

1 – Floored

Cyrus

My guts are twisted like a fucked-up piece of tumbleweed as I stare at the paper in my hand. It shakes as I read the address for the hundredth time, her address, or at least where she's staying at the moment. What if she doesn't want to see me?

I close my eyes and lean back against the wall, running a hand through my hair. Damn it, we're supposed to be together. I gave her the space her dad said she needed. Space to deal with Bryce plus whatever guilt she was harboring over what we did. A month's worth of lonely nights lying on my cot at the campground gave me more than enough time to think about all this shit.

What Eddie said about her having a hard time with the lives we took that night started to make sense. Sure those kids were as good as dead anyway. Once the Uprising attacked the Union, their fate was sealed, but Ev wouldn't have been the one responsible.

I want to talk to her about all this, let her unload everything, make sure she knows we probably saved way more kids than we killed. The rest of them can go home now that the Uprising's been defeated. Not to mention all the people in the Union who were saved. Well, we can talk about all this after some quality one-on-one time. Damn, I've missed the hell out of her.

Glancing up, I locate the right block and the knot in my stomach tightens. Everything is ordered on a grid in the Union, making it simple to find just about any place, even for someone like me with only basic reading skills. After staring at the hotel for what feels like hours, I take a deep breath and enter the lobby heading into the waiting elevator. The number two glows bright green when I press it, and the doors slide closed before the box eases up one floor.

With a soft tone, the elevator pauses and the doors open into a small waiting area complete with chairs and potted plants. An illuminated map on the wall shows the location of every room, exit, and stairwell on this floor. Although the room number is burned into my brain by now, I still take another peek at the paper in my hand and make a right, heading down the corridor. With every step I take toward the girl I love, the tightness in my chest loosens until it hits me I'm no longer nervous. Behind that door is an answer, ending two months of uncertainty, because this limbo shit isn't working for me.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, I raise my knuckles to the door. It's early and I give a passing thought to getting coffee and coming back a little later, but the need to see her is more powerful than the need to make sure I don't wake her.

I rap three times, my jaw clenched as I wait. Rustling comes from the other side, but no footsteps, so I knock again. More rustling is followed by silence and then the sound of heavy approaching footsteps. Definitely not Evan. I must have the wrong room and pull the paper out of my pocket to look at it again.

This is the room number Eddie gave me, unless he wrote it down wrong. Maybe she's already checked out and someone else is in the room.

The door opens and my jaw hits the floor.

Son of a bitch. I blink few times to make sure I'm not hallucinating, but what the fuck? A huge smile breaks across my face as I reach out to hug a very alive Bryce.

The dude is stiff and I feel like a giant tool for hugging a guy who's in love with my girlfriend, but shit, I can't believe he's here. He takes a step back when I release him, his eyes dropping to the floor. As I glance around the room, confusion replaces my initial shock. This is Evan's room. It's no coincidence Bryce is here, but I don't see Ev. What I see is a rumpled bed. One bed, two bodies sharing it.

I step back and take a hard look at Bryce. He's wearing nothing but a pair of jeans. His T-shirt rumbled on the floor beside the bed, as if hastily discarded. *Son of a fucking bitch.*

My face burns, like I'm standing too close to a fire. No way. She wouldn't sleep with him. Not again. Not when she knew I was coming back. My hands fly to my hair, trying to sort it all out. Eddie was weird when I showed up, the bit about how she really loves me, like I needed reassurance. Did he know Bryce and Evan were holed up together in a hotel room? *Fuck!*

Bryce turns and glances around the room, searching for something. He turns back to me with an embarrassed grin, "Look, she says you guys split up."

Bile rises in the back of my throat and I struggle with the rage building inside me. For the first time, I notice the ugly burns on Bryce's side and arm. Obviously something happened to him, but how long has he been here? With her?

Before I can stop myself, my fist connects with dipshit's jaw with satisfying force, sending an ache up my arm that I relish. He stumbles back, but doesn't fall, and I step forward to hit him again. My head throbs, on the verge of exploding. Douche braces himself for the next hit, but doesn't move to defend himself. As I draw back, I note the burns again and check myself.

Dickweed rubs his jaw and eyes me, anger flaring in his stupid gray eyes.

I unload a few choice words and his eyes widen in response, as if he's some kind of saint or some shit and my language offends him.

"Forget it," I say, turning and storming down the hall. I slam the elevator button, but I can't stand here and wait for it to arrive, spinning to take the stairs instead.

Intense, white fury like I've never known scorches through me and I smash my fist into the wall, feeling the crunch, the searing pain, that temporarily distracts me from the storm raging in my chest.

#

I have no idea how I got from the hotel to the train station. My fist throbs, but the blood on my knuckles has dried. Still, I have to consciously force myself not put my fist through another wall. A harried woman rushes past me on her way to the ticket machine, her destination most likely known. Mine on the other hand...yeah, not so much.

My head drops to my chest as I attempt to figure out my next move. Of all the scenarios I worked out in my head, her getting naked with Bryce wasn't even a consideration. I wander over to the elevators and push both buttons, figuring I'll get in whichever one arrives first. Let fate decide. Up will take me to the A-train and back to the northwest before heading home. Down, means I'm staying. At least for now.

The bell chimes and the doors slide open, the down arrow illuminated. I wait as people pour out in a hurry to catch a commuter train to their final destination before stepping into the now empty car. Pressing the button for the lowest level, I descend to the ground and hike out to the beach. For hours I wander along the shore, going over everything in my head, anger surging in waves. Anger may not be rational, but nothing about this is rational.

Hell, she disappeared into herself because she thought the asshat was dead. Apparently he's alive and well. And in her fucking bed. None of this makes any sense and the more I think

about it, the more pissed off I get. When morning passes into afternoon and finally evening, I've no doubt clocked twenty miles and haven't eaten a thing.

A loud rumble deep in my stomach has me heading for the nearest commuter station and back to the top level, putting as much distance between me and the beach as possible. Being here reminds me too much of her.

On the top level, I wander into the closest bar with every intent of getting piss-ass drunk. When I sober up, I'll go home. Fuck fate, I'm done here. Pushing my way through the crowd, I find an open stool and order a scotch. The middle-aged bartender with some prissy vest and fluffy shirt sets the glass in front of me. I down it in one gulp, the alcohol burning my throat. When it hits my stomach, its warmth spreads to my arms and legs, taking the edge off.

I catch the bartender's eye and order a second. Between sips, I stare at the ice cubes, forcing myself to think about the ice, the scotch, the scratches in the wooden bar, anything but what I saw in that hotel room this morning.

Before long, the alcohol has worked its magic, leaving me pleasantly buzzed. When I finish my drink, I put the glass down on the bar a little harder than I'd planned and order a third. While I wait for my glass to be refilled, I glance around. The place is packed now, every table full, low voices drowning out the background music I could plainly hear when I first arrived.

A group of girls talk loudly on my left, one screeching and clapping her hands. They're all wearing body-hugging outfits and an over-abundance of make-up. The bartender sets a series of shots in front of them, then lights the alcohol on fire. The girls scream and down their shots before clapping and bouncing up and down.

They're all very attractive, or at least they appear that way in my booze-fueled state. One girl in particular is extraordinarily beautiful in an artificial way. She's tall and slender with dark

silky hair and overly-made-up eyes that are so blue they nearly glow. She spots me checking her out and her bright red lips pull into a smile, showing off straight blinding white teeth.

She moves toward me, her hips swaying slow and mesmerizing. The smirk on her lips tells me she knows the effect she has on me and probably every other guy in the place. When she reaches me, she places a slender, graceful hand on my arm. “Whoever she is, she’s a fool.”

I give her a smile. The kind of smile that always gets me into trouble. “Is it that obvious?”

“I’ve seen guys drink that much for only one reason, but I can’t even imagine the complete idiot who’d let you go.”

Her voice is smooth and velvety, and my body is definitely responding, even if my brain isn’t engaged. Maybe what I need is a night of distraction. What could it hurt? I can catch the first train in the morning. Turning back to the bar, I signal the bartender again.

He approaches and nods at me. “What’ll it be?”

“Another scotch,” I say, then turn to the girl to find out what she wants. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Alivia,” she purrs.