G R E E N H O U S E

by George Comatas

for J & M

B O S T O N

MASSACHUSETTS

Chapter 1— Nick

The cold bite of January air is the last thing Nick wants to feel tonight, and if it weren't for the fact that he loves Mrs. Whitefield as much as he does, he wouldn't have even considered answering the call for a bouquet on such short notice.

But, as it stands, he's once again at the mercy of his father's business demands even despite the fact that he has two perfectly capable younger sisters doing nothing but drinking hot chocolate at home.

This was his curse.

The doorman at Mrs. Whitefield's apartment building knows him well enough that he's let in without having to buzz, which he's grateful for considering the temperature. Even in the wool-lined monstrosity he had on over his sweatshirt, the chill seemed pervasive enough to reach his bones, and he finds himself struggling to hold the crystal vase steady as he approaches the elevator, only finally warming up when it slows to a stop at the fourteenth floor.

"Oh, Nicholas, you look like you're freezing!" the old woman exclaims, somehow surprised as she greets him at the door. A shaky hand presses to his face as if she were his own *yiayia*, and Nick nods at her with a weak smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"It's brutal out there." He says through an exhale. "Might be the coldest it's been this month. The wind doesn't help." He lifts the vase a little, the flowers just barely jostling around inside. "Where do you want this?"

"Oh, just on the kitchen table is fine." She smiles, looking a bit apologetic. "Thank you for coming all the way out here to bring them to me."

"No trouble at all. What's the occasion?"

"You're going to laugh," She says, grinning at her own self. "But I looked at my calendar today and realized my son and his family are coming tomorrow, not next week. Here I thought I had all this time, and I was going to stop this weekend to pick these up and make the place look nice."

Nick laughs, unsurprised and just glad he was around to help. It was hard to stay mad about having to come out when Mrs. Whitefield was always this kind to him. "Did you see them for Christmas?"

"They like to come after the holidays and skip all the messy traveling." She laughs, waving the question off. "And I don't blame them. As long as I get to see those grandkids, I don't care."

Carefully, Nick walks through the kitchen and sets the bouquet in the middle, fussing a bit with the design. Had she not also paid for the vase, he'd stick around and help her cut and arrange the flowers as

well. But as it stands, Mrs. Whitefield never failed to buy the vase with her arrangements—and while Nick had no clue where she was keeping all of them, or why, it was decent business for his family.

“Do you want some coffee before you go?” She calls from the living room, undoubtedly settled in her chair opposite the TV. “It’ll keep you warm on your way back home.”

“That’s alright,” He finishes messing with the flowers and steps out of the kitchen into the living room. “It’s late, so I should be home quick.”

“Thank you again for coming on such short notice. I know it’s silly.”

He laughs. “Just don’t go telling all your friends down at Bingo about this. I wouldn’t do it for anybody.”

“My lips are sealed.” She looks back towards him, then turns back to the television. “You have a good night, sweetheart.”

“You too, Mrs. Whitefield.” He returns as he heads toward the door.

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It’s not until he’s comfortably parked in the garage at his building that he sends Erin a text to let her know her grandmother looks well, and to remind her that not only did she not bring up her only local granddaughter to him, but also that he still sees her more than Erin does.

Her response is not an amused one.

Why were you at her place so late?

Emergency delivery. She said your cousins are visiting and she wanted to spruce up the place.

Oh god, I completely forgot about that. They’re probably gonna wanna have dinner.

Kill me.

Good luck lmao

I'm surprised you
went out this late

It's only like
9:30

It's freezing!!

She's the only one
I'd do that for
anyway. I love
that lady

Not even for me?

Like you said,
it's freezing

Ha ha, fuck you

No need to be so
rude.

He sees Erin's typing bubble disappear and puts his phone away before going back inside. He doesn't know if he actually upset her, but that's kind of Erin's whole game—unpredictable, fiery, hard headed. Even when they dated, he didn't know what to make of her, and he didn't expect to start knowing that now.

So, he just plays along when he can, and that's proven to be way more fun than having a panic attack over it.

When he steps in the door of the shop, it's only his father still inside, clearing the register from behind the counter.

"How is she?" He asks through a smile. Considering how long Mrs. Whitefield has been a regular customer at The Nursery, it's not surprising that his dad gets excited whenever she becomes a topic of conversation.

"She looks healthy as ever. A little shaky."

"Bah. She's old, of course she's shaky. Did you help her with the bouquet?"

"Of course."

"Good boy," He says, looking back down at the day's cash profit. "Today was a good day for business. Imagine what February will be like!"

If there was one thing in the world that Nicholas wasn't looking forward to, it was Valentine's Day rush at The Nursery. The last time he'd had to work Valentine's Day as a florist was years ago, and truthfully he wasn't entirely convinced that he was ready to do it again. "Can't wait." He says, dryly, after a split-second of silence.

"It'll be nice to have you back for Valentine's!" His father laughs, blind to Nick's unenthusiasm. "Your sisters never want to do any work. They're too lazy." This gets a genuine laugh out of Nick.

"Happy to help, Dad." He lies.

"Of course you are! Maybe you'll want to stick around instead of finding a new job!"

Nick knows his father is kidding, but he also knows a part of him isn't. And suddenly, getting laid off in December of all months is only the second worst thing about getting laid off at all.

He undoes his coat before he gets upstairs, knowing his mother is going to have the heat turned on too high. When he reaches the apartment, he's immediately greeted with the smell of hot chocolate and his sister Iris yelling at him from the living room.

"We made you a cup! It's on the counter!"

"Thanks," He says, his voice quieter than she's ever been in her life. "You don't have to shout, the apartment's not that big."

"Shut up," She says, quieter but still too loud. He goes to the counter to find his mug, beverage still steaming. "How's Mrs. Whitefield?"

"She's good." He says, stepping into the living room and leaning against the wall to look in. He takes a sip, just barely cool enough for his tongue. "Her son is coming to visit, that's why she wanted the flowers."

"That's weird." His other sister, Sophia, says. "She needed them tonight?"

"He's coming tomorrow. She was desperate. You know how she is."

"That woman is crazy." Iris says, shifting under the blanket she and Sophia are sharing. Nick takes another sip of hot chocolate.

"Don't speak about Mrs. Whitefield like that," his mother speaks up. Nick hides his smile behind his mug his eyes darting toward her. "She's a good woman, probably one of our best clients."

"Oh my God, Mom. I didn't mean it in a bad way." Iris laughs. "She's just old, and kind of crazy!"

"With how much money she spends at the shop, she's probably the reason you've got a place to live."

"Okay, okay! You don't need to be so dramatic."

"You should apologize." His mother says sternly, turning her eyes back down to the newspaper she was reading. Briefly, Nick exchanges a look with Sophia, and the two grin. Iris just looks confused.

“Apologize to who…?” Nobody answers her.

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I think I’m gonna lose my mind working for my family again

You could have just gotten another regular job

It was December, so not really. No one is hiring in December

That’s true i guess

How’s work for you?

Boring. HATE being back after the break

I can imagine. Your students are good?

They’re alright. Nobody I love

You’re like the worst kind of teacher

At least I don’t have sex in my classroom

Is that something one of your coworkers did??

No, but that's something the worst kind of teacher would do.

Bet you feel bad now

You're so stupid Erin

But you love meeeee

Nick waits a moment, before he answers.

Sure do.

Somehow, he's always the last one responding, but at least the fact that she responded at all means their previous conversation didn't go entirely south. He doesn't expect another response, so he's just about to put his phone away for the night when it buzzes again.

Wanna come over?

He considers it for a second, but only a second.

It's late. And cold. I wasn't kidding about that lol

Yeah. It's just been a while

I miss you

It sure has

Haven't really been in the mood

I got laid off last month

Right, lmao. Don't blame you

Sorry

Just let me know if you change your mind

Will do

She leaves him on read again, but it's not really of any concern to him. To be honest, he's not entirely in the mood to feel guilty about *not* sleeping with his ex-girlfriend, and as weak as he can be he knows he doesn't have to be.

Another thirty seconds go by and he doesn't see her typing again. The phone goes to sleep, Nick's headphones go in, and the rest of the world fades out.

S A N F R A N C I S C O

CALIFORNIA

Chapter 2— Gabe

February was Gabriel's favorite month of the year.

Besides April; June, July, August; October and December, February was maybe the best month. The stress of the holiday season was over, but so was the post-holiday depression. The first tiny seeds of spring were finally starting to blossom, and while the last dregs of the colder months were present they never felt nearly as harsh.

All that being said, maybe February would suck a lot more if he didn't enjoy his job.

Valentine's Day was, without fail, the messiest, busiest, and most stressful time of the year at Flower Power. It was exhausting, Gabe's family spent the entirety of their month on their feet, and regardless of how well prepared they felt there was always inevitably someone with a last minute order that they aren't able to fulfill. All things considered, Valentine's Day shouldn't be fun.

But Gabe was good at his job. It came natural to him, and at the end of the day—privilege checked—he could fuck up for the entire month and he wouldn't lose his job. Perks of being the store owner's son, he supposes.

Luckily, they were only three days into the month now, and the store had plenty of time to prepare. And as the second oldest of the five Amaretto boys, and the oldest now in command at the store, Gabe had become accustomed to wrangling his three younger dumbasses, particularly in the busy months. That, of course, meant working them harder than any of them were accustomed to and become something akin to the most villainous person in their life.

"Is it a leap year this year?" Jordan's voice calls out from beyond the closed door leading out of the back room. Gabe barely hears it, and chooses to ignore it. After a moment of silence, he hears his brother's voice again.

"Hello? Does anyone know if it's a leap year this year?"

This time, Gabe replies. "I don't think so, why?" He pauses looking through his stocklist, holding his position on the page tight with his thumb, to focus on Jordan's response.

"Because, February has an extra day if it's a leap year." An idiot, like always.

Gabe sighs. "Yeah? And?"

"I wanted to know if there'd be an extra day since February is our busy month. That's all!" His brother goes quiet.

After a second of thought, Gabe decides it's best to leave it at that, and returns to looking at his carefully curated, highly imperfect list of orders he needs to make. An abundance of roses, too many to count and

still definitely not enough, alongside a healthy does of lilies, carnations, and tulips. This is just the beginning of a much more extensive list, but he marks up hyacinths, a personal favorite, as something to order extra of this month. He wants to include them in as many arrangements as he can.

And that's something he gets to decide, since the rest of his brothers are shit designers.

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"You're late," She huffs, her arms crossed tightly across her chest in a way that somehow makes her look both ridiculous and intimidating. Gabe knows for a fact she's not actually angry with him, but far be it from Felicia to let her emotions get the best of her. Angry, not so much, but a minute later than he said and she's going to be a sourpuss for the rest of the night.

"I'm sorry," Gabe responds with a cheeky smile, flashing his teeth wide. He knows he's playing Russian Roulette by waving it off as if it's nothing, but… he apologized, didn't he? "Lost track of time at work. You know how busy this time of year can get."

"You say it like you forget that I work at that store, too."

"Well where were you then?" He counters, almost immediately, still smiling from ear to ear.

"It was my day off." She says it deadpan, as if he wouldn't know. Like she doesn't pick up on the fact that he's teasing—or she does, and is choosing to be annoying about it.

"Well, it wasn't mine." He says back, stuffing his hands in his pockets and kicking the ground beneath him with the toe of his shoe. "And also, it's not *your* parents' store, so it's kind of different."

She groans. "Whatever." It's a clear signal that she's over the conversation and wants to get moving, and he's happy to oblige. "Do you want to go, or do you want to sit here and argue with me all day?"

"Obviously I want to go, you're the one that's turning things into an argument." He looks at Felicia dead in the eye, and his big smile returns. Through her stone cold gaze, he can see a little one of her own, too. "Whose apartment is this at, again?"

"Jen's." She says, flatly. "I have no idea if her roommates are going to be there, though, so prepare yourself."

Gabe laughs, and the two of them start to walk away from Flower Power's storefront. "I'm not sure I even remember Jen's roommates names." He thinks for a minute, scrubbing through the rolodex of people he knows he knows but isn't actually all that familiar with. "Rebecca and… Mike? Mark?"

"Matt. Last I heard, the two of them were fucking, but I don't know how much validity there is to that." For all the emotion that Fe wears on her sleeve, she's particularly good at delivering most things with indifference.

"Did Jen tell you that?"

"No, I just assumed based on the last time I saw them."

Gabe laughs. "So probably not much validity to that, then."

Despite the fact that Felicia was actually a very good people reader, Gabe got frustrated easily from her tendency to just make things up on the fly and then decide to hold them as definitive truths. It was something she'd done from the get-go of their friendship, making the decision that his family was wealthy based solely on the fact that they owned a local business. If he was remembering correctly, she'd even put it in her head that they owned a summer home in Florence. Or was it Sorrento?

Either way, it wasn't true. If his family had enough money for a summer home in Italy, he would have gone farther than SFSU for college and probably wouldn't have even met her in the first place.

He also wouldn't have dropped out after sophomore year.

But that was beside the point. It wasn't really an issue, but how many times was she going to decide that two people were fucking just because they seem to be close? If it weren't for the fact that Gabe had had a boyfriend when he met her, he can't be sure she wouldn't have decided that the two of *them* were a thing.

The BART ride to Jen's apartment is quick and easy, as it tends to be after rush hour is over (and let's face it, Gabe's never going anywhere during rush hour), so it doesn't take long for the two of them to arrive at the party. It's only when they're approaching the door does it occur to Gabe that he never asked what this was for.

"I think it's her boyfriend's birthday," Fe tells him as she rings the bell, checking her phone for a Facebook invitation. "But don't hold me to that. I wouldn't wish him a 'Happy Birthday' until you hear someone else do it."

"Smart girl." He says wryly. "I'll keep my mouth shut. Is she still dating Anthony?"

"Yeah." Felicia says, looking at him now with a furrowed brow. "Do you talk to her at all?"

Gabe opens his mouth to speak, but doesn't get the chance before the door swings open and a screaming, excited Jennifer Barden greets them both. He grins back at her with delight, realizing it's been a minute since the last time he's seen her—much less *drunk* her.

"*Gabriel*." She says, faking surprise even as she pulls him into a hug. He had no idea it was possible to slur one word, and it's enough to prompt him to make a mental note to watch how much she's drinking tonight. She never was the one that had any interest in controlling herself. "I missed you!"

"Hey!" He responds, much more casually and much less intoxicated. "I know, I'm sorry. Work's been a nightmare. Makes it hard to have a social life." He offers her an apologetic smile, but she's already waved him off in favor of greeting Fe, hugging her close and cupping her face in her hands.

"He's just making excuses." Felicia says, once again ready to bring up the fact that she works at the same store as him. As always, he's ready to break out the fact that her parents down on the place like his do.

"That's me," He responds in kind. "Kind of excuses, no responsibility." Jen just laughs, and grabs his wrist to tug him inside.

Felicia follows closely behind, and once they're safely indoors he turns to her to say, "We really should have pregamed. She's already wasted."

"We could have if you hadn't been late." She says, but there's only a second before a smirk finds its way to her face, and he can't help but smile back. "Lucky for you, I thought ahead."

She reaches into her bag and produces to plastic Sprite bottles, immediately indicating to him what the drinks are inside—two-thirds sour apple vodka, one-third lemon-lime soda.

"You're an icon," He says, and she beams at the praise as she hands one of the bottles over.

"Just pace it out a little." She says. "I only brought the two, so you'll have to suffer off whatever she's offering if you finish it too fast."

"You know I can't promise that." He says with another smile, unscrewing the cap and taking his first swig. It's strong, as always, and it burns the back of his throat as it goes down. But, it'll also catch him up to the rest of the miserable people at this party way faster than anything else he's willing to drink would, so he's happy to suffer through.

Felicia responds by doing the same, then closing her drink back up and pulling him further into the party.

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Gabe loses track of the time quickly into the night, realizing that he knows a lot more people than he thought he did and easily getting wrapped up into every conversation he passes by. Jen was someone he considered a friend, but she was never the one he spent time with on his own at school, even if he liked her plenty. But one thing he'd forgotten about Jen Barden was how good she was at getting him in the party mood—or anyone, really—so it ends up coming as a surprise to him when realizes how involved he's been all night.

Even Felicia picks up on it, pulling him aside and commenting on how much fun he seems to be having.

"I didn't realize how many people I'd know here." He says, a little sloppily but nowhere near his worst. All things considered, he's done a good job pacing himself tonight.

"We went to school with most of them, so it really shouldn't surprise you." She says dryly, though the pink in her cheeks suggests she's having just as much fun as she is.

"Yeah," He nods. "I just didn't know those were the people that would be here. Jen's so popular, I figured it'd just be super cool people."

Fe laughs, and puts a hand on Gabe's shoulder. "Gabe, we *are* the cool people."

He raises an eyebrow, and points a single finger in her face. "That is a very, very good point."

By the time they've left and headed home, it's nearly 3:00 AM and Felicia, against all odds, is drunker than Gabe had been all night. He knows his parents won't mind her staying over—his brothers might be annoyed—but he thanks his lucky stars that she had the foresight to take tomorrow off, too. Quite frankly, he wouldn't have wanted to deal with a hungover Felicia at work, anyway. Been there, done that with his brothers enough times. He's good.

So, he settles her into his bed, tucks her under his blankets, and as soon as she's asleep he pats her on the shoulder and whispers, quietly, "Please don't throw up on my mattress." Then, he gets as comfortable as he can on the floor of his bedroom, and before he knows it he's fast asleep.

B O S T O N

MASSACHUSETTS

Chapter 3— Nick

By the time mid-March rolls in, Nick is angry. He's angry at how poorly the shop did last night despite it being busy season. He's angry at the fact that he's, for some reason, getting shit for it. He's angry that he's still working for his parents, and that somehow he's having a harder time finding a new job than he did right out of school.

But mostly, he's just angry that it's March.

The problem with March is that it's supposed to be the time of year where winter officially starts turning into spring. People can start looking forward to the fact that they can shed their big wools and furs in favor of something lighter, and maybe get excited over the prospect of wearing shorts one time this month. Flowers are meant to start blooming, and the trees are supposed to get their green back again.

In Boston, this is all theoretical.

In reality, spring doesn't start until two weeks before summer, and all the time before that you're meant to just sit and wait and hope that it gets warm. But no matter how hard Nick wishes for temperature to go up, Mother Nature doesn't seem to want to listen.

It's fine. He's fine. Mother Nature can suck a dick.

"Do you need anything from the store?" His mother asks, putting a gentle hand to his shoulder when she finds him in the living room. "I'm going to *Titan*."

"I'm assuming you've already got their *spanakopita* on the list?" He asks with a small smile, looking up from his phone to address her. If there was one thing his mother hated more than anything else, it was not being looked at when spoken to.

"Of course." She pats his shoulder. "Your father would kill me if I didn't, don't you think?"

"Divorce you, at the very least." He says, and she chuckles under his breath.

"Oh no, never divorce. The man would go hungry in a day."

She makes a good point.

When she walks away, he immediately refocuses his attention to the string of texts from his best friend who, according to him, will be back in the city sometime next month. Despite Nick's prodding, Ben won't actually give up *why*, but at the end of the day he doesn't really care about the reason. More or less, Nick's just concerned that the idiot will actually follow through with the plan, and if Nick can get a reason out of him it's a lot easier to hold him accountable.

Listen

It’s a surprise, ok?

It’s not a big deal, trust me

Just make sure you have time for me

I didn’t ask if it was a big deal

All I asked was why, lol

So you’re sure making it sound like it is

I don’t know what you’re talking about

Will you be around?

Should be

I’m at the shop again for the time being

So bar any emergencies and I should be free whenever

Awesome

Just keep me updated on exact timing

I still need to know when to tell my parents I’m

abandoning them
lmao

Oh yeah of course
lmao

I'll let you know

Ok good

Are you flying in?

Driving. I'll
swing by as soon
as I'm home

Great

Looking forward to
it

Me too dude

Nick decides to end the conversation there, more or less because he's not interested in keeping it alive. He doesn't want to get into how much they miss each other, or reminiscing about when Ben still lived here. At the end of the day, *he's* the one that moved. He's the one that left for college, and while Nick couldn't really blame him for that, he had no issue with blaming Ben for never coming back.

Now, they don't see each other nearly as often as they should.

It's fine, though. Everything's fine. Nick's here, and he's got his sisters, and he's got Erin, and he can text Ben whenever he wants. That's enough for him by the time he goes to sleep every night. He doesn't need the social life he used to have.

He does need a new job, though.

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By the time he wanders down into the storefront, Nick's surprised to see Sophia behind the register and his father—typically the face of the business and refusing to be anything otherwise—nowhere to be found.

Nick looks around the store for a minute, idly picking at a loose stem on the back counter, before speaking up. "Where's Dad?"

"Genuinely I wish I could tell you." She says, blinking at him as if he's just asked her why the bees are disappearing. "You know how he just disappears sometimes."

"Never during store hours, though. Unless that's something that he started doing after I left."

"I honestly don't know, Nicky." She's the only person in the world that insists on calling *specifically* to grate on his nerves. He doesn't bring it up.

"Okay," He breathes out a nervous chuckle. "I was just asking. Just seems kind of weird. Where's Iris?"

"Probably upstairs—do I look like some kind of familiar almanac to you?"

He almost wants to laugh at this, because of all the people in his family Sophia absolutely *was* the encyclopedia of the Christopoulos clan—extended family included. She knew, by heart he was convinced, every -poulos and -kos that they were related to, and could likely list them off in order by age and relationship to each other.

He almost say "yes." Almost.

Instead, he opts for a much more polite, "I was just wondering, since you're down here."

She grins at him now, wide and almost a little wicked. He'd be intimidated by it if he knew any better. "Do you honestly believe Daddy would ask Iris to lift a finger for this store?"

"Oh, I know he wouldn't." Nick responds without missing a beat.

"Good. For a second I was afraid that working a real job might have fucked with your head and made you believe that people get treated *fairly*." She taps her nails against the counter, completely uninterested in the register by this point and turned to face him entirely.

Sophia had this unique way of staring people down that Nick had never seen in anyone else before. Truth be told, she'd probably make a really good lawyer if she had any interest in helping anyone other than herself.

"I promise," He responds, returning her intense gaze with an earnesty that's lacking in her eyes. "I have never thought that for a second."

The sound of the bell at the front door snaps the two of them out of their staredown, and Sophia, diligent as ever, returns right back to Friendly Storefront Operator. Two middle-aged women he doesn't recognize walk in and she greets them with a big smile, and Nick can't help but watch her complete 180 in demeanor with fascination.

No wonder she was Dad's favorite employee.

"Hi, welcome," She says with her Customer Service Voice. "Are you looking for something in particular, or just here to browse?" Usually, people came to the florist's with a specific vision in mind, but it was rare that they actually knew how to make it come to life. He'd realized years ago that if there was one retail experience people *want* to be helped with, it was at the flower shop.

"Actually, it's our ten-year anniversary next month," The woman on the right says. She's got sandy blonde hair pulled up into a tight bun, a thick-framed glasses that rest a little too low on her nose. She looks

tired, like she's spent most of her life working—but happy nonetheless. "We're throwing a party and we need some suggestions on centerpieces."

Sophia immediately gets to work, and Nick looks down at the catalogue his sister produces before realizing he's just standing there, behind the counter, like an idiot.

He's also not on the clock, so he has no intention of staying.

Sophia beats him to the punch, swatting his arm with the back of his hand and asking, "Are you just gonna stand there, or do you want to help me?" in the best voice she can muster between Customer Service and Aggravated Sister.

He grins. "Not working today, so it's all you. I'll be back later."

She looks at him and grimaces. "Is that all you're wearing? It's freezing out."

"It's March." He says flatly, before nodding at the two women with a small smile. "Happy anniversary, hope you have a great party." Far be it from his father to deny a customer and perfectly good business, but as he walks out he's happy Sophia was at the register instead.

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"I should have worn another layer," Nick says, hugging his arms tight against his chest. "It's freezing out."

Erin just laughs at him, her own coat undoubtedly keeping her toasty warm despite the harsh wind. "You'd think it'd start warming up by now. We're halfway through March."

"That's what my sister said," He lies through a smirk that Erin doesn't see, teeth chattering even as they walk. "*'Look, the sun's out. It's getting warm, you only need a sweatshirt.'* I think she was setting me up."

"She probably was." Erin turns to look at him, cheeks pink from the cold. Honey brown hair that falls gracefully from the hem of her hat, framing her face in a way he's always liked (an interesting fact about Erin being that she's never once changed her haircut in the many years he's known her). Freckles barely there at this time of year, but threatening to make an appearance as soon as the sun rears its big, beautiful head for the year.

She's not trying, but he's convinced that she is.

"I think I know Sophia well enough to guess that she was most likely fucking with you." She laughs again, and the two of them turn the corner at the end of their block in unison. Almost too in sync, kind of creepy.

"Actually," He says, like he's about to reveal some kind of big secret. "It was Iris."

"No."

"Sure was."

"Sweet little Iris, going out of her way to ruin your fun?"

Nick laughs. "The very one. I'm surprised you still think she's some innocent little thing." He shakes his head, tutting. "She's actually the worst of us all."

"I can't believe it." Erin doesn't even hesitate, instead choosing to throw her hands up in a mock disbelief. Or even real disbelief, maybe. "I *won't* believe it. She can do no wrong, you can't convince me otherwise."

She says this as if Nick doesn't know it already. "Trust me, I think know that better than you ever will."

"You know she's my favorite, right? Her, your mom, *then* you."

Again, she says this as if Nick isn't already painfully aware. "You just like my mom because she bakes you *spanakopita*. You know it's not even homemade, right?"

She pauses for a moment, silent except for the sound of her boots on the sidewalk. He doesn't dare trying to interrupt her processing time. "Are you trying to ruin my life today? Is that why we're going on this date?" She looks at him and throws her arms out to her side dramatically. "Is your plan to ruin my perception of your sister, crush my *spanakopita* dreams, and then break up with me?"

"Being broken up with doesn't seem so bad compared to the *spanakopita*, does it?" He grins, and she responds by shoving him into the side of a building.

Chapter 4— Nick

By the end of April, Nick's all in regardless of whether he wants to be or not.

Just another month or two, he keeps telling himself. Something will come up—a new job, a new opportunity. It doesn't have to be in Boston. He doesn't mind moving. But somehow it feels like hiring season is always *next* season. That the companies are always waiting until *after* this holiday, or *after* this quarter, or *after* something completely inconsequential and before long, it's been a year and you still haven't found anything and you've consigned yourself to the idea that you're going to be at your father's shop forever, with no hope of escape.

He's being dramatic. It's been four months.

But four months is longer than he ever intended to come back to the store for once he left, and while he knows his father is happy to have him, he can't help but wonder if it's just his fate to be here until he inherits it.

He knows if it were up to his father, that's exactly what would happen.

He suspects the pay raise and the "promotion" (in Official Title only, because he already did nearly everything his father asked of him) is a first attempt to keep him here and slow the job search down. It's not malicious in nature, Nick knows that much. Desperate, maybe, is a better word for it. Make finding a new job less of a priority, and not only does he have extra hands around the store, but his son doesn't leave him behind.

Plus, it was about to be busy season again, and Nick knows they'll need the help.

Unlike March, April is *actually* warm, most of the time. It's when the flowers start to bloom for real, and the greenery around town really starts to return. A new season's selection of stock rotates in, and while they can always outsource for any flower they need, it's always nice to have a fresh supply of what's growing on hand.

Then next month, it's Mother's Day, and Father's Day in June. As soon as Father's Day is over, it's FTD's annual florist's convention, and for the first time in at least half a decade Nick knows he'll have to attend. Las Vegas in June sounds like an absolute nightmare, though, and even with the event being two months out, he's already starting to dread it.

He supposes he can just drink and gamble the entire trip away, though. His sisters won't be there to judge him for it.

Once June is up and the convention is over, it'll really feel like Nick's allowed to leave. It'll be normal business again until November, or more likely December, and he'd rather not make it an entire year since his return. Once the end of June rolls around, he'll get serious about a new job again. Until then, dipping out now would just leave him feeling guilty—and as much as doesn't care about the work he's doing, he can't rightfully leave his family without his help.

The guilt might kill him.

—

It turns out that when Ben says "sometime next month", what he really means is "probably the last day or two of next month, with very little communication between now and then."

Nick had only text Ben a handful of times since he'd made his claim to come back home, and he was starting to believe it wasn't true when he got the text last week that the plans were made and the drive was being coordinated. Knowing Ben, that still didn't necessarily mean anything, but it was more than he'd gotten since he'd last heard of these plans, so it was hard to be mad at the attempt.

Mostly, Nick just wanted to see his best friend.

So when he gets the call—not text, but a call—that Ben is Officially Here In Boston This Very Second Right Now, Nick is ready to drop everything to go see him.

His dad lets him off early without much trouble (aside from a stern promise that no *baklava* will be left for him tonight), and Nick makes it to the parking garage to get his bike in record time. The helmet goes on and the rev of the engine—too familiar but not nearly heard enough—echoes throughout the otherwise empty lot. He can't help the little smile he makes, always feeling just a little bit more powerful on his bike. A little more free.

If he could just convince his mother that it's not nearly as dangerous as it seems, he'd be golden.

Pulling out of the garage, he merges onto the street with ease and, surprisingly, doesn't have nearly as much issue with the traffic as he'd expected to. Boston traffic is notoriously nightmarish, and while it's not that he doesn't hit any traffic, because that was inevitable regardless, it doesn't feel quite as

oppressive as it usually does. Either the gods were smiling down on him today, or he was just a lot more excited to see his best friend than he'd realized.

About five minutes out, Nick realizes that he didn't actually ask if Ben was staying with his parents while he was visiting. He'd made a reasonable assumption, and headed straight to the house he was all too familiar with getting to, but for all he knew Ben was kicking it in a hotel across town. Not that it matters, he's stopping at his old house regardless—it'll be nice to see his parents, who Nick will admit he should probably see more than he does.

But, he still probably should have asked. It'll be a pain in the ass to go wild goose chasing after his best friend, though knowing Ben that's not entirely outside the realm of possibility.

Nick finds a parking spot for his bike a few blocks down from Ben's parents' place, and it's only a couple minutes after that he's walking up the steps to get into the building. He buzzes the familiar apartment, and almost immediately, the recognizable voice of Ben's mom crackles through the speaker.

"Hello…?" She says, not timid, but quiet. Clearly not expecting visitors. If Ben was here, it only felt typical that he'd forget to tell his parents that Nick was on his way.

"Hi, Renée." Nick says into the intercom, her first name still sounding weird on his tongue even after all these years. *You're adults,* she insisted one day soon after they'd both graduated. *And you've known me for years.* "It's Nick! I heard Ben was visiting, so I figured I'd swing by to say hi."

"Oh, of course!" She shouts, her voice immediately picking up in demeanor. "Of course, I should have guessed. One second, I'll buzz you in."

Without hesitation, the front door buzzes and Nick's allowed inside.

He gives the woman a big hug when he walks in and sees her waiting at the door for him, which is more than he can say about his friend. She pats him on the back, her hand firm even as she's aging. "It's good to see you," He says, an apologetic smile all he has to offer. "I know it's been a little while."

"It's fine, it's fine." She waves him off. "You just remind me a lot of this young man that used to come over all the time and talk to me, unlike my ungrateful son." He laughs, and she gives him a wink.

"I should have brought some flowers or something, but I was rushing out the door. I'm sorry."

"You can make it up to me later." She says without missing a beat. "Mother's Day is coming up, and God forbid that one even comes back to visit." She nods towards the other room, but no response comes. Nick makes a mental note to get Mrs. Andies a big bouquet in May. Maybe a box of chocolates.

"Is he in there?" He asks, looking towards his old bedroom. She nods with a smile, and finally turns to walk back into the comfort of her own living room.

"He just got home, an hour or two ago, so I think he's still unpacking."

"Do you mind?" He doesn't want to abandon her, but at the end of the day he didn't come to see her.

As if she's reading his mind, she waves him off in Ben's direction. "Go, go, I'm sure I'll see you plenty while he's here."

He smiles and thanks her, and goes to greet Ben.

Without giving him a second to think, Ben immediately wraps Nick into a tight, nearly painful, bear hug, slapping his palm against Nick's back several times before pulling away, hands still gripping onto Nick's shoulders. "Dude!" He exclaims, a little loud. A little obnoxious. Very Benjamin. "It's so good to see you!"

Nick can't contain the smile. "It's good to see you too. When was the last time you were home?"

Ben's face scrunches up. "At least a year ago, maybe? Not sure."

Nick knows it's definitely been more than a year, but he chooses not to speak up.

"It's good to be back." Ben continues. "It's kinda cold though, don't you think? How do you survive in this?" It sort of sounds like he's trying to prove some kind of point, or brag about… something. But Ben only moved to New York, which was *at most* four hours south by car. Nick knows for a fact the difference in temperature is minimal if not nonexistent.

"It's nice to have you back. How long are you here for?" Nick asks, realizing that he has maybe zero total details about Ben's trip home. "Gotta maximize our time if you're only around for a week."

"Three weeks. Been saving my days off for this." Ben grins wide, like he's proud of himself. Again, trying to prove a point? Probably not—he's just an idiot.

"Jesus, dude. Long vacation. I'm jealous."

"Yeah, well." Ben shrugs, still grinning. Still looking like a dumbass. "Special times call for special measures."

Nick suspects that this is meant to get him to prod, but he's not going to take the bait. He tried already, weeks ago, to get the details of this trip out of Ben. If he was so desperate to share them now that he was here, he'll have to do it without Nick's prompting.

He is curious, though.

"Three weeks is plenty of time to get shit done." Nick says flatly, finally moving from his spot in the doorway to settle in Ben's desk chair, getting comfortable. It feels familiar, and secure. Safe, now that he's here. "We just have to figure out what it is we wanna do." Idly, he presses the pad of his index finger hard into the desk next to him, turning his skin white.

"I've got a lot to catch you up on," Ben says excitedly. "New York is kind of insane."

"I swear to God." Nick presses his palm flat against the desk. It's not an aggressive gesture per se, but definitely one that means business—though the grin on his face sort of betrays him. "If you spend this

entire trip talking about New York I will end your life with my own two hands." He laughs. "I'm not kidding.

Ben's hands go up in mock surrender. "I'm just saying! It's a lot. You're gonna hear about it."

"But that's not *all* I'm gonna hear about." It's not a question, or a request. It's a demand.

Ben nods, silent for a moment. Then, real low, he offers a short, "No." It almost sounds defeated, but the stupid smirk on his face says otherwise. Nick raises a brow at him, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms. He's not going to pry, but he's waiting. Waiting. Waiting, for Ben to crack.

Finally, "You're also gonna hear about my soon-to-be *wife*."

S A N F R A N C I S C O

CALIFORNIA

Chapter 5— Gabe

"MARCUS." Gabe yells back into the very depths of the store, hands completely full already and still scrambling to pick up the last remaining stray stems on the counter. "Luke? Anyone!"

No response. He lets out a dramatic huff, and stomps into the back room like a child.

Unsurprisingly, it's empty, but Gabe almost would have preferred his brothers ignoring him as opposed to not being present at all. Their complete lack of motivation wouldn't feel quite so unbearable if Ryan were still at the store. But as it stands, getting a full ride to a Master's Degree will put someone out of commission for a while, and as much as Gabe wanted to blame him for doing it he really couldn't.

It just meant that he was left with three pain in the ass younger brothers who sucked at doing their jobs.

He dumps the flowers in his hands gently onto another counter in the back, out of sight in the front of the store, before returning to check if any customers had walked in. When he can confirm that none have, he sends a text to all Luke, Marcus, *and* Jordan that he needs their help and they can't *all* be on break at the same time. He doesn't get a response from any of them, but it doesn't take long for one of them—Marcus—to make an appearance.

"Where were you?" Gabe asks, frustrated but doing his best not to show it.

"In the other room. Why, what do you need?" It's almost comical, how stupid they can be sometimes.

"I need you to do your job," He says, leaning back against the surface behind him and crossing his arms. "There's no one in right now, but I need someone to be ready for when there *is*."

"Oh, sorry." Marcus shrugs. "I thought you had it covered."

"I did. But I need to make this bouquet for Mom before it gets too late. Unless you want to do it, and I can man the front of the store."

Marcus visibly winces, and shakes his head with a face so scrunched up it looks like he's just been hit by the pungent smell of skunk. "No thanks, I don't like the thorns on the roses."

Gabe sighs. "You don't have to use roses." That's a blatant lie thought, and they both know it. For Mother's Day, especially for their mother, roses are mandatory. "But, fine. I like designing anyway."

"Yeah," Marcus says, in maybe the stupidest mocking voice Gabe has ever heard him put on. "You would."

It takes him another minute to get settled with the flowers he wants to include, but once he thinks he's set he immediately gets to work. There's a massive, elegant crystal vase that he's been eyeing for weeks, originally put out as part of the store's stock but almost immediately taken into the back by him. The minute he saw it, he couldn't figure out why his parents would want to *sell* it, even if it did fetch a solid

price. It was too pretty to go to some stranger, and Gabe thought it was much better left in the hands of someone responsible. Someone he trusted.

That person, of course, being himself.

He lifts it out of his not-so-clever hiding space—buried in a box underneath several leftover wreaths and ribbons from the holiday season that nobody's bothered touching or doing anything with in months—and sets it down on the arrangement table with a loud thud. From there, he immediately starts trimming the stems of the flowers he wants to include, pulling his favorite paring knife out from the pocket of his apron and slicing the tips of the stems straight into the garbage can beneath him. Always at an angle, he tells the customers, and *never* with a pair of scissors, if you want these suckers to last.

Several roses go into the vase first—four or five to start, though just those on their own look desperate and sad and lonely, so he quickly gets to work filling in the spaces. A couple carnations, which he's always thought are similar to roses in feeling and sentiment but offer just enough variety to make a beautiful pairing between the two. Then the orchids, a shared favorite between him and his mother, before several giant puffy blue hydrangeas. By the time he adds these, the arrangement is looking much more lively despite the fact that it doesn't feel quite as finished as he'd like it to.

A couple white lilies, he thinks, which will catch the eye both in color and shape compared to the rest of what he's included. He even makes sure to include a couple premature buds, which will offer something to watch bloom once they're actually in the water. Once these are added, he starts repeating the cycle, trimming stems and slowly but surely filling in the spaces until there's just enough room for each flower to breathe.

Once he's gone through them all more than once, adjusting and rearranging so that there's a good distribution of each species throughout, he stands back to admire his work.

"That looks good," A voice behind him says—his brother, who's decidedly not watching the register again.

"Thank you." Gabe says with a smile, as proud of his Mother's Day arrangement as he is every year. Hopefully, she likes it. "Will you grab me a card for her?"

He hears his brother's footsteps walk towards the front of the store, then quickly return to him. Only then does Gabe turn to look back at him, taking the card from his hand and producing a pen from his apron to write his mother something nice—even if he knows his brothers will take a fifth of the credit for it, each.

Mom,

Thank you for being the best mother a kid could ask for.

Sorry that five sons isn't exactly the easiest way to raise a family.

Thanks for sticking it out.

Love, Gabe

(and Ryan and Marcus and Luke and Jordan)

"I already signed your names." Gabe says, capping the pen and rolling his eyes. More than anything, it just means the handwriting stays consistent throughout the entire card, which would have pissed him off way more than it had a right to.

"Thanks," Marcus mumbles, Gabe watching as he looks down at his fingernails and idly picks at a cuticle. "Are you gonna give it to her tonight?"

"Probably. It's easier than having to hide it until tomorrow morning. But I didn't want to wait until tomorrow morning to make it, since we'll probably be slammed."

"Yeah, makes sense."

"Can you please make sure you're here on time tomorrow? You've seen Mother's Day. It's gonna be insane, like always." Gabe leans back against the counter again, palms pressed flat against the surface behind him.

"Yeah." Marcus says, low, then with a chuckle. "You're starting to sound more like Mom and Dad than Mom and Dad do."

"What do you mean?"

"*Can you please make sure you're here on time tomorrow?*" Marcus repeats, not quite mocking him but… if Gabe didn't know any better, he'd think he was being mocked. "It's just sorta, like, parent-y." He snorts.

Gabe nods. "Yeah, I guess you're right." Pushing himself up and away from the counter, he takes a few steps forward to get closer to his. "Just want the store to do well. I care about it a lot. And since Ryan went back to school it's like it all falls on me."

Marcus just nods, looking down at his hands again. Mostly uninterested, despite the one that brought it up.

"Besides," Gabe continues now, a tiny smirk playing at his lips. Like he's backed Marcus up into a corner somehow. "If the store doesn't do well, we all grow hungry. You do realize this is kind of our entire livelihood, right?"

Marcus doesn't respond, but does take a moment to at least look back up at Gabe. As if he knew this, but somehow, at some point, it didn't register what that actually meant.

Gabe turns to pick up the vase once again, and moves it towards the side of the room to place on some cluttered, crowded shelving that'll do well enough to conceal it in the event his mother comes in here. "Don't tell Mom I made this, okay? We can give it to her tonight."

"You got it." Marcus replies, before turning on his heel to sit in front of the register once again.

—

Gabe knows the exact moment his mother walks into the kitchen and see the gift, because he can hear the excited gasp followed by a simple, sentimental *awe*. It's only another thirty seconds before there's a knock at his door.

"Come in." He states simply, turning in his desk chair to face the door as he says so.

She enters the room and looks at him with a face full of love. "Thank you," she says, all too sappy and sentimental for a woman who co-owns a flower shop. "It's really beautiful."

"Marcus, Luke, and Jordan helped pick out what went in it." He lies, smile wide across his face, just happy that he was able to make his mother happy. "I put it all together."

"That's obvious." She says, taking a few more steps in the room and sitting down on the edge of his bed. "It looks like a you-arrangement. The rest of them are shitty designers, though Luke could be good if he tried."

The two of them laugh in unison because they both know she's not lying. Not in the slightest.

"I'm glad you liked it." He says after a minute's laughter.

"I loved it. Thank you again."

"Happy to. You know how much I like doing that kind of thing, anyway."

"Still," She starts, before hoisting herself off Gabe's bed and back into a standing position. "I suppose I should go thank your brothers, even if they didn't actually do anything."

Gabe raises an eyebrow, leaning back in his seat. "They picked out the flowers!"

"You don't have to lie to me, sweetie." She says with a smile. Almost wicked, very knowing. He laughs again as she exits the room.

—

The next morning, Gabe wakes up too late and realizes his family is already halfway through breakfast by the time he's out of bed. When he walks into the kitchen, all that's left are the dregs of a pan of eggs, a few english muffins, and three sad slices of bacon that were likely the runts of the litter.

He takes one and chews on it idly.

"Happy Mother's Day," He says when he sees his mom, stepping up to her to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I'd get you flowers but you already saw everything I've got." He offers a small, still sleepy smile. She returns it.

"Thanks sweetie."

"Why didn't anyone wake me up?"

"It's gonna be a busy day today." His dad, sitting quietly at the head of the table with a cup of coffee still steaming, finally speaks up. "Figured you might as well sleep as much as you can before we open." Gabe realizes he hadn't even bothered checking the time.

"Oh. Thank you." he glances over—7:42 AM. Thank God they didn't let it get too late… he thinks. "We're opening regular time today, right?"

"You got it." His dad says. "Closing late though." One of his brothers, all three seated at the table, groans. But Gabe isn't paying enough attention to know which one actually makes the sound. To be honest, he doesn't care.

"Right, just making sure." He hops up to seat himself in an empty space on the kitchen island, finishing his one piece of bacon. "Do we have any order requests that have been made in advance? I'll probably get started on those right away, if I can."

"I left a list in the back room. Shouldn't be anything too outstanding, though. You should be able to blow through them pretty quickly."

"That's the plan. Who made breakfast?"

His dad answers again, but he probably should have guessed that.

"Thanks for cooking. And letting me sleep in. I'm gonna go get ready." And without another word, he's off once again.

In less than an hour, Gabe's showered, prepared, and dressed to go, and in a sight that's hardly ever seen anymore the entire family piles into the car to get to the store together, early. No point in wasting the gas and going separately, when they're all going to be there from open to close, anyway.

They arrive before open and immediately get to work—Jordan making sure the storefront is clean, Marcus making sure the storefront stock is filled, Luke checking the backstock, and his parents handling the business stuff. Money and paperwork and schedules and the likes. Gabe wastes no time getting to the back to take a look at what's been ordered ahead of time, and he realizes his dad was right. He knows things requests will be coming in all day, but what's left for him to get started on isn't anything spectacular. Simple stuff.

It's a nice change of pace from the more elaborate stuff he usually gravitates too.

Despite the fact that he knows his mom—bless her heart—will be back here to help later, he wants to get a head start and hopefully finish any backlog before then. It'll be easier that way, and just like every other year he wants to leave her with as little work to do as he possibly can. She doesn't mind working Mother's Day, never has, but somehow the guilt of making her having to work just as hard as the rest of them when it's supposed to be *her day* is still always more than present.

The first thing on the list is a simple mix of spring florals.

Gabe gets to work without thinking, his mind running mostly on autopilot and his hands working in what only can be described as a focused sort of flurry of cutting and arranging and rearranging. One thing he knows he can't spare today is time, so he has to work carefully but diligently. Smart but not overthinking. It's weirdly high pressure, and not the kind of job you'd expect to be that way, but on days like Mother's Day being a florist took on a different sort of role. You could, for all you know, make or break a mother's holiday.

Some people might not care so much. Gabriel is someone that doesn't want to live with that guilt.

He sets the flowers in a simple glass vase and, once he's convinced the arrangement looks good, he ties a simple, sheer red ribbon to the front—a craft that most people don't really *can* be mastered. Ribbony tying is hard work, and without the right technique it usually comes out looking like shit.

When he's done, he sets the arrangement to the side, out of the way and out of his mind. If he looks at it too long, he'll decide he's unhappy with it and return to it over and over again, messing with it until it's picked up. That's not the kind of luxury he has time for today, so he ditches it and gets to work on the next thing on the list.

A mixed bouquet of reds and whites seems a lot more Valentine's Day to Gabe, but he's not one to question a request.

—

The afternoon rolls around and Gabe hears the familiar drop of a set of keys on the table in the next room. He leans back to look through the doorway and spots Felicia, removing her sweatshirt and slipping on her apron. He smiles.

"Hey!" He shouts, not wanting to leave his spot. "Happy Mother's Day!"

Fe snorts. "Am I already showing?"

"Are you kidding? It looks like you've got a watermelon under your shirt." He says as she joins him in the back room with the arrangement tables. They both laugh.

"You're a dick." She says, but she sidles close up next to him as she does, leaning over to look at the list he's been poking away at all morning. "Have you gotten a lot done?"

"Yeah, I've been working like a madman. I started right before we opened, been on arrangement duty all day."

"Probably for the best." She says with a nod, pulling the list closer to her. She traces a finger over the last thing that was crossed out—an extra large bouquet of white roses. "It's kind of your specialty."

"I like to think so." He grins wide, flashing his teeth at her. "You wanna help, now that you're here? You're about the only person besides my mother who I trust back here with me."

She slides the paper back, and moves to one of the shelving units on the wall to grab a vase. "Your dad is a pretty good designer, isn't he?"

"He's fine." Gabe says, scraping a pile of stem trimmings from the table to the garbage beneath him with the side of his palm. "Technically, yes. But I personally think he rushes, and it shows. Mom is better at the intricacies of it all."

Felicia laughs. "I think you take this job too seriously." He knows she's kidding but he still sort of feels the compulsion to defend himself.

"It's so weird you say that," He starts, tossing a few peonies into the arrangement he's currently working on. "My brother said something similar last night, and I had to remind him that this is our family's livelihood."

"Oh, I know." She nudges him with her elbow. "It's kind of mine, too, in case you forgot. I'm just saying, I don't think I've ever heard another person talk about 'the intricacies of flower arrangements'."

"Well you know I'm not like most people."

She pauses for a minute, and despite the fact that he's not looking at her, he can feel her eyes searing a hole into the side of his head. Then, she laughs.

"That's entirely fair, Gabe. You're really not."

"I'm pretending that's a compliment."

She laughs again.

He finally turns to look at her when she moves away from the table to grab more of their flower stock. Normally, he doesn't like working with another person directly next to him, which is why he often takes the table that faces the wall in the very back, but he's been frenzying all day and the company is a nice change of pace. If she starts distracting him and slowing him down, it'll be another story.

But for now, it's nice.

She returns to his side and gets to work with him, though her method isn't nearly as fast-paced as his. To her credit, there's not nearly as much work to do now as there was when he came in, even if it's only been a couple hours. But once he's in the groove, that rhythm doesn't quite stop until it has to, which means he stays in that *gotta go fast* mentality until everything on the list is finished, and checked once over.

"Do you mind starting from the bottom of the list and moving up?" He asks, not taking his eyes off his current project. "Might be easier to meet in the middle, instead of alternating one by one."

He can practically feel her roll her eyes, but he spots the nod out of the corner of his eye. "Makes sense." She admits, and he grins.

"I just want to make sure we get everything done as quickly as possible." He adjusts his footing, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Not quite a nervous dance, but one that comes close. He's doing his

best to keep his energy up. "I know Dad's already gotten quite a few new arrangement requests since we opened, so I want to make sure we have enough time to finish everything. Luckily most people are coming in and just buying the premade bouquets, without the vases."

"We'll get it all done," She reassures him, chuckling under her breath. "We always do, don't we? There hasn't been a Mother's Day since I've started here that's gone south, anyway."

"Yeah, I know." Gabe sighs, even if her admitted correctness is a good thing. He never wants one of the big holidays to go poorly. "It's just stressful. It very easily could go south if we don't stay on our toes."

"Yeah, of course." She agrees. "But it'll be fine. Let's just focus on getting this list done, and we'll be set. Then it should be mostly smooth sailing for the rest of the day."

Gabe nods. "It'll be nice to tackle things as they come in, instead of dealing with this backlog." He laughs, adding the last flower to his current arrangement, then adjusting the positioning of several of the elements before picking it up to set it aside. "As much as I love putting these together, I think that's my least favorite part of the big days."

Once it's on the shelf, he ties his signature ribbon.

"I don't blame you." She cuts the stems off several hydrangeas. Always more aggressive than she needs to be, he thinks. "But you've already done so much." She turns to smile at him, a real genuine beam. It's clear to him that she knows how stressed the major business days can make him—even if he loves doing the work.

"Thanks." He offers her a weaker smile back, but still one that's full of love. "I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Now get back over here, you're slacking." She grins. "Unless you want a thousand mothers to be disappointed on their one day of the year?"

If she hadn't just been extremely supportive and kind, Gabe would kick Felicia's ass right now.

Chapter 6— Gabe

"I still can't believe you're coming with us." Gabe says, still trying to decide whether or not Ryan was welcome to the convention in his eyes. "Feels weird, since you weren't around all year."

Ryan laughs and gives Gabe a soft punch in the arm, very reminiscent of two young brothers fighting in the backseat of the car. Which is mostly true, they're just not little anymore. "I don't know if you're trying to guilt me or something, but it's not gonna work."

"I'm not trying to guilt you!" Gabe defends, a look of mock offense painting his face. "I just didn't ever really think about it, since you weren't around the store all year. It didn't occur to me that you'd be home for the summer."

"Honestly, even if I wasn't on summer break, do you really think I'd skip out on a free trip to Vegas? I'd be here either way." He laughs, and Gabe admittedly has to laugh with him. He makes a fair point.

"You should be grateful that I'm coming with." Ryan continues, looking down at his phone while he does so. "When I started going to these conventions *all* I had was Mom and Dad, so it wasn't even fun. At least I'll be here to help you with the business stuff without being a pain in the ass, and I can introduce you to people." He pauses for a moment to send a text, then locks his phone and looks back at Gabe. "You start to get a little stir crazy when you have to spend a whole week in a hotel room with just them."

Their dad laughs from the driver's seat, and Gabe sees his eyes look into the rearview mirror to address them. "You know we're sitting right here, right?"

"Yeah?" Ryan says, adjusting in his seat to face forward again. "What about it?"

"Well, you don't have to be so mean."

Their mother chimes in. "Honestly, Frank, if you were them would you want to spend time with us?"

"Yeah!" Their dad responds without missing a single beat, almost as if he was expecting the question and knew exactly what his answer was going to be. "I'm really fun."

Their mom laughs. "No you're not."

"Ouch!"

Gabe rolls his eyes, and exchanges a look with Ryan that silently says something along the lines of *what the fuck did this turn into?* And Ryan laughs. Then, he looks down at his phone again. Gabe does the same and sees a text from Felicia.

My flight won't land until later tonight. Sorry you'll be stuck without me until then

Ha ha

It's fine, my brother isn't irritating me nearly as much as I thought he would

Excited for you to get there though

Me too, it's gonna be fun

I still can't believe you've never been on one of these before

Somebody had to watch the store !!

And they always had Ryan to go with them

Who's watching it now?

Who do you think? My other brothers

I guess between all of them they share enough brain cells to trust them with it for a week

Plus I think my grandpa is coming to check in on it at some point during the week

Lol good luck to them

And your grandpa

Gabe's phone goes dark, and he looks over at Ryan, who's still enamored by his. He lets his head fall lazily against the door of the car, staring blankly out the window as his family nears the airport. Felicia makes a good point—it feels weird that after all these years, this is his first annual convention that he gets to go to with his parents. Meanwhile, Ryan—who's attended every year since he was a young teenager and isn't even living at home most of the year—gets to tag along anyway. If Gabe wanted to be immature about it, he could say that it hardly seems fair, but the truth is he's honestly kind of relieved to have someone around to help him navigate it, both professionally and socially.

One thing he knows about these conventions is that they're way more close-knit than you'd expect, and florists from all across the country not only knew each other but were genuine friends because of them. It'll be nice to have Ryan there to help him with that part of it.

He'd really rather not spend the entire weekend with just his parents. At that point, he might as well just stay home.

—

Las Vegas wasn't necessarily a bucket list destination for Gabe, but there was something about actually touching down in Nevada and realizing that he was in one of the United States' biggest tourist traps that was kind of admittedly exciting to him.

He didn't have any real plans to gamble, or even necessarily drink a lot while he was here. After all, it didn't really make sense to him, because it it hardly felt like there would be time to. The majority of this event was meant to be a networking conference, and the idea of having to be professional and friendly and social all day, only to go out and party all night really wasn't something that sounded appealing to Gabe.

Though, the more he thought about it, the more it made sense for the convention to be here. Maybe it was by design—to put a bunch of tired small business owners in a place that's explicit purpose is to loosen its visitors up.

Regardless of why Las Vegas, specifically, it doesn't occur to Gabe until the plane actually lands that it'll probably be a cool place to see in general. There are tons and tons of people who are dying to get to come to Las Vegas even once in their life. Gabe gets to be here without even trying.

He might as well take advantage.

Felicia lands that same day, but much later, and by the time she arrives at the hotel his family is already entirely settled in. He feels bad, because she won't have much time to recuperate or recover from the flight before they have to get started in the morning, but at least they can both be grateful for the lack of a time zone change. They consider themselves the lucky ones now, but who knows. Next year's convention could be in Hawaii, or Bermuda.

What a shame that time difference would be.

Gabe greets her in the lobby, already in his sweatpants but happy to see her. She hugs him like it's been weeks since they last saw each other, before letting him go and immediately abandoning him to head for the elevator. He chases after her, like a puppy dog following a schoolboy.

"How was your flight?" He asks, pausing towards the end to yawn, loud and obtrusive.

"Aggravating." She states flatly, her disdain for small talk on full display. Once she stops at the elevator, she turns her head to face him, the look on her face bored and tired. "I wanted to sleep but couldn't because there were two people in the row in front of me that wouldn't shut up the entire flight."

Gabe laughs. "Not a crying baby?""

"I would have *loved* a crying baby." She says it as if this is obvious, like it should be expected that babies crying on planes is preferable to two adults having a conversation. "But no, instead I got to learn all about Martha's hemorrhoids and Danielle's gout. I swear to god it was like I was standing in an urgent care unit."

Gabe laughs again, harder this time, but he's not the one who had to suffer through this supposed medical nightmare. "Sounds thrilling," He starts, but Felicia doesn't look amused. "At least the flight isn't that long. You should have just put your headphones in—I literally refuse to be on a plane without music or a movie at this point."

"That's the thing Gabe," She turns to look at him again, her eyes narrowing now. The elevator reaches the lobby, and it dings as the doors open. Before she steps in, she says, "*I did.*"

He decides when he escorts Felicia to her room that, since his parents are already asleep, it doesn't matter if he sticks around to hang out with her for a bit. Truthfully, the last thing he wants to do is be up too late, and he especially doesn't want to be up too late with Fe. But, he figures, it can't hurt to entertain himself a little before bed.

As soon as he settles himself on the hotel bed, she pulls a bottle of wine from her suitcase.

"Oh, you came prepared." He says with a snicker, but she just grins at him.

"Do you know how expensive alcohol is in Vegas? Even if you're just buying it at a liquor store."

He nods. He doesn't, actually—he's never been to Vegas—but she makes a fair point. "I don't imagine you have glasses in there, too?"

"You'll have to live with the paper hotel cups." She glides over to the coffee maker, where two paper cups wrapped in plastic sit on a tray, face down. She tears them both open and brings them back to the desk in the room. "I'm sorry if that offends your highly refined tastes."

"Fe?" He says, taking the cup from her while she pours her own. "It's ten dollar Barefoot moscato. We're not exactly the pinnacle of high class here."

She gives him one loud, audible laugh—a short, *ha!* that permeates the otherwise dull room and puts a smile on his face. "I don't know about you, but this is the fanciest wine I've ever had in my life. So I'm excited."

He grins, and extends his arm for her to fill his "glass."

For about an hour, the two of them shoot the shit and Gabe makes it through one and a half paper cups of wine before he starts to feel sleepy and decides it's time for him to leave.

"I think my parents are looking to get going around nine? Maybe nine-thirty?" He says as he makes his way to the door. As she's dumping the remaining drops of wine from the cups into the sink in the bathroom and subsequently tossing them, she turns to raise an eyebrow at him.

"You're forgetting that I've been on these trips with them before. You haven't."

He blushes a little, and laughs. "I'm just saying, I wasn't sure if you knew. Make sure you're ready by then."

She nods, exits the bathroom, and sits down on the bed. Without even thinking about it, she flips on the TV, then looks at him. "When have you known me to take more than, like, ten minutes to get ready? Trust me, I know the protocol." She smiles, reassuringly.

"Alright, alright. I believe you." He surrenders. "I'll see you in the morning." He exits the room quietly, gently shutting the door behind him and making his way back to his own room.

L A S V E G A S

NEVADA

Unlike anything he's ever felt from his friend Felicia before, the death grip on Gabe's forearm is unbelievable. He had no idea she was this strong, and even with hardly any fingernails they still somehow manage to dig into his skin in a way that actually makes him flinch.

He pulls away almost violently, but her eyes are locked on his. "What the fuck?" He says through a nervous laugh. "Are you okay?"

She looks… intense. He's not sure how else to describe it. He's never seen this level of focus on her face before, but it doesn't look anxious. It's almost excited, and it's making it very unclear whether or not he should be nervous for her. He raises an eyebrow.

"Nick's back."

"Who?"

She groans at him. "You don't remember? Nick. Nicholas Christopolous." Felicia grabs his arm again, shaking it as if she's trying to rattle his brain and loosen an old, forgotten memory.

He shakes his head at her and gives her his best *I have no idea who the fuck you're talking about* look. He really doesn't. Is he supposed to?

He's positive the annoyed look on his face—and the way he's rubbing at the pain in his arm—is an obvious enough clue that he doesn't care.

"This guy who used to come to these things with his family. The literal embodiment of tall, dark, and handsome. My second convention with your shop was his last, but I had the *biggest* crush on him both summers." She almost looks irritated that Gabe doesn't remember. "Don't you remember me telling you about him?"

He thinks for a minute, something vaguely familiar almost surfacing in his memories before sinking back down into obscurity. "Not really, no. I was always mad I had to stay home, so I probably just ignored everything you said back then."

She throws her hands in the air, and Gabe realizes that he's not sure he's ever seen her so passionate about something in her life. Let alone a *man*. And that's coming from Gabe—self-admittedly boy crazy. He'd always wished she'd show more passion, but he's not sure he likes this side of her. It feels uncharacteristic. Stupid, even.

"Do you know him?" Gabe risks asking, the two of them trailing far behind the rest of his family as they walk towards the convention hall. "Or is this mostly like an admiration from afar type deal?" As soon as it comes out of his mouth, he regrets it.

She looks offended.

"I've met him, if that's what you're asking." She turns away from him, clearly desperate to look at anything other than Gabe right now. "You'd have to no way of knowing this, but you tend to meet a lot of people at these things. Store owners and employees—it's a lot of networking."

It feels like a particularly pointed comment for something that feels so obvious. "It's a networking event." He says, shrugging, looking ahead at his parents and his brother. Next to him, he can feel Felicia's eyes searing holes into the side of his head.

"Yeah," She agrees, folding her arms in front of her chest. " I'm just saying, it'd be weird if I hadn't met him. I don't know him super *well*, if that's what you're asking—"

"That's what I was asking, yes." He laughs, looking back in her direction. She's not happy with him, but he knows she'll get over it quickly. If not, she's being a baby.

"Fine, then no. I don't know him very well." She concedes, her arms falling again. "But he's really hot. Kind of obnoxious, in a way." For a moment, she loses herself in thought. Gabe let's her—the less he has to hear about this Nick guy, the better. He's already annoyed by it.

In a matter of seconds, though, she comes back to. "Anyway, my point is, he's *back*." She emphasizes, and he grins, raising both eyebrows and nodding with faux interest. "Last I heard, he got a real job that wasn't at his parents' shop, and he hadn't been to one of these since."

Gabe's brow furrows, and it's his turn to be annoyed. "This is a real job, too." He's positive he says it loud enough for her to hear, but she either doesn't hear him or just straight up ignores him.

"I can't imagine why he decided to come again now, but…" She sighs, dreamily. "I can't wait to see him. It's been years."

Gabe exhales too, but his is much more over it. "Did you ever hook up with him? Seems like it would have been the perfect time to." He chuckles. "Rock his world and leave him thinking about it for the rest of the year, you know?" He says this, of course, knowing that Felicia likely has never thought about a one night stand in her life.

She responds by smacking him in the arm, right where her death grip had him earlier. He winces, rubbing the spot with his other palm. "No. I think he had a girlfriend when he was at his last convention. I didn't dare try."

"Maybe they're married now." He grins at her—he's truly over this conversation.

"Don't say that." She says, suddenly defeated, looking at Gabe with a sadness in her eyes that only comes from desperation. Who is this person standing next to him?

He laughs again. "Well, if you're not gonna try to make a move and get with him," He starts, watching ahead as his parents make a turn into their destination. He nods ahead to indicate it to Felicia. "Then literally who cares that he's back?" He turns into the next room. "'Cause I don't. I don't know him."

"You're so mean." She says, sensitive and hurt over a man she's only spoken to a handful of times. "Have I ever not supported you when you were pursuing someone?"

He thinks for a moment, eager to prove her wrong, but he can't. Even with how practical and pragmatic Felicia was, she always found a way to support that sliver of hope that any man could be *Gabe's* man. "I guess not." He finally admits, giving her a genuine smile. "But maybe that's because I'm the one who's supposed to fall in love easily. You're the one that overthinks and tells people they're not making sense."

For just a minute, she seems to consider this. But it doesn't take long for her to fall back into her own head. "Well I think I should get to have just one." She pouts—something Gabe has quite literally never seen her do before. He nods, and pats her shoulder.

"Fine," He says quiet. "You can have just this one. I hope you get to see this Nick guy while we're here."

"Me too." She says, definitively, like she's never been more sure of anything in her life. "I bet he's even hotter now."

This time, Gabe says it out loud, gesturing towards her. "Seriously, I need to know—who is this person?"

Chapter 8— Nick

Day one wasn't a nightmare necessarily, but Nick thought he was done with this a long time ago. Granted, he also could have said that about the flower business in general, and about putting together arrangements and dealing with invoices and delivering special orders. All of that was behind him less than a year ago, and he never would have guessed that he'd be at one of these conventions again.

He feels exhausted.

At the end of the day, he knows he's capable of handling everything that's thrown at him here. Juggling the responsibilities of the shop and the convention, on top of the social aspects and the networking aspects of it all isn't something he *can't* do.

It's just that, after all this time, he doesn't want to.

Lucky for him, day one was relatively easy in a way he wasn't expecting it to be, and while he's not completely sure if it's because Sophia is here with him, or because he doesn't feel the pressure around the store that he used to when he was younger, or because it's just obvious enough that he doesn't want to be here and therefore not nearly as much is expected of him, he's not really complaining either way. The reasoning is kind of inconsequential, as long as things stay chill enough. Now, he gets to relax.

Of course, relaxing at these conventions means seeing as many people you've met throughout the years that you actually like, and as quickly as possible because you only have a week. If that. When Nick first started coming, he was a lot more open to making as many friends as he could possibly meet, but especially towards the end he'd really culled down his core group of FTD allies to just a few—most of which had moved on just like him.

That's what made finding out Ryan Amaretto would be here such a pleasant surprise.

The greeting comes with a big hug and a firm clap on the back, all of which are welcome. It's easily been years, and Nick's friendship with Ryan is genuinely one of the few that's persisted past the business of it all.

"It's good to see you," He says to his friend, smile wide and familiar. It feels like the first time he's been happy to see someone since they landed in Nevada. "How long has it been? Four years?

When Ryan's done hugging him, he settles back into his barstool. "Maybe? I've lost track." Nick seats himself in the barstool next to Ryan and Ryan claps a hand on Nick's shoulder. "Doesn't matter though, too long regardless. It's wild that you're here!"

"It's fucking weird, is what it is." Nick says, not really showing his opinion on it either way. He doesn't want to be depressing. "Can't say I ever thought I'd have to do this again."

"It's miserable." Ryan says with a grin. "For your sake, I'm sorry your back."

Nick laughs, and the bartender comes by to take drink orders—a Guinness for each of them.

"My sister is here to carry most of the burden, at least. Honestly, I'm mostly here to save face." He blinks slowly, thinking, leaning back in his seat. "You know, first son—only son—still at it, returning to the family business. All that bullshit." Then, a sigh. "It sounds kind of old-school, but I don't know anyone more old-school than my parents."

"They still Greek?"

Nick blinks at Ryan for a moment, unsure of what to make of him. For a second, he considers standing up from the bar and walking away to fly back to Boston without another word. Instead, he just nods. "Yes. They're still Greek."

Ryan laughs. "At least it doesn't sound like you have much work to do. Kind of annoying for a different reason, but hopefully easier."

"Easier for sure." The bartender returns with two glasses, and Nick takes his and downs a solid few gulps of his beer with ease before continuing. "Still sucks, though."

"For sure."

There's another pause for silence, the kind of boring conversation lull that only happens when two straight men with nothing real to talk about are forced together, even by their own will, before Nick realizes he has no idea why Ryan is here, either.

So he asks, "What brings you back? Last I heard, you were off at an ivy league studying for a PhD." He takes another sip of his beer, and Ryan mirrors.

"It's just a Master's Degree," He says when he sets the glass back down on the glossy counter with a hard thud. "And I wish it was at an ivy league."

“What are you studying?”

“History, at UC Berkeley.”

That explains it—close to the family. “So you’re still at your shop then?”

“Not really,” Ryan admits with a wicked grin. “I’m close enough, but it’s kind of an excuse not to be. I’ve got a place closer to the school, so I stayed there all year. But I’m on summer break now.” His grin gets wider, and he outstretches his arms, fingers interlocked, to crack his knuckles. “So I figured, why not a free trip to Vegas?”

Nick laughs, because as much as he doesn’t want to have to deal with being here, he’d be lying if he said he didn’t have the exact same thought process when he realized the convention was coming up. And while hot and humid Las Vegas, Nevada wouldn’t have been his first choice for a trip in June, a vacation is a vacation, right?

After all, he’s pretty convinced these conventions are mostly just an excuse for all these florists to drink and hang out for a week, under the guise of a networking and business event that really only lasts two days.

“I don’t blame you, dude.” Nick says with a shake of his head. “It’s half the reason I agreed to come, too.”

“Plus, honestly, I would have felt kind of bad if I had left Gabe to this all by himself. He stresses out too easily.”

A flash of a memory, nearly something but not quite. “Your brother?” Nick’s almost positive, but not one hundred percent. He’s only ever heard about him in passing and, since he hasn’t seen Ryan in so long, it’s been years since he heard about Gabe, too.

“Yeah. My parents kinda gave him the shaft these past few years while I was still at the store full time, so this is his first year coming to one of these. I think he only got to come because it wasn’t clear if I was going to be here.”

“That seems kind of shitty.”

“I don’t think they trusted my youngest three brothers to hold down the fort, to be honest. He’s so anal and cares so much about everything that it’s easy to throw most of the burden on him. So, I wanted to make sure he had a good first experience here.”

Nick laughs. “That’s really nice of you. Nicer than what I would have done, if I’m being honest.”

In a surprising turn of events, Ryan laughs and brings up Nick’s family. And considering how poorly Nick remembered Ryan’s brother, it makes him feel kind of guilty. “From what I remember, your dad would never make your little sister come to one of these things anyway. So it’s not something you’d have to worry about.”

"Fair enough." Nick laughs with him, and tilts his now half empty glass towards Ryan before taking another big gulp.

"Speaking of, though, I might bring Gabe and his friend Felicia to tag along and hang out with us, tomorrow, if that's alright with you. I told him I'd show him the fun parts of being here, too."

"Oh, I don't care." Nick waves him off, and Ryan grins.

"He's a surprisingly good drinker, so I think you'll like him. He's fun. Uptight, but fun."

Nick shakes his head. "You don't have to convince me, I believe you. I don't mind." Then, a beat, before he pipes up again. "Why does the name Felicia sound familiar?"

Ryan laughs, longer than a simple question should make him, and suddenly Nick is worried. He almost wishes he hadn't asked, and he doesn't dare ask what's so funny. "You remember Felicia!" He finally answers, polishing off his beer. "She's worked at our store for a couple of years—we always bring her to these as an extra pair of hands. She's kind of tall, and a little intense. I could have sworn she'd come to a couple before you got your new job."

It takes him a moment, and he has to think hard, but the face of a girl does come to mind. It's not super familiar, but Nick does start to remember her—mostly as just a tertiary character in all of his time hanging out with Ryan. He snaps, pointing his index finger at his friend once he's got it.

"Yes, I do. Sort of. She's still at your store?"

"Sure is. She's Gabe's best friend there, but I think she's kind of mean to him." He shrugs. "He doesn't think so though. And she's a hard worker, so my parents love having her." Ryan tangents, flagging down the bartender for another beer. "You want another?" He asks Nick.

He nods, then thinks so more. "I'm surprised she's lasted that long. I wouldn't have."

"It's different when it's your parents running the show, instead of just your bosses." Ryan clarifies, a fact Nick knows all too well. He nods, agreeing.

"I never really talked to her, as far as I can remember. But she *was* kind of intense." He chuckles. "A little scary, from what I remember."

"She's not bad, just takes things kind of literally and doesn't vibe with a lot of senses of humor." Ryan kicks his leg out, the toe of his shoe tapping hard against the leg of Nick's barstool. "So, she'll probably hate all the stupid shit you say."

Nick throws his arms up in defense. "Woah! That's big coming from the guy who asked if my parents were 'still Greek!'" Wasn't Ryan supposed to be getting a graduate degree?

"Ouch. Yikes. You made your point." Ryan says with a smile, ear-to-ear like always.

"It's gonna be fuuuuun." Ryan taunts, shooting Gabe fingers guns and vibrating his voice up and down to draw out the word "fun". Gabe rolls his eyes.

"I didn't say it wouldn't be," He responds confidently, crossing his arms defensively. He counts the room numbers as they make their way down the hotel hallway—408, 410, 412—until they reach Felicia's room at 418. "All I did was ask how many people are gonna be there." In Gabe's mind, this isn't an unreasonable question.

"No idea!" Ryan says excitedly. "But it's all people I like, so you'll like them, too. Stop being such a party pooper."

"I just need a vodka cranberry and I'll be fine." Gabe says, the slightest smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he knocks on Felicia's door. "Fe! We're ready to leave when you are!"

"Just a sec—" He hears, muffled from the other side of the door. And literally, it's just a second before it's swinging open and he's face to face with someone he's convinced he's never seen before. "Hi, I'm ready to go whenever!" She sounds excited.

He realizes she's anticipating this Nick guy to be there, and it makes him laugh. She immediately looks annoyed at him.

"What's so funny?" She says, her expression jumping back to a kind of focused stare that he's much more accustomed to seeing.

"Nothing, I'm sorry." He apologizes. He's willing to admit that she looks great—she knows how to clean up, when she has to, and that's not the issue. It's just not like her. "I just don't see you so done up like this very often."

She smiles a little, stepping close and taking his arm in both of hers to hug him close. "Well," She starts, her eyes brightening again. "It's a special occasion. It's your first time out in Vegas, isn't it?"

"It's yours too, isn't it?" He bounces back without missing a beat. She doesn't falter, though.

"You know what I mean. It's your first FTD convention! It's different!" He rolls his eyes. He's getting really sick of being reminded of the fact.

"Sure, I guess." He laughs, letting himself be dragged along back down the hall in the direction he and his brother came, Ryan just a few paces ahead of them. "I don't really see why that makes a big difference. It's not like it's any different than going out regularly. It definitely doesn't mean you had to get dressed up for me."

As they walk, she rests her head on his shoulder for a moment, both her arms still hugged tight around his one. She giggles a little, lifts her her head, and turns to face him without letting go. "It's different because there are new boys for you to meet." He laughs again. She makes a fair point.

“Fine.” He concedes. “That’s a fair enough point and I’ll accept it. But just this once.” She grins, proud of herself, and it’s only now that he realizes she definitely started pregaming on her own. He’s a little offended he wasn’t invited to come join her. He probably could have used a pre-cocktail party cocktail.

In just a matter of minutes, the three of them reach the elevator, make their way down to the lobby, and call a Lyft to take them to the bar, which Ryan has informed them is called Frankie’s Tiki Room.

“I didn’t pick it, but it’s got like four and a half stars, according to Google. Plus, it’s a tiki bar, so there’s probably plenty of drinks you’ll like.” Ryan flashes a mischievous smile in Gabe’s direction as they climb into the car, who returns by scrunching up his brow and shaking his head.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He says, more pointed than he actually means it.

“I just know you like, like, the fruity stuff.” Ryan laughs stupidly, and Gabe rolls his eyes through an embarrassingly red face. Felicia, next to him, is snickering.

“You don’t have to be a dick,” Gabe responds, his initial annoyance fading quickly into a smile. It’s not like Ryan is really wrong. “It’s not my fault I like for my drinks to taste good.”

“I’m not blaming you.” Ryan says from the front seat, turning to look back over his shoulder at the two of them. “It was just an observation. I think you’ll like it, that’s all!”

“I hope so.”

“You will.” Felicia says, nudging him in the side with her elbow. “Look.”

She holds her phone out in front of her to show him her screen, which is open on a slideshow of several photos of the bar’s interior. Diligent as always, he’s not surprised that as soon as she knew the name of the place, she was looking up everything she could find about it.

It looks kind of magical, with intricately carved furniture and the perfect mix of bamboo-palm-tree and tacky neon aesthetic. It’s everything he’s into, and quietly he thanks whoever he’s about to meet that chose this place because his brother wouldn’t have had the foresight to pick something as interesting as this.

“Okay, I’m sold.” He says to her, and she smiles.

“It says it’s pretty cheap, too.” She adds, clicking her phone closed and setting it back into her lap.

“Cheap for Vegas, maybe.” He responds with a smile. “Which I imagine is the same as cheap for San Francisco. Not very cheap at all.” He shrugs. “But you look really nice, maybe somebody will buy you a drink or two.”

“Are you volunteering?”

“Absolutely not.” He says with certainty, not a second too late. “If anything, I’ll be on the lookout for someone to pay for my drinks, too.”

Ryan chuckles from the front seat again, otherwise quiet unless there's another snide comment to be made. "There are a lot of gay people in Vegas, I think. So I wouldn't say it's out of the question."

"There are a lot of gay people in San Francisco, too, and I haven't had much luck there."

He turns to look at Felicia for backup, but she just looks offended. "What are you talking about?" She says, her tone all attitude. "Guys buy you drinks all the time when we go out."

Gabe tilts his head, thinking, then admits, "Maybe sometimes, when we go out in the Castro."

"We *only* go out in the Castro, Gabe."

Ryan laughs again, harder, but doesn't turn to look at them this time.

Before Gabe can respond, she continues, counting on her fingers now. "There's that time at Hi Tops, the guy you kept calling Baseball Cap; there was that one dude at Toad Hall who wouldn't leave us alone, *and* that one drag queen that bought us both a shot after her show; you had three separate guys buy you drinks at Twin Peaks Tavern, if I remember correctly, and one of them kept calling it *Twink* Peaks because you—"

Gabe cuts her off. "Jesus, Fe, I didn't know you had a photographic memory." He shrinks in his seat a little, his ruse—which he didn't even realize was a ruse—shattered. "My brother doesn't need to know about every romantic exploit I've ever had at a bar."

"Hey Gabe?" Ryan says, turning once more in his seat to face him. "I literally couldn't care less. Promise. Want me to tell you about all my bar hookups?"

"I'd really rather you not." Gabe says confidently. The last thing he needs to know is all the places his brother's dick is going.

"Your loss." Ryan turns back, and he can hear Felicia laughing next to him again. Clearly, she's getting some sort of sick pleasure out of this, and Gabe can only hope that this bar is close. Really close.

Fortunately for Gabe, it's only another fifteen or so minutes in the car before they arrive, and judging from the chorus of excited greetings that erupt from the back of the bar when Ryan steps in (Gabe and Fe following just a few feet behind), they're also the last ones to arrive. Truth be told, it's a good thing, because it means Gabe can get a drink and drown himself in being social, rather than waiting around and deciding it's not worth it. Once he gets going, he knows he'll have a good time.

Ryan stands back for a minute so Gabe can come to his side, and start pointing out faces and names. The group isn't particularly big, but it's enough people that Gabe will have to run through each more than once to memorize them, and even that isn't a guarantee that he'll catch them all.

"Okay, so that's Bex, Leon, and Jared." Ryan says, pointing to the first three people and going down the line from left to right. "And then Nick, and Roxie." Gabe takes a minute to look at each of them, nodding at each one as he repeats their names in his head, before it hits him and he hyper focuses on the one—Nick. Somehow, he can feel Felicia vibrating next to him.

"Everyone, this is my brother Gabe! Be really nice to him please!" Ryan shouts, and they all turn to look at him with big smiles and friendly waves. Nobody approaches to greet him personally, but that's fine, he doesn't expect them to. He'd rather them not until he's got a drink in his hand, if he's being honest. "And I think some of you might know Felicia? She works at our store and she's been to these conventions before. Be nice to her too, please!"

Gabe looks to her and she's smiling big, clearly eager to impress these people. He wonders if there's some sort of weird social culture he's completely missing here—usually Fe isn't one to care about impressing anybody. She's not looking at him, but he taps her on the elbow anyway to get her attention. "Is that him?"

She blinks, looking back towards him, then to Nick who isn't paying attention, then back to Gabe. "Yeah, that's him."

Gabe turns his attention back to Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome. And, okay. He gets it now. And he really needs a drink.

Chapter 10— Nick

Nick almost doesn't notice when Ryan walks in—too absorbed in his conversation with Roxie, a girl he knows from one of his very first conventions with his parents and the only other one aside from Ryan whose parents also own a store.

"So, I'm not kidding, I'm chasing this asshole down the street over a fucking potted plant," She laughs, and Nick's not sure if he's ever seen someone speak so animatedly. She spreads her fingers out wide in front of her face, emphasising *potted plant*. "And I'm, like, booking it, non-stop, thanking Jesus for the fact that I used to run track. And I can hear my mom screaming my name, but I catch up to the guy, and when I tackle him he pulls a knife on me and stabs me in the arm." She holds out her forearm to show him her scar—a long, thin crescent moon three quarters of the way up from her wrist.

He winces a little. "Looks painful."

"It was, but I was so hopped up on adrenaline that I didn't even feel it at first."

"Why didn't you just let him take the plant?" Nick figures, at most, it was a thirty dollar loss, and that's being generous. It was one product.

"It's the principle of it, man." She laughs, setting her arm down. "My mom was so pissed at me, though. Can't really blame her, I'm sure she would have rather taken the fifteen dollar loss instead of paying the hospital bill." Gently, she rubs the area with the scar with her opposite hand.

Not even thirty. He's got to admire her dedication.

His response is stopped dead in its tracks by the arrival of his last friend, two hostages in tow. Ryan announces his arrival dramatically, introducing his brother—Gabe, who he can now put a face to—and Felicia, Miss Intensity.

"She's pretty," Roxie says, and Nick turns back to look at her.

He smirks a little. “I heard she was really intense. I think I’ve met her once or twice but it was a few years ago.”

“You think she’s single?”

“I don’t know, you’d have to ask her.” Nick turns back to look at her, though she’s looking over at Ryan’s brother now. “I hope she’s gay, for your sake.”

“He definitely is.” She says, nodding to Gabe. “So things are already working in my favor.”

“Huh?”

“Listen, Nicky—” She starts, pointing directly in his face, and he curses his parents for ever calling him that in front of anyone other than his sisters. Roxie is absolutely the type of person who will see something like that annoy you, and immediately pick it up as a habit specifically for that reason, and he just wishes his parents were observant enough to have picked up on that.

She continues, a little aggressively, but clearly with a sense of humor. “The media will tell you over and over that gays and lesbians have it out for each other, but it’s just not true. *All* gays flock together, whether they want to believe it or not.”

“Who… who’s ‘they?’” He asks, confused.

“Anyone! I don’t know!” She throws her hands up in the air. “All I’m saying is, if this girl works at a flower shop and is hanging out with the gay kid who also works there, there’s a solid chance she’s a woman loving woman.”

Nick laughs, a real genuine, hardy laugh, reaching out to pat her on the knee. “Like I said, for your sake I really hope so. She *is* pretty.” He looks back over to the two, standing alone at the bar now, ordering something it looks like. Ryan’s abandoned them entirely in favor of greeting the other three they’re here with, and Nick would be offended if he hadn’t see Ryan on his own the night before.

This time, when he looks at the two stragglers, they’re both looking at him while they wait for their drinks.

He offers a friendly wave, and Gabe waves back. Felicia turns, her face a shade of beet red. Then he turns back to Roxie, eyebrow raised. “Want to go say hi with me? I feel kind of bad. They probably feel out of place.”

She shrugs, picking up the drink in front of her that she hasn’t touched for twenty minutes—some kind of banana rum combination that’s mostly watered down with melted ice now—and downs it in a couple swigs. Then, she pops her lips and stands. “They have no reason to, but sure.”

Nick stands, too, and they head for the bar.

They’re stopped in the middle by the other two, both now armed with a drink of their own.

“Hi,” Gabe says, looking up at Nick before turning his attention to Roxie, drawing a long sip from a colorful straw placed in a cup about the size of his head. “I’m Ryan’s brother. Gabe.”

“We know, he just introduced you.” Roxie says with a laugh. Nick just smiles.

“Yeah but not, like… well.” Gabe says back, then another sip. Eager to finish and get first introduction nerves out of the way, most likely. Felicia follows suit, but she’s not drinking nearly as quickly as Gabe is. “This is Felicia.”

“Hi.” She says, extending a hand to Nick to shake. He cocks an eyebrow at her, still silent, but extends his own hand to meet hers and shakes it once, firm and professional, with an accompanying nod.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Felicia.” He says, putting on his best businessman voice. She giggles. “And you too, Gabe.” He makes sure to make the second greeting much more casual.

“Nice to meet you, too.” Gabe smiles. “As weirdly formal as this is. I don’t like it.” He watches Gabe take another sip.

Roxie speaks up again, laughing. “Me neither, honestly. I’m Roxie, that’s Nick, you kind of already knew that but now it’s official. OK. Done with the formalities. Everybody good?”

Nick watches Gabe giggle, and mouth the words *thank you* to Roxie. He smiles, a laugh just barely forming in his lungs but not quite enough to actually let out. “Do you guys want to come sit down?”

“Yes.” Gabe answers quickly for the both of them, and Felicia nods. Nick notices that she hasn’t looked away from him since they approached. “But first, I need another drink.”

“Jesus,” Roxie says, her voice clearly impressed. “Did you finish that already?”

Gabe shrugs. “Not quite, but it won’t take me long and I know I’ll want another one. Might as well get it now.”

Roxie laughs again, louder and happier this time, and claps Gabe on the shoulder. Nick’s just watching, kind of purposely avoiding making eye contact with Felicia—who he thinks is still looking at him. “I like you,” She says. “Why is this your first time coming to one of these?”

Gabe rolls his eyes, and Nick grins at the fact that he actually knows the answer to this. “I don’t wanna get into it.” He says, before turning on his heel to make for the bar one more time. “Felicia, do you want me to get you something extra, too?”

Nick feels her turn away, finally to look at her friend. “Oh, uh, yeah! Sure! Thank you!” She says, before turning back to the two of them.

Ever the conversationalist, Roxie saves the day by diving right into the next question. “How long have you worked for Ryan and Gabe’s parents?”

Felicia is taken out of it, and turns to Roxie, smiling. At least she doesn't look annoyed for having to look away from him. "Oh, God, that's a good question." She pauses, thinks for a moment. She almost seems amused. "It's gotta be five years? Six at this point? Something like that. I've lost track."

"That's so valid." Roxie says with a wicked grin, putting on a thinking face of her own. "We have some employees that have worked at the store for as long as I can remember. There's this one lady who is like… ancient. Genuinely, I think she's turning to dust." Felicia laughs, and Nick can't help a little chuckle, too. Roxie doesn't even pause to breathe, though.

"She's worked at my family's store for so long, and we keep asking her if she has any plans to retire. Not because we don't like her, but she's *old*. But she just keeps insisting, 'What else am I gonna do with my day?'" Roxie puts on her best old lady voice, which is to say she puts on a really good old lady voice. Nick gets the feeling that she's done this impression in the past.

"Anyway, she's a sweet lady, just confusing as hell. I would have retired twenty years ago if I was her. I was always under the impression that retirement was specifically about not having something to do all day, but what do I know. I'm not an old woman." Roxie shrugs, and this gets an even bigger laugh out of both Nick and Felicia. "It's cool they bring you along to these. Most of the time, I just see family."

Gabe returns to the group from the bar here, interrupting as he sidles back up next to Felicia. "Fe basically is family." He defends, a big grin on his face and Nick can't help but notice that, while he's passing a second drink to Felicia, he's only got one in his hand—different from the one he had moments ago.

Kind of impressive, honestly. Nick catches himself nodding in approval, which feels stupid once he realizes he's doing it.

"Here," He says nodding towards Ryan and the rest of their group. "Let us introduce you two to the others properly. Like you said," He looks at Gabe and smiles, an inside joke that's not really an inside joke already shared between the two of them. "Ryan did kind of a shitty job."

"I can hear you!" Ryan shouts too loud for the space, from all of ten feet away, and Gabe laughs loudly, like he's getting a real pleasure out of it.

"Good!" He responds, matching Ryan's volume. Silently, Nick's already starting to admire their relationship. It's a good dynamic—and not anything like what he has with either of his sisters. "You were supposed to!"

Nick nods towards the group again, and turns to walk towards them. He can Roxie and his two new friends follow close behind them. "Okay," He says, clapping his hands together. "Real introductions now."

"Gabe, Felicia, that's Bex." He points a girl he met during his fourth FTD convention, whose hair down past her waist back then but is now barely a dark bob. She waves at the two newcomers.

“Gabe, I want you to know I had the biggest crush on your brother when I first met him.” Nick realizes only now that he’s introducing her to someone new that her Australian accent isn’t nearly as prevalent as it was when he first met her. Kind of sad, really.

Gabe laughs just as he’s trying to sip out of his new drink, clearly unbothered by the lack of a real greeting.

“I think she probably still does.” Nick says, leaning in to say it quiet to Gabe.

“Shut up, Nick, you know it’s not true.”

Roxie speaks up from behind now, and Nick’s not sure if he’s supposed to hear it or not but he does regardless. “She also had a crush on Nick for a while. I think they even hooked up once…?” She turns to look at Nick, grinning. He was definitely supposed to hear her.

He swats her in the arm, then points to Leon. “The guy in the leather jacket is Leon. He’s not nearly as impressive as he wants you to believe.”

Leon gives them all a two fingered salute, but otherwise doesn’t disengage from the conversation with Ryan and Jared.

“He’s actually a lot nicer than he looks.” Nick continues. “But not as nice as Jared, who’s the other guy.” Jared is tall, lanky, and wears glasses that are too big for his face. “He’s just about the nicest person I’ve ever met in my entire life—”

“Not anymore.” Gabe says, interrupting him almost too casually. Like he doesn’t even have to think about it.. “Since you’ve met me now.” Felicia snorts next to him, clearly unconvinced.

Nick raises his eyebrows, and bows his head in surrender. “Of course, you’re right. I’m sorry. He’s the *second* nicest person I’ve ever met in my entire life.” He puts extra emphasis on *second*, grinning at Gabe. “If you leave tonight with one friend, make sure it’s him.”

“He’s right.” Roxie says, though she looks annoyed—like somehow, her turf has been stepped on. That’s rich, coming from the girl who just described her family’s most dedicated employee as *ancient* and *dusty*.

Jared turns and waves politely, speaking up so Gabe and Felicia can hear him. “It’s nice to meet you both! I hope you both have fun tonight.” He offers a polite smile before turning back to his conversation, though it’s clear he’s doing a lot more listening and a lot less talking than the other two boys.

Nick continues. “And finally, the stupidest one here, your brother Ryan.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.” Gabe says, turning give Nick a very knowing look, like he’s had too much first hand experience. “He’ll try to convince you that he's not a dumbass because of the Master’s thing, but trust me. He’s just as stupid as he’s ever been.”

“Being school smart has nothing to do with being smart.” Roxie interjects, turning up her nose.

"Amen." Both Gabe and Felicia say in unison, before sipping their drinks together. Kind of creepy, how in sync they are. How much time do they spend together, Nick wonders? Stupid question—probably a lot, if they work together.

—

An hour and a half into the night, things have smoothed out considerably.

Nick's always been good at holding his alcohol, so it's taking him longer to really hit the point of no return for the night. But, one by one, he's watched the rest of them fall to the temptation of Dionysus.

Bex goes first, always putting on a kind of facade that implies she's way less of a lightweight than she actually is. And he knows that she knows that her tolerance is low, but she every time they're together she insists on keeping up with the rest of them. He doesn't blame her. At least she's a fun drunk.

Next is Jared, who Nick is almost positive doesn't drink more than once a year. But, Jared's fun because he gets fearless when he's drunk, and *loud*, and while that would normally irritate Nick, it's welcome from Jared. He deserves to be loud.

Roxie, Felicia, and Gabe all go next, close enough together that Nick can't quite tell in what order. They're having a good time together, and Nick's glad to see it. Roxie and Gabe in particular look like they've really hit it off, and Felicia, who initially seemed a little more hesitant, seems a lot more engaged now that she's got a few drinks in her.

If it were Nick in those two's position as the "newcomers" so to speak, he would've felt too aware of his surroundings to let himself really get drunk, but he's glad the two of them don't seem to feel the same way.

Finally, Leon, who Nick is convinced has secretly been taking shots all night. He's not sure he's actually seen him move from his spot in the back of the bar, let alone finish a drink, but judging from the heated argument about peonies he's having with Jared, he's far gone.

It leaves just Nick and Ryan again, which is typical for this group, though even Nick is starting to feel a little more tipsy. He just hasn't reached that point of drunk yet.

"I thought you said he could hold his liquor." Nick nods towards Gabe, leaning in to Ryan to make himself heard.

Ryan laughs a boozy laugh. "He can. I didn't say he doesn't get drunk."

"He seems cool. Felicia, too, but she didn't talk as much as he did."

"He is cool." Ryan nods, looking almost proud of his brother. "And she is too, but I have to admit I know Gabe a little bit better." He chuckles, flashing a dopey smile in Nick's direction.

"Do you know if Felicia likes women?" Nick laughs, taking a swig from his beer bottle, the lip making a loud *pop* sound when he pulls it away from his mouth. "I'm pretty sure Roxie immediately decided she wanted to sleep with her when she walked in."

Ryan, mid-swig of his own beer, snorts—the pressure of his laugh causing the remaining liquid to fizz up and pour out the top of the bottle and all over Ryan's hands. "Aw, fuck, dude!" He says, still laughing. He reaches for a few napkins from a nearby table and pats himself clean as best he can. "Fuck you!"

"What did I do?"

"You made me laugh!" Ryan says, balling up the dirty napkins and tossing them back onto the table, then reaching for a few new ones to continue the process.

"It was a serious question." Nick defends, laughing at his friend's misfortune. "I don't know if Roxie asked her, I figured you probably have a better chance of knowing."

Ryan shakes his head, once more balling up the damp napkins and tossing them aside. "I don't think so, as far as I know. And considering the circumstances, I think we'd know if she was."

"What do you mean?"

"We work in one of the gayest industries there is, and her best friend," Ryan nods towards his brother. "Is a flaming homo. I doubt she'd be keeping it a secret." He shakes his head. "But honestly, even if she was, the idea of Felicia hooking up with anyone is really hilarious."

"That seems a little harsh." Nick defends his new friend, his eyes going a little wide at Ryan's unabashed honesty. "She's pretty!"

Ryan laughs, clapping a hand against Nick's shoulder and shaking him a few times. "No, I mean look at her. She's so uptight. Always has been, as long as I've known her. I don't think she'd ever go for a one night stand."

"Oh." Nick says, embarrassed now at how quickly he jumped to such a shitty conclusion. "Okay, fair." He shrugs, looking back over at the trio and chuckling a little under his breath. "Who knows, maybe Roxie will be her first."

"I doubt it." Ryan says definitively. "But I've got my fingers crossed for her anyway."

There's a pause, a small beat between the two of them before Nick speaks up again. "So Roxie was right about your brother though?" He doesn't know why he's asking. Impressed by her gaydar, maybe?

"Huh?" Ryan pauses mid sip, the glisten from his beer still stuck to his top lip.

"When you guys walked in," Nick points over to the door with a snicker. "She called it, like, immediately. Said 'that one's gay' and pointed at your brother." He raises his eyebrows, looking towards the three again.

"Oh!" Ryan laughs, loud. "Yeah, I guess. I mean, I don't think it's that hard to tell. When he came out my whole family was kind of like, *ok*?" He shrugs. "But yeah, I guess she was right if that's what she said. It must be some kind of gay-lesbian solidarity thing."

"That's basically what she said." Nick laughs again, harder this time, and he realizes he's getting giggly because the beer is finally getting to him. He takes another swig. "Something about how the media will

convince you otherwise, but they all stick together. Or something. I didn't realize it was that deep, to be honest."

"I think Roxie was just being dramatic." Ryan points out, tilting his glass in her direction. "She has a tendency to do that."

Another beat. "I wouldn't have been able to tell." Nick shrugs, unsure of why it matters but feeling it necessary to point out anyway. "About Gabe, I mean. He doesn't, like, look gay."

"Okay, first of all," Ryan starts, turning his attention directly and entirely focused on Nick, pointing his beer at him now. "You didn't spend your whole life with him like I did. Trust me, we could tell." He snorts, which turns into a hiccup, and Nick's glad that it's not just him that the alcohol is finally getting to.

"Secondly, it's not like he keeps it a secret, really. He likes being gay—I assume, based on all the times he's expressed how sorry he is I'm straight." Ryan takes another long, drawn out sip, finally polishing off the drink. "And D, you're dead wrong. Gabe looks very fuckin' gay." He snorts again, and Nick can't help but scrunch his brow in Gabe's direction. He's really not sure what Ryan means, but—it doesn't matter, anyway. He shrugs it off, accepting that maybe he's wrong. Maybe Gabe looks very fucking gay, and Nick just has a terrible sense of homosexuality.

From across the room, the devil in question turns to look at the two of them with a look of confusion, and Nick realizes he's been staring. "What?" Gabe shouts, way too loud for the general space. "I heard my name." All his words slur together, and it makes Nick laugh.

"Just talking about how gay you look!" Ryan shouts back, waving his brother off. "Nothing special!"

"Oh." Without the hilarious grin on Gabe's face, he'd have guessed that Ryan's brother seemed defeated. But his hand goes in the air, middle finger extended and directed right at Ryan, and it's clear the whole thing is in jest. "Okay, bye!"

"Where you going?" Ryan doesn't miss a beat. Nick's starting to get the impression that this is how normal conversations between these two go, and he can't help but sit and watch, amused and admittedly entertained.

"Just ignoring you!" Gabe calls back, turning his back to the both of them to re-engage with Felicia and his new best friend Roxie.

Nick leans to catch Ryan's attention again, brain getting fuzzier. He's remembering now how much he hates being a tired drunk. "He's really loud." Nick points out, nodding towards the group.

"Yeah. It's really obnoxious." Ryan says back, also too loud. Nick decides it just must run in the family.

Chapter 11— Gabe

"I drank too much last night." Felicia says to him dramatically, letting her head fall back onto her shoulders as they walk into the conference hall they'll be spending the majority of their afternoon in. As

much as she's right, and Gabe feels the same way, he can't help but laugh at how intense she makes it out to be.

"Me too," He agrees. "But it *was* fun. I'll give my brother that much."

"Yeah," Felicia responds, rocking her head back and rubbing her temples with the pads of her index and middle fingers. "I just need to go to bed early tonight. I'm already exhausted, and everyone is irritating me."

Gabe opens his mouth to interject, but she looks at him, a smirk on her lips.

"Yes, even you."

"Ouch. My ego."

"You can take the blow." She reminds him. "You were popular last night."

"Moderately." He rolls his eyes. "And so were you! Roxie loved you, and she was my favorite of the bunch, if I'm being honest."

"She was fun," Felicia nods, agreeing. "I should have tried to talk to Nick more, but your brother hogged him most of the night."

"Maybe they're in love," Gabe points out, grinning ear to ear, poking her in the bicep. "You really want to meddle with my poor brother's love life?"

"I've seen the type Ryan brings around to the shop." She says, deadpan, narrowing her eyes at him. "It's not Nick."

Gabe lets out an ugly laugh, and nods. "Fair point." He skips a step in front of her, turning on his heel to continue his trek backwards and face her while they speak, surprisingly chipper for being hungover, surprising no one. "Anyway, you have time. The rest of the week, if you're really that desperate."

"I'm not desperate." She's quick to defend

"Ryan told me they're all getting together tonight, and said we could come."

"I just told you I need to go to bed early. I can't do two nights out like you can."

"Well, just a fair warning, I'm probably going. So I won't be around to entertain you."

She narrows her eyes at him further. "I. Will. Be. Sleeping."

"Okay, okay!" He puts his hands up next to his chest, surrendering. "Just letting you know, that's all!"

"I hope you have fun." She says, her eyes finally returning to normal. For how often she looks at him like that, her poor eyeballs have got to hurt. Maybe she needs glasses. "Just make sure to talk about how great I am, and I'm sure the next time I see him he'll be proposing."

Gabe ugly-laughs again. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up for a wedding any time soon.” He warns her, taking her hand in between both of his and patting it comfortingly, sympathetic. “I think you might need to exchange a few more conversations, first.”

She snatches her hand away, and the two of them arrive to meet Gabe’s parents in the conference hall, where they’re already setting up their booth for the day. Felicia immediately moves to start unpacking a box, setting it up on a low table. “Where is your brother, anyway?”

“Probably just oversleeping.” Gabe says, shrugging it off without much thought. He doesn’t usually think about where Ryan is when he disappears. It’s way easier not to, especially when he knows they’ve been drinking. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“He better show up soon,” his father speaks up from behind him, interjecting out of nowhere and making himself known—though perhaps, more importantly, making it obvious that he’s always eavesdropping just a little bit. “Or he’s gonna be in a lot of trouble.”

“He’s a grown man.” Gabe and his mother both say in unison, smiling at each other before Gabe adds, “And he doesn’t even *really* work at the store anymore.”

His father frowns, but doesn’t say another word.

—

The day goes by without a hitch if you don’t count the raging headache that Gabe started feeling right at the front of his brain about midday. Which he doesn’t, because just as quickly as it came, he willed it away with a large iced coffee, a breakfast sandwich, and two Advil LiquiGels. All things considered, he considers himself pretty good at hangovers. Even if he wasn’t, he wasn’t about to let anyone else know he wasn’t good at them.

Felicia complains in a way that’s both underhanded and heavy handed the entire day, but Gabe’s pretty used to dealing with that from her at this point. She’s not always the type to look for the *positive* in things most of the time.

Ryan only shows up about twenty minutes later than he should have, and ultimately doesn’t catch any slack for it because, again, he’s a grown man and it would be really silly for their father to stand their and scold their graduate student eldest son in public for taking an extra long shower. He ends up staying later than Gabe and Felicia, but Gabe makes sure to catch the details of tonight from him before he and Fe are dismissed.

“I think it’s just gonna be chill tonight,” Ryan reassures him, looking past Gabe and down the hall at someone else.

He turns around to look, and spots Bex walking towards them. He waves, and turns back to his brother, who’s now looking at him. “You said just in someone’s hotel room, right?”

Bex approaches from behind, and pats Gabe on head. “Yeah, mine. You coming?”

"That's the plan." He says, a smile on his face.

"Good. I'm staying at this place called the Flamingo. I told your brother I'd text him the details later, but everyone should be there."

"Sounds great," Gabe says, looking back at Felicia as she finishes packing up her things. The tiniest part of him feels bad that she's not feeling up to it tonight, but that's not on him. She said she wanted to sleep, anyway, so he can't even be held responsible for having to keep her company. "I'm heading out now, but I can't wait. Thanks for the invite." He smiles at her, turning on a dime and then looking back over his shoulder to add, "It was nice to see you!"

"You too!" She says, over her own shoulder, before her and Ryan start a conversation he can't hear and doesn't bother trying to.

He and Felicia walk off to exit the building and ultimately head back to their respective rooms, where a much needed nap before tonight is waiting for him.

Before they separate, his guilt gets the best of him. "Are you sure you don't mind if I go without you tonight?"

She sighs, quirking an eyebrow at him. "I'd be kind of a shitty friend if I told you I did, wouldn't I?"

She makes a good point, and he knows she's right. She could be obnoxious, but she was certainly practical. "I just don't want you to think I'm abandoning you."

"I want to sleep." She reassures him, though her tone is flat and very un-reassuring. "I have a pounding headache and everything seems way too loud. I'd rather not feel like this tomorrow."

Gabe nods, and doesn't mention the Advil he could have shared with her. Best if she doesn't know.

—

Evening comes quickly, and Gabe suspects that it would have even if he didn't sleep through the latter half of the afternoon. But his nap speeds up the rest of the day considerably, and by the time he wakes up it's dark out, the lights of the city of Las Vegas blinding even through the windows of his hotel room, and for a brief second he's afraid he might have slept through the party entirely.

Or small gathering. Get-together. Whatever it was.

He catches the sound of the shower running from the bathroom a few feet away and checks the time—9:30—relieved instead that it must be his brother getting ready for tonight. Taking advantage of the empty room for a moment, he forces himself up off the bed and out of his sweatpants, into a less comfortable but nicer pair of jeans and a short-sleeved, button-up shirt. Quietly, he curses himself for not bringing more light clothes, but he didn't realize how disgustingly humid Las Vegas could get.

He should have anticipated that, but compared to San Francisco, humidity wasn't even on his mind.

It's only another few minutes before Ryan emerges from the bathroom with one towel wrapped around his waist, another towel around his shoulders that he's using to dry his hair, and a cloud of steam chasing close behind him from out the door. It might as well be a scene straight out of an eighties movie, and it almost makes Gabe laugh.

"You're not gonna shower?" Ryan asks, glancing at Gabe briefly before leaning over the bathroom counter and looking at his teeth in the mirror.

"All I did was nap." Gabe reminds him. "Why do I need to shower?"

"Naps are sweaty and gross and terrible." He says it so matter-of-factly, for a minute Gabe actually reconsiders his choice.

"I showered this morning." He responds. "I don't need to again."

"Your loss." Ryan laughs, and Gabe can see him picking something out of his teeth from the reflection in the mirror, running his teeth along the surface of his pearly whites. "Just making sure you're gonna be ready when I am."

"Yeah, I'm ready to go whenever."

"Cool." His brother runs the spare towel across his hair a few times, and shakes his head aggressive in the mirror like a dog drying itself off before tossing the towel back into the bathroom. He eyes Gabe as he steps into the bedroom section, squatting down to dig through his suitcase for something suitable to wear. "You know you don't have to be fancy, right? We're not actually going out tonight, as far as I know."

"Yeah." Gabe shrugs, sitting down on his bed and idly checking his phone. "I just like to look like I care when I hang out with people."

"You know what might help with that?" Ryan turns to look over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Taking a shower before you leave."

Gabe throws a pillow at him.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger!" He defends himself, tossing a spare shirt from his suitcase back in Gabe's direction and missing tragically. "I'm just pointing out the obvious. Thought you might want to impress all your new friends."

"I don't need to impress them more than I already have." Gabe crosses his arms, turning up his nose with a smirk.

"They all seem to really like you. Even Leon, who I don't think you spoke to."

"I felt kinda bad about that, but he seemed preoccupied."

"Oh, don't." Ryan reassures him. "He's terribly at holding a conversation. He can hardly read a room. It's not your fault at all." There's a pause for a moment, Gabe thinking about how he can remedy that situation, before Ryan speaks up again. "Roxie adores you. She texted me this morning basically yelling at me for never having brought you earlier." He whips out a pair of pants from his suitcase, holding them up like long-lost treasure newly found.

"Good, I'm glad she's on my side."

"I *tried* explaining to her that it's not up to me, but she still doesn't seem to think I did enough to stand up for you." He stands again, clothes now bunched up in his arms, and he turns to face Gabe. "Be right back." And without a second of hesitation, he skips back to the bathroom to change.

"You didn't!" Gabe shouts from his bed, leaning over a little to better see the closed door of the bathroom. "And I bet it was on purpose!"

Thirty seconds later, Ryan re-emerges, fully clothed. "You wound me, little brother."

"You robbed me of new friends, probably because you knew they'd like me better than you." Gabe declares with confidence, raising an eyebrow at Ryan. Challenging him. "Am I right or am I right?"

"You got me." Ryan throws his hands up, then lets them fall and hit his thighs with a clap. "You've discovered my deepest, darkest secret. I'm secretly extremely intimidated by you."

"That's not a secret." Gabe grins, standing up from the bed to put on his shoes, watching as Ryan does the same. "It's just obvious."

"I think you're *trying* to hurt me."

Gabe shrugs. "Kind of. It's fun." He smiles wider, tongue pressed between teeth. "You're really easy to make fun of."

"*Ouch*. Maybe I should tell my friends that they should stop liking you so much. You're mean." The smile on Ryan's face as he slips on his shoes betrays his words. Gabe walks up, past him, to reach the door, eager to go now.

"They won't listen." He says quietly, matter-of-fact, like he knows something that Ryan somehow suddenly doesn't. As if Gabe's been filled in on some kind of inner circle secret. "You've been dethroned. Didn't anyone tell you?"

"You smell." Ryan says as he stands and walks to the door himself, pushing past Gabe to walk through before him. "And you're officially banned from the group. Hope you enjoyed you're one day!"

Gabe narrows his eyes, his brow scrunching up just above them as he chases after his brother. "You can't actually do that, I like them too!"

—

The music from the other side of the door of Bex's hotel room is loud enough that Gabe knows they'll get a noise complaint in no time—at least as soon the hotel's quiet hours started, which was probably not very far off from right now.

Sure enough, it doesn't take long for the phone in Bex's room to ring once Ryan and Gabe have entered asking her to turn the music down, which she does without an argument (though she definitely doesn't look happy about it, either). Better to follow the request and not get shut down entirely, but to be honest even Gabe, who doesn't mind the noise, doesn't understand why the music needed to be that loud if they were just hanging out in her room.

"It pumps me up," She says in defense of it, and Gabe can see Leon nodding from the armchair in the corner. In the back of his mind, he wonders if he'll see Leon get up and move at any point in the night.

"Sure, I guess," Gabe settles himself comfortably on the floor, sitting cross-legged at the foot of one of the beds, a pillow in his lap. "But, like, you had to have expected that."

"I'm kind of with Gabe." Nick speaks up, mostly quiet until this point—though granted, Gabe and Ryan just barely showed up. "It's just a tiny room, you don't need a speaker at full blast."

"You're all lame." She says without hesitation, pointing in each of their faces. "It's my hotel room, I get to decide how loud the music is."

Ryan laughs. "One, don't take it so seriously. Two, you actually don't I think that was proven just a minute ago."

She sits back, crossing her arms, pouting out her lip. Gabe doesn't think she's being serious, but if she's not she's doing quite a convincing job of playing it as real. "I should just kick you all out and go to bed." She grumbles, head falling backward and arms falling limp to her sides. Definitely joking.

"Thank you for defending me, Nick." Gabe turns back to look at him, and from the corner of his eye he can see Roxie—currently taking up and laying across an entire bed—perk up to attention from her phone, craning her head forward to try and address him.

"Ah shit, I wasn't paying any attention. Are we already getting into arguments?" She sounds both intrigued and annoyed, a combination Gabe kind of expects from her based on the single day he's known her.

"No, no," Nick waves a hand dismissively at her. "Bex is just being dramatic about the music."

"Oh." There's a sense of defeat in her voice. "Dumb."

There's a beat, a pause where everyone in the room is silent. But it only lasts a second, before Reoxie's voice breaks the quietness again, kind of shrill and aggressive.

"Well I'm ready to start drinking."

Jared snorts, and Roxie hops up from her bed to move over to the hotel room's minifridge, where she withdraws a bottle of champagne.

"Whew, looks fancy." Ryan whistles, and Roxie rolls her eyes.

"It's like fifteen dollar champagne. I'd break this bottle over your head if I didn't want to drink it so bad." She tears the wrapping around the cork off with her teeth, and looks down at Gabe, who's still seated on the floor. "Where's your friend Felicia? Did she not like us?" Roxie snickers.

"She said something about not wanting to hang out two nights in a row." He shrugs and looks around the room at the same crowd they were with last night, much more lowkey now but still fun, social—everyone together but engaged in their own conversations. "I thought it was kind of a bad excuse but she insisted she wanted to sleep. I don't think she knows she doesn't have to drink."

Roxie pops the cap of the champagne and snorts, finding a nearby cup to pour her serving into. "Last night was explicitly about drinking and reuniting as a group." She pauses, looks down, raises the cup. "You want some?"

Gabe nods, and she hands him the already full one so she can get started on a new one.

"But tonight we're just hanging out. It doesn't really matter—we're not alcoholics." Her eyes dart to the side of the room, narrowing. "Well, Leon might be. But he's like, a fun one. Anyway," She sets the bottle down on the counter, then leans back against it and folds one hand under her armpit as she takes the first sip. "I just broke it out because I'm in a committed relationship to this brand of champagne and I felt bad for leaving it out of all the fun."

Gabe takes his first sip, and even for champagne it goes down surprisingly smooth for such a cheap wine. "That's fair. I'm not complaining." He grins a little around the rim of his cup, not pulling it away from his lips. His voice bounces back up into his face from inside, and he takes another gulp, bigger this time. If he's not careful, he could polish off his first "glass" in one tiny go, but truthfully he doesn't have any intention of getting quite as drunk as he was last night.

By the time he looks back at Roxie, she's already pouring herself a refill, and he almost laughs champagne out of his nose.

Time gets away from him quickly tonight, and despite his best intentions he still finds himself having several glasses of champagne too quickly, not realizing how many bottles of the stuff Bex actually had in her when he initially thought it was just the one.

It could have also been Roxie, secretly stashing them throughout the room, and Gabe gets this vision in his head that makes him laugh, of his new friend in a black catsuit, sneaking in through the window every night to find a new place to hide another bottle of booze—all leading up to this day. It's almost scandalous.

He's not the only one drinking, though, and he only gets through about a glass and a half before the others join the two of them. Including Ryan, who usually bitches about having to drink any kind of wine product despite the fact that he goes nuts over rotten dirty grain water (also known as beer).

About three glasses in it hits him, almost regrettably so, that it's nice not having to worry about Felicia. The two are attached at the hip so often nowadays, between work and the fact that most of his remaining friends were friends he made in the same group as her, that even if he doesn't have to *worry* about her, he still has to worry about her. He doesn't remember the last time he's gotten to just chill, without considering getting home together or who has to work the next day.

Which is stupid. It's not like they're dating.

A pang of guilt washes over him, not the worst he's ever felt but he realizes he doesn't want to feel that way about her. She's supposed to be one of his best friends—she is, even. But that same feeling of guilt isn't nearly as bad as he thinks it should be, so he pushes it out of his head entirely and focuses his attention on his conversation with Roxie.

Who brings her back up again.

"Kinda sucks Felicia didn't wanna come." She declares, blinking slow and laying down on her side on the floor, facing Gabe. She props her head up in her palm and supports it with her elbow, which looks uncomfortable, and Gabe shrugs, giving her a disinterested look.

"Honestly," He says into his cup, once again not trying to feel guilty. "I'm just glad she didn't try to convince me to skip out, too."

"Would she do that?"

He shakes his head and lowers his cup. "I don't think so, but I offered to stick behind if she really wasn't feeling well." A tiny smile creeps at the corner of his lips, and he shakes his head again, dismissing the guilt entirely. "Honestly, it was a stupid thing for me to offer in the first place, when I'd way rather be here with you guys." Empowered by a newfound sense of fun and friendship, he gulps down about half of his glass of champagne and grins at his new friend. "Don't tell her I said this, but I kind of think you're more fun than she tends to be."

Roxie looks pleased, and stupidly proud of herself. She grins back, twice as big as Gabe's smile. "Don't worry. My lips are sealed." Pinching her index finger and thumb together, she runs the tips of the two across her lips and throws away the metaphorical key—a childish gesture, in the grand scheme of things, but one that's appreciated regardless. Then, she shrugs and takes another sip. "Honestly, she's been to enough of these things that she should know it's just an excuse to party. For everyone, including the real grownups." Gabe chokes back a laugh, mostly because at this point they're all real grownups, too. But he gets it, has heard the stories from his parents, and lets her continue. "And if we're being honest, I think we'd all rather have you here, too. Don't know why your brother kept you to himself for so long."

Gabe laughs, loud, pointing at her with the same hand that's holding his cup. "I was just saying this to him earlier!" He speaks up, hoping Ryan can hear him now. "I was asking why he kept me from meeting you guys, and then I realized it's because he's scared I'm gonna steal you all away."

Roxie doesn't hesitate. "Sounds about right."

From the corner of the room, Ryan speaks up, meaning he and Roxie were loud enough to get him to hear, or he's eavesdropping just enough to get the gist. "You've known him for two days!" There's a slight slur to his words, which means he's had a lot of champagne in a very short span of time.

"I told you," Gabe starts through a big smile. "I was right! They like me better than you!"

Roxie laughs, and from the back Gabe hears Nick's voice speak up, otherwise a relatively quiet presence overall. "He makes a point, Ryan." When he hears this, Gabe raises an eyebrow, still smiling. "Definitely like Gabe better than you, but to be fair you're not that hard to beat."

Ryan puts on his best offended face, shocked at the possibility that his younger brother could possibly beat him at anything, much less at having friends. At least, that's what Gabe assumes it is, considering Ryan's so used to having everything come so easily to him.

"Thank you, Nick." Gabe says, turning to face him and thank him properly. Nick flashes him a sly, knowing smile, and Gabe can't keep the giggly drunk part of himself quiet. "I already knew it, but I appreciate the confirmation." He adds, lingering with his gaze on Nick for just a minute or two longer than he means to before turning back to Roxie.

"You all suck. Everyone but Jared." Ryan says, giving them all death glares, though the sound in his voice is anything but serious. Mostly anything but serious. Gabe sees Ryan get mock offended nearly every day they're together, so he's gotten pretty good at picking out when it's real.

Roxie taps Gabe's knee and grins. "You even got the Nick stamp of approval." She raises her cup, a poor show of a toast to him that he fails to replicate entirely. "Impressive." She raises her cup to her lips.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing, really." She clarifies, smirking behind her cup. "Like, it's not actually anything." He figured as much, that a stamp of approval isn't *actually* a stamp of approval, but apparently she's reached a point where she's taking everything literally. He doesn't interrupt. "Nick's just quiet in groups. I don't think he and I talked once until the last day of the week the first time I met him."

"Oh, God," Gabe starts, leaning in closer to her. The hotel room isn't actually all that big, so anything they say is at risk of being overheard by any of them. "So it's not just me? I felt really bad I hadn't, like, gotten a chance to talk to him very much."

"I mean, you talked a lot yesterday when you guys showed up." She points out, taking another sip.

"Yeah, but that was just an introduction. I felt bad that I haven't talked to him much besides that."

"Don't." She waves him off, dismissing the concern. "He's just weird like that. We're close now, but seriously, he was basically a stranger that first week I was hanging out with him. He's better in small groups, but even five or six people is a lot." She smiles at him comfortingly. "Also, I think Felicia kinda worries him."

Gabe rolls his eyes, not because of the idea but because he doesn't really blame Nick. "Fair enough." He pauses, and when she doesn't elaborate he continues. "She thinks he is… attractive, to say the least."

Roxie snorts. "Well, he is."

"Yeah." Gabe agrees, a little hesitant to admit it. "You're not wrong."

Chapter 12— Nick

It's a bit of a stretch, but Nick manages to catch Bex's foot with his own, reaching to kick the pad of hers with his big toe. "Hey," He mumbles, his head fuzzy from the champagne they've been drinking all night. "Do you want another glass?"

"I'm more than good." She shakes her head, her eyes staying closed, her words tired and slurring together like a soup made up of the English language. "I don't even know how much is left."

He curses the fact that he's the best drinker of the bunch. Or maybe just the best at pacing himself? That doesn't seem right.

"Here," A voice speaks up from the other side of the room, somebody on the floor, body obscured by the bed. Suddenly, a hand appears from behind, raising high up into the air. In its grasp—a half full bottle of sparkling wine.

"Shit, Gabe, I didn't even realize you were there." Nick hears a giggle from behind the bed, snickering.

"Good, I was hiding. Obviously."

Nick stands up from his seat and slowly moves from where he is to a spot where he can see the younger man—and Ryan, who he hadn't realized also disappeared. Both are staring idly at their phones. "Why?" Gabe swings his arm down to hand the bottle to him, and he takes it appreciatively. It only takes a second for him to start filling his cup again. The champagne nearly reaches the rim, but Nick thinks it's kind of silly to bother with portion sizes at this point.

Gabe shrugs. "Roxie left me for dead and I thought better just to hide my face forever than face the shame."

Leaning to the side just slightly gives Nick full view of Roxie, passed out on the bed further away from him. He snorts a little and nods toward her. "Doesn't seem like she left you for anything good."

"I know." He watches Gabe set his head back against the bed, rolling his eyes toward Ryan. "My brother came to comfort me but he's the worst support system I've ever met."

Ryan laughs, looking up from his phone. He looks bored, tired, a little lazy. "You're so dramatic." As if on cue, he lets his phone fall to the carpet with a dull thud, a big grin stretched across his face.. "Nobody's abandoning you, you're just boring."

"See what I mean?" Gabe looks up at Nick with puppy dog eyes and a stupid smile that gives away the entire game. Nick can how drunk Gabe is just from the way he stares—lazy and not entirely focused. "He's the worst, completely lacking in empathy. Mean." When Gabe kicks a leg out to hit Ryan in the knee, Nick laughs. It'd be an impressive mini-monologue if Gabe didn't *sound* so intoxicated.

But he supports it, and he turns to Ryan to defend his new friend. "You should be better to him." He scolds, his words also slurring slightly as he talks into his cup. "I mean, he's your little brother and he needs your support."

Ryan looks offended again. "How often do you apply that logic to *your* sisters?"

"I didn't know you had sisters!" Gabe's eyes light up a little bit, his attention focusing back onto Nick.

Nick, deciding he's officially in the conversation now, leans against the wall opposite from Gabe and bends at the knee, sliding down the surface until he's properly seated, legs out and pointing in either direction. "To be fair, you didn't know *me* until yesterday."

Color rises to Gabe's face quickly and noticeably—even through the red in his cheeks caused by the alcohol—like this was a fact he'd somehow completely forgotten. Then he nods slowly, and frowns in a sort of understood agreement. "That's fair. That's a fair point."

Nick snorts. "Two younger, in case you were wondering. How old are you?"

"It's rude to ask that," Gabe says, raising an eyebrow. Ryan scoffs next to him, but doesn't say a word. "But I'll let it slide for you. I'm twenty-four."

"Okay, so my youngest sister is just a year younger than you. Her name's Iris." He smiles. "And then Sophia, who's between us. She's actually here with my family, but she's got her own group of friends she spends time with. They're all kind of crazy control freaks." He laughs, harder this time. "You might meet her, though."

Gabe looks fascinated. "That's awesome. I always wondered what it'd be like to have a sister." For a split second, Nick notices an annoyed glance over at Ryan, like Gabe blames him for being a man. Which… fair. "Instead I somehow ended up with four other brothers."

"Oh I've heard plenty about your brothers." Nick grins, also looking to Ryan now. "He's told me pretty much every interesting story about your household since I met him. Sounds like kind of a nightmare house."

Ryan nudges Gabe with his foot. "Maybe you were supposed to be the sister. You know, since—"

Gabe cuts him off with a sarcastic laugh, his voice dripping with an attitude that Nick hasn't heard from him at all. "Ha, ha, ha. You're so *clever*." Gabe says, but the look on his face tells Nick that he's anything

but annoyed. That this is normal banter for the two of them, even if Nick thinks he would have been offended, personally.

Gabe seems too cool to be upset by that kind of thing, though. He really seems good at taking everything that comes at him in stride.

"I know I am," Ryan defends, sticking his tongue out at Gabe like a small child. Gabe pulls a pillow from the top of the bed down and throws it at him, and Nick can't help but be amused.

"If it makes you feel any better," He starts again, addressing Gabe. "I always wondered what it'd be like to have a brother. Kind of one of those 'you always want what you can't have' situations, I guess."

"I guess so, yeah." He shrugs. "My brothers are alright, just annoying. Ryan's actually the best one, I think."

Despite having returned to being distracted by his phone, Ryan speaks up again. "Do *not* get gay on me now, Gabriel." Full name. Ouch. "I'm too drunk and we're around too many people."

"I wasn't getting gay on you, don't worry!" He throws his hands up in defense, chuckling behind them and careful not to turn his cup so the drink doesn't fall out. When he lowers them, he takes another sip.

Again, Nick just watches with a sort of admiration for their dynamic. It's fun, and nothing like what he has with his two sisters.

Ryan returns to his phone.

"I think he's cool, too." Nick says to Gabe, nodding towards Ryan, and he can feel his friend's eyes burning a hole into the side of his head, just for a minute before he forgets about it again. Then, he leans in closer to Gabe, close enough to barely whisper to him, careful about his volume so the rest of his friends can't hear—even if he's positive the majority of them are asleep. "Probably the best friend I've made through all the years coming to these."

Gabe leans in to meet him, hear the whisper, and respond. "Until now," He corrects Nick with a grin, and Nick snorts. "But as we've established, I'm much better than him."

Nick nods, agreeing, playing into the fantasy. "Until now." He repeats. "But up until this year, he had a pretty good run." Finally, he pulls back, his voice returning to full volume. "Isn't that right buddy?"

"Huh?" Ryan mumbles, completely not paying attention now, probably also getting tired. In all honesty, Nick can feel a little bit of that same exhaustion in his eyes, too, but he doesn't want to admit it.

"Just talking about how incredible you are." It's not really that funny, but he watches Gabe fight back a laugh and figures it's the booze affecting Gabe's better judgement. Doesn't matter, he'll take the compliment regardless. Meanwhile, Ryan just nods, humming quietly like he heard or processed a single word Nick said.

“He’s out of it,” Gabe shakes his head, letting it fall back against the bed again for a moment and resting his hands on his own knees “Don’t bother. He gets like this once he hits a certain point in the night.”

“You say that like I wouldn’t know.” Nick grins ear to ear. “I’ve seen your brother wasted enough times to know how weird he can get.

“He’s so dumb.” Gabe says under his breath, still chuckling to himself. “Can you pour me another?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Gabe holds his near empty cup out in front of him and looks at the champagne bottle that’s sitting upright next to Nick. “Not a ton, but I don’t want to stop yet. I’m feeling good.”

Nick laughs. “Ryan told me you were good at handling your alcohol. I wasn’t sure when I saw how loud you got last night,” He watches Gabe blush, and takes the cup to refill it for him. While he’s at it, he refills his own. Can’t let Gabe be drinking alone. “But then Ryan started talking and I just realized that I think it’s just a family thing.”

“It is not—!” Gabe starts, then quiets down, readjusting his volume. “It is not a family thing.” He snorts, grinning as he takes the cup back. “And I *am* good at handling my alcohol. That, and making really nice flower arrangements. Those are my two skills.” He puts a prideful look on his face, and takes a sip of his fresh glass.

“Two very fine talents to have.” Nick raises his cup to cheers them both. “Though I’m sure there are other things you’re good at, too.”

He watches Gabe put on a dramatic thinking face for a moment. Then shake his head with a pout. “No, I think that’s it.”

“Fair enough. You know yourself best.”

“Good. The last thing I want to do is argue with you and risk your favorite convention friend going back to Ryan.”

They both laugh together, and Nick takes a few big gulps from his cup. From behind it, he watches Gabe do the same.

“Honestly, I’d hate for it to happen, too.” He knows they’re both joking, but there’s a tiny level of truth to it. In a matter of two days, Gabe’s quickly cemented himself as someone that Nick really genuinely gets along with, and likes being around. Impressive, honestly.

“I mean that for your sake, of course.” Gabe clarifies. “I have plenty of friends, obviously. But he’s not worth having as your best one.”

“You don’t hold back with him, do you?”

Gabe laughs again. "I suffered through being second in command my whole life. Now that I'm smart enough to bite back and have the vocabulary to do it, I'm not going to *not* use it."

"You know what," Nick says, raising his cup once more. "Cheers to that. He kinda deserves it."

Gabe raises his cup to meet Nick's, and nods. "He really kind of does."

They both down their champagne.

It's not exactly how Nick would have expected the night to end, but he finds himself shooting the shit with Gabe for another hour or so before they both decide they're too tired to focus on anything, including a conversation. Each of them pours another glass of champagne, this time around just sipping on it casually as they talk—mostly stories about their experiences at their parents' shops, but other stuff, too. Nick learns that Gabe dropped out of school two years in, and willingly lovingly still works as a florist. He tells Gabe that he hadn't planned on ever coming back, but he didn't have much of a choice when he got laid off.

Ryan is long gone by that point, head slumped against the wall, snoring lightly. But it's a surprisingly nice back and forth regardless, and Nick quickly loses track of the time. He figures Gabe must have, too, because he's not mentioning anything about going to bed despite how tired he looks. And Nick's sure he looks tired, too, but the conversation continues until they're both nearly passing out.

When he finally does start fading into an actual sleep, still against the wall himself—Gabe now curled up on the carpet with one of the throw pillows under his head—he realizes he's actually coming out of this year with a new friend, which is already more than he could ask for.

Chapter 13— Nick

Waking up the next morning is hard, getting back to his own hotel is harder. Actually getting ready for the day and knowing he has to do shit is the hardest, and he knows regardless of how prepared or unprepared he is for the day, he's most likely going to catch shit from both his sister and his father.

How thrilling.

Much to his surprise, Nick actually finds himself to be one of the last ones leftover from last night—when he wakes up, Gabe and Ryan are long gone, all traces of them wiped from the room entirely. Leon is passed out on the other side of the room, but Jared has disappeared spare for a stray sweatshirt that got left behind accidentally. Bex, obviously, is here, but Roxie is gone too, which is entirely surprising because everything he knows about her points to her being the worst offender when it comes to sleeping in.

He didn't even think he drank that much champagne, but sugary bubbly will fuck you up anyway, apparently.

Sneaking out is easy enough and in the early hours of the morning (early all things considered, anyway), Lyft doesn't take long to drop him off back at his own hotel. He's hoping he can slip into the building, sneak up to his room and hop in the shower before running into any of his family, but—

Sophia's already eating breakfast in the lobby, and her keen eye spots him immediately. Figures, with how diligent she is, that she'd be up and at 'em and ready to go.

She grins a little when she sees him, and nods at him, prompting him to come over. He takes the bait.

"Fair warning," She starts immediately, ripping a piece from her toast and putting it in her mouth, chewing delicately. "And I don't think it's that big of a deal, but Daddy's mad."

Nick scrunches his brow together and stuffs his hands in his pockets with a loud sigh. "Really? For what?"

"Because you didn't come back last night." Another piece of her toast.

"How would he know? It's not like we're sharing a room."

"Don't shoot the messenger, Nicky." She says, taking a small sip of orange juice. "I'm just saying what he told me. Apparently he knocked on your door late late last night, and you didn't answer. That's all." Carefully, he watches he open a packet of butter and scoop it out with a knife, spreading it across a new piece of bread.

It only takes a second for Nick to get defensive. "What if I was asleep? Or what if it was the wrong room?" She doesn't respond, but another brief pause and Nick sort of laughs, throwing his hands in the air. "Wait, actually—if he was knocking on my door it means he was up and out doing shit too! Probably gambling!"

She snickers a little, and it's clear that she's on his side. Granted, she was probably out late last night, too. Sophia's just a lot more put together than he is.

Turning towards the elevators, he starts to walk away, ready for a shower. "I'm twenty-eight years old!" He calls out to her, probably too loud for the morning in a hotel lobby. "Why does he still care?"

"Because he's Daddy!" She calls back, and he can hear the laughter in her voice. She's not wrong, after all.

The elevator gets him to his room quickly, and even after just a fresh glass of water and a long hot shower, he's feeling more like himself and less like the ghost of a wine mom who got drunk off mimosas at brunch the day prior. Without even realizing, he finds himself wondering if the rest of them are holding up okay, realizing that Roxie had somehow brought way more champagne than any one of them had initially anticipated. Particularly, he thinks about how Gabe is feelings—he's the one who stayed up with him the whole night. He's got to be feeling that same exhaustion more than anyone else.

But hey, at least he can say he outlasted his brother. Ryan will never live that one down.

Just as soon Nick is dressed and finally feeling refreshed, he hears a heavy hand knocking at his door. It's not hard to figure out who it is, especially after what his sister told him in the lobby, so he takes his time to answer and, when he does, rolls his eyes dramatically. His father doesn't even give him a chance to greet him before he starts on him.

"Why didn't you come back to the hotel last night?" His father's accent usually isn't so bad, but when he's angry it becomes significantly heavier, thick with the threat that he might start yelling in full-blown

Greek any minute. That's not the kind of thing Nick wants anybody staying in this hotel to have to experience for themselves.

Nick says exactly what he said to his sister. "If you knew I didn't come back, it means you were out late too." He laughs, and he can actually see the demeanor of his father's face change almost instantly. Like a light switch had been flipped, and he realizes he's been caught in an act just as guilty as Nick's. Not that either of them were really *guilty* of anything, but the sentiment felt the same.

His father makes one attempt at a comeback. "I'm an adult, I can stay out as late as I want." His voice, noticeably, is quieter now.

With a gentle hand on his father's shoulder, Nick grins and responds, "So am I, dad. I'm almost thirty."

There's a pause, a dead silence between the two of them for a moment until it's interrupted by the sound of his father's hand clapping on his own, an unintelligible grumble under his breath that sounds something like "make sure you're ready for today's conferences" before he waddles off. It's almost endearing, how much he still cares, and it would be entirely endearing if it wasn't such a hassle to deal with.

Iris has no idea how lucky she is.

It's only another half an hour or so before the day's first conference meeting, which according to the program schedule that Nick has begrudgingly been carrying around with him, is called **Let It Go: Leadership Skills to Empower Your Team and Free Up Your Time**. All about time management, and making sure you're making the best of all your employees. It's just about the last kind of meeting he has any interest in going to, but both his parents specially requested his presence in the audience, preaching something about how if he ever takes over the business, he'll need to know these things.

It's like they don't know him at all.

But, better to go and get it over with than catch flack for it later. He's smart enough to know that much, and it's not like he really has to pay close attention to the speaker. Chances are, they're going to be some overenthusiastic FTD ambassador who's been trained by corporate on this kind of thing. Fat chance it's actually another business owner.

At least the conference hall is in his hotel.

There's a disappointment in his chest when he steps in and doesn't immediately recognize any of the faces in the audience. A quick scan provides nothing, and a more in-depth one just gives him a quick hope that's quickly squashed when he realizes he doesn't actually see Leon, just some other douche in a leather jacket. Dejected, he's read to give up when he hears his name—a quiet whisper among the idle chatter of the attendees before the thing actually starts.

"Nick, over here!"

He turns to the sounds and immediately, he's grinning. "Thank God. I was just about to accept the fact that I'd have to sit through this entire thing by myself."

Gabe's grinning right back at him. "Just pull up an empty chair, I don't think anyone will actually give a shit."

Nick does as he's told, sidling up close next to Gabe. "Where's your brother?"

"Sleeping." Gabe says, not hiding the annoyance in his voice. "My parents didn't think it was necessary for him to come to this, since he's not really at the store full time anymore."

"And where are they?"

"Sleeping, I think." He says this annoyed, too, but with a little more humor injected into it, too. "They own the store, so they don't think they need it the advice."

"So they made you come to this by yourself?"

"Yeah, they asked me to see if it might help keep my younger brothers in check. They claim that they can just ground them, so it's easier. Unfortunately, I don't have that luxury."

Nick laughs and leans back in his chair.

"Clearly you're here by yourself, too."

"Yeah. Something about inheriting the business, or something. Knowing how to manage employees." He exhales, loud and heavy. "Bleh."

When Nick looks back towards Gabe, he almost looks fascinated. "Kind of cool they're already talking about passing it off to you, don't you think?"

Nick shakes his head. "To be honest, I don't like thinking about it. It's just a reminder that they're getting older and are having a hard time managing everything—even if my father would *never* admit it—and I never planned on taking over the business in the first place. Kind of always assumed my sister would want to."

Gabe's lips sort of purse up to the side, thinking. Contemplating. Nick knows they had this conversation last night, that the two of them have very differing views on what it's like to work at their parents' flower shops, so it really shouldn't come as a surprise to Gabe that this is how Nick feels.

Lucky for him, Gabe just leans back in his chair and doesn't say another word about it. Probably for the best.

"I'm sorry they're making you do this." He finally says, just as the speaker is setting herself up on stage and getting ready to start. "I'll take any opportunity I can to whip my brothers into shape, but this just seems miserable. So I can imagine how you feel about it."

"It's fine," Nick shrugs, interlocking his fingers and placing his hands flat against the back of his head. "How bad can it be? An hour, hour and a half tops?"

"I think it's like three."

"Jesus." Nick rolls his eyes. "Florists are insane, I'm telling you. Thank God I'm in decent company." He nudges Gabe's foot with the toe of his shoe.

Gabe laughs, a little loud for the mostly quiet room now. "You say that like we're not." A brief pause, before he continues. "I think they need to convince themselves that they're not *just* partying all week, they're being productive, too."

"They're probably worse than we are." Nick points out, and Gabe can't help but nod along and agree.

"I'm not defending it." He says with a smile. "I'm just saying, that's basically what I've heard from my brother. And my parents, honestly."

"My parents would never admit that kind of thing to me." A low rumble of a laugh escapes Nick's lungs as he sits back in his seat, doing his best to get comfortable and brace himself for the long ride ahead. "My dad tried to give me shit for staying at Bex's last night, and I pointed out that if he noticed it meant he was up late, too." Slowly, he turns his head to the side to look at Gabe, a big victorious smirk across his face. "That shut him up pretty immediately."

Gabe laughs, again maybe too loud for the room that's not mostly entirely quiet. Their conversation has died down to a near-whisper, but obviously Gabe has a hard time keeping his laughter in check. Honestly, it's kind of endearing, even if Nick has to make a mental note to not be *too* funny so they don't get in trouble.

It'll be hard, but he'll manage somehow.

"My parents are kind of open books. At least, more than most parents are, I think." Gabe finally responds, readjusting his volume back down to something more appropriate. Nick watches as he shakes his head slowly. "I don't think they'd willingly admit to going out and partying around like animals, but I've definitely heard plenty about the *others* that do it."

"My parents are probably the *others*." Nick emphasizes the word in the same way that Gabe does, and they both snicker under their breaths—Gabe's laugh just a tiny bit louder, enough to mostly mask Nick's.

When she's finally set herself up, the speaker at the front of the room claps her hands together three times and directs the group's attention towards the projection screen, where it looks like she's finally figured out how the presentation is going to work. It's not exactly how Nick wants to spend his morning, but he has to admit that he's got to give the woman credit—she looks genuinely excited for whatever she's about to present to them, like she's really mastered the art of being a leader and keeping your employees in check.

In a weird sort of masochistic way, he's interested to see how she approaches the topic.

That interest only lasts about twenty minutes.

When he feels himself start to fade out and completely disconnect, he lets his head roll to the side to find Gabe's eyes again. Unfortunately for him, his friend is engrossed in the presentation—leaned forward, elbows digging into thighs with his head supported in his palms. At least for the time being, he's fascinated, and probably fantasizing about all the different ways he can go back to his parents' shop and be a better boss to his brothers. As much as Nick doesn't get it, he gets it, and he doesn't want to be the one to interrupt that.

Hey

He regrets sending it the moment he does, realizing now is not the time and place to open up this can of worms. He's bored, but he doesn't want to completely engross himself in a potentially annoying text conversation.

There's a glimmer of hope when it takes several minutes for her to respond, a lingering feeling that maybe she'll just ignore him, but the response does come.

how's vegas?

Cold, even for Erin.

Fun i guess,
really weird to be
back though

Still haven't
decided if i like
or hate it being
here at all

busy i bet,
surprised you had
time to text me

He almost doesn't want to respond, and just leave her on read. But it's hard to tell when Erin's being serious in general, much less over text, so he pushes forward.

In this conference right now, so fucking boring but my parents made me come

ah. i see, you're just bored

Oh for fuck's sake.

Yeah lol

you're 28, how are your parents still making you go?

Okay, they especially requested i attend this one in particular

you don't have any friends there to entertain you?

So she definitely doesn't want to talk. Good to know.

This one kid, my friend ryan's brother. He's here but he's kind of into it, so i'm SOL

that sucks, i'm sorry :/

It's cool i guess lmao. It'll be over in… 2.5 hours

good luck haha

Thanks. What're you up to?

He waits for a response, bouncing his leg against his chair anxiously. Now that he's here, in the conversation, he'd rather it extend into something normal, but it's almost painfully obvious that Erin has no interest in talking to him while he's gone. Maybe in person, once he's back in Boston, but even that's up in the air.

No response comes, and he waits longer. And still no response comes, so he stuffs his phone back into his pocket and pretends he didn't bother in the first place.

Quicker than he would have expected, maybe an hour into the meeting, Nick feels a nudge at his side and he glances back over at Gabe—the supposed instigator. Keeping himself busy and "entertained" in the meantime has consisted of people watching, staring off into space, and pretending to be anywhere but here, so the draw back into reality is a pleasant albeit unexpected one.

"I'm so fucking bored." Gabe whispers, leaning slightly into Nick to make sure he's the only one that hears it.

"Join the club." Nick offers in response, mirroring the lean. "I don't know a single thing this woman has said in the past hour."

"Nothing significant." Gabe sort of snorts under his breath, doing his best to stifle it. "I've been trying, I really have. But I can't do it."

Nick laughs, and there's another moment of silence before he can feel Gabe's eyes at the side of his head again. For a second, Gabe just waits there, nothing but the speaker's presentation to break the silence.

"Do you want to bail?" Gabe finally says, after boring holes into his temple.

"More than anything." Nick says without hesitation.

Immediately, Gabe starts moving, putting his things into his bag and getting his shit together to leave. Once he does, he lets his hands fall into his lap and leans into Nick one more time. "Meet me outside in, like, five. We can't make it obvious we're ditching."

"You're bringing all your stuff with you." Nick points out flatly.

"Shh. I'll see you in a minute." Gabe picks up his things, stands, and walks out quietly. Nick turns to watch him go, eyebrows raised.

By no means is he mad that this was Gabe's idea. The room was starting to feel stuffy, anyway.

Chapter 14— Gabe

He really, really wanted to like that conference meeting. Swear on his life, he really did.

At the end of the day, finding new ways to whip his younger brothers into shape sounds like a great idea. In theory, that's exactly the type of conference that should work. But when you're not actually running the show—when it's still his parents behind the business, not him—it just felt kind of moot. Pointless. They're his brothers, he's watched them grow up, and if they didn't want to listen to him then they wouldn't, regardless of his tactics or newly learned skills.

It only made sense to leave, and he wasn't about to leave Nick behind to fend for himself in there. It only took a quick glance to see that he was even more disinterested than Gabe was trying not to be. Had he left Nick on his own, he might not have ever forgiven himself.

Maybe that's just a bit dramatic, but he would have felt bad for sure.

"This was a good idea," Nick says through a bite of a Big Mac, the two of them seated firmly on the curb outside of a McDonald's. "Way more fun than being stuck inside, and the food is probably better than what they were offering, anyway."

Gabe munches on a couple fries and nods in agreement, waiting to swallow before he speaks. "Let's agree to never do another one of those things again." His gaze shifts to Nick, who's already looking at him with a grin on his face.

"You've got a deal. We just have to come up with a cover story for our parents."

"If we both have the same story it's more believable that we waited through the entire three hours."

They both laugh, and NIck brings up a good point. "Do our parents even know each other? Does it really matter?"

"Probably not," Gabe shrugs, and pops a few more fries into his mouth—this time, he doesn't wait to finish chewing them before he talks, muffling his words with stuffed cheeks. "But the thing is, if we've got the same story, we can point to each other as backup. If your dad thinks you're lying, you can just say 'ask Ryan's brother!' and he won't have any choice but to believe you."

"What if he thinks you're lying, too? My dad can be a very suspicious man."

"Well, then I tell him my parents made me go, too. So, then he can ask them if I really went, and they can say yes, and then he'll *really* have no choice."

"You make a compelling argument." Nick says, a look of delight on his face. Gabe can feel the color rise to his cheeks, proud of the compliment, even if it's over something stupid. "The thing is, you've forgotten one potentially vital detail."

"What?"

"That they probably don't fucking care." Nick grins, and Gabe shoves him hard in the arm. He barely moves, wobbles a little to the side in his seat, but otherwise stays stable.

"Okay, you don't have to be a dick."

"I'm just saying!" Another bite of his Big Mac, before he starts talking again. "They're probably out getting drunk at brunch or throwing their life savings away at the slot machines. It's not entirely unreasonable to think they might not actually care if we skipped two hours of what was essentially a college lecture."

"You make a good point."

"Especially when you consider the fact that they probably asked us to go specifically so that they could go do fun things without having us in their hair."

"That's an even better point. Kind of an annoying one, but not a bad one." Gabe admits that it's pretty sound thinking, even if the thought of it kind of annoys him. "But what about your sister? Or my brother? That kind of screws with your theory."

"My sister is too neurotic to not be doing something productive. When I got back to the hotel this morning, she was already showered, dressed, and halfway through breakfast by herself in the lobby. My parents don't need to worry about making her do shit." Nick shrugs, and Gabe watches as he swallows the bite of burger without hardly chewing it, almost a little fascinated. "And your brother is probably still asleep, if he can help it. So…"

Nick arches an eyebrow at Gabe, and Gabe has no choice but to admit defeat. He's been bested by a man he only met two days ago.

"You got me." He says, holding his palm his free palm up towards Nick. "I have no evidence against it."

"I'm brilliant." Nick says, looking up towards the sky, his arms going limp and barely hanging onto his burger between his knees. Clearly, basking in his own glory—a little conceited, but over something just dumb enough that it's adorable. "I should quit the shop and become a detective. Fuck account management."

Gabe snorts. "So eloquent."

"It's not like I've had any luck finding anything in my own field for months! Maybe it's time for a change."

"Detective work definitely sounds like more fun." Gabe agrees, nodding, looking into his almost empty carton of fries. "A lot more pressure, though. Can you handle that kind of heat?"

Nick looks back down and makes direct eye contact with Gabe. "Can I handle the heat? *Can I handle the heat?*" He repeats, for emphasis. Then, a long pause, and Gabe stays silent so that he can wait for an answer, anticipating whatever thrilling response might be thrown his way. Finally, after watching the gears turn in Nick's head for what feels like an eternity, he gets a response. A shrug. "Probably. Who knows."

"You're kind of a dumbass." Gabe says with a big, toothy grin. "And I mean that as a compliment. It's no wonder my brother likes you so much."

"Woah!" Nick immediately throws back at him, leaning to the side and further away from Gabe. "Damn, okay, there's no reason to be rude about it!" He pulls the burger back to his mouth, chomping down his biggest bite yet. Noticeably, the smile doesn't leave his face.

"I'm sorry, it wasn't meant to be rude." Blinking slowly, Gabe bows his head in a weak apology, knowing the both of them are just teasing. "It's just, if you have to think about whether or not you can handle all that criminal justice work, you probably can't. You know?" He shrugs, because what does he know? He's never worked as a detective. Except, there's no way anyone with even a sliver of self doubt has enough moxie to get into criminal justice. "It just makes sense to me that in order to be a detective, you've really got to be sure of yourself." He balls his hand into a fist and swings it upward in a hook, flexing his bicep to emphasize the point. "Be confident in your ability to solve any case, or some shit. I don't know."

He flashes a grin at Nick, who returns the smile mid chew.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter because detective work still can't hold a candle to the flowers." He leans in a taps the side of his elbow against his friend, still grinning, trying to convince him of something that he knows is a lost cause already. "Even if you don't think so."

"Yeah, yeah, don't get me started." Nick dismisses the point quickly and unsurprisingly. "I didn't have a problem with it when I was younger, but now I'm just bored and tired of it."

"That just makes me sad—that it bores you." Gabe says, not trying to convince him otherwise but feeling defeated over the fact that he knows he can't. "You're responsible for, like, the happiest days of people's lives. Weddings and birthdays and holidays and baby showers—the way I've always seen it, people would notice if there were no flowers at those kinds of things. Mother's Day would just be a day for moms everywhere to be upset and uncelebrated." He sighs. "The flowers might seem like tiny pieces of the puzzle, but I've always seen them as some of the most important ones, too. Like the corners. Have you ever noticed how much harder it is to complete a puzzle without the corners?"

"I've never really thought about it." Nick admits a little sheepishly. Gabe can hear the chuckle building in his chest.

“Well, it’s really fuckin’ hard! Just like how it’d be really hard to throw a wedding with no floral centerpieces. But if you’re *bored* about having to be a florist, sad even,” He huffs, a little fustrated, knowing he’s getting in his head about this now. “All your flowers are just gonna come out looking like funeral arrangements.”

He feels almost bad, lecturing Nick like this when he realizes it’s ultimately inconsequential and he’s probably being just the tiniest bit dramatic.

“You know, it’s funny,” Nick says, turning his body on the curb a little to better face Gabe. Big Mac still in hand, he uses the same fingers to point at Gabe. “My mother literally said those exact words to me a couple of months ago. I swear—’all your arrangements look like they’re made for a funeral.’ I didn’t really get what she was saying.”

“Funeral arrangements aren’t any fun.” Gabe is quick to point out. “They’re stifled, they have no room to breathe. Quite frankly, they’re not very pretty.”

He watches his friend nod thoughtfully, like he’s actually contemplating what Gabe’s said. For a moment, Gabe just watches intently, leaning forward on his knees, careful not to be obnoxious about it.

“Now that I think about it, you’re kind of right. They’re kind of lifeless, aren’t they?”

“Almost like some kind of sick joke.” Gabe nods with a tiny laugh, leaning back once more.

“I’ve never been a very good designer,” Nick turns to make eye contact with him again, and Gabe meets it happily. He doesn’t seem upset by the fact, just aware of it. Designing isn’t everyone’s strong suit, and even if it sounds rude in his own head Gabe will admit he didn’t strike Nick as someone who’d be particularly talented at making arrangements.

“Not everyone is.” He shrugs. “Ryan’s okay, I don’t know if my other brothers have ever even tried it. I’m sort of the prodigy in my family, after my mom taught me.”

“That’s my sister, Iris—when she actually gets up to it. Sophia is good technically, I think, but she’s too methodical. Even my dad has said that aout her, that it’s too much of an art form for her to be so anal about it.” He starts a laugh under his breath, but slowly it builds into something louder and more robust—not a fit by any means, but Nick’s clearly gotten up in his own head about whatever’s making him laugh. “Iris doesn’t give anything a second thought, which I guess is why she’s the best designer I’ve ever met.”

Gabe scrunches his brow at Nick, looking up at him defensively.. “Second best.” He reminds. “Just wait until I get a chance to show you what I can do—and unlike your sister, I *do* care about things.” He grins. “I’m just really good at doing what feels right in the moment, without second guessing.”

“Okay,” Nick says, patting his palms against his thighs with a loud exhale. “How about this? When you come to visit in Boston, we’ll throw a design-off. You versus my sister—same table, same selection of flowers. Winner gets… something, I don’t know.”

When you come to visit.

He doesn't know why, but the sentence stirs something in Gabe—an unfound confidence in how quickly this friendship has grown in a matter of days? The fact that Nick is willing to throw that possibility out into the world so casually? He'll be the last to admit that he even thinks twice about it, but—

"The extremely honorable title of Best Designer Nick—" Gabe cuts himself off, a flush of pink suddenly rising to his cheeks. "I'm just realizing now that I don't know your last name."

Nick laughs, loud. "Christopolous."

"Jesus that's Greek."

"Yeah, you don't have to tell me that."

They both laugh now, and the mood—which hadn't darkened all that much in the first place—lightens back up to where it was.

"Actually, while we're at it and because you'll probably fuck up the spelling—give me your phone."

"Huh?"

"Just give me your phone! I'm gonna put my number in, so you don't have to rely on your brother anymore."

Gabe's face sort of scrunches up in confusion, but he does as he's told and hands his phone over to Nick, who immediately goes into the contacts to start entering his info. "It's a 'C', not a 'K', by the way. In case you're looking for me."

"You could have just put 'Nick'." Gabe points out.

"You're really about to try and convince me that I'm the only Nick you've ever met?"

Gabe shrugs. "Okay. Fair."

"Anyway," Nick passes the phone back. "You're a free man, now. Released from the binding shackles of your brother's oppressive contact hoarding regime." He cackles at his own joke. "Also, your friend Felicia is calling you."

Gabe takes the phone and feels the buzz of the vibrate through his fingers, looking at the screen nearly perplexed. Maybe he should feel guilty, but he almost entirely forgot about Felicia now that he's here with Nick and—to be honest—part of him wants to just ignore the call.

Despite that, he hits answer.

"Hey!" He says excitedly as soon as he holds the phone up to his ear, offering Nick an apologetic look. He seems to take it in stride, waving Gabe off and turning his attention to his own phone.

"Where are you?" She says back. It's not cold, but there's no greeting. "I knocked on your door but you weren't there."

"Uh, my parents asked me to go to that leadership conference, remember?" He says, debating whether or not he should tell her that he bailed with Nick. But he knows if he lies, it'll just make him feel bad—and cause trouble later. "So, I went to that for a while, ran into Nick there, and we decided to ditch. We're outside a McDonald's right now."

"Oh, right. You're with Nick?" She says, and there's an excitement in her voice that just barely doesn't mask the sleep still in her voice, like she just woke up recently. "I completely forgot you were doing that. I thought we were both just sleeping in." She chuckles a little under her breath. "Did Ryan go, too?"

"No, just me." He shakes his head, even though she can't seem him. "They said something about how he didn't need to, since he doesn't work at the store full time. I don't know, I wasn't paying much attention to them." He giggles a little, looking over at Nick again. "It's just me and Nick right now."

You're welcome to join us, he almost says, but he realizes he doesn't really want to.

"Sounds fun." Her voice is flat, almost irritated but it's hard to tell with her. In general, but especially over the phone when he can't see her face. And she doesn't press further, either. "Not jealous about the conference, though. Are there any plans for tonight?"

Gabe raises an eyebrow, thinking. "I'm actually have no idea. I'd have to ask my brother."

"You can't ask Nick?" That's her annoyed tone, for sure. "If he's right there."

"I don't think he knows. He hasn't mentioned anything." Now Gabe's annoyed, too. "But I'll text Ryan and let you know when I do."

"Okay." She says, flat again until her voice picks up a little, before she goes. "Tell Nick I said hi?"

Gabe giggles again, having a hard time masking his amusement over her obvious infatuation. "Sure."

There's a tiny pause, then, "Okay, cool. Thank you." And without even saying goodbye, the line goes dead.

"Fe says hi", He says to Nick as soon as his phone back in his pocket. "She totally forgot I was supposed to be going to that thing earlier, so she sounded kind of sad that she's not getting to hang out with me right now."

Nick turns back to Gabe looking almost feral, the last remains of a Big Mac falling desperately out of his hands and onto the curb to his side. Rogue globs of whatever mystery sauce they put on the Big Mac are stuck high above his lip to the left and towards his cheek, and Gabe laughs, sort of confused over what happened in the span of a minute and a half phone call. "You could have invited her." Nick shrugs, mouth still full of food.

"Meh." There's not a beat missed when he responds, already prepared for the polite response. Truth is, he didn't want to—which is why he didn't. "Would have complicated things. This is more fun," He grins a

little. “And she’d probably just be screaming at you and trying to police you for how you ate that burger. You’ve got a little—” Gabe brushes his thumb across his upper lip, to the left.

Nick repeats the motion on his right, missing the sauce.

“No, other side.” Switching sides, Gabe swipes his thumb across the right of his lip—trying to prompt Nick to get his left side.

Nick mirrors the side properly now, but this time just uses his tongue, not even close to reaching the mess. “Did I get it?”

Gabe sighs, noticeably. It’s straight out of a fucking sitcom or romantic comedy. Kind of stupid, if you ask him..

He scoots in closer, dragging his butt along the concrete of the curb so he can reach out and run his thumb against Nick’s cheek, successfully picking up the stray sauce. He can’t help but roll his eyes a little.

What’s he supposed to do with it now? Suck it off of his thumb? Try and make cleaning Big Mac mystery sauce off a straight man’s face sexy? He hadn’t thought this far ahead.

He grabs a napkin from the nearby bag.

“Thanks. I got a little carried away.” Nick says, lighting up with a dopey smile and stuffing his garbage into the now empty paper bag. A hand extends to take the napkin from Gabe, and he offers it up without hesitating. Quickly, Nick stands and power walks to the trash to ditch it all. With a head turn back towards Gabe, he calls out to him. “What do you want to do now?”

“World’s our oyster, I guess.” Needlessly, he checks the time. “We’re still technically supposed to be in that seminar or whatever, for like another hour and a half. So we definitely have some time to kill.”

With a hard thump, Nick’s seated back down next to him, closer now than he was before. “Hmm,” He hums idly, mindlessly. Gabe watches his eyes wander—from the concrete beneath them, to the clouds above them, to the city out in front. “It’s probably too early to go to a bar, right?”

Gabe gives him a funny look. “It’s like eleven-thirty in the morning.”

“Yeah.” Nick shrugs. “I don’t really want to do that either.”

“Are you a gambler?” Gabe asks, though admittedly he doesn’t want to do that at 11:30 in the morning, either. Nick shakes his head.

“It’s fine, but it feels kind of early for that, too.”

“Glad we’re on the same page. Which seems silly, because we’re in Vegas. But,” Gabe shrugs, and starts typing away at his phone.

After a moment of silent thinking between the two of them, he speaks up again.

“Okay, don’t judge me.” Gabe says cautiously, not really afraid of Nick’s judgement but wary of it anyway. “But how do you feel about going to an arcade?”

Another brief pause, and then Nick’s face lights up at the potential. “Oh, that sounds so fun.”

“There’s this place called GameWorks nearby, it’s almost like, um, Dave & Buster’s. I’ve only been to one once, in Seattle, when I was a kid, but it was really fun and—”

“Dude,” Nick leans in towards Gabe, bumping him and promptly shutting him up. “You don’t have to convince me, I’m in. Let’s go.”

It’s only a few more seconds before a Lyft is ordered.

—

There’s something really magical about an arcade that Gabe is convinced any person, video game enthusiast or not, can enjoy and appreciate. The flashing neon lights; the bubbling, exciting atmosphere; the inherent competitive nature of trying to win way more tickets than the people you showed up with; it’s not that Gabe is a frequent arcade-goer, but he’s seen them transform even the grumpiest and unconvinced people into little kids again.

By that, he mostly means he’s seen Felicia enjoy herself way more than she thought she would at an arcade.

There’s a sense of relief that washes over him when he doesn’t have to convince Nick that this is a good idea, and that’s good because he knows it is—even if it seems a little silly or juvenile in the grand scheme of things. Even better, he knows Ryan will be jealous, probably more jealous than he has any right to be, and the sweet, sweet knowledge of that in and of itself is enough to make the trip here worth it.

As soon as they’re inside, Nick seems eager to prove how much of a Skee-Ball master he is. Honestly, Gabe can’t help but be intrigued.

“Watch,” He instructs after finding the machines almost immediately, like he’s got some kind of Skee-Ball tracker implanted in his brain. Carefully and with his first ball in hand, he points a single finger at Gabe’s face, then turns towards the machine and point it down straight at the one hundred point hole in the corner. “And learn.”

Gabe just raises an eyebrow, gesturing towards the machine and prompting his friend to get a move on. He wants to see this.

First ball thrown, and he sticks the landing perfectly. “See? What did I tell you?”

Shifting his full weight from one leg to the other skeptically, Gabe crosses his arms and stares Nick down. His technique might looked impressive, sure, but it was one ball. Could have been a fluke, easy, and Nick’s going to need to do a lot more to impress him. “Okay, congrats. You’ve still got eight balls left, so.” Quickly, Gabe’s eyes flick down to look at the remaining ammunition.

It's clear by the immediate fire in Nick's eyes that he takes this as a challenge.

The next three balls he scoops up in one fell swoop—cradling them in his arm like a baby—and throws them up the incline fast, like he's trying to prove something. Gabe doesn't care how *fast* Nick can prove himself, but clearly the man has different plans and Gabe isn't going to stop him, that's for sure. After all, it's really endearing how eager Nick seems to show off this one specific completely obscure, not very relevant skill.

All three of the balls land perfectly into their targets, and now Gabe is slightly more interested and engaged. "Not bad." He says, nodding, playing it off maybe a bit too cavalier.

"*Not bad*?" Nick asks, offended. "Four in a row isn't good enough for you?" He looks at Gabe sort of desperately, then his face scrunches up in a determined kind of anger and he takes the remaining five balls for his game in his arms at once.

"I mean, it's good." Gabe teases, biting his tongue between his teeth now, knowing full well he's being more provocative than he needs to be. "But you said you were a master. Anyone can land four one hundreds."

"But *in a row*?" Nick emphasizes the point again.

"Maybe it was lucky. How am I supposed to know?" Gabe keeps his arms crossed, staying faux skeptical until the last minute.

"Ugh," Nick groans, turning back to face the machine but leaning back, so the weight of his head causes it to fall backwards, limp. "You're the worst. I thought we were supposed to be friends."

Gabe lets out an amused snort and chooses to only further Nick's despair. "I'm only friends with Skee-Ball masters. If you can't prove that you are, then we never were in the first place."

A long, deep, contemplative exhale whistles out of Nick's nose, but he finally straightens himself up and turns to look at Gabe in the eye once more. He doesn't say a word, just keeps their eyes locked until he turns to face the machine again. He lines himself up, and—

Another.

And another.

And another.

And another.

Finally, the last ball sinks snugly into the hundred point target slot, and Nick pumps his fists into the air once, holding them up high. "Ha ha ha! What did I tell you?"

Gabe slow claps, taking a few steps forward closer to the machine and his now confirmed Skee-Ball master friend. "Okay, you've proven yourself, you win. *Very* impressive." The truth is, Gabe actually is

impressed—but he'd much rather play it off cool and pretend it's only mild fascination. It's clear that Nick is competitive enough where that kind of response is what's going to be the most fun.

"I told you I'm a champion." Nick repeats his excitement, leaning down to wait for his tickets to emerge.

"Oh, it's all digital now." Gabe says.

"Huh?"

"The tickets, they all get added to the swipe card you use to play the games."

Nick looks like he short circuits for a minute, his brain processing this new information. "Okay," He says, slow and drawn out. "Convenient, I guess, but that's so *lame*. Getting actual, physical tickets is the most fun part of even coming to an arcade."

"I agree, but it's a paper thing, I think."

"That's so sad. That means I couldn't even given you my tickets if I wanted to."

Gabe looks up at Nick, hand pressed to his heart. "Aw," He says, sincerely now. "Were you going to give me your tickets?"

Nick meets Gabe's eyes with a look of confusion, almost offended. "What? No way, of course not!" He laughs. "But if I wanted to, I couldn't now."

Gabe responds by blushing. Hard.

He waits another moment, thinking about it. "Actually that might be the point."

"Why would that be the point? That doesn't make any sense." Nick furrows his brow at Gabe. "It just seems like a convenience thing. And maybe a way to save paper, like you said."

"Yeah, sure. But also," He stuffs his hands in his pockets. "If you can't share, you can't save up for something with someone else, you know? Like, if you really wanted a giant stuffed teddy bear, you'd have to earn all those tickets *on your own*."

"Huh."

Gabe continues. "And I couldn't be a good friend and say 'Here, take mine, I don't need them for anything.' Which means that it's way more difficult to get those big ticket items. AKA, you have to spend way more money to do it. *AKA*, the arcade earns more money for the same amount of customers."

"God damn." Dumbfounded, Nick looks at his game card, theoretically counting the virtual tickets inside. "That's so evil, but it makes so much sense."

"I don't know if I'd go so far as to say it's evil—"

Clearly completely engrossed in this concept now, Nick cuts Gabe off. “You figured that out so quick, though.” He says, impressed enough to point it out. Gabe really didn’t think much of it, but maybe it’s a good thing considering how impressive Nick was at Skee-Ball. An eye for an eye, as they say.

“Yeah, well,” Unsure of how else to respond to the compliment, he just shrugs.

“Would you be interested in starting a detective agency with me?”

“What?”

“Earlier, when I was talking about being a detective.” Nick grins wide, like he’s actually onto something. Like he’s going somewhere serious with this. “And you asked if I could handle the heat. Remember?”

It was like an hour ago, of course he remembers.

Not bothering to wait for an answer, Nick continues. “Well, I wouldn’t have to handle all the heat with a co-detective, and clearly you’ve proven yourself as more than capable. Plus, it’d be a lot easier working with a friend.”

Gabe laughs. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Nick claps his hands together, looking like he’s genuinely convinced himself of this idea. Gabe knows—hopes—he’s just playing a stupid game, but a tiny piece of him is worried that somehow, in a matter of thirty seconds, Nick has deluded himself into thinking that the two of them are going to be successful detectives. “It’s decided.”

“No it’s not?”

“You’ll be the brains, and I’ll be the slightly lesser brains and the brawn. It’s perfect.”

“Wait, hold on. I can’t be the brawn, too?”

“Well,” Nick pauses for a moment, stops walking entirely and Gabe stops with him. The two of them turn to face each other, and Nick gives Gabe a good once-over. Gabe can see him pressing the tip of his tongue into his cheek, deep in thought. “I mean, I guess you could. But you’re short.” Nick finally says.

Gabe goes bug-eyed. “What does that have to do with being strong?”

They both start walking again, Gabe deciding he wants to take a stab at an old Dance Dance REvolution machine and turning in the direction of the one he sees in the distance. Nick follows close behind, unquestioning.

“I mean, I guess it doesn’t, really. But, look at me.” Dramatically, he flexes his biceps, and as much as Gabe doesn’t *want* to look, his gaze has been requested. He must, for his friend.

He watches the muscle flex underneath the the sleeves of Nick’s t-shirt, straining the fabric just slightly, and he has to catch himself before he stares too long.

“Like, clearly, I’m the brawn.” Nick continues to grin like an idiot, and admittedly it makes Gabe laugh, too. “Just compared to you. I didn’t mean for it to be offensive!”

Gabe shakes his head, too amused to even feign anger or annoyance. “No offense taken. I mean, you’re not wrong. I just don’t know why you get to be brains *and* brawn, but I only get to be brains.”

“Oh.” It’s clear Nick hadn’t considered this. “Well, it wouldn’t really work if I was just brawn. I would be a terrible detective.”

“But,” Gabe bites back almost immediately, raising a finger as if to raise a point. “You’d be really good at catching perps.”

“Yeah,” Nick nods, slowly, lost in thought over the idea. Gabe decides he’s going to let NIck live this fantasy out until he gets bored of it. No use in squashing it now, when he seems so excited. “I guess I would be.”

He doesn’t dismiss it as a joke, so Gabe is fully prepared to be hit with a bill later this year declaring that Nick has put down a deposit on a building for them to operate out of.

“Okay Mr. Brawn.” Gabe says, skeptic once more. “Do you think all that strength can help you beat me at DDR?”

Nick eyes the machine carefully, the speakers blasting snippets of the song selection as it cycles through them, waiting for someone to actually play. When he was a kid, he always hated how loud these machines could be when they were in a public space, but now he’s kind of appreciating it. “It’s been a while,” Nick finally says, speaking up so he can be heard above the song samples. “But yeah, probably.”

Once again, Gabe sees a competitive fire light in Nick’s eyes. Unlike with the Skee-Ball, though, it’s matched in Gabe’s own. He steps up onto the dance pad excitedly, placing his feet on the right and left pointing arrows and pulling out his own game card. “Here, my treat.” He says, leaning forward to swipe the card, activating the game. It nearly shouts at him, and before long it’s asking him to pick a song.

Gabe nods towards the selection screen. “Your choice.”

“No, no.” Nick insists, gesturing towards the screen as he steps onto the opposite dance pad. Gabe watches as Nick finds his position, looking down at his own feet as he figures out the footing. This will be a piece of cake. “You paid, you get first pick.”

“You’re gonna regret it,” Gabe smirks, scrolling down to find it—the quintessential DDR song. The one everyone remembers from their childhood. The one he’s confident he’s got the muscle memory to absolutely slay without trying.

“Butterfly” by SMiLE.dk.

To his left, he can hear Nick snort through his nose. He can’t tell if this is Nick’s way of mocking his choice—despite the fact that he insisted Gabe pick—or if its a false sense of confidence that he’s got this in the bag. Gabe supposes they’re about to find out.

As the song starts and picks up and Gabe's feet start to move, he gets lost in the rhythm of a decades-old pop song that had no business being as popular as it was. As two white Swedish women sing proudly about their search for a samurai—*someone who is strong, but still a little shy*—Gabe's feet feel like they start to move on their own, disconnected from his brain. It's been a while for him, too, and it takes a minute to get back into the swing of the game. He knows not to overthink every movement, because he'll only start tripping over himself. But, once he's got it, he's confident that he's *got it*.

"*COMBO!*" The machine shouts at him. It might be a lifeless compliment, but it ultimately fuels him anyway. Now that he's on a roll, he can't break it.

Before long, the song is over, and when he hits the final beat he realizes that he has no idea how Nick performed. He didn't bother looking over at him once to see how he was doing, didn't want to risk messing himself up or fumbling on the possibility that Nick might have been keeping up with him.

It only takes a few seconds for the results screen to pop up, but when it does Gabe looks on in horror.

"Four hundred? You beat me by four hundred points?"

"Actually, it's four hundred and thirty five." Nick grins over at Gabe, clearly proud of himself—both for winning, and the quick math.

"That's, like, literally one extra combo over me!" Gabe shouts, a little frustrated. This all feels rigged, suddenly. "Are you some kind of arcade god?"

"I don't think so," Nick says casually, leaning back against the metal support bar behind the dance pads. "But I played a lot of video games when I was younger. Still do, honestly. I've got some experience under my belt."

"You never told me this." Gabe crosses his arms, a little pouty. He'll be over it in a second, but he was really expecting to win that one.

"You never asked!" Nick laughs, and pushes himself off the bar, towards the screen and the card swipe. "I thought the immediate enthusiasm to come to an arcade would be enough of a hint. Do you wanna go one more round?"

Gabe purses his lips to one side, thinking. Does he want to risk losing again? Apparently, it's not like it'll be any different at a different machine. And he figures he's got enough energy in him for one more dance. He nods. "Yeah, but winner pays."

"Winner also picks the song." Another laugh while he swipes his card, then returns to his spot on the arrows.

"Yeah, yeah." Gabe begrudgingly agrees, nodding towards the display. "Just pick something good, please."

After a bit of scrolling, he picks another iconic song from the franchise, and "A Little Bit of Ecstasy" by Jocelyn Enriquez starts blaring too loudly through the speakers.

Chapter 15— Nick

If he knew it wouldn't piss off his friends, Nick would rather be napping right now.

He and Gabe had spent way longer at the arcade than he thinks either of them had anticipated, and while the initial plan had been to blow enough time there to officially be "done" with the conference they were meant to be at, it was hours after that it hit them they could leave. And another hour after before they decided they wanted to.

And as much fun as winning was, absolutely dominating at every cabinet and wiping the floor with Gabe was exhausting work, and Nick needed some rest that he knew he wasn't going to get before he had to see the rest of his group.

The post-victory high was short lived, though, and officially killed when his father started asking him how it went.

"Fine, Dad. Mostly stuff that felt self-explanatory, anyway."

"Did you take notes?" HIs father asks, which feels almost ironic when he asks from behind a glass of ouzo.

"I didn't even bring a notebook. Why would I have taken notes?"

"How are you supposed to remember everything you learned without taking notes?"

Nick shakes his head and laughs. "Like I said, it was mostly self-explanatory anyway. I think taking notes might have been overkill."

"Hm." His father hums, bringing the flass to his lips. "You better hope you're right, or your sister is going to end up running the shop better than you."

Getting increasingly annoyed, Nick rolls his eyes. How is it not obvious that that's *exactly what he wants*?

He sighs. "Yeah, I think it was fine. The lady seemed super excited."

His father gives him a belly laugh, and nods before changing the subject. "Why are you back so late?"

Thank God he'd already prepared for this question. "You know my friend Ryan? His brother was there, too. We were both hungry after so we went to get something to eat."

"You were gone a long time." A quirked eyebrow, but Nick knows exactly how to get his father off his back. He's lived with the man long enough.

"We went to a bar, so we kind of lost track of time."

Another loud belly laugh, and a long drawn out sip of his drink. The laugh is enough of an indication that his father gets it, but he doesn't say another word, even when Nick waits patiently for a response.

He looks around the room idly, wondering where his sister is. What his parents are going to be up to tonight. And how much longer he has to sit here before he has permission to leave. When another thirty

or so seconds pass and silence still fills the air, he speaks up. “I’m gonna go now, I’m meeting some of my friends in a bit and I need to get ready.”

“Go, boy. Go.” His father waves him off dismissively, like he’d been expecting him to leave anyway. It’s amazing what a day of drinking and doing nothing will do to this man. “Don’t forget there’s another conference we’re all going to tomorrow. The one about how to better organize your store, or something.”

He almost wants to laugh, knowing full well that his father is too stubborn to listen to tips about store optimization and customer journeys. “Yeah, I won’t forget. Don’t worry.”

“You better not. Now go! Your mother are going to dinner soon, anyway.”

He bids his father a weak farewell, and checks his phone for any updates on tonight. Two texts from Leon, and one from Roxie.

He shifts focus to text Gabe.

Apparently, we’re
going bowling
tonight

—

“I told you!” Leon shouts, maybe the loudest he’s been since they’ve arrived in Vegas. “I told you I’m good!” He points towards Bex, who’s currently taking up three of the chairs for their lane by laying full chaise lounge across them. She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms and playing like she doesn’t care.

“You got *two* strikes. Big whoop.”

“In a row!” He corrects her, now point his fingers up at the frame display above them. “In a *row*! And it’s two more strikes than you have!”

“It’s frame three, Leon.” Jared points out quietly, smiling, sitting opposite of Bex. “Wait until you have a few more beers and we’ll see how good you really are.”

“You guys are the worst. You know I’m good.” Leon sticks his lower lip out in a dramatic pout, stomping over to an empty seat and pulling out his phone to give the impression that he’s ignoring them.

“I thought he was supposed to be the calm, cool, collected one?” Nick overhears Felicia ask Gabe, and Gabe’s face lights up in a confused laugh, nodding as he eyes Leon.

“We all have our moments.” Gabe points out, still recovering. “Clearly, his weakness is how much pride he takes in his bowling skill.”

For a brief moment, Nick catches Gabe’s eyes turn to him, and they exchange a knowing look. Gabe, knowing that Nick can hear them. Nick, knowing that Gabe is clearly shitting on him for how good he was at the arcade earlier.

Felicia nods, and Nick turns back to his focus on his other friends—the ones he hadn't seen all day.

"Gabe told me you guys skipped that thing earlier. The leadership… whatever." Ryan says, peering down into the neck of his beer bottle with one eye. Nick's not really sure what he's doing, but he swirls the drink around a few times before taking another swig from it.

"Yeah, it was kind of bullshit." Nick mirrors the sip. "I was checked out from the beginning, but your brother tried for like… twenty minutes. The woman leading it was enthusiastic about it, but that almost made it worse. I couldn't get into it."

"I get that." Roxie says, looking comfortable with her feet kicked up onto the low table in front of them, shoes dangerously close to Nick's order of mozzarella sticks. He leans in and pulls them away, indulging in one while he's at it. "If someone's too excited about something I think is dumb, it doesn't make me any more interested."

Nick points a half eaten cheese stick at his friend, still chewing. "Exactly." His words are muffled by the food in his mouth, but he doesn't bother with the manners—especially around Roxie, who was just seconds ago centimeters away from imprinting the pattern on the bottom of her bowling shoe into his fried cheese. "It's like, 'I'm glad you're into it but I'm having a really hard time understanding why.' I just made me want to leave faster."

"Personally," Ryan speaks up again, setting his beer down and leaning forward onto his knees, turning to look up at them both. "I think all these conferences are kind of just an excuse to hold the event in the first place. Like, they can't just have the convention without doing anything for it, but nobody really cares about going to things that are planned for it. Maybe the big luncheon, but otherwise…"

"Oh, don't say that." Nick laughs. "My parents definitely care. I think."

"That's an oxymoron." Roxie points out.

"What? No it's not."

"You *think* they *definitely* care. Either they definitely do, or you think they do."

"You're being too literal." Nick says, and Ryan nods in agreement.

She fights back. "It just doesn't make sense!" A couple of their other friends turn to look at what's getting her riled up, but quickly lose interest.

"Anyway," Nick decides to continue the conversation, not wanting to give Roxie any more credence than she already has. "My parents *definitely* care, even if they sometimes act like they don't. I'm pretty sure in terms of things that make fulfill their life, it's the store, then Iris, then me and Sophia."

Ryan laughs. "Mine are similar, I think. It's me, then the store, then Marcus and Luke and Jordan, then Gabe." He says it with confidence, but as soon as it comes out of his mouth his eyes dart over to Gabe, like he's afraid he's about to incite some ancient dormant wrath within his brother.

Lucky for them, he's too caught up in his own conversation to have even heard.

"That's surprising," Nick says, nonchalantly. "Because based on what I've heard, Gabe makes that whole store happen in the first place."

"You spend a lot of time talking to my brother? You're an expert on my parents' store now?" It's not really an accusation, but it's kind of an accusation, lighthearted as it is.

"We spent the whole day together, Ryan." Nick says flatly. "You can learn a lot about a person and their life in twenty four hours."

"Damn." Roxie nods along as if Nick's said something actually profound and philosophical, when in reality it sounded stupid even coming out of his own mouth. "That's deep."

"No it's not." Ryan quips back. "Because I'm obviously the favorite, even if Gabe is holding down the fort."

"And so humble, too." Roxie rolls her eyes.

Ryan ignores her. "And I think my parents do care about this stuff, but they pretend they don't. Like, they'll act all casual and whatever about it, but then at the end of the day they're the ones that are furiously scribbling notes at each meeting."

"Wait, do people actually take notes?" Nick's eyes go wide, and he laughs. "I seriously thought my dad was joking when he suggested that."

"Only the crazy ones, and even they try to hide it like my parents." Ryan chuckles. "I don't think most people are that involved. The ones that are know they're the nerds of the group."

"Your parents *are* nerds." Roxie points out, and Nick has to stifle a laugh.

"Only kind of!" Ryan half-defends, though he doesn't sound very convinced. "We're from San Francisco, what do you expect?"

"Hippie Californians." Nick says without skipping a beat.

"They own a flower shop, Nicholas." Ryan says back, not even having to think about it. "They *are* hippie Californians."

"Fair point."

Without Nick realizing, Gabe approaches the group from behind him, Felicia in tow. His hands grip the back of Nick's chair, and he leans forward slightly to speak to Ryan. "Don't talk about our parents like that." It sounds serious, but Nick can hear the lightheartedness in his voice. "Being a florist doesn't mean you're a hippie."

"Maybe not in, like, Boston," Ryan defends, gesturing towards Nick—who's clearly no hippie. "But in California? I dunno, kinda seems like it doesn't it?"

Roxie interrupts them all, pointing out something that, to Nick, doesn't make any sense but to the rest of them seems to land profoundly. "It's twenty twenty, guys. Aren't we all kind of hippies at this point?"

They all nod along, and Nick furrows his brow. "That's kinda dumb."

They all laugh.

Behind him, Nick can feel Gabe pat the back of his chair with his palm a few times. "Anyway, Ryan, are you gonna take your turn or are we supposed to just sit here for an hour waiting for you to be done with your conversation?" Nick looks back at him, and watches Gabe nod toward the point display up top—Ryan's name highlighted in gold.

"Oh, shit!" He stands, quickly. "Why didn't anyone tell me it was my turn?"

"I think you're supposed to be paying attention for yourself." Gabe says back.

"I think you're supposed to be paying attention for yourself." Ryan mocks him back, hurrying quickly over to the ball return to find the one he was using. Nick watches Gabe roll his eyes.

"You're so dumb." Gabe says, right as Ryan is throwing his ball down the lane, presumably to throw him off. And as much as Nick thinks it shouldn't work—

Gutterball.

"That was your fault!" Ryan points his finger accusingly at Gabe, with Gabe just smirking stupidly back at him, arms crossed. He looks almost proud of himself.

"You can't prove that." He shrugs, and from behind Felicia snickers, her face going red.

"This is the dumbest argument I've ever seen in my life." Comes a voice from beside him, Roxie leaning in to whisper into his ear.

"Agreed, but it's kind of entertaining." Nick whispers back. "My whole life has been sisters fighting, and it always involves a lot more screaming. So I'm kind of enjoying this."

"I'm sure it's not that bad." Roxie says dismissively.

"You're an only child."

Weirdly enough, Roxie shuts up and leans back in her chair.

"Just know that if you beat me now, it doesn't count. It's totally invalid." Ryan continues, clearly ready to die on this hill. Nick's prepared to watch him do it, too.

"I was gonna beat you, anyway, so it doesn't even matter."

Nick turns to look at the rest of his group, who don't even seem to notice the fraternal verbal deathmatch that's happening in front of them. Which is fair, it's probably because it's stupid and inconsequential.

“Plus,” Gabe continues, finding a seat and crossing one leg gracefully over the other. Unbothered. Impressive. “You still have another ball. It’s still your turn.”

Felicia laughs again, and Ryan looks up at the frame. “Oh. Right. Yeah.”

“I promise I’ll keep my mouth shut this time.” Gabe says, pinching his thumb and index finger together and running the tips across his lips, zipping them closed.

“Good.” Ryan says, sort of dark and low. Nick’s going to be genuinely impressed if he’s worked himself up to being actually mad over this.

When the ball returns spits Ryan’s ball back out at him, he takes it quickly and rears back his arms in what might be the most focused throw of a bowling ball that Nick has ever seen. The focus works, and the ball goes zooming straight down the middle of the lane, connecting with the front most pin at just the right angle to send the rest of them tumbling down quickly. Ryan pumps his fists into the air, turning and pointing at Gabe.

“See that? Strike!”

From a few feet away, Nick hears Bex speak up, addressing Leon. “Look at that, you’re not the only one who can do that.” She laughs, and Leon groans.

A few feet across, Gabe points up at the monitor. “Technically, on your second throw it’s always a spare.” He grins, and Ryan’s face drops.

“What the fuck? Really?”

—

“Please don’t tell me your brother is really mad over a stupid gutterball.” Nick says, passing a cider to Gabe as he joins him at the bar.

“I don’t think so. He better not be.” Gabe takes it, takes a small sip, and scoots the barstool in closer to the counter, until the edge is pressing gently into his stomach. He leans his elbows onto it and laughs. “He’s just dramatic, I think.”

“Must run in the family.”

It takes a second for it to hit Gabe, but once it does he leans back, eyebrows angry. Face aghast. “I am not dramatic!”

From behind his beer, Nick turns to look at Gabe with a single raised eyebrow.

Gabe realizes his mistake, and settles back into his seat.

“I’m just teasing.” Nick clarifies, setting his glass back down on the counter with a loud clunk. “I’ve known Ryan for years now, I know he’s dramatic. He always tries to play like he’s really aloof and emotionless but I think he’s the most dramatic of any of us in this group. It’s kind of hilarious, I think.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.” Gabe takes another sip.

After a quick beat, Nick speaks up again. “What’s up with your friend Felicia, by the way? She seemed cool the night we met but she didn’t come last night and now she seems really quiet.”

Gabe shrugs, really passive, clearly not putting too much thought or stock into it. “I think she’s kind of mad at me, maybe? I feel kind of bad but I also don’t think she really has a reason to be, so I’m trying to mostly just ignore it.”

“Why would she be mad at you?”

“For starters, I think she expected the two of us to just spend the week together, alone. Just hang out by ourselves. Even though she’s been more than welcome to everything with you guys, I think she’s bugged that I’m getting along with you all so well.”

“That’s stupid.” Nick says, thinking for a moment. He watches Gabe take another, longer sip.

“Yeah. Also,” He chuckles a little under his breath. “I think she gets really nervous around you. And she’s mad I’m specifically becoming friends with you.”

He almost wants to be offended, but he realizes quickly that it’s probably not malicious. After thinking for another second or two, he dares to ask, “Why is she nervous around me?”

“You’re very intimidating.” Gabe says without another thought.

Is he? Nick always considered himself pretty laid back.

As if Gabe can read his mind (or the look of worry on his face), he does a quick course correct and re-answers with a laugh. “No, actually, I think she’s just really into you.”

“Oh.” Nick breathes out a sort of weak laugh, staring down into his glass for a moment, before speaking up again. “Really?” As if he believes the point about him being intimidating more.

“Yeah. She basically told me, without telling me.” Gabe looks at him. “Can’t really blame her. I think she said something like ‘the physical embodiment of tall, dark, and handsome,’ and she’s not necessarily wrong.”

He doesn’t want to admit it, but he can feel the heat rise to his own cheeks, and almost as if Gabe catches it, he turns away.

“Well, thank you. That’s really nice.” Nick musters out, taking another long drawn sip of his own beer. “Now I feel almost bad.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, because I didn’t realize, I guess?”

“I mean, that’s not, like, your responsibility.”

"Yeah, but if she's been nervous because of me—"

"That's on her, though." Gabe reassures him. "That's not your fault. You can't feel bad about that."

"I don't want her getting her hopes up, though." He says, almost somber. It's direct enough that he can see Gabe taken aback a bit, like he wasn't expecting such a forward rejection of the idea so outright, even if not to her face. "Like, I'm not trying to be mean but I barely know her. I don't want her just thinking I'm into her, too."

He watches Gabe purse his lips for a moment, clearly considering what to say next, wanting to be careful of how to approach this. "I don't think she necessarily thinks you two are just going to get hitched, or anything." He chuckles, obviously trying to bring a little light to the situation. "I think she just thinks you're really, really handsome, and really likes the idea of you two being together. Like, she's *in love* with you but she's not actually in love with you. Does that make sense?"

"I think so?" It makes him laugh, so that's something. "Yeah, I think I get it."

Gabe continues. "Let me put it this way, I guess. She wasn't expecting to ever see you again, and she got really excited when she found out you were gonna be here because she thinks you're really hot. Like, I don't think she was expecting to marry you, but when she found out you were back she wouldn't shut up about it because suddenly it was like, a fleeting reality again."

"Okay, yeah. That makes sense."

"Does that help?"

"A little." Nick admits, taking another sip of his beer, which is nearly empty at this point. As soon as the bartender swings by again, he's getting another. "It's silly, but thanks."

"No problem." Gabe says, with a smile, picking up his own drink again and leaning back against the counter of the bar.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be weird about it." The apology comes without thinking, and he feels almost stupid for saying it as soon as it comes out of his mouth.

"What? You don't have anything to be sorry for. You're not being weird."

"I just know she's your friend, I'm not trying to be, like… a dick."

"You're not, I promise." Gabe reassures him once again, and suddenly Nick's very appreciative that it's Gabe who joined him at the bar, instead of literally anyone else from the group.

"I've only ever had, like, two girlfriends in my life. I don't think about that kind of thing that often, and I don't know how to deal with people being into me." He laughs, a little nervously, blushing again. "So I sort of freeze up when it happens. I know that's dumb."

"It's not dumb, I get it." Gabe laughs, taking everything Nick says in stride—another thing to appreciate about him. "It's sort of the same being gay. Like, you never *expect* the people you're into to like you back because, y'know." He shrugs. "So it's always sort of like 'wait, really?' when they do."

"That makes sense." Nick says, realizing he hadn't even considered that. He's glad Gabe gets it, probably even more than he does. Which also kind of makes him feel bad, too. But Gabe's not turning it into a pissing contest of who's dating experience is worse, so he shakes the thought. "I'm sorry to hear that, I never really thought about that. But it sounds kind of shitty."

Gabe shrugs. "You get used to it. I don't really want to dwell on it—just makes finding a person you really like more special, I guess."

It's followed by a laugh, but Nick's not sure if that really makes sense to him.

Gabe continues on though, changing the focus of the subject back onto Nick. "Not to pry, but now I'm curious. Is one of those two girlfriends you've had a current girlfriend? Is that why you're not interested in Fe?"

Nick can't help the red that rises to his cheeks even more now, and he runs his hand through his thick hair to distract himself. "No, no. Like I said, I just barely know her, that's all." He sighs. "I had this sort of on-again, off-again relationship with this girl back home, but I don't know. It's off right now, and I don't think I really want it to be on again."

"Well," Gabe grins wide, sounding like he's ready to reveal some unspoken truth that only he knows of. "Lucky for you, if you don't want it to be, then it doesn't have to be."

Apparently, that's exactly what Gabe was read to do. Nick had no idea! It gets a good laugh out of him before he responds, swirling the last dregs of his beer in his glass before polishing it off. "I guess you're right, it doesn't. I just always end up going back to her, some way or another. I've known her for forever, so she's in my life whether I like it or not."

"That doesn't have to be true, either." Gabe raises an eyebrow, skeptical. "If you don't want her to be in your life, she doesn't have to be."

"I have no idea if I actually want her in my life, though. I like her, just in general. I think."

Gabe's eyebrow moves higher up on his forehead. "Okay, well. Figuring out whether or not you definitely like her is a good place to start. Just as a friend."

"I guess that's true." Nick raises his empty glass to Gabe, who shakes his head.

"No, don't toast me with an empty glass. It's offensive."

"It is?" No lie, this is not something he's ever heard of before in his life.

"Yeah. Something about offending the gods, since raising a glass is a tribute to them. Same with water. If you've got either of those, just forego the toast entirely. You can Google it, it's a thing."

“Isn’t that kind of rude to the person you’re toasting?”

“Tell me, Nick.” Gabe looks him dead in the eye, serious now—all remnants of their previous conversation gone. “Would you rather a friend be mad at you, or be smitten with lightning by the gods?”

Nick raspberrys out a stupid laugh, which turns into his not-really-an-answer. “I mean, when you put it that way…”

“That’s what I thought.”

A moment of silence, before Nick speaks up again. “You’re pretty smart, Gabe.” He says—mostly referring to the previous conversation, though the one about being smitten is fairly clever, too.

“Thanks,” He responds with a humble smile, turning proud quickly. “Had to make up for Ryan somewhere, right?”

Chapter 16— Nick

Day four of the convention is, for Nick, easily the most boring. When he wakes up, he’s starting to realize that the week is coming to a close, and that he’ll have to fly back to Boston soon enough and leave his friends behind again. There’s something sort of solemn about it, and about the way the day suddenly feels from the get-go.

Vegas has been a nice distraction from the reality that he’s back to working with his family, even if that’s the reason he’s here in the first place. He’s not looking forward to going back to just dealing with the store in Boston.

More importantly, he’s starting to realize that he doesn’t have a ton back home anymore—his best friend moved away, and his relationship with his other best friend is half based on the idea that sometimes they start dating again. Having a full-time job that wasn’t tied to his personal life kept that from really feeling like it was such a big deal, but now that it’s the thing he has to actually return to? It’s coming at him like an eighteen wheeler.

He’s not looking forward to it.

By the time he gets himself out of bed, showered, and dressed, he realizes that he’s already nearly late for the meeting his family is going to today, and if the conference room it was being held it wasn’t in the lobby of the hotel they were staying at, he probably wouldn’t make it in time. And as much as he doesn’t care about going or being there on time, seeing this speaker sounds ultimately better than getting an earful from his father later.

He makes it with just a few minutes to spare, and finds a seat next to Sophia.

She snickers next to him. “Did you bring a notebook?”

“What the— no!”

"Okay, good." She smirks, turning to him so that he can see the look in her eyes and know that she was trying to fuck with him. "Me neither, but Daddy insisted that we needed to study up."

"He's insane." Nick says, blinking slowly and inhaling deep through his nostrils, bracing himself. "How long do you think this is supposed to be?"

"An hour and a half, I think."

"Jesus, thank God." He opens his eyes. "Yesterday's was three, and I'm starting to wonder how a meeting on leadership can last twice as long as one about optimizing an entire store's experience."

"Truth be told," She says, leaning in close so that only Nick can hear. "I think this one is mostly bullshit, so that's probably why."

Out of anyone, he's surprised to hear Sophia say that, but that's all the more reason that it makes him smile. "No shit, Sherlock." He grins. "I'm just happy it's relatively quick bullshit. You think Daddy is gonna change anything about the layout of the store when we get home based on this?"

"Hell no." She says, without question. "And if he does, I'll honestly be pissed."

"I'm starting to think you and I are more alike than we thought." Nick says with a wicked grin, which Sophia returns back to him.

It feels like an eternity before the speaker actually shows up and gets to talking, and by the time she does Nick has been staring at the presentation screen so long, he's pretty sure the title of this meeting is seared directly into his retinas:

ORGANIZATION & OPTIMIZATION
A How-To Guide to Store Layout
for a Better Customer Journey

He starts to wonder if this is what he'll see when he dies, when he's pulled out of his thoughts by the presenter, who dives right into the presentation with reckless abandon.

"She wasted no time," Sophia points out, looking at their parents before turning back to Nick. "Barely gave anyone time to get started on their notes."

Nick looks around for these supposed notetakers, and sees… one? Two? There are several people who are obscured enough for him to not be able to tell, but he thinks he can make good enough assumptions based on how focused they look. Which is to say, either extremely focused, or not at all. There's no inbetween with these people.

"I doubt she has much interest in tailoring her presentation to the six people in the room who are." Nick responds. "She's probably got places to be, too."

"Places more important than this? Than telling small business owners how they can be better at owning small businesses?"

"Yeah." Nick crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, doing his best to get as comfortable as he can. He turns his head to look at his sister again. "I mean, you really think she wants to be preaching all of this? Honestly."

"I'm almost positive she's the one that made this presentation, Nicky." Sophia has to stifle a snort to keep herself from getting too loud in the near quiet audience of people watching. "This is probably her passion."

"Damn, you're harsh." Nicky raises his brow at her. "You think you'll ever be one of the presenters for one of these things? Maybe in a couple years?"

This time, she can't stifle the laugh. "You wish. As far as Daddy's concerned, you're the one taking over the store now. So this'll be all you, brother."

Nick fakes a dramatic gag with a roll of his eyes. When he looks back over, he catches his mother smacking Sophia's shoulder with the back of her hand and shushing her.

"Will you two be quiet? Pay attention." She specifically is scolding Sophia, but he knows that's just because it's easier to address the one child. Especially the one child that's more likely to listen. He watches his sister roll her eyes, too, before they settle on him and give him a look of begrudged compliance. Nick returns the look, obviously not happy about it.

If he can't even bitch and whine to his own sister about a boring presentation, what is he supposed to do to entertain himself?

The speaker gets louder, flipping to a new slide in the presentation. "The last thing you want to do when a customer walks in is bombard them with options and merchandise." She says, and to his right, Nick actually hears his stubborn father scoff. "You want the customer to feel like your store is a place for them to walk freely, and browse, and ask questions if there's anything they need. Cluttering the area near the entrance with potential sales might seem like it makes sense, but in reality it will likely just overwhelm and frustrate the customer, which leads to less sales overall."

His father scoffs again, a little louder this time. And as much as Nick wants to tell *him* to give the presentation if he knows so much better, he just laughs. He knew coming to this one felt like a waste, and he's still trying to figure out why his father was so adamant about attending it. Let alone as a family.

For another few seconds, he tries to give the poor presenter the time of day, but he just can't do it. He loses focus entirely.

So instead, he pulls out his phone and stares at the blank, locked screen for a moment before deciding on what will help pass the time the quickest.

His first thought is games. He's got to have something download that will keep him occupied for the next hour and twenty five minutes, but even as he scrolls through his apps and stops concerning himself with the options that might be more discreet, he's still coming up blank. It's kind of amazing how infrequently

he plays or even downloads or looks for mobile games anymore, when they used to feel like such a quintessential part of his phone.

He settles on sudoku, but that only keeps his attention for ten minutes give or take before he finds himself staring off into space, again.

He can't consider watching anything or listening to music for obvious reasons, and scrolling through Twitter and Instagram only offer him another few minutes of relief before they have anything new or interesting to show him. It almost feels pathetic, that there's this little for him to cure his boredom with, and he realizes that maybe the smartphone isn't nearly as worth it as people claim it to be.

He decides to text Iris.

How are things at home?

Ahhh so good! The weather has been so nice i've been taking full advantage of it, hehe

How's the store?

Ew, you sound like dad. Maybe you should be the one to take over

Please don't say that, don't make me rethink my favorite sister

Ok ok ok, I'm sorry! I'm just saying! Anyway store is fine really boring nothing's change blah blah blah

Sounds like you're taking it really seriously

Oh be quiet, I just don't want to talk about workkk

What're you up to? Why the sudden text? You guys are coming home soon anyway

In this random conference meeting thing. Bored as fuck

Just trying to keep myself entertained

Ew

Yeah

Can you just leave?

Dad made us all come, so not really. Unless i wanna get bitched out later lol

Oooh god. Is sophia there? Tell her i said hi!!

Will do. What’re you doing?

Getting ready for a dateee

What? Really? With who?

This guy i met at a party one of my friends invited me to. We’re going to see a movie and then prob an early dinner or smth

Look at you. Hope you have fun

Thanks!! I hope so too haha

If you don't mind i'm gonna go, i don't want to be distracted while i get ready

Unless you have something actually interesting to tell me

For a moment, Nick considers anything from the past week. But, he decides against it. He doesn't want to bother her.

Nope, just bored. I'll talk to you later

Byeeee nicky!!

He'll never quite understand how Iris is able to sound so enthusiastic over text, but he'll give her credit for it. It's impressive, to say the least, and it certainly does its job in reflecting her actual personality.

He's not sure who gave her the right to have a life when he needed her for entertainment, but he supposes he can forgive her. This time.

He scrolls through his recent text threads and considers the other people he's spoken to recently. Sophia isn't any fun to text, and she's sitting right next to him, anyway. Bex is never on her phone and terrible at getting back to people on time, and Roxie talks too much to the point that the buzzing of his phone starts to feel annoying—and it'd probably end up really loud, too. Leon and Jared, he's convinced, straight up don't text, and even if they did at this point in the week he feels bad that he's spoken to them so little. He'd rather just see them in person.

As predictable and annoyingly cliche as it feels, that leaves Ryan and Gabe. He opens the the text thread he has with Ryan, starts typing his message, and backpedals.

Hey, please don't tell me you were forced to come to this organization meeting, too

It only takes a minute for Gabe to text him back.

No, don’t even know what it is. Why? You had to go?

Yes. my whole family did, so no sneaking out this time. It’s miserable

Oh my god. I’m so sorry

Lmao, it’s fine. Not the end of the world, I’m just glad only one of us is suffering

You’re a kind soul for checking. Need me to come cause a distraction so you can sneak out?

You’re a saint, but don’t bother. This one is only like half the length of yesterday’s

Oh, wig ok

Wig?

Yeah, wig. Im sorry about your scalp

My condolences

I have literally no idea what you're referring to

It's like. Wig. like… nevermind

No tell me

It's like when something is good or shocking enough that it knocks the wig right off your head

I don't wear a wig

It's theoretical

That's weird. You're so weird

You just called me a saint a minute ago, you can't take that back

I'm not trying to, you're just also really weird.

Rude

Sorry

It's okay i guess. I'm glad it shouldnt last too long. At least your sister is there with you?

My mom silenced us violently, so she's not really much help

Damn. hope you're doing ok

I'll survive i think. Just looking for new ways to entertain myself

Well i'm happy to oblige as best i can

What makes you think i was texting you for entertainment?

I'm not even going to entertain the idea that you weren't because i'm the most fun person you know here

Actually i'm probably the most fun person you know period

Really hard to argue with that logic

As soon as he sends the response, Nick has to think about it for a minute. Is that true? It's kind of weird to think about considering the short span of time they've known each other, but it kind of is. Gabe is, at least, *one* of the most fun people he knows, and he's enjoyed spending time with him here way more than he could have anticipated. In fact, Gabe has acted as a really refreshing new face in a sea full of reminders of a life he willfully left behind. Sure, he always has fun with Ryan and Roxie and the others, but would he

have been so willing to indulge in all of it if there wasn't something *new*, something that felt different from before he forced himself to return to the store?

Maybe he's thinking too much into it. He probably is, he knows he has a tendency to do that in general.

But it's an interesting thought, and one that sort of sticks with him for the rest of the presentation—which Gabe, like the good friend he is, text Nick the entirety of the way through. Thanks to his help, the rest of the meeting flies by in no time at all.

"Bah, that was stupid." His father declares once they've left the conference room, waving both his hands dismissively and emphatically at the door. "She didn't know what she was talking about."

"I think she made some good points," His mother says as she slides her arms back into the sleeves of her jacket. "You're just too stubborn to listen. But I'm glad we went, it'll be interesting to think about when we get back home."

"Maybe" His father grumbles, knowing better than to argue with his wife—especially when she's clearly right. "I'm hungry. Let's go get lunch."

"I think that sounds like a great idea. Kids?"

Nick and Sophia both give each other a look, knowing it's better to just go.

—

"So, who were you furiously texting that entire time?" Sophia asks him over a Coke, while their parents are too distracted by their menus.

"Well, I tried text Iris first."

"Tried?"

"She wouldn't let me talk to her long. She," He looks to his side, making sure his parents are still preoccupied. "She said she was getting ready for a date."

Yes, she's a grown woman, and yes, it shouldn't matter. But this is his family, and he's not convinced they won't make a big fucking deal of it if they overhear the word date. Better to err on the side of caution.

"Really?"

"That's what I said." He falls back into his seat.

"With who?"

"Some party boy, I don't know. She didn't even give me a name, so probably someone that doesn't matter."

"Well, good for her. But I'm going to need more details." She says definitively, whipping out her phone and almost immediately typing out a long, prying message to their sister.

When she's done typing, and she sets her phone face down on the table, Nick speaks up. "You know I'm gonna get shit later for telling you, right? Did you consider that before you sent that message?"

"Not really, and I don't care." She grins a little. "I feel like I have a right to know."

"I don't think you technically do."

"As her older sister," Sophia says sternly, as stern as she can without drawing their parents' attention. "I absolutely do. Whether she likes it or not." She gives Nick a wicked grin, and her phone buzzes on the table, no doubt Iris immediately getting back to her. He's hot to hand it to his other sister—she's a good texter.

"Aren't you gonna answer her?" He asks, pointing to the phone.

Sophia shrugs. "Later, I don't need to know all my answers *now*."

"You're kind of evil." He says, doing his best to hide a laugh.

"I wouldn't say evil," She argues, defending herself. "Just… clever. Is that such a bad thing?"

"Kind of!"

Sophia opens her mouth to respond, but they're both interrupted by their mother, who's now leaning over to address them both. "What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing, really." Nick mumbles quietly, though Sophia was clearly more prepared for this question than he was.

"Just how interesting this year's trip has been. I was asking Nicky why he thought they hadn't done it in Vegas until this year when it seems like such a good place for it. Everyone seems to be having a really good time."

From underneath the table, he feels the toe of her shoe kick against his shin. "Yeah," He chuckles. "I was just saying that it seems like everyone is really enjoying the location this year. Feels like a really good one for me to make my return at." Genuinely, Nick is a shitty liar and his sister—who could teach a masterclass on the subject—knows it.

Their mother nods thoughtfully. "I thought you two were making fun of me."

"What would we be making fun of you for?" Sophia asks, seriously, and even though she's playing it up it's legitimately a good question. Why would their mother think that?

She shrugs and turns back to her menu. "Oh, I don't know. Just being silly, I guess."

He and Sophia both laugh, then turn back to each other and exchange confused looks. Regardless of how much Nick wants to press Sophia for more information, they don't return to the conversation, too afraid to now.

Nick's halfway through his club sandwich before Sophia speaks up directly at him again, this time turning the conversation directly onto him as she chews lazily on another bite of her eggs.

"You never answered my question before."

"Huh?" He answers, lifting his face from his plate, cheeks stuffed full of sandwich.

"My question. I asked who you were texting that entire time, and you said you *tried* Iris, but she was—" Sophia interrupts herself, pauses with another bite of eggs while she glances to their parents. Preoccupied with their own meals, she continues. "Busy."

"Oh!" Nick shakes his head, not even realizing he hadn't properly answered. Using the back of his hand, he wipes his mouth and swallows too early, struggling a little to form a sentence through the meal. "I was texting, uh," He reaches for a napkin, dabbing at his face. "You know my friend Ryan?"

"Yeah, FTD Ryan, the one you met the first time you went to one of these conventions?"

"Yeah, him. I was texting his brother."

Sophia's brow scrunches up, her face pulling back. "His brother?" She pushes her eggs around with her for a bit, scraping the ceramic with the tips, before bringing another bite up to eat. "That's kind of weird."

"Why is that weird?"

"Why his brother?"

Duh. He hadn't hung out with his sister all week—the lack of context didn't even occur to him. "Oh, it's his brother's first time at one of these things. So he was tagging along with Ryan and he and I just sorta clicked, I guess. He's really cool."

"Oh." Sophia says, and Nick can tell by the look on her face that she's looking for any excuse to judge the situation. But, he can also tell that she can't quite find one. "That's really nice."

"Yeah." Nick agrees, nodding into another bite of his food. "I felt bad because he seemed kind of overwhelmed when Ryan first introduced him, but he seems to have figured it out pretty quick. Oh!" He points at her, sandwich still tight in his hand. "Do you remember that girl, Felicia?"

For a minute or two, Sophia puts her thinking face on. He'll be surprised if she doesn't. Sophia remembers *everyone*.

"She works at Ryan's family's store, she's come with him a couple times in the past. You probably only met her in passing—"

"Oh, wait. Dark hair, kind of tall? Really serious looking face most of the time?"

"Yes, that's the one." He grins. "She and Gabe are, like, best friends. Supposedly." He chews a couple more times. "Gabe being Ryan's brother, sorry."

"Okay," She thinks a bit longer. "So why has she come to more of these conventions with Ryan than his own brother?"

"See, I thought that was weird, too. But according to them, Gabe is kind of the one that holds down the fort at home, because he's the only one that cares about their store enough to do so. So he always had to stay behind. But I guess this year, Ryan wasn't originally supposed to come? So they were finally giving him his chance."

Sophia nods slowly. "They really filled you in." She laughs, taking one final bite of her food before setting her fork down carefully beside her plate, graceful as ever.

"He was at that conference I had to go to yesterday, too. He was the only one from his family, so we hung out for a while and kept ourselves from dying of boredom." He laughs out loud, mouth full of food. "I can't tell you how nice it was to see a familiar face when I walked in there. I was terrified I'd actually have to sit through it."

"Don't tell Daddy that." She raises an eyebrow, eyes flicking over to their parents.

"I already told him that we went to a bar afterwards, but that's about it." He avoids bringing up the fact that they skipped the meeting entirely, even with his sister. He can't trust her enough not to accidentally bring it up in conversation with his parents. And despite the fact that he's *twenty eight years old*, he knows he'll still catch shit from them. Better to just avoid that possibility altogether.

"Okay," She says, questioningly. "But you have to deal with that on your own if it turns into something. Don't count on me to back you up."

"When have you ever backed me up on anything?" He says defensively, the smile on his face marking his disbelief.

"I back you up! But I also mind my own business—I'm not getting involved in shit that has nothing to do with me." She pulls her coke in and takes a long, drawn out sip.

"If it were up to you, nothing would ever have anything to do with you."

"Exactly." She says, replacing her drink back down onto the table. "Which is why I mind my own business."

It might seem a bit harsh, but it's nothing he can't expect from his sister at this point. That attitude really used to piss him off when he was younger, but in a way it kind of just amuses him now. Him and both his sisters are adults—if he didn't want to deal with her, he didn't have to.

"Anyway," She says, removing her napkin from her lap and folding it neatly in front of her plate, then folding her hands on top of said napkin. "I'm glad you made a new friend, I'm sorry you'll probably never see him again."

Okay, that was unnecessarily harsh. "Ouch." He frowns. "I'm sure that's not true. Especially if shit really does keep going the way it's been."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Inheriting the store and ending up back here permanently." He laughs through it, though the idea isn't exactly the funniest to him.

"Oh." She shakes her head, her face dismissive. "Don't be so dramatic. You'll be out again before the year is up."

To anyone else, it might seem almost rude to say, but that was maybe one of the nicest things his sister has said to him in months.

It does get him thinking though, as depressing as it is—if he *does* leave the store, will he ever see his new friend again? Would he ever see his old friends again? The first time he left the store, and stopped coming to these, he'd hardly considered it—though that's starting to make him feel guilty now. What happens when he has to go again? If all goes according to plan, this has just been a one-time revisit of the idea, but… Kind of depressing to think about, but he's starting to realize it's something he has to consider.

Especially when it comes to Gabe.

Chapter 17— Gabe

The final day of the convention comes with an overarching somber tone that, for all Gabe knows, only he's feeling. This was a new experience for him, one that turned out much better than he'd initially planned or hoped for. Last night was a complete dud in terms of hanging out with anyone, with the entire group deciding to take one night off to prepare for their final night out tonight.

He doesn't think it'll be drastically different from what they'd already been doing, but he gets it—even if he thinks it's kind of lame.

Felicia corners him right outside his hotel room when he's getting ready to go down for breakfast, pressing him with questions he doesn't know the answer to, all while he's still trying to wake up.

"Have you heard what the plan is tonight?" She doesn't sound excite so much as she does trying to prepare, in every sense of the word. He knows she's got to work up to the idea mentally, and the longer she goes without knowing exactly what they're doing, the harder it is on her. He gets it, even if it can be a bit frustrating.

"No idea," He says, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. "I barely just woke up, I just want breakfast right now."

"Does your brother know?"

He knows it's not meant to be annoying, but the questions are annoying. "Haven't spoken to him either. Will probably text him while I'm eating, but I doubt he has any idea. He's not typically the person who sets plans in motion. It's still kind of early, too."

Felicia's face remains flat. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Just trying to figure out my plans for tonight."

"I get it." He says, understanding. He probably knows this about her better than anyone else. Maybe better than she knows it.

"I hope it's nothing too formal or fancy, since it's the last night. I didn't really pack anything too nice or dressy."

Gabe sort of snorts as he approaches the elevator, calling it to take him down to the lobby. "Have you met these people? They're not going anywhere fancy." Idly, he runs a hand through his hair at the scalp, tousling it at the ends. " I've only known them for a few days and I know them well enough to know that,"

"Okay, fair enough." She exhales, clearly trying to not be an anxious, nervous wreck.

"I'll text Ryan when I get some food and sit down." He repeats, doing his best to comfort her. "And I'll text Nick, too. See if he has any intel. If either of them are awake, I'm sure they'll respond. Hopefully." He checks the time on his phone, just to make sure he hasn't completely misread it. "But, chances are, neither of them are. I wouldn't blame them."

"Why are you up then?" She asks.

The elevator dings, and the doors open to the lobby area. Continental breakfast is being served, though the attendance is relatively light, considering the fact that it's still early. "I was hungry. I could ask the same of you."

"I don't sleep in." She says, deadpan. He knows this. He's not sure why he bothered asking in the first place.

"Of course not." He says dryly, making his way immediately to the counter with the food and finding a plate. Gently, he scoops some scrambled eggs onto his plate from a hot buffet serving platter, and throws a few pieces of toast into the hotel toaster. While he waits, he picks up a blueberry muffin and bites into it, crumbs falling from his lips onto his shirt below. Felicia stands there, watching him. "Would you like to join me for breakfast?"

It's sarcastic. Mostly.

He catches the tiniest of a smile at the corners of her lips, but otherwise she stays deadpan. "I'm not very hungry." She says without much enthusiasm. "I'm gonna wait to eat until dinner, since I'm sure wherever we're going it's going to be good."

"Honestly, I wouldn't bother saving your hunger." He says through a laugh and another bite of muffin. "Like I said, I doubt it'll be anything fancy. My guess is probably another bar or something, in which case it'll just be, like, bar food." Another bite, nearly polishing off the muffin top entirely, leaving him to suffer through the measly, pathetic bottom section. He did that to himself. "Plus, that sounds kind of terrible—waiting that long to eat."

For a minute, she seems to consider this. Then, with a slight nod, she pulls another muffin from the breadbox and bites into it herself. “Maybe you’re right.” Mouth full, she looks into the pastry she just took a bite out of.

“I’m always right.” He grins ear to ear. “Except for all the times when I’m not.”

By the time Gabe gets a response text from either Ryan or Nick, he’s only got a bite or two of scrambled egg left and Felicia is twiddling her thumbs impatiently in the seat across from him. Truth be told, it was still early, and he wasn’t expecting an answer from either of them until much later into the morning. He was counting on that, even, because it would mean he wouldn’t have Felicia breathing down his neck for updates.

“Ryan texted me,” He says to her, looking down at his phone without taking it off the table—daintily swiping a finger across to unlock it and read the text. From the corner of his eye, he can see Felicia straighten out, peering across the table, curious for any new info. “He says he hasn’t heard anything yet, but that’s not surprising.”

“Yeah,” She says, sounding a little defeated. Honestly, he feels kind of bad. He wouldn’t have expected her to be this excited about tonight, and clearly she’s frustrated over not knowing what’s going on. “That makes sense.”

“But,” He wants to reassure her, eyes skimming the rest of his brother’s message. “He also says he’s sure he’ll hear from someone soon. He thinks the rest of them probably aren’t even up yet.”

“Late sleepers, I guess.” She says under her breath, sounding more like she’s making a note of it to herself than addressing him.

“Meh.” He shrugs. “It’s the last day. I doubt any of them have anything productive to do—I mean, we’re not going to any meetings today. Neither are my parents or Ryan.” He smiles at her, doing his best to reassure her again. “They’re probably just taking advantage of the time. But I’m sure someone will let everyone know soon.”

“Just make sure I know about it, okay?” She says, smiling a little but mostly sounding anxious. “I don’t want to be excluded.”

He realizes, suddenly, that she’s regretting isolating herself more than he has. With a scrunch of his brow, he shakes his head. “Duh. Of course. I’ll make sure you’re there.”

This time, her laugh feels a little more genuine. Almost like she’s laughing at the face he’s making, but he’ll take that happily. “Thanks.” Then, she places her palms flat on the surface of the table, runs them across once, and pushes herself to her feet. “I’m going to go shower and brush my teeth. That muffin was kind of stale.”

He nods, grabbing the last few bites of eggs with his fork and popping it all into his mouth at once with a nod. “It kind of was.” He agrees, then picks up his plate and looks back at the dish dropoff. “I’ll text you if I hear anything else. See you in a bit?”

“Sounds good.” She says, before swiftly turning on her heel and walking off.

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“Answer me a question, my dear baby brother.” Ryan calls out from the bathroom of his hotel room while Gabe nearly falls asleep on top of the covers of the bed.

“I’m not your baby brother.” He mumbles back, face half buried in a pillow. He’s hardly paying enough attention to even say that, though. “You have three other brothers who are younger than me.”

“Oh I’m not talking about age.” Ryan’s voice sounds clearer now, so Gabe forces one eye open only to be greeted by his brother’s intense gaze, head poking out from the doorway that leads into the bathroom, steam practically pouring out of the entryway. “I’m just commenting on the fact that you’re the biggest baby in our family.”

Immediately, Gabe eyes spring open and he presses his palms deep into the mattress beneath him, pulling himself up into something akin the the cobra pose. He glares directly at his brother, brow pinched inward. “I am not the biggest baby in our family!”

Ryan stays frozen and dead silent for a moment, before waving his hand in Gabe’s direction in a shallow bow, effectively saying *my point exactly* before disappearing back into the bathroom. Gabe stares at the empty space left unoccupied by him, irritated, before allowing himself to fall back into the bed with a groan.

“Rude.” He says quietly into the comforter.

Clearly, Ryan doesn’t hear him. He calls back out from the bathroom again. “Anyway, answer me a question, dear baby brother.”

“Okay,” Gabe rolls his eyes again, Ryan clearly determined to pry something out of him. What it is, he’s not entirely sure. “What is it?”

“I have a hunch about something, and I want to know if you can confirm.” Ryan’s speaking over the running faucet, most likely shaving, and Gabe can barely make out what he’s saying. He has to strain his ears to make sure he’s hearing his brother properly.

“Okay.” Gabe repeats. “What is it?” He emphasizes his question this time, repeating himself word for word.

“I’m getting to it!” He barely hears, before Ryan’s face pops back out from the doorway. As Gabe suspected, half his beard is trimmed. The other half, still a scraggly mess. “Okay, does Felicia have a thing for Nick?”

Gabe sighs a little. “What made you guess?”

He meant it sort of sarcastically, because to him, it’s obvious. Ryan, on the other hand, seems to take the question seriously.

“I was texting Roxie last night.” He says, once again disappearing into the bathroom. “And she was talking about how weird it was that you’ve been so social with us, but Felicia hasn’t.”

“I mean, Felicia’s a lot weirder about that kind of thing in general.” He says, shrugging and forcing himself up from the bed. Clearly, this isn’t going to be a one sentence, one answer sort of conversation, so he might as well stop being so comfortable and not risk falling asleep.

“Yeah, sure.” Ryan agrees. “I know that, but then Roxie brought up the fact that she and Nick greeted you guys that first night. And you guys were drinking and having a good time, but you seemed to be way more involved. And then Roxie brought up the fact that she thought she and Fe were getting on pretty well, but since that night she seems kind of avoidant entirely.”

“I wouldn’t say she’s being avoidant.” Gabe looks down at his nails, and from the corner of his eye sees Ryan re-emerge, the faucet no longer running in the background.

“She didn’t come to Bex’s hotel room the next night, and then when we all went bowling she barely spoke.”

Gabe shrugs again. “Maybe she feels awkward? She’s been coming to these conventions with Mom and Dad and you for years but this is the first time she’s really hanging out with these guys, right?”

“Yeah, I guess I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Plus, why Nick specifically?”

“Well, it can’t be me.” Ryan says, kneeling down at his suitcase to fish for fresh clothes, likely the last he has packed for the trip. “As awesome as I am, we’ve known each other long enough where I’d know. And she’s never really acted weird around me before.”

“Fair.” Gabe agrees. “Though I can’t imagine why she wouldn’t be into someone so humble.”

The joke goes over Ryan’s head, and he continues. “Jared? Maybe, he’s really nice and cool and funny.”

Gabe raises an eyebrow. “You sure you’re not into him?”

“Ha ha.” His brother gives him a stupid fake laugh. “But seriously, I don’t think she even spoke to him once besides being introduced? So he seemed like an obvious no. Sort of the same with Leon, but I mostly didn’t count him because most people are really intimidated by him, including girls.”

“Hm.” Gabe blinks slowly at his brother. “Did you consider that might be the reason she seemed to be acting weird? Because she’s just intimidated by Leon? I mean, it doesn’t have to be because she’s into someone, does it?”

Ryan stands and holds out a t-shirt at arm’s length to examine the front, then slips it on. Then, he grabs a pair of jeans and runs back into the bathroom. “No looking.” He says once he’s out of view.

“Ew.”

“I guess you’re right, though.” He calls out, his voice much easier to hear without the running water. “But I just kind of assumed.”

Gabe’s not entirely sure why he’s playing so coy, when he knows the answer point blank. Maybe because it’s kind of fun to make Ryan second guess his reasoning? For a graduate student, the man is painfully oblivious.

“You know what they say about people who make assumptions.” Gabe scolds, bringing back old memories of their parents’ words of wisdom when they were children. He always thought that one was particularly stupid, but what did he know?

“Okay, but let’s say I am right and it *is* because she’s into someone.” Ryan returns to the bedroom, buttoning his jeans and, finally dressed, flopping down into the desk chair across from the bed that Gabe is now sitting cross-legged on. “That just leaves Nick, right? Unless Felicia really *is* a lesbian.”

“I really don’t think she is.” Gabe can’t help but laugh.

“What if Roxie awakened something in her, and *that’s* why she’s been so weird since that first night?”

Gabe rolls his eyes, visibly this time for Ryan, and shakes his head. “I think she probably would have told me that if that’s what happened. But she hasn’t said a word.”

“So it’s Nick, then, right? She’s got a thing for Nick?”

“I mean, I was mostly kidding before, when I asked what made you guess. I thought it was obvious.”

Ryan’s face twists into something more annoyed, and from his chair he kicks across one of the legs of the bed frame. “So you just made me explain all that for nothing?”

“I was curious about your logic.” Gabe says, as if this should be particularly obvious. “I wanted to see if you actually came to a conclusion for a reason or if you were just making things up.”

“You’re kind of a dick, you know that?” Ryan says, smirking.

“You’re the one making assumptions about my friend!” Gabe fights back, and immediately he can see in his brother’s face that he can’t exactly argue with the fact.

“Is she gonna try and make a move on him?” Ryan asks, after taking a minute to consider his next question.

Gabe denies it immediately. “Oh, no. I don’t think so anyway. I’d be surprised if she did. I think she’s just really infatuated with him.” He chuckles. “I was telling him the other day, like, she’ll say *she loves him* but I don’t think she actually *loves* him. It’s, like, theoretical.”

“Wait, you told him?”

Gabe shrugs, not seeing why that should surprise his brother in the first place. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I just spent, like, two hours conspiring with Roxie over this! You’re telling me I could have just asked him directly?”

“Did you think to?”

“Well, no!” Ryan throws his hands in the air, like he’s been duped somehow. It’s almost comical in how cartoonishly dramatic it is, nearly enough to make Gabe laugh. “I didn’t think he’d be the one to know, considering it was about him!”

“I mean, I didn’t set out on a mission to tell him.” He clarifies, hoping that will help ease Ryan’s dramatics. “He was wondering the same as you—concerned over the fact that she seemed so nervous. He thought he was being intimidating, so I was just trying to ease his mind a little.”

“Well. He is kind of intimidating, though.” Ryan grins, pleased with himself.

Gabe tilts his head, confused. “I don’t think so!” He exclaims, coming to Nick’s defense even when he’s not here. “I think he’s kind of a sweetheart. He’s really chill.”

“That’s what makes him intimidating!” Ryan defends his own opinion. “How chill he is! I swear, sometimes he doesn’t have a single deep thought going around in his head.”

“That’s so mean! I’m sure he’s plenty smart.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t smart.” Ryan says, pointing a clarifying finger at Gabe. “I said he didn’t have any deep thoughts. I just don’t think he concerns himself with very much.”

Gabe nods, silent for a moment. “Anyway,” He decides to abandon this particular argument, feeling it to be almost too pointless, even for them. Instead, he swings it back around to finish his thoughts on the earlier subject “I made sure to tell Nick that I mostly just think Fe is just really attracted to him. Which really is what it comes down to.” He chuckles a little. “Which is fair. He’s very handsome.”

Ryan sighs, then nods, then stands to find his sneakers, which are hiding in the corner of the room. He slips the first one on, then the second. “So you don’t think she’s gonna get down on one knee and propose to him today?”

“Definitely not.” Gabe says confidently. “If she was, I cannot imagine I wouldn’t know about it.”

“What if you’re just keeping it from me so I don’t ruin the surprise?”

It’s almost like Ryan has these entire conversations in his head before they happen, because these responses feel too good and too calculated to be on the fly. “Oh, my God.” He says with a roll of his eyes, finally pushing himself to the edge of the bed and then up to his feet. “You’re so stupid.”

“Am not!” Ryan says like a child.

"Yeah, kind of." Gabe says back, before showing Ryan his palms—a sign of vulnerability and honesty. "I swear, I'm not hiding any secret proposal plans from you. As far as I'm aware, Felicia will not be asking Nick to marry her tonight."

"Good." Ryan agrees with a nod, heading for the door. "Not sure I'm emotionally prepared for that."

Gabe doesn't answer, but when he thinks about it, he realizes that he's not sure he'd be, either. And then he realizes that maybe between the two of them, he's the dramatic one after all.

Chapter 18— Gabe

Gabe was under the impression that tonight would be similar to the previous nights—fun but not overwhelming, nothing particularly crazy, and familiar even in an unfamiliar city. He's not entirely sure why he was under that assumption, and as he and Felicia and Ryan approach the venue, he's starting to regret that that's what he's told himself. Because, clearly, this is club. A full blown, proper dance club, and already Gabe's realizing he's going to need to be properly drunk for this.

"This seems intense." Felicia says, hooking her arm into his. She doesn't sound intimidated, but he knows that's her way of telling him that she hasn't quite prepared for this level of social interaction, either. The difference is, he's much more adaptable than she is, so he'll have no problem getting into it. It might take her a bit more time, and a few more shots.

Under any other circumstances, he might offer her the chance to escape, and ask if she'd rather ditch and go do something else. But this wasn't really something he wanted to miss out on, and he knew that despite her supposed hesitation, it likely wasn't something she wanted to miss, either.

"Yeah." He agrees, but he puts on his biggest smile and looks at her. "But fun, right? Not what I was expecting at all."

"Me neither." She shakes her head, the hesitation a little more prevalent in her voice. Still, she marches forward with them, her actions not quite matching her words. "Makes sense, though."

"I think so too. I think it'll be fun." He repeats, doing his best to reassure her. Ryan, a few paces ahead, turns back to look at them both, a grin on his face. He's clearly looking forward to it. "I'll buy us our first round. And our second, and third probably."

"You don't have to." She comes back immediately.

"Oh, I know. I just know I'll get impatient." He laughs, and they continue on into the building.

The inside is almost magical, and even though it takes a minute to locate their friends, Gabe isn't mad about it. The walls are lined with television screens that play the accompanying music video to whatever song is booming overhead with the selection being actually surprisingly impressive, the corners of every wall are lined with neon string lights that pulsate and change colors, and the dance floor is huge, and properly occupied. He takes in the information for a solid minute with Felicia before his brother taps him on his shoulder, nodding towards the bar, where Bex and Leon are sitting. He doesn't spot anyone else yet.

“I think everyone else is on their way.” Ryan says, ushering the two of them towards the bar. Gabe’s already getting his wallet out, ready for his first drink when Ryan says into his ear, right before approaching their friends, “I don’t know if I mentioned this before, but the last night is typically when the hookups happen.”

Even under all the neon, Gabe can feel his face go beet red. Which seems silly, after just a second. It’s not like it matters. There aren’t really any options for him, anyway.

The rest of the peanut gallery arrive in no time, but even so Gabe is already two shots in and preparing for a third. First comes Jared, who immediately gravitates towards Leon, the Nick and Roxie together. One look at their faces and Gabe is almost positive they’ve been pregaming (how did he somehow not think to do that again?) and almost immediately he feels less bad about already having started drinking when they arrive.

“You look drunk,” Roxie says to him when she approaches, tapping him against his upper bicep. “And happy.”

“Not drunk yet!” He says over the music, though his lack of volume control already would state otherwise. He feels fine, though, not really hitting that point of alcohol-induced fogginess quite yet. “But definitely getting there.”

“That just means you need to catch up, then.” Roxie grins wide with her teeth, looking from him to Felicia, also several shots in now. “I want to see you guys on the dance floor, I bet you both know how to tear it up out there.”

From the corner of his eye, Gabe can see Felicia get embarrassed, and he can practically feel the heat rise to her cheeks from here. On the other hand, he smirks, placing his fists against his hips in a power pose. “You’re damn right.” He says, knowing that he’s a small white boy who absolutely can dance as well as anyone would expect a small white boy to be able to dance. But, he’s willing to give it a go and show off for her regardless, if that’s what she wants to see.

“I need another drink, or three.” He says without hesitation, knowing that once he’s drunk enough he’d be out there regardless of the push from Roxie or not.

Nick approaches from behind her, temporarily distracted by the rest of the group but rejoining now without them. “Need another drink for what?”

“We’re trying to get them to go dance.” Roxie answers for him, and Gabe grins back at him with a cheesy smile.

“Oh, that makes sense.” Nick says, cocking an eyebrow at them all. “I get it. I’m the same way. But I bet you’d be great out there.” Without hesitation, Nick returns the grin. “In fact, I want to see it, too. Next round is on me.” He turns on his heel then without waiting for a response, approaching the bar, and Gabe can feel his own cheeks burning now.

He's grateful for the quickly changing colored lights that occupy most of the interior, because otherwise Roxie would see right through him.

In what feels like only a matter of seconds, Nick is turning back to them with shots in his hand—two, which he hands off to Gabe and Felicia, before he turns back to grab two more, for him and Roxie. "I didn't know how everyone felt about tequila—"

Oh God, was Gabe about to have to suffer through drinking literal gasoline for this man?

"—so I got us all straight vodka instead. I figured that was safe."

Thank Jesus.

The four of them toast to a great week before throwing the alcohol back. He's done enough vodka shots in his life that it goes down without much of a hitch, and despite the small burn at the back of his throat he manages through it like a champ. After all, it's just vodka. He's just grateful that Nick's idea of a tequila alternative wasn't Fireball.

Before long, Gabe loses track of how many shots he's taken.

He knows after the round Nick bought, Roxie bought them all lemon drops, which taste so much like candy Gabe's not even entirely sure they should count as shots. But, if they do the trick and get you drunk, he supposes it doesn't matter, either.

Then? He's not entirely sure. He knows he bought himself and Felicia each another at a point where they ended up separated and by themselves, and he's positive that Ryan must have also gotten him something. The problem is, the goal for everyone tonight is to just *get drunk*, so they're all blowing through them like it's nothing—pushing through the unpleasant taste so the can all enjoy their last night together as much as possible.

Losing track of his drinks is probably not the best sign of a good night, but he's having fun so it doesn't really matter.

What pulls Gabe back into reality officially, is seeing his brother mid-hookup, at the end of the bar. He can't even do it on the dancefloor like a sane human being, which gets Gabe giggling as he taps Felicia's shoulder to get her attention and point it out to her.

"Oh my God, ew. I don't want to see that." She says through a laugh of her own, face red and words slurring from the drinks. "I feel like your brother probably sucks at making out."

"You're probably not wrong." Gabe shakes his head, not really wanting to think about it. Still, he squints at Ryan and the girl he's with, addressing his friend once more. "He told me the last night is usually the night when everyone ends up hooking up, so I guess I'm not surprised. I just wonder—" He pauses mid-sentence, interrupting himself once he realizes that the girl whose face he's currently sucking is Bex. "Oh my God." He laughs, louder now.

"What?" Felicia asks, like she's missing some part of the joke. He nods toward Ryan again.

“Look. Look who he’s making out with.”

He watches as Felica leans in, squinting her own eyes to try and get a better view. When she finally sees it, her face transforms from confused and curious to amused and just a little bit horrified. “Oh, Jesus.”

“I know.”

“Your brother is kind of an idiot.”

Gabe nods, repeating himself. “I know.” He chuckles again, finally turning away to look back at his friend. “I really can’t wait to give him shit for this later.”

“Please, you have to tell me how it goes.”

He nods, because of course he will, before turning away again and finding Roxie just a few paces away. She sees him, and without thinking hands him another shot.

“My brother is sucking the soul out of Bex right now,” He says, raising the shot glass in a toast before downing it in one go. “So, I think I’ve seen everything I need to see for the night.”

“You can’t really say you didn’t see that coming, right?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, no!”

“Well,” She reaches over to ruffle his hair a little. “You’re a lot more naive than I thought, my friend. It was pretty obviously in the cards, the way I saw it.”