

GREY

“Can I look now?”

I reached up to untie the blindfold covering my eyes, but LeMarc gently pulled my hands back down, chuckling softly into my ear. “Not yet. Keep walking, Monroe.”

He’d been guiding me from behind, hands warm against my waist as we walked further into the trees, but we’d stopped at my interruption.

My lips, disobedient as ever, curled into a smile. “You call me *Monroe* again, and I’ll start calling you *Collin*.”

“I could call you by your middle name if I knew what it was,” he said, placing his hands on my waist again and giving me a gentle nudge to guide me forward. Whatever this surprise was, he was determined not to let me peek.

“I don’t have a middle name,” I answered. “I guess you’ll have to stick with *Grey*. What’s yours?”

“James.”

“And how much longer until we reach my surprise, Collin James LeMarc?”

Another chuckle. “Almost there. Careful, there’s a slight dip in front of you.”

After another ten feet or so of stumbling steps, he pulled me to a stop. Flashes of green light shimmered at the edges of the blindfold, like the sun sparkling through the trees.

A slight breeze stirred my hair, but there was no sound of moving water. It would have been too public to return to the riverbank where we first met, anyway. Any news of a Monroe and a LeMarc fraternizing would surely get back to my mother.

Fraternizing. That was one word for it.

“Are you ready?” LeMarc asked, his voice buoyant with excitement. He was always so suave, the master of cool nonchalance, that I felt a thrill of triumph catching him acting boyish.

“Ready.”

No matter what he showed me, I’d ooo and aah until he knew I loved it.

I was such a fool for this stupid boy.

With a dramatic flourish, he pulled his hands away. We *were* amongst trees, at the edge of the woods. Out of sight, but not far enough from town to trigger my phobia.

I didn’t have to feign my delight at the sight before me. “Bicycles!”

There were two bikes leaning against a hefty oak in front of us. One was green and lean, with lots of confusing gears. The other, a lovely teal with a basket tied to the front, was clearly for me. It was perfect.

LeMarc wrapped his arms around me from behind, pressing a kiss into my hair.

“I think there’s been a tragic gap in your education,” he whispered. “I plan to remedy it at once. Today is the day that Grey Monroe learns how to ride a bike.”

WILDER

I knew it wasn’t real.

The feel of the afternoon sun, skipping through the trees onto my skin. The softness of Grey’s shirt against my arms as they encircled her waist. The small gasp of delight that escaped from her when I told her she was going to learn to ride a bike.

None if it was real.

But in the last few months acting as LeMarc in Grey’s digital world, my definition of *real* had become a lot more flexible.

Standing there with the girl I loved, seeing her excitement at the sight of that bike, it felt more real than anything I’d ever known.

It seemed a silly thing for her not to have experienced before, but for insurance purposes, Monroe Studios had decided not to have Grey’s TV dad teach her how to ride a bike when she was young. A virtual avatar can’t steady his daughter’s handlebars, and there was a risk of injury. It was easier to leave bikes out of her world altogether.

However, an inept intern on Reggie’s team years ago had made a mistake, and 12-year-old Grey had witnessed a young boy riding a gleaming blue bike right in front of her in the local park. She’d been far too old for the studio to use their usual fear conditioning techniques without her remembering, so they solved it by having the Heringford city council outlaw bicycles altogether.

“You know these aren’t allowed, right?” she asked, but she was already pulling away from my arms, drawn towards the pretty turquoise frame.

“Every clandestine relationship needs a little clandestine rule-breaking.”

She grinned back at me. “I think you might be a bad influence on me.”

“I certainly hope so.”

I grabbed the other bike and spent the next few minutes demonstrating the different parts, how to push the kickstand up, how to push off and start pedaling without falling over.

“Now it’s your turn.” I wished I could help her, steady the bike while she mounted, but Grey’s was real, not a virtual creation like mine. My hand would go right through it.

Eventually, with only two falls and some slightly skinned knees, Grey got the hang of it, and we biked around the clearing together. It was nice to hear her laugh, a sound I was becoming more and more familiar with. She deserved to be happy. She deserved to be a kid sometimes.

Though the way she looked at me over her handlebars, the light blush that spread across her cheeks when we locked eyes... Nothing child-like about that.

After an hour of riding she declared herself a bike-riding expert, and we leaned our bikes against the tree once more and sat beneath the trees to talk. She lay back on the ground, gazing up at the leaves dancing with the breeze.

“Who taught *you* to ride a bike?” she asked drowsily.

“My dad,” I answered honestly. It was a strangely happy memory, considering our relationship now.

“Mr. LeMarc doesn’t seem the type to break the rules like that.”

I leaned down and dropped a kiss onto the tip of her nose, making her giggle. “Sometimes people surprise you.”

“A family trait, apparently. No one has surprised me more than you. Who would have thought that the boy who teased me mercilessly in grade school would grow into someone I could tolerate?”

“Tolerate?”

“Admire.”

“Hmm. I feel like we could still do better.”

She smiled up at me, and in her warm gaze I could fill in the next word. *Love*.

But she shook her head teasingly, pulling my head down for a sweet kiss.

“Thank you for today,” she whispered against my lips.

“Today and forever,” I whispered back.