walls of his house were pictures of their father around their age—his mom always joked that if their dad could be plucked from those photos, she could pass the three of them off as brothers.

Roman dug his fingernails into his palm as he clenched his fist and slammed the top of the counter.

Leaving the bathroom, Roman went to Room 2 and closed the door shut before picking the bed closest to the window overlooking the campus.

Roman wasn't sure how long he sat huddled on the purple covers, staring blankly at the forest-covered mountains out the window. Maybe if he didn't move long enough, he'd be forgotten about, left alone. Maybe he'd even disappear entirely. No one would miss him.

Even as new voices and footsteps reached him from the suite, Roman didn't move. What was the point? He began to wonder whether the window pane at the top of Fuerza's tall spire might open up when his bedroom door barged open and thumped against the wall.

Standing in the doorway was a pale boy in clear-framed glasses. He ran a hand through his strawberry-blond hair before locking eyes with Roman on the corner bed.

"Oh," was all the boy said, his expression a mixture of surprise and something Roman didn't recognize. The boy's eyes danced over Roman's body before he stammered and backed out of the bedroom.

A flurry of voices argued outside before the boy returned, this time herded along by a woman with long hair the same shade as the kid's. Her hands were on his shoulders as she guided him inside.

"Ahem," the woman coughed, giving his shoulders a firm squeeze.

“I-I’m sorry I left without introducing myself,” the boy said, his eyes anywhere but on Roman. “I’m Fielding Everest.”

What an unusual name, Roman thought, glancing between the boy and his mother, although he supposed his own name wasn’t exactly common either.

“Delighted to meet you, dear,” Fielding’s mom said with a buttery smile that stirred something up inside Roman.

“Roman,” he managed, figuring he should actually get off the bed and move to introduce himself properly. “Roman Jacobs.”

The woman’s eyes grew wide in recognition. “I think I know your father! Well, my wife actually, but Jacobs, as in the director, Gerard Jacobs?”

“Mom,” Fielding said, “stop.”

“Oh, hush,” the woman said, conking the side of her son’s head.

Roman nodded and she came up to shake his hand. This was never a reaction he’d gotten before. Whenever people were interested in his father, they spoke with him, not Roman.

Mrs. Everest squeezed him in a hug, and Roman’s face smushed against her breasts. They were suffocating, and he fought the urge to push the woman away as he stood stiffly with his arms at his side.

“Mom, boundaries!” Fielding shouted, and Roman caught the tail end of a southern drawl in his raised voice.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and stepped back to wipe the tears from her eyes. “You’ll never know how grateful we are to your father. He was my wife’s big break. Ahh, look at me. Such a mess. Excuse me.”

The two boys waited awkwardly as the sound of nostrils blowing into a tissue reached them from the bathroom. Fielding still refused to really look at Roman, so he tried breaking the ice instead.

“Moms, right? Always doing embarrassing things like that.”

Fielding offered a meek smile, finally looking up at him. “Tell me about it.”

“So, your mom’s...”

Fielding’s face flushed. “Yeah, she’s gay. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“I was going to say an actress, but no,” Roman said. “Of course not. Why would it matter?”

“It doesn’t,” Fielding said with enough sting to make Roman flinch. The drawl was back in his voice. “Sorry, it’s just some people have issues with them. With—”

Fielding’s mom came back, her face now cleaned up, and she stretched her jaw like she was trying to wake herself up.

“Well, I guess this is it,” she said. “I’ve got to take care of a few things before I go, but try not to get into too much trouble. I love you, sunshine.”

Roman heard the muffled groan even as Mrs. Everest buried her son in a full-bodied hug. Seeing the two of them burned something inside Roman, and he turned away. What did he care how other families were?

After she left, Roman was ready to continue quietly ignoring each other, but Fielding seemed to have other plans in mind.

“So, why were you sitting up here all alone?”

“I...uhh...” Roman stammered, not sure what to say. His mind flashed to Xavier, the emptiness inside his chest, the window. “I don’t know.”

“Well, come on, let’s hang outside for a bit. I saw some kids throwing a Frisbee.”

“I don’t know,” Roman said again, worried Xavier might see him and ruin things.

“Is that all you know how to say?” Fielding asked. “Come on, let’s go.”

Before Roman could protest, Fielding grabbed his hand before running the opposite way, tugging Roman with him. It annoyed him at first, being pulled along by this kid he barely knew, but seeing the way Fielding’s smile lit his face, a different emotion fluttered through his heart as their hands clasped together too perfectly. Maybe this once, he could take a chance and see where things led.

When they reached the first of many steps at the top of the spire, Fielding shouted, "Last one there's a rotten egg!"

"Oh, you're on!"

They scurried past Mrs. Everest and a few other families before jumping the final steps. As they ran, Roman began to pull ahead, not far now from the large stone staircase leading down to the grassy fields. He was just about to turn back and taunt Fielding, when a figure stepped from around the corner.

"Woah, hey!" Moving too fast to stop, Roman recognized too late the navy suit of one of Blue Ridge's professors. When they collided, a handful of papers sprang up and danced like feathers to the ground as the man fell back on his butt.

A sinking pit spread through Roman's stomach. Not an hour into his time at Blue Ridge, and already he was done for. He scrambled to collect the papers, but the man stopped him.

"Really, it's fine." His eyes widened with recognition as he took a good look at Roman, and he laughed. "Well, if you aren't the spitting image of Xavier. You know, I think I remember him saying he had a brother on the way."

Roman shook his head in confusion.

The man seemed almost disappointed as he pointed to his face. "Professor Bell? Xavier's math tutor? Surely, he's mentioned me."

This was Professor Bell? Back when Xavier was happy to share about his life at Blue Ridge, the name Professor Bell popped up often. In addition to being popular with a lot of the students, Roman vaguely recalled something about Xavier needing extra help in math.

"He's mentioned you before," Roman said.

Professor Bell brushed the last bits of dirt clinging to his suit pants before waving it off. "Well, I would have preferred our hellos to be done in the classroom, but it's a pleasure all the same. Do me a favor? Try not to plow anyone else over."

Professor Bell walked away, but before he left their sight, a hand reached back to rub his tailbone.

Beside him, Fielding smacked a floppy hand into Roman's chest. "Oh my god! I can't believe you just did that!"

"Shut up," Roman muttered.

"You were like, 'Whoosh,' and he was like, 'Watch out!' and then BAM! I thought you were gonna get expelled for sure!"

"I said, shut up!" Roman shouted. "Anyways, you wish I had gotten expelled."

Fielding's eyebrows furrowed. "Huh? Why's that?"

"Because that was your only chance to beat me!"

Before Fielding could react, Roman sprinted the rest of the way outside to the fields.

Chapter 3

As the picturesque castle loomed above, Cooper and Anakin kicked a soccer ball with a group of students outside. It beat being stuck in their room the rest of the afternoon, and as the mist covering the grounds began to clear, the day was getting nicer by the hour. The mountain breeze tickled the back of Cooper's neck as he passed the ball forward, thankful for the few seasons of rec soccer he played growing up. At least he was doing better than Anakin who kept having to chase the ball down each time he jabbed it with his toe.

It was tricky to remember everyone's name, but one person Cooper didn't have any trouble remembering was a Latino boy named Jordy Diaz. He was all personality. Right when he spotted the two of them walking down the stone staircase, Jordy invited Cooper and Anakin to play soccer with them. He was only an eighth grader, but it seemed like so many people, even the upperclassmen, knew about Jordy. They could hardly get a kick in without somebody high-fiving or fist bumping Jordy as they walked past.

Now as he rainbowed the soccer ball over his shoulder, Jordy's tan skin glistened in the sun. Cooper was drawn to him like a magnet.

"So, what house are you both in?" Jordy asked.

"Valentia," Cooper said. "You know, the one with all the red?"

Jordy pointed a thumb at his chest. "You lucked out with yours truly. I'm a Valentia, too. And I'm our House's Blue Ridge Buddy."

"Blue Ridge Buddy?"

Jordy shrugged and juggled the ball between his feet while Anakin removed his scarf and set it nearby on the grass.

"Silly name, I know. Think of it like the student council. I help out new students, organize events, team bonding, things like that. Most of us are older, but I guess they saw something special in me."

"That's cool they let you help," Cooper said truthfully.

“Well, just know if you need anything, I’m the guy to ask. Just say the word!”

Cooper thought about what his dad said about Headmaster Robinson right before leaving. What were Jordy’s thoughts were on their principal? Maybe the man had completely changed from the person his dad remembered. It had been over twenty years, after all.

“Hey, I’ve got a question,” Anakin said. “Do all the teachers live with us or something?”

“That’d be pretty terrible, right?” Jordy said with a laugh. “No, take a look behind you. See that path?”

Jordy pointed toward the far end of campus where a cobblestone path stretched across the grassy fields. Every so often there was a set of lampposts that were currently off. The path continued on until it hit a forest much further down.

“That’s where the professors live. Only Headmaster Robinson and a few others stay in the castle, but they have their own wing. It’s a bit of a walk, if you ask me, but the professors’ houses are pretty cozy, like a little village. If you want, I can show you guys around.”

“That’s alright,” Anakin said. “Maybe later.”

“Suit yourself,” Jordy said as he passed Cooper the ball.

When Cooper asked about the different students at Blue Ridge, he learned that Blue Ridge Academy only accepted a total of thirty two students every year, sixteen boys and sixteen girls. Eventually those 6th graders became 12th graders, and every year, a new bunch came in to fill the gaps of the graduating seniors.

“Your classes are intermixed, of course,” Jordy said. “You’ll share classes with the other girl Valentias and the newbies from Fuerza as well. That’s the one with all the purple.”

Anakin’s kick went wide, and as he hunted down the ball, Cooper wondered about the other two roommates they hadn’t yet met from their

suite. What were their personalities like? Would they want to hang out together outside of class? Would they even like him?

“Cooper, watch out!” Jordy called.

A football spiraled straight towards his head, and Cooper had just enough time to duck before getting plowed down by another boy. He tumbled to the grassy dirt and landed on his butt. When he looked up, standing above him was a tall, thin boy whose short, blonde hair looked almost white in the sunlight.

Further away, another boy was laughing and shouted out, “Way to go, Xavier!”

Xavier leaned over and stretched out his hand, but when Cooper went to grab it, Xavier continued past him and plucked the football from the ground instead. It wasn't until he stood that he looked at Cooper.

“Sorry about that,” he said, sounding anything but sorry. “Guess I didn't see you there.”

Cooper was about to shout back where Xavier could shove the football when, out of nowhere, Jordy ran up and slung an arm around Xavier's neck like they were old pals.

“Come on, Xavier,” Jordy said. “Don't be like that. What do you say we help my buddy Cooper out and give him an apology?”

Before getting tackled, everyone was minding their own business, hanging out with whatever friend cliques they'd huddled up in, but now...there was only staring, silence, and held breaths for whatever might come next.

Xavier noticed, too, and after a quick glance, he spat in the dirt beside Cooper before forcefully dragging him to his feet. Cooper thought his shoulder would rip from its socket. Without another word, Xavier ran off with his friend before any other trouble could happen.

Cooper brushed the wavy brown hair from his eyes. Jordy and Anakin inspected Cooper together for any dents or damages before Jordy patted him on the shoulder. Other than the way his palms stung and the grass stains on his shorts, Cooper was alright.

“Dude, Jordy,” Anakin said, “you’re like a freakin’ superhero. I thought that guy was gonna beat the shit out of you.”

“He could try,” Jordy said with a grin. “But then I’d have to bust out a little Judo on him. Maybe try and give Xavier some distance, if you can. Feels like lately he’s always causing some sort of trouble. He used to be so nice, too.”

“Yeah, well he seems like a royal jerk to me,” Anakin said. “Let me know if you ever end up kicking his ass because I want a front row seat.”

Cooper laughed with Jordy, and soon they rejoined the others, kicking the ball until the sun dipped past the nearby mountain peaks. The sweat was beginning to sting his eyes, and Cooper was grateful as a heavy bell chimed from somewhere deep within the castle walls.

“Looks like it’s time,” Jordy said. “We better get moving. Time for the opening ceremony!”

“Come on,” Anakin said. “Let’s hurry inside. I want a good seat.”

“Wait, your scarf!” Cooper said, and Anakin bumped fists with him before throwing it back over his head with his other mismatched clothes.

Rushing past the streaming students, they followed the crowd until they reached the wide, double doors of the banquet hall. Inside, crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling around the room, casting light across the different colored cloths draped over each table. Near the back of the room was a raised platform where many adults were already seated at the long, rectangular tables stationed there. Each of them were dressed in the same, identical navy blue suits.

From the covered platters along the side wall, a delicious smell like seasoned meat wafted Cooper’s way, making his stomach growl. If he had it his way, Cooper planned to eat himself into a food coma.

With Jordy’s help, they found their table, draped with a red cloth for Valentia. Already seated were two other boys as well as a couple girls. Cooper and Anakin took two of the open seats.

“What’s up? You must be our other suitemates,” the first of the boys said. “I’m Naveen.”

Naveen's coppery skin reminded Cooper of a penny, and his smooth, dark hair was streaked with auburn. They learned Naveen and his twin sister Nadia, another Valentia at the table with them, were originally from south Florida.

"And then our mom's from India, but our Dad's Irish," Naveen said. "It's a long story how they met."

Introducing himself beside Naveen was a boy with a thick accent named Julian, who was small even for a 6th grader. He came from Poland two years before, where most of his time before Blue Ridge was spent getting tutored in English at a private school in New York City.

"English still tough sometimes," he said. "But I get better more each day."

Anakin tugged on the yellow scarf around his neck. "Yeah, well my family's also from New York City, the greatest place on the whole Earth."

Naveen was quick to counter. "New York is not the greatest city."

"Is too!"

Cooper rolled his eyes. Not even five minutes had passed, and already drama was starting. Julian leaned past their two arguing suitemates and asked Cooper, "Where's family from?"

"Me?" He blinked, not sure how to answer. Anakin and Naveen both paused to listen in. "Misty Pines. It's a small town in Virginia. Pretty sure my parents spent their whole lives there!"

Something made Naveen squint his eyes and ask, "What do your parents do?"

But before Cooper could answer, a fierce clinking pierced the chatter inside the banquet hall. All eyes fell upon an older man with salt and pepper hair hunched at a podium in front of the other professors. Each of his lanky arms stretched like branches from a tree as he lifted his glass into the air. His was the only Blue Ridge uniform with black and purple trim.

With a raised chin, the man cleared his throat and panned across the four 6th grade tables, making it a priority to lock eyes with as many as he could.

Cooper couldn't keep the chills running up his arms when the man swept his gaze over him.

"My name is Headmaster Robinson," he said. "Welcome to Blue Ridge Academy."

Headmaster Robinson's smile made Roman shiver in his seat. The stripes of gray in their principal's hair, along with the fierce gleam in his eye, reminded Roman of a tiger on the prowl.

When he spoke about the four Houses of Blue Ridge, it was with great pride as he explained their meanings: Valentia, red house of Bravery; Sagesse, blue house of Wisdom; Ehre, green house of Honor; and finally, his own—Fuerza, purple house of Strength.

Everyone cheered loudest for their own house, and their applause swelled like a crashing wave inside the banquet hall. He and Fielding traded grins as the Fuerzas pounded the purple table cloths with their fists in a show of might.

Beside Roman was one of his suitemates named Ivan. The kid was a tank and already had the faint outlines of a mustache cresting his upper lip. Even his voice was lower than the other squeaky-voiced boys at the table. On Ivan's other side was Wyatt, who smacked the table with his fist as loudly as he spoke, which was to say, hardly at all. They were total opposites! At least he and Fielding seemed like a good match so far.

"Of course," Headmaster Robinson continued, "each of our houses are led by our extraordinary faculty, who you will continue to meet throughout your long journeys here."

The professors came up in groups of four, each introducing themselves briefly before stepping back. Professor Bell was met with thunderous applause from many of the upperclassmen around the room. Fielding snickered and poked him in the side.

"Roman, now's your chance. Go tackle him off the stage!"

"How about I tackle you?" Roman shot back.

Other than the abundance of love for Professor Bell, most of the teachers at Blue Ridge were greeted about the same until a man stepped up with long, wiry hair that fell like strings from his head, Professor Gray. Hushed whispers filled the room.

Fielding only shrugged when Roman looked to him for answers. None of the 6th graders understood the sudden shift in mood until fragments of words reached Roman's ears:

"...why would they..."

"...can you believe..."

"...only professor..."

"...not one of us..."

Professor Gray's face remained stoic as Headmaster Robinson returned to the podium. As he cleared his throat for silence, it took longer for the tables to quiet, but in the end, all eyes fell back on the leader of the school.

"Before we begin our celebration tonight, I would like to take a moment to introduce this year's scholarship student, offered as always to an incoming 6th grader in the community. I expect you will all give the warmest of welcomes to this year's recipient, Cooper Morrow."

Even without Headmaster Robinson gesturing to Valentia's table, there was no way Roman could have missed the expressions of shock, confusion, and disgust aimed toward the wavy-haired boy hanging his head.

The uncomfortable silence was only made worse by the occasional burst of halfhearted applause. The same stigma around Professor Gray would stick to this kid like molasses. There were those who belonged, and those who would never.

"Lastly, I would remind you all of your responsibility in upholding Blue Ridge's code of conduct. Failure to obey certain rules could lead to immediate expulsion."

Roman scoffed under his breath at the idea. He wished. If he thought there was a way to get Xavier out of the picture, he'd take it in a heartbeat.

When Headmaster Robinson finished, the doors to the banquet hall burst open, and a line of kitchen staff dressed in white buttoned shirts streamed inside. In their arms were plates stuffed with buttery gravy dressed over mashed potatoes, a brown sugar bake over sweet potato casserole, and pyramids of fresh, steaming rolls. As Roman dug into the food with the others at his table, it was like stepping into food heaven. Even Ivan looked satisfied as he stuffed his face.

Across the room, Roman locked eyes with Xavier at the 8th grade tables. The moment he did, his brother ducked his head, pretending to busy himself with the food on his plate as the Fuerzas around him laughed. As if reminding Roman who was responsible, the pain from his bruise reared its ugly head. Xavier didn't want anything to do with him at Blue Ridge. He'd made that painfully clear.

Their plates now emptied, Roman forced a smile and gave Fielding a playful shove.

"You about ready or what? I'm beat!"

Fielding's eyes perked. "Sure, if you're ready. How about you guys?"

Ivan frowned as the waitstaff took his plate from the table, but Wyatt gave a silent thumbs up for the both of them.

Outside the banquet hall, the dim glow from the electric lanterns made every corner thick with shadows. More than once, Fielding bumped against his arm as they walked back to their suite.

"This place gives me the creeps at night," Fielding whispered beside him.

"Yeah, bet you don't wanna wind up lost around here."

"No kidding," Fielding agreed.

An image of the Valentia boy, Cooper, flashed through Roman's mind, and he was thankful to have his suitemates by his side. Making the walk together from the banquet hall to Fuerza helped put his nerves at ease. And, as he climbed the seven flights of stairs with his suitemates, he was especially thankful, for the first time in a while, to not feel utterly alone.

Chapter 4

Cooper had never been so alone.

From the moment their principal outed him as the scholarship student, Cooper's stomach was tangled knots. The rest of dinner was nothing but stuffy silence or whispered conversations that didn't involve him. None of the other Valentias would even look at him. Not even Anakin.

Getting back to his suite was the longest ten minutes of Cooper's life.

The moment they reached the top, Naveen and Julian slipped inside their dorm and slammed their door. Why was it such a big deal to them that he got the scholarship?

He stared blankly after them, his heartstrings ready to snap as he fought every urge to call his parents and have them take him from this awful, stupid place. They would be there by the morning, and then Blue Ridge would be nothing but a painful memory.

At the top of the steps, Anakin pretended to find interest in one of the old portraits hanging on the wall.

How could everything have gone so wrong? He had been willing to give the school a chance, trusted his parents, and where did that get him?

Legs numb beneath him, Cooper barely registered the walk into his bedroom. Their belongings were stacked in the center of the room, and Cooper dragged his suitcase over before sitting against the side of his bed. Inside, his favorite, well-loved copy of Detective Dackery lay on top of his clothes.

Clutching the book to his chest, Cooper hung his head as the tears finally spilled out. What would his hero do in a situation like this? Had the famous detective ever been in such a hopeless situation?

"Cooper?"

He ignored Anakin's voice, even as the door closed and his roommate sat against the wall across from him.

Cooper wasn't sure how much time passed, but he knew his shirt was soaked, and he was dribbling snot from his nose. He wiped his forearm across his face and saw Anakin still seated. His roommate slipped off his yellow scarf and offered it to Cooper.

"I don't want your scarf," he said through a stuffy nose. "Besides, that's really gross."

"Take it anyway," Anakin said, holding it out. "It helps me feel better."

"What do you care?" Cooper spat.

Anakin slowly lowered the scarf and released a heavy sigh. "Cooper, I'm sorry I ignored you. I just didn't know what to say. And then everything got really awkward with everyone, and I guess I got cold feet."

Cooper wiped more snot from his nose but said nothing.

"Who cares about the scholarship stuff? It's bullshit anyway. Anyone who makes a big deal out of it doesn't know you."

"You don't know me, either," Cooper said weakly.

"I haven't known you long," Anakin corrected, "but long enough to know I like hanging around you. Cooper, I'm a big, freakin' dummy idiot, but please. I want to be your friend. Will you forgive me?"

The book grew tighter against Cooper's chest. He wanted so desperately to have someone at Blue Ridge he could rely on, someone he could call his friend.

Finally, he wiped his nose one more time before setting his book down in his lap.

"Do you think the others hate me?"

Anakin scratched his temple as he stared at the wall dividing their room from Naveen and Julian's.

"I don't think so," he said. "At least, I hope not. But it might take some time for them to come around. We just have to show them how much they're wrong."

“We?” Cooper asked.

Anakin smiled. “Totally. Cooper, I meant what I said. I want to be your friend, and that means sticking by your side no matter what. I messed up, but I won’t let it happen again.”

When Anakin held out his fist, Cooper wasn’t sure he could do it. Wasn’t sure he could build up the courage to open himself up again. What if it all came crashing down in the end, and he was left humiliated? There’d be nothing but broken pieces left.

Be brave, he told himself. Brave like Detective Dackery. Like the time with the dog and Sawyer.

Bumping fists with Anakin was the hardest thing Cooper had ever done, but the moment he did, Anakin crawled over and gave him a hug. Even though his snotty face was buried in Anakin’s shoulder, his roommate didn’t seem to mind.

“Thank you, Cooper,” he said. “I promise I won’t let you down.”

The rest of the evening they spent unpacking their bags, Cooper finishing much sooner than Anakin who easily had three or four times the bags he did. By the time all his clothes were sorted, Anakin stretched the sore muscles of his back.

“Why do you have so many clothes?” Cooper asked. How Anakin managed to squeeze all his clothes inside a single dresser, Cooper still wasn’t sure.

“Uhh, duh,” Anakin said, gesturing to the mismatched clothes all on his body. “It’s kind of my thing. Wouldn’t you be bored wearing the same thing all the time?”

Honestly, it had never crossed his mind. Sure, his parents packed his favorite shirts for him, but after that, pants were just pants, and nobody could see his socks and underwear, so what did those matter?

“I guess,” Cooper said with a shrug.

“Here, I’ll tell you what. If you ever want to wear something different, you can borrow some of my clothes since we’re about the same size.”

“Thanks,” Cooper said and picked up the student handbook from his nightstand.

When he opened to the rules section, he expected to find a page or two at most, but instead, the list kept going, page after page after endless page. How was he supposed to keep up with all of them? It would take ages to memorize everything!

Some of the rules were generic, like how they were responsible for their own laundry on their assigned day or making sure they were taking care of personal hygiene. There were entire pages set aside for extracurriculars: rules for the lake, for the stables, for swimming, archery, and more. Classroom and homework rules, rules for trespassing in staff housing, rules for curfew and wandering campus after lights out. So many that by the time Cooper read through them all, his brain was mush, and he’d already forgotten half of them.

He groaned and fell back on his pillow with the handbook over his face.

“Cooper, listen,” Anakin said. “Relax. Just don’t do stupid stuff, and we’ll be fine!”

Cooper slid the handbook from his face as Anakin retrieved a spiral bound notebook from his bag, the kind that flipped over the top rather than side to side. The way Anakin cradled it in his hands reminded Cooper of his Detective Dackery book.

“What’s that?” Cooper asked.

The dark green cover showed a pencil putting the finishing touches on a beautiful hand-drawn tree in the sun.

Cooper’s eyes lit up. “I didn’t know you liked to draw! Can I see your pictures?”

“No!” Anakin shouted, pulling the book to his chest.

“What? Why not?”

“It’s just,” Anakin paused, “it’s embarrassing. No one’s ever seen them before. Besides, they’re not even that good.”

“Show me, anyway?” Cooper asked.

For a second, Cooper thought Anakin might shove the spiral notebook back inside the safety of his luggage, but in the end, he flipped open the cover and handed it to Cooper.

“Just be careful with them, okay?”

Cooper traced his thumb along the textured paper as he admired the detail in Anakin’s work. The first drawing was a sketch of a boy hanging from a tire swing. His body was craned back as he grasped the rope with one hand, mouth wide open in a grin as his hair danced in his face. Leaves fluttered down from the tree, adding to the scattered piles on the ground, and despite the sketch being in pencil, Cooper knew right away it was autumn.

Anakin was faced the other way, unable to look over as Cooper flipped through more of the pages. Pictures of landscapes, portraits of people, all in motion. They weren’t perfect, obviously, but there was so much love and detail in each one that Cooper couldn’t help but stop and admire them all.

“You’re not saying anything. I told you they were bad.”

“Anakin, these are some of the best drawings I’ve ever seen!”

His roommate turned around then, a dark blush across his cheeks as Cooper looked through a few more. On the next few pages were sketches of clothing: scarves, shirts, tops, pants, shoes, all with notes jotted beside them.

“I want to be a fashion designer one day,” Anakin explained, gesturing to the tablet like it explained everything.

“Anakin, these are really good. I wish I knew how to draw.”

“Thanks, Coop.”

A smile spread across his face. Anakin called him Coop. No one, not even Sawyer, had ever given him a nickname. And it felt so natural, like that’s the way he had always said it.

Suddenly, a massive yawn betrayed how tired he was, and he had to wipe away the blurriness from his eyes as he handed Anakin back the sketch pad. The clock on their nightstands only read 10:30, but the day had been jam packed ever since arriving.

Anakin slipped off his yellow infinity scarf before removing his shirt. The skinny, bare-chested boy set them neatly in the corner hamper. When Anakin unbuttoned the button of his jeans and pulled them down, Cooper gulped.

Like most of Anakin's clothes, his briefs hugged his body like they were molded especially for him. It didn't take a genius to spot the curvature of Anakin's soft penis inside his tight briefs, and Cooper turned away in embarrassment, grabbing his pajamas before darting quickly out of their dorm and into the open bathroom.

Closing himself inside the private toilet stall, Cooper quickly shed his shorts and underwear before sticking his leg in the hole of his pajamas. No way was he risking anyone seeing him undress! His bare penis flopped against his balls as he pulled the waistband of his pajamas up to his belly button. For some reason, he expected a head to peek above or below the stall door, but it was only his paranoia. By the time he left the stall, the bathroom was just as empty as when he started.

Back inside the room, Anakin was already under the silky red sheets.

"Why'd you leave?" he asked.

"Uhh, had to use the bathroom," Cooper lied. "I figured I'd change in there, too."

"Oh, okay," Anakin shrugged and then adjusted the throne of pillows propped behind his head.

After the lights went out, all they could see was a blade of pale moonlight slicing against the window. Other than the occasional chirping cricket or cicada, all was still and silent. Cooper was nearly asleep when he heard Anakin's voice.

"Hey, Coop?" he asked in a loud whisper.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry again about before. I really am glad we’re roommates.”

Cooper choked out the words, “Me too,” before he quietly cried into his pillow, his heart swelling with happiness. No, Anakin wasn’t Sawyer. No, Blue Ridge wasn’t the perfect way he imagined starting middle school. But maybe that was okay. Maybe there was enough good here if he looked for it hard enough.

The first time Xavier left for Blue Ridge, Roman was nine years old, crying his heart out as he clamped on to his brother’s leg.

Roman would have done anything to stop him from leaving. Gone was the person who spent countless hours playing video games with him when their parents weren’t around. Gone was the person who always knew how to make him laugh with a funny joke, or the person who let him crawl inside his bed when a fierce storm swept through. It was agony, and Roman made sure to write Xavier anytime he had the chance. He even stuffed some of his crayon drawings inside his letters. Anything to remind Xavier of home.

When Christmas break came, Roman begged to ride in the Tesla with his mom to pick up Xavier. He didn’t even care that his dad was going to miss Christmas as long as it meant Xavier was home. At least for a couple weeks.

Xavier might have crushed him in a bear hug if Roman wasn’t squeezing his brother twice as hard in return. By the time they made it back to the house, Roman’s head was stuffed like a turkey with all the amazing things Xavier told him about Blue Ridge. Xavier even got to have his own roommate for sleepovers every night! The idea only made Roman want to go even more. After the two weeks of winter break finished, Xavier left again for the rest of the school year. To his nine-year-old self, May was an eternity away.

Later that summer, after Xavier finished 6th grade, Roman was shocked when the top of his head didn’t reach as high as he remembered. It was only a few inches, but Xavier had hit a growth spurt. He seemed a little

gloomy during the first few days home, and Roman wondered if his brother would have rather been at Blue Ridge instead of spending his summer at home. Over a game of horse one day, Roman asked him.

“It’s not that, it’s just—” Clang. Xavier’s shot bounced off the rim as Roman chased it down. “People like Logan, Professor Bell, and my other professors, they’re always...I don’t know, there for me, you know?”

When Roman missed his next shot, he frowned as the ball clattered off the backboard. “I’m always here for you, too.”

Xavier scratched his forehead. “No, yeah, I know. I don’t mean it that way. But I never have to wonder who’s going to be around, because at school, everyone always is. I don’t know, I just miss that, I guess.”

Roman grabbed the basketball and held it by his side.

“You mean like Dad.”

“Mom, too. I mean, it’s summer break! How many days have they even been here? Dad even missed last Christmas!”

“That wasn’t his fault,” Roman snapped back. He swiped away the sweat stinging his eyes. “He had to work.”

Xavier sighed in the way that said, This is why I don’t tell you big kid things, because you don’t understand.

“I know. It’s fine, Roman.”

It’s true their parents weren’t around much, but when he couldn’t count on them, Roman had Xavier, and the two brothers spent the hot, summer days hanging out with each other until the day arrived when Xavier had to leave for his second year.

That’s when everything changed.

That winter, their reunion was a quieter one as they picked up Xavier from Blue Ridge. It was like he was suddenly less interested in the amazing things he got to do at school. He was still Xavier, but he was also different somehow. Not in some weird body snatchers kind of way, but more like a piece of his personality had been chipped apart.

Over the holiday, Xavier only wanted to spend his free time locked inside his bedroom. It didn't matter how often Roman banged at the door. Pleaded for his brother to play with him. Begged him.

When Xavier finally ripped his bedroom door open and shoved him, Roman smashed the back of his head against the wall. It shocked him more than anything, and Roman felt like a baby for crying in his mom's lap on the living room couch.

Xavier was getting older, she told him, and needed his privacy, but Roman didn't understand. It didn't make sense why Xavier didn't want to spend time with him anymore. Maybe if their dad was around, he'd know how to cheer Xavier up, but a few days after Christmas, he was gone for another long movie shoot.

When Xavier left again, it was the first time they didn't hug goodbye, and Roman's heart stung the whole ride back. This time there were no letters, from either of them.

Things hit their worst point after Xavier finished 7th grade. Their house was a ghost town, and the only time Roman ever saw Xavier was sometimes at breakfast or dinner or whenever they passed each other in the hallway. Without Xavier to hang out with, summer break meant nothing, and boredom was gnawing at him like a dog on a bone.

During an early June afternoon, Roman had reached peak boredom and wanted to swim in the pool. Already in his swim trunks, he draped his towel across his shoulder as he left his bedroom. Roman's curiosity was piqued when he saw Xavier's door cracked open.

Xavier never left his door open anymore. That ship had sailed. Roman knew it was possible his brother was somewhere else in the house, but a groan from inside squashed that theory, and Roman pressed his eye to the crack.

The last time he'd seen Xavier naked was a few years ago when they still bathed together. Now, Roman's mouth hung open when he saw how Xavier's mood swings weren't the only thing different about him lately.

With the sunlight streaming through Xavier's window, Roman could just make out the darker blonde bush of hair around the base of Xavier's penis

as his brother panted in short, sharp gasps. He lay spread eagle on the mattress as he tugged and twisted his hard dick.

Roman wasn't stupid. He was nearly in middle school. He knew his brother was doing sex, or at least, some form of it. Xavier's moans made it sound like he was in pain, but if he was, why would he keep hurting himself? Instead, the moaning increased as his toes curled, and his hips lifted off the mattress.

All at once, Xavier tensed, peering down his torso as several sharp bursts of something white spewed from the end of his penis. Whatever it was plopped on his abs with a wet splat before his brother's sweaty head hit the pillow.

Shocked to feel a tightness in his swim trunks, Roman reached down and squeezed the tiny nail poking up inside his shorts. It happened to him sometimes, but he'd never made a connection with being hard and what Xavier was doing to himself. As Roman leaned closer, the towel slipped from his shoulder and crumpled to the floor.

Roman's body turned to ice. When Xavier's head whipped his way, Roman barely had enough time to step back before Xavier stomped forward, his still-hard dick wagging away, and slammed the door shut with the loudest bang Roman ever heard.

Xavier didn't talk to him for three days after that.

The next weekend, however, Xavier wanted to game on the Playstation with him. Roman worried if he questioned it, the one chance he had at having his brother back would be squashed like a bug. For a few hours, it was like old times: playing, talking, joking around, but then Xavier set his controller down and asked if Roman wanted to swim. When Roman came back, ready to go, Xavier was still dressed.

"I was waiting for you," his brother said in his scratchy, raspy voice, yet another sign of getting older, like his short hairs.

"Waiting for me?" Roman asked, but Xavier said nothing as he removed his shirt and stripped from his shorts and underwear.

Seeing his brother's junk up close, there was more hair than Roman would have guessed. They were only slightly darker than the faint, pale color of Xavier's eyebrows. Roman thought it was awesome the way they bunched around the base of his penis, accentuated by his brother's smooth, bronze skin. Xavier's penis stretched and lifted from his drooping balls until its veiny stalk twitched outward a thin five inches. It looked enormous.

"You can touch it if you want," Xavier said in a low, breathy voice.

He was about to reach out, when something caught Roman's eye. All along Xavier's hip were little crescent moons indenting his skin.

"What are those?" Roman asked and pointed.

"Don't worry about it," Xavier said as he shielded his hip. "It's nothing."

Roman didn't want to disappoint his brother, and he was curious about the steely hardness in front of him, so he ignored the marks and carefully reached out until his fingers brushed against the velvety skin of Xavier's erection. It was hot and spongy, different than when he poked and flicked his own tiny rod. Interested to see the reaction he would get, Roman curled his fingers around his brother's boner and moved his arm like Xavier did a few days before.

Xavier's eyes fluttered closed as he released a breathy moan, and Roman was encouraged to continue, especially when Xavier gently ran his fingers through Roman's soft hair. The touch made the hairs on Roman's neck stand, and he shivered as his own boner perked up against the inner lining of his swimsuit.

After a couple minutes, his brother started panting before his body clenched and he shot the white stuff again. When he did, his face grimaced, and Xavier's fingers clutched too tightly around his hair.

"Let go," Roman whined, wincing as more of the white liquid pulsed on his hand before dripping to the floor.

After that, Xavier didn't want to swim, his demeanor suddenly shifting as he demanded Roman leave his room. When the door shut in his face, Roman was left alone to clean the sticky, drippy remnants on his hand. Swimming didn't seem so great to him anymore either.

As Roman's summer before Blue Ridge went on, Xavier went through the same cycles: warming up to Roman, getting what he wanted, and shunning him right after.

Why he let Xavier use him, Roman couldn't answer. Maybe he wanted so desperately to get his brother's love and affection back that he was willing to do anything it took to feel connected again. But he hated his brother's mood swings. Hated the way he lashed out at him and hurt him. Why couldn't Xavier just be nice like he used to be?

Flash forward to that morning when they were ready to load their bags for Blue Ridge, and Roman wasn't shocked when Xavier sucker punched him in the ribs. Hurt, of course, but not surprised.

Xavier loomed over him as Roman clutched his stomach and gasped for air on the floor.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from me at Blue Ridge."

Roman awoke with a startled gasp. His forehead was damp with sweat as his heart jackhammered inside his chest. His sweaty, sleeveless t-shirt stuck to his chest, and it took Roman several seconds to remember he was in the safety of his dorm room.

He steadied his breath and flopped back against the pillow. From his dresser, the clock read 4:37, far too early to wake up or start the day. Still, he couldn't sleep.

Roman tossed the comforter back to let the cool air kiss his skin.

A whisper across the room made him jump.

"Roman, are you okay?" Fielding asked.

"I'm fine," he whispered. "Just a bad dream."

There was a long quiet that followed, so long that Roman thought Fielding might have gone back to sleep, but eventually he asked, "Who's Xavier?"

Roman swore in his head. There was no way to know what he let slip while dreaming. And how could Roman even begin to explain?

"No one," Roman answered. "Don't worry about it."

Another long pause.

“Okay...” Fielding finally said.

It was better to lie than face the truth. That was how it had to be. It hurt less that way.

With a sigh, Roman closed his eyes, and tried to focus on the old days, back when Xavier still loved Roman as much as Roman loved him.

Chapter 5

Cooper groaned as he tried to clumsily smack the off button to his alarm.

How had 6:30 come so early? It seemed like only seconds ago he had closed his eyes and drifted off into a blissful dream of biking down the neighborhood streets and jumping into the lake at the quarry.

Cooper covered his head with one of his pillows. The alarm could screech all it wanted as long as it meant more sleep. What did it matter if he made it to breakfast on time or not?

Across the room Anakin groaned out, "Cooper, turn it off!"

As Cooper slung the pillow from his face, forcing himself to roll over and turn off the alarm, he realized he had a problem. One he hadn't anticipated when first thinking about how awesome having a roommate would be.

Cooper could barely keep from making a groan as the tip of his boner dragged against his cloth pajamas. Why did these things always happen? No matter what he tried, every morning was a new, frustrating hard-on. Until he could find a way to escape to the bathroom and pee, his boner would refuse to back down. Worse still was how the more attention he gave it, the harder it felt. Cooper missed the easy days of his childhood when constant erections weren't a part of daily life.

Other than the pale, morning light outside their window, the room was still dark. If he moved quickly, then maybe Anakin wouldn't see the bulge sticking up in his pajamas. It was that, or wait for his roommate to wake up and leave. His bladder threatened to burst, and Cooper made up his mind. It was now or never.

As he pushed back his covers, Cooper's ankle popped as he padded across the floor before Anakin opened his eyes. He double checked no one was in their suite before sprinting into the bathroom and to the toilet stall.

Like a jack in the box, Cooper's fleshy pole sprang out the moment he lowered his pajamas. Peeing was so difficult this early in the morning. It was nearly painful to push his boner down and aim, and it wasn't until a

few seconds of conscious breathing and relaxing that a stream of steady pee finally gave way, splashing into the porcelain bowl with the force of a full bladder.

While he peed, the strain in his penis began to wilt, and by the time he finished, Cooper was able to tuck his drooping dick downward before walking back into his dorm room.

Anakin sat on the bed, fishing his leg into a new pair of pants as he shimmied them up his hips. There was a bulge sticking up at Anakin's crotch, and before his own little friend could betray him again, Cooper pivoted towards his half of the room in search of a new set of clothes.

When Anakin left to shower with a bag of toiletries, Cooper tried to shuck his pajamas, but his foot caught on the end as he hobbled around the room. With a jerk, the pajama leg snapped free, leaving him butt naked. Despite the warmth of the dorm room, chills crawled along his bare skin as he slipped into new underwear and gathered the rest of his clothes.

By the time Anakin returned, his hair was neatly styled with gel, and he was double checking the clothes on his body before asking, "I might come back and grab more later, but how does this look for now?"

"I think it's fine," Cooper said, doing his best to act like he hadn't been hopping around naked moments before.

By the time they made it down to the banquet hall, Naveen and Julian were already seated. Cooper scratched his arm as a pit formed in his stomach. Would they say anything to him today or would he still be a total outcast?

Anakin placed a hand on Cooper's shoulder. "It's okay. Remember, who cares what they think?"

Cooper found it impossible to focus on anything as he meandered numbly through the breakfast line. Unlike the night before when servers came to their tables with plates of food, the students were expected to grab their own breakfast from the line of silver platters on the long table at the edge of the room.

Cooper let Anakin pass him so he wouldn't have to be first to the table. Naveen said nothing, just ate through his plate of eggs as if Cooper wasn't there. Julian, at least, gave him a quick glance and a meek smile, but that was all.

There was a quick jab from Anakin's elbow as he pointed to Cooper's plate of untouched food.

"Eat," he mouthed.

Why bother? His appetite was hardly there.

"So, how'd everyone sleep last night?" Anakin asked in an attempt to start a conversation.

A couple of the girls at the table raised their eyebrows in lackluster responses, while Naveen gave a terse, "Fine."

"Well, I slept great personally, but whoever decided breakfast was this early is a real cracked egg."

Anakin slapped the table like he thought it was the funniest joke in the world, and Cooper jumped as Naveen's chair scraped backwards.

"Come on, Julian."

Taking his plate with him, Naveen marched towards the kitchen counter, dumped his food inside the trash bin, and left the banquet hall. The other Valentias at the table joined him until it was just Anakin and Cooper sitting alone.

"I think that could have gone worse," Anakin offered with a shrug.

"They hate me," Cooper moaned.

There was a clatter at the table as a plate was set down.

"They don't hate you," a familiar voice said. "You just have to give it some time."

At the opposite end of the table, Jordy Diaz was slicing apart the sausage on his plate before popping a piece inside his mouth.

“What’re we supposed to do?” Anakin asked. “They think Cooper’s worse than a piece of crusty, moldy bread—no offense, Coop.”

“How is that not offensive?”

Jordy finished chewing before answering. “Having someone on your side is a good start. But you gotta be the one to show them, Cooper. Show them you belong here. That it’s about more than money. These people just want a reason to see that you’re like them.”

“But I don’t want to be like any of them—no offense, Anakin.”

“Uhh...”

“Still,” Jordy continued, “until you come up with a way to prove them wrong, they’ll keep seeing you as something you’re not. Trust me, I would know.”

“What does that mean?” Cooper asked.

Beside Jordy, a small Asian boy with a rounded face plopped down with his food. His skin was like warm butter, and his smooth, jet-black hair was swooped to the side, nearly falling past one of his eyes. He and Jordy bumped fists before finishing out with a multi-step handshake.

“Woah,” Anakin said.

“What he means,” the new boy said, “is that Jordy was our scholarship student back in 6th grade. The name’s Kai Feng.”

“Kai’s been my roommate ever since the beginning,” Jordy explained. “You won’t find a better guy around.”

“You were a scholarship student, Jordy?” Cooper asked. “But you’re on the student council! How did you do it?”

“Ah ah,” he wagged his finger. “Still am a scholarship student. And I’ll be one every year until I graduate, thank you very much.”

Kai coughed and muttered, “Unless you fail math again.”

There was a hard knock against the table as Kai smacked his knee into the underside. Beside him, Jordy had an angelic smile on his face. “Yes, unless I

fail math again.”

“But still, how did you do it? You have to tell me!”

“Sorry, buddyroo, no can do,” Jordy said. “If I tell you what I did, then that wouldn’t be true to you.”

Kai pointed his fork at Cooper. “Listen. Ignore his dumb rhymes. If this ugly block can win people over, then anything’s possible. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

Something that was true to him. Cooper wasn’t sure Jordy’s advice would work like he thought, but it was worth giving a shot. After all, he wasn’t alone anymore. With Anakin by his side, Cooper felt stronger, braver, like a bit of his roommate’s personality was rubbing off on him. Working together, the two of them could find a way to convince the other Valentias that he belonged.

They had to.

Roman’s eyes snapped awake.

With a frantic jolt, he sprang up in bed and snatched the clock from his nightstand.

“Fielding, wake up! We slept in!”

“Huh?”

Roman chucked one of his pillows at the pile of lumpy covers across the room.

“We’re gonna be late. We have to go!”

Neither of them had set the alarms on their clocks, trusting they’d wake up in time on their own, but he’d underestimated how exhausted he’d be. Not anymore. Roman was wired as he leapt from his bed, dashing to his drawer and looking for a new set of clothes to wear.

“Are you sure there’s not time to shower?”

Fielding was still lying in bed, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“No, dude, come on!”

Roman tried to work how long it might take them to dash down the steps of Fuerza’s spire and sprint across campus to the opening assembly. That was assuming they didn’t get lost along the way.

Roman dropped his shorts and underwear before turning back to see Fielding fumbling for the glasses on his nightstand. He rolled his eyes. There was no way he was going to let Fielding make them any later than they already were.

He slipped on new clothes. 8:17, the clock read now. Did he have enough time to brush his teeth? They’d missed breakfast already, so that was out. His parents liked to tell him first impressions were everything, but it seemed like no matter what choice he made, he was destined to mess up somehow.

Fielding ruffled his hands through his strawberry-blond hair as he pulled on his shirt from the day before.

“I’ll just change later,” he said.

They left the room and glanced to their suitemates’ door. It was shut but not locked, and Ivan and Wyatt were nowhere to be seen.

“You would think they would have checked on us,” Roman muttered.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Fielding said, attempting to wave away Roman’s worries.

“Come on,” Roman said, and the two used the handrail as they pounded down Fuerza’s spiral staircase. Just past the mountainous ridge, the sun was creeping over, and with it, the warm, dewy morning air filled his nostrils.

The map from last night showed they needed to cross the main courtyard. It’d put them near the girls’ wing on the other side of the castle. From there, the assembly room would be within sight.

Dashing full speed into the courtyard, Fielding screeched as a trio of robins pecking at the ground got spooked and flapped away. An upperclassman

girl with her nose in a book peered up at them as they passed by. She brushed a loose strand of brown hair from her face before stopping them.

“You two headed to the assembly?” she asked, and after a quick nod, she said, “Keep going, turn the corner, and look for Professor Bell.”

Professor Bell. Great. Why was the universe determined to trip him up every step of the way?

They kept at a jog until they rounded the corner and finally spotted the open door leading into the assembly. Outside the main doors, Professor Bell stood with a clipboard in his hands as he greeted two girls coming inside.

“Ahh, look who it is,” Professor Bell said with a smile when he spotted them jogging towards him. He checked something off from his clipboard. “Always in a rush, aren’t we?”

“Sorry,” Roman said, failing to prevent his cheeks from burning. “We slept in.”

“And missed breakfast!” Fielding offered, working to catch his breath.

Bell leaned over and gave them the okay sign. “Listen, it happens. I’d say don’t sweat it, but you,” he said, pointing to Fielding, “are already sweating it looks like.”

Fielding grinned while he fanned himself and tugged on his shirt collar.

“You aren’t the last ones, and you have some time to spare. Come on in.”

The assembly room was a gymnasium, though nicer than any Roman had been inside before. Perched along the backdrop of the sleek, stone walls were four large colored banners, one for each of Blue Ridge’s Houses.

In the center of the room were several long tables draped in Blue Ridge’s navy cloths. Members of the student council stood around them chatting, while Headmaster Robinson sipped from the steaming mug in his hands.

It was obvious he and Fielding were one of the last to arrive, and Roman easily spotted Ivan’s tankish body in the bleachers beside Wyatt.

“Why didn’t you guys wake us up?” Roman whispered when he sat down beside him. “We were nearly late.”

“I told him we were fine,” Fielding said, but Roman shot him daggers.

Ivan grunted, and Wyatt shrugged, which might have been the best response Roman could have expected.

As one final student wandered inside the gymnasium, Roman’s stomach growled. How was he supposed to survive until lunch on an empty stomach?

The sixteen new 6th graders cheered together as Professor Bell closed the gymnasium doors, and soon Headmaster Robinson was hailing them all for silence. He cleared his throat before leaning in to the podium microphone.

“Welcome, again, to your first day at Blue Ridge. Before the main assembly with the rest of your fellow students, our Blue Ridge Buddies would like to give you an orientation.”

He took another sip from his mug as one of his gray stripes of hair fell over his tired face. Yesterday his headmaster reminded Roman of a tiger, but this early in the morning, maybe a skeleton was more appropriate.

“Thank you. Encouraging as always, Headmaster Robinson,” Professor Bell said before rubbing his hands together. “Alright, everybody! This is my favorite part of the year, meeting all the bright new faces. Before we get started, you should know that all of the students you’ll hear from today were elected by your other classmates. Your voices are important. They make a difference.”

Bell had the students introduce themselves, although Roman didn’t see the point in memorizing everyone’s names. Most of the student council were sophomores or older, including the class president. By the time Roman got to be their age, they’d be long gone. Instead, he wiped the sleep from his eyes and fought off a yawn.

Last to introduce himself was an eighth grader named Jordy Diaz. Unlike the other Blue Ridge Buddies, Jordy’s applause was loud enough to startle him awake. The loudest cheers came from the Valentias right behind him.

“Hey, everybody,” Jordy said, scratching through the thick tangle of dreads on his head. “Not much to know about me, really. I love having a good time, playing soccer, you know. Like everyone else here, you can always count on me for whatever you need! Go, Valentia!”

Over the next hour, the rest of Blue Ridge’s students swarmed into the gym, including a large handful of the professors. Between learning about the clubs, seeing demonstrations, and even getting a look ahead at some of the school wide festivities, Roman couldn’t keep his head straight.

“All in the name of your Houses,” Headmaster Robinson explained. “Many of you know the long lineage of competition born from our school. Those who have proven themselves here have often found themselves accomplishing great things beyond these walls. Which brings me to our final announcement before we dismiss you to your classes.”

Brought to the center of the table was a large fishbowl with an assortment of ping pong balls matching their house colors inside. Standing not far from the fishbowl was Professor Gray, the professor whose oily strands of greasy black hair made Roman’s insides squirm. He half expected a swarm of flies to be partying over the man’s head. For the first time that morning, he was glad he didn’t eat breakfast.

“Blue Ridge’s annual fall competition,” Headmaster Robinson explained, “will be comprised of five events: the suite challenge and the solo events.”

Roman jerked his head back. The competitions! This was what he’d been most excited for! His eyes flicked to the back of Xavier’s head a few rows down the bleachers. Back when they still talked, the House competitions were always some of Xavier’s favorite things that happened at Blue Ridge.

“Our suite challenge will be held at the end of the week. As always, we expect great effort from all our Houses, no matter the age group. That is the Blue Ridge way.” A hush fell over the students as Headmaster Robinson dug through the fishbowl. When he pulled out a blue ping pong ball, he held it close, building suspense as long as possible before announcing, “The Great Canoe Race!”

Just as Roman expected, the Fuerzas applauded loudest, stomping their feet on the bleachers over the cheering of the other students. Strength was what Fuerza was all about. Roman couldn't have been happier as he pumped his fist. With Ivan's solid on their side, the other 6th grade Houses didn't stand a chance.

Roman was buzzing by the time Headmaster Robinson dismissed them all to their first classes. Come Saturday, he was ready to show everyone how much the Fuerzas were about to dominate in the competition.

Chapter 6

Cooper knew how to win his suitemates over.

The canoe competition and solo events were the perfect way to prove he belonged just as much as Naveen or any other Blue Ridge kid out there. Now all Cooper had to do was survive until the weekend.

After the assembly, the 6th graders were split into two groups. The Valentias and Fuerzas walked together with Professor Riviera, who introduced herself as their history teacher. Inside her classroom, maps of all types and sizes covered the wall. Some were faded and brown, protected from further damage by lamination, and others were freshly printed. The dates on the maps ranged back over a thousand years in some cases. When Professor Riviera spoke to them, her face glowed as she explained how one seemingly unimportant event could spark revolutions for entire nations. Back in elementary school, history was one of Cooper's least favorite subjects, but the way Professor Riviera talked about it, he might actually start to enjoy it.

Even though they were made to sit with their Houses, Naveen and Julian still weren't talking to him. Someone tapped his shoulder, and when Cooper turned around, a girl whose name he didn't know yet from Valentia asked politely if he could crouch down so she could see better. Anakin shrugged like it was progress.

In their next class with Professor Bell, he let them sit wherever they wanted. Cooper wasn't surprised when only Anakin chose to sit beside him.

Right away, Cooper knew Professor Bell would be one of his favorites, especially with the way Jordy talked about him yesterday. Science was always a strong subject for Cooper, and Professor Bell's classroom had all sorts of beakers, tools, and instruments they would get to use throughout the year. They laughed as Professor Bell ended the class with a few funny videos of classroom experiments gone wrong.

After Professor Bell's class came lunch, and Cooper was quick to scarf down his food. The less time he gave Naveen to tease him, the better. There was a whole hour to relax before their next class, so he and Anakin walked back to their dorm room together. Already they had plans for decorating the inside of their room.

"The walls are only one shade, and it's burgundy, for crying out loud! They couldn't have picked a better red?"

Cooper thought it looked like plain old red to him, but maybe he didn't get what the big deal was to Anakin.

"I'll sketch some ideas that we can do. Start brainstorming something cool!"

"Maybe we can find some spare art supplies laying around."

"What I really wish we could do," Anakin said excitedly, "is paint the whole inside wall and make a kickass mural out of it."

"We'd get in so much trouble!" Cooper said with a grin.

"Yeah, but it'd look cool."

When they reached the top of the spire, a pang flared up in Cooper's stomach as the urge to poop struck him. Running into the bathroom, Cooper closed the stall door and squatted just in time to do his business.

It wasn't until he finished wiping and flushed that he heard the echo of footsteps in the bathroom. He expected to see Anakin, but when he opened the stall door, Naveen was standing there, eyeing him down like a wild west gunslinger. He scowled and said nothing as Cooper went to wash his hands at the sink.

"So what's your plan? You just gonna ignore me for the next seven years?" Cooper asked, flinging away the extra water dripping from his hands.

When Naveen said nothing, Cooper tried to walk past, but Naveen stomped his foot down and blocked his path with an outstretched arm.

"Dude, what's your problem?" Cooper shouted. He tried to steady the quiver in his voice and resist the urge to punch Naveen in the jaw.

“My problem is you! And don’t worry, I won’t have to wait seven years for you to be gone. It won’t take nearly that long.”

“Why are you being such a jerk to me?” Cooper asked and shoved Naveen.

Before Naveen could push back harder, Anakin ran into the bathroom, immediately jumping between them. Not too far behind him was Julian.

“If you wanna fight me, go ahead and do it!” Naveen shouted. “I could take you on any day!”

“Guys, stop!” Anakin shouted. “We’re part of the same House. We shouldn’t be fighting like this.”

Naveen grit his teeth, his eyes full of hate as he stormed out of the bathroom. Julian hesitated again before running after Naveen. Good riddance to both of them, Cooper thought. He growled in frustration as he dug his fingernails into his palms. “This isn’t working, Anakin. It’s never going to work.”

“It will,” he promised. “Your idea was a good one. I’m sure by the time the canoe competition starts, he’ll see how awesome you are. Besides, I think Julian’s starting to come around about. Notice it’s only Naveen who has the problem?”

Cooper forced himself to take a deep breath as he stared in the bathroom mirror. He was like a rabid dog on the loose, his eyes dancing wildly as he struggled to count to ten and keep from breaking down. He knew changing things wasn’t going to be easy, even if Anakin was by his side.

“You’re right,” Cooper said. “I know. I’m sure shoving him only made things worse.”

“Come on,” Anakin said, and patted Cooper on the back. “You’re good. Let’s just chill before our next class.”

By the time their third class started, Naveen made it a point to squeeze into one of the few open seats in the back corner of their reading class. Cooper and Anakin sat near the front.

Professor Gray was a lot like himself, Cooper realized. The students were respectful because he was their professor, but there was a clear tension in

the room. Professor Gray was another person who didn't belong at Blue Ridge. No, that wasn't true. Gray belonged, just like Cooper. It was everyone else who had the problem.

"Reading and writing are the foundation of humanity—they are what separate us from the primates. The pen is the sword which lets language bleed onto the page. You would be wise to learn both well."

Okay, so maybe they were pretty different, too.

"I don't know about that guy," Anakin said to Cooper after they were dismissed to their next class. "I mean, who talks like that? He makes life sound like some depressing Batman story. 'The pen is the sword that blah blah blah.'" "

"I think even Batman was happier," Cooper said, making Anakin laugh.

Their fourth class was math with Professor Lee. Before she got started, there were whispered comments from the girls around the classroom about how pretty she was and from the boys about how hot she was. Cooper agreed she was nice to look at, but he wouldn't ever want to date her or anything like that. What was so exciting about that?

One thing that was exciting to him were the STEM projects they would get to do throughout the year. The idea of working with robots and programming sounded awesome to him! Then, Professor Lee told them how the spring competition was always about solving an engineering problem in the most creative way possible. That was an event Cooper rubbed his hands in anticipation over. Hopefully by then he would have changed everyone's minds about him.

"Uggh, one more to go," Anakin said as he folded up his scheduling paper. "And then, we'll be free for the day. Sweet freedom!"

Their last class wasn't even a class at all. At least, not in the traditional sense. As they followed Professor Lee back inside the gymnasium, she explained how all new students were required to join one of the school's clubs.

"They're a wonderful chance for you to try something new or make new friends," she said.

Right away, Cooper spotted Professor Bell standing by a poster for the student council, the Blue Ridge Buddies. Maybe one day he'd be able to pull off what Jordy did, but for now it felt impossible. All around, the gymnasium was crawling with professors standing near their club posters. Cooper couldn't wait to find one for himself.

Anakin leaned over and whispered, "I hope I can get into the art club."

"You will," Cooper said. If anyone deserved to be in the art club, it was Anakin. One look through his drawings would convince anybody who saw them.

As Professor Lee let them roam the gymnasium and explore, Cooper searched for the one club that might speak to him more than the others. What were his interests? He loved Detective Dackery and reading, but there was no book club, at least, not that he could find. Maybe he could help out in the school's library. Cooper made a mental note to check it out when he had some free time.

Many of the clubs were either some form of athletic activity or a specialized art like music, choir, or art. As Cooper passed the Blue Ridge Buddies table, Jordy waved at him as he smooth talked a group of girls who looked way more interested in staring at Jordy than hearing about the club.

"Hey, Coop, come check this out!" Anakin called.

When he turned the corner, Anakin stood in front of a poster for the school's rock climbing club. Several action shots showed off kids climbing the fifty-foot wall somewhere on campus. Even though it had only been a few days, homesickness rocked Cooper like a wave. If he closed his eyes, Cooper could nearly sense the sun kissing his neck, the humidity clinging to his sweaty skin, the sweet smell of dirt and pine in his nostrils.

When he opened his eyes, he could imagine himself in one of the pictures, reaching up for the next rock on the wall. He didn't know much about rock climbing, but he loved climbing trees. That's where he felt at home. As he walked over to the lady standing in front of the poster, Cooper knew without a doubt that this was the club where he needed to be.

Roman found Fielding inspecting a handout for the horseback riding club.

“You like riding horses?” Roman asked.

“Well, I mean, I’ve never done it before or anything,” Fielding said, “but how hard can it be? What’re you choosing?”

Roman wasn’t sure. He spent the last half hour roaming the gymnasium for a club to catch his eye. The only thing he knew for certain was that he didn’t want to choose the archery club. Back home, an archery medal hung from Xavier’s bedroom wall. He was so happy to earn it for being the most improved student in his club, and at the time, Roman would have given anything to be in the same club as his brother.

“Come help me look?” Roman asked.

“You got it, partner,” Fielding said, pretending to adjust a fake cowboy hat as he galloped beside Roman.

They breezed past the music clubs pretty quickly. Who would want to spend hours outside of class having to practice a new instrument? No thanks. Art wasn’t really his thing either, not because he didn’t like it. He just wasn’t any good at it. When they turned the corner, Fielding slapped him in the arm and pointed.

“Look, it’s the scholarship kid.”

Near the rock climbing poster, Cooper chatted with the professor in charge of the club. Behind him was the scrawny, well-dressed boy he remembered seeing near Cooper the night before. Probably his roommate.

It didn’t matter to Roman where Cooper came from, and he had nothing against the kid. Clearly others did, though. Even Fielding, who was nice to everyone, couldn’t keep the criticism from his voice.

“You’re not thinking about doing rock climbing with him, are you?” Fielding asked and lifted his hands in defense. “I mean, if you want to, that’s your call. But me personally, I wouldn’t do it.”

Fielding was watching him for his response, and before he could change his mind, Roman turned away.

“Nah, you’re right,” Roman said. “Who would want to be in a club with that kid?”

Professor Lee told them they didn’t need to choose right away. They even had the chance to rotate around to a few different clubs. Maybe then he’d have a better idea. Who knows? Maybe he’d even give horseback riding a shot with Fielding.

There was a tightness in Roman’s bladder, and he promised Fielding he’d be right back before slipping away from the noisy gymnasium. Scratching his head about where to go, he exited the double doors and turned a corner, hoping to ask someone for directions, but the outside corridor was empty. It wasn’t until the end of the next corner that he spotted the restrooms, but as he drew closer, a familiar voice reached his ears. Roman crept closer to the edge of the hallway and peeked around the corner.

Xavier was deep into an argument with Roy Rochester, the dark-skinned head of security. From this far away, their words were little more than heated mumbles. Whatever they were talking about, Xavier wasn’t a fan. He scowled and shrugged off whatever Rochester had to say before turning his back and leaving the long hallway. Rochester turned around and cleared his throat, adjusted the front of his suit, and walked his way.

Roman wasn’t sure if looks could kill, but Roy’s face was twisted with anger. Praying he wouldn’t be seen, Roman ducked down and squeezed his eyes shut. If he didn’t find a toilet soon, his bladder was going to burst. Why did hiding always make him have to go even more? Roman waited until the man’s footsteps faded away before dashing across the corridor into the nearest bathroom.

He barely had enough time to unsnap the button on his shorts and fish out his dick before his bladder gave way. A grateful sigh echoed in the bathroom as his stream struck the inside of the toilet bowl. As he finished up and shook the last remaining drops, Roman wondered what Xavier might have done to draw the extra attention. There was no point in asking Xavier. He’d have better luck talking to a rock.

Back in the gymnasium, Fielding and Wyatt were craning their heads to see over Ivan’s shoulder. They were huddled together near the wrestling

posters, where a barrel-chested man was handing Ivan details about the club. His name tag read Professor O'Malley on the front, and even as he leaned over the table and pointed out information to Ivan, the man's biceps threatened to tear the seams of his Blue Ridge suit apart.

"Anyone dumb enough to wrestle Ivan is asking for it," Roman said as he walked up to them.

While Wyatt only smirked, Fielding said, "He's a walking bulldozer!"

"He's perfect," Professor O'Malley said, echoing their thoughts.

It wasn't long until Professor Lee called everyone together. After a few words about curfew and classes the next day, they were dismissed for the afternoon.

Ivan and Wyatt wanted to explore where the cobblestone path down by the lake led, but Fielding wanted to take all their stuff back to their rooms and rest. Promising to meet up with everyone later on, Roman and Fielding made their return to Fuerza's spire.

Along the way they passed a group of 6th grade girls from different classes who kept staring at them and giggling before they peeled away towards the girls' dorms.

Roman sneered at them, but Fielding leaned in and whispered, "Do you think anyone's ever tried to sneak up to their rooms?"

Roman blushed, knowing what Fielding was hinting at. "Maybe. Why, are you thinking about it?"

Fielding stuck out his tongue and made a blech sound. "Yuck, why would I want to hang around some smelly girls?"

"Please," Roman said, "you'd hang out and talk with an old broom."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a social butterfly, I know. Doesn't mean I wanna see them...you know," he leaned in again, "naked."

Roman agreed as they reached the bottom of the stairs and began their climb. They passed the senior's floor, where rock music blared from a speaker while a few older guys played a racing game together. Some of the

other high school suites had people inside as well, but no one paid them attention as they climbed past.

It wasn't until they reached the 8th grade suite that they had any trouble. Just as they were about to pass, a rubber ball hurled from inside before it thwacked against the wall.

Fielding yelped in surprise as the ball bounced back, and a sinking pit formed in Roman's stomach. He already knew when he turned his head that it would be Xavier inside.

They locked eyes at the same time. Xavier sat against the couch with his legs spread out as he cocked his arm for another throw. His eyes were like a coiled rattlesnake's, ready to strike with the slightest movement. Whatever had happened between him and Roy, Xavier was in a foul mood.

Fielding tried to go across the opening again, but the rubber ball was quick to launch from Xavier's hand. It struck inches from Fielding's head as he flinched, and Roman stepped in between them.

"Stop being such an asshole!" Roman shouted. "If you want me to leave you alone, then fine. But leave us alone, too!"

Xavier sprang to his feet and rushed him. The last time Roman had seen Xavier move that fast was when he'd spied on his brother jacking off. Xavier grabbed him by the front of his shirt and stretched it out as he hoisted Roman to the tips of his toes. The breath left his body as Xavier slammed his back against the wall.

"Hey!" Fielding shouted, but Xavier palmed his face and forced him away. His friend's glasses flung from his face as he stumbled to his hands and knees.

Xavier's breath washed over Roman's face, his eyes darting back and forth like a feral lion's. Roman tried to keep the tears from welling in his eyes.

Don't do it, he told himself. Don't let him win. Roman's hands trembled as he tried to pry Xavier's from his shirt.

Something clicked in Xavier's eyes. His brother looked down at Fielding and back at him before shaking his head and dropping Roman in a heap.

Without another word, Xavier spun on his heels and walked back inside his suite.

“Just go away,” he said before swiping the rubber ball from the ground and retreating to his bedroom. The door slammed shut, and they both flinched.

Roman drew the back of his arm across his eyes, trying to hide the tears that he’d failed to stop.

“Are you alright?” he asked Fielding, who was making sure his glasses weren’t bent before putting them back on his face.

“Are you?” he asked.

Roman shrugged and shakily stood back to his feet. Physically, he was fine, just shaken. But otherwise?

“Let’s just go upstairs,” he said, brushing past Fielding, knowing there was too much he wasn’t saying.

Fielding snatched his wrist and stopped him from climbing any higher.

“That was Xavier, wasn’t it?” Fielding asked. “He’s your brother.”

Roman nodded, not trusting himself to say anymore without getting choked up. There was little point in denying it now. He’d spent his whole life hearing how similar he and Xavier looked. Sure, Xavier had changed some with puberty, but the resemblances were unmistakable—their thin frames, their pale blonde hair, their clear blue eyes.

Fielding dropped his hand and pulled Roman into a hug. Maybe it was because of everything Xavier put him through over the past couple months, but Roman had to fight the urge to push Fielding away, instead keeping his arms pinned to his side. How messed up was he that a comforting hug felt foreign to his body?

When Fielding finally let go, he patted Roman softly on the back before the two of them finished their climb to the top floor.

Chapter 7

“Go! Go, Jordy! Paddle!”

The sun streamed high overhead as Cooper screamed with the rest of the Valentias down at the lake’s docks. Four canoes stormed around the final bend of of buoys, and Valentia only trailed behind Fuerza by half a boat.

At the head of Valentia’s canoe sat Jordy Diaz, who shouted commands at Kai and his other suitemates as they increased the power behind their synchronized rows.

“Left! Right! Left! Right!”

Jumping up and down beside Cooper, Anakin shouted, “I think they’re pulling ahead!”

It was true. Maybe thirty yards separated Fuerza from taking yet another win in the competition, but the Valentias were hot on their trail. Cooper hoped Jordy’s team would win. Not just because Jordy and Kai were part of his House, but also because Xavier was leading Fuerza’s canoe. A week into his time at Blue Ridge, and Cooper still remembered the way the bully toppled him over with no remorse on his first day.

“Come on, Jordy!” Cooper cried.

A brief glance at the bulletin board showed that Valentia and Fuerza were only separated by two points. The girls’ races had been just as heated, but if Jordy’s team could squeak out the win, then Valentia would be back on top.

“Oh, no! Cooper, look!”

Anakin pointed to the Fuerza canoe. Having noticed Jordy’s crew gaining on them, the tip of Xavier’s boat was steering at an angle in an effort to cut them off.

“That’s cheating!” Cooper shouted. “They can’t do that.”

“Well, they’re doing it, so it must be allowed.”

Any second now the two boats would smash together, unless Jordy could somehow find a way to cut their speed and pull around. It looked like Jordy knew what he had to do, because all at once he called for everyone to dig their oars against the current.

Water sloshed over their paddles as Xavier's canoe drifted harmlessly past, and immediately Jordy called for everyone to row in the opposite direction. Making up for the lost seconds would be difficult, but even as Jordy, Kai, and the others strained to regain their momentum, Cooper believed they could do it.

"Come on, just a little further," he urged.

In the end, it was the Fuerzas who crossed first as a starting pistol announced the end of the race. Cooper groaned with the rest of the Valentias as Jordy fell back against Kai in exhaustion. Already the Fuerzas were cheering obnoxiously as the bulletin board was wheeled out and another tally was added beside their House.

"We were so close, too," Anakin mumbled.

"We can't give up yet," Cooper said. "We can do this!"

As the canoes were rowed to the docks, the 7th graders readied themselves to start while an announcement called for all 6th grade boys to join Professor Bell over near the bulletin board.

Hanging around Professor Bell's neck was the boat house key. Like the castle where their classes were held, the boat house was a towering, two-story structure. Before the races started, they got to check out the inside and see where the members of the canoe club spent their afternoons.

As Professor Bell explained the rules about their life jackets and the race, a fresh crack from the pistol signaled the start of the 7th grade race.

Cooper found himself checking out the competition. Between the four Houses, they all seemed evenly matched except for one monster of a boy in Fuerza who easily had a foot and a half and a hundred pounds on all of them. He was more caveman than kid. Maybe the added weight would slow them down, Cooper hoped.

“Mr. Morrow, are you paying attention?”

Cooper blinked. Not good. He'd zoned out. A couple of the other 6th graders giggled, but Naveen's glare was venomous.

Professor Bell sighed. “These rules are so no one gets hurt. At any point, if you try and sabotage another team's canoe, your team will be immediately disqualified.”

The boys nodded, and after Professor Bell finished explaining the rules, he directed them down to the docks where they were fitted with their life jackets and helmets. The buckle beneath Cooper's chin was squeezing him too tight, but when he tried to get some relief, the professor who helped him out frowned and tightened it back.

Anakin held the mustard yellow lifejacket out at arm's length, shaking his head as he slid them over his arms. “Who in their right mind would ever want to wear these?”

Cooper laughed. “Maybe people who don't want to drown?”

“I think I'd rather drown,” Anakin said.

Cheers turned his attention to the group of boys rounding the final bend. In a rare turn of events, Sagesse had come out on top over Fuerza, with the other two Houses falling shortly behind. Winning the suite competition now was a long shot, but they had to try. There was no way they were giving up.

When the pistol fired again, they were up.

Cooper steadied his breath. Jordy's advice rang in the back of his mind. This was it. His chance to prove to everyone he belonged.

Cooper walked to the front of the canoe, but he was nearly smacked by an outstretched oar as Naveen leveled it at his face.

“Where do you think you're going?” Naveen asked. “That's my seat.”

“No, it isn't,” Cooper said. “We can sit wherever we want.”

“And I want the front seat. Someone like you doesn't get to choose where they sit.”

Cooper's hands twisted around his oar. He wondered how far Naveen's head might roll if he smacked it with his oar.

Naveen didn't wait for permission as he marched towards the front of the canoe. Julian shook his head and mouthed an apology to Cooper, while Anakin only gestured for Cooper to take the seat right behind Naveen. At least he wasn't the only one who understood how difficult Naveen was being. Anakin settled in behind Cooper, and Julian brought up the rear.

"We'll follow my lead," Naveen said to no one in particular. "Even with a handicap, we'll show them who's on top."

Cooper's blood boiled, and he doubted he could keep his emotions bottled up much longer.

At the other docks, the boys from the remaining three Houses loaded up.

"Ready!" a professor called from the middle dock, aiming the pistol high into the air.

With a deafening crack, the sidelines cheered, and Naveen led the charge, pulling the right side of his oar through the water.

"Stay with me!" Naveen shouted.

As they pulled away from the dock and the other canoes came into view, Cooper's fears were realized as the bigger boy from Fuerza sloshed bucketfuls of water behind him with every swing of his oar. The front of the canoe dipped under his weight, and the lean helped them slice through the water. Already they were pulling ahead.

"Row faster, guys!" Naveen ordered. "Come on!"

"We're trying," Cooper shouted. "You're not waiting for us to row with you."

"Who asked you?" Naveen said. "I was talking to my teammates."

Cooper had had enough. When Naveen lifted his oar out of the water to begin turning the canoe at the first set of buoys, Cooper used his oar to smack the end of Naveen's.

“What’re you doing, you idiot!?” Naveen shouted and slapped back at Cooper’s paddle.

Cooper thrust the bar against Naveen’s lifejacket, and the raft began to wobble. Turning his body around, Naveen toppled Cooper backwards into Anakin’s lap.

“Naveen, you stop!” Julian called, but it was no good.

Cooper gripped the edges of the teetering canoe and kicked at Naveen. Leaning over to try and knock his foot away, Naveen’s extra weight at the side sent the canoe tilting. In a panic, Cooper clutched the oar as his body went lurching out of the boat.

“Watch out!”

Cooper felt the end of his paddle strike something hard as his body plunged into the chilly lake waters. With the life jacket on, it was only a second before he breached the surface, but right away his heart sank as Anakin’s body floated face down.

“Anakin!”

Cooper ditched the oar, struggling against the lifejacket as he swam towards his friend. The moment he got there, he lifted Anakin’s head out of the water. Next to his temple, the skin was broken and bleeding, and Anakin wasn’t opening his eyes. Keeping Anakin’s head above the surface, Cooper positioned his body beneath it as he cried out for help. Julian was the only one of them to have stayed in the boat, and Naveen was swimming back towards Cooper.

From the shoreline, the cheers had grown silent and a few whistles pierced the air as Professor Bell dived in the water and swam their way. Everyone else had stopped the race, but that hardly mattered anymore. The most important thing was keeping Anakin safe.

All at once, Anakin sputtered up water and choked out a cough as his eyes fluttered open.

“What happened?” he asked. Anakin hacked up another wet cough as they floated on the water’s surface before signaling to Cooper that he was

alright.

“Cooper must have smacked you in the head, that’s what,” Naveen said.

“That’s it!” Cooper said. “I don’t care what happens anymore. I don’t care if I’m kicked out of this shitty school. You’re the biggest freakin’ jerk I’ve ever met!”

Cooper swam over to Naveen before grappling with him in the water. Naveen was ready, though, and swiped a fist at Cooper’s face, clipping him in the side of the jaw. His head wrenched sideways, but Cooper had so much adrenaline pumping through him, the punch was little more than a dull ache. He was ready to tackle Naveen into the water when an ear-splitting whistle sounded right beside them.

“Boys! Boys!” Professor Bell roared, but neither of them stopped until their teacher swam between and forced them apart.

“It’s his stupid fault,” Naveen said. “He tipped our raft and hit Anakin with his oar!”

“That was an accident!” Cooper explained. “And it only happened because you kept blaming me for everything that went wrong!”

“That’s enough!” Professor Bell shouted and silence fell over the waters. Their professor’s hair was soaked and plastered to his forehead. “Anakin, are you alright?”

Anakin winced as he pressed his fingers to the welt at the side of his head. The skin beside Anakin’s ear was still bleeding. Cooper’s stomach dropped as he realized what he’d done. He’d hurt the only real friend he had at Blue Ridge.

“I think so,” Anakin said. “It just stings pretty bad.”

“We’ll get you cleaned up and checked for a concussion,” Professor Bell said. “Boys, help me get him in the raft, and if either one of you causes any issues, so help me, this will be your last day at Blue Ridge.”

Naveen shot him a withering look, but Cooper didn’t have the heart to fight anymore. He swam to where Professor Bell was assisting Anakin to the canoe and helped push up until Julian was able to drag Anakin over the

side. Without a life jacket, Professor Bell pulled himself up before assisting Cooper and Naveen.

Professor Bell took the front, and Cooper squeezed in beside Anakin who rested his head against Cooper's shoulder and closed his eyes.

"It's okay, Coop," Anakin whispered. "I know you didn't mean it. It's okay."

"It's not okay," Cooper muttered.

For once in his life, Naveen said nothing as he sat in front of them, though Cooper was willing to bet if Professor Bell wasn't there, things would be different.

When they arrived back to the docks, two teachers with first aid kits helped Anakin step from the canoe before bringing him over to the shade of a tent and checking him for a concussion. Professor Bell's school uniform was still drenched and dripping as he tried to ring out the water from it.

When Anakin was cleared and his wound was cleaned and bandaged, Professor Bell escorted them back to their suite. The whole time, Cooper kept turning his head to check on Anakin. It didn't matter how many times Anakin told him he was fine. Things could have gone so much worse.

Professor Bell had them sit on the couch in the suite, while he pulled each of them to the side to hear their version of what happened. It wasn't until he heard from everyone that he spoke to them as a group.

"You boys were very lucky nothing happened to Mr. Adams," Professor Bell said. "And I do mean all of you. Not just Cooper."

"How is any of this my fault?" Naveen asked.

"Because you are a team!" Professor Bell said tersely. His voice cut the quiet of the room like a knife. None of them dared to speak.

Cooper kicked himself mentally. Maybe all this really was his fault.

"Like it or not," their professor continued, "Cooper is here to stay. I suggest you both find ways to make amends with each other. There won't be a second chance should something like this happen again."

There was no room for discussion as he spun on his heels and marched down Valentia's steps. Cooper jumped as Naveen's door slammed shut behind him. So much for trying to win him over, Cooper thought.

Anakin lay on the couch, leaning his head back against the cushions as he rested an ice pack on his head.

"Don't give up, Coop," he said. "He'll come around. Promise."

Cooper wasn't so sure anymore. Was staying at Blue Ridge worth putting the people he cared about in harm's way? Anakin seemed to think so, even though he could have been hurt so much worse. That wouldn't have happened if he had been gone.

"Cooper?"

A small voice spoke behind him, and when he turned, Julian was facing him, face scrunched as he searched for the right words to say.

"Just so you know, I tell Professor Bell Naveen started fight. You're not bad person."

Cooper nodded his thanks before Julian retreated back to his bedroom and shut the door behind him.

"See?" Anakin asked, giving a thumbs up from the couch as he forced a smile. "Progress."

"Did you see the way they toppled over?" Fielding shouted as they looked together at the bulletin board. No way was Fuerza going to lose now. "I thought PB was gonna strangle them for sure."

Roman raised an eyebrow. "I think PB is gonna strangle you if he ever hears you call him that to his face."

"Our little secret," Fielding beamed, smiling angelically as he mimed zipping his lips.

While there was talk about disqualifying the entire 6th grade boys' race, in the end, the professors agreed to award points based on their last positions before the fight. That meant Fuerza had pulled out another win.

Roman, Fielding, and Wyatt practically tackled Ivan off his feet, knowing it was him who had been a huge reason for their win.

Earlier in the day, they were told the first solo event would be a swim meet held right after the canoe races. Already, buoys were being arranged to mark how far they'd have to swim to before racing back.

They all agreed Ivan would be the worst choice. While his extra weight and muscle helped propel them to victory during the canoe race, he lacked a swimmer's body. Roman considered volunteering, until Wyatt raised his hand.

"I'll do it," Wyatt said. It was one of only a handful of sentences Roman had ever heard him say.

"Alright, Wyatt!" Fielding shouted. He patted him on the shoulder like a parent dropping off their kid for their first day of school. "You're gonna do great. We believe in you."

"You're just glad you don't have to swim," Roman pointed out.

Fielding squeezed a totally unprepared Wyatt in a hug. "You go and get us that win now, y'hear?"

"You're crazy," Wyatt mumbled.

"Crazy awesome," Fielding said. "Now, go!"

None of Cooper's group came back, and they were automatically given 4th place. If someone hadn't been hurt, Roman might have felt good about the win. He didn't want to win by default. Where was the fun in that?

In the end, Wyatt came in second, losing to a swimmer from Sagesse who glided through the water like a dolphin. Not even Roman could believe how effortless the boy swam.

"Check that kid out," Fielding said, pretending to hold up binoculars to his face. "Woah."

"Hey, whose side are you on?" Roman asked.

When Wyatt returned to them, his damp curls dripped water down his forehead. He huffed out an apology for losing, but they patted his wet

shoulder.

“You did better than any of us could have,” Roman said. “Especially Fielding.”

Roman ignored the gasp from behind as the final scores were tallied. The suite competition was a slam dunk for Fuerza, but there were still three other solo events happening the next day, and it was anyone’s guess what they would be.

Heading back inside, Roman was thankful for the break. His skin bristled with warmth from the hot sun, even with all the extra sunscreen he put on.

“Oh my god, I’m so burnt,” Fielding said as he pressed a thumb against his arms. “My Moms are gonna kill me.”

Roman refused to look inside Xavier’s suite as they walked past. Ever since he’d nearly pummeled him and Fielding, things had been silent. The only other time he’d seen Xavier that week was in the dining hall. It looked like his brother was barely touching the food on his plate. Despite pretending not to care, it annoyed Roman that he even wondered what might have been wrong with Xavier.

“I’m beat,” Fielding said as he fell back on his mattress. Already, the bathroom showers were running as Ivan and Wyatt rinsed the sweat from their bodies. “I swear I could fall asleep right now.”

“Don’t,” Roman said. “You’ll get your covers all smelly and gross.”

“Uggh, yeah, yeah, thanks, Mom.”

Roman chucked a pillow at his friend and grinned as Fielding yelped in surprise.

“What do you think tomorrow’s gonna be like?” Roman asked.

Fielding waved a hand from his bed. “Who knows? I just hope it’s something I’m actually good at.”

“Maybe they’ll have a competition to see who can talk the longest.”

Roman ducked when Fielding hurled the pillow back over.

““Maybe they’ll have a blah blah blah”” Fielding repeated. “Whatever. I think the shower stopped—guess I’ll go next.”

Roman sprang up from the bed and picked out a new set of clothes. “Hold up. I’ll go with you.”

Fielding whipped his head around and stuttered. “What? Why? You don’t have to do that.”

“Come on,” Roman said, “It’s no big deal. You’ve taken showers by yourself all week. There’s nothing to be worried about. I have the same thing you do, you know.”

“Yeah, but...” Fielding got fidgety, shifting his gaze around the room. It reminded Roman of the first day they met.

Roman grabbed his clothes and towel before leading Fielding out the door. It wasn’t until they reached the steamy bathroom that Fielding finished the walk unassisted.

Inside the bathroom, Ivan and Wyatt were toweling off as water dripped to the marble floor around their feet. Roman couldn’t believe how much body hair Ivan already had. His dick hung beneath a compact, but dense patch of black pubes. There were even little dark hairs down by his ankles. Because of his weight, his dick looked a little small, but there was no doubt Ivan was deep in the throes of puberty.

Wyatt on the other hand was scrawny in every way. Completely smooth other than the dark, curling hair on his head, Wyatt had the appearance of a boy two years their younger. Sitting on top of his tight sack was a shriveled up button dick that seemed to stick out more than hang.

Neither seemed fazed by the other’s nakedness, and Roman tried not to stare as he slipped inside and took his clothes to the empty ledge by the open shower.

As their suitemates wrapped themselves in their towels and left, Roman asked Fielding, “You coming or not?”

Without waiting for a response, Roman removed his shirt and let it plop on the marbled bathroom floor. He kicked it away from a puddle of water

before undoing his shorts. Behind him, Fielding faced the opposite direction, but he too had taken off his shirt. Freckles dotted the pale skin of his upper shoulders.

Roman flushed when Fielding lowered his shorts and underwear and the white globes of Fielding's ass came into view. Roman kept his underwear on as he reached inside the shower and turned the faucets back on. Hot water sputtered out until a steady flow began, adding to the steam already inside the bathroom.

Standing with his hands cupped over his bits, Fielding watched as Roman removed his underwear, not bothering to cover himself up. What was the point? They couldn't go the entire shower guarding themselves. And besides, wasn't it better to rip that band-aid off now? They had the next seven years to see each other naked. Ivan and Wyatt had clearly gotten over their bashfulness, and it was time for the two of them to do so as well.

"Oh..." Fielding whispered, his eyes drinking in the sight of Roman's body, his smooth tanned skin, his slightly drooping balls and penis, the curves where his abs began to show. In comparison, Fielding wasn't quite skeletal, but Roman could count his ribs.

Fielding's eyes locked on to the fading yellowed bruise on Roman's stomach. After their encounter with Xavier, Roman shared how it wasn't the first time Xavier had done something mean like that. He didn't mention any of the stuff about touching Xavier's dick or making him shoot his stuff. He tried, but he couldn't. It was like someone put a lock around his mouth and trapped the words inside.

Roman shook the thought away as he opened up the glass door of the shower and stepped inside, propping it open for Fielding to come through.

"Can you see without your glasses?" Roman asked.

"I can see alright," Fielding said, stepping over the ledge and into the shower.

The warmth from the spraying water immediately spread through the aching muscles in Roman's back, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Fielding

waddled over to the other shower, hands still cupped over his groin.

“You can’t cover yourself forever,” Roman said. “How’re you going to use shampoo or wash yourself?”

“I...uhh...” Fielding stammered. “I won’t then.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Look, what’s the big deal?”

Fielding turned his head away, and when he muttered, Roman could hardly hear him over the noise from the shower. “Promise not to laugh?”

Roman stepped out from under the shower head and placed a hand on Fielding’s shoulder. “I promise.”

Still keeping his head turned as he squinted his eyes shut, Fielding removed his hands, and Roman saw why he’d been so worried, even if it brought a smirk to his face.

Standing proudly up from his pale groin, Fielding’s boner arched upwards all three-and-a-half inches towards the ceiling, throbbing and pulsing in time with his heart beat. The shaft was as white as the rest of his body with a little pink mushroom crown on top. Beneath his penis, Fielding’s sack was larger than he’d expected, but his balls were drawn up, kind of like Xavier’s did before he shot his stuff.

If anything, Roman wanted to laugh only because of how anxious Fielding was. So what if he popped a boner? It happened all the time.

“Is that all?” Roman asked.

Fielding opened his eyes and looked down, as if to double check he was still hard. This close to his friend, Roman knew their groins were only a foot from each other at most. It had been years since he’d shared a bath or shower with Xavier, and the closeness alone was starting to get to him.

Fielding’s mouth opened as Roman’s penis stretched to its full length. Rather than curve upward like Fielding’s, Roman’s dick pointed out like a spear ready for battle. To show he wasn’t embarrassed, Roman flicked the end of his boner and gave it a wag.

“See? Nothing to be embarrassed about. We’re boys. It happens. A lot, actually.”

Fielding was breathing a little heavier, and when he reached down toward his groin, Roman thought he was going to cover himself up again. Instead, Fielding gave his penis a soft squeeze while staring at Roman’s and shuddered. The technique was different, but it seemed like he was making himself feel good like Xavier had. Roman wondered if that meant Fielding could shoot too.

A strange tightness formed in his chest as his boner twitched. Trying to distract himself, Roman grabbed his shampoo bottle from the ledge and squirted some in his palm.

“Come on. Let’s get washed up, and then we can go have dinner.”

They finished the rest of their shower, both boys hard as a rock the entire time. When it was time for his body wash, Roman was careful as his hands glided across his soapy body and down to his throbbing erection. Something was going on with him, and every touch on his dick sent little chills over his skin. He was careful to only touch it as much as he needed before moving on to his balls and rolling them in his hands.

Roman had tried to make it happen before. Tried to make his penis jump and twitch like his brother’s. But every time he felt like he was close, and he got close a lot, his mind was struck with a memory of Xavier slapping him or punching him or shoving him, and the desire emptied from his body.

Across from him, Fielding gave his boner a little more attention, his palm sliding over the entire length several times. Roman blushed at the small groan that escaped his mouth as Fielding’s knees buckled with every swipe across the pink crown. It took everything in Roman not to reach out and slip his finger’s around Fielding’s boner. Before anything could happen, Fielding took his hand away and washed his body free from the soap.

Roman felt like he needed to catch his breath as he cut the water off. Water dripped all over the floor as he opened the shower door and pulled their towels from the ledge.

Fielding's strawberry-blond hair was a shade darker as its curls plastered to his forehead. When Roman tossed him the towel, Fielding rubbed his hair with it, his tiny boner wagging side to side each time. As Fielding bent over to wipe his legs, Roman saw the globes of his ass again, and before he could change his mind, he coiled up his towel and flicked it out at Fielding's butt.

His friend lurched up and shielded his cheeks before hobbling away, and Roman laughed as he dodged Fielding's own attempts to towel snap him back.

"That wasn't nice, Roman," Fielding said, holding his ass with both hands as his boner jutted out. At least they were over their nervousness now.

Once their clothes were on, the two boys waited for Ivan and Wyatt before heading down to eat.

Along the way, Roman thought the day had been one of the best days he could remember in a long time. Maybe it was how well they did in the House competition, or maybe it was just the fact that he had done it alongside people who cared about him.

Roman couldn't stop himself from squeezing the tops of Fielding's shoulders. His friend looked back and beamed at him before adjusting his glasses.

It felt good to have someone close in his life again.

Chapter 8

The second solo competition was underway.

Arrows whizzed through the air before sinking into the target boards at the end of each lane, and soon the archers readied their next shots. From behind the safety of the hay bales, Cooper hung his head at a loss. None of his suitemates had any idea how to shoot a compound bow. How in the world were they expected to earn points for Valentia?

Jordy's floppy dreads appeared over the heads of other students as he worked his way through the crowd of cheering students.

"So, good news and bad. Professor Bell said you can participate today, but only if you remember his warning from yesterday."

"Okay, so what's the bad news?" Cooper asked.

Jordy sighed and shook his head. "Anakin isn't allowed to do any of the challenges because of his head."

"But that's stupid!" Anakin shouted.

Jordy raised his hands in self defense. "Listen, don't tell anyone I told you, but the last two competitions are supposed to be pretty intense. If you ask me, it's not worth the risk."

Despite Anakin's grumbling, Cooper thought Jordy was right. The ugly welt he'd given Anakin was already creeping from beneath the bandages wrapped around his head. If anything worse happened to his friend, Cooper wasn't sure how he would handle it, knowing he was the one responsible. Sure, Naveen was the one who egged him on, but Cooper was the one who lost control.

"Whatever, I probably would have sucked anyway," Anakin mumbled as he kicked some of the loose hay scattered on the ground.

The bulletin board with the updated House scores had been rolled over to the archery range. Yesterday, Jordy had taken the swimming event by storm. Out of the whole school, only two other students beat his time.

Jordy flexed his toned muscles in a superhero pose when Cooper and Anakin congratulated him.

“I’m really sorry,” Cooper said. “If not for me, you’d get to do these events too. I’d let you take my spot if I could.”

Anakin growled in frustration before shaking him by the shoulders.

“Cooper, if you apologize to me one more time, I’m gonna give you a knot as big as mine.”

“Okay, okay, sorry, I just—”

“That’s it!”

“Hey, idiots,” Naveen muttered. “Try to keep it down. I’m not trying to get kicked out.”

As the upperclassmen fired their arrows, Cooper tried to pick up on the techniques the older students used when nailing the bullseye. Most of them kept their back arm flat, and the ones who did best were the ones who were most patient.

Cooper hated to admit it, but Xavier made it look natural with the bow in his hands. The moment he picked up the compound bow, his face hardened as he fixated on the target over fifty feet away. Out of the 8th grade boys, his was the only one to land anywhere close to the bullseye.

When it was time for the 6th grade boys to participate, a pit formed in Cooper’s stomach. They didn’t have a shot in the world!

“I think Cooper should be the one to do it,” Naveen said. “It’s clearly the worst event, so why not?”

“We don’t know what any of the other events are! And why does it have to be me? I might be better at something else.”

“I can do,” Julian said, quickly stepping in between them. “No point in fighting.”

As Julian stepped up to the shooting range with the boys from the other Houses, Cooper didn’t have high expectations. The compound bow was more than half of Julian’s height. Thankfully the other Houses didn’t seem

all that capable either. He recognized Fielding from his classes, staring at the bow like it was from another planet before adjusting his glasses and trying to figure out the best way to hold it. In the end, everyone's arrows fell short, landing nowhere near any of the targets. Fielding's even managed to go wide into another lane entirely.

Naveen griped the whole time, whining it should have been Cooper up there. Cooper wanted to punch Naveen in the back of the head, but settled for balling his fists instead as he tried to tune out Naveen's comments.

No one blamed Julian when he came back. He only shrugged and laughed.

"Guess is not really for me. Was fun, though."

When the second of the three competitions was announced as wrestling, Cooper thought he might have stood a chance. With all the tree climbing he'd done, he knew he had good balance and grip. Either way the options were getting limited. Cooper would either have to volunteer now or gamble with whatever came up next.

Cooper had barely begun to say how he was willing to go next when Naveen cut him off.

"I'll take this one," Naveen insisted. "It's about time someone got us a win around here."

As Naveen walked away to submit his name, Anakin leaned over to Julian and said, "That wasn't very nice."

"He is...I don't know how you say," Julian said. "I am sorry, Cooper."

"It's alright," Cooper said. "It's not your fault."

There were a number of words Cooper could have suggested for Julian to use: jerk, asshole, dickhead, but in the end, what was the use? If he held on to his resentment for Naveen too long, it was only going to eat Cooper up inside. There was no point, and so even though Naveen was the biggest pain in the rear Cooper had ever met in his life, he still went to go cheer his teammate on as wrestling matches began.

Professor O'Malley paired off a bunch of boys from different grades before sending them to change into their singlets and headgear. A few minutes

later, Naveen stepped out from the changing room wearing a red spandex singlet that was clearly a size too small as it constricted his body. Anakin snickered at the lump near Naveen's crotch. He wasn't hard or anything, but the outline of his penis was obvious. Maybe Cooper was glad he wasn't the one wearing the singlet. If something happened and he popped a boner by accident, he wasn't sure he would ever live it down.

As Naveen waited at the center of the mat, he reached down to pinch at a wedgie. Finally the changing room doors opened, and Cooper paled as Ivan joined Naveen on the mat. Of course they'd get paired against Ivan!

Cooper wasn't convinced Ivan was even a 6th grader. Surely he must have failed school once or twice! If someone told him that Ivan secretly had his license, Cooper would have believed them. It hardly seemed fair that anyone had to wrestle him.

"Cooper, I think you lucked out," Anakin whispered beside him, and Cooper could only nod. Naveen didn't stand a chance. Over on the mat, Ivan looked bored as he dug his finger inside his ear to clean out any loose wax. He wiped it on his singlet.

"Maybe he can outlast him," Cooper said.

"Don't give up, Naveen!" Julian shouted.

The other boys from Fuerza cheered equally loud for Ivan. When the whistle blew, Naveen crouched low, widening his arms as he crab walked in a slow circle. There was a fire in his eyes, and Cooper hoped Naveen could use that to his advantage.

Sensing an opening, Naveen lunged forward in an effort to wrap his arms around Ivan's thigh and hoist him off his feet, but as he did, Ivan palmed the back of Naveen's singlet and dragged him to the mat with him. With a quick burst of speed, Ivan rolled his body over and pinned Naveen like he was a helpless baby. It was over.

When the whistle blew, Naveen coughed and hacked on the mat as he regained his breath. As he sulked back, they tried to encourage him, but Naveen didn't want to talk, even smacking away Julian's hand.

Fine then. Serves him right, Cooper thought.

His heart pounded as the mats cleared and everyone gathered for the final event. This was it. There was no other choice. He was the last of his suitemates to go and was stuck with whatever he ended up with.

“You got this, Cooper,” Anakin said in his ear.

Professor Bell marched forward, fist clutched around the final ping pong ball as he raised it in the air. A hush fell over the students as Professor Bell cleared his throat and lowered his hand to his chest.

“The final event of the fall House competition will be...”

Cooper could almost hear the drum roll rattling in the back of his mind.

Professor Bell took a deep breath before declaring, “Rock climbing!”

Cooper could hardly believe it. Of all the clubs and activities that could have been chosen, he knew rock climbing was a possibility, but he didn’t want to let himself believe. Even Naveen taking his place for the wrestling match turned out to be a wild blessing of good fortune.

Anakin shook his shoulders. “Cooper! This is it! This is your chance!”

The crowd of students swelled around Professor Bell as he led the way toward the school’s rock climbing wall across campus. They followed the grassy hills until coming upon the stables where the rock climbing tower was stationed. The pictures he remembered seeing in the gymnasium couldn’t do the tower justice. It was like the time he and his parents visited New York City, and half the trip he spent staring straight up at the unbelievably tall skyscrapers.

Per usual, the seniors started first. On the wall, multiple colored pathways led the way to the top. Using only the blue handholds, each group raced upward until they managed to ring the bell at the end of the path. Cooper knew the secret was in staying two moves ahead. You couldn’t afford to backtrack and start again. You’d burn out too fast. Lose your grip and fall. There were no second chances.

Cooper rubbed the sweat from his palms. He had to believe he could do this. How many hours had he spent climbing trees with his best friend over the years?

Spending the rest of his time memorizing the route he planned to take, Cooper felt as ready as he could be as the 6th grade boys were called to the wall. One of the professors helped him step into the loops of the harness. The straps were secured around his waist and thighs, tight enough that the front of his shorts bulged, but he didn't care about that. All that mattered was his focus on the climb.

The other 6th graders were preparing beside him, standing on their mark after their harnesses were fastened. The only boy Cooper recognized was Roman, since he shared classes with the Fuerzas. Ivan had already helped them dominate the canoe race, and then the wrestling match. Out of everyone, Cooper knew he had to beat Roman at all costs.

“Climbers, ready?”

Cooper took a quick breath. This was it. Now or never.

A whistle blared, and Cooper sprinted towards the base of the wall. Moving with the harness around his hips was strange at first, but he was grateful it didn't impede his range of motion any. Stepping onto the first blue handhold, Cooper stretched his arm out high. The handholds curved enough to grip, and Cooper pushed off his feet, using the momentum to get his foot to the next hold.

The cheers from below fueled him as he climbed. He didn't care if they were for him or not. He had to believe winning could help make a difference. He belonged here, just like them!

One more hold. Another. It didn't matter how many were left. All that mattered was getting to the next one. And then the next. With each step, Cooper's legs grew more shaky. When he was climbing trees, he could rest whenever he wanted. There was always plenty of space and plenty of branches. Here, there was only one path, and each narrow foothold didn't allow much room to catch his breath. He worried if he stopped too long to see how much was left, he might lose too many precious seconds.

One of the kids to his left slipped on his way to the next handhold. His flaming red hair flopped around as he tumbled headfirst into a spinning free fall. The farther he fell, the more the harness slowed him until his

body safely kissed the ground. The kid punched the ground in frustration before craning his head towards the rest of the climbers.

Anakin's voice cut through a chorus of disappointed groans. "Cooper, hurry!"

On the other side, Roman was passing him, grunting with each effort made as he climbed higher and higher. Gritting his teeth, Cooper sought out the next handhold and used both hands to launch himself upward. He nearly slipped as his sweaty palm twisted around the hard plastic jug handle. His hands stung as a blister formed, but he couldn't worry about that now. Couldn't let go. Had to keep climbing! In desperation, Cooper kicked out with his foot and managed to hook the bottom of his shoe around the hold without slipping.

The cheers below were swelling now. His legs were burning, his arms were cramping, and any moment he knew his body would quit on him. What good was it to get so close to where he wanted but fail just before the end?

Beside him, Roman was only a half step behind as they reached the last few holds.

Three to go.

Two.

Roman cried out as he made a last ditch effort to lunge for the bell at the top. His body torqued as he stretched his arm as high as he could, but in the end, his hand swiped only empty air. All at once, Roman's body thunked and tumbled down, slowing to a stop like the others who had fallen throughout the day.

Cooper's heart soared, and suddenly his whole body was like helium as he made the final step and finished the race to the top. The cheers from below couldn't match his own joy as he gripped the bell pull and shook it with all his might.

As Cooper kicked away from the wall, the harness controlled his descent until his trembling legs touched the ground again. The moment he was free, Anakin tackled him to the ground in a hug.

“Cooper, you did it! That was so badass!”

Others swarmed him in congratulations, patting his shoulder, ruffling his hair. Many of them were Valentias, some even as old as the seniors. Cooper had just enough time to pound fists with Jordy before getting swallowed back up in the chaos. Even winners from the other Houses came to give their kudos.

Cooper turned to see Julian standing with Anakin.

“That was so awesome, Cooper,” Julian said, his words thick with his accent.

“Julian cheered with me the whole time,” Anakin explained.

Cooper couldn’t help but look around. Even with all the people who had congratulated him on his win, the one person he had really been trying to impress was nowhere to be seen.

As if sensing who Cooper was looking for, Julian said, “Naveen saw you win, too. He’s not bad guy, Cooper. Just needs time.”

Julian held out a fist and apologized for not standing up for Cooper sooner.

“I’m not good friend,” Julian tried to say, “but I’ll do better.”

“It’s okay,” Cooper said, “I forgive you.”

With his win and the rock climbing event finished, the first House competition was brought to a close. Cooper couldn’t have asked for a better way to end the day as he headed back to the castle with Anakin and Julian.

Naveen was nowhere to be found in their suite, and it wasn’t until dinner when they found him already sitting at their table with Jordy. Whatever they were talking about, Naveen seemed to be nodding intently as Jordy explained something. By the time Cooper grabbed his food, Jordy was already back at his table with Kai.

It was like the past week hadn’t happened at all. The moment Cooper sat down at the table, everyone was talking to him and including him in their

conversations. Cooper wondered if he was in some kind of multiverse. Only Naveen was silent, barely eating his food or looking up from his plate.

In the end, Valentia lost the House competition. Actually, lost was too generous of a word. They got thrashed. The only reason they didn't wind up in 4th place was because of Cooper's win at the rock climbing wall. The win was just enough to snag 3rd place back. It wasn't pretty, but it was night and day from the canoeing accident the day before. As expected, Fuerza crushed most of the events, and nobody was surprised when Headmaster Robinson declared their House the winner.

Near the end of dinner, Nadia and Naveen were huddled together as they whispered. Whatever his twin was saying, Nadia looked pissed with Naveen. She talked a lot with her hands, waving them around whenever Naveen tried to say something back. When she was done, she grabbed her dinner tray and left with her roommate back towards the girls' dorms.

It wasn't until Cooper was about to leave with Anakin that Naveen called out to him.

"Cooper, wait," he said. "Can I talk with you for a minute? In private?"

"Anything you have to say to Coop, you can say around me," Anakin said and crossed his arms.

"It's okay, Anakin," Cooper said. For some reason, he didn't think Naveen was trying to corner him or insult him this time.

As he followed Naveen onto the cobblestone courtyard outside the banquet hall, the cool night air breezed across Cooper's arms. He rubbed them as the flickering lamplight cast shadows over Naveen's coppery skin. For the first time since meeting him, Naveen looked unsure of what he wanted to say next.

"Cooper, I don't even know where to begin apologizing."

"You could always start with, I'm sorry," Cooper suggested.

"No, of course. I am. Cooper, I've been such a dickhead to you. And I could come up with a million different excuses why, but it doesn't change any of

that. I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I hope you can give me a second chance to show you I'm not a terrible person."

Cooper bit his tongue to try and avoid saying something he'd regret. He wanted to blame Naveen for all the hurt he'd caused him—to tell Naveen the only reason he was apologizing was because Cooper made him and the other Valentias look good.

"Cooper, I was too dumb to see the type of friend you kept trying to be. I know words don't mean much, but please let me make it up to you."

Cooper shook his head. Words don't mean much, except Naveen's words had hurt him plenty. From the corner of his eye, Cooper spotted Anakin waiting in the shadows, quiet as the two boys worked out their problems.

A week ago, Anakin had asked for forgiveness as well, and now Cooper couldn't imagine life at the academy without him.

Everyone deserved a second chance.

Taking a deep breath through his nostrils, Cooper stuck out his hand. Maybe everything would turn south between them, and by tomorrow, he and Naveen would be at each other's throats again. It was a risk, but one Cooper prayed would pay off. At the very least, Naveen's face seemed genuine as he shook Cooper's hand and thanked him.

"Finally! Have you two made up yet?" Anakin called from the awning. Julian stood by his side, having snuck up at some point during their conversation.

"Haven't you ever heard of a little privacy?" Naveen asked.

"Like I said earlier, whatever you say to Coop, you can say around me."

"Come on," Cooper said, rubbing his arms for warmth. "Let's get out of here."

And for the first time since starting at Blue Ridge, Cooper made the walk back through to Valentia's tower with all of his suitemates. The day had been a rush of emotions, and his body was ready to collapse by the time they all finished the long climb to their bedrooms.

The cheers deafened Roman's ears as he stared at the final few handholds ahead of him. There was no way he would let Cooper Morrow win, not when Roman was so close to the top.

Still, Cooper kept his lead, and Roman was running out of time. Roman dug his toes into the holds and crouched, knees wobbling as he prepared to spring up and snag the bell that would claim his victory. But his foot slipped, and the jump that should have made him a hero wound up being his downfall as he uselessly pawed the climbing wall on his way down.

Only this time the harness didn't slow him, and when his body thwacked onto the ground, the breath was kicked from his lungs. There were no more cheers. There was no ringing bell.

There was nothing.

Roman groaned as he struggled for air. His ribs felt crunched as he struggled to flip on his back. Above him, the sun blinded him as it beamed down, but soon something blocked its path, and when Roman opened his eyes, Xavier was looming over him.

Roman could do nothing to crawl away from his brother who had the same look in his eyes like whenever they were in his bedroom.

Xavier dropped to his knees. Roman tried to protect himself, but Xavier pinned his arms beside his head before straddling Roman's waist. Even though his brother was clothed, Roman had no trouble feeling Xavier's erection as his brother ground against him.

Roman grit his teeth as his own dick tingled. Why did this always happen? He didn't want this. He hated it. Hated the way his body was reacting, responding, enjoying what Xavier was doing.

"Stop it," he muttered, not sure if he was talking to Xavier or his aching boner.

Xavier wasn't even looking at Roman, only through him as he continued rocking his hips forward. With every thrust, Roman drew closer and closer

toward that cliff he'd gotten to so close before. He didn't want it. He did, though. Just not from Xavier. Not like this.

"Stop it!"

A hand shook Roman's shoulder as he sprang up in bed. Like the other nightmares over the last week, it had left him breathless and sweaty, and worse yet, as painfully hard as he was in his dreams.

Roman couldn't make out Fielding's body in the dark, but the stress of the nightmare and Xavier was overwhelming, and Roman began to cry. His tears burned his cheeks as they fell, and he punched his arm to try and distract himself from the pain in his heart.

Fielding crawled in bed beside him, saying nothing as he scooted the comforter back and pulled Roman to his chest to let him cry.

It had been so long. He needed the release. Laying his head against Fielding's bare chest, Roman breathed out a sigh as his friend's fingernails scratched lightly through his damp hair.

"Is this okay?" he asked, and Roman nodded. "My Moms do this for me when I'm upset."

The touch was electric, sending goosebumps over Roman's body as he relaxed into it. Feeling cramped as he curled against Fielding's body, Roman tried to stretch his legs out, but as he did, the boner in his underwear brushed against Fielding's thigh.

They both froze.

Roman thought back to their shower from yesterday, when both of them had gotten hard in front of each other. Thinking about the soapy hand gliding over Fielding's slick erection made Roman shiver. He should repay Fielding for comforting him. That's what a good friend would do.

As Roman placed a hand on Fielding's stomach, his friend's undefined abs tensed beneath his touch. Smooth skin led the way down to the waistband of Fielding's briefs, and after a small hesitation, Roman brushed his fingers across the top of Fielding's underwear, pleased to feel the hardness there and Fielding's gasp at his ear.

“Roman, what’re you...”

Roman snaked a hand inside Fielding’s underwear, past his bare pubic region, until his fingers wrapped around the thin, straining erection. Fielding shuddered as Roman worked his fingers steadily like he had for Xavier so many times. Hands squeezed and latched on to Roman, not in a painful way, but like they had nowhere else to go as they palmed and pressed urgently against him.

Using his friend’s breathless moans as a guide, Roman knew Fielding must have been close to the same good feelings Xavier had.

“Roman, stop,” Fielding said in a strained voice. “Wait.”

It wasn’t until Fielding’s hands left his hair and went to halt his gliding wrist that Roman felt a sting in his chest. What was he doing wrong?

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Fielding said, “but you don’t have to do this.”

“Didn’t it feel good, though?” Roman whispered. Why wouldn’t Fielding let him do this?

There was a long stretch of silence before Fielding said, “It’s okay to just lay here together. Let’s do that instead, okay?”

Roman wasn’t sure what to think of that. Touching his dick was how Xavier liked him to show affection, so why wouldn’t Fielding want the same thing? Already Fielding’s fingers dragged teasingly along his scalp as Roman tried to settle his mind. The ever-chirping cicadas outside helped as he listened to their cries.

Under Fielding’s touch, Roman’s dick strained and he desperately wanted to reach down and squeeze himself, to keep chasing those good feelings and see where they led. But he also wanted to lay there and enjoy the soothing touch from his friend. Sinking into his friend’s chest, Roman yawned deeply as his eyes grew itchy and he finally fell back asleep.

Chapter 9

“Aaaachoo!”

Cooper shied away from the spray of mist shooting from Anakin’s nose. What didn’t land on him rained down on their writing assignment for Professor Gray. It was the fourth time he’d sneezed in nearly a minute, and Cooper had had enough.

“Dude, cover up,” Cooper said. “No one wants your germs in their face.”

Anakin sniffed, holding up a finger as another sneeze took him.

“I’m not sick, I promise!” he insisted. “But I can’t help it. Something’s making me sneeze.”

Professor Gray strolled over to their tables with a tissue box in his hand. While Anakin swiped a few extra to keep with him, a strange odor made Cooper sniff. It was a weird mix of lemons and some kind of flowers.

Cooper turned to Naveen and Julian behind him.

“You guys smell that? I think it’s coming from Professor Gray.”

Naveen smirked. “Anakin’s probably allergic to him.”

“Really? Now?”

“You’re right,” Naveen said. “Dumb joke. Sorry.”

Cooper spun back around and raised his hand as Anakin sneezed again, this time, at least, into his wad of tissues. It was clear nobody cared about the assignment anymore.

“Professor Gray, I think he’s sneezing because of you.”

Professor Gray glared at him as a few others snickered, and right away Cooper realized how it must have sounded.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” Cooper said. “What I mean is, are you wearing something different today?”

Professor Gray paused before leaning in to sniff the front of his suit.

“It’s possible it’s this new cologne,” he admitted and then sighed. “Anakin, excuse yourself to the bathroom and see if the sneezing stops.”

“Kay,” Anakin said through a stuffy nose.

By the time Anakin returned, his nostrils were plugged with the ends of toilet paper. It looked like one of those rings you’d see in a bull’s nostrils. Cooper couldn’t stop his laughter, especially with all the strange clothing Anakin liked to wear.

“I’ll just use these from now on,” Anakin said as he returned to his seat.

“You will do no such thing,” Professor Gray announced. “After tomorrow, I’ll be sure to use a different cologne. I will not have your appearance be any more of a distraction than it already is. Now, I trust you all have had plenty of time for your written work. Textbooks open to—p”

“Aaaachoo!”

It was time for laundry day.

Cooper braced himself against the laundry room door with his basket while the others carried their baskets inside. The laundry room wasn’t anywhere near the size of their bedrooms. It was a wonder the four of them could even fit in the tiny room tucked beneath Valentia’s staircase. Inside was two washers and two dryers, each facing each other on opposite ends.

Their first laundry day was awkward. Naveen still wasn’t talking to him, and washing his laundry was Cooper’s least favorite way to spend his time, he decided. Now, it was a completely different experience as they all piled into the cramped laundry room, laughing as they tried not to drop their hampers.

“I thought Professor Gray was going to wring your neck earlier,” Cooper said.

“It wasn’t my fault his smelly cologne makes me sneeze,” Anakin shot back.

After Julian clicked the door shut, they dumped their clothes inside the two washers. Cooper was about to close the lid when Anakin stopped him and pulled his shirt over his head. There was a flash of Anakin’s bare armpits.

Cooper had never seen them up close like that. For some reason they were cool to look at. It made him feel funny.

Anakin added his shirt to the pile of clothes before kicking off his shoes and socks. Next came his shorts, and when those had gone, Anakin was left in only a pair of teal briefs. The rounded bulge in his underwear was unmistakable, and Cooper tried not to stare.

“It makes no sense not to wash all our clothes,” Anakin said. “We only get to use the washers once a week.”

“I guess that’s true,” Cooper said.

“Works for me,” Naveen said, ditching his own clothes until he was left in only a pair of plaid boxers. Julian joined him, as usual following Naveen’s lead, and soon it was only Cooper dressed.

“Come on, Coop,” Anakin said. “It’s just us boys.”

What did he have to lose? Cooper took off his shirt to the cheers of the other three. Once he got down to his underwear, though, he was still self-conscious. His briefs were faded and loose, nowhere near the quality of everyone else’s clothes. Whenever his parents went shopping, his mom loved Goodwill because of how easy it was to find old clothes in his size. Now the thought of everyone seeing him in his used underwear made his cheeks burn with shame.

Other than a brief glance from Naveen, thankfully no one said anything.

“Finally. Let’s start this puppy up,” Anakin said as he slapped the washer next to him.

They hung around the washers as the machines rumbled and clattered. Cooper sat cross-legged on the floor beside Julian. Their Polish friend stretched back as he propped himself up with his hands. Cooper liked the way Julian’s neon briefs clung to his body. The material looked super stretchy, but soft to the touch. Beside the washer, Naveen had his arms crossed as he leaned against it, and Anakin sat on top, dangling his feet over the edge.

Stuck there until their clothes finished, they passed the time talking about anything—memories from home, past vacations, their favorite professors, friends they'd left behind. Now a couple weeks into his time at Blue Ridge, Cooper knew Sawyer would have started 6th grade. Had he made new friends? Was he enjoying Misty Pines Middle? He'd written a letter to Sawyer, but until their first care package arrived, Cooper had no way of knowing how life was going for his friend.

Anakin squirmed on top of the washer and spread his legs out as a very evident boner tented the front of his briefs. The sight made Cooper's face hot and sent a blush creeping down his neck.

It took them a few days to get comfortable showering together at the same time, but even then, he and Anakin had always been quick to shield their bodies from each other. Glimpses were all he'd really seen of Anakin's penis and balls, and the only other time he'd noticed his friend hard was the morning after their first day when he'd been trying to hide his own erection.

"Someone's got a boner," Naveen teased in a sing-song voice. He was only a foot from Anakin, getting a close-up view of Anakin's penis as it twitched in his underwear.

Anakin blushed. "Yeah, well, big whoop. It's not my fault. It's this dumb washer."

"You're the one sitting on it, dummy," Naveen said.

"Why not just come down here with us?" Cooper asked.

Anakin shrugged with an embarrassed smile. "I don't know. It feels kind of good. Tickles a bit."

Naveen gave a wicked grin as he leaned in close. "Keep going, and it'll feel even better."

"Really?" Anakin asked. Gripping the edges of the washer, Anakin flattened his bottom against the rumbling washer as much as he could. The more he held on to the washer, the more Anakin's legs trembled, jerking occasionally as he twitched. It must have been similar to the way Cooper's boner felt when it scraped against his pajamas or mattress in the morning.

Whenever that happened, the sensations were almost too much—a mix of pleasure and pain and something he couldn't put into words.

Anakin rubbed his palms repeatedly over his bare thighs as his head rolled. "It's starting to feel really good, but I think I'm gonna pee if this keeps up."

Naveen reached down and pinched the boner in his boxers. Through the opening, Cooper could just make out the penny-colored rod of Naveen's thin dick.

Watching Anakin made Cooper's chest all fluttery and jittery, and he tucked his knees up, trying to ignore how hard his penis was getting. Julian, on the other hand, didn't seem bothered at all as his little rod stretched firmly towards his hip.

"You won't pee," Naveen said. "Keep going."

"O...Okay..." Anakin said. His eyes fluttered closed as his body rocked, and a few seconds later, he groaned long and low. The strangest thing happened to Anakin's penis as it jumped around inside his briefs. It flexed against the cloth up and down the same way Cooper got rid of any lingering drops of pee in the bathroom.

Anakin's hand crept down and cupped his groin before he finally rolled off the washer. Pulling back his waistband, he stared down inside his underwear as if checking to see what had happened.

"Are you alright?" Cooper asked.

"Yeah," Anakin said, still staring at his dick. "That was...oh man. Why's it twitching?"

"Felt amazing, right?" Naveen asked. "Julian, Cooper. You should try it, too."

"I'm good," Cooper said, but Julian was already getting to his feet, his little boner leading the way.

"Don't be such a baby," Naveen said. "Trust me."

More irked at Naveen's response than anything, Cooper hunched over as he climbed to his feet, hoping his boner didn't stick out too much as he

climbed on the washer.

Naveen gestured down to his hardness. "See? That just means you're ready to try it. Ask Anakin if you don't believe me."

Anakin snapped the waistband of his briefs back, his still-hard boner smushed against his leg. "It did feel really good, Coop. He's right."

"If it feels so good, then why don't you do it?" Cooper asked Naveen.

The Indian boy shrugged. "I might later. We'll see."

As Julian hoisted himself onto the second washer, Cooper sat on the same one Anakin had, and immediately the vibrations rumbled in his butt cheeks. Even his balls jiggled and bounced around.

It was an interesting feeling, but nothing mind-blowing. It wasn't until Anakin told him to flex his dick and hold it as long as possible that something started to build inside him. It somehow tickled and tingled at the same time all throughout his boner, but Cooper figured it might have had more to do with the vibrations of the washing machine than anything he was doing. Testing his theory, Cooper ground his pelvis into the washer to try and make the feeling stronger.

Pretty soon the feelings were getting better, almost unbearable. When he was really little, he used to pretend wrestle with his dad. It always turned into Cooper being tickled on the ground, begging his dad to stop before he peed his pants. The feeling now was a lot like that, only Cooper could pull away if he wanted to. He didn't though. He wanted—needed the feeling to keep going.

Beside him, Julian was shuddering as his shoulders bunched up.

"Ahh...something's...ahh...happening..."

Julian rubbed his palm over his crotch before rolling the head of his penis between his fingers, each time bucking under the pleasure.

"Cooper, how does it feel?" Anakin asked.

Anakin was right next to him, hands resting just beside Cooper's legs as he leaned in. As he stared, Anakin's head was only a few inches from his groin.

The extra attention only made Cooper stiffer.

“It feels kinda funny,” Cooper panted. “Tickles, like you said.”

Suddenly Julian squeaked and snatched his hand away as he started peeing himself. Or, at least, it looked like pee. There wasn't much, but the front of Julian's neon briefs had spots of wetness soaking through where his dick poked against them.

Cooper started rocking his hips, loving how the underside of his erection rubbed against his underwear. It was better than the times he tried it in bed because the tickling vibrations kept up the whole time. Something felt like it was climbing inside his groin, and Cooper couldn't hold it back any longer.

Squeezing his eyes shut, his dick exploded with pleasure and twitched as goosebumps crawled over his arms. It was like a million tiny feathers were dancing all over his skin. Even the hairs at the back of his neck were standing on end as his penis kicked in his underpants. He hadn't noticed he was holding his breath until it came whooshing out of him. Cooper was grateful he wasn't peeing himself, because there was no way his body was in control anymore. It was all good, warm, tickly feelings.

When he could finally breathe, the rumbles became too intense on his penis, and he crawled off the washer. His dick was still hard though, just like Anakin's had been. He wiped a hand across his sweaty brow before his jaw dropped.

Over on the other washer, Julian had pulled the front end of his briefs down, and Cooper was nearly face to dick with a shiny erection. Sticking up with a curve, Julian's dick had a tiny drop of water clinging to the end. The head of his penis was smeared with a shiny, clear juice. Julian rubbed the spot with his fingers and twitched from the sensitivity.

“Happened again, huh?” Naveen asked, coming closer.

“Yeah, but I wasn't asleep this time,” Julian said, bringing his fingers to his nostrils as he sniffed.

“I bet it's your sperms,” Naveen explained. “Do you have any hairs yet?”

Julian shook his head, although he hunched over to inspect either side of his dick. All three of them were huddled around Julian.

“Can we get that feeling whenever we want?” Anakin asked. “That was awesome!”

“How did you even find out about it?” Cooper asked the copper-skinned boy.

“The tickling feeling is called a cum, and yeah, you can have it whenever you want. I don’t need a washing machine, though. I usually get my good feelings from sex.”

All three boys jumped in surprise.

“You’ve had sex!?”

“I don’t believe you!”

“No way!”

Naveen blushed and scratched the back of his head, suddenly uncomfortable from all the extra attention.

“It’s not really a big deal,” he said. “I’ve done it loads of times.”

“Bullshit it isn’t,” Anakin said. “Tell us about it. Who was it with?”

But Naveen suddenly wasn’t interested in sharing, no matter how much Anakin pushed and prodded. Naveen had had real sex. Cooper could hardly believe it. On the playground, he and the other boys always joked about it in giggly whispers, but sex was an adult thing, not something kids his age did.

His parents still had sex. He was uncomfortably certain they did. One night, when he had been thirsty and needed a glass of water, he crossed the open door of his parents’ bedroom. The moans coming from his mom and dad had been strange and sent a weird, tingly rush through his body. These weren’t like the over-the-top moans his friends made at recess. It was low and sensual and drawn out.

A couple times near the end of his 5th grade year, he and Sawyer had watched sex videos on Sawyer’s phone. The site said those people were

eighteen, and everyone else they saw looked way older, so of course sex was only for adults. It just made sense. So did that mean Naveen was having sex with a woman? But he was only in 6th grade. Maybe there wasn't a limit after all.

A million questions tickled the back of his brain as the washer buzzed. When the boys switched their clothes to the dryer, they weren't sure what to do about Julian's messy underwear. In the end, he decided to wear them, saying he didn't mind the way they felt.

"It's nice, a little," Julian said, searching for the right word. "Squishy."

While their clothes dried, Anakin kept fiddling with his penis which shifted between hard and soft multiple times. It was obvious he kept thinking about the cum feeling. Maybe he'd want to try it again next time they were at the washers.

Even though they found other things to talk about, the conversation kept coming back to Naveen having sex. No matter how much they begged and pleaded though, he was adamant that he didn't want to talk about it. Cooper wondered who it could have been. Surely not someone from Blue Ridge. They'd only been there a few weeks.

Once the dryer pinged, the boys folded their clothes and threw on a fresh set. As Julian opened the laundry room door and the boys walked up the spiral steps of Valentia, Anakin leaned in and said, "We should do that again sometime, Coop."

Cooper blushed, worried people around could somehow sense what they'd done together. Even still, there was no denying the lurching in his underwear as his penis more than agreed with Anakin's idea.

"We should talk about last night."

Roman knew this was coming and tried to busy himself with folding up the stubborn cloth hamper. Why didn't these things work when they were supposed to? He rattled the hamper until it finally collapsed. Behind him, Roman could hear Fielding tapping his foot, waiting.

After last night, when Fielding had stopped Roman from touching his dick, things had been awkward. By the time Roman woke up, Fielding was already gone from his bed, showered, and dressed. It wasn't until breakfast that Roman saw him, and by then it was too late to have any meaningful, private conversations. Too late except for now, that is. Why did Ivan and Wyatt have to bail on doing their laundry until later?

The dryer rattled and clattered as Roman turned to face Fielding. His strawberry-blond hair was dulled in the florescent lighting, but his green eyes were no less intense.

"Can we talk about it, please?"

Roman slid down against the dryer until his butt kissed the ground. Fielding crouched next to him. It was clear he wasn't going to give up.

"I just...I don't know," Roman said. "Didn't you like it?"

Fielding rubbed at his freckled arms. "I did, but not like that, Roman. You were really upset."

"Sorry. It was another bad dream."

"You always have bad dreams," Fielding said. "I'm really worried about you."

When Xavier had nearly pummeled the two of them early on in the school year, Roman had to give Fielding some kind of answer. He told him about the times Xavier had shoved him, slapped him, even about getting punched their first day at Blue Ridge. But whenever he thought about opening up to Fielding in other ways, like the ways Xavier had Roman help him shoot his stuff, something stopped him. It was like Roman's heart was locked in chains, and any effort to speak only rendered him mute. He wasn't sure he would ever be able to find the words.

He couldn't talk about Xavier directly, but maybe there was a way to talk around it.

"Fielding, have you ever felt like you don't belong?"

Beside him, Fielding's eyes grew unfocused, like he was recalling a memory from his past, but at last, he nodded.

“That’s how it is for me.”

“Being at Blue Ridge?” Fielding asked, but Roman shook his head.

“Being with my family. Maybe it’s me, I don’t know. They’re all so...caught up in their own lives, and sometimes it’s like they forget I even exist.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Fielding said and rolled his eyes. “My mom thinks your dad’s a pretty great guy. Believe me, ever since she found out you were my roommate, she won’t stop texting me about it.”

“I mean, he’s always there for other people. It’s part of his job. But him, my mom, they’re always someplace else or running late or never there. Then, with Xavier...”

It was like trying to explain the vastness of space or the depths of the ocean.

“Was he always such a big asshole?” Fielding asked, then quickly amended himself. “Sorry.”

“No, not always,” Roman said. “It’s like someone flipped a switch and turned off the Xavier I grew up with.”

“That sucks,” Fielding said, summing it up in the way only boys can.

“And there are other things...” Roman hinted at cryptically. “Things I don’t really wanna talk about. Can’t talk about...sorry.”

Fielding stood up suddenly and started pacing around the room, wagging his hands like he was trying to rid them of something germy and gross. When he spoke, he was a nervous and shaky mess.

“Okay, so listen. I’ve never really told anybody this other than my Moms, because, well, they’re my Moms, but I’m pretty sure—like 95% sure—I’m probably gay. And not because they are or anything, at least I don’t think, but because...well, I just am, okay?”

Fielding wasn’t even looking at him anymore as he bounced from wall to wall. Any faster and Roman thought he might combust.

“And I’ve never had anyone like me growing up. Again, moms don’t count. But last year there was this one boy at my school who I had the biggest

crush on, but I didn't know it at the time. I just wanted to be near him. And then one day I was at his house, and we were playing games, and I misread something he said and tried to kiss him, which he did not like, and then I panicked and asked if one of my Moms could pick me up. Next thing I know, he's told everyone in our class I'm a fag. The rest of that school year was a nightmare, but then I came to Blue Ridge to start over, so there. Now you know."

"Woah," was all Roman could say. Fielding had finally stopped to catch his breath, as much from his pacing as his prattling on.

"So, yeah, if you hate me now, or don't want to be my roommate or whatever, then that's fine. But I had to tell you. Because about last night, it's not that I didn't want to. I did...it's just..."

"I get it. You want it to mean something."

Fielding nodded and before anything else could be said, they jumped as the dryer buzzed behind them. It was good that it had, too, because Roman wasn't sure he trusted himself to do much else than breathe. He'd never considered doing something sexual with anyone because he was attracted to them. Sure, Roman was close with Xavier, but that was different. He didn't want to date his brother or anything like that.

"I don't hate you," Roman said. "And I don't want anyone else as my roommate. And I don't care if you're gay—or one day decide you're not. But I do care about you. And last night...you're right. I don't know what I was thinking, but I promise, if I ever try to do something like that again, it'll be because it means something to me, too."

It was like someone unknotted the tense bundle of nerves that was Fielding. His shoulders relaxed, and he took in a deep breath before he smiled and gave Roman a hug. As he did, a crack chiseled through Roman's heart, a place he thought long sealed away. For the first time since Xavier—the old Xavier—someone was managing to work their way in.

The thought terrified him.

Roman smacked his hands together and rubbed the chalk into his palms. With his helmet already tightened on his head, and most of his harness

laced up, he was ready to climb. He pulled the end of his cramped shorts down to give his balls some relief.

“Hey, Roman, wait up,” a voice called, and Cooper Morrow was there, his thick, wavy hair curling out from beneath his helmet. “I didn’t know you were joining the club.”

To be fair, Roman hadn’t either. Fielding had all but talked Roman out of it when they were first searching for clubs, using Cooper as the main reason why it would be a bad idea. But after the House competition, and coming so close to winning, only to have victory snatched away from him at the last second, Roman knew the rock climbing club was where he wanted to be.

“You climbed a heck of a race,” Cooper said. “I only barely beat you.”

Cooper held out his fist, and Roman had to fight the urge to say something cruel. Maybe it was Xavier bleeding off of him. It wasn’t Cooper’s fault Roman lost. He’d gotten too eager, too impatient. Roman shook away the mean thoughts like a case of bad fleas and instead playfully slapped Cooper’s fist away.

“Yeah, well that was only because I took it easy on you. Next time, you don’t stand a chance.”

A light twinkled in Cooper’s eyes. “How about a race right now?”

“Please,” Roman said, cracking his knuckles. “I could climb this wall with my eyes shut.”

They were poised to restart their race, but before they could begin, someone smacked the back of their helmets.

“You boys will do no such thing!”

Roman’s helmet slipped over his forehead as Professor Green strutted past, her tight ponytail swinging as she strode toward the base of the wall. Cooper shrugged, and they joined their teacher, who gave them all extensive rules on safety and always making sure they were properly geared up before ever climbing. After that, she released them to the wall

where they worked on basics, including types of holds, climbing and breathing techniques, and the importance of a spotter.

“Even though you’re harnessed up now, climbing alone is still very dangerous. Having someone to look after you can help keep you from taking a nasty fall.”

It didn’t take long for Roman to realize how much he’d misjudged Cooper. Maybe misjudged wasn’t the right word, but he certainly hadn’t given him a fair chance. It was obvious how strong of a climber Cooper was. Anytime Roman thought Cooper had jammed himself in an awkward spot, he always managed to readjust and make it to the next jug. On top of that, Cooper ended up being a great spotter, helping Roman to see the best routes to climb when he got stuck.

By the time Professor Green called them to unharness and hang their gear, Roman was sweating in places he’d never sweat before. His legs were jello, and his blisters had blisters. Cooper, on the other hand, looked ready to climb another round.

Roman dabbed the sweat burning his eyes with the end of his shirt, and when he looked back up, he saw Xavier’s lanky body slinking away from campus into the nearby woods. Something was clutched in his hand, a bottle perhaps, but from this far out, Roman couldn’t tell.

Just leave him be, Roman told himself, but already his legs were betraying him. Before Roman could slip away and follow Xavier, a hand clasped his shoulder.

“Good job today, Roman,” Cooper said. “I’m sure we’ll race again soon! You wanna walk back to the castle together?”

Roman was ready to decline and chase Xavier down, but by the time he turned his head back around, Xavier was already gone.

What was he up to, Roman wondered.

Chapter 10

Cooper scrubbed his shampoo through his hair as he reflected on his past couple months at Blue Ridge.

Already the terrible things he faced his first week were like a distant memory, constantly replaced by better ones, but that's not to say everything was perfect.

Naveen still made snarky comments, but that was just him, Cooper learned. Some people were just natural-born buttheads. Cooper rolled his eyes to think how many pointless arguments Anakin and Naveen had over dumb things like their favorite soccer teams or which snacks were better than others. Usually Naveen got too heated, and then Julian had to talk him down. For a kid who wasn't great at English, Julian always seemed to know the right words to say.

Naveen wasn't even the craziest friendship he'd made. If you asked Cooper at the start of the year if he was ever likely to be friends with Roman Jacobs, Cooper would have bet a million dollars against it.

It's not that Roman wasn't nice, but Cooper's first impression of him was soured because of his jerk older brother, Xavier. Of course Cooper thought Roman would be too! It didn't help that Roman's face looked like he was always ready to get in a fist fight with you. Cooper was thankful to find out how wrong he was. He'd misjudged Roman, doing the same exact thing he was frustrated at Naveen for—judging people without giving them a chance first.

Not only had he become friends with Roman, Cooper had also found a rival in him, someone who liked to push him as much as he liked to push back. In the races they'd had since the House competition, they were dead even on the rock climbing wall, with two wins each, though Roman still complained that Cooper let him win his first time. There was no way that would ever happen. Cooper never gave up on anything, ever.

As Cooper ducked his head beneath the shower head, the steaming water rinsed the suds from his eyes, and he blinked the water away. Across from

him, Anakin was running his soapy hands over his body. His hands glided over his flat stomach, spreading to his smooth thighs, before finally swiping across his drooping testicles and hanging penis.

In the two weeks since Naveen showed them how to get the cum feeling in the laundry room, Cooper wondered when he and Anakin would try it again. They were way more comfortable being naked around each other now, but whenever Cooper thought about asking, it was like running into a brick wall. Something always managed to get in the way. At least he wasn't shy about his boners anymore.

They happened daily now, but knowing it would go down once he peed, Cooper usually let it stick up against his pajamas. Anakin, too, was plagued with them, although since he only slept in his briefs, his boners were way more obvious. Anytime Cooper saw it, his heart skipped a beat. Whereas Cooper's was still thin and small, only about three inches when hard, Anakin's was like a thick tube and reminded him of a hotdog. Obviously Cooper hadn't measured it, but it had to be at least four inches if not a little bigger, and Anakin's was the same size soft as he was hard. Cooper wished his hanged like that when he was soft instead of looking like a shriveled up balloon.

As Anakin worked a hand over his penis, it chubbed up, and he gave a guilty glance at Cooper before dropping his hand away. It didn't stop his penis from craving the extra attention as it bobbed and pulsed into its full hardness. Cooper's face grew warm, and already his own tool was starting to respond.

They graded glances at each other's junk before Anakin gave a shy grin. "Still gotta try that thing again sometime."

In an attempt to distract himself from how his face sizzled like a frying pan, Cooper turned the squeaky shower knobs until the water stopped flowing, and Anakin did the same.

They opened the shower door, and immediately the cool air gave Cooper goosebumps. He couldn't wait to dry and wrap himself in one of the school's soft towels.

As he padded over the marbled floor to the towel rack, Naveen and Julian stepped inside the bathroom, each shirtless as they held their towels around their necks.

“Well lookey here, if it isn’t the boner boys.”

Naveen smirked at each of them, and Julian rolled his eyes.

“Ignore him,” Julian said in his thick accent, “he gets all the time, too.”

Naveen’s eyes widened, and a blush tinged his copper cheeks. “Well, so do you!”

All the talk about constant boners was doing nothing to help Cooper with his, and he quickly wrapped the towel around his waist, irked that the little lump was still visible.

Anakin wasn’t in any rush, letting his dick freely jut out from his groin as it wagged with each step.

“So what?” Anakin said. “We all get boners. Why should I be embarrassed? Mine’s the biggest one here.”

“It is not!” Naveen shouted. “Mine’s easily that big.”

“Anakin...” Cooper warned.

“Yeah, well prove it!”

“How am I supposed to prove it? By sticking it next to yours?”

“Yeah, unless you’re scared,” Anakin said.

They were quiet then, wondering who might take the next step. Did Cooper want to see Naveen with a boner? Maybe. Actually, yes. The only glimpse he’d had of it was that day in the laundry room as it peeked through the narrow opening in Naveen’s boxers. Their last laundry day, they lost the chance to try anything. One of the fuses had blown, and an electrician was busy fixing it next to one of the custodians.

Naveen tossed the towel around his neck over to the sink counter and hooked his thumbs inside his waistband.

“Don’t feel bad when yours is smaller,” he said and lowered his pants to his thighs.

Naveen’s dick had a gentle curve. It was definitely on the thinner side, but other than its width, Cooper thought it might have been pretty close to Anakin’s size. What’s more was that Naveen still had skin on the end of his dick. Cooper knew some boys still had it—or rather, they all did at birth—but he’d never actually seen it on someone. It was super cool the way it stretched over the head of his penis, exposing nearly half of the pink glans.

“Hah, mine’s fatter,” Anakin said as he walked over and stood in front.

“I was talking about length, dummy,” Naveen said.

Cooper held his breath as the two boys leaned forward. The ends of their dicks were like two ships passing in the night as they inched closer.

“Cooper, come tell us who’s bigger.”

“Me?” Cooper squeaked.

“You can’t ask him. Of course he’ll say you. Julian, you come over, too.”

Being right next to the two of their boners was making Cooper’s throb. He wondered if Julian was suffering the same way, but it was difficult to tell as the Polish boy hunched forward with his hands on his knees. Anakin and Naveen planted a thumb at the base of their dicks as they pushed their hips outward.

Anakin’s was definitely thicker, that was obvious, but it wasn’t crazily so. It just had more...heft. The two kept pushing their hips, until Anakin’s boner pressed at Naveen’s hip a split second before Naveen’s would have reached.

“See? Told you,” Anakin said, his words husky and thick.

What was going through Anakin’s head? If Cooper was in Anakin’s shoes—or rather, skin—he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to stop himself from wrapping his fingers around Naveen’s boner to see what it felt like. The smoothness. The texture. Hell, it took everything in him not to grab his own dick. There was an itchy, almost anxious energy in his body, and Cooper rubbed his palms over his stomach to try and get some of it out.

“Yeah, well it’s not always about size. It’s how you use it,” Naveen said, and he flexed his penis, making it bump into Anakin’s.

“Hey!”

“Come on, Naveen,” Julian said as he tugged his arm. “We have to shower or be late for breakfast.”

“You’re crazy,” Cooper told Anakin on their way back into the bedroom.

Now with a towel around his waist, Anakin still had a boner, but at least it wasn’t threatening to stab the next person they passed. Anakin wrapped his arm around Cooper’s neck as they entered their bedroom.

“Sometimes, Coop, you gotta prove to people they’re wrong.”

By the time they made it to the banquet hall, the place was in chaos. Brown packages were being tossed around the room like prizes as kids of all ages carried them back to their tables. At the center of the chaos was Professor Bell and the other Blue Ridge Buddies as they checked names off lists.

Of course! In the excitement of the showers, Cooper had completely forgotten about the care packages. Today was the day!

“Cooper!” Jordy called out as he tied his dreads together using a scrunchie.

“What do you think you’ll get?” Anakin asked as they rushed the table.

“I don’t know, but I can’t wait!”

Cooper’s body buzzed with excitement as Jordy handed them each a wrapped package. Anakin had to use two hands to hold on to the rectangular box, but even though Cooper was able to carry his with one hand, he didn’t mind. It was Christmas day in his heart.

They didn’t even bother with breakfast as they rushed to open their packages. Anakin tore away the brown wrapping, revealing a sleek black box inside. When he peeled away the tape holding it together, a pile of brand new, crisply folded clothes lay inside. Anakin moved lightning fast as he pulled out a pair of peach pants with red swirl designs all around the legs.

“These are awesome!” he beamed. “My dad’s so kickass.”

Anakin skimmed through the handwritten note inside before digging past the clothes and discovering a box of brand new, premium colored pencils. There were shades of color Cooper had never seen before. That was it. Cooper couldn’t take it anymore.

Ripping through the wrapping of his own box, Cooper pulled out a reused Amazon package, taped carefully around the edges to secure everything down. It was practically begging to be opened and have its mysteries revealed. He used one of the forks on the table to pry away the tape before opening it with a gasp.

Right away Cooper knew what he was staring at, he just couldn’t believe it. Shining with the newness only freshly printed books can have, Cooper gingerly scooped up the latest Detective Dackery mystery. He hadn’t even known a new one was being released! On the cover, the famous cartoon duck detective was dressed in his familiar beige trench coat, surrounded by the other animal members from his agency. Something was different about this back ground. As Dackery and his friends each struck a cool pose, an ominous figure towered behind them in the shadowy background. Cooper got chills just thinking about what might happen next to Detective Dackery.

“Nice, Coop, you love those books!” Anakin said, and they bumped fists.

Inside the box, where the book had been, were two different notes. The first was a note from his mom. It was filled with all sorts of mushy comments about how his parents missed him and couldn’t wait for him to come home for the winter holiday.

The final item in Cooper’s package was another note, this one with much sloppier handwriting, and a few scratched out words, misspellings, and smudges. Right away, Cooper knew it was from Sawyer.

He snatched it up and devoured the words:

Hey Cooper!!!

Im sorry I missed writing to you last time—stupid family trip to my grandmas. You know, the one in Pencylvania? Man it sucks not having you here. Middle school is SOOOO lame and theres so much homework. I wuld

much rather hang out in a castle with you all day. Ur teachers seem really cool and Anakin sounds nice, but I know he's not a better friend than me. Any way it was cool you won the rock climbing thing. Ur mom told me all about it. If I were there, I wuld have bet money on you winning and we'd be totally rich right now! Remember wut I said before you left. You better not be a snob when you get back! See you at Christmas!!

Your best bud,

Sawyer

It was a while before Cooper put down the letter. Even though the words were hastily scratched out, Cooper could easily see what Sawyer had written about being a better friend. His heart was conflicted as he reread the letter. His first day at Blue Ridge, hanging out with Sawyer was all that was on Cooper's mind. He didn't want to admit to himself that there had been days recently where Sawyer hadn't popped into his head at all. It's not that Anakin was a better friend than Sawyer, or vice versa. It's just that they were so different.

What made it tricky was that even though he and Anakin had only known each other a couple months, they spent practically every waking moment together. They slept in the same bedroom. They ate every meal together. They had all their classes together. They dressed in front of each other. They had been naked and showered together. They even saw each other hard and got the cum feeling together. How could anyone go through all that and not have some sort of special connection to the other person?

Sure, Sawyer was one of his best friends now. But what about a year from now? Two years? By the time they started high school or graduated? Would Sawyer even be around then?

The truth was, Sawyer had been Cooper's ride or die for the past two years, but what was two years compared to all of middle school and high school with Anakin? It pained Cooper to think that his friendship with Sawyer might be dying.

Maybe he was turning into one of those people that Sawyer warned him about, after all.

Roman tossed and turned for nearly the hundredth time that night.

No matter what he tried, he just couldn't get to sleep! Across the room, Fielding snored away. Usually that was enough for Roman—Fielding's snores were like a white noise that calmed his mind. But now his brain was racing like the times he'd drunk way too much soda before bed. With a sigh of frustration, Roman kicked the covers back and rolled to his feet. Maybe a drink of water would help him out.

On the way to the door, Roman cursed himself for not having a bottle he could refill like the one Fielding kept on his nightstand. At least then he wouldn't have to make a separate trip anytime he was thirsty.

Roman twisted the doorknob as quietly as he could and tiptoed to the bathroom, pulling down the part of his briefs that had ridden up his crack.

The bathroom light stung his eyes as his toes touched the cool, marbled surface. The zombie staring back at him in the mirror told him that even though his mind was buzzing, his body desperately needed to sleep. The past few days of rock climbing had been extra intense. Professor Green had been so relentless on them, even Cooper was worn out by the end of the day. Lately there'd been nothing but drill after drill, and by the time he'd left this afternoon, his arms and legs were like wet spaghetti.

Roman turned on the faucet and splashed his face with the cool water. A few streams ran past his jaw and down his neck, but the water was refreshing. He bent down to slurp a few mouthfuls before turning off the water and wiping his face. He was still wired, but at least he felt better as he made his way back into the suite.

The door to Ivan and Wyatt's room was barely open, and a thin light shined against the crack as Roman walked the short distance across the suite. He wasn't too worried. Sometimes they fell asleep with their lights still on. It happened.

Roman was ready to hop back into the warmth of his bed, but moments before reaching his bedroom door, a familiar groan reached his ears from the other room. He paused, his hand hovering over the doorknob. All he

would have to do is tune it out, step inside, and close the door behind him. The noise wasn't any of his business.

But Roman couldn't keep his mind from tumbling back to the previous summer when he first watched Xavier touch himself. The groans he heard now certainly sounded the same, but if it was what he thought it was, Roman knew he should leave.

Leave Wyatt or Ivan to their privacy and return to bed.

So then why were his feet betraying him?

Before he could stop himself, Roman's curiosity won out as he pressed his face to the gap in his suitemates' door. The light inside shined from one of their table lamps, illuminating Ivan's bare thigh as he sat on the edge of the bed. His feet rested on the floor, and his hands propped his stocky body upright as his head tilted back.

As he watched, Ivan released another low moan, deeper than any he'd heard before. Roman thought he might have been dreaming as he stared on. Buried between Ivan's legs was the scrawny form of Wyatt. From his angle, all Roman could see was Wyatt's head of curly dark hair as it bobbed up and down, but the slurps were unmistakable.

This was something he and Xavier had never done. Wyatt was actually sucking Ivan's dick.

Ivan whispered something, and as the two shifted, Roman got a better view. Ivan's body wasn't the only thing built like a tank. From their showers, they all knew Ivan was the most physically mature. He was the only one with body hair in more places than his head. Obviously there was no way Roman could spot much of the dark pubes from where he stood, but by then, he'd seen them plenty of times.

What's more was how thick Ivan's cock was, even soft. If dicks were vehicles, then Ivan's was a school bus. It was every bit as hefty as the rest of his body. Once they were comfortable, Wyatt continued, bobbing his head along Ivan's dick. Each time the tiny boy lowered his head back down, he deflected it to the side of his mouth where a thick bulge pushed out against his cheek.

Roman had never once considered the possibility of his dick being in someone's mouth. They were for peeing, plain and simple. But Ivan's continued moans told him it must be good. Really good. He sounded a lot like Xavier whenever Roman helped him out.

Pretty soon Ivan's hands were on Wyatt's shoulders, and when Ivan started to tense, he gave the side of Wyatt's neck a couple pats.

Immediately Wyatt pulled off with a wet plop, but he didn't go anywhere as Ivan scootched forward and pointed his dick towards Wyatt's smooth cheek. Ivan's hand squelched as he gave his meaty dick several quick pumps before he grunted. Right after, a few thick burps of semen smeared against Wyatt's cheek.

In the dim light, it was tough to tell, but Roman thought it didn't look quite the same as Xavier's. Ivan's cum wasn't nearly as pearly white as it dripped down Wyatt's face.

Wyatt grimaced even as he let out a soft giggle. When Ivan finally sat back down, the mattress sank under his weight again. Wyatt scooped some of the semen from his face, and Roman expected him to wipe it on the covers, but he nearly gasped when the small boy reached a cummy hand toward his groin. That part of Wyatt was still blocked by the mattress, but Roman could guess what was happening. Wyatt's eyes rolled and fluttered as more wet squelching filled the room.

Tearing himself from the opening in the door, the stiffness in his underwear was painful as he retreated back to his bedroom. Fielding was still snoring as Roman slipped beneath the covers once more. The walls between their two bedrooms were thick enough that Roman couldn't hear them, but he knew.

Roman slipped his hand beneath his waistband, shuddering as he gripped his quivering hardon. The pleasure shot like a spike through his penis before spreading out deeper inside his pelvis. Maybe this time he'd let himself go all the way.

Guiding his wrist up and down, Roman suppressed a moan of his own, not wanting to wake Fielding if possible. Still if pleasure had a taste, then the

feelings coursing through him were delicious.

Roman squeezed his eyes shut as his mind filled with the sexual things he'd witnessed: Wyatt pleasuring himself, bobbing along Ivan's dick, Fielding slickening his boner in the shower, Roman jacking Fielding's thin erection as they lay in bed together.

He was closer than he'd ever been to the feeling before, he could sense it. Sense it building in the same way a balloon swelled with each huffing breath. Soon it would burst. It had to burst. If it didn't, Roman might go insane.

His mind jolted as Xavier appeared in his fantasy, and Roman was back in the thick musk of his brother's bedroom, his hand coated in Xavier's slime, his cheek stinging after Xavier slapped him. Suddenly Roman's dick was like a hot stove as he snatched it from inside his briefs. His heart pounded as his balls throbbed painfully, and he tried to steady his breath. Everything in his body cried out to finish the job, but Roman couldn't do it. Wouldn't do it. Not while Xavier haunted him so easily.

Instead, Roman opened his mouth and clamped down on his fist, digging his teeth into his knuckles as he tried to distract himself from his memories. The rest of his sleep was restless, and by the time he woke up, he wondered if it would have been better just to stay awake.

In the days following, a fierce blush spread across Roman's face any time he crossed paths with Ivan or Wyatt. If the two of them ever suspected they had an audience, they certainly didn't show it. Roman tried to think back to how many times over the past couple months Ivan and Wyatt had slipped off by themselves somewhere. Roman knew it had to be far from their first time together.

Now as he walked with Fielding to Professor Gray's reading class, Roman wondered again if his roommate would ever want to do sexy things like that together. Fielding wanted it to mean something—to him, it wasn't just a way to please the other person. Maybe he should ask the next time they were alone.

Roman was so wrapped up tightly in his own thoughts, he barely had time to recognize Jordy Diaz before they collided. It stunned him more than anything as he tried to catch his balance. He tried to apologize, but Jordy hardly seemed to notice, already moving past the two of them.

“Hey, Jordy,” Fielding beamed, nearly starstruck as he stared with twinkling eyes at the 8th grader.

Something was definitely off. The edges of Jordy’s hair were damp with sweat and when he finally looked at them, his wide eyes darted wildly around. When his gaze focused on Roman, he recoiled and nearly tripped over his feet as he backed away.

Roman must have imagined it, but as Jordy scurried past them, he could have sworn he heard the name Xavier fall from his lips.

“Okay, that...was weird, right?” Fielding asked, scratching his ear. “Wonder what’s up with him.”

Roman agreed. If you could somehow bottle up joy and turn it into a person, that person would be Jordy. For something to shake him up that bad, it’d have to be really intense. He thought about calling after Jordy, but before they could do anything about it, Jordy rounded the corner and was gone.

Something had shaken Jordy down to the core, and Roman had a sneaking suspicion he knew who caused it.

Chapter 11

They were ready to start the mural.

During their first month, Cooper and Anakin talked about all the ways they could make their room pop with color, something to make it stand out and theirs. The problem was that doing things like drawing on the walls or marking them up with paint would only land them in a big pile of trouble, but Cooper knew there had to be something they weren't thinking about. It was Anakin who came up with the idea for a mural. All that was left was to get permission from his art club teacher, Professor Ricci.

They found the man hanging students' self portraits outside the art studio. When he paused to listen, he twirled the curly ends of his pencil-thin mustache between his fingers. By the time Anakin was done explaining, Professor Ricci practically gushed over the fact that anybody wanted to bring some personality into the drab, old dormitory rooms. "Uggh, my muse, my protege," Professor Ricci said, placing the back of his hand against his forehead as if he might faint. "I can hardly bear it. Yes, of course you can use the supplies. Go forth. Create!"

After they raided some supplies from the art studio, soon they were carrying a giant sheet of blank paper through the suite. Naveen raised an eyebrow at them from the couch before rolling his eyes. Whatever. When their room looked awesome and Naveen's sucked, that would be his problem. Besides, no one could make art like Anakin. They were about to have the coolest room in the whole castle!

By the time Anakin created a few sketches of what they wanted on the mural, most of the night had passed. Anakin was busy penciling in guiding lines, pausing every few minutes to look back at his work. Already Cooper could see parts of the drawing coming to life, but at this rate it was going to take forever.

"I promise it'll be worth it," he said. "If I don't take the time now, I might mess something up later, and then it'll be too late."

“You’re the artist,” Cooper said, hovering over Anakin’s shoulder as he looked at the sketch pad. He couldn’t wait to see the life-size drawings of Detective Dackery. They planned to have themselves somewhere in the picture too. Most of the space had been filled up on Anakin’s sketch, but there was still a gap on the page. They both thought something was missing, but they couldn’t decide what they wanted.

“Sometimes you have to let these things sit for a while,” Anakin said. “When the time’s right, we’ll know what we need to add.”

Cooper stifled a yawn as Anakin framed the mural again with his fingers. Oh well. Whatever it was, they’d figure out what to put in the blank space eventually.

As Cooper crossed the window overlooking the campus grounds, he was about to change into his pajamas when a light outside caught his eye. It wasn’t like the glow from the homes nestled in the distant mountains. This one was round and dim as it bobbed steadily in the darkness.

“What is that?” Cooper asked.

“What’s what?”

“There’s something outside the window. I think it’s at the lake.”

Anakin set his pencils back in their case before joining Cooper at the window. Together they cupped their hands over their eyes and leaned against the cool glass. The moon was bright enough to cast a pale glow over the autumn trees, but not enough to see the lake or the boat house well. There was no doubt about it, though. Something was drifting across the lake.

“Maybe it’s a ghost,” Anakin said.

Even though he didn’t really believe in ghosts, a chill crept up Cooper’s arms. “That’s not funny.”

“Ooooooh,” Anakin moaned, raising his hands above his head as he mimed being a ghoulish figure.

“Stop, or I’ll flick you,” Cooper said. “I’m serious. What do you think it is?”

Anakin waved it off and stepped away from the window. “Beats me,” he said. “Probably just some reflection. Anyway, we gotta hit the hay, or we’ll be wiped tomorrow. Come on.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Cooper said, taking one last glance at the spectral light before heading to his bed.

As he ditched his shirt and pants, Anakin snickered behind him.

“I see London, I see France,” Anakin sang.

“You’re gonna see the moon again in a second,” Cooper said and quickly stripped out of his underwear. He wriggled his butt at Anakin before slipping into his pajamas. Shaking his butt was starting to make him hard, so before Anakin could see, he dashed over to the light and tucked himself beneath the covers.

When Cooper woke up the next day, it should have been ordinary. It felt ordinary. But by the time he and Anakin came down for breakfast, he knew something was terribly wrong.

Cooper didn’t notice anything unusual at first, but as he and Anakin sat down with their trays alongside the other Valentias, there was something odd in the way the teachers scurried about.

Hushed conversations. Low whispers. Strange glances.

“What’s going on?” Cooper asked.

“Beats me,” Anakin said.

A few professors moved table to table as they spoke with students asking questions. The only thing Cooper could work out was that something was wrong. Two tables down, Kai Feng looked miserable. His sunken eyes had dark rings beneath them, and Cooper wasn’t certain, but his eyes looked puffy like he might’ve been crying. Where was Jordy?

All around the room, students kept shaking their heads whenever the professors would show up at their table. At least he wasn’t the only one to notice how weird things had gotten. One thing that was certain though, all eyes were on the 8th grade table.

Kai suddenly stood up before accidentally knocking his chair over. He barely had it back in place before he left the banquet hall in a hurry. That was it. Things were too weird. Cooper needed answers now.

“Coop, where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back,” he told Anakin before chasing after Kai.

The late autumn hair burned Cooper’s nostrils as he raced outside the banquet hall. Kai was resting at one of the courtyard benches, with his head buried in his hands. It wasn’t until Cooper drew closer that he heard the crying and hiccups. Cooper’s foot crunched against some pebbles on the ground, and Kai immediately wiped an arm across his eyes before facing him.

“Hey, Cooper,” he said, trying to put on a brave face. “Sorry, I just...needed a moment. Everyone started staring, and I panicked, I guess...”

“Can I join you? What’s going on?”

Kai motioned to the other side of the bench, and the hard stone was like ice against his butt.

“It’s Jordy,” Kai said. “He never showed up last night.”

“What does that mean?” Cooper asked.

“After dinner last night, he said he needed to take care of something, but no one’s seen him since. Then Professor Bell got annoyed because he never showed up for their student council meeting either. I don’t know what to do. I’m really worried, Cooper. I think something bad happened.”

Cooper reached out to steady Kai’s fidgeting hands.

“Hey, you can’t think like that. Maybe there was an emergency and his parents came by to get him. Did you try texting him?”

Kai nodded. “I did, but his phone’s off. Or the battery’s dead. I’m not sure.”

“He’ll show up, Kai. Everything’s going to be alright.”

Kai looked anything but convinced.

“He’s not the only one missing,” Kai said, an edge of bitterness creeping into his voice. “I’m sure you’ve heard of him by now, but Xavier Jacobs is missing, too.”

Roman’s brother was missing?

Honestly Cooper wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He didn’t care much for Xavier, but he cared plenty about Roman. Did he know yet about his brother? What could have happened to the two of them?

No, he couldn’t think like that. He had to stay positive.

“Listen,” Cooper said, “why don’t you come hang with us after classes tonight? It might help being around other people, you know?”

Wiping the back of his hand across his nose, Kai sniffled again before saying, “Thanks, Cooper. I’ll think about it.”

Cooper’s head swam with thoughts, doubts, and suspicions by the time he returned to breakfast. The moment he stepped inside, it was clear Jordy and Xavier were all anyone was talking about. The professors no longer moved around the room, but as Cooper glanced to their seats, there was no mistaking the concern on their faces.

“I don’t like this, Coop,” Anakin said softly.

“I know,” he agreed. “We have to find out what’s up.”

Roman couldn’t shake the worry from his stomach.

It had grown from a seed into something fully rooted by the time classes started. During breakfast, when their flustered professors asked if anyone had seen Jordy, Roman and Fielding swapped nervous glances. They knew something had been off yesterday. Should they have said something then? No, it wasn’t his or Fielding’s fault. Nobody knew what happened. To either of them.

It wasn’t until Professor Lee came and told him Xavier was missing that Roman really started to worry. Like Jordy, Xavier was a no show after dinner.

“Roman?” Fielding asked, but Roman shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. His emotions were more unsteady than a ship in a storm. How was it possible that he could feel so many different ways about Xavier disappearing?

The day only got worse. Everywhere Roman went, someone wanted to ask him about Xavier. Ask if he was alright. Ask if he needed anything. Ask how they could help. He knew they were just being polite, but with all the extra attention, Roman wanted to shake them all by the shoulders and shout at everyone to leave him alone.

Later in class, Professor Riviera could barely get a peep from any of them. Her words only fell on deaf ears when she told them not to worry. Worrying was all anyone could do.

If Roman had any hopes Professor Bell’s class would be better, they were quickly dashed. There was no smile on his face, no friendly banter. They were quick to get to their science lesson, and in a rare break of character, he even snapped at two girls whispering to themselves during his lesson.

No one wanted to talk during Professor Gray’s class either, and their reading teacher’s ghastly frown did nothing to break them from their sour mood. If anything, Professor Gray seemed the most distressed of all the teachers. His greasy thin hair looked like he hadn’t showered at all that morning, and his eyes were dark from lack of sleep.

It was only Professor Lee who sat them down to talk. She had just finished working out the math problem across her chalkboard when she lowered the hand holding her chalk with a sigh.

“Boys and girls,” she said. “You cannot let this eat at you. There is nothing to worry about. All of us are doing everything we can.”

Across the room, Cooper raised his hand. He glanced at Roman when Professor Lee called on him.

“But Professor Lee, isn’t this super weird to you? People don’t just go missing.”

Professor Lee adjusted the base of her shirt and considered her words.

“It’s unusual, but tell me what worrying will do for you. No? No one? My advice for you all is to blow off some steam this afternoon during your clubs. Come back refreshed tomorrow.”

Easier said than done.

By the time Roman geared up at the rock climbing wall, he said nothing as he joined Cooper on the next climb. He gripped the holds too tightly, forgetting any of the technique drilled into him over the last couple months. Several times he misplaced his foot and smashed his knee or lost his hold and careened to the bottom.

“Roman, do you want to talk about it?” Cooper asked, placing a hand on his shoulder, but Roman shrugged it off.

“It’s fine, Cooper,” he said. “I don’t really wanna talk.”

“But he’s your brother...”

When Cooper tried again, the touch burned Roman, and without giving it a second thought, he lashed out and shoved Cooper away.

“I said, I’m fine!”

Great, now he felt like a jerk. Balling his fists, Roman ignored the hurt on Cooper’s face and made the next climb alone and struggled the whole way up. When he finally reached the bell at the top, his muscles were tight with ache across his shoulders and back, but he could hardly feel them past his fury. He hadn’t had such a difficult climb since his first. His brain was running wild, filled with ceaseless thoughts. He wasn’t going to worry. He didn’t care. It didn’t bother him at all.

As the harness carried him safely to the ground, Roy Rochester was barking orders to other faculty before they split off in a search party. Roman’s stomach gurgled with uneasiness as he prepared for another climb.

Pretty soon it would be winter, and already the campus grounds grew darker by the night. The shadows stretched like eager hands waiting to snatch him up as he walked to dinner. Fielding was extra clingy the whole way, nearly hugging Roman’s side through the castle’s dark corridors.

“I don’t like this, Roman,” he whispered. “What if something’s really wrong?”

“It’s not,” Roman said. “Xavier’s probably pulling some dumb prank.”

“But how do you know? You remember how Jordy looked the other day. We should say something to one of the teachers. We should—”

“No!” Roman shouted, wincing as the harsh words escaped him.

“But why not? Something happened, and you know it.”

“We don’t know anything,” Roman lied, ignoring his growing fears. “Please, just drop it, Fielding, okay?”

Dinner was filled with nothing but halfhearted clinks of forks on plates. Near the end, Headmaster Robinson took a rare stand at the podium and cleared his throat for everyone’s attention.

“No doubt many of you have heard by now about our two missing friends.”

Roman flicked his eyes to the empty seat at Xavier’s table.

“Rest assured, there is nothing to fear. For the time being, however, we are insisting nobody wander the campus alone. Until we know more, all students will adhere to a strict curfew following dinner each night.”

The groans after that were the loudest part of the whole dinner.

Roman walked back to the dorms in silence. Outside their window, fat raindrops plopped against the panes of glass as lightning flashed in the distance. A low grumble of thunder washed over them as he climbed the final stairs up the spire. He didn’t believe in fate. Destiny was whatever he wanted it to be. But if everything that had happened was some kind of sign from the universe, Roman didn’t want to know where it was pointing to.

Chapter 12

Cooper couldn't remember the last time anyone had ever looked as depressed as Kai with his head drooped past his sagging shoulders. Ever since he'd joined Cooper and the others upstairs, he was more like the echo of a person than an actual one.

The rain slapped against the outside windows in sheets, but the boys could hardly hear it over the TV. Leaning against the couch, Naveen was more interested in beating Julian in Mario Kart than listening to Kai. How did they not understand how big of a deal this was? People were missing! Kids, just like Naveen and Julian!

And on top of it all, Roman's brother was missing. Cooper knew Roman hadn't meant to be mean earlier. Roman said as much when he apologized that night at dinner. He couldn't imagine being in Roman's shoes. The closest thing Cooper had to a sibling was Anakin. If it was him who vanished, Cooper would stop at nothing to get answers. Just like Detective Dackery, Cooper would use all the tools in his kit, sniff out the clues, and wouldn't rest until he solved the case, no matter what the costs.

Seeing Kai stress over Jordy only made Cooper more determined. If no one else was going to step up, then he would find them both.

"Alright, one more time," Cooper said. "Tell us about the last time you saw Jordy."

Kai took a ragged breath and his shoulders somehow sank even lower. The dark rings under his eyes made Cooper think he hadn't slept much at all last night.

"It was yesterday during dinner, but honestly, he was acting weird since lunch."

Cooper and Anakin traded curious glances.

"Weird how?" Anakin asked.

"I don't know...jumpy? Anxious? I mean, you know how he is. It's strange if he isn't happy all the time. I thought maybe he needed space."

Jordy acting jumpy? That did sound odd. Anytime they talked, Jordy was always smiling. Especially early on at Blue Ridge, Jordy was a light in Cooper's dark tunnel. He frowned. What could have happened to him?

"Eh, I'm sure you're all being paranoid," Naveen said. He chewed his bottom lip as he pulled off a handbrake slide around a sharp corner and dropped a banana peel behind him. "Jordy's probably fine. Xavier, too."

"Dude!" Anakin shouted, and Julian smacked Naveen's arm.

"Oww, what? It's true."

"Not the time," Julian said as he mashed a few buttons.

Cooper knew he needed more info. Something to give him a starting point. "So he was acting weird at lunch, but what about your other classes?"

"I should have said something to him—asked what was up. I tried, but Jordy didn't wanna talk much. Once dinner came around, he said he had to take care of something alone. Wouldn't say what. You know the rest..."

Anakin put a comforting hand on Kai's knee and leaned against him.

Cooper thought about everything that might have happened between lunch and dinner. Jordy was an active part of the swim club. Maybe he could start with the other members and see if Jordy mentioned anything. Then there was the lake. The more Cooper thought about it, the more he was certain the lake held answers. It couldn't be a coincidence that Jordy and Xavier both went missing the same night he and Anakin spotted the ghost light. Thinking about it made Cooper shiver.

After Kai went downstairs to his suite, the boys brushed their teeth as the thunder grew heavier outside. Naveen spat out a mouthful of toothpaste in the sink and said, "I still don't see what the big deal is. Anyone else think they might have just run away?"

Julian rolled his eyes as he ran a string of floss between his teeth.

"Okay, but why would anyone run away in the first place?" Cooper asked. "Something weird is definitely going on."

"Sure, Detective Dorkery. Whatever you say."

Once inside his bedroom, Cooper stared past his reflection in the window. Another bolt of lightning flashed, briefly illuminating the trees, the mountains, the lake. No ghost light tonight, just the storm.

They were out there. Somewhere. If they were trapped or in need of rescue, how was anyone expected to find them in Blue Ridge's never ending acres?

"Coop?"

On the other side of the room, Anakin sat on top of the covers, hugging a pillow to his chest as another bout of heavy thunder rattled the windows.

"I know I saw something last night," Cooper told him as he gestured to the window. "We both did."

"Do you think it was them?"

"Maybe. Tomorrow we have to get down to the lake and see for ourselves."

"Coop, I'm scared. Do you think..."

"What?"

"Do you think maybe we can push our beds together? I don't want to sleep alone."

Cooper nodded, and as Anakin jumped from bed, they worked together to drag the furniture around, straining against the heavy wooden dressers and nightstands. By the time they rearranged everything, Cooper was out of breath but happy with their handiwork. The twin beds still had a narrow gap between them, but once they shoved their mattresses close, it was good enough. There was even enough space to squeeze their nightstands on either side.

"You don't think anyone will get mad will they?"

Cooper shrugged. "I think they're worrying about more important things."

Cooper stripped down to his underwear before putting on his pajamas, while Anakin grabbed a new t-shirt to wear with his briefs. A sudden flash of lightning rocked the building, and for a small second, the lights went out. Cooper flinched in the dark, and there was shouting from next door.

The lights flicked back on, but Cooper was ready for bed. Heavy storms were never his thing.

The moment he crawled under the covers, Anakin was right there and grabbed his hand. The inside of the covers immediately grew warm as they shared body heat.

“Who do you think screamed?” Anakin asked as he and Cooper snuggled close.

“Probably Naveen,” Cooper said. “At least, I hope it was.”

“Betcha he’s a big scaredy cat.”

Cooper giggled as the rain swelled outside, no end to the downpour in sight. The white noise was soothing, almost like when a heavy wind rustled a bunch of leaves, and if the day hadn’t been so stressful, Cooper might have conked out easily.

Anakin whispered beside him, “We’ll find Jordy, right, Coop?”

“Promise,” Cooper said.

They were silent as they listened to the rain. Cooper knew Anakin wasn’t asleep. Any time lightning flashed, Anakin’s eyes were open, not really looking at anything specific, but like he was lost in thought.

“Hey, Coop?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember that thing we did on laundry day?”

Cooper’s breath caught, and he was thankful for the darkness hiding his blushing face.

“Yeah...” Cooper answered.

“Have you done it since then?”

He shook his head before remembering Anakin couldn’t see him. “Not really. Have you?”

“Just a little,” Anakin said. “Mainly in the morning, when it’s, you know...hard.”

Cooper didn’t need to reach his hand down to know his stiff dick was pressing against his cotton pajama bottoms, but he did it anyway. He squeezed himself softly and shuddered as the spot just beneath the head of his penis brushed against the fabric. Ever since that day in the laundry room, Cooper had wanted the cum feeling again, but he wasn’t sure how. He didn’t have a way to make vibrations against his crotch like the washing machine.

Taking in a deep breath to steady his nerves and build his courage, Cooper placed a hand on Anakin’s smooth arm and rubbed it.

Anakin shifted even closer, and now Cooper could feel Anakin’s smooth, lean legs slide against his own as their toes curled together. Their hips couldn’t have been separated by more than a few inches. With how hard his dick was, Cooper knew if he thrust forward, he might even bump against Anakin’s.

“Do you wanna try it again?” Anakin asked, his breath tickling Cooper’s nose.

“I don’t know how,” Cooper said.

“I’ll show you.”

Another bout of fierce thunder rocked the castle, but this time when Cooper jumped, it was because Anakin’s hand rested low on his tummy before cupping the three-inch boner inside his pajamas.

Cooper groaned under the intense sensation. Anakin’s hand against him was electric. It was nothing like when Cooper tried it, instead a lot like trying to tickle himself but failing.

“Is this okay?” Anakin asked, and Cooper desperately nodded, whispering his approval as Anakin snaked his hand inside Cooper’s waistband and coiled it around his length.

“Aaaah,” Cooper panted, grunting as little sparks of pleasure raced along his penis. It was similar to the rumbling washer, but without the buildup. It

was more focused, more deliberate. By now, Anakin's thicker dick pressed against Cooper's thigh, and they both ground against each other, Anakin against his hip, Cooper into Anakin's hand.

Cooper dropped his hand from Anakin's arm and trailed it along the front of his silky briefs. When his fingers grazed Anakin's boner, it seemed to quiver under his touch, and Anakin shivered beside him.

"I think it's better with someone else," Anakin groaned, pumping his hips against Cooper's hand.

Feeling bolder, Cooper mimicked Anakin and worked his hand inside his friend's briefs. They hugged Anakin's hips, but Cooper didn't need to go far to bump against the velvety pole. Maybe it was because they were in the dark, but it felt massive in Cooper's hand. He remembered in the shower comparing Anakin's boner to a hotdog, although he'd never held a hotdog so hard and soft at the same time and warm as it danced in his grip.

Already, Cooper thought he was getting close to the good feeling. His insides tingled and there was a spot somewhere deep in his tummy that hummed.

"My hand's cramping," Anakin said and took it away.

As if outside of his control, Cooper humped his hips, seeking out the warmth of Anakin's missing hand. He bit his lower lip as he tried to capture the fleeting pleasure in his groin. He'd been so close.

Cooper still had his hand around Anakin's dick but dropped it as his friend wiggled his briefs down to his thighs. Getting the idea, Cooper rolled on his back and raised his legs so he could do the same with his pajamas.

Now when they scooted against each other, their dicks smushed together. Cooper gasped.

"Closer," Anakin breathed.

They lined the base of their dicks together, and even though Anakin's boner dwarfed his in size, the touch was enough to make Cooper's eyes roll as they humped against each other. Every once in a while their balls connected, gently rubbing and sticking together before peeling apart. Like

with their dicks, Anakin's balls had more width than his own, but Cooper didn't care. Breaking a sweat under the combined heat of the covers and their bodies, both of them panted as they rocked their hips.

Suddenly Anakin gripped his shoulders as his eyes fluttered shut. There were a few frantic thrusts against him as Anakin's fingernails dug in to his skin, and soon Anakin whined as his dick spasmed against Cooper, twitching and kicking against his own, smaller boner as Anakin got his cum feeling again.

The thumping against his dick was enough to send Cooper over the edge, and he jammed his hips forward, locking their penises together as the good feelings took him. He tensed as his dick pulsed, his buttohole clamped, and delicious goosebumps ran up and down his arms before tingling down his spine.

Cooper wasn't sure how much time had passed, but when his focus returned, he and Anakin were still hard as they pressed against each other's hips, panting as they came down from their highs.

"How is it so good?" Cooper wondered aloud.

His dick was extra sensitive as Anakin reached a hand between them.

"I don't know," he said, "but I feel like we've been missing out on the good stuff for too long."

"No kidding."

Anakin rolled away, laying on his back as he caught his breath. After reaching beneath the covers and shifting around, Anakin came back with his briefs and dropped them beside his head.

"No point in wearing these anymore, right?"

Cooper shrugged, following his friend's lead as he tossed his own pajama bottoms. His body felt freer in a way, unrestricted by the extra clothing. If he had still been at home, Cooper wondered if he would have eventually tried sleeping in the nude on his own. Maybe not. He would have died if his mom ever walked in on him in the buff.

"Anakin, can I tell you something?" Cooper asked.

The rain continued to beat against the window, though the thunder seemed less intense than it had before. Anakin twisted on his side and propped his head up.

“Sure, anything.”

Cooper bit his lip, warring with his thoughts, but knowing he needed to tell Anakin.

“I think...I think you’re my best friend I’ve ever had.”

“What about Sawyer?”

Cooper was quiet. It’s not that Sawyer was replaced so easily...but the fact was that Sawyer wasn’t around anymore. It was no fault of his, or Cooper’s, or anyone else, but that’s how it was. Anakin was the one he spent most of his time with now. Actually, all of his time. He’d even stuck by Cooper’s side when he felt at his worst.

Anakin seemed to understand. He leaned close and gave a quick smooch against Cooper’s temple.

“You’re my best friend, too, Coop. And not only because of what we just did.”

Cooper laughed as his heart swelled. “But we can do it again, right?”

Anakin laughed too. “I’d do it right now if I wasn’t so tired.”

As they snuggled together, Anakin slipped his fingers alongside Cooper’s. He needed this. Not just the good feelings, but the distraction as well. His mind had been stuffed with concerns for Jordy and Roman’s brother, and even though Cooper had no way of knowing where to start, he remembered his promise to himself.

He would find them, whatever the cost.

Outside his bedroom, the evening storm raged on as Roman tried to nurse his aching back muscles from the comfort of his bed. They were bunched tight and locked from overuse, and Roman struggled to even reach a hand behind his shoulders.

Across the room, Fielding hadn't said much since they'd gotten back from dinner. Even now, he sat hunched on his bed as he chewed his fingernails. A quick burst of thunder made them both jump in place.

"Would you stop worrying?" Roman asked. "It's just a little thunder."

Fielding's eyes flicked to meet his. "You know that's not what I'm worried about."

"They're both fine."

Roman growled in frustration as he failed again to reach the achy spot that needed the most relief. Maybe the best solution was to let his back soak in a hot shower, but it was already so late. Besides, he was undressed and comfy, and didn't want to deal with the hassle of another shower.

"You overdid it today, huh?" Fielding asked.

"I guess," Roman said, "and okay, maybe I am a little worried. Even Cooper looked stressed out."

Fielding perked up and adjusted his clear-framed glasses. "You guys have been getting pretty close lately..."

Fielding let the statement hang unfinished. What was he implying, that Roman had a crush on Cooper? No way. At least, not like that. Sure, Cooper was good looking, but in a charming, boyish kind of way. Not a romantic one.

"It's not like that," Roman said.

Whether he believed him or not, Roman wasn't sure, but Fielding scooted off the edge of his mattress, his loose white t-shirt hanging past his underwear as he walked to Roman.

"If your back's bothering you," Fielding said, "I can try something my moms do."

"What is it?"

"Here, lay on your stomach," Fielding said, pointing for Roman to go face down on his pillow. "Actually, lose your shirt first. It'll be better that way."

Pulling his shirt over his shoulders proved to be tricky with his tight back muscles, but Roman finally got it off, tossing it in a crumpled heap at Fielding's feet. Once he laid face down on the bed, Roman turned his head to the side in time to see Fielding disappear behind him as the mattress dipped beneath their combined weight.

"Sorry if this is a little strange," Fielding said. "I don't really have anywhere else to sit."

And with that, Fielding nestled his butt against Roman's as he straddled his hips. They both still had their underwear on, but the closeness of their skin made Roman's head buzz. Fielding cracked his fingers and leaned forward, kneading his knuckles into Roman's knotted muscles.

Fielding had done this before. He must have. There was no way he could reach the exact spots Roman had been struggling with for hours if not. His muscles rippled under Fielding's touch as he switched between firm pressure and soft, at times even switching to the heel of his palm.

Roman groaned into his pillow as Fielding struck a particularly painful knot. The pressure was borderline too much, but Fielding continued rolling over the stubborn muscle until it finally released. Each time it clicked, the pain ebbed away as the knot shrunk more and more.

While Fielding worked, a few times he had to lean forward, and Roman could have sworn he felt the pouch of Fielding's ball sack smushing against him. When something stiff pressed against his lower back, it was impossible to not grow hard. What sucked was the way his boner pressed uncomfortably into the mattress. There was no way to adjust himself, not without being super obvious.

To Roman's surprise, the back massage was working better than he could have hoped. It had been relaxing with the added rain, and once or twice, he nearly dozed off. At some point, Fielding's hands were doing less massaging as they mapped out the contours along his shoulder blades. The touch was soft and tender, like Fielding wanted to memorize the ridges and muscles there.

A few minutes passed before Fielding leaned back and said, "I think you're good, unless you want me to do the front. I know some stuff there...if you want..."

"Kay..." Roman's cheeks were on fire. During the massage, his boner had come and gone, especially as he started to snooze, but with Fielding's last feathery touches, he was rock hard, once again smushed tight against the mattress. He had to stop himself from grinding against it.

As Roman twisted around, he tried to play it cool. How many times by now had they seen each other with a boner? Still, it was how he got his boner that made Roman so embarrassed, and he fought every urge to shield himself with his hands as he closed his eyes.

There was a long pause where nothing was said or done, and Roman almost opened his eyes to check, but then Fielding's fingers began to work, first at his chest and then over to his shoulders. As he leaned forward, Roman gasped as something brushed against his dick.

"Sorry," Fielding said a little breathlessly.

This time, Roman opened his eyes. Fielding worked just above him, inches away from Roman's face as his thumbs dug softly into his skin. Fielding's long t-shirt covered their groins, but there was really only one thing that could have bumped against his dick.

The lamp from the nightstand highlighted Fielding's teal-green eyes and the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. Even his curling hair took on a reddish hue in the soft light. Pausing near Roman's chest, Fielding's thumb strayed dangerously close to Roman's nipple, already rigid on his chest.

Fielding teased it once, and Roman wriggled into the mattress. It was an interesting feeling. Like being tickled, but in a way that made his insides feel all funny. Instinctively, Roman understood the need radiating from his hard penis. He ground his hips up against Fielding's ass. There was no way his friend missed his poking boner as he flicked his thumb across Roman's nipple again.

Roman's head rolled back against the pillow. He just wanted release, whatever that looked like, whatever that felt like. He had to have it. This must have been what Xavier felt each of those times Roman had gotten him off, an instinctual, animalistic desire. It was a hunger and a thirst all wrapped in one, and it could only be quenched by one thing.

Their eyes darted between each other's, and Roman raised his head as Fielding bent down and mashed their lips together. His lips buzzed as Fielding's mouth worked against him. It was aggressive at first, almost stiff and rigid, but soon they softened and relaxed into the kiss.

Fielding broke away, panting heavily as he tried to catch his breath.

Roman could barely speak, his heart setting new records inside his chest.

"Fielding..." Roman breathed, hoping the name alone somehow communicated everything Roman needed to say. His desire was burning him up, ready to consume him like fire.

Fielding shimmied back until their groins were together. They wriggled against each other, Roman pinned beneath him, bucking up as Fielding thrust down. Whenever one of them deflected away, they were quick to readjust, and Roman could hardly breathe as he neared the tipping point he'd been so close to time and again.

"Something's...aaah..."

"I know, me too," Fielding grunted, and he leaned forward, keeping their bodies together as he went in for another kiss.

This time they melted into each other, and Roman's head swam with dizziness, pleasure radiating like the sun from his whole body. Their lips moved softly in sync, their chests rubbed together, and the underside of their boners rubbed together in that same ticklish way, getting better and better.

"Gonna...ungh..." Fielding grunted again as he increased the power behind his thrusts, and Roman couldn't stand it anymore. Grabbing Fielding by his smooth thighs, Roman pulled him down against his body while he humped upward, losing control of himself as every nerve ending went haywire in his groin. With each burst of pleasure, something jumped

and flicked behind his balls, sending new shudders down Roman's spine. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. He was simply lost in the moment until, at last, the feeling subsided.

Roman couldn't remember when his eyes had clenched shut, but as he opened them, he let out a whoosh of air as he processed the amazing feeling that had just wracked his body from head to toe.

Above him, Fielding's shoulders were drawn up as his head rolled, apparently going through the same thing Roman just had. When he opened his eyes, his pale cheeks were tinged like roses.

"That was...wow..." Fielding said dreamily, falling on the bed in the narrow space between Roman and the wall.

"What was that?"

"My moms called it an orgasm. Everyone can get it."

So that's what it was. The thing Xavier had been so desperate for. Roman pulled back his waistband to check for the white stuff that shot out of Xavier's dick. Nothing. He even rubbed a finger over his penis to be sure, but he only shivered as his fingers brushed the sensitive head.

"Anything there?" Fielding asked.

Roman shook his head.

"I can almost make jizz," Fielding said proudly. "It's only a drop, but it happened after I got my first hair. Check it out."

When Fielding pulled down the waistband of his black briefs, Roman couldn't see anything at first except the purplish head of Fielding's mushroom crown as it quivered from his recent orgasm. It wasn't until he reached down and smushed his fingers together that Roman saw something thin and clear there.

"Huh, I thought it was supposed to be white," Roman said, before realizing what he was saying.

Fielding shot him a funny look before wiping his fingers on Roman's comforter. Thankfully he didn't push the issue, and soon Fielding was back

on his side of the room.

Roman laughed to himself as he pulled up the covers to his chest.

“What’s so funny?” Fielding asked.

“Nothing, it’s just...that was the best massage I’ve ever gotten.”

Chapter 13

Cooper's eyes were heavy with sleep as the sun streamed into his bedroom.

If it were the weekend, he might have slept in a few hours more, but his subconscious knew he had to wake up for class. What's more, something was different. A rustling and shaking kept interrupting the last bit of sleep he tried to cling to. It wasn't until he heard a strained whimper that Cooper finally opened his eyes.

In the twin bed beside his, Anakin was up in more ways than one. The covers had been tossed back, revealing his fully nude body. Anakin's mousy face was a mix of intense concentration and pleasure as he gripped all four inches of his boner in his fist and stroked it at a furious speed. His normally styled hair was fanned out in messy bedhead, although the edges of his hair were damp with sweat. With his free hand, Anakin pawed and gripped at the mattress, his fingers digging into the silky material.

One of Anakin's legs twitched, and his voice gave another high-pitched strain. Each time Anakin worked his way up, his balls jumped and bounced with every tug. They were beginning to flatten, nearly pancaked against his groin as his breath huffed through his nostrils.

Cooper was painfully hard and torn between staring at Anakin's bigger dick or his friend's face. It didn't help that he was also dealing with his usual morning wood. If the pleasure hitting Anakin was anything like when the two of them smushed their dicks together or felt the rumblings of the washer, then Anakin must have been totally wrapped up in the good feelings. He didn't even break concentration when Cooper snuck a hand down to his own boner.

As Cooper softly squeezed the underside of his penis, rolling the head beneath his fingers, his eyes fluttered as he groaned. Anakin noticed then and flicked his eyes down to Cooper's.

"Morning, Coop," he panted. "Sorry, I can't help it."

“How long have you been going?” Cooper asked, his mouth sour and dry from sleep.

“I’ve already done it twice this morning,” Anakin replied.

After a few more strokes, Anakin’s stomach muscles bunched as his feet raised from the mattress. As he gripped the base of his penis, his jaw slacked open and he groaned loudly. Suddenly, Anakin squeezed his boner at the base. The way it flicked back and forth was kind of like when Cooper tried to shake the last bit of pee out, but the twitches all happened super fast.

“Oh, that feels so good,” Anakin said, finally falling against the pillows. His dick pointed towards his chin, still pulsing with leftover throbs.

“Was it like last night?”

Anakin turned to face him. “It’s different. Still awesome, but I think I liked it more when both of us did it.”

“I think you might be addicted to sex,” Cooper laughed.

Classes weren’t much better than the day before. People were starting to talk again, but whenever they did, it was always about how Jordy and Xavier were missing. It seemed like everyone had already given up hope on finding them, but Cooper couldn’t. Not when there was still a chance of getting them back. And why did everyone automatically assume the worst? It frustrated him to no end. If they put the same effort into searching that they did worrying, then maybe they’d have already found the two missing boys.

As the day ended, Cooper bumped fists with Anakin before heading to the rock climbing wall. He zipped up his sweater to beat the chill as he worked his way down the stone steps and path leading towards the stables. Already ahead of him, Roman walked with his head down and hands shoved inside his hoodie. There hadn’t been much time to talk to him throughout the day until now, and Cooper chased him down.

“Roman, wait up!” Cooper called.

Roman didn’t hear him. Or if he did, he wasn’t listening.

“Hey, you good?” he asked.

Roman stopped and shrugged his shoulders. “I guess. Just a lot on my mind, you know? Listen, about yesterday—”

“I already told you, don’t sweat it,” Cooper said. “Just know I’m here for you, man, no matter what.”

“I appreciate it, Cooper,” Roman said as the hints of a blush surfaced across his tanned cheeks.

Roman looked more relaxed as they spotted each other on the wall. Earlier in the week, Professor Green reinstalled all the handholds in different spots, creating new and trickier paths for them to attempt. Yesterday Roman hadn’t been in the right head space. How could he be? Now, at least, he was taking Cooper’s advice on where to place the next foot as he climbed.

As Cooper finished up and hung his harness back on the hook, the sun was inching its way toward the mountains. If he didn’t go now, there’d be barely any daylight to help him in his search. Already he was losing time from the curfew, and now it had been two whole days since Jordy and Xavier went missing. Time was of the essence. Cooper wasn’t exactly sure what he hoped to find, but any clue was better than nothing.

Getting to the lake took him fifteen minutes. He kept having to blow warm air into his palms to keep them warm, but he wasn’t planning on giving up. A little cold never hurt anybody, he told himself. Once the boat house came into view, it wasn’t long before he spotted several upperclassmen dragging their canoes inside the main door. Could that have been what he saw several nights ago outside his window? But that didn’t make any sense. Why would someone be out on their canoe after dark?

Inside the boat house, Cooper plugged his nose. The place smelled like stuffy mildew no matter where he went. It had to be from all the wet life jackets dripping on the floor. As he tried to get a look around, there were a couple older kids who gave him funny looks, but he didn’t have time to explain. Maybe they didn’t see anything suspicious with this place, but Cooper did.

Suspended from a hook on the back wall was a lantern with a rounded amber sphere. He couldn't be certain, but it might have matched the shape he saw the other night. A closed, splintered door stood next to it that looked like it hadn't been touched in years. Cooper was surprised something so shabby hadn't been replaced. Maybe it was an old storage room. Without making a scene and barging inside, there was no way Cooper could get behind the counter to check if the door was locked. And if it was, the odds of him finding the key laying around were next to nothing. He shook his head. What was he even hoping to find inside? Maybe the lake would have better clues.

As Cooper went back outside, his feet squelched through the soggy grass as he squinted against the sunset. Several hundred yards away, Blue Ridge castle stood proudly. Valentia's red banner flapped in the wind as sunlight reflected off his bedroom window. He wasn't crazy—whatever he saw at the lake couldn't have been a coincidence.

Shaking the cold water from his shoes, Cooper tried to dodge the puddles of water as he followed the bend in the lake back to the cobblestone path. The street lamps were already buzzing to life, flicking on one by one as day turned to dusk. Time was running out, and Cooper growled in frustration.

Ahead of him lay the castle. He knew there was enough time to make it back if he hurried. Besides, it was getting colder by the minute outside. Behind him, the path continued on into a canopy of dark woods surrounded by thick hedges. Cooper had never explored this far out. Maybe he should turn back and start again tomorrow.

Exploring a little bit couldn't hurt.

The closer he drew to the forest, the more the darkness swallowed him up. Here there was no sunlight, and the temperature dipped even more until Cooper was rubbing his arms through his sweater. Next time, he'd ask to borrow some of Anakin's clothes to keep him warmer.

These woods weren't like the ones back home. These were cold, barren, lifeless. Something had spooked all the animals away. The forest should never be so quiet. A wall of high, shrubs guarded either side of the path, stretching nearly eight feet high. Running his fingers along the leaves,

Cooper was curious how deep the shrubs might go when a branch snapped from beyond the shrubs.

Cooper froze in place.

For a moment, all was quiet, so quiet Cooper thought he might have imagined the noise. But then something tore through the shrubs, and before Cooper could react, a black German Shepherd darted out, barking and gnashing its vicious teeth. Cooper careened back and landed on his bottom.

Moments before the dog would have ripped him apart, the leash around its neck jerked tight. On the other end, Roy Rochester towered over him, scrutinizing Cooper with the same glaring intensity as his dog.

With his free hand, Roy made a sharp whistle using two fingers, and in an instant, the barking stopped. The dog squatted on its hind legs, but every single one of its muscles were tightly coiled. Its whole body looked charged with electricity, and its glinting, black eyes were downright murderous.

“You should be more careful where you wander off to,” Roy said. “You wouldn’t want to be the next to go missing.”

As Roy led the dog along the path, Cooper’s blood ran cold. He’d come seconds from being ripped to shreds. It was nothing like the time he’d rescued Sawyer from the dog back in Misty Pines. If the dog had made Cooper his chew toy, there would have been no one to save him.

Cooper’s arms and legs trembled as he pushed himself to his feet. His heart was a rattling mess inside his chest, and without another glance back, Cooper ran towards the safety of the castle. He didn’t have all the answers yet, but he was sure of it.

Roy Rochester had something to do with the missing boys.

Roman felt like he was on trial.

After dinner, he was called to share about the last time he’d seen Xavier. The whole time, his professors scrutinized him, as if he were somehow responsible for what happened to Jordy and Xavier. Roy Rochester and

Headmaster Robinson were there too, listening in and interjecting questions of their own.

“Surely he said something to you,” Professor Gray said. His face was like the hardened scowl of a gargoyle.

“We don’t talk much anymore,” Roman confessed.

“He didn’t say anything to you at all?” Professor Bell asked. “Nothing about running away, or maybe being in some kind of trouble?”

Clearly none of his professors knew how awful his and Xavier’s relationship had been. Still was. Roman shook his head and picked at his arm.

Professor Lee crouched down and placed a hand on Roman’s knee. “It’s alright, Roman. We’re just trying to get some answers.”

“I already told everyone, I don’t know anything, okay!?” he snapped.

They eventually gave up on getting anything out of him, and soon Roman was back in his suite, sitting on the couch while he and Fielding worked on their homework together.

Lately it seemed like Fielding was all he could think about.

The kiss from last night practically consumed his thoughts. It didn’t help that whenever he looked at Fielding, he couldn’t help but get lost in the freckles sprinkled across his pale cheeks or his curling strawberry-blonde hair. He was seeing things in a brand new way now. He couldn’t help it.

Sometimes Fielding noticed him watching, and then Roman had to quickly turn to hide his blushing face. One glance into his teal green eyes was enough to unravel him.

Fielding wasn’t the only thing gripping his thoughts. On top of everything else was the guilt. Xavier was missing. Wasn’t Roman supposed to be doing everything he could to help find him? He didn’t have time for crushes! And yet, things had been quiet lately with Xavier, even before he ran away or went missing or whatever it was.

It wasn’t like things were better for them—far from it. It was more like Xavier was doing everything he could to avoid Roman entirely.

Fielding set down his journal and homework and leaned in. “Okay, that’s it. Are we cool? With what happened last night, I mean?”

Roman blinked out of his stupor. “What’re you talking about? Why wouldn’t we be?”

“Because ever since last night, you’ve been acting all weird.”

“What? I’m not being weird. Nothing’s weird at all. Why would you think that?”

Fielding’s eyes narrowed.

“Okay,” Roman conceded with a sigh, “so maybe things are a little weird.”

Fielding folded his legs as he turned to face him on the couch. “Did you wanna talk about the kiss? Or Xavier? Or just school or something?”

Roman’s tongue was thick in his mouth, and all the spit was dried up. He swallowed to get his mouth working again.

“The kiss? I...uhh...I liked it, yeah.”

A smirk crossed Fielding’s face as he leaned in close, too close. The heat spreading across Roman’s cheeks made his ears hot as he tried to lean back, but Fielding kept coming, bracing himself with his hands as he hovered within inches of Roman’s face, his lips.

“Do you wanna do it again?”

Not trusting himself to speak, Roman only nodded as he closed his eyes and leaned in for another kiss.

Right before their lips met, the door to Ivan and Wyatt’s bedroom swung open, and Roman and Fielding jerked apart. Roman had never tried to act so casual about doing homework before in his life. Surely his suitemates must have heard Roman’s heart clanging like a gong inside his chest. Were his ribs breaking? Surely they were breaking.

“Taking a shower?” Fielding asked, maybe a little too casually.

When Roman looked up, his mouth fell open. Wyatt was already halfway to the bathroom, shirtless with only a towel wrapped around his scrawny

waist as he strolled barefoot across the floor. Behind him, Ivan walked out of his bedroom fully nude. His towel was slung over his shoulder as he clicked the door shut behind him.

What drew Roman's attention most was the swinging python between Ivan's legs. Like the rest of Ivan's body, the size of his penis looked disproportionate for someone who was only twelve, and all Roman could think about was the other night when he spied on Ivan and Wyatt in their bedroom. Their groans were still crystal clear in his mind, and the image of Ivan smearing his cummy dick across Wyatt's cheek was seared in his memory.

"Good talk," Fielding said behind him as the two left without a word into the bathroom.

After the shower squeaked to life, Fielding leaned forward again and said, "Maybe we should start calling him Hog. Woوو boy, imagine that thing in bed."

"Fielding!"

"What? I'm just saying," he said through his laughter.

They were quiet for a few moments, giggling each time they bumped their knees together. When the showers squeaked to a stop, Fielding quickly leaned in for a kiss. His breath smelled vaguely of the key lime pie they had for dessert, and Fielding's lips against his own sent tingles down Roman's body, straight into his hardening dick.

Later in their room, as they settled down for the night, Fielding brought up Ivan's big dick and made another joke.

"Maybe Hog wasn't the right word. How does Ramrod sound?"

Roman frowned. "Like he's a viking about to pillage a town."

"I bet a town's not the only thing he's pillaging," Fielding said, wriggling his eyebrows.

"Are you always this perverted?" Roman asked.

Fielding raised his arms defensively. "I just call it like I see it."

Roman slipped off his shirt and his socks before sitting on his bed. He lowered his voice and said, "I saw them the other night."

The walls weren't so thick that Roman thought Ivan and Wyatt could hear the two of them, but he didn't want to take any chances. If Ivan overheard him, it wouldn't take much to snap Roman like a toothpick.

"Saw who? Ivan and Wyatt?"

Roman blushed. "Yeah...the other night. I was getting some water, and when I came back, they were...well, you know..."

"Gettin' it on like Donkey Kong?"

"What!?" Roman sputtered. "What does that even mean?"

Hopping out of his bed, Fielding squatted as he pretended to be a gorilla, scratching his armpits while making gorilla noises. Roman couldn't help but notice the way Fielding's erection poked against his briefs as he thrust his hips.

"You're crazy," Roman said.

Fielding monkey-walked over to Roman's bed and sat close beside him, their thighs brushing together as Fielding's hand fell gently on top of his. Roman's dick was sticking up like a flagpole in his briefs.

"So, what were they doing?" Fielding asked as he traced his fingers on the back of Roman's hand.

"I...uhh...couldn't see much at first," he said, trying to ignore Fielding's tender touch against his hand while he formed his words. "I heard these slurping sounds, and all I saw was Ivan's back at first."

"Oh my god, were they...?"

Roman nodded. "Just Wyatt. But his head was bobbing. And then it didn't take long before Ivan shot his stuff. He did it on Wyatt's face."

The last time Roman had seen Fielding's face this red was when he got burned from being out in the sun all day for their House competition.

"Is that how you knew what jizz looked like?" Fielding asked.

Roman stopped short and shook his head before chewing at his fingernail. When he tried to look away, Fielding gently pulled his hand down.

“You can talk to me, Roman,” he said. “I’m your friend.”

Roman shook his head again, his lower lip trembling as his body fought him and his words failed him. Why was this so hard to do? Even thinking about his brother was enough to put shackles around him. When he opened his mouth to speak, nothing but a hoarse whisper came out.

He was scared. Scared of what admitting the things Xavier did to him might mean. Scared of how it might change the way Fielding saw him. For some stupid reason, he was also scared of what people would think about Xavier. He was still his brother, and despite lying to himself, Roman still cared about him.

The hurt was winning, chewing him alive and breaking him down until he was nothing but a pulpy mess.

Before his sobs could wrack his body, the tears sprinkled down his cheeks as he squeezed his eyes shut, and choked out a single, confessing word.

“Xavier.”

Chapter 14

“I don’t know, Coop. It sounds crazy to me.”

Cooper leaned over and smacked a palm against the polished wood of the coffee table. Across from him, Anakin, Naveen, and Julian squeezed shoulder to shoulder on the couch in their suite. Their faces were a mixture of concern, apathy, and doubt.

“I know what I saw,” Cooper said. “Roy did something to them!”

Naveen yawned as he dug out the wax in his ear with his pinky. He flicked away the bits that came out. “I think you’re delusional. Roy’s job is to protect us. What reason would he possibly have to hurt Jordy or Xavier?”

“That’s exactly why! Because no one would ever suspect him!” Cooper shouted.

“Naveen has good point, Cooper,” Julian said. “And Roy searches every day.”

“Exactly! Why do you think no one’s found them yet? He’s probably throwing them off the scent! I’m telling you guys, it’s him! You should have seen the murderous look on his face. He was ready to sick his dog on me!”

“You do have that kind of face,” Naveen said and winced when Anakin and Julian punched him on either shoulder.

Cooper growled in frustration. Why couldn’t his friends see he was on to something? There was no denying the veiled threat Roy made to him when they crossed paths. The only reason he was alive was because Roy probably didn’t want to clean up the shredded bits of dog food that would have been left behind.

“Coop, I think you should be careful,” Anakin said, running his fingers through his styled hair. “This sounds really dangerous.”

“We can’t be afraid of danger,” Cooper said, trying to sound braver than he felt. The words sounded better coming from Detective Dackery. Still, he

believed in them. If Cooper couldn't be brave enough to find Jordy and Xavier, who would be?

"Yeah, well, they're fine," Naveen said as he stood from the couch. "And this convo's done."

Cooper was about to shout something mean back, but even Anakin had a discouraging frown on his face. Did no one believe him?

"Besides," Naveen said, smirking as he faced Cooper. "Don't you two have...other things you'd rather be doing?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Anakin asked, although Cooper had a sneaking suspicion he knew what Naveen was hinting at already.

Naveen shrugged. "Who needs alarm clocks when we have the moaning brigade to wake us up?"

Anakin dipped his head in embarrassment, and Cooper's temper flared. "Yeah, so what? It's no big deal. We already know you do it, too."

Julian gave Naveen a soft poke in the ribs. "Not only that, but he uses girl underwear too sometimes."

"Dude!" Naveen shouted.

"What? Is true."

"You wear what!?" Cooper shouted. He wouldn't be caught dead wearing a girl's undies, no matter what.

Naveen gave them all a warning finger. "Repeat any of this, and I'll kick all of your asses. I mean it."

"There's nothing wrong with wearing panties," Anakin said and shrugged. "I wear different clothes all the time."

"Keep your voice down," Naveen said, eyeing the open staircase that led down to the other suites. "And it's not like that. I don't wear them. They aren't mine."

Julian's brow furrowed as he scratched his temple. "They're not? But why do they have your initials?"

Cooper thought about Naveen's first and last name, and the fact that he had a pair of panties. He snapped his fingers as the answer came to him.

"They're not his! They're Nadia's, aren't they?"

Naveen's eyes widened, but he said nothing as his cheeks grew several shades paler than normal.

"But why have her underwear?" Julian asked.

"Unless she gave them to him," Anakin suggested.

"Like gift?"

All eyes were on Naveen, who was steadily backpedaling towards his dorm room before bumping into the closed door.

"I...uhh, I..." he trailed. Even from across the room, Naveen's knees shook. He fumbled with the doorknob before rushing in and closing himself inside.

An awkward silence filled the room until Julian shook his head and sighed.

"Come on. Let's give talk."

As he rose from the couch, Anakin said, "I still don't see what the big deal is. Wear whatever clothes you wanna wear."

"I think you're missing the point," Cooper said to his roommate as they followed Julian to his bedroom.

The Polish boy knocked on the door before announcing, "Naveen? Is Julian. We are coming in."

Right away, Cooper was hit with the stark difference between their two bedrooms. Their beds sat on opposite ends of the room, and other than a few posters about outer space hanging from Julian's wall and a salt lamp casting a glow on Naveen's dresser, the room was bare. Cooper much preferred Anakin's growing mural inside their own bedroom.

Laying on his bed, Naveen was trying to smother himself with a pillow. When he spoke, Cooper could barely hear his muffled voice.

"Go away."

Cooper shut the door behind them as Julian sat on the mattress beside Naveen. A rank odor like old sweaty socks was coming from the dirty clothes pile in the corner. Laundry day couldn't come soon enough.

"You know we do not care, right?" Julian asked. "We are your friends."

"We all are," Cooper said. "If you can't talk to us, who can you talk to?"

Naveen slowly slid the pillow from his face, and when he did, he stared at the ceiling while chewing on his thoughts. The glow from the salt lamp painted his squinting face in brown shadows. Finally he growled and sat up to face them.

"The underwear's not mine," he said. "It's Nadia's. She let's me...use them."

"Use them?" Anakin asked.

"I think he means...you know," Cooper said, miming the motion Anakin did when he was getting the cum feelings. They all blushed as Naveen nodded.

"It helps me feel close to her."

Anakin was still confused. "But she's already your twin. Why would you need them to feel close to her? Unless...oh..."

"Don't say it," he said.

"You and her?"

"It's not a big deal."

Cooper had suspected it since the moment Naveen lost his cool over the panties. It made sense when he thought about it. Naveen already told them he'd had sex before. And he was the one who didn't want them asking too many questions. But to find out he was having sex with Nadia, his own twin sister? Honestly, Cooper wasn't sure how to feel. He didn't have any siblings, but he knew what it was like to feel close to someone, to want to spend time with them. Maybe that was all that mattered. Who was he to judge?

Anakin was still trying to process what Naveen had said. Cooper could see it in the way his friend scratched his temple and furrowed his brow.

“Look, I don’t expect you guys to understand, but you can’t say anything. We promised to never tell anyone. Besides, it’s our business, anyway.”

“We won’t,” Cooper assured him, looking to the others to get their nods.

“But I have so many questions,” Anakin said as he rambled out his thoughts. “When did it start? How often do you guys do it? How does it feel?”

“Maybe later,” Cooper said. “Come on, Anakin. Let’s leave them alone for now.”

As Cooper led Anakin back into the suite, Naveen mouthed a silent thanks to him as Julian closed the door behind them.

“I can’t believe it,” Anakin breathed. “I wonder what it’s like to have real sex.”

Cooper rolled his eyes and giggled. “I’m sure it won’t take long before you find out for yourself. Come on, it’s been a long day. Let’s get some sleep.”

The hot shower water washed over Roman’s body, melting the tension in his muscles tense after another exhausting day at the rock climbing wall. How was it that he was still finding new places to ache? He was getting stronger, that was obvious. His arms weren’t the scrawny sticks they used to be. He wasn’t shredded or anything, far from it, but his biceps and forearms were showing more curvature, and his calves were tight and strong. Now if only he wasn’t so short, maybe he’d start to feel like he was finally growing up.

Last night had been tough. Fielding already knew Xavier was the cause of his reoccurring nightmares, but it was the first time Roman had shared about some of the ways Xavier had sexually abused him.

“Your brother’s a jerk,” Fielding told him. “Whenever they find him, if he ever tries anything like that again, kick him in the nuts.”

“I just wish I knew why,” Roman said, his tears all cried out by then. “Something happened to him, I know it.”

“Maybe it’s puberty,” Fielding said. “You know, all the hormones?”

“I guess,” Roman said, but the answer didn’t satisfy him. If it were puberty, wouldn’t the changes have happened gradually? The Xavier now was the polar opposite of the one he fondly remembered. They were yin and yang.

As Roman left the shower, he wrapped a towel around his waist before stepping into the suite. Fielding was waiting for him on the couch, and his eyes roamed all over Roman’s mostly naked body. Roman blushed at the extra attention. If he was being honest, the way Fielding had trouble taking his eyes from him or gawking over his near nakedness made him feel wanted.

Back in his bedroom, Roman dropped his towel and slipped into fresh clothes before pulling on a sweater to keep warm against the nippy autumn breeze. Perfect for a walk together outside.

“Ready?” Roman asked as he pulled the bedroom door shut.

When they walked down the staircase, Roman couldn’t help but tense up as they passed the quiet 8th grade suite. Even though Xavier wasn’t there, Roman tensed as if Xavier might suddenly leap out from the shadows, having played a cruel joke on him over the past three days.

“Come on,” Fielding whispered. “Let’s go.”

Outside, the clouds hung low in the sky like thick tufts of cotton. As they strolled down the cobblestone path, Fielding looked around for signs of anyone around, but they were alone. Everyone else was getting ready for dinner. That was fine with him. The whole point of walking outside was to have some alone time.

Fielding slid his hand beside Roman’s. They stopped together on the path. Holding Fielding’s hand was like warm butter on pancakes, and Roman squeezed it gently, bringing a smile to Fielding’s face.

“This is okay, right?” he asked.

Roman nodded, swallowing back his nerves. It was a new experience for Roman, the way his chest tingled as they clasped hands. If anyone happened upon the two of them, what would they see? Two boys holding

hands, sure, but that wasn't so unusual. Out of the two hundred something students at Blue Ridge, there had to be at least a few gay couples, but is that what they were? Is that what he wanted them to be?

"Is this why you wanted to go on a walk so badly?"

Fielding shrugged. "I thought you might be more comfortable if there weren't a lot of people around. It's my first time doing this, too."

"I like it," Roman said. Taking a quick glance around, Roman leaned in and quickly kissed Fielding on the cheek. When he pulled back, Fielding's face was Christmas morning.

"Come on," he said, "we still have a little more time before we gotta head back."

Around them, the once orange and yellow autumn leaves were now dulled, many having broken loose in scattered piles around the base of the trees. As they came upon the lake, a flock of Canadian geese hissed at them, prepared for war if they dared to come closer.

"Geez, sensitive much?" Fielding asked and squealed as one of geese charged, chasing the two of them around the lake with angry honks. It wasn't until they were safely to the other side that the goose finally slowed. It kept a beady, watchful eye on them as they walked away. Fielding stuck out his middle finger.

The goose had shoed them near the edge of the forest. Here, the lake water lapped against the muddy shore, and a dense cluster of cattails waved softly in the late afternoon breeze.

"Eww, it's smelly out here," Fielding complained, pinching his nose.

Roman laughed. "Careful. You might step in a big pile of goose poop."

Fielding nudged a stormy gray pebble with his foot before picking it up and attempting to skip the smooth stone across the lake. It died under a heavy splash. Roman joined him and picked up a new stone before slinging it at an angle, cheering as it skipped a few more times before plopping beneath the surface.

When Fielding threw his next stone, he laughed as it accidentally flew into the nest of cattails. It landed with a chunky splurch against a jammed pile of debris stuck inside. There was something inside that caught Roman's eye, a flash of blue within the tangled weeds, and before Fielding launched his next stone, Roman raised an arm to stop him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, following Roman's gaze to the thick cluster of grass.

Tiptoeing around the shore, Roman's shoes sank in the mud the closer he got. The stench grew stronger with every step as a nauseous pit formed in his stomach and his mind raced. It couldn't be.

"Please, no," Roman whispered.

"Roman?" There was a tremor in Fielding's voice as Roman crept ever closer.

He couldn't know for certain until he climbed up the high bank near the trees and looked down at the lake. Roman wanted to believe it was nothing—wanted desperately to turn the other way and ignore his gut.

Part of the bank had eroded away, and Roman's foot slipped as he tried to find purchase up the hill. Using the exposed roots as leverage, Roman hauled his body up the ten foot drop, remembering to shift his weight like he'd been taught.

When he turned around, the view wasn't perfect, but even through the thicket of fallen branches and dense clump of cattails, there was no mistaking it.

"Fielding, we have to get help."

There, body trapped and floating in the dark waters, was Jordy Diaz.

Chapter 15

Jordy Diaz was dead.

Cooper couldn't believe it—couldn't breathe as the news became official. It started as rumors—everyone heard the sirens as they came in, but soon one squad car became two, then the ambulances showed. The vehicles converged at the far side of the lake until Jordy's body was plucked from the water. Now the search was on for a second body.

Cooper's food sat untouched on his plate as his knees shook at the table. They were all a total wreck. It didn't matter what anyone tried to say. No amount of kind words could fix a dead boy. Cooper craned his head to try and find Roman again. He and Fielding were nowhere to be found.

Kai wasn't at dinner, either...Cooper shuddered, wishing he could go back in time and undo hearing Kai's tortured scream.

"This is so fucked," Anakin muttered. He sank in his seat, eyes still puffy from his recent tears.

"I can't believe it," Naveen said, shaking his head. "I never thought, I mean...who would have?"

"You were trying to be hopeful," Cooper said.

"We all were," Julian agreed.

They waited a long time in the banquet hall. No one felt like moving. Cooper didn't want to go back to his suite. Not like this. Not when the whole world felt like it was falling apart.

"Come on," Anakin finally said. "Let's go together."

That night, Professor Bell came to visit them with another professor from another grade. The four of them waited on the sofa in silence as a low fire crackled in the hearth. Cooper couldn't remember Professor Bell ever looking so miserable.

"Boys," Professor Bell said, "I know this isn't easy to hear, but it was Jordy they found out there. The police are still investigating, but they found his

leg twisted up in the weeds. They think it was an accident.”

Cooper fell back against the couch deflated. Had he been wrong this whole time?

“What about Xavier?” Cooper asked, his throat hoarse and scratchy.

The two professors traded glances, but the one Cooper didn’t know shook his head like they were communicating about something else entirely.

“They’re still looking for him, but they don’t think a second body’s in the lake. Listen, boys, classes are canceled while arrangements are made for Jordy, but under no circumstances are any of you allowed near the lake or the boat house. Headmaster Robinson wants everyone to stay within the castle walls. If you have to go somewhere, go in pairs, alright? And if you see anything out of place, say something.”

“Thanks, Professor Bell,” Anakin said as his fingers teased the folds of his scarf.

“Professor Bell, wait,” Cooper said as the two started to leave. When they turned to face him, he hesitated. Did he voice his suspicions or trust the officers to do their job? Cooper couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something the two professors weren’t sharing. No, if he wanted answers and justice for Jordy, he’d have to get them his own way. “Sorry, nevermind.”

That night as they lay in bed together, Cooper broke down, crying as he lay next to Anakin whose face was as wet as his. Cooper was furious with himself for being too late to save Jordy. Did he miss something at the boat house yesterday when he went inside? Surely there must have been some clue he overlooked. Cooper’s mind traveled back to the round lantern and the splintered door. Had there been a clue inside all along? What if Jordy’s body had somehow been inside? It was stupid to think Jordy could have drowned! He was the best swimmer Cooper ever met.

And how did any of it make sense? There were so many people searching for any sign of Jordy or Xavier! Even he had checked out the lake yesterday! He’d been so close, only a couple hundred feet at most when he ran into Roy and his dog.

That was it, Cooper realized.

Roy must have been keeping an eye on the area, and then when Cooper got close, he chased after him with his dog to scare him off. But if that was the case, then that meant Jordy really didn't drown. He was killed. And his killer was still on the loose.

The next morning, Cooper explained everything to Anakin as they got dressed.

"You can't be serious, Coop," he said.

"I am. I have to tell Headmaster Robinson what I know, but I need you with me."

Anakin's eyes were darkened from a restless night of sleep. He paced back and forth and said, "I don't know about this. You heard Professor Bell. It was an accident."

"And I know there's more to the story," Cooper said. "Don't you think we owe it to Jordy to figure out what happened?"

A pained expression crossed Anakin's face as he sat down on the mattress.

"What if it makes things worse?"

"Nothing will happen if we're together," Cooper said. "I promise. Trust me, Anakin, okay?"

Cooper knew time was running short. All he could think about was Roman and the fact that his brother was still missing. Hadn't he made his friend a promise to do whatever he could to help find Xavier?

Maybe the next best step was to find Roman and come up with a plan together.

Roman threw up again for the third time in twenty four hours.

By now his stomach was emptied, but he kept dry heaving, his gut punching him with each violent wretch. He couldn't shake the bloated corpse from his mind, the way Fielding's last stone had squelched against

it. The only good news about finding Jordy's body was that it was face down.

Roman wasn't sure he could have handled it otherwise.

When he and Fielding ran like madmen up to campus, it didn't take long to find Headmaster Robinson. As the emergency vehicles came, Roman wondered if they were in trouble. Roy Rochester refused to say a word as he delivered them to the headmaster's office like prisoners.

All Roman could think about was Xavier floating somewhere cold and dead in the murky lake like Jordy. That's when he threw up the first time. Roy scowled at him but let Roman clean himself up in one of the nearby bathrooms before Headmaster Robinson was ready for them.

Dinner was brought to the headmaster's office as they shared everything they knew, including how they'd seen Jordy the same day he disappeared, just hours before.

"I don't know why I never said anything," Roman said. "I was just scared."

"But we don't know anything else," Fielding added in a panic. "Honest!"

"And why were the two of you out at the lake?" he asked.

"We were just...out for a walk," Fielding said.

"Together," Roman added, giving a pointed look at Fielding. "We were spending time together."

Headmaster Robinson coughed and scribbled down a few extra notes before leveling his gaze at them. When he first met Headmaster Robinson, Roman's first impression was that of a tiger. Now, with everything that had happened at Blue Ridge over the past few days, all Roman could see was a tired old man.

"I believe you both," he said. "For now, we'll let the police investigate and go from there. For what it's worth, young man, I hope your brother is not in that lake."

"Do my parents know?" Roman asked, and Headmaster Robinson nodded.

“We made a call when your brother first went missing and again tonight. I understand they are both away for travel, but they should arrive within a couple days.”

What did his parents make of Xavier’s disappearance, especially now that there was a dead body? When they were allowed back to their dorm room, it didn’t take long for Roman’s food to sour in his stomach, and before he could make it past the first steps, he threw up again, his stomach rejecting the little amount of food he managed to choke down.

One of the upperclassmen who saw them went to get an adult while Fielding rubbed his back. Roman clenched his hands in white-knuckled fists. He had to get it together. Xavier wasn’t gone yet. He couldn’t be.

Later that night, when they were gathered on the couch in their suite, Professor Lee pulled Roman to the side.

“I’m not supposed to say anything yet,” she said, “but they don’t believe Xavier’s in the lake. This is good news, Roman.”

It was good news, and for the first time, Roman felt like he could breathe. But then the cogs in his mind started turning, and he began to wonder. If Xavier wasn’t down in the lake, then where was he?

When he asked Professor Lee what she thought, a frown crossed her face, and she hesitated. “We aren’t sure. The investigation’s still ongoing.”

The next day, Roman hunched over the toilet bowl and wiped the residue of stomach acid from his face. He needed a plan. Xavier hadn’t mysteriously vanished off the face of the Earth. He was somewhere at Blue Ridge. Roman had to find him, no matter what. Even if it meant coming across a second body. He had to know.

With classes suspended, there wasn’t as much urgency to eat breakfast quickly, but it didn’t matter. Roman’s appetite was gone. He wasn’t sure he’d ever eat again, not when every time he closed his eyes he saw Jordy’s bloated body again.

“I’m not hungry anymore,” he told Fielding and started walking away before he could be talked out of it.

“Wait, where are you going?” Fielding asked, turning around to follow him out.

Roman wasn't sure, but he couldn't be in a room full of people who had no idea what he was going through. He was almost out of the banquet hall when someone grabbed his arm from behind. Spinning on his heels, Roman raised his fist, ready to punch whoever it was in the face. Cooper and Anakin were there, and an intensity burned in Cooper's eyes that Roman had never seen before.

“Let's find someplace private to talk.”

They gathered in the nearby courtyard, their only company the nearby birds pecking the ground for food. Roman shivered in the cool air as Cooper walked them through all that had happened over the past few days from their perspective. When Roman heard about Cooper's theory on Roy, his ears perked up.

Wasn't there a time he'd seen Roy and Xavier in an argument earlier in the semester? He wasn't sure that meant Roy was some vicious killer like Cooper believed, but there was clearly more going on than they knew.

“The same night Jordy went missing, Anakin and I saw something floating on the lake. I tried getting inside the boat house, but there were too many people, and it was getting late. And then later on, I saw Roy right near the same spot they found Jordy!”

“Well, good luck getting inside now,” Fielding said, waving his wrist in dismissal. “The police have that whole place taped off.”

Anakin nodded in agreement. “Plus, how would we get permission to go? Everyone's under lockdown.”

Roman locked eyes with Cooper and nodded. There was no way anyone was changing their minds. They were getting answers tonight.

“Who said anything about getting permission?”

Chapter 16

“We’re gonna get in so much trouble for this.”

Anakin paced around the bedroom, fidgeting with anything he could get his hands on. After picking up and putting down one of his colored pencils for the dozenth time, Cooper was ready to strangle him.

“Would you stop?” Cooper shouted. “No one’s making you go, you know.”

“Of course I’m going with you guys. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t?”

Cooper took a deep breath. It was nearly 10 o’clock. This was it. Maybe their one chance to find answers down at the boat house. Maybe ever again.

“It’s time,” Cooper said.

After shutting their lights, Cooper eased the bedroom door open. He half-expected to find his professors outside, tapping their feet as they waited to bust their plan before it had even begun, but the suite was empty. There was only the low hum coming from the bathroom lights.

If anyone happened upon the two of them as they made their way outside, they’d be done for. Cooper held his breath anytime they passed the next suite, carefully dipping his head around the corner to check nobody was there.

They were nearly busted as they passed the 10th grade suite. An older boy was walking from the bathroom to his room, brushing his teeth in a pair of boxers. Cooper froze in the stairwell, silently pleading the boy wouldn’t turn around and catch them. The second the 10th grader turned his attention away, Cooper scurried down the rest of the stairs. His heart was racing a million miles by the time he and Anakin reached the bottom.

They hugged the walls as they snuck along through the corridors. They weren’t out of the woods yet. Not until they met up with Roman and Fielding and made it outside the castle.

Cooper breathed a sigh of relief when Roman rounded the final bend down Fuerza's staircase. Fielding was right behind him, constantly checking his rear to make sure they weren't followed.

Cooper stepped out from his hiding spot to wave them over.

"What now?" Roman asked as the four of them stood in a circle.

"The boat house," Cooper said. "Try to stay quiet until we're out of the castle."

The main entrance was the most exposed but the quickest way to the castle grounds. Thankfully, there wasn't a student or teacher to be seen, not with Headmaster Robinson's curfew in place. What they were about to do was crazy, maybe insane. Cooper imagined what his parents would say if they got busted, but if he was right, if the boat house held an important clue, then it would all be worth it.

As they reached the stone landing, a dog barked in the distance. Cooper traded glances with the others, but there was no going back now. Roy was out there. Searching. Hunting. They all knew the risks.

"Let's go," he said.

The brisk night air stung Cooper's lungs as he huffed down the sloping hills towards the boat house. With little light to guide his way, he was careful not to roll his ankle or lose his footing. Behind him, Anakin and Fielding were gasping for air, and twice they had to stop to let them catch their breath.

When the boat house finally came into view, Cooper shuddered. Caution tape surrounded the building and stretched around the borders of the lake. It was a reminder to everyone that death lived on these waters.

Cooper shuddered as he faced the ominous, creaking frame of the boat house. He didn't believe in superstition, but as he tightened the scarf around his neck against the late autumn breeze, Cooper could almost sense Jordy with them.

"How're we supposed to get inside?" Anakin asked.

"Let's bust a window open," Roman said.

“Are you actually crazy?” Fielding asked.

Cooper stepped forward and raised the band of caution tape guarding the boat house before ducking underneath. He held it up for the others.

“Remember what we’re here for,” he said, “We’ll do whatever it takes.”

They were risking everything just by breaking curfew. If Headmaster Robinson caught wind of what they were up to, they’d be kicked out of Blue Ridge by morning. Getting to the boat house unnoticed was only half the battle.

Cooper’s feet clunked against the old wooden boards as he led the way to the front door. The inside of the boat house was pitch black through the cloudy glass, and the doorknob had the chill of death as Cooper twisted it.

“It’s open,” he said.

“I can’t see a thing,” Fielding complained.

Anakin asked, “Maybe we should turn on the lights?”

“No,” Cooper said quickly. “Remember you can see the boat house from our room. Someone will see us right away.”

“Well then, how are we supposed to see?”

Cooper scratched his head, trying to remember the layout of the boat house from when he tried searching for clues a couple days earlier. There was the lantern on the back wall. That should let them see without being too bright.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said.

Cooper headed inside, and the darkness sucked him in. Suddenly it was hard to breathe, and the whole boat house seemed to wobble as the lake water lapped against the wooden supports below. Almost at once Cooper stumbled into a metal stand, nearly knocking it over as he regained his balance. The harsh clang made him flinch, and the boat house seemed to mock him with its strange creaks and groans.

“I’m alright,” he called out.

“God, this place smells awful,” Fielding whined. His voice was nasally like he was pinching his nose.

Moving more carefully with his arms outstretched, Cooper heard his friends shuffle carefully inside while he inched towards the back wall. There was a counter he’d have to make his way around. After that, the lantern would be hanging from its hook beside the old splintered door.

Anakin sneezed a couple times in quick succession. “Sorry,” he apologized. “Must be something in the room.”

Cooper felt like he’d been walking for an eternity by the time his hands brushed against the countertop. His fingers slicked through something gross and oily and he wiped it away on his pants. As he kept moving, his fingers bumped into what felt like a thick, glass container, and immediately it started to wobble. His hands shot out to steady the object before it could tip over and shatter. The last thing they needed was to leave any evidence.

“Guys, I’m close,” he called out.

Something tingled his nostrils, and Cooper brought his fingers to his nose. Whatever liquid his fingers had touched was really strong. It smelled a lot like the cleaning supplies his mom used—a weird mix of chemicals and lemons. Anakin sneezed again as Cooper tried to wipe his fingers again.

“Hey, Sneezy?” Fielding asked, “Can you try not to spray it everywhere?”

“I’m sorry!” Anakin shouted through another sneeze.

“Does anyone think that smell is a little familiar?” Roman asked.

Cooper made it. The moment he touched the nylon lining of the life jackets, he knew he just had to reach up a little more...and...there. Got it.

Lifting the lantern from its hook, Cooper fumbled around until his thumb brushed against the flip-on switch.

“Found it!” he shouted.

The room was bathed in the amber glow of the lantern. All at once, Cooper saw his friends spread out near the open doorway. Anakin was in the

middle of another sneezing fit as Fielding shielded his face, but Roman was staring in open-mouthed horror as he pointed behind him.

“Cooper, watch out!”

A cloaked arm wrapped around his neck, and Cooper’s scream died in his throat as he struggled for breath. He tried swinging the lantern at whoever was behind him, but his arm was batted away, and the lantern clattered to the floor. The light spun around the room and made his head dizzy.

Even worse, the terrible citrus stench from before was burning his nose, and Cooper nearly gagged as he choked for breath. What was he supposed to do? Nothing was working! He tried digging his feet into the floorboards, but anytime he did, his feet got knocked out from under him. He was losing air fast!

“Let him go!” Roman shouted, and something thunked above Cooper’s head before shattering on the floorboards. There was a pained grunt from a man’s voice as Cooper was shoved to the ground. When he landed, tiny glass fragments buried into one of his palms, and he cried out in pain.

Before he could get to his feet, the man fled past and shoved Roman into one of the life jacket stands before breaking past Anakin and Fielding like they were little more than gnats. Roman toppled over backwards with the stand, and by the time any of them could get their bearings, the door to the boat house clattered open, and the man was gone.

“Roman!” Fielding shouted.

“I’m alright,” he said, groaning as he rolled to his side. “Just a little sore.”

Anakin ran over to Cooper. “Are you okay?” he asked. His shoes and knees crunched into the glass as he leaned down.

“Fine, I think,” Cooper said, but his hands trembled. Pinpricks of glass jabbed at the palm of his right hand, and little streams of blood trickled to the floor.

The moment Anakin stooped down, his nostrils scrunched at the smell, and he turned away as a bout of violent sneezes took him. The odor wasn’t

cleaning supplies at all. Cooper wasn't able to place it when he first noticed it, maybe from the way it was mixing with the smells of the boat house.

But as he brought his fingers close to his nostrils, there was no mistaking it. The smell was a lemon cologne.

Cooper's blood ran cold as he stumbled to his feet. How could he have been so stupid not to notice?

Fielding quickly ran outside and back in before shouting, "He's gone! At least, I think he is. Guys, we have to go back. This is too dangerous."

"We aren't going back," Roman said as he helped Cooper to the small sink anchored to the wall. When Roman turned on the faucet, Cooper hissed as bits of glass and blood washed down the drain. The soap was only going to make things burn more, but he had to get the wound clean. Behind them, Anakin sneezed again.

"Who was that guy? Am I the only one freaking out here?"

"We should have seen it before," Cooper said, wincing as he carefully stretched his fingers under the running water. His hand still burned, but there wasn't time to waste. "The smell as soon as we got inside. Anakin sneezing. There's only one person I can think of who wears that type of cologne."

Roman nodded in understanding.

They both knew who their assailant was.

"Professor Gray."

Under the glow of the lantern, Anakin removed his scarf and wrapped it around Cooper's injured hand. While he worked, Roman pulled Fielding closer to the door. The cool air rushing in was like ice in his lungs, but at least he could finally breathe again.

When the lantern flicked on, Roman thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. In the brief instant before his body went on autopilot, he

remembered seeing the shadowy outline of Professor Gray's nose and the disheveled strands of hair sticking out from his cloak.

The glass bottle was in his hands before he could think. He only wanted to save Cooper. Roman was secretly hoping the throw would be enough to drop Professor Gray. He knew he'd hit him good. But their professor ran like a coward before they could stop him. At least Cooper was alright. Mostly, anyway.

There in the doorway, Fielding's hands shook as violently as his voice, even as Roman reached out to steady them. "You guys can't seriously be thinking about going after Professor Gray, can you? It's literal suicide! He just tried to kill Cooper!"

"Fielding, I have to do this. Xavier still needs help, and if there's any chance he's still alive...no, I know he's alive. I have to go after Professor Gray."

"What if you get hurt?" he asked.

Roman leaned his forehead against Fielding's and closed his eyes. "We can't let what happened to Jordy happen again."

The floorboards creaked beside them.

"We need both of you to go and get help," Cooper said. Anakin's yellow scarf was scrunched around his hand, wrapped tightly against the wound. "You guys have to tell Headmaster Robinson. We don't know who else can be trusted yet."

"What about Headmaster Robinson?" Anakin asked. "Why should we trust him?"

Honestly, it was a good question. There was nothing to say that Professor Gray was the only person involved. But at some point, they had to take a risk. Like it or not, their headmaster was their best choice for getting the help they needed.

"Tell him, tell everyone," Roman said. "Don't stop until the whole world hears about it, for all I care."

"Come on," Cooper said as he stepped out of the boat house. Already, he was walking towards the thick black woods beyond the lake. "We're

running out of time.”

Roman began to follow, but before he could make it far, Fielding shouted, “Wait!”

He turned in time for Fielding to tackle him in a hug. Roman stumbled back, barely keeping his footing as Fielding choked the life out of him. Even through their sweaters, Roman could feel the pounding of Fielding’s heart. Or was it his own heartbeat going nuts? When he broke away, Fielding’s eyes were wide and misted. They both knew how dangerous things had gotten.

Roman gasped as Fielding kissed him, and in the brief moment his lips parted, their tongues swiped, sending tingles down Roman’s arms. Inevitably his penis wasn’t as nervous as the rest of his body, and Roman shifted in place as he boned up inside his pants.

When he broke away, Cooper and Anakin were pretending to stare elsewhere.

“Say something,” Roman said with a scowl. “I dare you.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Anakin said quickly. “I think it’s cool!”

“Please come back,” Fielding whispered, and Roman pulled him in for another hug.

“I will,” he said. “I promise. Now, go. We need you guys.”

Fielding wiped his nose and nodded before running towards the castle with Anakin. It would take them a few minutes to get back and likely a few more to reach Headmaster Robinson. After that, Roman couldn’t guess. It all hinged on their headmaster believing the two of them.

“Let’s go,” he said to Cooper.

The chilly darkness wrapped its arms around Roman, clutching onto him, refusing to let go. This was it. No matter what happened next, there would be no turning back. They already knew what Professor Gray was capable of committing. Jordy’s body was a testament to that. One way or another, Roman was finding Xavier tonight.

As they reached the cobblestone path leading into the woods, even the lampposts failed to illuminate much beyond the high wall of shrubs on either side of them. Cooper slowed down, eyeing the torn gaps in the shrubs with scrutiny.

“This was the place,” he said. “With Roy and his dog.”

Roman stopped with him to catch his breath. “Still think he’s in on it?”

“Who knows?” Cooper asked and shrugged. “We should get off the path, though. The last thing we want is for anyone to see us coming.”

Pushing through the shrubs was simple enough, but Roman couldn’t help but flinch every time their feet crunched through the dead autumn leaves and decaying branches. Every little noise was like glass breaking. There was no way Gray wouldn’t hear them stomping through the leaves. Worse still, once they left the path, the forest swallowed them up in total darkness, and Roman only had the faint outlines of trees to guide himself along. Already, Cooper was pulling ahead of him, and Roman forced himself to walk faster. Somewhere above, an owl hooted from its perch, and something skittered past their feet through the underbrush. The entire forest sucked at night.

“We’re here,” Cooper whispered, as the forest thinned out, and spots of light appeared in the dark.

They crouched at the edge of the clearing as they took in their surroundings. This was where the professors lived. From what he could tell, the homes were all ranch houses, each surrounded by tall, white picket fences. It’d be impossible to see through the gaps unless they pressed their faces up close. How were they supposed to tell which one belonged to Professor Gray? He could be hiding in any one of them!

Roman followed Cooper as they ran in a crouch alongside the fence to the next house down.

“Where are we going?” Roman whispered.

“I don’t know,” Cooper admitted, “but we need to get somewhere we can see better.”

Around the corner, the cobblestone path leading from the forest stretched through the neighborhood like a slithering snake. At each house, the path forked, leading up to a set of stone porch steps. Not a single house had their lights on. The lampposts on the path were the only light they had.

Cold was seeping into Roman's bones, but he bit his cheek to distract himself. Stamped his feet to get warm. Blew hot air into his hands. Just as he was beginning to think they should move to somewhere new, a light appeared from inside one of the houses across the path.

"Cooper, look," he whispered.

"I know. I see it."

"I'm gonna get a closer look."

"Right behind you," Cooper said.

Roman squatted as he crept around the front yard of the next house. His heartbeat spiked higher and higher as he forced himself to breathe. He needed to stay invisible by blending with the shadows. Crouching beside a nearby oak tree, Roman leaned against the bark and rubbed his hands together for warmth. The chill was making his teeth chatter. Catching Professor Gray was one thing, but dying from the cold wasn't something he was interested in.

The light from the house flicked off, and Roman nearly growled in frustration, but then the door opened, and a tall figure stepped out, something clutched in his grasp. Roman couldn't see what it was from this far away. The door closed without a sound before the figure dashed through the yard.

"That's him!" Cooper whispered. "It's gotta be!"

"Yeah, but where's he going?"

The good news about the dark was that Professor Gray would practically need night vision to see them spying. All Roman could make out was the man's silhouette as he moved like silk through the clearing.

Should they run out and tackle him? Try to corner their teacher and make him confess? No, that wouldn't do any good. They needed to make sure

Xavier was safe first. That must have been Professor Gray's house they just saw. If everything went as planned, Headmaster Robinson would be on his way with backup any minute now, and Roman could point them in the right direction. But how much longer would that take?

Roman held his breath as Professor Gray halted in his tracks. One hand touched the side of his head while his other cradled the bundle.

"What's he doing?" Cooper whispered.

"Probably still reeling from the knock I gave him," Roman hoped.

Professor Gray adjusted course, and for just an instant, he stepped beneath the light of the lampposts. The first thing Roman recognized was the black cloak from the boat house bundled in the man's hands. There was no doubt this was the man who attacked Cooper, but when he stared up at the man's face, Roman gasped.

For a moment, his brain shut down. He didn't believe it. Hadn't he seen the oily strands of Professor Gray's hair extending from the hood of his cloak? Hadn't they all recognized the smell of his lemon scented cologne?

So then why was Professor Bell the one beneath the light?

His dark hair fell like sweaty strings down his forehead, barely covering the ugly purple knot on the man's temple. Eyes darting wildly, Professor Bell adjusted the cloak and took a panicked look around before sprinting away.

Roman could only trade horrified glances with Cooper. His stomach churned as he tried to swallow back the sour lump that was stuck in his throat.

How could they have been so wrong?

Chapter 17

How could they have been so wrong?

Cooper collapsed beside the oak tree as he ran his fingers through his hair. Nothing he had seen made any sense. Why was Professor Bell holding Professor Gray's cloak? Did that mean he was the one at the boat house? No, that couldn't be right. There had to be some kind of misunderstanding.

"Cooper, we have to go," Roman whispered.

"Go where?" Cooper asked.

"Inside the house," he said. "I don't know what's going on, but we need answers."

Cooper wobbled to his feet, no longer feeling brave. The house Professor Bell had come from was dark now like the others, and Cooper followed Roman's lead as they reached the porch steps. Cooper could hardly breathe as the door opened without an issue, and without a word, Roman dragged Cooper inside.

Everything in the darkened house was silent, and right away, Cooper inhaled the familiar lemony scent from the boat house, the same exact one from Professor Gray's classroom the day Anakin had his sneezing fit. What was Professor Bell up to?

Roman twisted the lock on the front door, trapping Professor Bell on the outside. At least for as long as the door held.

"We have to move fast," Roman said, pushing past Cooper into the living room. "Xavier!"

Room to room they searched, calling out his name, but there was never any response. On top of it all, making their way through the dark house was proving all but impossible. Where was Xavier? Cooper winced as he slammed his hip into the corner of a desk.

"I think we have to risk it," Roman said when they were in the front room again.

“If we’re quick, maybe he won’t see.”

Standing at the wall, Cooper counted to three before flipping the light switch on. Right away, his eyes squinted against the harsh overhead light. The house looked totally normal. If they hadn’t been there to witness Professor Bell leaving the home, Cooper wouldn’t have thought anything was out of place.

They split up again, and it wasn’t until Cooper passed the opening of the mudroom that he spotted the desk he bumped into from before. Scattered on top were piles of books, including a laptop and some other loose papers. There was enough clutter that Cooper nearly missed the door behind the desk.

“Roman!” he shouted.

Roman was by his side in seconds.

“It’s worth a shot,” he said. “We have to see what’s inside.”

Cooper helped Roman swipe all the junk off the top of the desk. As they worked to lift and rotate the desk out of the way, the cuts on Cooper’s palm burned. Whatever he and Anakin had done to stop the bleeding, he knew the cuts had been torn open again. When they moved the desk far enough out of the way, Roman wrenched the doorknob open to check inside.

A steep, narrow set of steps led down into an inky black basement. Not much light reached inside, but Cooper thought he spotted a pull chain near the bottom of the steps.

He tried to slow his breathing. At any point, Professor Bell would be back. The locked door would only hold him off for so long. If Anakin and Fielding weren’t able to get help in time, none of them were going to make it out alive.

“Xavier!” Roman called again, but there was no answer.

They took the steps slowly, descending one by one into the darkness. The deeper they went, the more Cooper wanted to gag as an unpleasant, sour

odor struck him in the face. It turned his stomach, and Cooper tried to only breathe through his mouth.

“What is that?” Cooper asked.

“Xavier! Are you down here?”

The basement was completely shrouded from their view. Somewhere in the back corner, a machine gently whirred and ticked every few seconds. Standing on the tip of his toes, Cooper struggled for the pull chain, just able to grip the end between the fingers of his good hand before he tugged. The light bulb buzzed to life.

And there was a body.

“Xavier!”

Roman had no doubt it was him as he dashed across the basement. Even though they were caked with dried mud, he’d recognize those red sneakers anywhere. Roman slid to his knees, praying Xavier was still breathing.

Xavier was strapped to a support beam, his arms wrenched behind him and tied at the wrists. Though he wasn’t responsive, his chest rose with shallow breaths, and Roman released a grateful sigh.

From head to toe, his brother was a mess. His greasy hair lay matted from several days without a shower. A dried gash ran across his temple with old blood staining his jaw. His cheeks and eyes were sunken and hollow, his lips cracked with dehydration. Part of his shirt had been torn near the collar, and the dark stain spread around Xavier’s groin told Roman everything he needed to know about the nauseating stench in the room. Roman’s blood boiled as tears welled in his eyes.

“He’s hurt bad,” Cooper said as he inspected the bindings around his wrists. The zip ties cut deep into Xavier’s skin, leaving them dark with blood.

Roman tried to shake his shoulder, and Xavier’s eyelids fluttered open, unfocused and hazy before closing again.

“Xavier, wake up!” Roman said, low and urgent.

Xavier’s lips moved, but no sound came out. His face scrunched in pain as he tried again, this time forcing out a hoarse word, hardly more than a scratchy whisper.

“Roman...”

“We’re here,” Roman said, trying to keep Xavier alert. “We’re gonna get help. We’re gonna...”

What were they going to do? Cooper was still struggling with the restraints around Xavier’s wrists, and even if they got him free, Xavier wouldn’t be able to walk up the steps. Roman doubted they could get him anywhere close to somewhere safe before Professor Bell stopped them.

“Cooper, what’re we supposed to do?”

Cooper scanned the basement. “There’s gotta be something down here we can use to cut the zip ties.”

Roman helped Cooper search, hastily looking through the messy boxes scattered around the basement to find anything with a sharp edge. If nothing else, he’d chew through the binds with his teeth. They couldn’t give up now, not when they were so close to freeing Xavier!

“There’s nothing here!” Roman shouted, kicking a box over in frustration.

Cooper fidgeted with the end of his shirt as he cleared his throat. He eyed the stairs leading into the house. “I’ve got an idea,” Cooper said, “but I don’t know if you’ll like it.”

“What is it?”

“We can’t get him out,” he said, “but maybe I can keep you both safe. I’ll lead Professor Bell away until the others show up.”

“Are you crazy!?” Roman shouted.

“You got any better ideas?”

“Yeah, not running out and getting yourself killed. Do you know how dangerous that sounds?”

Cooper's knees wobbled as he clenched his fists. "We can't be afraid of danger. I can do this, Roman. I'll buy you guys time. But, in case I don't make it—"

"No," Roman said. "Don't think like that. Just be careful."

Cooper nodded, taking one last look at Xavier before he left. His feet clunked up the stairs, and after reaching the top, Roman heard the basement door close, followed by the scraping of the desk being pushed back against the door. It was all up to Cooper now.

As Roman knelt down behind Xavier, he checked out his wrists. They were crossed together, the zip ties chewing into his flesh. No matter how much he dug his fingernails into the ties, they wouldn't budge. Maybe they overlooked something that could help cut Xavier's bonds. He tried tugging them again.

Xavier's voice rasped as he choked out Roman's name.

"I'm here," Roman stammered, sliding around to face Xavier. "Cooper's getting help. Don't worry."

Every word from Xavier's mouth was like sandpaper.

"Roman...I'm...sorry..."

A memory flooded Roman's mind, from years ago, running through the house playing tag with Xavier. Roman wasn't paying attention to where he was headed. All that mattered was that whenever he peeked over his shoulder, Xavier was hot on Roman's heels, arms outstretched as Roman squealed with laughter.

Roman never saw the vase coming. By the time Xavier shouted his name, there was nothing Roman could do as he toppled the podium. The vase lay broken in thick glass chunks. All Roman could hear in his mind was his mom's frustration. How many times had she warned them not to make the house their playground?

Xavier's hand was on his shoulder, squeezing it in a way that said he was the big brother, that he was the one who would take care of it—take care of Roman. Xavier took the blame and along with it, two weeks' worth of

grounding. Even to this day, his parents never knew the truth, but Roman always remembered. He wasn't sure why the memory came back then.

Roman wiped the hot tears from his cheek.

A muffled shout came from upstairs. No doubt it was Cooper's voice. Tied to the support beam, Xavier had dropped unconscious again, his head sagging towards his shoulder. Cooper needed his help, but Roman couldn't abandon Xavier. What was he supposed to do?

Did he run to the pull chain, hide with Xavier, and wait it out in the dark?

What if Cooper needed him in that moment and there wasn't a second to spare?

Would going upstairs only put Cooper in more danger somehow?

Roman pulled at his hair and rubbed his eyes. He wished Fielding was with him.

The noises had fallen silent. There was a moment where Roman thought he heard a man's voice, but he couldn't be sure. He couldn't abandon Xavier, but he couldn't leave Cooper all by himself either. How many times had Cooper put himself in harm's way to help him find his brother?

Roman placed a hand gently on Xavier's shoulder and squeezed just like Xavier had done for him when they were little. Just a few moments longer was all they needed.

Roman stood to his feet. His brain was foggy as he climbed the staircase, every step like a heavy lead weight. When he reached the top, he pressed his ear against the door, listening for any clue as to what was happening on the other side.

Nothing.

Roman tested the doorknob, but as expected, it didn't budge, not with the desk shoved against it. Roman turned the handle and slammed his shoulder against the door, wincing with every dull jab of pain shooting through his arm. Each time, the door budged a little more. A little more. A little more. With a final grunt, Roman wedged his hands between the

opening and pushed with all his might until there was enough space to squeeze his slim body through.

The lights were still on, and after quietly closing the door behind him, Roman raised his fists in self defense in case someone sprang out at him. Not that he really thought he could fight off Professor Bell if he tried to get the jump on him, but he wouldn't go down without a fight either. Roman had everything to lose.

Every heartbeat stung his chest. Roman spun to either side as he stepped out from the mudroom, ready to dodge a punch or oncoming tackle. When he passed the hallway leading to the bedrooms, he ducked his head inside, but there was no one there. This side of the house was empty.

A distant shout drew his attention, and Roman stepped cautiously forward until he entered the kitchen. A table had been knocked on its side, and a phone had broken apart in pieces on the floor. The back door was wide open, and Roman froze as he saw Professor Bell in the yard.

Cooper had to buy Roman time.

Any second, Anakin and Fielding would be back with Headmaster Robinson, but right now they were headed to the wrong house. If Cooper couldn't find a way to get them to Professor Bell's, then Jordy wouldn't be the only dead kid discovered.

After storming up the stairs, Cooper grunted as he shoved the desk against the basement door, his muscles straining under the weight. Now Roman and Xavier were pinned in, but at least Professor Bell wouldn't be able to get back to them so easily.

Running to the front door, Cooper breathed a sigh of relief. Still locked.

Did he chance escaping out the front? What if Professor Bell was waiting for him? Cooper shook his head. He had to be decisive. This wasn't like his books where Detective Dackery had time to contemplate every little move. Living in the what-ifs would only get him killed.

Cooper ran towards the kitchen, forming a plan as he went. He would head out the back door, hop the fence, and make as much noise as humanly possible. All he needed was one other adult to notice him, hear him calling out for help.

Inside the kitchen, a phone flashed on its receiver, and Cooper snatched it from the stand. He wasn't sure how soon the police would be able to show, but it was worth a shot. Anything to increase their chances. The moment he was over the fence, he'd dial 911 and tell them everything.

He was so close. All that was left was to open the back door and run like hell for the fences. With a click, Cooper twisted the latch and wrenched the door open.

"Cooper!"

Cooper stumbled backwards over his own feet and cried out as Professor Bell stepped through the back door. The phone lay smashed in pieces at his feet, useless now to him or anyone else. Now what was he going to do?

Inside the kitchen, Professor Bell moved like a cornered, rabid animal. The knot near his temple had swollen into a nasty purple egg, and the nearest eye was bloodshot throughout. Both eyes fixed on Cooper, dilating to sharpened points. Without a word, Professor Bell lunged at him, hands outstretched like talons as he dove forward, clutching Cooper by the throat.

Cooper panicked, trying to dig his fingernails into the thick forearms of the man, but already the air was being squeezed from his throat. As he struggled desperately, the scarf around his hand came undone, and the shallow wounds reopened. Little streams of blood trickled down his wrist and dripped onto his face as he tried anything to escape from Professor Bell.

The fingers around his windpipe tightened, and Cooper knew his professor had gone insane. He wasn't just trying to protect himself or cover his tracks. He was making sure Cooper went down with him.

Cooper begged for breath. His eyes bulged with pressure. He had to think of something. Trying to claw Professor Bell's face wasn't doing him any

good. He was too far away, and Cooper wasn't strong enough. Looking down, Cooper saw one last, hopeful opportunity and drove his knee into the man's crotch.

At once, Professor Bell buckled and gave a pinched yelp. His grip around Cooper's throat loosened, and Cooper sucked in a choked gasp. He smashed his knee in a second time. As Cooper tried to scramble away, a furious hand tore the collar of his sweater.

Struggling to his feet, Cooper checked his throat with his good hand. Already, his windpipe was achy and bruised, and as he tried to speak, his voice was as hoarse as Xavier's had been. How was anyone going to hear him calling for help? Even the phone was useless, its pieces broken apart on the kitchen floor. His only chance was to run.

Professor Bell stood to his feet, blocking Cooper's path to freedom. Cooper wished he had nailed him a third time in the balls.

As Cooper backed away, he bumped into the kitchen table and felt it wobble. He tried to steady his breath, control his breathing. Professor Bell made another desperate lunge, and Cooper waited until the last possible second before ducking beneath his arm. The instant his teacher collided with the table, they both toppled to the ground with a loud clatter. This was his chance!

Cooper's eyes watered as he sprinted out the back door, looking for the quickest way to safety. Like all the other yards, a tall white picket fence guarded all ways out. On a good day, Cooper could wedge his hands between the boards and scale the fence with no problem, but with his one hand messed up, he wasn't sure he could make it in time, not before he was dragged back down and pummeled to death.

Cooper couldn't look back, refused to look back, was terrified that if he did, Professor Bell would be over his shoulder, ready to snuff the life out of him. Cooper's eyes darted to the tree near the corner of the yard. Its branches started low and thick, growing thinner as the tree stretched higher and higher. There was no other choice.

Cooper squeezed his fingers into the palm of his bad hand as he dashed to the base of the tree. The pain stung like a thousand wasps, but Cooper swallowed it down. Gripping the first thick branch, Cooper hoisted himself up, wincing as the bark chewed into his hand. One down. The next branch was in easy reach, and again he climbed, using every ounce of adrenaline pumping through his body. Push with the legs, not just the arms, Cooper reminded himself, imagining the hundreds of times he and Roman had scaled the rock climbing wall over the past several months.

Ten feet below, Professor Bell appeared. Even in the dim light spilling out from the kitchen, the knife gripped in his hand was unmistakable.

“It’s alright, Cooper,” he said in a strained voice. “There’s just been a misunderstanding. You come on down, and we’ll talk it out.”

No way that was going to happen. As Cooper tried to twist his body, his foot slipped from the branch, and he cried out as he clutched his arms around the one at his chest. It was all he could do to hang on. Falling now meant losing everything. When his feet swung back the other way, Cooper dug his toes in and regained his footing.

“Careful, Cooper,” Professor Bell mocked. “A fall like that would be pretty nasty.”

Cooper’s eyes widened as his teacher approached the base of the tree and lifted himself up onto the first branch with little effort. His extra height made it easy to climb, and Cooper looked up. There were only so many branches, so much space to put between them.

Cooper ground his teeth as he spun back around and pulled himself to the next branch. The branches were growing thinner, weaker. Each branch wobbled as Cooper held on with trembling hands and legs. Twice he nearly slipped like he had before.

Before he could pull himself up further, a hot, searing pain flashed across his heel, and Cooper screamed in pain before scrambling to the next branch. Professor Bell was only close enough to nick his ankle, but the knife was sharp. Blood dripped from his heel into his shoe, and right away, a chilly, nauseous pit formed in Cooper’s stomach. One more branch.

Cooper thought about his parents, how he would probably never see them again. He wanted to crawl into their arms and have them say everything was going to be alright. He wanted to hug Anakin tight and tell him he was the best friend Cooper could have asked for at Blue Ridge. He wanted to apologize to Roman, for letting him down. One more branch.

Every limb in Cooper's body trembled. He could hardly put any weight on his sliced foot, and his strength was waning. One more branch.

The branches were thin enough now that he could wrap his whole hand around them. They creaked and groaned as they warped under his weight. One more branch. One more branch. But there was nowhere else to go. As Cooper reached for the next branch and tugged, it snapped free. Tears streamed down his face. This really was it.

With a shuddering breath, Cooper squeezed his eyes shut as he pressed himself against the trunk of the tree, tucking his knees to his chest. Whatever came next, he didn't want to see it coming. Below him, Professor Bell's breathing came in frustrated pants as he climbed ever closer.

"Got you now!" he shouted, but before Cooper felt the piercing sting of the knife in his ribs or across his throat, there was an ear-splitting crack.

Snapping branches.

Fluttering leaves.

A sickly, dull crunch.

And then nothing.

Roman's feet were glued to the ground. Even his words were trapped in his throat.

Professor Bell's contorted body lay in a crumpled heap at the base of the tree, surrounded by fallen branches and dead leaves. If by some chance he was alive, whatever life was left would be miserable and filled with endless pain.

Where was Cooper?

Roman tried not to focus on the way his teacher's head was twisted at an abnormal angle as he tiptoed closer. Scanning the branches of the tree, Roman's eyes landed on Cooper's small, shriveled form huddled at the top.

"Cooper, hang on! I'm coming!"

Scaling the branches was simple, especially with the months of recent practice using the rock climbing wall. Shrapnel from snapped branches jutted out from the trunk as Roman made his way closer to Cooper. His stomach turned as he imagined what his professor's final moments must have been like.

Roman shook his head. What was he thinking? Professor Bell was a murderer and would have happily killed either of them if given the chance. Still, Roman took a glance towards his teacher's body, and couldn't stop himself from pitying the man.

The branches right below Cooper were wet and sticky, and Roman heard Cooper's sniffing as he sat with his knees drawn to his chest. There was so little room for Cooper to sit that it was a miracle he hadn't slipped off.

"Hang on, Cooper," he called. "Don't move!"

One more branch.

Even now Roman could see there was nowhere else to go. Cooper and he were so high up that they couldn't climb another branch if they wanted to.

"Cooper?" Roman called softly.

Cooper's body was shaking, thin and fragile as he huddled in a ball. There was a gash on his heel, and his sock was all bloody, but Roman couldn't see how deep it was. Soft cries reached his ears as Cooper whispered, "What did I do?" over and over again.

Shifting his weight on his heels, Roman carefully gripped the branch Cooper sat on and leaned his head against Cooper's side. He wasn't sure what else to do, other than remain there until help came. From the thin branches at the top of the tree, Roman could see that some of the lights from the other houses had turned on. He needed to call for help. No one

knew they were up in the tree yet, wouldn't know until they stumbled across Professor Bell's home and found his body.

Roman bit down on the inside of his cheek to stop the tears from spilling down his face. He had to be strong, just a little while longer. But everything was adding up. Professor Bell, Xavier, Cooper, Jordy, how close everything had been to going so terribly wrong.

"Ssshhh," Roman whispered past Cooper's sobs as he wrapped his arms around his friend in a gentle hug. "You saved Xavier. That's what you did. You saved his life."

Chapter 18

It was the sirens that came first.

Everything that happened after was a blur of blinding lights and blaring sounds, and Cooper's head was so dizzy that it wasn't until his heel had been stitched up in the hospital that the fog began to lift.

How could he even describe his parents' faces when they burst through the doors of his hospital room? He had so much he wanted to say and nothing at all, and he melted into their arms as they swaddled him in a hug. He didn't have to be brave anymore. For just a moment, he could pretend he was still the same little kid that he was when he started 6th grade.

Cooper wasn't sure where Roman was. He remembered Roman being there until the firetrucks came, but then they were separated. Gone. Cooper hoped Xavier was okay.

The first time Cooper gave his statement, his chest was hollow and his legs too tingly and numb to stand straight. They questioned him so critically to the point where his dad raised his voice and his mom fled the room in tears.

The next day when they asked him again, they were calmer. Everyone was. The officers told them they would try to limit their questions, and Cooper told them everything he could. Of course there were things he didn't know. Why would he know why Professor Bell wanted to kill Jordy? Did it matter why he had Xavier locked up in his basement? No, his teacher had never mentioned anything to Cooper. That was insane!

It was funny how his parents' mood changed so dramatically, from sheer joy that he was alive to fury about how reckless he'd been. Of course they wanted to pull him immediately from the Academy. A place that dangerous was no place for him. He didn't have the heart to argue, because what could he say? They were right. Thinking he had any chance to stop Jordy's killer was nothing but reckless and foolish and stupid.

They treated his wounds, cleaned out the lacerations on his palm and heel. Thankfully the knife hadn't cut too deep. As long as he was careful, the

stitches should hold without too much trouble. He'd been so, so lucky he heard over and over again.

Before the day was done, two sets of visitors came by to see him. The first was a man and woman he didn't recognize. Both of their faces were honey bronze, and the man's head was thick with dreads hanging past his shoulders. Cooper immediately saw Jordy in each of them. He wasn't prepared for the way they shook his parents' hands and wept at his bedside. As they each squeezed his good hand and cried, Cooper knew he would be reckless and foolish and stupid a thousand times again if given the chance.

Cooper's second visitor came as the sun's golden rays reflected off the blinds of his hospital room. With a gentle knock, Headmaster Robinson stood in the doorway, his pristine Blue Ridge uniform a stark contrast to the worn, weary man wearing it. He regarded each of them before clearing his throat.

"I apologize," he said. "I don't want to interrupt if now's a bad time."

Cooper's parents traded glances before his dad spoke. "Not at all. Please, come in."

Headmaster Robinson's shoulders slumped as he walked inside. It was like he had aged ten years over the past few nights. When he reached Cooper's dad, he extended a slow and steady hand to shake.

"Joe," Headmaster Robinson said.

"Good to see you, sir," his dad said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Been a long time."

The headmaster quirked an eyebrow at this, and Cooper thought he saw the slightest smirk. After giving a polite welcome to his mom, Headmaster Robinson turned his attention towards Cooper and lowered himself to his knees. Each of them cracked like thick branches, and Cooper winced. He wasn't sure he'd ever get over hearing sounds like that again.

Placing both hands on the railing of the bed, his headmaster bowed his head and breathed a heavy sigh. When he lifted his head, his eyes

brimmed with tears. “Young man, what you have done for this school can never be put into words.”

Cooper tried thinking of a way to break the tension that seemed to swallow him up over the last twenty four hours. “So, I’m not in trouble?”

Headmaster Robinson chuckled. “No, son, you’re not in trouble.”

His parents made room for his headmaster to sit on the thin blue cushions of the narrow couch inside the room. The sun gleamed off the stripes in his thick head of hair. It was a long time before he spoke, like he was trying to choose the right words to say.

“I was told today you all would be withdrawing your son from the academy.”

His parents shuffled on their feet, neither of them making eye contact with Cooper or his headmaster

“We think it’s for the best, you see,” his dad said. “We wanted Blue Ridge to be a fresh start for Cooper, not...this.”

His mom was quick to jump in. “Sending him there was really more our idea. Maybe we pushed him too early to be off on his own like that. And we’re not saying that what happened was your fault or anyone else’s, it’s just...”

“I understand,” Headmaster Robinson said and stood to his feet before walking to the door. A team of nurses was busy pushing an incoming patient along a gurney, paying their room no attention as they passed. Headmaster Robinson placed a hand against the door frame and rested against it as he cocked his head towards them.

“Joe, you have known me for a very long time. Of anyone, you should know how deeply Blue Ridge’s values mean to me. What I’m about to say, I don’t say lightly, and please feel free to disregard it. This is your decision, after all.”

What Headmaster Robinson said next would stick with Cooper for all his years.

“There isn’t a single person at our school who represents what Blue Ridge means more than Cooper.”

Then he was gone.

“Roman, you deserve to know the truth.”

The heart rate monitor beeped steadily as Roman stared at Xavier. His bright blond hair was messy from sleep but clean now as he sat in the raised bed. A couple hours ago, a nurse had changed the gauze bandage around the gash near his temple.

Between them was a small rolling desk they were using to play cards on while their parents picked up dinner from a nearby restaurant. Roman tossed a card in the growing pile and picked up another from the deck.

“The truth about what?”

Between the blood loss, dehydration, and starvation, Xavier was lucky to be found when he had been. Another day or two, the nurses said, and things would have been much worse. After being treated, Xavier slept the entire first day, only coming around in the late hours of the following night. His throat was groggy and hoarse, and he was only allowed sips of water to begin with, but he had survived.

“About what happened with Professor Bell,” Xavier said.

His mom had carried on relentlessly about how she’d sue the school for negligence and letting a murderer on the staff, but Roman had finally snapped, screaming at her in tears through his exhaustion to just let it go. Why couldn’t she be satisfied that they were all together again, alive, safe?

“Didn’t you already tell the police everything?” Roman asked.

They’d both given their statements early on. Roman imagined they asked Cooper, Fielding, and Anakin a lot of the same questions. He didn’t care. There was nothing to hide. The fact that Xavier was able to testify about why he was tied up in Professor Bell’s basement was all the evidence the police needed for a dead man who had already killed another boy.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” Xavier whispered, and his brother’s face crumpled into tears as he dropped his cards in his lap and wiped his eyes.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Roman said.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I need to. You of all people deserve to know what happened, why I...just promise me you’ll try not to judge me too hard. No one could hate me more than I hate myself.”

One of the first nights at the hospital, when Roman was supposed to be sleeping on the couch for a nap, he overheard one of the nurses talking in hushed tones with his parents about whether or not they knew about Xavier’s self-inflicted marks. The nurses found fingernail cuts all along his stomach and ribs, and Roman immediately thought back to the summer before when he’d first seen them and Xavier had told him not to worry.

He balled his fists. His insides felt all shaken up like a bottle of soda ready to burst. He wasn’t sure why Xavier would want to talk about a dead man, but Roman nodded anyway.

And then Xavier told his story.

Chapter 19

Xavier's first month at Blue Ridge was filled with homesickness.

By the end of the first few weeks, he thought his heart might actually break. His roommate Logan was nice to him—a country boy who had more posters of guns, deer, and the outdoors than anyone Xavier had ever known. Very different than his own privileged lifestyle. Every time he saw Logan, Xavier was reminded of Roman, because having a roommate was a lot like having a brother.

The day he left, Roman wouldn't stop clutching his leg, and later Roman promised to write him every chance he could. When his first care package arrived, a dozen handwritten letters were stuffed inside, including a crayoned picture of the two of them holding hands on a sunny beach as a big blue wave crashed behind them. It wasn't very good, but it was everything to him. Xavier pinned it to his bedroom wall so it would be the first thing he saw waking up and the last thing before going to bed.

His classes were alright, and the professors were nice, but a top student he had never been. Especially in math. The numbers always swam across the page. He understood how they were supposed to work together, but the moment he was alone, a mental barrier blocked his path.

Maybe if he'd studied more, if math hadn't been so tricky, then maybe none of the terrible things that happened to Jordy and Roman would have happened.

It was late October, just over two years ago.

Fall break meant a long weekend free from classes. Xavier was sitting on one of the marble benches outside in the courtyard, working on one of his letters back to Roman. His brother had drawn himself dressed as Michael Myers for Halloween. Did Roman remember making that drawing? Xavier never forgot it.

An approving whistle from behind drew his attention.

"Good morning, Professor Bell," Xavier said.

“Morning, Xavier. What’re we working on today?”

Professor Bell took the open seat across the bench and set his steaming mug down before adjusting his sweater and warming his hands. The mountain chill was beginning to numb Xavier’s hands, but the clear, sunny day was too nice to stay indoors.

“A letter to my brother,” he explained. “He sends me these drawings each month, so I try to write him back all the time.”

Bell nodded in understanding. “Ahh, so you two must be pretty close.”

Xavier smiled. “He’s the best brother ever.”

“You know, not many people know that I have a brother. Two, actually. I’m the oldest, just like you.”

“Are you guys close?”

Bell tilted his head as he considered the question. “Not so much now, but we were pretty inseparable growing up. Sorry, I didn’t mean to distract you with all my rambling.”

Xavier was quick to perk up. One of the coolest teachers at Blue Ridge wanted to talk with him, spend time with him. Of course he didn’t mind.

When their conversation finally ended, Bell took his emptied mug and left, but not before giving Xavier’s shoulder a soft squeeze in passing. “Keep being that great older brother, Xavier.”

Their last day before winter break, Xavier explored some of the sections of Blue Ridge castle that he hadn’t been to yet. Obviously the girls’ spires were totally off limits, but that was okay with him. Girls were like a foreign language. You heard them alright, but they were impossible to understand.

He ended up looping around to the school’s library, where towering shelves stretched high towards the ceiling. The fireplace crackled brightly as Xavier discovered Professor Bell reading a novel in one of the thick padded chairs. The flames warmed Xavier’s skin as the two locked eyes.

“Already out of things to do?” Bell joked and waved Xavier to take the cushiony chair opposite of him.

“What’re you reading?” Xavier asked. For some reason, he never thought his science teacher would want to read regular books in his free time.

“Oh, just a boring story about a small hockey community.”

Xavier smirked. “If it’s so boring, then why are you reading it?”

“I was trying to be polite,” Bell said. “I think you would find it boring. I find it fascinating.”

“Mhmm.”

Xavier smiled and turned his attention to the rolling flames. One of the logs sank with a crack into the embers, and a burst of sparks floated into the chimney.

“So what’s on your mind? I doubt you’re sticking around just for the fire.”

Xavier looked over. Bell had tucked his novel beside him and turned his full attention towards him. He wanted to hear what Xavier had to say.

“I’m just not sure about going home this Christmas. I already know my dad won’t be there—and Roman’s great, obviously, but my mom works all the time too, and it’s lonely with just the two of us. There’s always people to hang around with at school.”

True to his point, a trio of teen girls strolled past, laughing together as they returned a stack of books to the librarian at the front desk.

Bell leaned forward with his hands clasped together, his chocolate brown eyes reflecting the warmth and comfort of the chimney fire.

“You’ve got a lot of great friends here, Xavier. And I think you’ve got a great family, even if sometimes they can feel a little distant. It’s important to treasure both, but it’s also important to live in the moment. Make the most of your Christmas with your brother. The people you have looking out for you at Blue Ridge will be waiting for you when you’re back.”

Xavier nodded, coming to grips with the fact that he was part of two worlds now, his life at Blue Ridge and his life away. Professor Bell made it easy to see things in a different way, and Xavier knew he would miss his teacher most of all.

“You can’t keep going on like this, Xavier. Any more tests like your last one, and you’ll fail the class.”

Xavier hung his head across from Professor Lee in her office. She was right. He’d totally blown his last math test! Ever since getting back from winter break, his grades had been slipping more each day. Nothing he tried worked.

“What happens if I fail?” Xavier asked. “Do I have to repeat the year, or am I kicked out of school?”

“I’d like to think you have it in you to succeed, young man,” she said. “But I also think a little extra support can go a long way. Have you considered working with a tutor?”

“You’re going to tutor me in math?”

Professor Lee shook her head and brushed back a strand of her glossy, black hair behind her ear. “That would be unethical since I teach you math already. No, we would find somebody who can help support your specific needs.”

“I’m not stupid,” Xavier growled. “I can do it!”

The tsk sound Lee made with her tongue silenced him.

“It is not an issue of smarts. Everyone is different, Xavier. Having a tutor is not a blemish on who you are.”

It sure felt that way. Xavier didn’t know anyone else who had to stay behind and talk about failing Professor Lee’s class.

Later on when Logan asked him how his talk went, Xavier said, “She thinks I’m an idiot who needs help with math. I don’t want to have to stay behind each day.”

Logan sat on his bed while using a toothpick to prod at the leftover lunch stuck between his teeth. “Wouldn’t getting held back be worse?”

“Uggh, Probably,” Xavier said and stared at Roman’s pinned up pictures on his wall. If Roman could draw his emotions, there’d be a dozen numbers

flying out of his head while his brain smoked from the overload. "Can't you help me? We could stay up late and go over homework before bed."

"Help you?" his roommate asked. "Shoot, I'm barely scraping by. Just go ask someone, man."

Xavier had all but kissed his life at Blue Ridge goodbye when Professor Lee approached him at dinner the next night with a beaming smile. Everyone at the table traded glances. Their professors didn't just walk over and chat unless someone was in big trouble. Xavier's cheeks burned when she had him follow her.

Back at the teacher tables, Professor Bell gave him a kind wave. It turned out Professor Lee had spoken about his tutoring needs, and Bell was quick to offer up his time.

"Really, it's no problem at all," he said as he dug his fork into the salad on his plate. "Because of the Blue Ridge Buddies, I don't have as many extra responsibilities. Honestly, Xavier. This will be good for you."

And he believed it. Because Professor Bell was awesome, and because Xavier wanted to spend time with him.

As spring blossomed on campus, Xavier spent extra time each day with Professor Bell in his class. It had taken some time to get approval from Headmaster Robinson to miss some of his club activities, but after that, the two of them met for half an hour each day, working through some of the trickier skills Xavier struggled with all year. It was Professor Bell who realized Xavier was missing some foundational math skills, but after several weeks of exhausting and grueling drills, he was making progress. Even Xavier could see the tutoring was working.

After clawing his way back, Xavier knew he was far from out of the hole, but as his 6th grade year drew to a close, he had a decent shot at passing.

All that was left was the final test. If he managed a 70 or higher, he would pass. He barely slept at all the night before, tossing and turning so much that Logan threatened to make him sleep on the couch outside their bedroom. Xavier's feet dragged like a zombie as he slumped into class, but as he worked through the test questions, remembered all the different tips

and strategies Professor Bell taught him over the past couple months, he was able to answer a lot of the problems.

When Professor Lee showed him his test score after class, Xavier snatched it and ran all the way down to Professor Bell's office.

Seeing Professor Bell through the door's glass window, Xavier barged inside and nearly cried with happiness.

"I got a 74! I passed!"

Bell was out of his seat in a second and scooped Xavier up in a hug as he spun him around.

He was dizzy with excitement and joy and affection, and a million other emotions coursing through him. Bell looked over the paper, and Xavier figured he was checking to see the problems he still got wrong.

Instead, Bell surprised him by talking about all the things he did right. "You nailed order of operations—and then the patterns, nice job! Wow, even the algebraic stuff. We were working on that for weeks. Xavier, this—"

His arms were suddenly wrapped around his teacher as he cried, and Bell's arms folded over him, too.

"I'm so proud of you," his teacher whispered above him as Bell gently rubbed his back.

When 7th grade started, it was only a few weeks into the year when Professor Lee suggested he continue tutoring with Professor Bell.

Xavier couldn't have agreed quicker, eager to spend more time with his favorite teacher. He couldn't quite explain why, but lately being around Bell made his chest feel tight and his words freeze up. It was a lot like being nervous during a project, but in a good way.

Their tutoring sessions continued as normal until one day, Xavier arrived outside of Bell's classroom the same time his favorite teacher was on his way out.

Bell smacked his forehead when he saw Xavier with his books.

“Tutoring, right, of course. Sorry, Xavier. Headmaster Robinson’s got us scrambling all over the place to have decorations in time for the Halloween dance.”

“So we can’t meet today?” he asked. His chest was like a balloon someone had blown up and popped with a needle.

Professor Bell started to shake his head, but then stopped. “Well, there is another place we could go. Only if you wanted to, of course, but my home is always available.”

“I’m okay with that!” Xavier blurted out and struggled to keep the blush from spreading across his cheeks. Why were his words so jumbly lately? “I mean, if you’re sure it’s okay.”

A smile crossed Bell’s face as he stepped back inside the classroom and scribbled directions on a piece of paper before scurrying past. “Perfect. Let’s say around 7 o’clock then. Door should be open.”

As dusk settled, Xavier walked the winding cobblestone path away from Blue Ridge’s campus, past the lake, and through the canopy of woods leading to the teacher homes.

Stopping under a nearby streetlamp, Xavier dug the crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket and checked the directions once more. As if plucked from the pages of a storybook, all the houses possessed a quaint charm. Bell’s house was surrounded by a white picket fence like the others, with a manicured lawn and rows of bright flowers huddled together in the garden bed. A winking gnome waved at him from the shadows of the yard’s oak tree as Xavier rubbed the goosebumps from his arms, walked the small set of stairs, and knocked on the cherry wood door.

An owl hooted nearby as Xavier stood there awkwardly. His backpack was beginning to strain his shoulder. Did he have the wrong house? After he knocked again, Xavier remembered his professor had said to come inside when he got there. Should he, though? That sounded a lot like trespassing. The curtains were all drawn shut on the main windows, so he cupped his hands around his face and leaned against the tiny window slit at the door.

The empty living room was empty, other than the glow from the table lamp and the news playing from the TV. On the coffee table in front of the couch was an open math textbook along with a mini whiteboard and some markers. At least he was in the right place.

The chill of the doorknob surprised him, and at any moment, he expected someone to yell at him, demanding to know why he was so far from the castle at night. There was no point in waiting outside only to get busted. The door gave no resistance as Xavier opened it up, and the sound from the TV immediately filled his ears.

“Professor Bell?” he called out. “It’s Xavier.”

When there wasn’t any answer, Xavier moved further inside the living room before setting his backpack on the couch. The living room led directly into the kitchen, where a kettle of tea was steeping on the stove, but his teacher wasn’t there either.

There was a squeaking of metal from one of the rooms inside the house, and Xavier pursued the noise, pausing to look at some of the hanging photographs Professor Bell had of his family. They ranged back from when he graduated college down to his younger days at Blue Ridge with his roommate. He had his arm locked around the neck of another boy as the two flashed mischievous grins at the camera.

Xavier had to stop himself from reaching up and touching the photos. His teacher was cute in these photos, but he was handsome now, his features sharper and more chiseled in his late twenties.

At the end of the hallway, there was a cracked door, and Xavier gently pushed it open before calling his teacher’s name again.

“Xavier? Shit!”

Xavier blushed as Professor Bell danced on one foot as he tried to pull his briefs up. Even though his teacher turned away, there was no rewinding what Xavier had seen. The thick, hanging dick between his teacher’s legs was so much bigger than Xavier would have guessed, with a trail of dark brown hair spreading from his bushy groin all the way up to his belly button and down his thighs. Even his teacher’s balls looked twice the size

of his own. As Bell pivoted the other way, his briefs only hugged the firm ass cheeks within.

That fluttery, tightness was back in Xavier's chest, and his penis sprang to its full hardness as it rubbed along the inside of his own underwear.

"I'm sorry!" Xavier stammered and pulled the door quickly shut before running back to the couch and covering his face in shame.

When Bell came to greet him on the couch, he was dressed in a sleeveless t-shirt and sweats, his hair still damp from a recent shower. Xavier could barely make eye contact without dying from embarrassment.

Bell cleared his throat. "I, uhh, I'm sorry you had to see that."

Xavier was sure that if he looked in the mirror right then, his skin would be brighter than a tomato's.

"I shouldn't have been snooping."

"No, no, it's my fault. I was the one who told you to come in."

"But I saw you...you know?"

"Naked?"

Xavier was dying in embarrassment all over again as he nodded. Professor Bell shrugged in a nonchalant way that Xavier thought was the coolest.

"I'm sure it's not much different than seeing your suitemates naked." When Xavier's jaw dropped, Bell said, "What, you think I don't remember what it was like to be a kid here?"

"Yeah, but I didn't think teachers said things like that."

Bell bumped his shoulder into Xavier's. "Eh, so what? We've known each other long enough now. If I can't be honest with you, then who can I be?"

That helped break the ice, and after Professor Bell excused himself to take the tea from the stove, Xavier decided if his favorite teacher wasn't embarrassed about being caught naked, then he wouldn't be either.

They were close to wrapping up for the evening when a nagging question kept bothering Xavier. Taking a risk, he said, "Professor Bell, can I ask you a

personal question?”

“Go on,” he said, checking through the algebra problems they’d worked on over the night.

“What is it like...” Xavier paused and couldn’t believe he was about to ask this. He cleared his throat and tried again. “What is it like having so much hair? On your body, I mean.”

Bell set the paper down and faced Xavier on the couch. “It’s a little hard to say, since I’ve had it for so long now. It doesn’t grow all at once, you know.”

Xavier blushed. “Erm, yeah, I know. I have a few hairs too. You know, down there.”

Talking like this was making Xavier hard again, and for the first time that evening, Professor Bell’s face flushed. Xavier never considered how his teacher might get embarrassed like regular people. He thought nothing fazed the man.

“Then, you already know they’re a little different than the hair on your head. Why, do you want a lot of hair on your body?”

Xavier reached his fingers out before his mind could convince him otherwise as he gently teased his teacher’s arm hair. “Maybe, but I don’t know. I think it would take some getting used to.”

He shivered as Professor Bell’s fingers matched his, tracing along the smooth, bare skin of his forearm.

“I wouldn’t be in a rush to grow up so soon,” Bell whispered, leaning forward. “I think you’re perfect the way you are.”

His whole insides burned as Professor Bell’s lips tickled the downy hairs on his cheek, and goosebumps erupted across his body. When their lips met, Xavier gasped into the kiss. His boner had been teetering back and forth since they started talking, but now it was like steel as an overwhelming ache to touch and grab it coursed through him.

Sometimes it was like that whenever he had an intense dream. He’d wake up in his bed, grinding against the covers, tantalizingly close

to...something, but never able to reach it. It was like trying to hold a fistful of water. He could never catch the whole thing.

Xavier finally pulled away and took a few panting breaths, noticing the thick lump in Bell's sweatpants.

"I, uhh, probably shouldn't have done that," Bell said, shaking his head as he closed his eyes.

"Why not?" Xavier asked. "I wanted to do it, too."

His teacher's forehead creased in thought as he scratched it. "Yes, but I'm also more than twice your age, Xavier. You're a minor. I'm an adult. There's a lot wrong with what just happened."

Xavier couldn't see the big deal and said as much. "So what? It's not like I'm going to tell anyone. Besides, that was really fun."

Bell said nothing, and as the timer on his phone went off, signaling the end of their tutoring, he hastily gathered up the materials on the coffee table. As he did, the lump pressed forward against his sweatpants the same way Xavier used to make teepees in his bedroom.

"You're not mad at me, are you?" Xavier asked.

"No, of course not," he said, but he still wouldn't look at Xavier as he returned the papers and textbook to Xavier's book bag. After that, he was quick to shuffle Xavier out the door, and told him to hurry back to the castle before curfew.

For the next few days, Professor Bell canceled their tutoring. There was always some lame excuse about why they couldn't meet. Xavier knew it was because of the kiss. He wasn't stupid. Why didn't his teacher understand how badly he wanted the kiss too?

Three days later, Xavier was back at Bell's house.

Earlier that day, Bell came up with an excuse for why they couldn't meet in the classroom like normal. They both knew it was bogus. It's just that Xavier didn't care.

The chance to spend more one on one time with his favorite professor was all he was interested in. Halfway through their next session, Xavier asked if they could kiss again, and unlike the first time, Bell didn't hesitate.

As the stubble from his teacher's chin grazed his own, Xavier leaned back under the man's weight, immediately hard as they kissed. Xavier made sure to wear sweatpants like Bell had the last time. When his erection pushed against the cloth, there was no way his teacher could miss it.

The long fingers of Bell's hand cupped against his dick, and Xavier heard someone moan in the house before realizing it was himself. Bell worked his fingers along the outside of Xavier's clothed erection, and it was like laying in his bedroom at night as he humped against the covers, trying to chase the pleasurable feeling that always managed to elude him, only this time, it was surging faster than ever before.

Something was happening near his groin, like a rubber band being stretched and stretched and stretched, until it finally snapped away, rippling through him all at once.

"Something's...unngghhh...feels good," Xavier panted breathlessly, forcing his mouth away from Bell's as his dick twitched against his teacher's hand. There was a wetness down there too, and Bell was making his penis glide against it.

"Did you just cum?" his teacher asked.

Xavier could only stare down at his groin, too confused to give an answer. When he lifted the waistband of his sweats back, there was a little white puddle smeared beside his dusting of blonde pubes. His still-hard dick looked shiny with the stuff too, and a bleachy smell struck his nostrils.

"It's never happened," Xavier said and started to return his waistband, but Bell wanted a closer look and helped Xavier lower his sweats down to his thighs.

"That was your first time?" Bell asked as a smile crossed his face. "That's a big deal!"

Xavier blushed and smiled, proud of himself for something he didn't even really mean to do. But man, did he wish he could do it again. That feeling

had been amazing. Just like what he'd been trying to make happen in his bed, but this time he'd gotten there. He wondered if Logan knew about this stuff, too.

Bare ass against the couch, Xavier looked down as Bell swiped a finger across the slippery stuff at his groin. His dick twitched as his teacher lifted his finger to his mouth and ate whatever was on it.

"Ewww," Xavier said, blanching at the idea of eating something out of his dick. That was where he pissed from.

"You haven't tried it, so you wouldn't know," Bell said. "Do you trust me?"

When Bell took another swipe and lifted his finger to Xavier's lips, he wanted to push away and say no, but he was too curious about the taste. Besides, he trusted his teacher. Xavier didn't resist as Bell smeared a finger past his lips, and he was surprised at the bitter-sweet taste and the way it clung to his tongue and the roof of his mouth. Not at all like he thought it would taste.

"Can I see you?" Xavier asked, wanting the chance to see his teacher's body up close again. The fleeting glimpse after Bell's shower had been etched in his mind, and now he wanted more.

When Bell unzipped his jeans and pulled down his briefs, his boner slapped against his torso, surrounded by the same dark nest of hairs Xavier saw days before.

"It's so big," Xavier breathed and glanced down at his much smaller package.

"Don't worry," his teacher said, "I'm sure you'll have a lot more growing to do."

Reaching out, Xavier placed his palm against his teacher's dick, and Bell shuddered as Xavier lifted it upward. A thin string of clear moisture ran between the end of Bell's penis down to his groin.

"Did you already do it?" Xavier asked.

Bell laughed softly. "Cum? No, but if you keep rubbing it, I probably will soon."

Xavier knew that was exactly what he wanted to do. The explosively good feelings had made goosebumps ignite all over his body, and he wanted his teacher to feel the same.

Bell guided him on how to touch his penis. It wasn't just about rubbing it. There was squeezing, and a pumping motion, and sometimes pausing to give extra attention to the sensitive part near the tip. Soon, Bell was spewing out the same stuff Xavier made, only his was so thick and white, and there was way more of it. The idea of tasting it like before made his stomach feel squeamish.

Before long it was time for Xavier to go. After Bell helped him slip back into his sweater, he pulled Xavier in for a hug.

"That was very special, Xavier," he said. "You're a beautiful boy."

"Do you think we could do it again some time?"

"Only if you promise to keep it a secret. People don't understand relationships like ours."

Were they in a relationship? Xavier didn't think about what they did in the same way his parents must have dated before they got married. It left his insides with a fluttery feeling, even though there was a small voice in the back of his brain warning him of something he didn't understand.

"I won't tell anyone," Xavier promised.

Shoving Roman against the wall was the worst day of Xavier's life.

He hadn't noticed when the changes started, but suddenly there was the Xavier who protected and loved Roman, and another who pushed him away.

Maybe they were two sides of the same coin, only his coin was spinning more and more out of control, and Xavier spent nights clamping his teeth down on his knuckles or pinching his fingernails into his skin until the pain forced him to stop.

Did he still like doing things with Professor Bell? Of course. They felt really nice, and who wouldn't want to feel loved, appreciated, worshiped? Besides, his teacher understood him better than anyone, even better than Roman, and sometimes it felt like better than himself. Professor Bell always knew the right things to say.

Xavier's body sang whenever his teacher snuck a gentle, teasing touch during the school day, unnoticed by anyone else but the two of them. Then, when they were alone at his house, it was like the whole world melted away. His teacher was good about making him feel like the most important person on the planet, only Xavier couldn't deny anymore how the secret was eating away at him.

He was bitter and angry when he shoved Roman that last winter, not at his brother, really, but at himself. Roman was so oblivious to anything going on—he would never understand the way Xavier's emotions raged through him like a violent eruption. When had he become so aggressive?

After Roman ran downstairs in tears holding the back of his head, Xavier punched himself in the same spot on his thigh until a grotesque bruise formed. He was so ashamed of himself that he couldn't even bring himself to say goodbye to Roman when it was time to go back to Blue Ridge. Xavier spent weeks hating himself for that.

Of course Professor Bell asked about the bruise the next time he saw him naked, but Xavier didn't want his teacher to think any less of him, so he lied, saying how he was running around careless and bashed his leg in the side of a dresser. The answer seemed to satisfy him as his teacher worked tender kisses down Xavier's chest, pausing to suck at each nipple before going further down and engulfing his boner to the hilt. Man, he loved that.

Sometimes Xavier wondered if his roommate knew what was going on. He never said anything, but Logan would occasionally shoot him a wary glance when Xavier mentioned he was on his way to yet another tutoring session.

Whenever Logan or Professor Bell mentioned the fingernail marks on his body, he tried to brush it off like it wasn't a big deal, as if every night his thoughts weren't constantly buzzing in his head like a thousand beehives.

“You’re worrying too much,” Xavier would say.

“Of course I worry about you, we’re best friends,” Logan would say after they finished jerking off on their own beds.

“Of course I worry about you, we’re together,” Professor Bell would say after swallowing Xavier’s cum.

By the time summer rolled around, Xavier was ready to be done with his secrets. He was going to tell Professor Bell that he liked being around him but didn’t want to be with him, at least not romantically. Besides, Roman would be starting school at Blue Ridge soon. Even if he’d been terrible at showing it lately, Xavier wanted to protect Roman, to make things right.

He just didn’t know how. How do you apologize to your brother for being the biggest jerk in the world and pushing him away for so long?

Worst yet, it was like his body was going through some strange form of withdrawal, and whenever he jacked off on his bed, Professor Bell invaded his thoughts like a parasite. When Roman saw him cum, Xavier had been so frustrated with himself for letting things go on too long with Professor Bell that he’d snapped and slammed the door in Roman’s face.

Things were going to be different. He was going to change. He had to, for Roman’s sake. Even if it meant he would never touch himself again, he would do whatever it took. And he even convinced himself it was possible, for a little while at least.

Three days later, when Xavier asked Roman to hang out with him, it was like the old days between the two of them, laughing, playing games, teasing each other. When he asked Roman if he wanted to swim, he hadn’t intended to take advantage of him, but suddenly there he was, exposing himself in front of Roman. Could he be anymore fucked up?

His three days of abstinence made his head foggy and lustful, and suddenly every curious touch from Roman reminded Xavier of Professor Bell. When he coated Roman’s hand with his jizz, of course he freaked out. He didn’t know what to do, and so he shoved Roman out of his room again and cried on his floor for hours.

The worst part was that Xavier couldn't figure out how to break the cycle. It's like he was jammed in the mud and couldn't wrench himself free. Roman had somehow become a vessel for him to direct his sexual urges towards. At least with Professor Bell, things had been different. God, what was wrong with him?

Xavier was so scared of himself, and if he was honest, scared of what Professor Bell might do if he rejected him. The day before his return to Blue Ridge, he sucker punched Roman, and a piece of Xavier broke forever.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from me at Blue Ridge."

Because if Roman wasn't around him, then Roman couldn't be around Professor Bell.

A week ago, Professor Bell's classroom was empty. It was the time of day when everyone was at their clubs. Mostly, anyway.

They met so often for tutoring now at night that Xavier should have been down at the archery ranges, but lately he'd had no interest. He was good at it, sure. He just didn't care anymore. Nothing felt important to him. Whenever one of his teachers called him out on his apathy, Xavier shrugged them off, because what was he supposed to do?

In his mind, the solution was simple: go to Professor Bell, tell him things were over, and move on with his life. But whenever he'd try, the words died in his throat before he could get them out, and then they were making out again, and the cycle started all over. Professor Bell was like a drug.

When Xavier found him in his classroom, the man winked at him, and even though the attention still made his heart flutter, lately it was making his stomach sour.

"Close the door," Professor Bell said softly.

Xavier had grown a lot taller over the past year since they started fooling around, but Professor Bell still had no trouble lifting him up onto the table. He was getting bolder lately with the places they hooked up.

Xavier was putty as Professor Bell worked one hand over his nipple while he sucked at Xavier's throat. There were certain things his teacher did that always made him moan, no matter how much he tried to hold it back. Suddenly Xavier's shirt was on the floor, and his jeans unzipped. His dick was leaking, knowing Professor Bell was about to suck him off again to a shuddering orgasm.

That's when the door opened.

And there was Jordy.

"Shit, shit, shit," Professor Bell muttered as he scrambled to his feet and tossed Xavier his shirt.

The halls were empty as Professor Bell ran out to flag Jordy down. Xavier overheard fragments of the hushed conversation.

"...don't want to talk..."

"...not what you think..."

"...but why were you and him..."

"...can work this out....misunderstanding...my place to explain..."

Xavier could only cradle his arms to his chest as he tried to comfort himself. Maybe this was what they needed, to be caught. Maybe that was his escape.

When Professor Bell came back, Xavier couldn't read his expression. It was almost like his teacher was trying to convince himself of something. He told Xavier they were all going to meet at his house later that night. That was good. Maybe then Xavier could find a way to explain how jumbled up his insides felt lately.

But then of course things didn't go that way. Why couldn't Jordy have just reported them? Stayed at the castle that night? Then, nothing would have gone the way it had.

No, it wasn't just Jordy's fault. Xavier had been too much of a coward to do anything about it. Jordy's death was just as much his fault.

Was Professor Bell always planning on killing Jordy? He wasn't sure, but after Jordy was inside his house, the two must have recognized something in the others' face, because suddenly Jordy was trying to get away, and then Professor Bell was on him, tackling him down, suffocating him, and Xavier felt like a child, frozen in fear, unable to cry out even.

"What did you do?" he croaked out in a whisper.

Jordy. Jordy wasn't moving. Why wasn't he moving?

"Xavier, it'll be okay," Professor Bell said, leaving Jordy's body and standing to his feet.

Wake up, Jordy. Wake up!

"Stay away from me," Xavier said.

He tried to run, tried to flee, but his teacher was like a savage animal. He'd become a monster. And suddenly Xavier's head was burning as if someone set a fire to his temple, and everything went dark.

After that, he awoke in Professor Bell's basement.

"Roman, I think I'm really messed up."

Roman sat on the couch, knees huddled to his chest as Xavier finished his story. If he was honest, he didn't understand it. It wasn't so much the gross sex things with a man. He knew how good touching himself could feel, especially when someone else was helping. What Roman couldn't wrap his head around was why Xavier hadn't just told the police or someone who could help.

But then maybe the way Xavier had cared about Professor Bell was the exact same way Roman cared about Fielding. Did anyone really get to choose who captured their heart? There were always consequences, though. Professor Bell had manipulated Xavier, and in doing so, Jordy lost his life, and Roman almost lost Xavier forever. Roman would hate his teacher for as long as he lived.

Reliving the memories where Xavier hurt him was like picking open a scab. How many nights had he struggled to sleep or woken up in hysterics? And yet, that whole time, Xavier was struggling more, hurting more, begging for someone to notice. Roman never noticed. He wanted to scream and smash windows and burn something down to ash.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Roman whispered.

“The things I did to you were,” he said.

Xavier refused to look at him, his eyes fixed instead on the red sneakers Roman got for him for Christmas. Because he loved him. Loved him still. The other night, all the caked on mud had been scrubbed from them meticulously until they shined like new. Roman had made sure of it.

The silence in the hospital room was deafening. Even the steady monitor beeps were drowned out. It was like the whole world was gone apart from the two of them, and as Roman stood to his feet, he hadn’t fully worked out what he wanted. Was it even possible to fix something that had been broken so many times, or were the pieces too small to hold?

Roman shuffled across the floor in his socks until he was in arms length of Xavier. If there was a way, if it was possible, Roman knew the path to healing started with the two of them. It had to. Xavier stiffened as Roman leaned down and hugged his arms around his brother’s neck. Even still, Roman squeezed him tighter as the tears spilled from his eyes and dampened Xavier’s hospital gown. He’d cried so much lately, cried so much he was surprised he still had tears to give.

“I forgive you,” Roman said into his brother’s chest.

And then the best thing happened that Roman could have ever hoped for. Xavier hugged him back.

Chapter 20

The service for Jordy was held on campus.

It wouldn't be his final resting place, but his family wanted everyone to have some kind of closure. Seeing all the students dressed in formal clothes was strange, and Cooper couldn't wait to get out of his collared shirt. It wrapped around his throat like a pair of squeezing hands.

Even though it was chilly, they couldn't have asked for a more perfect day as they listened to Jordy's dad read his eulogy. He spoke of Jordy's love for everyone, the smile he always wore, and the memories he shared of Blue Ridge.

Beside the closed casket was a beautiful painting of Jordy made by Anakin's art teacher, Professor Ricci. If Cooper stared long enough, it was almost like Jordy might somehow pop out of the portrait, and everything would be back to normal. Next to the portrait was a smaller photo of Jordy and Kai, and it pained Cooper to know that Kai would likely never return to Blue Ridge. Some losses were too great.

Soon they would be leaving for an early winter break. Headmaster Robinson thought it best to cancel the remaining classes leading up to the holidays. A fresh start was what everyone needed. Cooper had wrestled with his parents' decision all week, but finally he couldn't take it anymore. Blue Ridge was where he needed to be. When the winter break finished, he was coming back to finish out the year with his friends. This was his home now.

That night, Anakin asked Cooper to wait in the suite. He wouldn't say why. Naveen and Julian helped pass the time with him as they played Smash Bros. on the Switch, but soon everyone got tired, and they went to bed, and Anakin took so long that Cooper wondered if he'd forgotten about him entirely.

Finally a triumphant shout came from Cooper's bedroom.

"Finished!"

When Anakin came out of the bedroom, the lights were off, and he guarded the door as he ushered Cooper over.

“Cooper, no peeking,” Anakin said as he had Cooper cover his eyes.

It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the light, but when he saw what Anakin had been working on, tears sprang to his eyes.

The mural was finished. All week Anakin had been chipping away at it, but he still thought the piece was missing something, a *je ne sais quoi*, he called it. Whatever that meant.

So far Cooper’s favorite part was how Anakin had drawn Detective Dackery. But not just the duck detective. He’d put them both in as well, posing as members of Dackery’s agency. Cooper had seen the way Anakin could create realistic pictures before, but now the drawings were life-size, filled with meticulous detail and realistic color. Cooper remembered earlier in the week when Anakin had been penciling in the faint freckles on Cooper’s cheeks. Whenever Anakin needed a reminder, he got real close to Cooper, his eyes scanning him intensely. Cooper never failed to blush, especially when Anakin was that close.

The finished mural was filled with bright explosions of color, but now, Anakin had found the missing piece. Standing proudly in the center of the mural, with a beaming smile on his face, was Jordy Diaz.

“Anakin, it’s amazing!” Cooper shouted and tackled his friend in a hug.

“You really think so?” he asked.

“I know so. You’re the best artist I’ve ever met!”

“Aww, thanks,” he said, blushing as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“What’re you going to do once the year’s done?” Cooper asked.

“I think I’m going to keep it here,” Anakin said. “That way anyone who has our room from now on will always know about Jordy and how much people loved him.”

The night before everyone left for the winter holiday, Fielding wanted to throw a Christmas party. Classes were suspended, so one morning at breakfast, he dragged Roman with him to invite Cooper and all his friends.

“But I don’t celebrate Christmas,” Naveen said.

“Fine, call it whatever dumb thing you want,” Fielding said, “but you’re coming.”

“Do I have to bring gifts?” Anakin asked.

“Oh my god, bring whatever! Just be there!”

They got permission from Headmaster Robinson to have the party in Roman’s suite. Earlier that night, Fielding made Anakin help with the decorations until it was time for the others to arrive. Ivan and Wyatt were kicked out of their room to go find plenty of snacks. “Don’t eat them!” Fielding said pointedly to Ivan. Meanwhile, Fielding sent Roman on a mission with Cooper to grab plates from the banquet hall.

“He’s pretty nuts, isn’t he?” Cooper asked as they walked.

Roman rolled his eyes. “You have no idea.”

Not many students were around. Dinner had finished, and most were likely packing for an early leave the next day. Roman smiled. For the first time in a long time, he was looking forward to being home with his family.

The suite had been transformed.

Somehow, Anakin and Fielding had worked together to dress the room in bright reds and greens. Even silver ribbons hung from the ceiling, reflecting the light. Cooper was afraid to ask how they managed to pull that off.

The couches were pushed out to make plenty of space for everyone and soft Christmas music played from a small Bluetooth speaker. By the time everyone brought their food and presents, they were having a real party.

Most of the night was spent drinking way too much soda and burping loudly or sharing some of their favorite memories so far from the year. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement that they would only ever talk

about the good things with Jordy, like how he could make friends with anybody, or how he was one of the fastest racers any of them had ever seen. They would never forget what happened, but they would honor his memory over dredging up Professor Bell's.

When it came time for gifts, they turned their attention towards the pile in the corner of the room. Somehow Fielding had managed to snag a miniature Christmas tree from somewhere in the castle, but he refused to say where. There weren't enough gifts for everyone, but that was okay with Cooper. The gifts weren't nearly as important as being together.

"Me first!" Julian shouted before handing Naveen a hastily wrapped box with a bow on top.

"But I already said, I don't celebrate—"

"Just open it. I promise you enjoy," Julian replied in his heavy accent.

When Naveen opened it up, his cheeks burned red. Inside was the pair of panties from Nadia.

"You jerk! I knew you were the one who stole them!"

"Was there something I missed?" Fielding asked as Cooper and Anakin laughed in tears with Julian.

Cooper watched with glee as Anakin opened up a new set of Prismacolor pencils. While finishing the mural, Anakin had burned through nearly his entire pack. He begged his parents to help him buy some.

"You're the best, Coop!" Anakin said and they bumped fists. After the break, they promised to create a secret handshake only they could use.

Anakin's gift to him was a handmade drawing of the two of them. In it, Anakin's arm was wrapped around Cooper's shoulder as they smiled. How Anakin managed to make everything so lifelike, Cooper would never understand.

"I'll keep this forever," Cooper said with a smile, and he meant it.

"Alright, listen up!" Fielding said, clinking his red plastic cup to draw their attention. "I have an announcement to make!"

They were sitting in a large circle, and as Fielding got to his feet, he dragged Roman up with him. They each gave a subtle nod before turning their attention back to the group.

“We just wanted to officially let everybody know here that we’re a couple!” Fielding announced.

Roman blushed as he said, “And if anyone has a problem with that, I’ll kick your ass!”

They all cheered.

After the party was over, Cooper and Anakin took their time making their way back to their suite. They were about to spend more than a month away from each other, and neither of them were in a rush to go to sleep.

“So, Roman and Fielding, huh?” Anakin asked.

“Kind of surprising, right?” Cooper suggested.

“Maybe. I mean, you spend all your time with someone, you’re bound to start having feelings for them.” Anakin stopped short and stammered. “I mean, I’m not saying that’s what happens with everyone or anything, if that’s what you thought I meant. Unless, of course, you felt the same way, ughh, I don’t know what I’m saying anymore.”

“Anakin?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s okay. I like you, too.”

Back in the bedroom, their beds were still pushed together, and as they ditched their clothes for the night, Cooper’s hand found its way into Anakin’s as they snuggled close together beneath the covers. Their bond was the main reason Cooper wanted to stay. Anakin filled his heart so much, Cooper swore it might spill over, and it was the best feeling in the world.

Anakin kissed him, first on the side of the temple, then on his cheek, and as Cooper turned his head to face him, on the lips. It wasn’t a kiss of lust

and passion, but one of tenderness and love, the kind that said, I'll always be there to look after you.

In the days following Jordy's death, Cooper hadn't touched himself at all, and one kiss was enough to make him hard and twitchy. The underside of his boner was extra sensitive as he slowly ground it against Anakin's hip, yearning for release.

Anakin's fingers brushed through his hair, and the way his nails teased Cooper's scalp made him shiver despite the warmth of the bedroom.

One hand slid down Anakin's torso until his thick erection was in Cooper's hand. Anakin's husky groan tickled Cooper's ear as Cooper gently slid his wrist up and down like he'd watched Anakin do several times before. Already his best friend was raising his hips to meet him, but before Cooper could get too far, Anakin held up a hand to pause him.

"Let's do it together," Anakin insisted. "Like, you do me, and I'll do you."

"Okay!" Cooper said and tucked enough pillows behind them so they could sit up together.

When they pulled the covers back, Anakin's boner made Cooper's look like a little kid's. He didn't mind it so much—he knew he was supposed to start getting bigger in the next couple years. Anakin reached over, and instead of using his whole fist like Cooper had, he used his thumb and first two fingers.

The little zappy feelings shooting all up and down his three inches made it tough to breathe as he tried to relax enough to enjoy the intense pleasure. Cooper put his hand back around Anakin's dick and squeezed. His boner reminded Cooper of holding a hotdog, if a hotdog could jump and wriggle around.

Anakin matched his speed, and whenever Cooper went up, Anakin went up too, following him on the way back down with every stroke. Cooper's head started to roll with the pleasure, and soon his head fell against Anakin's shoulder.

In a breathy voice, Anakin said, "Let's kiss while we do it. I liked that a lot."

Cooper turned his head to meet Anakin's soft lips again, and it was like the good feelings multiplied. His skin tingled as his nerves fired off all up and down his body. He wanted to rub himself against every part of the mattress, and all the anxious energy seemed to zero in around his groin.

Something pushed against his lips, and when it happened again, Cooper realized it was Anakin's tongue. They'd never tried that before. Opening his mouth, Anakin's tongue darted inside and swiped his own. If Cooper thought kissing while jerking off was nice, this was a whole new level of awesomeness.

The creeping pleasure was making his balls scrunch up. He wanted to tell Anakin he was about to get the feeling, but if he did, Anakin might stop moving for a split second, and even that would be too long, so he said nothing and let the wave build and build until it crashed.

The room was filled with wet sloppy sounds from their making out, and Cooper moaned loudly as he came, shuddering as Anakin kept up with the kisses. Against Anakin's fingers, his boner twitched and throbbed, spitting out nothing as it spasmed, but feeling amazing nonetheless.

It was Anakin who broke away from the kiss then, his breath hitching in a puppy dog whine as his muscles clenched. All at once, Anakin's boner flicked against Cooper's hand a dozen times as Anakin released the shaky breath he'd been holding.

"Grrrh, so good," Anakin whined, finally relaxing his body as his boner stopped twitching in Cooper's hand.

Cumming had made Cooper sleepy, and all he could manage to do was adjust the pillows enough to lay down. Already his eyelids were closing, but before he passed out for the night, Anakin's fingers slipped back into his own as he wriggled their bodies close together.

"Goodnight, Coop," Anakin whispered.

"Goodnight, Anakin."

Roman admired the bracelet around his wrist. With all the decorations and planning he'd done, Roman never expected Fielding to get him a gift. The silver charm hanging from the corded bracelet meant everything to him.

"I'm sorry," Roman said after the party. "With everything that happened with Xavier, things got so busy. I didn't have time to get you anything. I'm officially the worst boyfriend ever."

"It's okay," Fielding said and kissed him. "But you better bring me something good when you get back."

Roman laughed as he was assaulted with kisses. No matter where he turned his head, Fielding pursued him like a puppy with relentless love.

"So, things with your brother...?" Fielding asked, letting the question hang as they lay in bed together. They were dressed in only their underwear, but that was fine with Roman. Being close was all that mattered.

"I think they're gonna get better," Roman said honestly. Ever since forgiving him, Roman couldn't fully describe how weightless his body felt, like he could drift away and float in the clouds.

"I'm really happy for you," Fielding said and nuzzled up to him.

Fielding circled his index finger around his belly button, and Roman couldn't help but harden up. His boner twitched on its own each time Fielding approached the waistband of his briefs.

Roman hadn't planned on anything happening tonight, really. It would have been perfectly fine with him if they just laid there and held each other. Whenever they did that, Roman felt warm, whole. But, he was also okay if Fielding wanted to spend their last night together doing something fun.

Roman trailed his fingers across Fielding's bird chest and licked his lips as he pressed them to Fielding's ear.

"I think I might have a present for you after all," he whispered.

Fielding shivered, and Roman swung his leg over, straddling his hips. He was pleased to feel Fielding's dick matching his own hardness as it pulsed against his briefs. When Roman leaned forward, he gently tugged Fielding's

wrists above his head, exposing his boyfriend's bare armpits. Pretty soon, maybe sometime in the next year or two he figured, the space would fill with the same strawberry-blonde hair on top of Fielding's head. For now, Roman loved the pale smoothness there.

Wriggling his dick against Fielding's, Roman leaned down and hungrily kissed Fielding's lips before working his way across his jaw and along the grooves of Fielding's neck.

"Unnh," Fielding moaned, panting in shuddering gasps as Roman suckled his skin.

Hearing Fielding's groans sent little shivers through Roman and made him grind his hips harder, rolling his erection forward and back. Even with their underwear between them, the feeling was addictive like a drug.

"Lose them," Roman said breathlessly, sitting up only long enough to wrench his briefs down his legs.

"Thought you'd never ask," Fielding said and took his off too.

They tossed them somewhere on the floor before Roman was back on him. He was working up the courage to try something he'd only seen once but had thought about ever since.

First, he returned to Fielding's neck. Roman loved the way he drew out little moans from Fielding's throat, each one a little more whiny and desperate than the last. Soon, his lips worked their way down his chest until they paused on one of his hardened nipples. They weren't very big, no larger than a dime with a tiny nub on top, but each one was rock hard as he flicked his tongue across them. Whenever he teased them with his teeth, Fielding bucked beneath him, hissing in pleasure. He made a mental note to have Fielding try that on him sometime, but tonight wasn't about Roman. This was Fielding's gift.

Leaving his spit-soaked nipples behind, Roman continued on his path, dragging his tongue down Fielding's torso until his chin bumped against the tip of Fielding's penis. There was a little gasp above Roman as it dawned on Fielding what was about to happen.

“Are you really gonna...?” he trailed, and in response, Roman turned his head, letting his tongue glide down Fielding’s bare pubic area. The boner just beside his tongue was like steel, rigid and unwavering beyond the subtle twitches it gave.

Roman wasn’t sure what to expect. Obviously he knew penises were meant for peeing, but apparently licking and sucking it must have felt really amazing too. Why else would Ivan and Wyatt have done it? For some reason he was nervous, even though he knew he had nothing to fear. Fielding made him feel safe, always.

Lifting his head and scooting further down, Roman leaned in and flattened his tongue against the base of Fielding’s three-and-a-half inch boner. The gasp and breathy moan made Roman’s heart soar. As he slowly dragged his way up Fielding’s dick, each subtle twitch throbbed against his tongue. Roman couldn’t remember, but he thought Fielding’s dick might have grown a little bigger since the very first time he’d seen it hard. It was impossible to say. He’d seen it so often but never up close like this.

When he reached the top, the spongy crown flared against his tongue, and Roman took a second to gather more spit in his mouth before wrapping his lips around the tip.

“Oh my god,” Fielding moaned as he bent his legs and squeezed them against Roman.

With a free hand, Roman used a few fingers to tease and lift the tightening ball sack beneath Fielding’s boner. Each flutter of his fingers seemed to make them draw up more until Fielding was steadily pumping his hips in Roman’s mouth. There wasn’t enough there to fill his mouth completely, so he wasn’t worried about gagging anymore. He just let Fielding ride out the pleasure and dictate the pace.

Soon the thrusts became less rhythmic, more frantic, jerky. Roman rubbed Fielding’s stomach, loving the way it seized and tightened beneath his palm.

“Roman...” Fielding whined. “Roman, gonna—ahh, gonna cum.”

To Roman it sounded less like a warning and more like a celebration. He didn't want to stop, didn't want to take away from any of the good feelings he'd helped Fielding have. If anything, he doubled down as he flicked his tongue against the underside of Fielding's erection, and soon his boyfriend's hands were at the back of his head as Fielding lost control of himself.

"Aaah, ahh, ahhh," he whined, and for a split second, the tip of Fielding's penis expanded before something dropped on Roman's tongue. It was a little squirt of something that got smeared against Fielding's dick as he kept humping through his orgasm. The taste was subtle—a little like salt but also something unique entirely. Roman loved it.

With one final shiver, Fielding finally collapsed, his hips dropping back to the mattress as he released a breathy whoosh of air. Taking one final slurp up Fielding's penis, his boyfriend shivered at the sensitivity. Roman worked his way back up Fielding's body, trailing kisses along the way until he ended where he started, right at Fielding's lips.

"Merry Christmas," Roman whispered, giggling at himself and them and life.

Roman closed his eyes and could hear the grin in Fielding's voice as he replied.

"Did you say officially the worst boyfriend ever? I think you meant to say, the best."

When the sun came up the next day, everything was so quick to happen.

Naveen and Nadia left early in the morning. Cooper knew from last night's party that their parents had plans to take he and his twin sister on an extended family vacation. Before they left, Julian gave a mischievous smile and elbowed Naveen playfully when he found out Naveen and Nadia would be sharing a room together. Naveen punched him in the shoulder.

Pretty soon Julian was gone too, leaving only him and Anakin. The suite felt strangely empty without their two roommates playing games or giving each other a hard time.

They spent their last hours together outside where Cooper taught Anakin the basics of climbing trees. He wasn't terrible at it, but Anakin was too worried about getting dirt and grime on his clothes to make any real strides.

"Okay, I suck now, but when I come back, I'll make sure to bring a whole bunch of old clothes so you can teach me for real!"

"I'll hold you to it," Cooper said, and they bumped fists.

"We really gotta work on that secret handshake."

When Anakin's parents beeped their horn, they hugged each other so tight, Cooper thought he might burst. Both their faces were teary as they pulled away.

"We'll be back soon," Anakin said. "And you can tell me everything you did over break!"

"I will," Cooper replied. "You, too."

Then there was just Cooper. Well, Cooper and Roman.

As Cooper bounced his way down the steps of Valentia's long spiral staircase, he ran into his unexpected friend halfway through the corridor, and they walked together the rest of the way toward the entrance in silence. It wasn't that they didn't have anything to say to each other; rather, there was so much to say and so little time, but Cooper knew this wasn't the end. They were only going away for a little while, and then they'd be back.

Dragging his suitcase behind him, Cooper wheeled it to a stop as he reached the top of the stone staircase just outside the school's main entrance. The air was chilly, but the sun was shining bright as Cooper searched the parked cars lining the turnabout. His parents' green station wagon pattered as it waited for him, ready to take him home.

Roman looked like he wanted to say something, but before he could, the station wagon beeped, and Cooper saw his mom roll down the window and flag him down with waving arms. She looked way more excited for him

to be coming home than he was. Cooper smiled. Maybe he was a little excited, too.

“So, this is it, huh?” Cooper said, struck by a strange sense of déjà vu as he held out his fist for Roman.

“Cooper, I...” Roman trailed, and Cooper lowered his arm.

“What’s wrong?” Cooper asked.

“No, nothing, really,” Roman said, stammering as he tried to collect his words. “It’s just...with everything that’s happened, I don’t know how I can ever thank you. Without you, Xavier...”

Cooper swooped in and hugged Roman. He didn’t need to say it. Cooper knew how thankful Roman was. Ever since rescuing Xavier, it was like Roman was a completely different boy. Seeing the way Roman smiled more and laughed harder was worth everything to Cooper.

“Thanks, Cooper,” Roman said.

“You sure you don’t want me to stick around until your parents get here?”

“Nah,” Roman said, “Go ahead. I’ll see you soon.”

Halfway down the stairs, Roman called out to him one last time.

“Hey, Cooper?”

“Yeah?”

“When we get back, you owe me a race!”

“Deal!”

With each breath Cooper took down the stone staircase, he thought back to his first semester at Blue Ridge. So much had happened—he had changed so much in such a short amount of time. He wasn’t sure how things might feel being back to his old home, with his family, in his old bedroom, hanging out with Sawyer as December slowly turned into January.

It made him a little nervous, but if there was one thing Cooper had discovered about himself over the past few months, it was that he was

braver than he would have ever thought possible. He deserved to be anywhere his feet landed. And he belonged wherever he ended up.

- The End -

*Copyright 2023 – Levi Holland
All rights reserved*

Levi's note for readers:

As I said on the Jason Crow website, thank you to everyone who has read through this story and shared their thoughts. Your voice means the world to writers. Thank you to Jason as well who was willing to read through and offer his insights as I was building the story over the last several months. Your friendship and kindness are pretty amazing!

*I'm beyond thrilled with the challenge I set for myself in completing my first full-length erotica novel. Lots of planning went into this bad boy, and even though *Boarding School Blues* isn't a perfect story by any means, it is a very personal one and one I will always celebrate having written. Could there be more adventures in friendship, romance, and adolescence for Cooper, Roman, and their friends and family? Of course! But like all good things, this story has come to a close...for now.*

(Although, seriously, if you're ever interested in more, let me know.)