

By the time Alex returned to their—his—suite, he'd managed to erase the physical markers of grief.

In the hotel kitchens, where he'd ventured despite numerous signs warning guests not to enter, he'd discovered a *Gates* fan elbow-deep in dishes and charmed her into supplying a towel full of ice for his tear-swollen face. Luckily, the young woman also carried a tiny bottle of eye drops—"Sometimes I get called into work at a bad time, know what I'm saying?"—she was willing to sell, so that took care of Alex's bloodshot eyes. And at her suggestion, he swished and spat a palmful of water into an empty sink, then chewed a stray sprig of mint from a platter of cherry cheesecakes, and his vomit breath disappeared.

She'd refused more money and patted his shoulder comfortingly before sending him back out to the guest areas.

In the hall outside his suite, he straightened his cuffs and smoothed his suit. Then he dropped into character for the first time in months.

Breezy. Fond but not clingy. Charming and entirely okay with Wren abandoning him without warning, as if he didn't fucking *love* her, as if they'd never—

His keycard at the ready, he halted and breathed deeply, until his sinuses stopped burning.

Okay, none of that. Back in character.

When he swung open the door, she stood there with her suitcase and backpack, wearing a tee and leggings, her hair in a limp ponytail. Shadows arced beneath her eyes like bruises, as if she hadn't rested properly in weeks, and she probably hadn't. No doubt she'd get more sleep without him in her life.

So many times, he'd been told he was exhausting, and he couldn't argue. He was. He

exhausted himself too. Of course she'd tired of him.

This would be his final image of her, because he couldn't handle another direct glimpse, and it was fitting. The shine of her beautiful eyes dulled, the damage he'd done apparent.

He smiled at her, easy and bright. "Let me get your bags."

With one swift movement, he removed both from her not-tight-enough grip, ignoring her instant protest. The display of gallantry would occupy his hands, which still had a tendency to shake, and that goddamn suitcase might be a normal size, but it looked ludicrously gargantuan next to her. Besides, this was the end. From now on, she'd have to wrestle with her own bags.

He'd been good for that much, at least. Carrying her physical baggage on occasion, even if she wouldn't let him near the other burdens she shouldered.

They chatted all the way to the front entrance. Or, rather, he chatted, and she trailed behind him in silence.

"I'll get back to the reception after this," he said as the automatic doors slid apart, and the smell of earth and damp forest surrounded them both. "I hear they hired a live band, and I intend to impress everyone there with my wholehearted commitment to the Chicken Dance, complete with squawking and occasional faux-pecks at the ground. Honestly, if the awards committees were watching, they'd shower me with trophies on the spot, stunned and awestruck by my superior poultry-related acting skills."

No way in hell that elegant band was playing the Chicken Dance, and no way in hell he'd be there if they did. But reality didn't matter anymore, only his character.

The cab was already waiting, and he swallowed back an involuntary sound. A cry.

This was it, then. The end.

But he didn't stop moving. Instead, he deposited the luggage in the trunk, then swiveled

without pausing to take Wren in his arms one final time.

He wanted to cage her, crush her so tightly against him she couldn't slip away.

Instead, he kept the embrace loose, her body only a brief, ephemeral hint of warmth and softness before it was gone again, and he was so fucking cold.

Another smile as he focused on a spot three inches in front of her nose. "Safe travels, Lauren."

He stepped back once, twice, even as every atom in his body howled for him to swoop forward and snatch her up, to never let her go. His body juddered in an uncontrollable shiver, despite his best efforts, and he forced his smile wider.

The driver had closed the trunk and returned to the car. As soon as Lauren ducked into the backseat, they'd be gone.

He swallowed hard and spoke quickly, before she could leave.

"I wish you all the best." That, at least, was the truth. "Good luck."

Finally, she broke her long silence. "Alex..."

She paused in front of the open cab door, and for a moment, he could have sworn she had something of substance to say. An explanation or an apology, or an offer to stay until they worked out whatever the fuck had gone wrong between them over the course of one goddamn day. The worst day of his life, with only one possible exception.

But no. He was wrong again. Inevitably.

Her chin quivered for a moment before rising and firming, and she said her last words to him as she climbed into the cab.

"You too. I wish..." Her face twisted, then smoothed. "I wish you well. Please take care of yourself. You deserve the world."

Then she shut her door and fucking *left*.

After ten minutes, he was still standing by the hotel entrance, still staring at the spot where the cab containing her had disappeared, and he'd drafted and deleted a dozen texts.

Pleas. Promises. Rants.

But she deserved peace, and she wanted space. He'd give both to her.

He hadn't memorized her number, not when it was conveniently listed in his contacts. A few taps on his cell's screen, and her name was gone. Her number was gone. Vanished, like her.

His breathing turned labored, and he was falling apart again. He broke into a near-run through the lobby and punched the button for his floor, shaking.

And once he was safe behind his door, he let himself dissolve into nothing.