

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white button-down shirt and blue jeans, is shown from the waist down. A man's hand is resting on her hip. The background is a bright, slightly blurred indoor setting.

A NEW ADULT
ROMANCE NOVEL

Vacancy

Who knew her life
would change so much
from renting one room?

L I N D A K A G E

VACANCY

THE SEVEN SERIES
BOOK 1

LINDA KAGE



*For Bambi
The Firstborn
The Retired Teacher
The Pastor's Wife*

Thank you for leading us into the world. You may have already moved out by the time I came along and have always been the sibling who lived the farthest away, but your grace and piety is a marvel I've always tried to emulate.

This one's for you, as well as your husband John and children, Jason and Katie, plus their spouses and children: Bethany, James, Luke, Emily, and the new baby to-come.

Love you, Linda Kay (Number 8, The Baby)

The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?

EDGAR ALLAN POE

CONTENTS

Prologue

1. Oaklynn
2. Oaklynn
3. Oaklynn
4. Damien
5. Oaklynn
6. Damien
7. Oaklynn
8. Oaklynn
9. Damien
10. Damien
11. Damien
12. Oaklynn
13. Damien
14. Oaklynn
15. Oaklynn
16. Oaklynn
17. Oaklynn
18. Oaklynn
19. Oaklynn
20. Oaklynn
21. Oaklynn
22. Damien
23. Damien
24. Damien
25. Oaklynn
26. Damien
27. Oaklynn
28. Oaklynn
29. Damien
30. Oaklynn
31. Oaklynn
32. Oaklynn
33. Oaklynn
34. Oaklynn
35. Oaklynn
36. Damien

37. [Oaklynn](#)

38. [Oaklynn](#)

39. [Damien](#)

40. [Oaklynn](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

Vacancy
Copyright © 2023 by Linda Kage

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses or establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book—except in the case of brief quotations in reviews—may be used, reproduced, or translated without written permission of the author.

Contact Information: linda@lindakage.com

Publishing History
Linda Kage, December 2023
Smashwords edition

Credits
Cover & Formatting: Kage Covers
Editor : Shi Ann Crumpacker
Editor: Summer @ Red Pen Revolution
Proofreader: Shelley @ 2 Book Lovers Reviews

PROLOGUE

DAMIEN

“**A**lrigh**t**, bud. Here we go. This looks like the place.”

I glanced up from the book I was reading—or at least pretending to read—and peered out the back side window of the car as my dad pulled into a tightly packed parking lot.

Across the street, I saw the building he was referring to. It was a dull, tan thing that hogged the entire block with short walls, a flat roof, and high-set windows like a prison. But it wasn't prison.

To me, it was so much worse.

The Westport Children's Trauma and Grief Counseling Center was the absolute last place on earth I wanted to go, but both of my parents had decided I would, anyway.

When I saw a woman walking toward the entrance carrying a girl who had pigtails in her hair and looked as if she was only two or three years old, I cringed. I couldn't join some bereavement group with a bunch of babies. What would that make *me* look like?

“Dad, seriously,” I tried with one last-ditch effort to bail. “I think I'm doing better now. I don't need—”

“Damien,” he cut me off with a stern voice that told me there was no changing his mind. “We already talked about this. And you agreed. You were going to stick with it for a full month just to see what it was like.”

Yeah, except I could see what it was like from here. I wasn't impressed.

"But—"

"*End of discussion.*"

Huffing out a breath, I slumped down in my seat and frowned as he whipped into a free parking spot and cut the engine.

So this was why *he* had brought me, not Mom. Mom was the softy. All I would've had to do with her was pull out one of my mopey faces and she would've already caved by now. We could be halfway home—and probably with ice cream—if *she'd* brought me.

But I guess my parents were getting too smart. A mopey face around Dad only seemed to convince him *more* that I needed to be here.

I was so totally stuck doing this.

"Okay, time to take a break from Percy Jackson," he announced as he slipped off his seatbelt. "Let's go, kiddo."

Regrettably, I set the book on the seat beside me and mournfully touched the glossy cover in farewell. I had waited months for this volume to be released so I could learn all about Rick Riordan's take on the Greek gods. But by the time it had hit the stores, my world had already turned upside down.

My parents had gotten it for me, anyway, thinking it would help cheer me up. But I'd had it a full month now, and I still hadn't gotten past the introduction. My brain felt too numb to focus on words... Something I would most definitely not be sharing with anyone, or they'd probably have me freaking committed.

But carrying around the book had been comforting, like it was a memory of life before everything had changed. If I just kept it with me, things might still have a chance of going back to normal.

It didn't stop Dad from opening my door, though. My fate was sealed, and nothing would ever be normal again.

I sent him a rebellious glance, wondering if he'd climb back here and drag me from the seat and all the way inside kicking and screaming if I just

absolutely refused to move.

With Dad, the answer was too hard to gauge, so I groaned out a disgusted breath and climbed from the car.

I tried to trudge petulantly behind him and hide from my fate as best I could, but Dad forced me up to his side and guided me with a firm hand on the back of my neck.

At the street, we paused to wait for a car to pass, and when we stepped off the curb to walk across, I focused on the bright white stripes of the pedestrian crossing on the asphalt, too afraid to look up at where we were heading.

Only brave people faced hell straight-on.

But then my father said, “Hey, look. That boy appears to be your age. Maybe you’ll make a friend.”

I lifted my face against my better judgment, only to discover that the pleasantly sterile glass gates of hell loomed even closer than ever, welcoming me with green and white balloons and a sign that said *Grand Opening*.

My stomach clenched into immediate knots. This was really happening. I was being forced into grief counseling.

My breathing started to escalate. My skin went itchy and hot, then extremely cold. And my vision clicked off before popping back on again.

But Dad hadn’t lied about the other boy, at least. With bright, blond hair, he was about the same height as me but way less hefty.

Head bowed in misery, he held the hand of the woman walking with him. When he glanced up briefly and met my gaze, he looked as if he might burst into tears at any moment.

For some reason, that made me feel better. Neither of us wanted to be here. Neither of us was okay.

I exhaled deeply and began to calm down again, glad I wasn’t the only one.

Except I couldn’t let my dad know he’d been right—that seeing the other kid had helped—so I muttered a quiet and sarcastic, “Whoopee,” for his

benefit.

“Damien,” he said with a tired sigh. “You promised. You said you’d try it.”

“I *am*,” I bit out.

I was here, wasn’t I? I was voluntarily walking toward the front door with my own two feet, not wailing or resisting at all. What more did he want from me? Cartwheels?

At the entrance, he opened the door and then waited for me to enter first. I sent him a dark glance as I stepped inside, only to plow to a petrified stop.

Because holy... Nope. Just...no.

The enormous reception area was crammed with parents and kids forming half-organized lines that led up to five different foldout tables where people were checking them into the main event. It was loud and chaotic and scary as shit.

I didn’t do crowds and people and busy spaces. This was not my happy place. I wanted to go home, where I could sneak into my sister’s room and listen to the Macklemore CD sitting on her dresser.

That “Thrift Shop” song was my favorite.

So I tried to backpedal my way out the exit, but Dad ushered me forward toward the far right side of the lobby, where he murmured a refreshed, “Ah... This line seems to be moving along nicely, don’t you think?”

What? I couldn’t focus on words right now. Panic was creeping up my throat, gripping its claws into my windpipe and making the edges of my vision dim.

I glanced around desperately for the blond boy, needing something—anything—to quell my fear, but he and his mom, or whoever she was, were halfway through another line already.

As Dad paused us at the back of *our* line, I heard a girl in the front shriek at her own parents, “You never said you were going to leave me here!”

Wait. *Leave* her?

My face drained of all warmth and it seemed to plop heavily into the pit of my stomach where it burned fiercely.

But the parents were leaving us here to do this by *ourselves*? This was news to me, too.

I glanced up at my father, feeling betrayed and already shaking my head no. I was barely holding it together with him by my side. No way was I doing this alone.

Reading my expression, he set a hand on my back. “It’s going to be okay,” he assured in a steady, soothing voice. “I’ll be back again to pick you up in just three hours.”

Three *hours*?

Hell no. I couldn’t. I *wouldn’t*. This was stupid.

I mean, I was fine. I could handle waking up in a cold sweat and screaming every other night. And who cared if my appetite had plummeted? I could stand to lose a few pounds, anyway.

What I *didn’t* need was to be here.

I was *fine*!

But we’d already reached the front of the line, and Dad had started filling out forms and answering questions from the two women seated on the other side of the table.

From there, time morphed into overdrive, and doom approached at hyper-speed, sucking me into a void of terrorizing fear as I stood there frozen and helpless to stop the inevitable.

This was happening.

And I couldn’t breathe.

The women looked at me with kind eyes and welcomed me to the center. But I didn’t need their kindness. If they’d just let me go back home now, I’d be fine.

Yeah, *of course*, I was sad. I’d just lost someone very important to me. Couldn’t they all simply *back off* and let me deal with it in my own way?

“Well, I sure am glad you decided to join us today, Damien,” one of the women told me, smiling brightly.

I glanced at her miserably, only to stop cold and blink twice.

Because she had dimples, and they were...*dimpling* right at me. Like magic. Or diamonds. Or magic diamonds that put spells on boys who didn't want to attend counseling.

I had no idea dimples could make a stomach churn with such mad adoration before, not until *she* smiled.

“I'm just over the moon about how many kids showed up for our very first day,” the beautiful, young dimpled woman was saying. “Makes me wish we'd gotten this place opened ages ago.”

“Yes, ma'am...” I think I answered, too busy falling into those bottomless pits of love that dented in her perfect cheeks to pay attention to a word that was being said otherwise.

“I think that's all we need, sir,” the other woman told Dad as she gathered the forms he'd just filled out and tucked them into a crisp new file. “Madisyn here can take Damien in and show him to his new group, if he's ready.”

Madisyn? Was *that* the name of my dimple goddess? I liked it. Madisyn was the perfect name for the perfect girl.

She made my life complete by flashing those dimples yet again and holding out a hand for me to take. “Are you ready, Damien?”

And that was it; I didn't care if she had to be at least fifteen years older than me, I was going to marry this woman someday.

I took her soft, waiting fingers, and the world was awesome.

“Bye, kiddo,” Dad called after me. “I'll be right here waiting for you when you get out.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said, waving at him dismissively over my shoulder without even glancing back. I was too busy gaping up at the face of an angel, hoping she'd smile again.

And when she did, my face went hot and happy.

We went through a doorway and then another, finally entering some kind of wide, open community space with tiled floors and white walls. It was separated into five areas, each containing a massive circle of folding chairs with big signs standing in front of each section.

Madisyn steered me toward the circle labeled *Ages 10-12*.

“Here we go, hun,” she said in her perfect, sugary sweet voice. “This is your group. I just know you’re gonna love it.” Then she ruffled my hair. “Sit wherever you like, and your guidance counselor will be over in two shakes of a lamb’s tail, alright?”

When I nodded, mumbling, “Yes, ma’am,” she patted my shoulder.

“Great. You take care now, Damien.” And with that, she turned to stroll off, leaving me there alone.

My dreamy smile fell flat as I watched her abandon me, and that’s when I realized she’d just been a decoy this whole time, distracting me with her pretty dimples and then dropping me flat.

And now I didn’t have her *or* my dad.

Panic slithered over my skin in a rush. I turned stiffly to face my *group* and saw the blond boy sitting in the circle by himself.

He glanced up, making eye contact, and then straightened in his chair as if *relieved* to see me.

A kindred spirit, my heart seemed to whisper, so I shuffled uneasily forward. His gaze lit hopefully, and if I were more of a courageous, outgoing kind of person I would’ve gone over and sat directly beside him to introduce myself. But I wasn’t, so I slumped into a chair on the opposite half of the circle, and there, we eyed each other curiously.

I think he was opening his mouth to say something when another voice broke into our moment. “Hey, this is the group for ten to twelve-year-olds, right?”

Blondie and I glanced over to find two more boys approaching.

“That’s right,” Blondie answered.

The speaker in a green Hulk shirt nodded gratefully before guiding the other boy in a plain black turtleneck to sit near Blondie, leaving me alone and by myself on my half of the circle.

“Man, this place is way more packed than I thought it’d be,” Green Shirt said.

Blondie replied, “That’s what I was thinking too,” while the silent guy in the turtleneck slumped deeper into his chair, not bothering to talk at all.

I felt even more alone than ever until I heard someone say, “Hey, it’s Damien, right?”

I glanced up to see a face that I *thought* I recognized.

The kid was tall and slim with floppy, dark hair, and he wore a Macklemore concert shirt that I was so utterly jealous of.

Pointing at me, he squinted. “Weren’t we in Little League together?”

It came back to me, then. His name was Hudson, and he’d been one of the popular kids on the team.

I had not.

When I nodded, letting him know I remembered him, he dropped into the chair two down from me with a relieved sigh. “Thank God. I didn’t think I’d know anyone here.” Glancing at me in a commiserating grimace, he asked, “You get forced into coming to this too?”

I nodded.

“Figures.” He sniffed derisively. “Damn parents think they know what’s best. It’s utter bullshit, if you ask me.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, feeling like I’d been invited into an exclusive club, now that *Hudson* thought I was good enough to talk to.

As he relaxed back in his chair, letting his legs sprawl out in front of him, I envied his ability to get so comfortable in a place like this. Resting his arm across the back of the seat that separated us, he glanced over to study me a moment before hitching up his chin and asking, “So were you thinking about joining the team again this summer?”

“Uh...” My stomach pitched with dread. Honestly, I couldn’t see myself ever having fun again, playing stupid games, or doing anything that might possibly bring me joy.

As I lifted one shoulder and mumbled, “I don’t know,” he nodded in understanding.

“Yeah. I heard about what happened to you. Sucks, man. I’m not sure if I want to play anymore, either. My best friend was on the team.” Motioning a couple of his fingers at me, he asked, “Did you hear about him? Brett Dunham?”

Now that he mentioned it, I think I vaguely remembered hearing something about Brett’s death, and that Hudson had actually *been* there when it happened. As I glanced into his eyes, I finally caught sight of the hidden trauma floating in his gaze.

So I nodded, wishing I knew the right thing to say at a time like this. But I didn’t.

Before I could come up with any response at all, Hudson caught sight of something past my shoulder and furrowed his brow in confusion. “Whoa... Hey! Don’t you two go to the same school as me?”

I turned to find another pair of boys joining our circle, except they looked as if they were trying to sneak over without permission.

“Oh, yeah. Hi,” one of them answered, straightening in recognition as he pointed at Hudson. “You’re Hudson Ivey.”

“And you two are in third grade,” Hudson shot back. “Don’t you belong over in *that* circle?”

“Oh, come on,” the other boy begged. He had super-curly, brown hair that seemed to go everywhere and bright blue eyes. “That group’s just awful. It’s full of all *girls* and only one other boy who won’t stop bawling for his mom.”

“Can’t we just join you five?” the first kid begged. “Please.”

Hudson made a face and then shrugged. “I mean, it’s fine by me, if no

one else cares.”

“Go ahead and stay,” Green Shirt spoke up from the other side of the circle. “We won’t rat you out.”

Both third-graders blew out a big breath of relief. “Cool. Thanks.”

And that’s how an adult found us. “Whoa, an all-boys group,” the man greeted with a smile. “This’ll be interesting. And there’s seven of you, huh? What a great turnout. So... I’m Matt,” he started as he sat in the circle with us and settled a clipboard onto his lap. “And I’m just here to guide the conversation. You seven will do most of the talking.”

Wait. We would?

I did *not* like the sound of that. Speaking words aloud was not my specialty.

But thankfully, I wasn’t the only one who was concerned. The silent kid in the black turtleneck who’d followed Green Shirt around like he was his shadow, flew up from his chair and shook his head aggressively. But when he turned to leave, his green-shirted friend grabbed his arm, drawing him back patiently.

“But we don’t *have* to talk if we don’t want to yet, right?” Green Shirt asked Matt with a prodding nod.

“Oh, sure. Of course, you don’t,” Matt answered quickly. “I only want you to open up if you feel comfortable doing so. No pressure to say anything you don’t want to.”

I exhaled in relief, and the green-shirted boy was finally able to coax Turtleneck back down into his chair with an encouraging nod. “Good,” he told Matt. “Because Parker here hasn’t spoken a word out loud since his parents died.”

I winced. But *both* parents? Wow, that had to suck.

“Of course, of course,” Matt was repeating in reassurance. “I totally understand. No more explanation is necessary. Though I was hoping we could all go around and at least give our names, and then if you feel okay

with sharing, let us know who you lost in your life.”

Pointing at Turtleneck, Green Shirt spoke up again, “Okay, then. Well, this is Parker Ohrley. And he lost both of his parents in a car accident last month.”

When he lifted his eyebrows at Matt for confirmation, Matt nodded and then splayed out his hand in greeting. “Alright, thank you. And welcome, Parker. We’re glad to have you.” Then he shifted his attention to Green Shirt. “Would *you* like to go next?”

“Oh!” Green Shirt straightened as if he’d been goosed. “No. I’m just here for Parker. To be his mouth and talk and stuff. We’re best friends who’ve lived next door to each other our whole lives. He’s been staying with us since it happened. But I didn’t lose anyone, sorry.”

“No, that’s okay. That’s just fine,” Matt answered, nodding with encouragement. “We appreciate you being here for Parker. Would you like to share your name, anyway, though?”

“Yeah, sure, I guess.” Green Shirt gave a rueful smile and waved to the rest of us. “I’m Thane. Thane Eisner.”

“Welcome, Thane,” Matt greeted. “And what about you?” he asked next, motioning toward Blondie.

“*Me?* I, uh, I’m... My name is Foster Union,” he said, glancing around the circle hesitantly. “And I lost my...” Ducking his chin, he took a breath before shakily admitting, “My little brother.”

When his voice broke, my throat constricted, and a fine mist of tears coated my lashes. I wasn’t sure if I could sit here and listen to this. I already felt sad enough for myself. Heaping everyone else’s grief on top of that felt too big. I wouldn’t be able to handle it.

But they kept going, saying their names and who they’d lost.

“Keene Dugger. My mom.”

“Alec Younger. Dad.”

“Hudson Ivey. My best friend, Brett.”

And then it was my turn. I hated talking. I hated admitting how I was feeling. I hated all of this. It was so freaking embarrassing. But everyone was looking at me, which was even more mortifying because my throat had closed over, and I couldn't speak.

"And you?" Matt said with an emboldening smile. "What's your name?"

I cleared my throat. It was just my name. I could say my name.

"Damien," I mumbled, my voice wobbly and probably too low for anyone to actually hear. So I tried again. "Damien Archer."

"Well, hello to you, Damien," Matt greeted. "We're happy you're here with us today. Would you like to tell us who you lost?"

OAKLYNN

“**I**’m not saying I *want* you to go. I love having you around—I really do—you’re like a sister to me,” Jaylani promised as she clasped her hands together and sent me a fake, begging smile. “But...”

With a groan, I threw my head back to wince up at the clouds before finishing the question for her. “But when the hell am I going to get off your couch and finally find a place of my own already, huh?”

“Seriously, it’s been *three* weeks,” my best friend shrieked, clutching her French coils in agitation. “I mean, come on, O! You said you’d be gone within a couple of days, tops.”

“I know! And I’m sorry,” I whined. “Trust me, I’m just as sick of encroaching on your and Scarlett’s love nest as you are of me *being* there.”

Jaylani blinked her extended eyelashes drolly. “I highly doubt that. Scar wouldn’t even go down on me last night, worried you might hear us through the walls.”

“Really?” I lifted my brows in surprise. “That didn’t seem to bother her the night *before*.”

Jaylani’s gaze narrowed. “Because she didn’t know you could hear us until you just *had* to go and mention it at breakfast the next morning.”

“Whoops.” I winced and cleared my throat. “Sorry about that. But...” I shrugged.

If they didn't want commentary, they should've been way less loud.

I didn't say that, though. Instead, I swore, "If I'd known rent in this town was going to be so astronomical, I would've applied for a dorm room much earlier. Now I'm stuck on a waitlist, and it'll probably be next semester before something opens for me."

"What? No..." Jaylani groaned. "Please tell me you're joking."

I scoffed and uncapped the bottle of water I was carrying. "I wish." After taking a long drink, I dropped the water back to my side and lifted my eyebrows in interest at the guy who came jogging toward us down the trail that Jaylani and I were currently power walking. "Well, hello, handsome."

He didn't hear me, of course, since he hadn't reached us yet. But he did skim his gaze down my black shorts, over my legs, then back up again to settle on my sports bra that zipped up the front, checking me out just as hard as I was checking him out. I winked when we made eye contact, and we kept looking at each other until he passed, where I turned to walk backward beside Jaylani so I could keep ogling.

Because, mmm, that tight ass...

Yes, please.

Okay, so the city of Westport, Texas might've ended up being a little costlier than I'd been prepared for, but the sights here were definitely worth the price of admission.

Haverick University housed some grade-A hotties.

"Damn, Jay," I said, shaking my head to clear all the stirred-up hormones from it before I spun around to continue walking forward again. "I thought we were *friends*. Yet you never once mentioned you had all *that* walking around campus. I mean... Have you ever seen so many beautiful men in one town before?"

Jaylani glanced back at the disappearing runner and shrugged out an uninterested, "Meh. Too penis-y for me. Besides..." Sending me a stern glance, she added, "Ain't you supposed to lay off the guys this year?"

Ugh. She was right. I'd gotten overly boy-crazy during my last half of high school and let them—plus a lot of parties—distract me too much, landing me in this situation in the first place because, *apparently*, when your grades slip, you don't immediately get accepted into your dream college.

So I'd finally sworn myself off men, focused solely on my community college classes, and vowed to stay away from the party life until I graduated with a bachelor's degree in hand.

But still...

"I was just *looking*," I defended.

A girl could still enjoy the scenery, couldn't she? I mean, Jay and I had gone to the beach just yesterday to take in the natural beauty of the Gulf. This was basically no different.

Except I hadn't dropped three-fourths of a grade point average from sleeping with too many pretty sunsets.

"But I'll stop looking and behave." I lifted a hand solemnly. "I swear."

Because I was here for *school*, setting up my entire future, and beginning the rest of my life. I didn't have time for fun this semester.

Screwing my priorities on straight, I glanced over at Jaylani as she snorted, letting me know how little faith she had in me.

"Hey, I don't mind you looking," she assured. "Just as long as it's for a new place to live."

"Oh...*snap*." I laughed at her evil humor, only to moan pathetically a moment later. "I just wish I knew *where* to look. I only want *one* place that's under five hundred a month, in a neighborhood that doesn't make me fear for my life, and is also *not* a million miles from campus. Is that too much to ask for?"

"Uh...yeah." Jaylani patted my shoulder dolefully. "Because you're dreaming if you think anything within ten miles of here is going to be that cheap."

"No..." I sobbed imitation tears. "But I can't afford any more than that."

“I know, baby doll.” She wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “I know. And I’d tell you that you could keep staying on my couch for as long as you like, but...well...you can’t.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

She beamed cheerfully. “Any time.”

I blew out a long breath.

Last month, I thought I’d been so lucky, finally managing to get into the English program at Haverick this semester. The undergraduate acceptance rate here was, like, fifteen percent, and their Journalism program was to die for. I’d seriously been on top of the world to finally make it in.

But this having-no-place-to-live nonsense was kind of squashing the dream.

“Maybe I could sell my plasma or find some escort service to hire me,” I started teasingly. “Or ooh... I keep seeing these posters all over campus from some professor, seeking human test subjects for this lab research he’s doing. They claim he pays well.”

But Jay made a face. “You mean, Professor Zweifel? The crazy chemistry guy? No. I’ve heard rumors about his *research*. I’d stay away if I were you.”

Well, that sounded juicy. I opened my mouth to ask what kind of rumors she’d heard, only for music blasting from an open, second-story window of one of the fancy-schmancy brownstones we were passing to catch my attention instead.

The song was “Somebody That I Used to Know,” and it immediately distracted me from my current curiosities.

“What a blast from the past,” I said, glancing up to see bits of a gossamer curtain billowing from the open window in the breeze. “Remember when you and I—and Lizzy Maine—choreographed a dance together for this song when we were, like...”

“Ten? Eleven?” Jaylani guessed, letting go of my shoulder so she could clutch her face in horror. “Oh my God, yes. It was...awful.”

“So awful,” I agreed with a laugh as my gaze returned to the window. I swore I could make out movement in the room beyond, someone creating their own dance routine to the beat, and this urge rose inside me, wanting to join in and move along *with* them. “Good song, though,” I mused nostalgically.

“Hey, check it.” Jaylani nudged my arm.

“What?” I followed the direction of her finger as she pointed to the ground level of the place. And right there in the main front window sat a sign that read *One Room Vacancy Available*. Under that was simply a phone number to call for details.

“No way,” I murmured, not even daring to hope.

Because the entire neighborhood was top-notch. All the townhouses connected on this block were decorated in a matching pattern and were either multicolored sandstone bricks, a light tan exterior, or dark brown. This particular apartment was bricked and located at the end. A wrought-iron balcony wrapped around the second story, and a third story of windows told me it probably had a pretty sizey attic up there.

The whole place made my skin buzz with eager anticipation as if my body thought it was actually possible for me to live there.

Except, I’m sure it wasn’t.

“I think it’s a sign,” Jaylani coaxed, lifting her eyebrows at me encouragingly.

I snorted. “Literally.”

She rolled her eyes, and I chewed on my lip thoughtfully as we both stopped in front of the brownstone to inspect it from roof to doormat.

It seemed too good to be true. I mean, it was located right along Bridleway with a straight shot to campus in a very nice neighborhood.

Bridleway was the university’s famous pedestrian trail that wound through town, named so because of HaveU’s stallion mascot not because actual equestrians used it. It linked up to pretty much all the major stops in

Westport. Everyone on campus used it. And I couldn't get luckier than to find a place to rent directly *on* Bridleway.

"They can't be asking anything less than fifteen hundred a month," I decided, talking myself out of even the possibility. "I mean, *look* at it."

"Well, you won't know if you don't ask," Jaylani prodded. "You should call."

I shrugged because, yeah, I guess I could at least ask. And it appeared as if I'd just be renting a single room from an already established roommate, not the entire place for myself. Maybe it *wouldn't* be as steep as I was convincing myself it must be.

"Actually," I said, nodding in agreement. "It sounds as if someone's home. I'm just going to ring the doorbell. This way, I can meet the potential roommate, tour the place, *and* get the rental details all in one shot."

"But I need to get back and ready for work," Jaylani argued, biting her lip with worry.

"That's okay." I waved her on. "Go ahead and go. I'll check it out myself."

"You sure?"

"Definitely. I got this."

"Okay, then..." She held up both hands, waving a set of crossed fingers. "Here's hoping it works out with a super awesome roommate and low rent."

Lifting my eyebrows in agreement, I snapped my fingers and pointed back at her. "For sure." Then I blew her a kiss. "Alright, I'm going in."

"They'll love you," she called, waving me on.

Hell, yes they would. I'd make sure of it.

I sucked in a bolstering breath and started toward the front door.

The outside really was in spectacular condition. Even the concrete of the sidewalk and the miniature front porch looked to be poured recently while the flowers in the small garden had to have been professionally planted and arranged.

I took the two steps up, then balled my hand into a fist, and knocked.

From inside, a female voice called, "It's open. Come on in."

Alright, time to pour on the charm. After shaking out my hands to dispel my nerves, I opened the door.

As I did, the song streaming from the window above changed over to Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe."

The first thing I noticed once I was inside was a beautiful hardwood floor.

The entrance led straight into the kitchen, where the counter of a granite-top island bar stretched out to greet me with a fancy sink in the center on one side and three metal-back bar chairs on the other. The rest of the kitchen wrapped around the island with gourmet-styled and top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances.

"Wow," I croaked before I even stepped over the threshold to behold the rest of the first floor. And then I did, only to be blown away with awe.

It looked like a freaking display home that people didn't actually live in, but rather something architects showed you to help you imagine how your own unbuilt dream house could look.

Decorated in varying tones of brown and tan with white borders and white doors, there was a leather wraparound couch with a huge rug sitting at an angle in front of it and a coffee table like nothing I'd ever seen before. It all faced the opposite wall that had a hanging large-screen television over an inlaid, electric fireplace.

The only thing that detracted from such utter perfection was a clear plastic painter's sheet laid out on the floor with a small can of paint sitting on top of it. The dark tan wall there had some white spackling spots as if a few holes had recently been patched over.

Against the far wall was a metal staircase that matched the design of the balcony outside and disappeared up a stairwell. And as I was taking in the intricate design on the banister, a bare foot appeared with toenails covered with blood-red polish.

I held my breath as that foot took a step down the stairs, followed by another until they revealed toned and tanned legs, and then shorty shorts in that style that usually said something like *Juicy* on the butt. A slim, feminine hand latched around the railing—its long nails also bathed in piercing red—before a worn HaveU shirt with paint splatters along the chest came into view.

And then, there she was. A woman about my age appeared, dark curls piled on her head in a sloppy ponytail as she fisted her hand like a microphone and sang along to the song.

“Ripped jeans, skin was showin’. Hot night, wind was blowin.’” Then she paused with flare, striking a pose in the center of the staircase. She bent out her knees and rose onto her tiptoes while throwing back her head to belt out, “Where you think you’re going, baby?”

I laughed outright and had to clap, cheering her on. “Brava! Brava. Very nice.”

With a jaunty grin, the girl fell back onto the balls of her feet and returned to her natural stance as she finished jogging down the stairs.

“Thank you,” she greeted good-naturedly. “And sorry for the show; I just had to get that out of my system.”

“Oh no,” I lifted my hands to pardon her. “No apologies necessary. You totally rocked it.”

“Sweet.” She beamed appreciatively as she strolled over.

And the closer she came, the more flawless she grew. I mean, this girl was *gorgeous*.

It was a good thing Jaylani *hadn’t* come in with me; she might’ve forgotten she was already in a committed relationship with someone else.

“The name’s Thalia,” she greeted with a bob of the head and a wave of her hand. “Thalia Archer.”

I waved back, answering, “Oaklynn.”

Her eyebrows rose with interest, and she tapped her chin thoughtfully.

“Oaklynn, hmm? Yes. I like it. I like it a lot.” Sitting on the armrest of the wraparound couch, she crossed her legs and kept eye contact as she smiled. “So what can I do for you today, Ms. Oaklynn?”

I nearly bounced on my toes with excitement as I clasped my hands together and answered, “Well, I’m hoping it’s something I can actually do for *you*. Like...” Biting my lip with an influx of hope, I added, “Take that spare room you have available off your hands...maybe.”

Thalia’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You want to move in with me?”

“I mean...” I wobbled my head in indecision and then grinned beseechingly. “Possibly. Hopefully. If everything works out okay. I can already tell I *love* the place.” I swept out my arms to encompass all the glorious perfection surrounding us. “But I’m fairly certain there’s no way I can actually afford the rent.”

With a shrug, Thalia made a, “Meh,” sound in the back of her throat to disagree with me before she said, “How does four hundred a month strike you?”

My jaw damn near dropped to the floor. “No way?” I blurted.

Thalia grinned back and started to nod slowly. “Way...” she countered.

“Wow,” I breathed before shaking my head to clear it back into focus. “There’s a catch, though, right? There’s got to be a catch. Like awful plumbing or horrible smells from a nearby sewer plant.” As Thalia started to shake her head, I kept going. “Loud noises of planes flying overhead or nearby train tracks, or...”

When I took a breath, Thalia answered, “The plumbing’s great. And there’s no sewer treatment plant, airport, *or* train tracks nearby. Though, I guess, sometimes...” She leaned forward as if she was fixin’ to confess a grave secret before she added, “Late at night...”

“Yeah?” I encouraged with a wince before biting my lip to brace for the worst.

Then she smiled. “I play music at full blast so I can sing and dance

around the apartment in nothing but a shirt and undies.” She shrugged unapologetically. “What can I say; I’m a free spirit.”

I laughed because I’d been known to do the same thing a time or two in my life.

Thalia might be a free spirit, but she seemed like a kindred one, and I wanted to live here more than I thought was humanly possible.

“I think I can handle that,” I said.

“Though I have a feeling you’d rarely see me,” she added with a thoughtful frown. “So you probably wouldn’t be graced with the pleasure of my midnight serenades *all* that often, if ever. I’ll be gone a lot, so I’d really like someone trustworthy that could act as a caretaker of sorts to watch the old place for me when I’m not around.”

And... That’s when I started to drool.

Not only was the place way too affordable, *and* in spectacular condition, but it’d basically be all *mine*?

“That’s me,” I volunteered. “I’m as trustworthy and responsible as they come. And clean too. You can always count on me to leave stuff better than when I found it.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. But do you already have furniture? I’m not sure where we’d put it if you did. The room comes fully furnished with a private bath; it probably can’t accommodate a lot of *extras*. And I don’t do pets.”

I’d brought a total of three suitcases to Westport with me—sans animals—and no furniture at all. So hearing that it was already furnished was a dream come true.

Plus, having my own bath...

“Okay, who do I need to sell my soul to in order to stay here?” I begged as I lifted my hand, not even playing.

Thalia laughed and popped perkily to her feet. “I’ll tell you what. If you help me paint this here wall—because I know next to nothing about painting

—and we get to know each other enough to bond by the time it's done, the room's yours.”

“Sold,” I cried, lifting a fisted hand into the air triumphantly.

I was so going to get this place.

“SO I’VE BEEN STARING AT THIS PAINT CAN FOR, LIKE, THE PAST HOUR,” Thalia explained as she led me over to the plastic-covered section of the floor. “And I still have no idea how to even open it.”

“Have you tried a...paint can opener perhaps?” I asked, amused by her cluelessness.

She glanced back, blinking blankly. “A what?”

With a laugh, I motioned toward the white plastic sack lying next to the cans. “Let’s see if there’s one in here, shall we?”

“Good idea. Let’s.” She stepped back for me to take the lead. “Have at it.” She even sat back on the couch’s armrest to watch, swinging one foot lazily as I knelt and opened the bag to peer inside.

“Ah. Here we go.” I lifted a bit of metal barely bigger than a key. “One opener.”

“Yay.” She raised both hands and shook them in congratulations.

I guess she hadn’t been the one to buy the supplies. Curious.

“Looks like you have about everything else you need too,” I said as I continued to snoop through the bag, pulling out a stirring stick and then some new paint brushes.

The section that needed to be touched up didn’t seem large enough to require rollers, a tray, or even edging tape, so we looked to be good to go.

“Great!” Thalia said and splayed out a hand before her. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

As the song ended and switched over to “We Are Young” by Fun, she

glanced up with a slight frown. “No... Go back to *Call Me, Maybe*.”

I returned my attention to the paint set, and the song switched back.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Thalia called from behind me. “I have to repeat my favorites when they come on.”

“No worries,” I assured. “I can dig it.”

With a content sigh, Thalia added, “I just love Carly Rae so much.”

“Yeah,” I murmured with a nod. “It’s too bad she was basically only a one-hit-wonder.”

As I picked up the small can and began to shake it, Thalia sniffed. “What’re you talking about?”

I glanced back to find her sending me a funny look.

And she appeared to be dead serious when she answered, “I’m sure she’ll come up with something just as popular soon enough.”

My brows lifted over such loyal devotion, and I refrained from disagreeing in any way as I concentrated on getting the paint shaken properly.

Then I sat the can down, kneeling next to it as I started to pry the lid loose with the opener.

Thalia leaned forward with interest as she watched. “Well, you really do know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

I laughed as I popped off the lid and set it safely out of the way. “I should. Every time I broke a poor boy’s heart in high school, I needed to repaint my walls. It was a very cleansing process.”

“Hmm.” Thalia plucked at a stray hair that had fallen from her ponytail and started to wind it around her finger. “I usually just got a new hairstyle.”

I shrugged. “That works too.”

Bobbing her head in agreement, Thalia tipped me a curious glance and asked, “So... Is there anyone promising in your life *now*? Nosey prospective roommates want to know...”

“Not currently, no,” I said with a depressed sigh as I dunked the brush in and then ran it against the lip of the can as I pulled it out to minimize

drippage. “I just transferred to Haverick this semester so I decided to take a sabbatical from the party scene in order to focus on my studies.”

“Commendable,” Thalia praised with a thoughtful nod. “I wish *I’d* done that. So you’re a...junior then?”

Standing, I lifted the can with me as I surveyed the wall. “Yep. And a journalism major in Broadcasting.”

“In the English sector.” She whistled as if impressed. “Nice. You know, there’s a hot, young professor that just started this year, teaching Technical Writing.” Rubbing her hands together, she added, “And, mmm, he is *quite* the treat. It’s almost enough to make me want to switch majors to something over in English myself.”

Pausing from my project, I glanced over. “So you’re attending HaveU too?”

“Yep.” She lifted her hands to put herself on display. “I’m a junior, like you. But I hail from the drama department. Of course.”

“Of course.” I nodded, thinking that made sense with the amazing flair for life she had, even as I wondered how the heck she was able to attend classes and keep up a GPA that didn’t get her kicked out if she didn’t expect to be around town all that often. But then I figured it was none of my business.

“So... Transfer student,” Thalia was saying to herself before she lifted her gaze to me. “You’re not from Westport?”

“Nope.” I lifted my brush and started applying paint to the wall. “I’m actually from Dallas...or near there. On the northern outskirts.”

“Leave a big family behind?”

“Not really. I’m an only child, but my mom has a sibling and Dad has two, so I have aunts and uncles and cousins spread across the country.”

“I only have my parents and a younger brother,” Thalia said. “Damien,” she added with an adoring smile. “He’s such a sweetheart. So cute, and oh my God...shy.” She pressed both hands to her heart. “If you ever have to

have a little brother, I recommend the shy kind. They never annoy you, are great for fetching things you don't want to get up and get yourself, and oh Lord... All you have to do is give them the simplest compliment, and they blush for days. I just want to squish his adorable cheeks every time I see him."

"Aww," I said, actually feeling a little jealous. I'd always kind of wanted a sibling.

After miming the act of pinching her brother's cheeks, Thalia sighed and dropped her hands into her lap, where she sent me an adoring smile. "Damien's the best."

I nodded as I concentrated on making smooth, even strokes. There actually wasn't all that much to paint, just a few white patches to cover. The wet stuff was obviously darker than the drywall around it, but I figured it would dry and lighten to match spot-on, so I didn't bother painting the entire section.

When I finished covering the last patch, I stepped back to survey my work before glancing over at Thalia. "What do you think?"

"I think..." Sliding off the chair, she wandered over to study the wall before turning to me severely. "Your key's in the cookie jar on the counter," she answered. "And rent deposit information is tacked on the refrigerator. Welcome aboard."

"Oh my God!" I yelped, physically hopping in excitement. "Are you serious?"

This was so awesome. My stars were finally aligning.

Thalia nodded slowly as she watched me. "I think it's imperative that you stay, actually," she said thoughtfully. "Because I have this sense about you, Ms. Oaklynn. Someday, I think we're going to be, like, sisters."

And that was how I got my new place.
Thalia hadn't been lying about rarely being around.

It'd been days since I had moved in, and I'd only seen her one other time aside from the first day we'd met. But I couldn't complain about having the place to myself. I didn't have to worry about dirty dishes in the sink, other people's shoes tripping me up everywhere I stepped, or anyone keeping me awake with their sex sounds on the other side of the wall.

It was honestly the dream.

Waking up before my alarm went off, I stretched in the king-sized bed that had come with my room.

It felt as if I was staying at a hotel...one of the nice ones, except the pillows were better.

I stretched under the covers, my arms poking out the top and brushing against the cloth-padded headboard. And with a satisfied yawn, I sat up to gaze about my new kingdom.

It was very beige. Beige carpet, beige chair, beige curtains, beige bedspread. At least the throw pillows and nightstand knobs were accented with gold. And the wall behind me was a deeper brown, while another wall was a tan and brown brick ensemble. But then the last two returned to a creamy...beige.

Aside from a tall, fake plant in the corner with brilliant green, palmy leaves, the only color came from *my* stuff: purple suitcases propped against the brick wall, a hot pink shirt thrown over the arm of a chair, seafoam green laptop on the nightstand, peach walking shoes sitting by the door. Each item seemed to pop with such a dull background, which made me adore the room even more. It was as if the place wanted to highlight *me*.

Totally willing to accept a little extra attention—even if it was just coming from a couple of walls—I threw off my covers and sprang out of bed to greet the day. My bare toes sank into the plush carpet as I hurried into the bathroom.

Let me repeat...my own, private bathroom.

In all my twenty years, this was the first time I didn't have to share a bathroom with anyone.

Living it up, I had my toiletries scattered everywhere, hogging basically every inch of counter space to myself.

It was the life, I'm telling you.

On top of that, there was a smart toilet, a waterfall-style faucet, and a clear glass wall surrounding a mammoth shower.

It was still hard to believe the rent here was so freaking cheap, and what's more, Thalia told me she wasn't even keeping the money I paid her. My monthly deposits went straight into her little brother's account.

The chick had to be loaded, which yeah... Must be nice.

But I guess Thalia had never actually paid for the place *herself*, either. Her aunt had owned it first, or something like that, and she'd left it to the two siblings. But still... If I was them, I'd at least charge what the place was worth. Make a little more off the top, if you know what I mean.

When I entered the hallway, I paused. This was my least favorite part of the whole apartment. It was still very opulent with a chandelier and grand, polished hardwood flooring; I'd just never been a fan of long, stretchy corridors. They always reminded me of creepy movies, like *The Shining*. And

this one was particularly narrow. And echoey.

All the doors branching off from it were closed, too. There was one at each end: one that Thalia had said went up to the attic and the other went out onto a miniature patio on the roof which led around to the outside second-floor balcony. I'd eaten supper out there last night. It'd been awesome. Very posh.

Then there was the door that led into Thalia's room, which I'd never seen open either, so I'd felt weird about leaving *mine* open. Shutting my door behind me, I started for the stairwell that was located next to the attic entrance, the old wood creaking underfoot. And as I passed Thalia's room, I knocked three times, which was something I'd started to do every morning as I passed by, just to see if she was around.

But she never was.

"Good morning, Thalia!" I called cheerfully. "Rise and shine."

When a muted groan answered from within, I paused, surprised to actually hear an answer. "Oh, hey! You're home. Sorry, I hope I didn't wake you."

I bit my lip until Thalia blearily croaked, "No...no... I'm good. Wide awake."

I laughed. "Yeah, it sounds like it. Hey, I'm about to make myself some breakfast. You want anything?"

"No thanks," she answered with a hearty yawn. "I'm going to be heading out soon."

"You sure?" I coaxed. "I'd be willing to share my beloved French vanilla cappuccino with you for the road."

"Aww, you're such a doll. But nope. I'm good. Have a good day, though."

"Alright," I said with a shrug. "You too."

When I had moved in, she'd told me I would be responsible for getting my own food, and she hadn't been kidding. The cabinets and refrigerator had

been utterly bare with only a box of baking soda in the fridge. It seemed so strange to me that she didn't even have bottled water or coffee to snag before she was out the door again.

But to each their own, I guess.

I turned at the opening of the stairwell and bounded down the metal steps, gripping the railing as I went.

After my initial visit, I'd thought the ground floor had been completely open, like a studio apartment, but there was actually a small, easily overlooked doorway under the stairs that led into a short hall, where a utility room with a washer and dryer, plus a broom closet and half-bath were located. And at the end of that hall was another exit out the back way, where two snug parking places were tucked behind the townhouse in place of a backyard.

I made my way toward the front kitchen area, needing caffeine in my system, stat.

Barefoot and wearing a pair of short, plaid night shorts plus a tight cami with lace fringe and the words *Sweet Dreams* stretched across my breasts, I padded across the floor, straight to the single-serve coffeemaker on the kitchen counter.

"More French vanilla for me, then," I sang to myself as I dragged a mug from the cupboard to set it under the spout before slotting in a pod.

Humming to myself as the machine grumbled and complained and finally spat out my morning brew, I pulled a yogurt from the fridge and then hunted up some fruit, settling on a cup of mixed blueberries, raspberries, and a banana.

When Thalia came prancing down the steps fifteen minutes later in an all-white romper, lime green high heels, a thick belt to match, and a small gold change purse, I was still seated on my stool at the bar, sipping my daily dose of get-up-and-go, only about half-awake. She even had full makeup on as if she were spending a night out on the town with her hair slicked back and

pulled up severely into a tight, tidy bun, along with big hoop earrings dangling above each shoulder.

I sat up and lifted my eyebrows. “Wow. You look like a million bucks.”

Once she stepped off the stairs, she grinned and dramatically posed for me again, lifting one arm above her head and propping a hand against her hip as she kicked a foot up behind her. Then she tilted her chin my way and batted her lashes. “Why...thank you.”

“But where’re you going, all spiffed up like that?” I asked.

With a wink, she shot back, “Wouldn’t you like to know.” Then, she blew me a kiss and turned around to head down the back hall. “Toodles!”

A second after she disappeared completely, I heard the back door open and close.

“Toodles,” I called lamely, still blinking at where she’d just been standing, all glitzy and glamorous.

Seriously, though, where was she *going*? And at six-thirty in the freaking morning, too.

Ooh! Six-thirty. I was going to miss him.

Checking the time as I scampered off my stool, I caught my foot on the bottom rung and stumbled in my haste to make it to the window.

But I didn’t want to be late for the show.

I was still hopping on one foot and trying to catch my balance by the time I reached the glass, where I latched onto the curtains and pulled them open so I could peer out.

The best thing I’d discovered about living right on Bridleway was getting to see all the joggers each morning. All the glistening, male, half-dressed, and very *fit* joggers, to be specific.

I already had my favorite, too. And if he followed his usual morning schedule, he was going to run by my window any moment now.

Biting my lip, I craned my neck, searching...searching...until there!

Just like clockwork, here he came.

I released an adoring breath. But gawd... He was just beyond gorgeous.

Somewhere between six feet even and six-three and probably a hundred and eighty pounds—give or take—he appeared to have that perfect mesomorph body type with the wider shoulders, slimmer waist, and all-around model physique.

His skin was a dark golden tan. I couldn't tell if the hint of swarthy meant he had some Hispanic heritage running through his veins, like me, or if he just tanned that well.

Either way, it looked good on him.

Then again, *everything* looked good on him. Except maybe his gaudy shoes. They were these yellow and bright orange monstrosities that were probably super popular brands in the running world. But yikes...no.

He had trim ankles, muscular calves, and bulging thighs that made up for it, though. Except I barely got to see much of those glorious thighs because the hem of his shorts swallowed up most of them.

But I could deal with that because his shorts rode low and loose around his waist, and with his white shirt hanging from the back pocket of his shorts, his rock-hard abs were on full display.

A dark happy trail circled his belly button before disappearing down inside his waistband. And oh... My stomach quivered and thighs clenched as my gaze moved over his six-pack abs and up to his perfectly defined chest, which was chiseled with a light sprinkling of dark hair around his small, flat nipples.

I licked my lips as he paused at his normal turn-around spot right in front of my brownstone and lifted his arms to rest both hands on the back of his head as he walked in a small circle, showing me a perfectly rounded and pert ass before coming back around to display the front again as he took a moment to cool off.

This was just no fair. Even the dark thatch of hair in his armpits was a frigging turn-on. Maybe because it dwelled under a set of biceps that were

curved to firm perfection, but I liked it. I liked how the muscles in his throat moved when he swallowed and how his strong jawline shifted as he opened his mouth to inhale, then curved his plush lips into an O when he exhaled again. I liked how his lashes rested on the tops of his cheekbones when he closed his eyes and how he lifted his face to the morning sunlight to soak in some Vitamin D.

I just...*liked* him.

The dark hair on his head was straight, not quite military grade buzzed but close, and his beard was thick and fully grown in but equally short and trimmed. It made him appear very controlled and orderly, not letting much else about himself out.

An enigma, if you will, with a hooded gaze that watched other people pass but never engaged with them. No hello smiles, no bobbing of the head to acknowledge others, just scrutinizing watchfulness. And to me, that made him one hard, closed-off nut to crack.

But, boy, did that make me want to pop him open and learn everything there was to know.

As if hearing my brain work in overdrive, trying to figure him out, he glanced over and caught me standing in the window, ogling him.

And just like that, his entire demeanor changed. Dropping his arms from the top of his head, he straightened in surprise and blinked at me as if he were seeing a ghost.

“Oh shit,” I gasped and lurched away from the window, batting the curtains back into place and utterly mortified that my gawking ways had been exposed. Now I was never going to be able to spy on him unnoticed again; he’d always check to see if I was there.

Ugh!

Watching him had become my favorite morning pastime, too.

Grumbling to myself, I returned to the counter to clear away my breakfast and get ready for classes, already certain the rest of my day was ruined.

I moodily reached for my yogurt spoon when I heard a key in the lock at the front door.

Not expecting anyone, I yelped and dropped the spoon.

As it clattered onto the countertop, the main door started to open, only to get held up by the chain door guard and jar to an abrupt halt.

“Oh!” I said, scrambling forward, certain it was Thalia. “Hold up.”

But the door had already slammed shut again.

Determined to catch my roommate and let her in, I hustled to the entrance and fumbled to slide the chain off. Then I tried to pull the door open, only to realize she’d relocked it from the outside, so I had to twist the lock, and then, *voilà*, I finally had the thing unlocked.

But when I pulled it open and peered outside, no one was there.

“Thalia?” I asked as I stepped barefoot onto the front steps. “Hello?”

She was long gone. As was my fantasy jogger.

Only three guys with book bags slumped over their shoulders were walking past and talking to each other, paying absolutely no attention to me.

“Huh,” I mumbled, scratching my hair in confusion.

That was strange. I wonder where she—

“Hey!” a voice growled from behind me...inside my apartment.

A very male, very angry voice.

I screamed and whirled around to find a shadowy silhouette exiting the back hall from the rear entrance and wielding the umbrella that I’d had hanging from a hook back there. He held it as if it were a bat with his knees bent slightly and feet spread apart in that typical, I’m-ready-to-kick-ass stance.

He shuffled into the room as if uncertain but still ready to dive into a physical brawl.

Oh, and did I forget to mention he was shirtless?

No, scratch that. He *had* a shirt. He just wasn’t wearing it. It was dangling from the back pocket of his running shorts. And his shoes were the same

yellow and neon-orange atrocities that my favorite jogger wore.

When he moved into the light enough for me to see his face, I pulled back in surprise before breathing, “Whoa.”

Because he *was* my hot jogger guy.

OAKLYNN

Somewhere in my brain, I knew I should be straight-up terrified. Someone I didn't know had just broken into my apartment and was wielding a... kind of weapon.

I think my brain even tried to get the ball rolling.

Alright, guys! This is Stranger Danger 101. Heartbeat, initiate overdrive mode.

Check. My pulse was definitely picking up speed.

Skin, sound the alarm.

And there went my flesh, prickling in his presence.

Arms and legs, brace for possible—Reproductive organs! No. Stand down. You are not—dammit, vagina. Don't prepare for sex. And nipples, don't you dare follow her lead. We're scared right now, not turned on. I mean, look at him. We do not know him. He's not supposed to be here. We don't care how hot he looks with all that menacing, male aggression on full display...or what a gorgeous color his narrowed eyes are. And maybe it IS slightly thrilling to imagine those hands gripped gently around your throat instead of that umbrella as he pinned you to a wall and—fuck. Where was I going with this?

In front of me, the gorgeous intruder fell to a stop and straightened to his full height when he got a good look at me.

The umbrella fell limply to his side, letting me know he no longer considered me to be a threat—probably because he could sense I was more aroused by him than scared—and he furrowed his brow in confusion. His lips parted as he glanced me over from head to toe. Then he slid his attention to the island where my breakfast remains sat.

Cocking his head curiously as if unable to make sense of why it was there, he swerved his attention back to me.

“Uh...” I started uneasily, not sure what to say as I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear and resisted the urge to smooth the locks down and primp for the trespasser. “Can I *help* you?”

Jogger dude lifted his eyebrows in dismay as if he couldn't believe I would dare ask him such a thing. Then, he blurted, “Who the fuck *are* you?”

“Excuse me?” I shot back snidely, pressing an indignant hand to my chest. “Who are *you*? And how did you even get in here?”

Eyes squinted in disbelief, he slowly dug a hand into his pocket and pulled up a set of keys, dangling one that looked suspiciously like the same key I had for this place with black paint coating it and a fancy red letter A on the bow.

Well, huh.

I mean, not that I blamed Thalia for sharing keys to the apartment with hotties like him, but it would've been nice to know I might get a surprise visit.

“How did *you* get in?” he challenged with a lifted eyebrow.

“Same,” I smarted off, growing annoyed by the attitude. Gorgeous or not, the boy needed to learn some manners, so I set my hands on my hips, ready to teach him the first one.

His attention veered down by the movement of my hands, however, and he blinked at my body, successfully distracted from our conversation before his gaze settled on the words written across my chest, which reminded me that I was still in my pajamas and barely dressed at all.

“Hey!” I squawked in censure and crossed my arms over my breasts to hide how hard my nipples were.

So I guess my sense of propriety was still in working order, despite the dirty thoughts my brain kept having. Which only proved that this guy was turning me into a hot mess of contradicting reactions.

A part of me wanted to argue with him until we got worked up enough to jump each other’s bones while the other part of me was commanding me to remain cautious because he was still potentially dangerous. As a result, I suddenly didn’t know up from down.

He jerked his gaze guiltily from my breasts and frowned at me while the tops of his cheeks darkened briefly and he tightened his lips in displeasure.

“*You* have a key?” he repeated slowly, obviously not believing me. “Where?”

“Where?” I huffed out a hard laugh. “Are you serious? Okay, fine. I’ll play. Not that it’s any of your business, but it’s in my purse.” I jabbed my finger, pointing. “Right over there.”

When he glanced toward the side chair where my purse lay, I slapped my hands back to my hips. “Now would you please stop threatening me with my own damn umbrella and put it down?”

He turned back in surprise, then looked at the umbrella in his hand before complying and tossing it onto the couch.

I took that moment to dash toward my purse and scoop it up. There was mace inside if I needed it.

But when I dug my hand in, it was my rental key that I pulled up. “So, ha!” I cried triumphantly. “Looks like we both have a key.”

His eyes flared as he focused on it dangling tauntingly from my fingers. “Where did you get that?”

He sounded accusative and looked as if he might try to snatch it right out of my hand.

When he actually took a step in my direction to see it better, I curled my

fingers protectively around the key and dropped it back into my purse, which I hugged to my chest.

“Thalia gave it to me,” I said.

“Huh?” Sexy Jogger Guy pulled up straight as if I’d just walloped him in the chest with a two-by-four.

“When I rented a room from her,” I added. “How did you get *yours*?”

Gaze frozen, he gaped at me for a good ten seconds before he shut his mouth, swallowed thickly, and then hoarsely rasped, “I’m sorry; *what* did you say?”

“I said, I rented the vacant room upstairs from Thalia. What’s *your* story?”

“You rented the room...from *Thalia*?” he repeated carefully, watching me with eagle eyes as he spoke as if trying to catch me in a lie.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Yes. Why are you—?”

When he lifted a finger to silence me, I stopped talking abruptly, and I’m not sure why I did. He was kind of pissing me off too much for me to want to actually *follow* his rules. But there was something about the look in his eyes that compelled me to go silent. He seemed so confused, and yet utterly intrigued while completely suspicious.

He stared at me that way for another overly long moment before snorting in disbelief and shaking his head. “Look, I don’t know who you are, what your game is, or *how* you got that key, but you are squatting on this property, and you need to go. Now.”

“As if!” I cried, marching toward him to get in his face. “I paid the first month’s deposit already, buddy. So I’m here until at least October twelfth. But if you think the room should’ve gone to you instead, then you need to take that up with *Thalia*. Until then, it’s mine.”

“That’s not—” he started, growing irritable, only to pause and blink at me. “Wait. You paid rent? To *whom*?”

I let out an impatient sigh. “To Thalia. Duh,” Then, I winced. “Er...to her

little brother...or something. I don't know! She said the money went into his account. But it's paid, alright? The room is mine."

He blinked dumbly, squinting a moment before he shook his head outright. "No fucking way," he breathed before scrambling to dive his hand into his pocket and pull out a phone.

I shook my head, confused. "What're you doing?"

His fingers fumbled to open an app before he found what he was looking for. Then his mouth dropped open, and he croaked, "Son of a bitch." After taking a few more moments to blink at the screen of his phone, he looked up at me with wide eyes. "Are you...Oaklynn...?" He checked the screen again before adding, "Vargas?"

He turned the phone to show me the line deposit of four hundred dollars into his account.

This time, it was my turn to gape stupidly.

Lifting my finger, I pointed at the deposit. "That's my..." I shook my head. "Yes, sir, that's me, but..." Trying to make sense of what was happening here, I looked up into his eyes. They were extremely potent from this range, an intoxicating honey hue, equal parts yellow, green, and brown. Like a glass of rich, high-proof whiskey.

I swallowed thickly. "But that would make you..." I still couldn't quite believe it, so I had to cringe when I guessed, "Damien?"

His eyebrows shifted, telling me I'd guessed correctly.

I blurted out a harsh laugh. "*You're* Damien Archer?"

When he nodded, I fell back a step. "Holy shit. But..." Shaking my head to clear it, I looked him over from head to toe. Then I lifted my hands to frame him in my vision. "This was *not* what I pictured when Thalia mentioned her little brother."

She seriously needed to revisit her meaning of *little*.

And *cute*.

Because the creature before me could grab *cute* by the hair, spank its ass,

and then make it call him daddy.

I mean, wow.

A shot of pure arousal zapped through me, and I visibly shuddered as I pictured him spanking...well...*me*.

I swallowed thickly.

Thalia had even called him a sweetheart, hadn't she? And said he had *adorable* cheeks.

His cheeks were the furthest thing from adorable there was. They were like granite, shaped as if some god owned them. There were even these hard-edged, manly scars along them, little chips of flesh taken from the corner of one eye and just above the corner of his mouth on the other side. They made him sexy and lickable and completely hot but in no way *adorable*.

Wondering if he had any more of those alluring little scars elsewhere, my gaze dropped back to his bare chest, only for him to snap his fingers to get my attention and growl, "Excuse me."

I jerked my gaze up and cleared my throat guiltily before scowling. "What? You looked first."

He exhaled impatiently and grabbed the shirt from his back pocket before jerking it on. "Alright," he said, lifting his hands as if to create some order in the universe as soon as he was a lot more dressed than I was. "I don't know who you rented the room from, but it wasn't Thalia."

"Yes," I told him steadily. "It was."

Damien growled in his throat. "No. It wasn't."

"Look," I countered. "I know she said she wouldn't be around much, but she was *here* when I knocked on the door to ask about the sign in the window. We had nearly an hour-long conversation before she told me the key was in the cookie jar and the rent information was on the fridge. She also told me the money was being deposited into *your* account, and that the house had belonged to your aunt before she left it to the two of you. I mean, who else would know that shit?"

Scowling irritably, Damien seemed forced to admit, “No one.”

“Exactly,” I snapped, thinking Thalia should’ve warned me about a possible surprise visit from her brother...and that he wasn’t so little. Or sweet. “Plus that’s a picture of her, hanging right there. *That’s* who I rented the room from. So is that your sister or not?”

When I pointed to the framed sixteen-by-twenty-inch portrait, Damien turned and sucked in a breath.

“Wha...?” He shook his head in disbelief as he slowly drifted toward it as if mesmerized. “What is this doing down here? It was locked in the *attic*.” Glancing at me, he lifted a condemning eyebrow.

I only shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess Thalia got it because I certainly didn’t drag it down here and hang it. I don’t even have a key to the attic.”

His brow only furrowed in confusion as he pointed. “And who the hell painted this wall?”

“Oh! Thalia and I did,” I said, only to flush and roll my eyes. “Well, mostly it was me. Er, all of it was me. But she oversaw everything.”

Damien shook his head. “This isn’t...” He sounded dazed as he returned his gaze to the freshly painted wall, or rather to the picture of Thalia hanging from it. “But how...?”

When he glanced over at me again, I frowned, not tracking. “How *what*?”

Wincing as if it physically hurt him to speak, he pressed a hand to the base of his throat and inhaled shakily. Then he looked into my eyes as if seeking help. “Thalia... She...”

This urge to reach out and grab his arm to steady him overcame me, but I held back. “She...?” I asked softly.

“Sh-she’s gone.” He exhaled roughly and then winced. “She...left.”

“Oh.” Not sure how else to respond, I lifted my shoulders. “Well... I guess she’s back.”

That answer only seemed to crush him more, though. “So...she—is she here?” His gaze crawled restlessly toward the ceiling where her room was

located directly above us. “Right now?”

“No, I...sorry.” I cringed apologetically. “You just missed her.”

“Yeah, I bet I did,” he muttered under his breath, only to focus on me again and blow out a long sigh. “When was this, anyway? When did you... meet her and rent the room? How long have you been staying here?”

“Let’s see.” I bit my bottom lip and took a moment to calculate in my head. “About a week now, I guess. Yeah. It was...last Wednesday, so wow, exactly a week ago today.”

“And you...?” He seemed like he wanted to add more to that question but he lost his concentration and had to frown around the room as if trying to make sense of what was happening. “You really saw her?” he murmured in awe. “You talked to her? And she—she’s...back?”

“Apparently,” I said slowly, only to lift my hands and wave them. “But I’m confused,” I confessed. “If she’s been out of town, and you’ve obviously been the one maintaining this place with the paint and stuff...” I motioned to the wall I’d painted, realizing he had to have been the one who’d bought all the supplies. “Then why didn’t she *tell* you she was back or that she was going to rent out the room?”

He squinted briefly. “*I* was the one renting the room out,” he explained. “And the sign in the window...” When he glanced toward the window, only to see that the sign was gone, he hissed out a disgruntled sound and revised, “That *was* in the window... It had *my* number on it.” Turning back to me, he frowned in reprimand. “You were supposed to call the number and talk to *me*.”

“Oh,” I said in a small voice before wincing. Then I gave him the sweetest smile I could muster. “Well, crap. I’m sorry. I actually *almost* called, but I could hear music playing from inside when I was walking by on Bridleway, so... I just went up to the door and knocked instead. But Thalia didn’t mention anything about needing your approval or... I don’t know. This is getting really weird. I mean... Why wouldn’t she tell you she was back or

that she'd rented out the room for you?"

He stared at me, frozen for a moment, before he gave a slight shake of the head. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Well... *You* don't have a problem with me staying here, do you?"

God, please say no. Please say no. Because I seriously loved it here. I did not want to be kicked out.

Damien blinked at me as if I'd lost my mind. Then he huffed out an amused sound and shook his head as if he couldn't believe any of this conversation was happening at all. "I guess you *have* already paid for a month's worth of rent," he admitted ruefully. "But..."

Lifting a hand to scratch the back of his head, he looked momentarily uncomfortable.

"I will be the perfect tenant, I swear." Pressing my hands together, I sent him the biggest, most appealing begging eyes I'd ever produced. "Rent will never be a day late. I will clean and take care of everything. I won't throw huge ragers, or even mini ragers, and I..." Wincing but desperate, I added, "I'll even tack on another fifty dollars every month."

Hoping he didn't demand more—because I honestly wasn't sure how much more I could afford—I bit my lip and kept entreating him with my expression until he huffed out a defeated sound and dropped his arm back to his side.

"I mean, I guess it's fine," he allowed. "I don't have to find a new tenant myself this way, and...and... She obviously likes you enough to allow it, so... Yeah. It's okay. You can stay, with no added rent."

"Really? Oh my God!" I exhaled and gave him a grateful smile as I slapped my hands to my chest in relief. "Thank you. Thank you so much! Because there was no way in hell I was going to find anything else this nice. Or cheap. Or accessible to campus."

He nodded before adding, "I'll just... I'll send you the lease agreement to sign and make it official, then, since I have a feeling you haven't signed

anything yet.”

“No, I haven’t,” I admitted. “Thalia was very...informal about all that.”

He sniffed out a sound that could’ve been amusement...or maybe it could’ve been irritation. I wasn’t a hundred percent sure.

“So...alright,” I announced, rubbing my hands together and smiling in relief. “Legal papers to sign sound good. Thank you.”

As I blasted him with a grateful smile, Damien Archer gazed back intently, and his eyes heated with an awakening awareness that made my thighs tingle and my breasts go hot and heavy.

“You’re welcome,” he answered belatedly, his voice low enough to send shivers through me.

Unaccustomed to having such a strong reaction to anyone, I cleared my throat and tried to ignore the pulsing flares igniting inside me. “So... I’m still puzzled by all this. If Thalia didn’t think to tell you that she’d returned to town *or* accepted a new tenant for you, then why did she still let all the proceeds *go* to you?”

And how long had she been gone, I wanted to add.

“All good questions,” he admitted, seemingly just as confused as I was. Then he stepped closer. “She didn’t... I mean, did she ask you to give me any kind of message or anything?”

When an aching hopeful expression lit his face, I felt like a terrible person for having to say, “No. I’m sorry, she didn’t. But she didn’t act as if she’d been gone or as if she’d even lost contact with you either. I never would’ve guessed you two were estranged. I mean, she only said *good* things about you.”

He sent me a half smile as if he didn’t want me to see how much hearing that hurt him. “I don’t... Well, I don’t have anything bad to say about her either,” he admitted hoarsely. “And I know she didn’t leave *because* of me. I just...” He exhaled heavily and sent me a longing glance. “It’d be really nice to see her again, you know.”

I nodded sympathetically. “How long has it been?”

His eyes looked glassy as he shook his head. “Feels like forever.”

Not the answer I was looking for, but I wasn’t going to press something that was obviously a painful topic for him, even though I physically had to bite my tongue to keep from blurting out a dozen more questions.

“Hey,” he said abruptly as if just then coming up with an idea. “Do you think you could... I mean, could you let me know the next time she’s around?”

I cocked my head suspiciously. “Do you not have her number?” He flushed guiltily, and I cried, “Really?” How could he not even have his own sister’s phone number?

That was sus as hell, right there. A guy asking you to let him know when some girl was around when he should already have all her contact info... Not cool.

Even if she *was* his sister.

Except I didn’t want him to be a bad guy whose sister actively avoided him. There was this aching vulnerability in his eyes that I wanted to just hug out of his system. It made me feel extra drawn to him.

As if realizing he was walking on eggshells with me, he quickly added, “Or could you just let her know how much I’d like to talk to her the next time you see her?”

Alright, that was better. Whew! I bobbed my head in enthusiastic relief, glad he no longer had the stalker vibe hanging over his head.

“Sure ’nuff,” I said, wanting to do anything to help wipe that dejected look off his beautiful face. “Of course, I’ll tell her.”

His shoulders fell heavily with relief. “Great. Thank you. I guess I should give you my number then, which...” He lifted his brows. “...you should probably have, anyway, you know, in case you have plumbing or electrical problems or something. With the rent money going to me, I’ll be the one who takes care of any repairs around here.”

“Right.” I nodded slowly. “I mean, yeah. That makes sense. Okay. I’ll... give you mine too.”

He gave a jerky return nod. “Sounds good.”

As he dug his hand into his pocket and pulled up his phone, a surreal sense of disconnection swamped me. I mean, the hottie I’d been ogling from my window and dreaming about from afar was now giving me his number.

Because he was my landlord.

How in the world was this happening?

As I awkwardly took the phone he extended to me, we glanced at each other once more before I called myself. When I heard my ringtone blare from the kitchen island next to my empty breakfast plate, I hung up again and handed his phone back to him.

“There you go.”

“Thanks,” he rasped, keeping eye contact as our fingers brushed accidentally, zinging a strange pulse of heat straight through my veins.

“Well... Thank *you* for letting me stay.” I quivered out a nervous smile. “Even though you apparently had no idea I was here.”

This time, he merely nodded, and his gaze dipped to my lips.

Arousal pooled into the pit of my belly as he stared at my mouth as if he wanted to own it. I drew in a measured breath and then exhaled shakily.

In the back of my mind, a distant, vague voice bellowed at me, trying to remind me that I was focusing on school this year, not guys. *Do not go there*, it warned.

And I must’ve been listening to that voice because, in the next breath, I found myself blurting, “I can’t have sex with you.”

Damien’s eyes snapped to mine in utter surprise before they filled with confusion. “O...kay,” he drew out slowly.

“Oh God,” I whimpered. Lifting a hand to my brow as if checking for a trace of crazy, I admitted, “I have no idea why I just said that.”

God, this was embarrassing.

But he only cringed. “I was looking again, wasn’t I?”

More than relieved that he was going to take some culpability for my insane slip of the tongue so that I wouldn’t have to be utterly and completely humiliated, I latched onto the scapegoat he provided and began to nod madly.

“It’s just... I’m a new transfer to Haverick this year,” I blabbed, unable to shut up already. “And it took me way more effort than I want to admit *just* to get in, so I really can’t have any distractions like...”

Realizing what I was doing—again—and Damien was simply watching me as if I’d lost my mind, I slowed my explanation to a stop and winced.

“Yeah...” I drew out, taking a long, slow step backward. “I’m going to stop turning you down now since you haven’t even made a single advance toward me. I...am so sorry about that. How super presumptuous of me.”

He lifted a hand in forgiveness and huffed out an amused but equally uncomfortable sound. “It’s fine,” he assured, even as he scratched the back of his neck and glanced toward the exit. “I’m going to go, though.” Returning his gaze to me with an uneasy farewell wave, he added, “I’ll make sure to get that paperwork sent to you.”

I sent him a tight smile in return, glad he hadn’t changed his mind about letting me live here after all. “Great. Thanks.”

He nodded and looked momentarily lost before he retreated a step and then noticed the umbrella that he’d tossed onto the couch. “And I’ll return this from where I took it.”

Oh my God! Would he please just go so I could die of humiliation in peaceful, quiet dignity already?

“Perfect,” I gritted out, not moving a muscle.

After scooping up the umbrella, he sent me one last brief glance. “See you.”

I waved back. “Bye.”

And he left the same way he’d come in, through the back entrance.

As soon as I heard the door shut, I sagged my shoulders and pressed my

hand against my abdomen with a pathetic moan. “What is *wrong* with me?”

I’d never had game *that* lousy with anyone in my entire life. Not that I’d been trying to have any with *him*—my intent had been just the opposite—but still. That had to be the first time I’d ever stuck my foot so firmly into my mouth that I’d started talking out of my ass before.

From here on out, I’d have to learn how to unclog my own drains and watch do-it-yourself YouTube videos about electricity because no way in hell could I ever face him again for apartment problems.

Not for any reason.

DAMIEN

“**Y**o, Arch! Toss me a breadstick, will you?” From the end of the table, Foster sent me the beckoning gesture with both hands.

Obliging, I leaned forward and peered into the basket in front of me to find one garlic-coated stick left. So I picked it out with two fingers and gave it a backward-spinning fling his way.

When Foster caught it with one hand, he grinned and sent me a thumbs-up. “Nice.” Then he returned his attention to Keene and Alec on either side of him as they argued over some foosball match they’d had earlier in our living room.

Directly across from me, Thane was telling Parker to his left all about his day.

And on my right, Hudson was taking a long swallow from the drink that had just been delivered before he hissed in delight as if that had hit the spot. Once refreshed, he lifted a finger and joined Alec and Keene’s discussion.

“No, no, no. That’s not how it went down at all.”

Thane had sent out a message earlier, organizing a meet-up for us since Foster had a game the next day and liked to carb out the night before, so we’d landed here, at this Italian joint called Rizzo’s, where Keene had charmed the waitress into seating us in a private room by ourselves.

Everyone was talking, being loud and rowdy, and even though I didn’t

join any of what felt like half a dozen conversations that were taking place around me, I sat back contentedly, listening to them all and soaking in the feeling that I was home.

As I lifted a cola to my lips for a drink, Thane finally noticed how taciturn I was being and nodded at me to catch my attention as I set my glass down. “So what’s been new with Archer?”

“Not much,” I said, then shrugged and started tapping on the top of my thigh under the table because it felt as if I was lying...to one of my best friends on earth. “Just school mostly.”

He nodded good-naturedly, not suspecting a thing as he lifted his own drink. “Are all those psychology courses you’re taking this semester weighing you down too much yet?”

“Nah.” I lifted my shoulder again. “We’ve been going over a lot of case studies that make things more interesting. So it doesn't feel as overwhelming as I’m sure it sounds.”

“Good, good. And did you ever go to the police about your theory that the missing Haverick girl might be tied to—”

“Yeah,” I cut in with a wince. “They said she probably just dropped out and didn’t leave a forwarding address with the university. And I guess the roommate who reported her missing had a blowout fight with her not long before her disappearance, so it’s entirely possible she just didn’t tell the other girl she was leaving.”

“Huh. I hope that’s the case, then.” Thane nodded thoughtfully before snapping his fingers. “Oh, hey! I was biking Bridleway the other day and saw that you’d taken down the vacancy sign at your aunt’s place.”

And there it was.

“Uh, yeah...” I stalled lamely, clearing my throat as a vision of Oaklynn in nothing but a pair of shorty shorts and a tight cami filled my head.

Unable to think up a lie that I could feel comfortable about giving, I ducked my chin and mumbled, “Finally got a new tenant to rent it.”

And just like that, I'd caught everyone else's attention. The six loudmouths surrounding me went immediately silent as they gaped in surprise.

"No shit?" Thane asked a second later with raised eyebrows right before Parker lifted a bill in the air.

"Ten bucks says they're gone by the end of the month."

"Oh, you are so on," Keene exclaimed, already digging into his pocket. "I put fifty down for the end of the *week*."

From there, everyone started arguing and debating over their bets.

"Well... She's already been there *two* weeks," I tried to tell them because it had been a week since I'd burst into the apartment on her, and she'd already been there a week before that.

But I was completely ignored until I added, "And she says she rented the room from Thalia."

Once again, I captured everyone's attention, and they all gaped at me in unspeaking confusion before Foster cleared his throat and tapped his ear. "I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

So I told them about the entire encounter I'd had with Oaklynn—neglecting to mention the part where she'd given me a very clear rejection.

That had definitely been a first for me.

I honestly don't think I'd ever been shot down *ahead* of making a move on a girl before.

Not that I should've been making a move on her at all because the odds that Oaklynn Vargas was a complete liar were probably ten-to-one.

But I'd wanted her, anyway.

I hadn't cared if she was a con artist intent to scam me, I had *wanted* her. Badly. And she'd known it.

God, rejection sucked.

What was worse, still thinking about her now—a week later—made my blood sing with awareness.

She'd just been so sassy and bold, standing up to a complete stranger she thought was breaking into her apartment and taking him on, toe-to-toe.

I mean, that was probably only because she'd been *expecting* the owner—aka, me—to show up, and she'd practiced her innocent, oh-I-already-paid-my-rent speech to precision.

Unless she hadn't.

Because her shock and confusion had seemed pretty damn genuine.

But more than likely, it wasn't. And she was a complete, fucking liar.

A gorgeous liar, but a liar regardless.

Everyone listened to every detail I fed them until I finished with, "And so... I let her stay."

"Holy shit," Keene breathed in utter awe.

While Alec asked, "Do you think she was actually telling the truth?"

Parker snorted. "Come on. Of course, she wasn't. Thalia's *dead*."

A heavy silence filled the table after his blunt words, and Parker almost immediately winced in regret. "Shit..." he breathed as he sliced a concerned glance my way. "Arch, I'm..."

"No." He wasn't so good with apologies, and I could see the regret on his face without it, so I lifted a hand in forgiveness as I paused him there. "It's fine."

"Regardless of her breathing status," Hudson spoke up with a shrug. "No one can dispute the fact that she's still hanging around. We've all experienced some kind of encounter with her. Why can't this Oaklynn chick be legit?"

"To be honest," I cut in abruptly. "It doesn't matter if she's lying or not." Though secretly, I didn't want her to be a liar. I wanted all this to be true. "Her money's good and sitting in my account right now. Plus, I don't have to try to find anyone else to rent the place to, so it makes no difference at all how she got there."

Except that obviously wasn't the truth, and all my friends knew it.

Wincing, Foster said, “But you shouldn’t be played like that.”

“Unless she’s telling the truth,” Alec argued.

“Really?” Thane frowned at him, clearly on the side of the disbelievers. Rolling his eyes, he muttered, “You’ve watched one too many ghost movies, Younger.”

“What?” Alec lifted his hands in defense. “I’m just saying, if she *has* interacted with Thalia, then maybe she can help Damien get in contact with his sister again and finally get some answers.”

“Like *who* killed her,” Keene added.

“Stop,” Parker growled, sending both Alec and Keene a severe glance. “Just stop putting those ideas in his head. This...*Oaklynn* is a fucking liar.”

But I didn’t like hearing him say that, so I said, “Hey, no one’s saying anything I haven’t already thought to myself. I even gave her my number in the hopes that she’ll call the next time she...*interacts* with Thalia.”

“Dude...” Keene gave a low, impressed whistle. “You gave her your *number*? Wait. Wait...” He lifted his hands to gain everyone’s attention. “Is she hot? Young? Single? Please say yes.”

“She’s definitely got a hot name,” Hudson spoke up with a lazy drawl. “I mean, *Oaklynn*...” With a pleasant shudder from where he was sprawled back in his chair, he nodded. “Oh, yeah, I’d give her my number too.”

“She’s a potential psycho who lies and breaks into rentals that are notoriously haunted, and you’re automatically *attracted* to her?” Parker asked with lifted brows. “Yeah, that tracks.”

“Hell yes, it does,” Hudson purred with a smile. Then he snapped his fingers at me. “Yo, Arch, could you give her *my* number too?”

Sending him a hard glance, I growled, “I don’t fucking think so.”

“Oh ho...” Foster screeched, slapping the table in excitement before pointing accusingly at me. “She *is* hot!”

Alec nodded in agreement. “No way would Archer turn *that* territorial if she wasn’t”

Still slouched back in his seat, Hudson lifted his drink in salute, “And *I’m* the one who got him to admit it.” After winking smugly at me, he told the others, “You’re welcome.”

I glared back, simmering.

While Keene immediately pounced on this revelation. “Like, how hot, though?” he demanded. “On a scale of one to ten?”

When I merely shook my head, refusing to answer, Foster gave a low whistle. “If he’s not saying, then you *know* she’s gotta be a nine or higher.”

I rolled my eyes. “You fuckers are seriously annoying.”

“You totally have to ask her out,” Keene encouraged.

“Yes, *please* ask out the crazy, lying girl, Archer,” Parker begged sarcastically. “So we can help you look for your favorite body parts after she *chops* them off.”

“Hey, this is serious, guys,” Thane scolded the others before turning toward me in concern. “You’re not going to let this potential fraud get to you with her stories and put one over on you, are you?”

I furrowed my brow, instantly wanting to defend Oaklynn.

But I said, “Of course not,” as I lifted my hands defensively. “Except what can she put over on me? The worst would be that she lied to get the room. And I’m fine with her having it, so what else could there possibly be?”

“There’s false hope,” Thane immediately shot back. “She could make you believe that *communicating* with Thalia again is actually possible.”

“And then charge you out the ass for some bogus séance that doesn’t fucking do shit,” Parker muttered bitterly, probably remembering a certain trip he’d taken to Houston his senior year of high school to pay a psychic medium thousands in the hopes of speaking to his parents again. Which hadn’t worked.

But all I could think was that maybe Oaklynn Vargas *could* help me pass a message along to my sister. And get one in return. I mean, if I could just talk to Thalia one more time...

If I could learn who'd taken her from me...

Fuck.

I blinked rapidly, trying to dry the moisture gathering in my eyes.

Thane saw how much it was affecting me, though. My hopes had already reached their peak, and sympathy filled his face. "Damien..." he started, shaking his head sadly.

But I sighed and lifted a hand to stop him. "I know," I said a little more roughly than I should have. "And I'm not going to let it get to me. Alright? I've got this."

"Okay," Thane said quietly, but the concern in his eyes remained, even though physically, he backed off. "Okay," he repeated.

Keene broke the tension at the table by saying, "Psycho liar or not, I still think you should fuck her." Nodding encouragingly, he added, "The crazies are always the hottest in bed. Trust me."

Parker muttered, "Oh Jesus," under his breath and pinched at his forehead as if Keene's idiocy had given him a headache.

While Hudson only shrugged. "Hey, I'm all for it. Get her out of your system so you can view her a little more rationally. I can almost *assure* you that you'll be able to suss out her lies better after a healthy roll in the sheets."

"Just... For the love of God, keep her away from all sharp, knifelike objects until *after* you get your pants back on," Parker advised.

"Ah, jeez," Thane grumbled, shaking his head in disappointment as a rash of mad whispering from the doorway to our private room caused us all to glance over, where we spotted a trio of giddy girls watching us nervously and gossiping amongst themselves.

"Howdy," Thane called out, addressing them directly. "Can we help you?"

"Um, yeah..." They all focused on Foster and giggled as one. "Are you Foster Union?"

Foster straightened in surprise and flashed them his perfectly straight,

white smile. “Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“Oh my God,” they shrilled in excitement and rushed forward eagerly. “We thought so. Can we take a picture with you? Please, *please*, say yes.”

“Sure. Of course.” As he pushed back his chair to stand, they surrounded him to touch his arms and shoulders and back. One might’ve even copped a feel of his ass.

Another handed Parker her camera, asking, “Could you?”

He sent her a dry, unimpressed smile. “It’s what I live for,” he muttered sarcastically as he regretfully slipped from his seat to play photographer.

“So are y’all Stallion fans?” Foster asked, sliding easily into his public persona, as the ladies flocked closer.

“We never miss a home game,” they announced wholeheartedly, jockeying for position to get to stand directly next to the university’s star quarterback.

Foster looped his arms around the waists of the two winners, and the loser pouted for half a moment before resting her hands on her friend’s shoulder and leaning in to cheese for the camera.

After the shot was taken, Foster invited them to join us, saying there was plenty of room, even though we had to find three more chairs and reposition everyone to make them fit.

From that point on, the rest of the night revolved around the ladies.

Keene went home with one, another left with Parker, and the last one came back to my place...with Hudson.

Foster didn’t end up sleeping with a single one of them. And that was why we called him the ultimate wingman. His fame brought them in, but he rarely partook of the spoils himself. Like me and Thane, he actually had to be dating a girl before he had sex with her.

Parker, Keene, and Hudson were much more into casual hookups.

While Alec... Well, I’m not sure what side of the teeter-totter Alec would land on, since I’m almost certain he hadn’t tried either the casual or

committed route yet.

The whole topic had me thinking about Oaklynn, though, with her dark brown eyes and sexy smile, and legs that were too utterly shapely to be legal in a few states.

Plus, those dimples.

Fuck, why did she have to have dimples?

It was like someone out there knew all my weaknesses and was exploiting them mercilessly.

There had always been one specific quality that had attracted me to every female I'd ever crushed on. They'd all been *different* qualities, but without fail, there had been one thing each of them possessed that had kept me hooked, starting with Madisyn and her dimples when I was eleven.

Next had been Catalina when I was twelve. She'd had the darkest, most sincere brown eyes I'd ever seen.

Just like Oaklynn's.

Then I'd fallen for Meghan, an early developer who'd grown D-cups in the eighth grade.

And I must say, Oaklynn's were probably bigger than that.

In high school, I'd sighed over Emily, Hannah, and Alexis, one with curves that had filled my wet dreams for over a year, one with a bold sass that turned me on every time she spoke in class, and the last with long, glossy dark hair I ached to get my hands in.

All three things that Oaklynn seemed to have in spades.

Freshman year of college, I'd been obsessed with Lily's ass.

Yet another attribute Oaklynn had well in hand.

But each of the other girls had only seemed to be one portion of a much broader picture. And if I had ever just paused to put all those pieces together and then stepped back to take in the final product, I swear my dream woman would've looked and acted exactly like Oaklynn Vargas.

She had the ass and breasts, the curves, the dark hair, the outgoing,

adventurous smile, and big brown eyes that seemed sympathetically sweet.

But her dimples.

Sweet Christ. Dimples still got to me. Every time.

I wanted to own those dimples.

I was still thinking about them after I'd settled into bed that night and was scowling irritably up at the dark ceiling because Hudson's late-night visitor was the loud, boisterous type and only a single wall separated my room from his.

There was no chance of getting any sleep until after they were done.

Repositioning myself onto my side I punched at my pillow to fluff it and stared at the window where light filtered in from a street lamp down the block.

When all the moans and cries finally died down, I muttered, "Thank God," and I forced my eyes shut.

But it still took me forever to fall asleep. I was too busy thinking about dark brown eyes and deeply pitted dimples.

I wasn't sure what to do about Oaklynn Vargas, though. If she could really help me with Thalia's unsolved murder, then I definitely needed to have another conversation with her. Yet I had no idea how to approach her again without keeping my damn attraction at bay. I'm surprised I hadn't sprouted wood out the front of my jogging shorts last week when I'd met her. And that just wouldn't do in the middle of talking about dead sisters.

So until I figured out how to remain cool-headed in her company, I needed to stay away.

I woke to the sound of fighting.

My roommate was definitely watching some kind of combat movie.

“Ugh...” I groaned and flopped onto my back, wishing I could go back to bed because I’d stayed up late editing what *I* considered to be the best article I’d ever written, but someone was really getting into it down there.

“Okay, alright,” I murmured, shoving the blankets down to my lap. “I’m up.”

Rolling out of bed, I grabbed a pair of pajama pants I had draped over the foot of the mattress and slid them on over my panties. Then, I rearranged my boobs inside the cami top I’d slept in, ran my fingers through my hair a couple of times, and grabbed my phone before starting downstairs.

My roommate was on one end of the couch, curled up under a blanket and avidly watching—

I stopped dead and blinked before pointing. “Is that—?”

“Yes. My brother and I watched this the night it released.” Thalia flashed me a wicked grin. “Don’t tell him, but I snuck us into the theater without paying. He’d been dying to see it, though, so I made sure he did. I even nabbed us some popcorn from some loser in front of us who left his tub sitting there unattended when he went to the bathroom.”

My eyebrows arched at her story, but I held up a finger. “Speaking of

your brother... I met him.”

“Did you?” A fond smile lit her face. “Isn’t he just the cutest?”

“Er...sure.” I mean, who was *I* to tell her that her hunk of a brother had probably bypassed *cute* ten years ago? “But you kind of misled me about the *little* part.”

Casting me an incredulous glance, Thalia gaped a moment before narrowing her eyes and hissing, “Did you just fat shame *my* brother?”

“What? No!” Good God, a person would have to have impossible standards to do that. I probably had twice the body fat that Damien Archer did, anyway, if not more. “Not even,” I added, still shaking my head in confusion.

“So I meant *younger* when I said that,” Thalia muttered, still seemingly irritated with me as she returned her attention to the television. “Whatever.”

“Yeah...” I answered slowly, feeling as if I was on eggshells all of a sudden. “I figured. But, uh... You never mentioned that *he* was actually the one trying to rent this place out and that you hadn’t even been around for quite some time.”

“Well...” She shrugged as if it didn’t matter. “Now you know.”

“O...kay,” I said.

Remembering how intent and seeking Damien had looked when he’d asked about his sister, I continued to push the issue. It felt important somehow. “Were you aware that he didn’t know how to reach you in that time you were gone? And that he’d really like to talk to you *now*?”

“Shh...” Thalia lifted a hand, blocking me as she kept her gaze glued to the television while a big green guy on the screen grabbed the man in the cape and started flipping him around, pounding him against the floor.

After he delivered an epic one-liner and strolled off, Thalia released a breath. “God...I see why that was Damien’s favorite scene ever. It really is legendary.”

“You know, maybe instead of remembering fond times, you could just

call him,” I suggested as I started past her, leaving the base of the stairs and crossing between her and the television to enter the kitchen.

Thalia sighed impatiently and sent me a hostile glance. “I’ll see him when I see him. Gah, what is your problem?”

“Wow. Sorry.” I lifted my hands in surrender. “He just seemed super surprised that you were back and acted as if he’d love to reconnect with you, that’s all. But I’m butting out now. Don’t worry.”

“Thank you,” she breathed in relief.

With my back to her, I approached the window to get a little more light in here. “So where’d you go for so long, anyway?”

“Wherever the wind took me,” she answered with dreamy satisfaction, only to cry out in dismay when I yanked the curtains all the way open.

“Ack. I’m trying to watch a movie. Can you close that, please? At least partially.”

“Sure,” I told her and reclosed the curtain, leaving it halfway open so I could have enough light to at least see what I was doing. But jeez Louise. Someone was in a mood today.

As I hunted up a French vanilla cappuccino K-Cup and got my morning brew started, I yawned and turned to lean against the counter, facing the television as I watched some of the show with her while I waited for the cup to fill.

Wondering if it’d be too rude to ask when she was going to leave again so I could have the place back to myself, I said, “Want anything to drink?”

“No thanks. I’m good.” She gifted me with a more pleasant smile this time as she started to wind a piece of her hair around her finger.

When she returned her attention to the show, I shrugged and picked up my own mug once it was full. After taking a sip, I sighed, refreshed, and carried it to the spot on the island that had become my breakfast place, where I set down my phone and slid onto the stool.

“When’s your first class today?” I asked as I took another sip and eyed

the bag of bagels on the counter in front of me, deciding whether I wanted one for breakfast or not.

“Don’t have any,” Thalia answered, distracted, before laughing at something in the movie.

My brows arched. “Really?”

Huh. Maybe I should’ve done that and scheduled my courses so I only had to attend three or four days a week. That certainly would’ve cut down on a lot of stress in my life.

“So how many hours are you taking overall this semester?”

Thalia only shrugged. “Enough.”

Well, alright, then.

She was definitely down with the vague, non-answers today, wasn’t she?

I didn’t know if she was just trying to appear interesting and mysterious, or what, but to me, her obscure responses sounded like a loud and clear signal for me to butt out of her personal life.

Message received.

“Hey, want to share a Greek yogurt cup with me?” I asked, finally making up my mind about what to eat. After sitting my cup down next to my phone and starting back toward the refrigerator, I explained, “I can never finish an entire cup and hate putting an opened, half-eaten one back.”

“Meh, not a big yogurt fan,” Thalia said. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” I glanced outside as I stepped in front of the exposed portion of the window, where morning light was splashing onto the surface of the refrigerator, and there, I did a double take as I pulled the door open.

I’d been sneaking peeks outside every morning with much more discretion since Damien had caught me watching him the last time. I made sure the crack in the curtain was so small that he had no idea I was there. But I’d only seen him one other time after our first encounter, so I really hadn’t been expecting to see him today either.

Except there he was, right next to the lamppost in a T-shirt and jogging

pants, staring right back at me.

I blinked, momentarily overcome by just how good he looked, but then I realized...hey! Thalia was here, obviously missing him and watching movies *he* liked as she reminisced about their good, old times together. And he'd straight-up told me he wanted to see *her*.

It felt like this was my freaking *calling* to reconnect them. So I held up a finger, commanding him to stay right where he was.

He pulled back, obviously not expecting the order. But he stayed like a good boy.

Excited, I raced to my phone I had sitting next to my cup and snagged it up to find his number in my contacts.

When I did, I jotted out a quick text and pushed *send* before I could stop myself.

DAMIEN

The morning after eating out with the guys, I was up early and in the shower, eager for a new day and ready to forget all the achingly impossible dreams that had kept me tossing and turning throughout the night about dark hair gripped between my fingers, soft moans of pleasure under me, and generous curves pressed right up against me.

I turned the water colder, determined not to let my mind go there, and I finished rinsing at top speed before cutting off the spray and stepping out to grab a towel.

But as I dried myself, I could hear heated moans through the wall.

I must've woken Hudson and his *guest*.

"You gotta be kidding me," I muttered. "Again?"

Not in the mood to listen to them carrying on through one more round, I tossed the towel down as soon as I was dry...enough...and hurried back into my room.

There, I shoved my way into some running clothes, cursing as my fingers fumbled over the laces on my shoes, and then thankfully, I was out of the house and heading toward Bridleway, which was only a few blocks away.

A nip in the air reminded me that the Gulf was drawing in a storm, so I was glad I'd put on thin pants instead of shorts. Keeping my shirt on as well, I stretched as I walked, pivoting my torso and holding onto each forearm as I

high-stepped along to loosen my thighs.

Being that it was late September, hurricane season was basically over, which meant I didn't need to prep any of my rentals for that, but there was still a chance of severe winds being in this little squall line, so I should probably still check in with all my tenants after the rain passed to make sure no one had suffered any damage.

Which got me thinking about Oaklynn again. Maybe I wouldn't have to call *her*. I could just glance over at the apartment during my run to make sure the place looked fine.

Because I wasn't ready for that call yet.

At Bridleway, I turned south and started my jog. I always went five miles when I ran, two-and-a-half one way and then two-and-a-half back with my aunt's brownstone as the turnaround point. That used to be because I was always hoping to catch some kind of sighting from my sister.

But since meeting Oaklynn, I'd kind of forgotten about Thalia. And now, I looked for glossy, dark hair, brown eyes, and deep dimples.

Except I hadn't caught my new tenant at the front downstairs window again, peeking out at me.

Probably for the best.

Working my legs harder as I jogged up the steps that led onto a skywalk over a busy street, I puffed air from my cheeks and concentrated on nothing but moving my legs.

But the sunrise coming in through the glass walls forced me to squint and bow my head a little to see better, which drew my attention down to the view below.

Morning traffic seemed to crawl along lazily as if it needed to wake up some more before it really got flowing. I watched a garbage truck backing slowly toward a large trash bin. And then Bridleway descended again, taking me away from the view before it spat me out on ground-level at the start of a park.

I ran through that next, enjoying the variety of joggers and different types of dogs that were being exercised.

As I neared campus, school pride seemed to sweep across the landscape, taking over the colors and decor, turning everything brown and yellow and horse-themed. A bronze sculpture of a prancing stallion with its tail lifted marked the opening of the path through the historic, yet remodeled, brownstone apartments.

My aunt's place was about three blocks down, and the closer I got to it, the more my blood seemed to pump in anticipation.

But when I reached the lamppost that I always turned around at, just outside her front door, no familiar face peeked out the window.

Disappointed, I slowed to a walk around the pole and set my hands on my hips to catch my breath.

Sweat trailed through my hair, and oxygen heaved through my lungs, but I was ready to keep going today. So I turned back in the direction of home, only to send one last glance to the brownstone...just as Oaklynn walked past to the refrigerator.

I pulled up short, unable to keep from watching. And as she opened the door, she glanced over, only to do a double take when she saw me. Suddenly, she slapped the refrigerator shut and turned to face me fully, holding up her index finger as if instructing me to wait.

I straightened and blinked as she disappeared briefly from view.

A moment later, my phone buzzed from my pocket.

Frowning in confusion, I pulled it up and sucked in a breath when I saw Oaklynn's name.

Thalia's here now, if you really want to see her.

My head snapped around as soon as I read those words.

Oaklynn reappeared in the window once more with her phone in her hand, and when she saw me just standing there, staring dumbly, she waved

me forward.

For a brief moment, my heart stalled, then it jerked back into motion, beating rapidly.

No longer frozen in place, I lurched toward the front door.

Repocketing my phone, I pounded up the steps and knocked abruptly. The lock clicked almost immediately, and the sound of a deadbolt sliding open ignited my hopes just as the latch turned.

I pressed a fist to my chest, almost nervous to see my sister again after all this time. I had honestly thought I never would, but Oaklynn's text had me keyed up.

The door began to open. I eagerly lifted my gaze to meet Oaklynn's brown, brown eyes.

"Damien!" she greeted in fake shock as she flashed me those jockey-dropping dimples of hers with a warm smile. "What a surprise to see you. Come in. Come in." She stepped back, drawing the door farther open to let me in. "Hey, Thalia," she called. "You'll never guess who—*oh!*"

As soon as she glanced over her shoulder into the rest of the room, she pulled up short.

I stepped inside and took in the wrap-around couch first, then furrowed my brow in confusion. The entire room was empty except for us, while on the television, the first Avengers movie played loudly.

Next to me, Oaklynn scratched her head as if puzzled. "Where did she go?"

I turned toward her slowly, my gaze accusing, because I hated getting scammed.

"She was sitting right there, like, half a second ago," she insisted, jabbing her finger toward the couch, only to blink and straighten when she turned back to me. "And why the hell are you looking at me as if I'm lying."

I lifted a single eyebrow. "Are you?"

With a gasp, her mouth dropped open, and she took a moment to gape in

righteous indignation before her eyes narrowed and she stamped her hands to her hips, pulling out some seriously hot, Latina sass.

“Why the hell would I lie about a thing like that?”

“I don’t know,” I countered, taking an angry step toward her. “Why *would—*”

Before I could finish the accusation, a door slammed sharply at the back of the house. Oaklynn yelped out a startled scream, and we both jumped in surprise as we glanced that way.

“Son of a bitch,” I breathed. A heartbeat later, I scrambled into action and sprinted toward the back hall, yelling, “Thalia?”

When I reached it, however, it was locked.

Which took me too precious long to turn the bolt and whip the door open before I leaped outside, hopping right over the steps and landing on the patio before dodging around what must be Oaklynn’s silver Kia Forte and racing out to see past the corner of the building.

But there was no one around, not from either side.

“Motherfucker!” I hissed, fisting my hands in utter frustration and lifting them to the sides of my head in the hopes of relieving some of the insistent pressure building there.

But it didn’t help, so I gritted my teeth and growled irritably.

I turned in a circle, still looking for my sister, or *anyone*, but all I found was a wincing Oaklynn stepping barefoot from the back door of the brownstone. “She got away?”

I bobbed my head, unable to speak, and she lifted her eyebrows.

“Wow. She was really moving.” Hissing out a breath, she turned back to me to fold her arms over her chest and send me an arch look. “So... are you ready to believe that she was really here?”

“Yes, ma’am, I think so,” I said, my voice breaking as I glanced around for a glimpse of Thalia one last time. “But I don’t get why she ran from me.”

“I...” Losing her anger, Oaklynn hissed out a breath, dropped her

shoulders, and sent me a sad glance full of apology as she shook her head. “I don’t know either. I mean, when I came downstairs for breakfast, she was sitting on the couch watching that movie in there and talking about how the two of you had gone to see it together at the theaters the night it released and how you stole a tub of popcorn from the guy sitting in front of you when he went to the bathroom.”

I blurted out a hoarse sound, remembering that night, and my eyes started to burn. “*She* stole the popcorn,” I corrected.

But I had eaten it with her after she’d placed it between us.

God, I missed her.

In front of me, Oaklynn nodded. “She seemed so nostalgic and wistful as she talked, that I...I... I thought for sure she’d be happy to see you. I just... I’m really sorry, Damien. I totally miscalculated that one.”

I shook my head and waved a hand to excuse her as I swallowed down a hard knot in my throat. “Not your fault,” I rasped.

“I *did* mention to her that you’d like to talk to her, though,” Oaklynn added. “Except...” Her brow furrowed in confusion. “I don’t think she really heard me. She got so into watching one of the scenes. She said it was your favorite part, where Hulk calls Loki a puny god.”

I sputtered out a watery laugh because she was right; that had been my absolute favorite scene, and I think only Thalia had known it.

But that day at the theater with my sister was such a fond memory that it hurt to recall. Tightening my jaw, I turned away, admitting, “Fuck, I can’t do this.”

I wanted those days back, when Thalia had been my best friend, and we’d gone to the movies together and stole popcorn and laughed at great scenes. I wanted them back so much that the wish made my joints ache.

“Damien?”

Soft fingers caught my arm, and Oaklynn’s concerned voice caused me to freeze.

I spun toward her, needing answers.

“Why won’t she just—?” I started to demand in a broken voice, only to cut myself off because Oaklynn had no idea what had happened and couldn’t even begin to answer me.

I could feel everything inside me grow unstable before I quickly reined it back in and slapped my knuckles against my lips.

“I’m sorry,” I gushed. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh, hey, no!” she cut in and stepped toward me. “You have nothing to apologize for. I’d be straight-up pissed if I were in your shoes. It doesn’t seem as if she’s giving you a fair chance to reconnect at all.”

I lugged out a small grateful smile. “Thanks,” I mumbled. “I’m glad *someone* understands.” But I’d still missed out on my first, real chance to see Thalia in forever, and it made my chin tremble and my eyes sting.

Oaklynn seemed to grow alarmed as her gaze darted around my crumbling expression. “Are you...?”

“I’m fine,” I assured, waving a hand to excuse my behavior. But halfway through the reassurance, my fingers curled into a fist, and then I almost immediately shook my head and admitted, “God. No, I’m not.”

“Oh, Damien,” she breathed, her voice full of pity. “Come here.”

Horrified by the notion of losing my cool in front of her, I started to turn away, already ducking my chin and hiding my expression. But Oaklynn touched my arm, low down, almost near my wrist.

Not expecting the gentle brush of her soft fingers on the sensitive spot, I sucked in a sharp breath and glanced at her. Her eyes were full of sympathy for a man she barely knew. Sympathy that tugged at something inside of me, urging me to accept her unspoken offer.

“It’s okay,” she murmured kindly. “I just want to hug you.”

Cautiously, I lifted my gaze to hers. I think she was holding her breath as much as I was to see what would happen next. Then, with a heavy exhale, I nodded and released the tension in my shoulders. Twisting back to her, I

tipped my forehead down to hers, seeking comfort.

“There you go.” She lifted her hand without hesitation and cupped my bearded cheek.

I closed my eyes, relishing the contact as I buried my nose in peach-scented hair. Then I stepped in more, not pressing against her in any way, but moving in enough that we shared body heat.

When she finally did hug me, I wound my arms around her in return and tucked my face against her neck, gratefully gobbling up every last crumb of emotional support she provided.

I breathed her in fully while the rest of the world melted away. This cocoon of pleasant sensations surrounded us until we were the only two people left on the planet.

Oaklynn gave me all the time I needed and let me stay there in her arms, luxuriating in her warmth and smell, and relishing the physical closeness between us. At some point, I forgot why I’d been upset in the first place.

My bones turned to jelly, and I just wanted to nuzzle against her forever. But in patching my nerves back together, she also made reality return for me, and eventually, I regained my senses until I realized I’d been getting emotional all over a near stranger.

Releasing a shaky, reluctant breath, I lifted my face slowly to take in the world around us.

And damn. I think that had to be the most vulnerable I’d ever let myself get around anyone before. I wasn’t sure how to handle it. I felt stripped and raw and uncomfortably hesitant. But also...safe with her.

“Better?” she asked as she stroked a hand over my hair soothingly, and not at all reticent after what had just happened.

I nodded mutely and looked into her dark, caring eyes. A sense of wonder filled me as I stared because this made no sense. I never let anyone in like that, except my core group. But she’d gotten me to show her a glimpse. And I had no idea how.

Because it certainly wasn't her stunning looks.

The looks should've made me button up stiffer and get *more* self-conscious, desperate to show her only my strong, resilient, *best* side, in the hopes of impressing her.

No, there was just something about her as a person that my emotions intrinsically trusted.

It was eerie as hell, and yet also...nice.

After a thick, shaky swallow, I gave her a trembling smile, and rasped, "Yeah, thanks." Wincing, I followed it up with an immediate, "And...sorry."

Cocking her head in confusion, she squinted. "For what?"

"For...you know. Losing it like that in front of you. I don't...I don't do that. That's not me. I don't—"

"Hey," she murmured, grasping my hand and squeezing warmly. "It's fine. You don't have to explain anything." With a loose shrug, she flashed me a smug smile, causing her dimples to pit perfectly. "Though, I kind of feel special now, knowing you just let me in on something rare."

I tightened my grip on her hand and looked deeper into her eyes. "You should," I told her with all honesty. "I think you're the type who can draw others in to the point that they want to show you their true selves."

When I eased closer, she sucked in a sudden breath. "You really think so?"

I nodded and lifted her hand to my mouth before lightly pressing my lips to her knuckles. "The fact that Thalia chose *you* as her roommate says enough for me right there. But I feel it too." I watched her eyes change from warm companionship to startled awareness before I added, "You're exceptional."

"I...I..." The compliment clearly befuddled her. "Well, I...thank you. I didn't really do anything, though. I was just being...me."

Her modesty made me grin. "Apparently, that's all you need to be."

Running my thumb over the spot on the back of her palm that I'd just

kissed, I watched her lips part as her gaze dropped briefly to my mouth. There was no way I misread the arousal I saw there. She wanted me. Just as much as I wanted her.

My muscles bunched, and an eager kick caught me right in the diaphragm. Her lips parted, looking plush and receptive.

Skin buzzing and core body temperature heating, I stepped even closer, looming like a hungry, stalking predator. A ripple of need prickled its way down the length of my cock, and my nostrils flared when the breeze picked up, washing her peach scent over me again.

When her shoulders lifted through a heavy breath and an imprint of her nipples appeared on the front of her shirt, I was a goner.

My hand lifted toward her jaw, needing to hold it, angle it, and keep it prisoner so my mouth could devour such tender flesh.

Aching for that first taste, I leaned in to kiss her.

But she tightened, making a sound of protest, and I froze solid, realizing I'd just made a colossal mistake.

Yep. That was really classy, Archer. Try to jump the poor woman who was only offering you a little sympathy...because she thought you were just that pathetic.

God, I was a moron.

Her eyes were wide and frightened as they continued to stare into mine.

Hoping to retreat as gracefully as possible, I loosened my grip on her hand and then dropped my fingers from her face as I eased backward.

"I—" She cut herself off, and I wasn't sure if she was going to apologize to me for her rejection or make some other lame excuse about needing to focus on school, not guys, but I didn't think I could handle either. Not right now.

So I beat her to the punch, blurting, "I'm sorry. Damn." I stepped back some more, gripping my head. "I did not know I was going to do that."

"Well..." She shrugged ruefully. "I mean, it was a pretty heavy moment

and—”

“But you—you already told me no. Last week,” I reminded her. “And I knew that. So I shouldn’t have—”

She lifted her hands, cutting me off. “Seriously, Damien. It’s fine. I was feeling it too. I got swept up in the emotions just as much as you did.”

I paused. “You did?”

Did this mean I could continue? Because I kind of wanted to continue. More than I wanted my next breath.

I stepped closer. “So does that mean...?” I lifted an eyebrow, needing direction and praying she’d give me a green light.

Except she winced. “Nothing, sorry; it can’t mean anything. The timing’s all wrong. If you could just give me, like, a two-year raincheck, then I’d be *begging* you to try that again, I swear.”

I blinked at her, not really reassured by her assurances.

“Two *years*?” I repeated, just to make sure I’d heard her right.

She bit her lip and nodded, her brown eyes imploring me to consider the idea.

But I scoffed. “Yeah, I don’t think so.” This kind of craving couldn’t handle that kind of hiatus.

So cupping the sides of her neck in my hands, I dragged her close and pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her *now*.

Oaklynn muffled out a sound of surprise, and she initially stiffened against me. But barely a moment later, she sighed against my lips and capitulated.

Gripping the front of my shirt, she rose up onto her toes and kissed me back fully, openly, and hungrily, surrendering everything to me. Her breasts flattened against my chest, and my body sizzled with heat. Creeping my fingers up into her hair, I gripped the silken locks and drank deeply from her lips, drowning in them to the point that I felt drunk and dizzy-headed when I finally pulled away.

With a protesting whimper, Oaklynn swayed toward me, and her eyelashes fluttered open in confusion as she looked up at me with drugged arousal.

Feeling as if I'd proven my point, I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth, still able to taste her. Then I said, "If you still think you can wait two years after that, then you have more willpower than me. But if not..." Reaching out to touch the corner of her dew-glazed lips with my thumb, I murmured, "You know how to reach me."

Without waiting for her to answer, I smoothed a hand gently over her hair and then turned away to jog off, leaving her there to stew on *that*.

I felt pretty damn proud of myself until I returned to Bridleway and glanced back down the block toward the front of her brownstone, where I abruptly remembered—fuck.

Thalia.

I'd forgotten all about Thalia, along with the fact that Oaklynn still fully believed she was alive.

God, I was screwed. There was no way in hell this was going to end well.

“O h...my God,” I gasped desperately to myself as Damien ran off, leaving me shaken and more aroused from a kiss than I could ever remember being in my life.

But what the fuck had just happened?

Spinning away, I hurried inside and shut the back door behind me before bolting and patting it lovingly. Then I slumped against the wall of the hallway next to it and sighed, pressing two fists against my stomach before blowing out a long, calming breath.

But holy baby Jesus, my girl parts throbbed, so ready for sex that I wasn't sure if I was going to get off right there next to the back door, or not, from merely thinking about the heated exchange we'd just had.

The way he'd looked at me, though...

It had been as if he were already positioned between my thighs with his cock right there at my entrance, ready to drive it home.

God.

It was too much.

And his mouth.

That sinfully delicious mouth.

Guys should not be allowed to have mouths like that. Or kiss like that. They could turn a poor girl's mind to mush.

I mean...

Asdfghjkl...

Whatever had just happened between Damien and me had been way too hot, way too personal, and way too...well, too *everything*.

Completely overwhelmed, I shook my head and blew out a breath, trying to breathe normally again.

You know how to reach me.

Damn him. I wanted to hunt up my phone and text him that very moment. I had wanted to get down and dirty with him since the first day he'd jogged by and I'd seen him through the window. But this...

Yeah, I didn't have time for whatever this was. It was too involved, too complicated, and just...

Too much, that's what it was. And if anything in my life was going to be too much right now, it'd have to be too much school.

Pushing away from the door, I smoothed my hands down my sides and stepped forward, determined to put all this behind me. I had classes to prepare for. I was here in this town, renting a room in this apartment to attend Haverick and get my journalism degree, *not* to get busy with the landlord.

And someday, I was going to be the best damn anchorwoman there was.

So there.

Head on straight again with my priorities back in working order, I hurried upstairs to shower and prepare for the day.

Half an hour later, I was strolling back down the steps and fastening my horseshoe necklace around my neck—because Jaylani had insisted that *all* the HaveU students wore them—ready to take on the rest of my life.

Hefting my book bag onto my shoulder, I briefly debated my transportation options. If I took Bridleway, it was about a fifteen-minute hike to campus, but if I drove, parking would be a pain in the ass. So I settled for the brisk walk.

Summer was melting away, and there was the slightest chill in the air

accompanying me.

As soon as I reached the manicured lawns, maze of sidewalks, and uniquely designed buildings named after people I'd never heard of, I veered toward the journalism complex, otherwise known as the Irene Hill School of Journalism.

The building was split into three sections: the newspaper, the radio station, and the video broadcasting center. As I headed up the steps toward the second floor, where the broadcasting department was, I held my chin a little bit higher, proud I was here at all. I didn't even care that being a new transfer put me at the bottom of the hierarchy, even below underclassmen. I was *here*.

And I was fixin' to give my first video-recorded report for the university's news station because the girl who'd been *scheduled* to give it—Blaire—had been sick all week. I'd even researched and written the entire article myself about the influx of recent international students and how that influenced and benefited the entire campus. It was an awesome article, if I did say so myself, and I'd even worn my favorite blue and cream power suit to read it in.

I looked good, let me tell you, and when I stepped into the journalism room, I was jazzed and ready to deliver a killer performance.

Until I saw Blaire sitting at the makeup station and getting her face powdered.

TO SAY THE LEAST, I DIDN'T GET TO GIVE MY PRESENTATION.

But *Blaire* used my write-up since she'd been too sick to research and write one herself.

I knew the grade for the research and writing part would still go to me, but I was miffed about losing out on the opportunity to get my face in front of

a camera. And by the time lunch rolled around, I needed someone to bitch to. Urgently.

Thankfully, Jaylani said she was free that hour and was only studying with a lab partner in the student center's cafeteria, so I should totally join them.

I agreed and had worked myself into quite a fit of indignant anger by the time I arrived. Beyond ready to vent, I waved at my bestie and the stranger sitting across the table from her as I hurried forward.

"Hey, this is Raina," she said, motioning toward the gorgeous, auburn-headed doll who smiled up at me in greeting and waved.

And I meant doll almost literally because I swear I'd had a porcelain toy once that looked exactly like this chick.

"Nice to meet you." I waved back as I plopped my backpack heavily onto the floor and sat with a huff in the empty chair next to Jay. "But I hope you don't mind listening to whining and complaining because I plan to do *a lot* of that here in the next few minutes."

But all she did was wave out a hand in invitation. "As long as you don't leave out any juicy details, I say, whine away."

So I did...all the way through the meal.

"Which means," I concluded, "whenever you see Blaire's segment, just know *I* wrote that beautiful assortment of words."

"I'll picture your face as I watch it," Raina swore with a flourish, making me smile and decide I liked her.

Jaylani was bored with the topic, though, and ready to move on to something she thought was more interesting.

"So how's the new apartment?" she asked. "Do you like your roommate? Thalia, right?"

When I hesitated—my thoughts veering toward my roommate's *brother*—Jay cringed. "Oh no. Is she that bad?"

"What?" Tearing my mind from Damien and that talented mouth of his, I

blinked at the two ladies watching me. “Oh! No, Thalia’s fine. I mean, she might not be the most cheerful morning person, but other than that, she’s a pretty good roommate actually. I rarely ever see her.” I laughed at that before admitting, “But, oh my goodness, it’s been too long since we last talked. You need to hear about *this* bit of craziness. So last week, I was sitting at the counter, eating my breakfast when someone burst into the apartment... wielding an umbrella.”

I went through the whole encounter with Damien and even added this morning’s debacle of Thalia taking off and refusing to see him. The only part I didn’t mention was our steamy kiss or his invitation for us to hook up.

Or just how insanely attracted to him I was.

“Dude, that’s weird,” Jay said with a cringe.

“Right?” I said, splaying my hand in her direction. “I still can’t figure out why she ran off. Or why she didn’t tell him she was back in town. Or why she accepted me as a tenant without even *notifying* him first. It’s all just...so bizarre.”

“Yeah, no. *She*’s not the one I was worried about,” Jaylani spoke up, watching me with concern. “I mean, what’s up with this *brother*? The fact that your roommate *ran* from him immediately puts him on my radar. I think you need to watch yourself around him.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Raina spoke up. “He sounds sus. Actually, I was wondering if he was even your roommate’s brother at all.”

“Huh?” I made a face and shook my head. “Of course, he’s her brother. He...”

“He what?” Jaylani arched a censorious eyebrow. “He showed you his identification?”

“Well, no...” I uttered. “But I saw on his phone where my deposit was placed. And Thalia said the money was going into her *brother*’s account.”

“So he had access to the brother’s information,” Jaylani argued. “That just makes him creepier.”

“Totally,” Raina agreed, wincing in apology when I swerved a hard glance her way. “Hey, you said your roommate always describes him as younger and cute and little, which this guy obviously is *not*. Maybe he’s a psycho ex who still has a key to her place and just pretended to be her brother in order to try to get closer to her through *you*.”

“*What?* No...” I started, shaking my head and making a face, unable to believe such a crazy claim...no matter how much credence it might have. “You two are going way off base here. That is *not* the case at all.”

“Then why did she take off the moment he showed up?” Jaylani demanded. “That’s fucking fishy.”

Okay, yeah, it was.

“But if he *wasn’t* her brother, then why didn’t she just *tell* me so?” I countered, making a face.

“Maybe she’s too scared to say anything,” Raina suggested logically. “Maybe he’s threatened to hurt her if she exposes his true identity.”

Except I didn’t want to think of Damien as a liar and creepy ex-stalker that my roommate was *scared* of. I wanted him to stay the sad brother who just wanted to see his sister...and then hook up with *me*.

And seriously, if he was obsessed with her, then why’d he kiss me like I was the freaking air he breathed?

“I don’t know...” I started hesitantly. “Thalia acts weirder about it than he does. I mean, she either gives me vague answers, evading almost everything I ask, or she straight-up ignores me. I honestly feel as if I can trust Damien more than I can her.”

“Oh, girl...” Jaylani moaned, clutching her chest and acting as if I’d just stabbed her. “You wound me. You wound all women when you take *the* *guy’s* side over hers.”

I rolled my eyes over her dramatics. “Seriously? She won’t even *give* me her side. You’d take his side, too, if you spent any amount of time around either of them.”

Raina lifted her hands in surrender, saying, “Okay, I believe you,” but Jaylani furrowed her brow skeptically.

“He sounds sketchy as shit,” she flat-out admitted.

“Dear Lord.” I sighed and shook my head. “Pretty soon you’re going to start accusing him of being responsible for that missing girl whose roommate put up flyers about around campus.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Maybe he is.”

I snorted, and Raina sided with me. “Yeah, I heard the roommate was completely overreacting. All the girl’s stuff in their dorm room had been cleared out. She just dropped out of HaveU and didn’t tell anyone.”

When Jay opened her mouth to respond, I pulled a move from Thalia’s playbook and broke in with a distraction.

“And with that, I’ll keep your concerns in mind,” I promised abruptly. “Now what about *you*, Jay? You haven’t said yet if my moving out has helped things with Scarlett?”

When Raina blurted out a scandalous laugh and muttered, “Well, I’d say so,” under her breath, my eyebrows rose.

Turning back to Jay, I demanded, “Okay, this sounds good. You better spill right now.”

“Well...” Jaylani started, flushing, and completely diverted by the question. Bubbling out a thrilled laugh, she dove into her tale about how her girlfriend had set up a candle-lit picnic dinner for her in the middle of their living room floor.

“That is so sweet,” I cooed, completely jealous but still glad to hear how happy Jay was to have her apartment back to just the two of them again.

As we finished our lunches and cleared the table before dumping all the trash, Jaylani regaled Raina and me with a story about how she and Scarlett decided to redecorate their bathroom, only to break a full-length mirror in the process.

“So now she thinks we’re going to have bad luck,” Jay concluded with a

roll of her eyes. She refused to believe in anything superstitious or supernatural. “And there’s no convincing her otherwise. I swear, she’s more insistent about it than you were that time you thought you saw some dude on fire running down the fifty-yard line of the football field during the homecoming game our senior year.”

“Wait...you saw *what*?” Raina broke in with a dismayed laugh. “Was it some kind of stunt?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. It was just a trick of the setting sunlight, I think, since no one else saw it.” When her eyebrows rose in question, I lifted a hand and hurried to add, “I was three-sheets-to-the-wind *drunk* is what Jay always fails to mention when telling that story.”

“Ah...” Raina started to nod only to tip her head and frown. “During your high school’s *homecoming* game?”

With a wince, I admitted, “Yeah... I was a bit of a party animal back then.”

“She was *fun* back then,” Jaylani put in, hooking her arm through mine as we left the student union behind.

“Ah, yes.” Sighing sadly, I leaned my face to the side so I could rest my temple along hers. “And now I’m boring and responsible, determined to be a good girl so I don’t flunk out of Haverick my first semester here.”

“Sounds smart to me,” Raina started, only for me to glance past her and spot a familiar figure exiting the history building.

“Oh my God!” Jarring to a halt, I grabbed Raina and Jaylani on either side of me to stop them as well. “Y’all won’t believe this.”

OAKLYNN

“**W**hat?” Jaylani asked, already glancing around. “What do you see?”

“Ooh, please tell me it’s a headless horseman charging across the quad,” Raina whispered excitedly.

“What?” Sputtering out a laugh, I shook my head. “No! It’s just...*him*.”

“Who?”

“Damien...my landlord.” Shaking both ladies’ arms, I added, “Thalia’s brother.”

Jaylani gasped and gripped my arm right back. “He followed you onto *campus*?” Sending me an arch glance, she demanded, “And you say he’s *not* a stalker?”

I rolled my eyes. “Relax. He’s a student too.” At least, he appeared to be. I guess I didn’t know that for a fact. He’d never actually said as much to me, but he had a book bag hooked over one shoulder right now, and he was on campus, so he *had* to be a student.

Right?

“Which one is he?” Raina asked, squinting across the courtyard.

“Right there.” I pointed. “The drop-dead *gorgeous* one.”

“I don’t—Oh! Oh my... Wow.” She twisted to lift her eyebrows at me in question. “Do you think he could stalk me too?”

As I refrained from growling at her, she began to fan herself. And all the while Damien walked along, clearly unaware that he was being scrutinized.

“I’m telling you,” Raina said. “If that was *my* new landlord, I’d be calling him over nightly with a leaky water problem. Oh, Mr. Landlord, sir! Come quickly. It’s just so...wet over here.”

“No,” I groaned. “Please stop.”

But Raina was apparently on a roll. “I really need you to get in there and...snake my pipes.”

“Yeah, I will most definitely *not* be saying that to him,” I assured.

Raina shrugged. “Suit yourself. But...”

She didn’t finish the sentence because, across the courtyard, someone behind Damien called his name.

Damien turned and then paused to wait for the other guy—some blond who wasn’t too shabby-looking either—to jog over and catch up with him.

“Fine. So maybe his name *is* Damien,” Jaylani relented regretfully. “I still don’t trust him any farther than I could throw him.”

Only for Raina to whimper. “Dear heavens. He knows Foster Union.”

“Who?” I started to ask only to grow distracted and utterly captivated by watching the two men clasp hands and pull each other in for a mini hug. “Gah,” I groaned out a needy whimper. “Isn’t it just so hot when guys bro it out like that?”

“They definitely make it look hot,” Raina agreed, bobbing her head distractedly in agreement.

Jay rolled her eyes, not impressed.

The two men spoke for another few seconds before Damien motioned in the direction he’d been walking and the blond motioned the other way. Then the blond patted Damien companionably on the back of the shoulder and started off away from him.

And as the two men went their separate ways, Damien glanced in our direction as if he could feel us gaze-molesting him.

His eyes met mine, briefly, only for him to do a double-take and squint slightly as if questioning whether he was seeing me correctly. He must've decided he was because his eyebrows rose in surprise. Then he waved, his hand lifting slightly with his index finger going higher than the rest of his fingers in one of those super-masculine half-waves that made a majority of the organs in my body shut down so blood could rush to my reproductive system and prepare for some serious baby-making action.

I think my nipples grew hard enough to cut diamonds.

Swallowing thickly, I waved back, and his lips lifted in one corner, not a full smile but something so much sexier. And I could be totally wrong, but I swear that smug look was saying, *you're going to give in any minute now and call, begging me for sex; I know you are.*

He didn't slow his pace or veer toward us but kept walking along as if he had somewhere to be, then he was out of sight and gone, and I felt as if I'd just been ridden hard by an entire ball team of guys.

"Dear God," I uttered hollowly, gripping a hold of both Raina and Jaylani on either side of me for support. "But I really want that man to snake my pipes."

"You and me both, sister," Raina agreed, only to gasp and grip my arm. "Wait! Wait a freaking minute. Is your boy one of the...seven?"

"The seven?" I echoed cluelessly. "Who are the seven?"

"Ooh, I've heard of those guys," Jaylani spoke up, tugging on my other arm now. "Aren't they supposedly the hottest men on campus?"

"Uh...not supposedly," Raina answered, already on her phone and tapping buttons. "It's a hard fact. And in my opinion, they're, hands down, the finest specimens to walk the *planet.*"

I lifted my brows in interest as she concluded with, "And...there he is. I was right. He's one of the seven."

She turned her phone to show me the screen. When I first focused on it, I saw that it was Foster Union's Facebook account, but then Raina tapped on

one of the pictures, and I noticed Damien was in the photo with the guy he'd just been talking to on the quad. They were both shirtless and sweaty and grinning at the camera with their arms looped around the other's shoulders and medals hanging from ribbons around their necks.

The caption read: *Look who talked me into running a 10K with him today. Never again.*

And it tagged one Damien Archer.

"There's no denying his name's Damien now," Raina concluded.

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I already knew that." Though, secretly, I was glad to have proof after the way Jaylani and Raina had made me question it.

"This is so cool," Raina uttered as she turned the phone to gaze at the screen herself. "You're renting a room from one of the seven."

"Okay..." I nodded, still lost. "But who *are* they?"

"They're the *seven*," Raina repeated with more emphasis as if that should explain it better. "Just seven of the hottest men on campus. Though, they probably wouldn't be that well known if it weren't for Foster Union. He kind of put the other six on the map since they're *his* best friends."

Furrowing my brow with more confusion, I asked, "Except who the fuck is Foster Union?"

Raina blinked at me once before saying, "You're joking." She glanced toward Jaylani. "Please tell me she's joking."

"What?" I started, only for Jaylani to grip both my shoulders from behind and manually turn me toward a building we were standing next to.

"Oh sweetie," she said in a sympathetic, you're-too-clueless-for-your-own-good voice.

I opened my mouth to ask again what they were talking about when I finally noticed the huge billboard posted against the side of the wall. It showed a full-body, head-to-toe picture of the blond who'd just been talking to Damien. He was standing between two other guys—all three of them wearing football jerseys—and each had a title under them. The one under

Damien's friend read *Foster Union, Quarterback*. He was grinning out at me and holding a football in my direction with one hand. The other half of the billboard congratulated the team for being the National Champs the previous year.

"So... He's a football player?" I guessed slowly.

"A football player?" Raina gaped at me as if I'd lost my mind. Then she glanced at Jaylani and shook her head. "A football player, she says. Oh, Oaklynn." She sighed in defeat as she turned back to me. "He's not *just* a football player. He's a freaking legend. A god. He took our team to the *national* championships last year. And he was only a *sophomore*! He's probably going to do it again *this* year, too, with the way their season's going." She shook her head, exasperated. "How can you not know any of this? I thought you were a journalism major."

"I'm still new," I muttered, offended. "And I don't cover sports."

I was still learning the names of all my professors. I hadn't gotten around to memorizing notable students yet. Jeez.

Raina patted my back. "It's okay," she assured. "I'll let it slide this time. But to catch you up to speed... Last year was the first time HaveU had ever won a national title in football, and it was the first time in fifteen years that we'd even made the playoffs. Foster has a passer rating of 168, which put him in fourth place as the most efficient quarterback in *all* of divisional college football, the big six included."

"Wow," I murmured, impressed by Raina's knowledge but not so much by some guy's football stats, since I had no idea what a passer rating even was. "You really like football, huh?"

"Uh..." Raina's smile faltered. "No, not really. I don't exactly know how the whole game works." Then she shrugged ruefully. "I'm just a Foster Union fan."

"I guess," I said, nodding my head slowly.

"I heard he was, like, super friendly, too. Not arrogant or rude at all. Like

the sunny, sweet, boy-next-door type of pure and nice.”

“Huh,” I said, thinking I preferred the dark, mysterious type better.

There had just been something thrilling and addictive about Damien’s enigmatic way that gave me a danger rush. Like parachuting or bungee jumping, where you weren’t a hundred percent sure if the cord would hold or the chute would open. That intense expression in Damien’s eyes made me question whether he was thinking of kissing me or strangling me. It was hot as fuck.

I shivered as excited goosebumps pebbled my skin.

“And get this,” Raina was saying, still going on about her pleasant, agreeable, boring football player. “He works as a humble pizza delivery boy at Duke’s Pizza Palace.”

“Let me guess,” I said, growing amused. “You eat a lot of pizza these days.”

“Three or four times a month,” Raina admitted miserably. “And I *still* haven’t gotten him as *my* delivery guy yet.”

“Isn’t there porn that starts just like that?” I mused more to myself as Jaylani suggested, “Maybe he works at Finch’s Pizzeria instead.”

Raina gasped. “No way! Does he really?”

Jaylani shrugged. “I have no clue. It was just an idea.”

“Oh my God. Don’t freak me out like that.” Raina shoved at her arm aghast. “I’m, like, ninety-five percent sure it’s Duke’s.”

I laughed, only to check the time and shriek, “Shit! I need to get to class. Guys, I’ll catch you later, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” Jaylani waved me off. “I’ll call you.”

“Great. See ya. Bye.” I blew her a kiss and then waved at her study partner. “Raina. It was nice to meet you. We totes need to hang out again.”

“For sure.” She waved me off with a friendly smile. “A monthly lunch thing maybe?”

I walked backward as I sent her a thumbs-up. “Definitely.”

With all our farewells said, I pivoted forward and hurried off, only to catch sight of the championship billboard again with Damien's smiling friend on it.

He was super attractive, no doubt about that. But he looked one hundred percent like the wholesome, gee-shucks, thank-you-ma'am Texas boy that Raina described. And the mystique around Damien screamed, *you can either take your own panties off or I'll rip them off you*, which was an intensity that drew me in the most.

Not that I'd be doing anything with *either* man since I'd sworn off all of them.

But still. I wished I could test drive Damien just once to see how extreme of a ride he really was.

Then, I could go back to—Wait a tick.

What *was* wrong with just one time with him?

I'd sworn off becoming a party animal. I hadn't decided to become completely celibate. So maybe...if I just gave in only once, it wouldn't be so bad.

Honestly, it'd probably *help* me get back to focusing on my schoolwork again. Thoughts of him were already breaking into my studies. And that wasn't supposed to happen.

I needed to flush this guy from my system once and for all.

And that's when *the plan* formed.

DAMIEN

After five days of not hearing from Oaklynn, I finally accepted the fact that she'd rejected my offer to finish our kiss.

Which was honestly just as well because I'd also decided she wasn't a scammer, liar, or con woman out to get me. And since she was merely some innocent coed renting a room, I had a feeling I should clear up a few facts that she had wrong about her new living situation.

Yet, I had no idea how to actually break the news to her. I was not the type to finesse my way through complicated conversations. And this one would probably be the most tangled I'd ever had.

So... I hadn't even tried.

And every day that passed, when I ran by her front door without going up to knock and explain everything, the idea of telling her grew more and more difficult to do.

I mean, *surely* she'd figure out the truth for herself soon enough.

But when she did, would she hate me because *I* hadn't been the one to reveal it?

Or would she hate me for *being* the one to tell her since, obviously, she had no idea she could see and talk to dead people?

No matter how things went down, this was going to flip her entire world on its head.

And no matter what *I* did, I felt fucked. I couldn't imagine that she'd be willing to help me find Thalia's killer when she found out. *Or* that she'd be willing to kiss me again.

A fresh wave of guilt swirled over me as I approached the brownstone this morning. Dodging puddles from rain the night before, I wiped the morning sweat from my eyes and focused on the big bay window in the hopes of seeing her just one more time.

It took me a moment to notice that someone was sitting on her front steps, and then another to realize it was her.

I faltered a step, and my mind immediately emptied of...whatever I'd just been stressing about.

From that point on, there was only her.

Oaklynn was barefoot, wearing a T-shirt and shorts and sipping from an enormous mug with steam rolling from it.

When she saw me, she straightened and lowered the cup so she could wave.

I waved back, mesmerized by her dimples. And as I reached the corner post where I always took my break, I twisted in her direction to get another look.

She was still watching me. After setting down her coffee to pick up a bottle of water that was on the step next to her, she lifted her eyebrows in offering.

And my system went haywire because, fuck, she'd been sitting there waiting specifically for me.

I gave into temptation basically immediately and started forward to accept the drink.

"Good morning," she said brightly, and my body responded to her voice, rippling pleasure down my spine.

With a brief jerk of the head, I nodded back to her. "Morning," I managed to rasp before I took the bottle. "Thanks."

“Of course.” She smiled and started to rub her hands along the outsides of her bent knees as if chilled. Or nervous. Then she motioned vaguely toward the trail. “I’m not messing up your run, am I?”

“Nah.” I waved out a dismissive hand before wiping the back of it across my mouth after taking my first drink. “I usually pause for a break here, anyway. Gives me a chance to check out the apartment and make sure it’s still standing.”

“Ah, nice.” She bobbed her head in approval. “Well, as you can see, we weathered the rain last night just fine.”

“Good.” I nodded, not sure how else to answer.

When she simply continued to watch me, I propped my shoe on the step next to her and leaned against the railing. “So what’s up?” I asked. “Having plumbing problems?”

Color immediately infused her face and she coughed before she stumbled out a hesitant, “Uh...no.” With a wince, she added, “No.”

“Oh?” I straightened from the wrought iron railing, growing eager.

But this was it. Bye-bye, two-year raincheck. Hello, sexy times.

Oaklynn looked vaguely uncomfortable as she cleared her throat and then forced a tense smile as if she was going to ask for my kidney or something before she blurted, “Do you eat tacos?”

I squinted one eye, wondering where the hell that question had come from. “Tacos?”

“Yes, sir.” Still sitting on the step, Oaklynn nodded encouragingly. “They’re having a Taco Tuesday over at the student union on campus tonight. Two for a dollar, and there’s no way I can pass that up. But I don’t really want to go alone, except I only know, like, four people in Westport so far. Five, including you. And I haven’t seen Thalia in days. Then my best friend, Jaylani, is at work, and I don’t think her girlfriend likes me all that much.” Leaning toward me, she lowered her voice confidentially before confessing, “Honestly, I think Scarlett’s kind of jealous of my and Jay’s friendship even

though she has *nothing* to worry about there. And I have no idea how to even *reach* Raina, who I've only met once, but—”

“I eat tacos,” I cut in quietly, making her stop talking abruptly and give me her dimples.

She sat up straighter as she smiled. “You do?”

I nodded, charmed by how awkward she'd gotten before asking me out. It was obvious she was too proud to admit that she'd changed her mind. But I was completely willing to let her keep her pride and pretend that she hadn't.

Just as long as I ended up inside of her because of it.

“I could pick you up here,” I offered. “Say, seven...six o'clock?”

Oaklynn drew in a deep breath before she exhaled and bit her lip. “Six,” she answered after a moment. “And let's meet there. By the Stetson statue?”

I nodded, knowing the spot. Haverick's mascot was a humanized stallion named Stetson the Stormin' Stallion, and there was a ten-foot-tall stone statue of him standing in the center of a circular fountain decorating the main entrance of the university's student union.

“I'll see you there at six,” I confirmed with a nod.

“Alright. Great,” she said with a smile as she scooped up her coffee and pushed to her feet.

I stepped back from the railing, realizing our encounter was drawing to a close. “Thanks again for the water,” I said, lifting the bottle in farewell.

Her smile was personal and intimate. Full of dimples. “You're welcome.”

Then, she turned away and went inside.

Once the door shut behind her, I blew out a heavy breath and glanced at the bottle in my hand. My gaze lifted to the apartment building, and the goofy smile on my face froze as a cold ache spread through my stomach because, shit, I'd forgotten to tell her about Thalia. Again.

Great. Way to dig yourself into an even deeper hole, Archer.

I'd been so involved in the idea of getting to spend more time with Oaklynn that nothing else had crossed my mind.

Now I really, *really* needed to tell her everything. And soon.

DAMIEN

My hands were shoved deep in my pockets so I wouldn't be tempted to check the time on my wrist again, even though I knew it had to be about five minutes until six...since I'd just freaking checked the time ten seconds ago.

I glanced up at Stetson's stone face to make sure he wasn't sending me a judgmental leer and rested a foot on the base of his statue, wondering how Oaklynn was going to react when I told her about Thalia.

The student union loomed behind me. Groups of people had already gushed past, intent to reach the cafeteria before all the food ran out. Facing away from the building, I glanced around the rest of campus, only to spot a solitary figure strolling toward me.

From that moment on, my mind emptied so completely that it could only focus on watching art in action.

But fuck me, she'd dressed up.

She wore a short jean skirt, a sleeveless floral top that hugged her chest, and sandals with heels.

High heels always made me think of sex, and this was no exception. An intense vision lit up the inside of my head where I picked her up, my hands gripping her ass, and pressed her against the side of the student union while she wound her dark, bare legs around my waist and dug the sharp heels of her

sandals into the base of my spine.

A flush of raw heat prickled its way along my flesh.

I felt way too underdressed in my worn jeans and plain brown and yellow HaveU shirt to be around her.

“Hey, you made it,” she greeted happily with both her dimples on full display as she drew close, which did nothing to dampen the semi-aroused state I was already in. But then she opened her arms for a hug, and my body went into hypersensitive overload.

“Wow, you look great,” I admitted, returning the hug and gritting my teeth as the scent of peaches flooded me.

Her breasts felt particularly soft and lush against my chest. It made my head flood, my blood thicken, and my cock harder.

“Mmm, and you *smell* good,” she returned before pulling away. Her voice slid along my nerve endings like a hot tongue.

And when my gaze caught hers, her dark, dark brown eyes did things to me.

I wanted her. I wanted her with an intensity that made everything else unimportant.

“Thanks again for agreeing to keep me company tonight,” she was telling me as she ran a hand over her glossy, dark hair. “I feel like I should know way more people in town than I do after being here for over a month, but classes and my part-time, student-employment job have been kicking my ass. After I get home and finish all my homework and research, I usually just want to curl up in a ball and sleep.”

“Yeah, it’s no problem,” I answered. “Like I said, I eat tacos.”

“Great.” She smiled, pleased by my answer as she clasped her hands in front of her. “So...do you want to head inside and eat *now* or...?”

“Whatever you want,” I answered as I silently hoped we’d get food first. The other option seemed like I’d have to talk more, and I didn’t want to admit that I wasn’t the best conversationalist. I’d gotten better over the years,

but no one would ever call me *chatty*.

The hot, achy look Oaklynn sent me seemed to say she wasn't all that interested in food *or* talking.

But then a horde of fraternity-looking guys came piling out of the student union, and their arms were loaded with tacos.

After widening her eyes at them, Oaklynn returned her attention to me. "Maybe we should eat first to make sure we actually *get* some food."

I nodded, saying, "Sounds good."

Oaklynn took my hand and held onto my fingers as she led us inside.

"Is this your first semester at Haverick too, or have you been here a while?" she asked as we found the end of the line that led to the tacos.

"I'm a junior," I said. "So... This is my third year on campus."

"Man, you must know your way around town like a pro," she guessed, sounding jealous.

I shrugged. "Well, I was born and raised in Westport, so...yes, ma'am, I do."

"Were you really? Ugh..." She nudged my arm with hers. "You're so lucky. I bet growing up on the coast was sweet. I'm from the Dallas area. Just north of there actually, in Plano. So I was basically surrounded by a concrete jungle my whole life."

My eyebrows lifted. "That's quite a ways away."

With a nod, she blew out a long breath. "Yeah. It's a six-and-a-half-hour drive, at least. But I'd been dying to get into the Journalism program here since high school when I saw my first *Have U tried Haverick* ad." With a self-deprecating roll of her eyes, she added, "And it only took me until my junior year of college to finally get accepted."

"So you're a writer," I concluded, already telling myself to get a copy of the school newspaper so I could hunt for an article from her.

But she said, "I'm more of a talker actually. I'm specializing in broadcast journalism."

My eyebrows lifted, impressed. “A *television* reporter. Wow.”

“Yeah.” Oaklynn smiled out her gratitude and squeezed my fingers. “What about you?”

I winced, already sure she was going to think my career goals were...odd. “I’m a Forensic Psych—”

“Wait,” she broke in, holding up both hands. “Wait, wait, wait. You just told me you were a junior, right? But I thought Thalia told me *she* was a junior.”

Before I could respond, Oaklynn stopped frowning in confusion and slapped a hand to her forehead. “Oh...” she said as if realizing something. “You’re twins. *That* must be why she’s always making such a big deal about being older than you and trying to make you sound little and young. Because she came out, like what...two minutes before you. Likes to lord that over you, I bet.”

I opened my mouth to reply. “Actually...” But I never got the chance to say more.

“How many?” an impatient guy behind the counter asked, stealing our attention and jolting me into realizing we’d already reached the beginning of the line.

“Uh...” Oaklynn froze for a moment before darting a quick, guilty wince my way and hissing, “Please don’t judge.” Then she turned to the food attendant. “I want four.”

My eyebrows lifted because I was impressed that she seemed to be willing to actually *eat* in front of me. But four didn’t seem like *that* many, so after the server slid a tray across the counter toward her that had four tacos on it, and he turned his attention to me, I answered, “Same.”

Oaklynn beamed up at me, and we lifted our separate trays together.

At the pay station, I leaned past her to hand the cashier enough money to cover eight tacos and two drinks.

“Hey, you didn’t have to pay for me,” she scolded while looking wholly

pleased that I had.

I only shrugged. “Two tacos for a dollar? I have a feeling it won’t break me.”

She laughed. “Well, thank you.” And then she turned her attention to the rest of the cafeteria, glancing around at the seating. “What about over there?” she asked, nodding with her chin. “We can set these down, then get our drinks.”

I nodded. “Works for me.”

I started that way, only to hear a familiar voice call, “Yo, Arch!”

Glancing over, I caught sight of Parker at a nearby booth. Someone was with him but they were tucked deeper into the shadows so I couldn’t see who it was. Thinking it had to be another one of the guys, I gave a little groan and nodded my head in greeting.

Before heading over to say hi, though, I turned back to check on Oaklynn and make sure she seemed okay with the side trip. When her gaze brightened with interest, my stomach only burned hotter.

Because why the hell would she want to be here with me after meeting *Parker*? He was the witty one who could always come back with some kind of clever comment. The rich one. The confident one. Probably better-looking than me, too.

Girls had *always* flocked to Parker, thinking they could fix him.

I really didn’t want to introduce her to a better prospect.

Plus, now *all* the guys were going to learn I’d gone out with the girl they thought was my crazy, scheming tenant. And I was not in the mood for their razzing.

But Oaklynn had already started in that direction, so I hissed out my reluctance and went as well.

“Hey,” he greeted, settling for a wave when he noticed how full my hands were. “What the hell are *you* doing out and about in public when you don’t have to be?” But even as he asked, his speculative gaze slid toward Oaklynn,

and more questions filled his eyes, the biggest being, *who is THIS?*

“Taco Tuesday,” I answered the obvious, only to tip my head in her direction. “This is Oaklynn.”

“Howdy,” he greeted her with another bob of the head. “Parker. It’s nice to...wait. Did you say Oaklynn?” His gaze flashed back to me. “Isn’t Oaklynn the name of the chick who...?”

“Yes,” was all I could think to answer when he didn’t even bother to finish asking the question.

All the while, Oaklynn glanced between us in open curiosity.

Parker’s eyebrows spiked with surprise. “No shit?” he murmured before shifting his gaze to her once more for a thorough inspection before he asked, “How’s the brownstone treating you?”

The question jolted her. She glanced at me first, clearly wondering how this stranger knew what place she’d just moved into, and then she turned back to Parker. “Uh, it’s great actually. I still can’t believe I was able to snatch it up before anyone else did.”

“Yeah...” His eyebrows lifted as if he didn’t buy that answer at all. “Lucky you.” Then he watched her with untrusting eyes as he reached into the inner pocket of the jacket he was wearing and pulled out a silver flask.

As he took a drink, still staring intently at Oaklynn, I drilled him with my own glare, trying to get him to stop. But the person next to him that I’d completely forgotten about shifted up against him so I could see her face as she pointed at me and said, “You’re...Damien, right?”

“Uh...yeah.” I pulled back briefly, about as startled to see Parker here with a lady as he’d been to see me with one. Then I squinted at her face, trying to place her because I had no idea whatsoever *who* she was.

“Last week...” Parker spoke up, trying to jog my memory as he tucked the flask away and waved a hand. “Guy’s night... Rizzo’s...”

“Oh!” I blurted, finally remembering who she was: one of the three girls who’d wanted to take a picture with Foster. This must’ve been the one Parker

had hooked up with.

“Yeah...hi,” I told her vaguely. “Again.” Only to send Parker a pointed glance.

And from that one look, we had an entire conversation.

Me: *Seriously, you're still with her?*

Parker was not at all the type to give a woman a second night.

And his rueful shrug answered, *What? I was bored. Shut up. Besides, I'm not the one here taking out my crazy, lying fraud of a tenant.*

To which my return scowl growled out a defensive, *Shove it, asshole.*

“Well, we better get all this food to a table,” I said aloud, glancing at Oaklynn to make sure she was okay with that idea.

She nodded uncertainly and then sent Parker a tense smile. “It was nice to meet you...both.” Her gaze strayed a little more questioningly to the girl she hadn't been introduced to at all.

The girl smiled back cheerfully, clearly oblivious to all the underlying awkwardness. “Yeah. You too.”

And next to her, Parker lifted his chin. “Yep,” he agreed. “Later, Dimples.”

When he shot me an amused, knowing glance that seemed to say, *I should've known she'd have dimples*, I purposely ignored him and guided Oaklynn the rest of the way to the table.

After we'd gotten our drinks and settled in for the meal, sitting across from each other, she pointedly asked, “Did you not like that guy or something?” as she picked up her first taco.

“Who?” I asked, glancing up in surprise. “You mean *Parker*?” When she nodded, I blinked, totally confused by the question. “No, of course, I like him. He's one of my best friends.”

“Oh...” She furrowed her brow as if also bewildered.

“What made you think I didn't like him?” I had to ask.

She shrugged. “I don't know. You cursed under your breath when he first

called you over. Then you seemed reluctant to say hi and super eager to get away again.”

“Oh.” Damn, she was more perceptive than I thought.

My brain stalled for an explanation.

But before I could come up with an answer that wasn't as embarrassing as hell, Oaklynn straightened as if offended. “So... I just don't rate high enough yet to meet one of your closest friends?” she guessed.

“*What?*” I gaped in disbelief and lifted my hands. “No! That's not the case at all.”

“Then...?” She lifted one eyebrow, awaiting an explanation.

I felt my face heat. “Okay,” I yielded, lifting my hands to stop her thought process right there. “I guess there were two reasons why I didn't really want to introduce you. But neither of them had anything to do with me being ashamed of you. Not at all.”

“Okay,” she said, sounding relieved but also intrigued. “I'm very curious to hear what both reasons were, then.”

I gnashed my teeth, not wanting to actually share them. But she was staring and waiting.

“You're really going to make me admit this, aren't you?” I tried, hoping she'd have mercy and drop it.

But she lifted her eyebrows, letting me know her answer.

“Okay, fine,” I reluctantly mumbled. “I was being selfish, I guess, and I didn't want to share your time and attention with anyone else. I...wanted it all to myself,” I concluded, glancing away miserably.

Oaklynn was quiet for a few seconds before she rasped, “And the other reason?”

I huffed out a breath and slid my gaze to her. “I didn't want you to compare me to him and find me...lacking.”

Lifting an eyebrow as if she didn't buy it, she said, “For real? You think I'd prefer *him?*”

I let out a strangled laugh and glanced around us before returning my gaze to her to admit, “I’m not sure why anyone would make up *that* kind of admission.”

“True.” After a brief shrug, she stared into my eyes for the longest moment before she murmured, “Huh.” She took another bite of her taco before she chewed and swallowed, lifting a finger. “Do you remember last week?” she asked. “When you were at my apartment...”

I crinkled my eyebrows in confusion because I was pretty sure I’d never forget that very memorable encounter. “Which part are you referring to?”

“The kiss,” she said bluntly. “Or actually...your offer afterward.”

I took my own bite and watched her squirm in her seat uncomfortably. Then I wiped my mouth and sat back in my booth. “I kind of thought that’s why we were here right now.”

“It is,” she assured readily, only to wave her hands. “I mean, I have no time for dating or any of that right now.”

“Right...” I said slowly, getting confused. “So you said before, and that hasn’t changed? Has it?”

“Well...” She swallowed audibly as she dropped a nervous gaze to the tabletop where our two plates of half-eaten tacos sat ignored.

“I worked really hard to get into Haverick,” she went on with another one of her explanations that didn’t make me feel any less rejected than the first time she’d told me all this. “It took me two years of community college before I was even accepted here as a transfer. Now I have student loans out the wazoo, and I can’t do anything to ruin this hard-earned opportunity. And I certainly don’t need the kind of distraction that you’re causing for me.”

“Okay,” I started slowly, not sure what I was supposed to say to that accusation. *Sorry?*

“But you’re distracting me, anyway,” she went on. “Even after five days of keeping my distance, I wake up thinking about that kiss, and I go to sleep with the same exact ache in my blood. I can’t get you out of my head. And it

just...*blows* my mind that you can even *think* some other guy stands a chance in hell of possibly competing with you.”

Well, fuck. I blew out a long, heavy breath, beyond turned on. “So?” I asked quietly. “Where does that leave us?”

“It leaves us,” she answered harshly, looking none too pleased. “With me needing to have sex with you. Like...soon.”

DAMIEN

Just breathe, I told myself. But fuck...

Shaking my head, I leaned forward to hear Oaklynn better over all the commotion and talking going on around us. “Are you serious?” I had to ask.

“Hell, yes,” she answered. “I just need one super-hot night of unbridled orgasms. Because if I don’t get this sexual tension *out* of my system—and soon—it’s going to start affecting my schoolwork, my grades, my job. Before I know it, my entire future will be on the rocks. So please, *please*... Could you just fuck whatever this is *out* of me so I can return my focus to college again?”

“I...” After blowing out a breath because, damn, there was no blood left in my brain for proper thinking, I cleared my throat. Needing to make sure I understood her completely, even though she’d been freakishly plain and blunt, I slowly asked, “You only want one night with me, then?”

“Yes!” She snapped her fingers and pointed with a big smile. “One really hot, casual hookup is all I need to get my head back on straight. So what do you say?”

When she flashed those damn dimples at me, I wanted to say *no fucking way*. I couldn’t settle for just one time with her. I wasn’t even a one-night stand kind of guy.

But from that look in her eyes, she *really* wanted sex. And if I told her no, she might just shrug me off and move along to someone else who was more likely to say yes.

Like Parker.

And no way in hell was I letting her go to someone else.

Her next orgasm was *mine*.

So that's why I found myself nodding and agreeing to a no-strings fling for the first time in my life. "Okay."

Oaklynn blinked as if she'd been expecting me to put up more of a fight. "Okay? Really?"

"Yes, ma'am," I answered, fully committed. "But, uh, I mean... How do you want to...?"

"Right," she agreed, clasping her hands together and beginning to look nervous. "Details. We should work through the details. Um...okay... This is kind of strange for me. I don't usually discuss hookups so formally with guys."

She was telling me!

"So..." Picking up her taco again, she took a bite and looked distinctly thoughtful as she chewed. After she swallowed and wiped her mouth, she lifted her eyebrows and leaned across the table toward me. "Well, deciding the time and place is always a good start. Does tonight work for you?"

I started nodding before my brain seemed to fully understand what it was agreeing to. "Tonight is fine," I got out before gulping heavily as my throat went dry. Then I took a drink and started nervously stuffing a taco into my mouth as well.

"Okay, cool," Oaklynn said, nodding through some thought before she looked up with bright eyes. "Oh! Do you, uh, have any hard limits?"

"Limits?" My mouth gaped for a moment before I slowly admitted, "I'm sure I do. Not that I can think of any at the moment."

"Yeah," she agreed with an anxious yet understanding smile. "I can't

think of any either. My brain's actually having a hard time getting past the fact that you're going to be inside me before the night's over."

I grabbed the edge of the table as a wave of pure arousal spiked through me.

Oaklynn didn't seem to notice, though, and kept talking. "And your mouth is probably going to be between my—"

"We need to go," I cut in tightly as the length of my cock began to throb. "*Now.*"

She glanced down at the uneaten tacos between us regretfully, only to glance up again and freeze solid when she spotted the look in my eyes. Her throat worked through a swallow, and her shoulders started to rise and fall rapidly before she nodded. "Yeah, okay."

She bumped her leg on the table in her haste to stand.

I was up right behind her, reaching out. "You okay?"

When I stepped close, barely touching her hip, she glanced up at me with those dark, dark eyes that captured me whole.

"No, I'm not okay," she whimpered under her breath. "I'm soaking wet in a room full of people. This is embarrassing as hell."

I huffed out an amused sound and shifted even closer, so she could hear me when I said into her ear. "At least you're not sporting a hard-on the size of Texas that's threatening to burst through the seam of your jeans."

She glanced down briefly, only to zip her gaze back up, eyebrows lifted. "I should probably walk in front of you," she offered.

"Thank you." I tightened my grip on her hip gratefully. "I would appreciate that."

We grabbed our trays, and walked determinedly toward the exit, dumping the rest of our unfinished meals into the trash as we passed by, barely pausing long enough to stack the trays above the receptacle.

I held the door open for Oaklynn, and as she stepped over the threshold, a breeze came in around her, sweeping her peach scent all over me. And it was

just too much. With a growl, I roughly steered her left as soon as we were outside.

She yelped in surprise and tripped in her heels, but I pulled her against me and picked her up a couple of inches off her feet, carrying her by the hip as I marched toward a darkened copse of trees not far away.

It wasn't even sunset yet, but the day had advanced enough into the evening that it was hard to see under all the leaves and branches.

That would have to do for privacy, though, because as soon as we reached the first tree, I had her against the trunk of an oak, and my mouth was on hers.

She gasped and arched up onto her toes against me, gripping my hair and trying to climb me. I helped her along, hefting her by the ass as our lips firmed against each other. Tongues touched, groans ensued, and fingers dug deeper into flesh.

When her skirt rode up to allow her legs room to wind around my waist, my hands slid further down, investigating the backs of her thighs. Her skin was warm and smooth there, and I palmed the softness before sliding up to find the edge of her panties.

Then I just kept going under the cloth until my fingers were secured around her bare buttocks. I clutched her roughly and pulled her hips away from the tree so I could grind her core against the ridge of my erection through my jeans.

Oaklynn broke from our kiss with a groan, and she threw her head back against the tree as she rode me, jerking her hips to alleviate her own ache.

Through the shadows, I was able to watch her face as she closed her eyes and bit her lip.

From that moment on, nothing became as important to me as witnessing her having an orgasm.

“Put your feet down,” I rasped abruptly.

Eyes fluttering open, she sent me a dazed glance full of confusion.

“What?”

“Trust me,” I said, peering straight into her dark, suspicious eyes. “Feet down.”

Releasing a breath, she bobbed her head once, then whimpered in protest to let me know she didn’t want to lose precious grinding contact before she unwound one leg and then the other.

As soon as she had her heels steady at the base of the tree, I lowered myself to my knees in front of her.

“Oh God.” She inhaled sharply in anticipation and kept eye contact with me until my knees settled in the grass. Then she shuddered out a breath and closed her eyes as I reached under her skirt, and grasped the waistband of her panties before peeling them down her legs.

“No,” I told her. “I liked your eyes on me.”

With a pleading groan, Oaklynn opened her lashes and caught my gaze, even as she shook her head. “I don’t think I can watch,” she begged. “I can’t take that kind of sensory overload. I just can’t.”

“Yeah, you can,” I promised as I stuffed her panties into my side pocket. They were damp within my grip, which made my skin ripple with excitement. “Just keep your eyes on mine.”

She made a weak sound of protest and widened her legs as I nudged them apart. But her gaze never strayed.

Pleased, I leaned in toward the trimmed patch of hair between her legs. Then I watched her expression as my mouth closed around her.

“Oh...” she gasped as she rose up onto her toes to escape the contact. Her eyes were wide and wild, as if her body knew the treatment I was fixin’ to give her was going to ruin her pussy for life.

I grabbed her hips and pinned her to the tree, forcing her to take it as my tongue flicked out once, catching the peak of her clit.

“Fuck,” she uttered before slapping a hand over her mouth to muffle the moan that followed.

She started to look away, only to remember my command and jerk her gaze back to mine. I congratulated her for following the rules by sucking and then lavishing her with long wet strokes.

Oaklynn made a rough sound in the back of her throat and gripped my shoulders, her fingernails possibly drawing blood.

I worked her faster, growling over the slick wetness that coated my lips and the musky scent flooding my nostrils.

From the entrance of the student union, barely twenty yards away, a flood of laughing, talking people exited.

Certain we were caught, I started to rise so I could cover her, but Oaklynn gripped my shoulder harder. “No! They can’t see us. They can’t see us,” she promised with a whispered pant. “Oh God. Please don’t stop.”

My mouth was still buried between her legs, so I settled back onto my knees and licked her with the flat of my tongue, catching a broader area of coverage.

Oaklynn jerked in surprise and muzzled herself again with her hand, thrashing her head and watching me with those wide, desperate eyes. Muted whimpers seeped out just before I pushed a finger inside her.

She sobbed and abandoned my shoulder to grip my hair, tugging my scalp and pulling me hard against her. Tears spilled down her cheeks as her body bucked and jerked, and her teeth had to be breaking skin on her hand as she bit down. But she never looked away, not once while she came against my mouth.

It went on in waves, her muscles spasming through her entire body, one milking contraction at a time.

I could tell the moment she finished. Her eyes closed and she went utterly slack, already sagging down the tree.

“Whoa, hey,” I rasped, tearing my mouth from her and catching her before she collapsed completely.

Sinking against me gratefully, she wrapped her arms around me and

buried her face in my neck, resting her head on my shoulder as her breath panted against my throat. She seemed so willing to let me take on all her weight that it kind of worried me.

“You okay?” I asked, kissing her hair and then nuzzling my cheek against the crown of her head. My hand smoothed her skirt back over her hips and rearranged her legs so she was sitting sideways on my lap as I settled my ass down into the grass.

“No,” I’m fairly certain I heard her say.

Alarmed, I tried to pull back to see her face, but she was equally determined to keep cuddling into me. Finally, I cupped her cheeks in my hands and coaxed her head up. “Oaklynn? What’s wrong?”

Her lashes fluttered open, and she gazed vacantly into my eyes for an overly long second before her throat worked through a swallow, and she opened her mouth. But her lips were so dry it took them some effort to part. When not even a sound exited, I shook my head.

“Fuck. Did I *hurt* you?” I started to look her over frantically for wounds, but she frowned at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“Are you *kidding*?” she finally managed to say. Then an incredulous laugh blurted its way out. “Hurt me?” she repeated as if mocking the question. “God.” Setting a fisted hand against her stomach, she shook her head. “I’m still trying to recover from the mind-blowing pleasure you just gave me. I mean, I didn’t even know it was possible to *come* that hard. My entire body is still jittery and shaking, and you think you fucking *hurt* me?”

I exhaled abruptly, wilting in relief.

“So this reaction is good,” I realized.

Oaklynn laughed. “This reaction is utter stupefaction. I mean, we should hunt up your friend you thought I might want instead and let him know there’s no way in hell I’d ever prefer him over you because you, darlin’... You deserve an award for that performance.”

With a chuckle, I shook my head and felt my face heat. “I received it,

trust me.” Feeling tender and protective of her, I smoothed a hand down her hair. “Now... Let’s get you up, shall we?”

Oaklynn furrowed her brow in confusion. “Up? Why?”

“Because we can’t stay here,” I explained patiently as I helped her stand on unsteady legs.

She started to nod merely for the sake of agreeing before she seemed to realize, “Oh, right. We’re not done yet. After that, I’d completely forgotten there was even more we *could* do.”

I laughed again, only to argue, “No, I think that’s enough for tonight.” The amount of happy endorphins that had already been released in her seemed to be making her a bit loopy. I was kind of concerned about what any more would do.

Oaklynn paused and blinked up into my face. “But you didn’t get to...”

“That’s okay,” I assured, smoothing down her hair again and tenderly kissing her brow. “The deal was only for *your* orgasm, anyway, to get the cravings out of *your* system.” I caught her elbow to steady her when she tripped in her heels. “Let’s just get you home safe and sound, okay?”

“What? No. Fuck that,” she hissed, scowling and ripping her elbow out of my grasp. “If you can do that to me with your mouth *alone*, then I want to know what the main course is like.”

“Oaklynn,” I groaned, trying to be noble. But she was making it incredibly difficult.

“What?” Lifting her eyebrows archly, she stared me down with a dare and then stepped close before grabbing my junk through my jeans. “Don’t you want it?”

Even through all the cloth, my cock jerked against her fingers and started to swell again. “Obviously,” I bit out, my lashes fluttering when she began to massage me, learning my length and girth. “You can tell I do.”

But she was no longer listening to me. “Holy damn,” she breathed in wonder. “You feel massive.”

When she hooked a hand around my neck and drew my head down for a kiss, opening her mouth and twining her tongue around mine, all noble intentions melted away. I needed to be inside her. Now.

But... “Not here,” I panted, even as I stepped closer to cup the back of her head for a deeper kiss.

She rose up onto her toes and strained against me, her breasts brushing my chest. I wanted to expose them and suck on their peaks. But I couldn't do that in the open. So when she gripped the top button of my jeans and tried to pop it loose, I caught her wrist. “Oaklynn...”

Our mouths broke apart, and we rested our foreheads against each other, wheezing, before she finally said, “I know a place. It's close.”

And that was all I needed to hear. I released her wrist, freeing her. “Lead the way.”

Walking wasn't happening for me.

Taking Damien's hand, I started to lead him out of our little love nest in the trees, but with my first step, my knees gave out, and I twisted my ankle in my heels.

"Shit," I muttered.

Damien tightened his grip on my fingers, keeping me upright. "Whoa. Easy," he cautioned.

"This is so weird. My legs feel like noodles." *Every* muscle in my body felt loose and languid.

"Here," he offered gallantly, patting the back of his shoulder. "Climb on. I'll give you a ride."

I blinked in startled wonder as he knelt in front of me. No way could I turn down such an enticing offer, so I set a hand on his shoulder and then wrapped an arm around his sternum, appreciating the solid muscle and bone under my grip.

He reached back to catch the backs of my knees as I wrapped them around his hips. Then he lifted me easily, taking me by surprise.

I yelped as we started from the trees together, especially as he bent at the waist to avoid lower-hanging branches.

Once we were out in the open, I glanced toward the student union,

amazed we hadn't been caught.

Stetson the Stormin' Stallion was rearing up on his two back legs and pawing the air as if congratulating us.

"Which way?" Damien asked.

I nuzzled up against his back, thoroughly enjoying the ride, and pointed past his arm. "That way. To Hill Hall."

"The journalism building?" he asked.

I kissed his ear and began to nibble on the lobe. "Mm-hmm."

Damien nodded and started through campus, past some buildings that were lit up with night classes taking place inside and some buildings that were darkened for the evening.

When a breeze blew up my skirt, I realized I had no idea where my panties were, probably lying abandoned somewhere in the thatch of trees next to the student union. Damn.

Oh well. Sex was more important than going back to look for them.

Hill Hall was half-lit when we reached it. But the lights in the north half on the second level were dark, making me hiss a happy, "Yes! Everyone's gone home for the day."

The place would be all ours.

Damien ascended the wide, marble staircase easily, only to sit me down at the main entrance.

"You okay?" he asked, gripping my elbow in preparation to catch me again.

But I felt much steadier now. "Yeah. Thanks." I nodded at him with a grin.

He groaned and lifted a finger to barely touch one of my dimples.

"In here," I encouraged, pulling open the door.

Inside, I led him to another set of stairs. Once we hit the second floor, I peered down the darkened hall before glancing up at him and smiling again.

"Perfect."

We hurried along until reaching a pair of double doors that had big black, block letters on them that read *Broadcasting*. I stopped and pulled out a set of keys from my jean skirt pocket before slotting one into the lock.

“You have a key?” Damien asked in interest.

“Yeah.” I nodded as I pulled the door open. “I work here. Being a journalism major, I got first dibs on one of the student employment positions. Actually, one of the articles I researched and wrote aired last week, but I haven’t gotten my face on a screen yet.”

“You will,” Damien said, sounding strangely certain of it.

I glanced up at him in surprise as we stepped over the threshold.

Damien shut the door behind us, casting us into immediate darkness. Campus lights from outside showed through the large windows, allowing us some visual aid, but the shadows on his face made him appear almost threatening as he lifted his hand to gently trace my jaw with a few of his knuckles. He was either preparing to strangle me or kiss me.

“This face was made for a screen,” he murmured.

I whimpered as desire raced through my system mixed with the thrill of possible peril.

I didn’t *really* know this guy. My friend was convinced he was dangerous, and yet I’d brought him here to this darkened place, alone. He could do anything he wanted to me.

So when he snagged my hips and lifted me, I gasped and gripped his shoulders, not sure of his intentions until he set me on a counter.

I sighed.

Stepping in close, he wedged his hips between my knees and cupped my cheek in his big hand. The muscles in his fingers alone were probably strong enough to crush my jaw.

But all he did was tilt my face up gently so his mouth could land on mine.

I kissed him back aggressively, turned on more by the precarious uncertainty, and the next thing I knew, I was gripping the cloth of his shirt. I

tugged it above his abdomen and coasted my fingers over his navel.

It was barely a brush of flesh over flesh, but he groaned deep and long, shuddering under my touch. So I grew braver, spanning his abs with my palms and stroking him until I went up his shirt enough that he got the hint and ripped it off entirely for me.

Grinning out my pleasure, I put both hands to work again, sculpting my way over his chest, only to realize he had a horseshoe necklace, too, that had been hidden under his shirt. I reached up in awe to touch it.

In return, he slid a finger over the horseshoe *I* was wearing. Then he followed the chain up my clavicle until he reached my neck. From there, his entire hand palmed my throat as if he was planning to squeeze.

Our eyes locked, and my lips parted. He glanced down briefly at his fingers that cradled the vulnerable area, where he could no doubt feel the wild beat of my heart against his palm. But then he moved, plundering his digits into my hair and balling a gentle handful within his grip. His uneven breaths fell on my jaw as he tugged on my hair to angle my face up.

As he lowered his mouth to that very pulse point along my throat and sucked, I choked out a sob and gripped his shoulders.

His tongue licked over the spot, and then he started to kiss his way down to the strap of my shirt. There, teeth nipped, plucking at it before his fingers came up and he slid two underneath. As the backs of his knuckles burned my flesh, he slowly caressed his way up to the top of my shoulder.

Pausing, he glanced into my eyes before he curled his fingers around the strap and slid it off me. The built-in bra sagged in the front, and my breasts started to spill forward, escaping...until the tip of a hardened nipple caught on the cloth, keeping me from being fully exposed.

Damien dropped his gaze, and we both held our breaths as he gave one last tug. I arched, letting my head fall back as both breasts popped free. He growled and lifted his hands, testing their weight, cupping and lifting, before he simultaneously slipped both thumbs over each pert peak.

I sobbed and gripped the top button of his jeans, fumbling in my haste to break him free.

He groaned, the sound so guttural it didn't even seem human.

But just as I got the button open and grasped his zipper, he rasped, "Wait. I need to taste these first."

I shook my head, not understanding, only hearing him try to stop me, until he lowered his head and sucked a pearled tip between his teeth. I trembled, breathing hard and choppy.

"Damien..." I pleaded, stroking the back of his head.

While his tongue lapped and stroked my breasts, he gripped my ass and jerked me abruptly to the edge of the counter.

I gasped and caught the side to steady myself while my other hand clutched his hair for dear life.

His thick fingers dipped between my thighs to find me wet and ready.

Damien lifted his face from my breasts, his eyes heavy-lidded and full of heat. Nostrils flaring as if he could smell my wetness, he reached for his own zipper and drew it down slowly.

Finally!

Charged heat buzzed over my flesh, rippling up the insides of my thighs, out the ends of my toes, and weighing down my breasts.

"Please tell me you have protection," I asked, biting my lip in anticipation as I watched his hand lower his fly.

Damien glanced up in surprise. He looked so startled I was certain he was going to say no, and the disappointment was already blaring through me.

But then he nodded. "Yes, ma'am, I do."

His hand fumbled as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. "One of my buddies makes sure I stay stocked." He opened the wallet and started leafing through cards and cash until he struck gold. "Not just me," he was quick to add as if he feared I may think that last comment was weird, which okay, I kind of did. "But all of us. His mom died from syphilis-induced

cancer, so he's a big proponent of safe sex and always makes sure we stay prepared, even if I take my condom out sometimes to make more room for —”

I cut him off mid-word by cupping his face in my hands gently.

He froze and looked up into my eyes.

“Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?” I asked.

Damien blinked once, then sent me a confused frown before shaking his head. “Not once in my life, no.”

I smiled, flattered that he'd saved all his words for me.

Then I tugged the condom package from his hand and ripped it open with my teeth.

“Closer,” I taunted, curling a finger to entice him.

His gaze heated, and he shifted in just enough for me to reach him.

I snagged his unzipped jeans and pushed the two sides out of my way eagerly before reaching into his underwear and pulling out—

“Oh, dear God. You've got to be kidding me.” My mouth dropped open the moment I pulled all of him free. All ten million and one feet of him. “Just how big *are* you?” I demanded, arching my eyebrows as if he'd deceived me somehow.

His lips quirked into a cocky, half smile. “Never measured.”

I snorted and let go of his heavy girth, already scooting backward away from him as I lifted a hand in protest. “You know... Maybe this isn't such a good idea after all. That thing could split me in half.”

Damien caught my thighs, stopping me.

I'd mostly been joking, but the look he sent me didn't seem amused in the least. His stare was daunting, almost frightening. And my heart skipped a beat, hoping he didn't try to hurt me. But then his mouth curved again, and his eyes went a little too confident as he rasped, “Trust me.”

And the wetness on my thighs doubled.

God, but when he wanted to be playful, he played in spades.

Still staring me straight in the eyes, he eased the condom from my fingers. Then he lowered his attention as he rolled it on. I glanced down as well and felt all the warmth drain from my face.

I honestly hadn't been with anyone this big before. I was as curious and eager to experience him as I was worried. I mean, God, he was just more than necessary.

But then he wrapped his hand around the base and stepped close so he could align us, and I found my legs parting, needing it...craving it.

He eased his free hand around my hips and slid me forward another inch to the edge.

I gripped the sides to steady myself and began to pant, my vision dimming at the corners.

"Tell me if this hurts," he murmured and barely pressed the tip against my swollen, sensitized lips.

I gripped his side and bit my lip, braced for it. But when he didn't move, I glanced up to find him watching me and awaiting an answer with raised eyebrows.

"Really?" I rolled my eyes. "Of course, it doesn't hurt yet."

"Okay. Then... What about this?" He barely pressed in.

My body bowed, and my inner muscles cramped, seeking more, *demanding* more. "Nope. No pain."

"And now?" he asked, pausing again, after maybe an inch.

"Motherfucker," I warned, biting my fingers into his ribs. "Don't play with me. Give me the whole fucking dick."

With a chuckle, he shook his head. "Nope. Sorry, I'm on a roll now." And he sank another inch deeper, making my thighs quiver, loving it, loving it, until, bam... He stopped.

"Damien!" I shrieked, slapping his arm. "It doesn't fucking hurt!"

He growled with arousal and looked into my eyes, only to gnash his teeth and mutter, "Fuck," in a tight voice just before he pushed deep. As far as he

could go.

I shouted out my surprise, and my body started to contract, already coming around him.

“Oh God. Oh God.”

“Oaklynn,” he gritted out, his voice strained as he stroked me through my orgasm.

“Oh...my...God,” was the only response I could give before my words turned to gibberish.

Gripping my hair and kissing the top of my head when I leaned my face in to shudder against his chest, he continued to pump into me, his hips never slowing.

Plunge, withdraw, plunge, withdraw. He couldn't seem to stop once he'd started.

As soon as I rode through the last crest of pleasure and slumped against him, he groaned and gripped my hips, then he picked up his pace, turning aggressive and rough, nearing his own peak. I held on to the side of his arm and tightened my inner muscles to help him along.

A second later, he jerked and cursed out a sound of surprise, then he drilled into me deeply, his cock pulsing hotly as he clutched me hard, releasing himself. I slid my hand up to run it gently over his hair as his big, hard body quivered almost vulnerably.

It was the most intimate moment of the entire night for me—him seeking me to physically hold him through his orgasm. And the moment he finished, he rested his cheek on my shoulder and nuzzled closer as if needing my warmth and affection.

I kissed his jaw, unable to help myself, and he blindly lifted his hand to cup my cheek.

“How about now?” he slurred, his breath fanning over my neck. “Did that hurt?”

I snickered and slugged his arm for the lame joke. “Funny.”

With a chuckle, he lifted his face. “You started it.”

But the languid, affectionate warmth in his whiskey eyes made my chest burn because fuck...

I didn't want this to end. I didn't want a one-time-only, casual hookup from this guy.

I wanted to keep him.

DAMIEN

When Oaklynn didn't respond to my teasing, merely gaped into my eyes as if she'd just realized something dooming, I touched her hip in worry. "What's wrong?"

I could actually hear her swallow before she managed to send me a jerky shake of the head. "N-nothing." She glanced down, only to add, "I think my thighs are beginning to cramp in this position, though."

"Oh! Shit. Sorry."

I eased from heaven and immediately turned away to find a trashcan in the dark to dispose of my condom. Spotting a box of tissues on a nearby desk, I snagged it and returned to Oaklynn, offering her a handful before taking some for myself.

We took care of our own cleanup for the next few seconds, then put our clothes back in order.

When I pulled her panties from my pocket and handed them to her, she seemed startled. "Thanks. I thought I'd lost them in the trees."

"I was tempted to keep them," I confessed.

Oaklynn paused from sliding them on and met my gaze before handing them back. "There. A memento," she offered with a slight shrug.

I took them from her fingers and gazed into her eyes as I repocketed them. "Thanks."

“Well...” she said, her voice not quite steady as she smoothed her hands over her skirt, then her hair. “That was...”

I lifted my gaze to her face and watched her expression turn unnerved as she searched for the right word. Then she looked up at me and finished with, “Nice. That was really nice. Thank you.”

Nice?

And to top it off, she patted the side of my arm in dismissal.

Arching one eyebrow in amusement over her attempt to keep this casual after the way we’d totally just rocked each other’s worlds, I nodded politely and couldn’t help but torture her, just a little.

“Think it helped?” I asked.

She blinked blankly. “Helped?”

I felt my lips twitch but managed to keep myself from grinning. “You know... With schoolwork. Classes. You not wanting to do anything to ruin this hard-earned opportunity you have at Haverick. Fucking all the horny out of your system in one night so you can focus on your grades again.”

“Oh!” Eyes flaring with recollection, she started to nod before actually answering, “Yeah, oh, yeah. I think this helped *tons* to get my concentration back on the right track. For sure.”

“Good.” I stepped closer and ran my hand slowly up and down the side of her arm. “I’m glad I could assist.”

Her lashes fluttered as she glanced at my hand on her flesh, then she tipped her face up to meet my gaze. “Yes, sir, you definitely did.”

“Because if once wasn’t enough,” I added. “I’d feel *obligated* to try again and again—as many times as it took, and in as many places and positions you needed—to finally get everything out of your system.”

I could see it in her eyes; she was half a breath from folding like a deck of cards and telling me she’d changed her mind about this being a one-time deal.

I almost had her right where I wanted her.

Until yelling from outside caught our attention. Together, we turned toward the window and then frowned questioningly at each other before we hurried over to peer out onto the courtyard below.

“Ah, hell,” I groaned when I caught sight of the drunkard stumbling along and bumping into shit, yelling at the girl following him before she screamed back that he was a complete asshole and whirled away to race off.

Oaklynn pointed. “Um... Isn’t that your friend?”

I groaned and shook my head to deny it, only to reluctantly mutter, “Yes.” When Parker tried to sit on a bench only to miss it and land on the ground, I sighed. “I should probably...”

I glanced over to send Oaklynn an apologetic wince, and she immediately waved me away. “Yeah, no. Of course. It’s totally fine. You should go; take care of him. That’s what I’d do for my bestie, Jaylani.”

I nodded but still hesitated, feeling weird about just leaving her after what we’d done. Which was why I hated casual shit. I didn’t know the rules, and now I felt awkward. Did I offer to call again? Tell her it’d been fun, now have a nice life? *Loved being inside you; too bad you don’t want me there again.*

Nothing felt worse than awkward, I-don’t-know-what-to-do-now moments. After glancing around the darkened newsroom, I returned my reluctant attention to her. “Are you sure you’re—?”

She smiled, and her dimples slayed me. “This ain’t my first rodeo, partner. I can get myself home just fine.”

I nodded and opened my mouth instinctively, wanting to tell her something that led to future meetings. But shit, *would* we see each other again? It was likely since I was her landlord and all, but would it be uncomfortable now?

Since I was obviously floundering, Oaklynn took control of the moment and grabbed my elbow before pulling me into a warm hug. “I had a good time,” she admitted into my ear before kissing my cheek. “Thanks for

tonight. I really needed this.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

I turned my nose into her hair and breathed in her peach scent one last time before letting go and pulling away. “Bye,” I said softly, looking into her eyes with the hope that this wasn’t our last encounter.

She smiled softly and waved back. “Bye.”

Huffing out a breath, I turned away and hurried from the darkened newsroom.

After jogging down the hall, then some stairs, and finally pushing my way outside, I was able to find Parker immediately.

He was still sitting on the ground next to the bench he’d fallen off of with his arm draped over the seat as he sang Morgan Wallen’s “Last Night.”

“Ohrley?” I called as I strolled over.

He broke off singing to glance around wildly before spotting me.

Then he grinned big and lifted his arm, waving with his flask. “Hey! It’s Damien!” he cheered. “There you are again.” He started to stand, only to sway dizzily as soon as he made it to his feet.

When he frowned in confusion, as if he couldn’t figure out why he was tottering, I rushed the last few steps to grip his shoulder and steady him. “Let me help you home.”

Parker took my help without question, and as soon as he was stable, he hugged me. “Thanks, man.” But when he started to pull away again, he paused and sniffed at me. “Dude, you smell like peaches.”

God, please don’t remind me.

A zing went through my system. But I ignored it.

Taking his arm, I started to lead him in the direction that I’d parked my truck. “Come on. I’m this way.”

“Okay.” Bobbing his head, he followed me trustingly, only to nudge my arm. “Hey. Where’s the crazy tenant?”

“She’s not crazy, and we said goodnight already,” I alluded as Parker

slung an arm over my shoulders and bumped into me as we stumbled along.

“Good,” he slurred with a sloppy nod and then pointed at me as if trying to be serious, even though he could barely hold his head up. “You needed to send her on. That woman is not to be trusted; I’m telling you...” He paused a second, and froze with his finger lifted before belatedly adding, “Though, I gotta say, I do not fault you at all for thinking with your dick instead of your head on this one because, wow... She was seriously hot.”

I wanted to defend her, but I knew that would only get Parker going even more. And I didn’t want to listen to what he had to say about it. Especially while my body was still trying to recover after being with her.

So I diverted. “Where did *your* date go?”

“Who?” When I merely lifted my eyebrows, he sniffed. “Oh.” Grimacing, he waved a dismissive hand. “She was beginning to annoy me. I told her to get lost.” With a shrug, he concluded, “Can’t believe I let her hang around for as long as I did.”

“Fuck, man,” I said, shaking my head. “You can be utterly heartless, you know that?”

He rolled his head toward me until our faces were only inches apart. “But I still love *you*,” he countered.

I sighed. “I love you too, Park. And that’s why I’m going to say this.”

“No...no.” He shook his head. “Don’t even bother. I already know. I’m fucking spiraling again. I’ve been reliving that last night I saw them way too often lately.”

Surprised that he’d so openly admitted it, I patted his back sympathetically. “And why do you think you’ve been doing that?” I asked as I steered him toward my truck when it came into view. “What’s changed?”

“I don’t know.” With a loose shrug, he mumbled, “Nothing.”

But he did know. I could see the answer swimming through his eyes, tormenting him.

“Ohrley,” I warned. “Do I need to call a meeting?”

“No,” he rushed to answer. “Fuck no. And *definitely* do not call Thane. Dammit, why did I have to stumble across *you* tonight?”

“Because you’re one lucky son of a bitch,” I told him as we reached my ride.

But that only caused his eyes to water with distress. “I am,” he choked out painfully. “I’m luckier than I deserve, and it’s fucking killing me.”

After unlocking the doors and opening the passenger side for him, I turned to block the entrance before letting him in. “Here’s the deal. If you agree to tell me everything—no holding back or avoiding—then I won’t call Thane. Got it?”

Parker sniffed and wiped a hand across his nose. “Fuck. Fine,” he grumbled.

“Great.” I stepped aside and gave him a shove. “Get in.”

He stumbled forward, and I had to set both hands on his back to keep him from falling right back out again, but after plenty of cursing, we got him settled into his seat, and once he was belted in, I shut the door to jog around toward the driver’s side.

Before sliding behind the wheel, however, I glanced around the parking lot in the hopes of spotting Oaklynn one last time, except she was nowhere to be found.

Hissing out my regret, I got in and started the engine.

“So what happened?” I asked as I reversed us from the spot.

Parker was moodily silent for nearly a minute as I navigated out of the parking lot before he grumbled, “I bought and sold another business this week. My net worth is now just over twenty-eight million. Which is a new record for me.”

“Jesus,” I breathed, shaking my head in amazement.

Parker was a financial genius. After his parents died in an accident when their car had an electronic malfunction, he got paid, like, two million from the automobile company in recompense. And he’d been playing the stock market

with it ever since, starting out by transferring funds through Thane's parents and letting them invest for him until he turned eighteen. From there, he'd taken over the reins himself, and these days, it seemed as if he doubled his money every few months.

He was still enrolled in college, working toward a business degree, but the classes bored him. He thought he knew more than his professors, and hell, maybe he did; he definitely *made* more than them. I was curious if he was going to stick around until the spring to graduate or not.

"That's awesome," I said, impressed by his skills.

But Parker scoffed and pulled his flask from his jacket, only to realize it was empty. Scowling, he tossed it into the backseat and muttered, "Yeah, real awesome. And all I had to do was scream *I hate you* to my parents as they were walking out the door to go meet their deaths."

I nodded, having heard this before. "So it's just guilt you need to work through this time?"

"Just guilt?" he mumbled snidely. "You say that as if it's nothing."

"I know it's not nothing," I promised before shrugging. "This shit sucks. But...it is what it is."

"What it *is*, is not fair," he grumbled. "I mean, why do I *still* have the hardest time dealing with this? Why can't I get over it like the rest of you did?"

"It's not a cold you get *over*," I reminded him, using the same words our first counselor had all those years ago. "It's a life-long condition you survive, and we all still deal with it, just like you do. The only reason you make it so hard is because you avoid and suppress more than the rest of us do. You always act like it's going to hurt more if you face it head-on. But it doesn't. The pain actually moves through you faster if you just open your arms and taunt, *bring it on, motherfucker.*"

Parker sniffed out an amused sound and shook his head before he sighed and let his head fall back against the headrest. "And what if I don't feel as if I

should be allowed to work through it? I don't deserve to heal."

"Then I would say..." I blew out a breath and glanced over at him as we approached a red light. "Who really deserves any of the good things they get? Just be grateful for it. I guarantee you your parents would be more upset if they learned you squandered this precious gift they left you. They'd be proud of your success."

With a pained shudder, he drew in a shaky breath and reached out to grip my dashboard as a wave of grief engulfed him. "But I'd rather have them back than all the cash in the world," he ground out with tears trembling from his lashes and his teeth clenched. "God... This fucking *sucks*."

"Embrace it, anyway," I encouraged. "You think you deserve the pain, right? Take it. Feel it."

"And I hate *you*," he hissed as he bowed his head. "I want to scream. I want to shout as loud as I can."

I rolled down both windows on my truck. "Then shout."

So he did. He roared out all the agony inside him, cursing and yelling at the top of his lungs.

When I reached his place, I kept driving, circling the block until he'd worn himself out and was nothing but a panting, exhausted mass of raw emotion. He fell back in the passenger seat, sweating and breathing hard. When he lifted his hands to look at them, they were shaking.

"Damn," he rasped. "That was..." He frowned in thought before concluding with, "Weird."

I only shrugged as I finally pulled into his driveway and paused at the gate to punch in the code. "Feel better, though, don't you?"

He glanced over at me. I think he wanted to deny it, but the pain just wasn't there the way it had been a few minutes earlier. He'd successfully survived this round.

Lifting his brows hopefully, he asked, "Are you still going to call the others?"

I shook my head and drove through the opened gate. “Nah. I’m going to check back with you tomorrow, though, and if you’ve spiraled again, *then* I will.”

“I...actually think I’m good for a while,” Parker admitted, looking remarkably better than he had when I’d ushered him to my truck less than twenty minutes before. “Strangely enough, that did the trick.” He glanced at me in wonder. “Thank you.”

I nodded as I slowed to a stop next to his front walkway. “Want me to come in and stay awhile?”

Parker shook his head. “No, I’m good. I...” He sniffed as if in awe. “I’m honestly really good.” His gaze met mine again. “I reckon I’m going to hit the hay now. I have this feeling I’m going to sleep...well tonight.”

Insomnia had been one of his issues during the worst of his grief, so I reached out and clasped his shoulder, murmuring, “Good.”

He nodded back and reached for his door handle, only to pause and glance over with a wince. “I was really shitty to that girl, wasn’t I?”

It didn’t matter that I hadn’t heard what he’d said to her, I nodded, anyway. “Yes, sir, you were.”

He cursed quietly under his breath. “I should probably call and apologize.”

My nod morphed from up and down to sideways as I started to shake my head instead. “No. I would just leave her alone.”

He’d tried the apology approach before, only to accidentally lead another poor girl on, which had ended up hurting her more in the long run.

As if remembering that, he pointed at me and slurred, “Right. Good idea.” He opened his door and slid out into the night. “See you around, Arch. Thanks for talking me off the ledge.”

“Always,” I called after him.

He shut the door behind him, and I watched him mosey his way up the front walk to the grand entrance of his mansion.

The fucker had five bedrooms covering two floors and a total of six thousand square feet. I shook my head as he let himself inside the quiet, lonely house, wondering what he did with all that space.

I guess he'd recently moved a housekeeper and her family onto the premises, but they probably stayed out back in the pool house.

When lights came on inside, I finally put the truck into gear and pulled around through the circle drive, making sure the gate closed behind me.

From there, I knew I should've gone home, too.

But I didn't.

I had no idea if it was okay to text someone after casual sex to make sure they'd gotten home okay or not. So I just drove to the brownstone, taking the street behind it so that I could make out her car sitting out back and nestled safely in its parking spot. Pausing at a stop sign across the street, I exhaled, glad she'd made it back safely.

Then, I stayed there a moment longer than I should have, gazing over the entire building.

Memories flashed through me of playing hide and seek in the attic with Thalia when our aunt had owned it, and then helping Thalia move in before her freshman year of college.

I swear, I'd lugged more boxes full of her damn clothes up those rickety metal stairs than anyone. And all Thalia had done was gripe at me to be careful—there might be breakables in them.

A shudder seized me as my memories of this place picked up speed, whirling through me faster.

I hadn't told Oaklynn the truth.

I'd fully planned on spilling everything tonight before we'd even eaten, but the moment I'd seen her walking toward me in that skirt and those heels, with her rounded hips swaying and her smile saying, *yeah, I know you want me*, I'd completely forgotten about everything else.

God, I definitely should've told her before sleeping with her.

Now I felt like slime.

When the light in the rear bedroom on the second floor popped on, I physically jumped in my seat, not expecting it.

Swallowing thickly, I glanced up as a shadow passed by the window. She was lifting her arms and pulling her long hair into a ponytail.

I'd had my hand in that hair not more than an hour ago. Her peach scent was still on my skin.

And she'd hate me if she knew everything. Which was probably why it was best that our fling had only been a one-time deal.

But now, I also couldn't ask if she would be willing to help me with Thalia. There was no way she'd agree to do *anything* for my benefit after all my stupid silence. Damn, I was a moron. And what was worse; I was letting down my sister's memory by not doing everything I possibly could to bring her justice.

Glancing briefly toward the window of the front bedroom on the second floor, I winced over how dark and desolate it appeared. There was no ghost hanging around tonight.

Disheartened, I pressed on the gas and drove home.

I deserved this, I told myself. I deserved not getting a decade worth of questions answered. I should've just spoken up and blurted everything out. But my stupid, hesitant tongue had failed me again.

I felt like I was back to being timid, ten-year-old Damien, unable to just open my damn mouth to make friends at Little League. Except this... This was going to end so much worse.

OAKLYNN

That Saturday, Jaylani talked me into going to the beach with her.

“Come on,” she coaxed. “You’ve been here for two months now and still haven’t dipped a toe in the gulf. There is something wholly wrong with that.”

“What’re you talking about?” I argued with a laugh. “We just went the other week.”

“To look around, yeah,” she complained. “We walked the boardwalk. Now, I want to actually swim. The weather’s perfect for it.”

“But I need to research some—”

“Later,” Jay growled. “Right now, you’re shaving all your wooly bits and then putting on that hot bikini I got you as a welcome-to-town present because I’m picking you up in half an hour. No arguments.”

“Ugh. Okay. Fine.”

Two hours later, we were stretched out in matching beach chairs under a huge umbrella near a tiki hut drink kiosk where we’d just purchased peach-flavored ice tea that was to die for.

After taking a sip, I sighed, refreshed, and leaned my head back against the chair so I could close my eyes behind my shades and enjoy the moment. A warm breeze rolled through my still-damp hair, drying it, while the sound of nearby waves slapped rhythmically against the surf. It was all just so

soothing and glorious.

People laughed and talked all around us. Seagulls cried overhead. Sunlight kissed my skin, smothering me with a pleasant warmth from the ends of my sandaled toes and up to the tip of my nose.

The only thing that would've made this moment better was if a certain, toned hottie was stretched out in the same chair as me, pressed close with an arm around my shoulders and my cheek resting against his chest.

When my phone buzzed with an incoming text, my heart gave a little gallop inside my chest because I couldn't help but hope that maybe it was Damien.

But when I checked, the message was actually from Raina.

"Hey, you gave Raina my number."

"Oh yeah." From her chair next to mine, Jay waved a dismissive hand. "Forgot to tell you about that."

"Well, she just messaged me, saying so. And she invited me to go on some haunted tour on Bridleway with her and a few friends on Friday the 13th."

Jaylani groaned and rolled her eyes. "Ugh. Don't bother. It's super lame. Scar wanted to go last year, and all they do is walk you down the trail after dark, telling you ghost stories until some dork jumps out and scares you when you pass by the cemetery. The supposed grand finale was this place where some college chick was killed. We just stood there in front of her old apartment until the lights inside flickered on and off."

"Well, that's creepy," I said.

Jay sent me a dry glance. "It's not an *abandoned* apartment. People still lived there."

"Oh." I shrugged. "Well, I can't go anyway," I said as I typed out my regrets to Raina. "I gotta work that night and get the set ready for our Saturday morning monthly broadcast."

Getting to report on the monthly, Saturday morning specials was the goal

of every broadcasting student, since they were the only times we got to go on live air.

Jay sniffed. “Set up? When the hell are they going to take you off the set-up crew and put that gorgeous face in front of a camera already?”

“Dude, I know!” I said. “I’m trying.”

“I’m just saying,” she went on. “If they have any brains, they’ll give you a spot.”

I smiled fondly and fluttered my lashes at her. “And that’s why I love you.”

She smiled back and reached across the space between our two chairs until I reached back to squeeze her fingers.

“Thank you for today,” I told her when I let go. “I really needed this.”

“Anything for you, babe.”

With a happy sigh, I lifted my arms above my head to luxuriate in the fact that I was able to hog the whole chair to myself. I didn’t need some hot guy here to cuddle against, didn’t need his unique masculine scent in my nose, or his fingers idly running up and down the side of my arm. This was the fucking *life*.

“Seriously, why did you not talk me into this sooner?” I demanded with another moan.

Next to me, Jaylani sniffed acerbically. “Because Scarlett would’ve had a conniption.”

My eyebrows lifted in excitement because that word *would’ve* sounded promising. “Does this mean she’s cool with me *now*?”

It would be so awesome if I’d finally managed to win over her girlfriend because I was always distinctly uncomfortable around Scarlett. It felt as if she’d been giving me the cold shoulder since I’d arrived in Westport.

But my best friend scoffed. “As if! She’s more intimidated by you now than ever.”

“What? *Why*?” I lifted my face, shocked because I’d been working my ass

off to befriend her. Ripping off my shades to see better, I turned in my chair to scowl at Jay. “I moved out. I gave y’all space. I did everything right.”

“Doesn’t matter.” She shrugged as if fed up with the entire issue. “I swear, she’s convinced herself that I’m, like, in love with you or something.”

“Of course, you love me,” I uttered, blinking in confusion. “We’ve been best freaking friends since we were five.”

Jay sighed as if I didn’t understand. “Not that kind of love, sweetie.”

“Oh.” I groaned and rolled my eyes. “Eww, seriously? How can she not know better than that?”

“Uh... Probably because you’re gorgeous.” Jaylani blinked at me as if *I* should be the one to know better before she added, “I mean, you’re, like, way hotter than she is.”

“I am not!” I insisted, only to pause in my head and think that maybe I kind of was.

Not that any of that mattered.

“Plus, I’ve known you longer,” Jay was speling on. “I share more confidential shit with you than I do her, and I *guess* I talk about you all the time, according to Scar. Oh, and, ugh, okay... The other day, I saw that guy again on campus, but I was with just her this time.”

I furrowed my brow. “What guy?”

“The elusive, mysterious one,” she said, widening her eyes at me. “You know... The dude who claimed to be your roommate’s brother.”

I sat up straighter. “You mean, Damien?”

God, even saying his name made my skin ripple with pleasure.

And suddenly, I was in that darkened newsroom with him again, feeling his mouth against my throat and his hands on my ass as his hard cock confidently thrust into me over and over again.

A new kind of heat claimed me, and I had to cross my legs tightly to keep the burst of arousal from growing any higher.

But damn. I’d slept with him to get him *out* of my head. Why was he in

there now more than ever?

“Yeah. Him,” Jaylani said, snapping her fingers and pointing. “And I’m telling you, O, there’s something off about that guy. He’s way too shifty.”

“Shifty?” I exclaimed in dismay, completely not agreeing.

“He’s got secrets in his eyes,” Jay insisted. “I don’t trust him. *Something’s* going on there.”

I furrowed my brow, instantly wanting to defend poor Damien. “Just because he’s quiet and reserved does not mean—”

“The dude gives off serial killer vibes.”

“*What?*” I laughed outright. “He does not.”

“Yes, ma’am, he does. The kind of murderer that everyone always says lived down the hall from them. *He was just private*, they say, *always kept to himself*...right before they find barrels full of dead bodies in his basement.”

“Oh my God!” I cried. “Damien is *not* a serial killer. If anything, I would say he’s...haunted.”

Jay wrinkled her nose in total disagreement. “Haunted?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I think he and Thalia share some kind of past trauma together or something. I don’t know.”

I could still remember him saying, *I know she didn’t leave because of me* with his sad expression and tortured eyes. That told me *both* of them had gone through some kind of hell. She just hadn’t been able to stick around and work through it here in Westport the way Damien had.

“Well, I still don’t trust him,” Jay insisted. “Which is why I followed him.”

I paused. “You did *what?*”

She nodded. “Yep. On campus, when I spotted him with Scarlett the other day. I trailed him for a while to see where he went, and she utterly lost it... just because I was concerned about a friend and wanted to protect her by checking out the creepy, mysterious guy who has unlimited access to her apartment.”

“Hold up,” I said, waving my hands to pause her because there’d been a lot to unpack in that explanation. But when I gaped at my best friend, all I could screech was, “Are you serious right now?”

“I know!” she confirmed with the same disbelief, rolling her eyes and sniffing. “She went totally ballistic about it. I mean, he could just walk in and watch you *sleep* some night, if he wanted to. Or worse! But did Scarlett care about *that*? Hell no, it was all... you’re not worried about her, Jay. You’re jealous. Because you know she’s attracted to him, and you secretly want her for yourself. Can you believe that shit? I mean, the level of her insecurity... To say the least, we had a huge fight, and right now, we’re not currently on speaking terms with each other. She’s even been sleeping on the couch for the past few days.”

Mouth falling open, I gaped at her, not sure what to say. If I didn’t know her as well as I did, I might’ve agreed with Scarlett and also thought she’d been acting as if she had a thing for me. But I *did* know her, and since I was sure that *wasn’t* the case, I remained caught on another glaringly crazy detail.

“I can’t believe you *followed* him!” I accused. “I mean, what the hell?”

“What?” she screeched, lifting her hands in question. “Even you have to admit that there’s something off with his story. How can you think you’re renting from one person, only for—surprise—some other guy to end up being your landlord instead? I mean, you know absolutely nothing about him, but he can now get into your private sanctum any time he wants? That’s like... well, it’s like some kind of hinky, bait-and-switch maneuver.”

“Good Lord, it wasn’t that underhanded,” I argued. “Thalia even mentioned her brother, said his name, and flat-out admitted that I would be paying him. Everything is fine.”

If anything, *Thalia* was the one who came off shady. She’d made him sound too young to be directly involved in the apartment rental, and she almost always evaded direct questions.

“I still feel suspicious about the whole thing,” Jay insisted. “So please...

Promise me you'll be careful. And that you won't let this guy's good looks distract you from any more of his red flags."

I swallowed uneasily, not about to let her know it was entirely too late for that. His looks had already distracted me straight into dropping my panties for him.

And then letting him keep them.

But I would like to think I was more intuitive than that. It was *not* the masculine shape of his calves or the sensual curve of his lips, or even the whiskey-brown hue of his eyes that made me want to trust him. It had been the vulnerable moment he'd shown me after coming off as the aloof, closed-off person he projected at first. It was the achy hope in his gaze when he looked at me as if he needed *someone* to understand him.

Something deep in my bones knew I was safe with him. And it wasn't just my hormones, although—damn—they really liked him too.

"O?" Jaylani snapped her fingers in front of my face to gain my attention.

I blinked her into focus and felt my face heat. "Alright, fine," I agreed. "I'll be careful. But you already know me; I'm a cautious girl. I mean, have you ever seen me jump into a heavy relationship with *anyone*?"

"No," she had to admit because I'd never actually *date*-dated a guy before. "But I've seen you jump into *bed* with plenty."

"Wow," I muttered, pulling back in extreme offense. "Way to make me feel like a whore."

"I'm not saying *that*," Jay insisted, starting to look desperate. "You're the sweetest, most giving woman I know. You show the best affection and are totally loyal and wonderful. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with you liking sex. Even if it's with gross men. I just worry about how freely you share your body with people you don't *know* that well. I'm telling you, after watching all that Dahmer shit on Netflix, I am thoroughly freaked out. There are some scary-ass, unhinged people in this world, and I don't know what I'd do if you got hurt by one of them."

My heart melted at her concern. “Oh, sweetie,” I said, reaching for her hand. When she took my fingers and clung tightly, I sighed. “I promise you, I’ll be careful.” And this time I was serious.

She tightened her grip briefly. “You better be. Which is why I need to tell you where I *followed* this Damien guy.”

My stomach automatically tightened with dread because I wasn’t sure if I could handle hearing anything bad about him. I mean, what if Jay had caught him going off with some other girl and hooking up with *her*? On campus.

I know I’d only planned on having him for myself that one time, so technically he was free to be with anyone he wanted, but damn... I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him...and wanting him. It’d only been four days since our night in the newsroom, but I’d been tempted—more than once—to call him up and see if he wanted a repeat.

It would really sting to learn he’d already moved on.

“What?” I asked, already cringing and bracing for the pain.

“Okay, so...” Jaylani heaved in a deep breath before delivering her big news. She turned to me completely and lifted her hands, “I’m, like, eighty percent sure he’s stalking you. When he was walking past Hill Hall, he looked up—right at the second floor where the broadcasting room is—as if he knew you were in there or something.”

“He did?” I exhaled in a rush as my belly heated and thighs quivered, *flattered*—not concerned—that he’d been remembering our night together when he’d walked past.

Quickly waving a hand in the hopes of diminishing his actions, I told Jay, “Jeez, he could’ve been glancing up there for any number of reasons, most of which have absolutely nothing to do with me. And besides, even if he glanced up briefly because he thought I might be up there, it’s not as if he discovered my possible whereabouts through some kind of underhanded measures. I straight-up *told* him I was a journalism major.”

“Well, he also spent a considerable amount of time in the psychology

department,” Jaylani went on. “Apparently, he has, like, three or four psychology classes this semester. And you know what *that* means, don’t you?”

I lifted my brows with no idea where she was going with this. “That... he’s a psychology major, perhaps?”

“It means that if he *is* a sociopath, then he’s learning how he needs to behave just enough to blend in and trick people into thinking he’s not.”

“Wow,” I said, lifting my eyebrows. “That’s it. No more serial killer shows for you. I’m serious, Jay. You’re getting a little bit *too* paranoid.”

She bit her lip and winced. “Maybe you’re right. But it’s really scary to realize how horrible people can be, especially the ones you *think* you know.”

“Definitely no more, then,” I ordered. “I know there are monsters out there, but it won’t benefit our lives any to live in constant fear of crossing paths with one of them.”

She nodded and drew in a deep breath. “But still be careful around this landlord guy, anyway,” she ordered.

I smiled and rolled my eyes. “I will.”

Her return smile was a little more relieved. “Good.” And before she could say anything else, her phone rang. After checking the screen, her eyes widened, and she pressed it right back to her stomach. “It’s Scarlett,” she gaped in horror. “What do I do?”

“Um, *answer* it,” I said, lifting my eyebrows in confusion. “She’s your girlfriend.”

“But she didn’t know I was coming here today. Or that I’d be with you? What if she hears the waves in the background?”

“Oh my God,” I screeched. “You didn’t tell her you were going to hang out with me? *Directly* after the two of you had a fight *about* me! Jesus, Jay.”

She winced. “But—” The phone stopped ringing, and she glanced down, looking devastated. “Fuck, she just gave up on me, didn’t she?” Only for the phone to start up again.

Her eyes widened as she looked up at me. “What do I do?”

“Answer the damn phone!” I cried.

“But I can’t tell her I’m here with you.”

“Yes, you can,” I said. “Because the worst thing you can do is lie to her. So pick up and tell her that you brought me out here to ask that we take a little time apart.”

“Time apart?” she gasped, already shaking her head to nix that idea.

But I nodded. “Look. Do you like this girl or not?”

“Yes! You know I do.”

“And do you want to keep her?”

“Dammit, yes.”

“Then, I understand that you need to prove to her that she’s important to you. We spent the last few years apart. What’s another few weeks or months or however long she needs? Whenever she finally feels secure with you, *then* you can start gradually introducing me back into the picture.”

“Okay...okay,” she answered, nodding before she looked down at the phone and then lifted it with shaking hands. “Wish me luck.”

OAKLYNN

After Jaylani ended her call with Scarlett, our trip to the beach was basically over.

“I still can’t believe I have to stay away from you for who knows how long,” she whined as she drove me home. “There were so many places around town that I still wanted to show you.”

I shrugged. “It’s not forever. And if it helps your relationship, then it’s worth it.”

“But what if it doesn’t?” she asked, sending me a worried glance.

“Then...” I shook my head. “You’ll know for certain that it wasn’t just me causing all this unrest between you, and it’s really her, which is something you should learn, anyway. So win-win. And you’ll still get me back after it’s all said and done, no matter what.”

“I feel like I’m just abandoning you in a foreign town that you don’t know, though.”

“Oh please. I’ve been here nearly two months now. I’m learning my way around just fine, meeting new people every day, and I really should keep my focus on my grades. A little separation from you might be exactly what *I* need, too.”

“Hey, you’re not supposed to make me feel completely unnecessary,” Jay scolded as she pulled into the parking spot next to my Forte.

I laughed. “You’re needed, trust me.” Leaning over, I opened my arms for a hug. “I’ll see you when I see you, ‘kay?”

“Okay,” she mumbled and hugged me back. “Just don’t go getting a new best friend until then.”

“Never,” I swore. After a quick kiss on her cheek, I opened the door and climbed out. “Love you.”

“Yeah.” Jaylani sent me sad puppy eyes through the front windshield and watched me all the way to the back door. Then she waited until I’d unlocked it and stepped inside before she began to back out of the drive.

I finally let my brave face fall as I stood in the open doorway and watched her leave. A hopeless depression swamped me. I already missed her. We’d even agreed not to text for a while unless it was an emergency, which felt all kinds of wrong. Even when we’d lived six hours apart, with me in Dallas and her here, we’d still been able to talk or text whenever we wanted to.

Feeling as if my foundation had just been ripped out from under me, I slumped inside and stowed away my beach bag before trudging up the stairs and taking a long, consoling shower to get all the sand and surf water off me.

When I turned off the faucet, I could hear muted noises from below, telling me a television was on.

Encouraged by the idea that Thalia was home, I hurried to towel off and put on something comfortable to lounge around the apartment in and left my room to head downstairs.

“Howdy!” my roommate greeted cheerfully from the couch, where she sprawled in a comfy but cute outfit that almost mirrored the exact same thing I was wearing. Tank top, shorts, bare feet.

“Hey,” I returned casually. “You’re already back from who-knows-where after doing who-knows-what with who-knows-who.”

She grinned in amusement. “I am.”

“Sweet,” I said. “It’s actually good to see you. How’ve you been?”

“Ah...mazing,” she said, tilting her face toward me in invitation. “I was just watching *Pitch Perfect*. Want to join?”

“Wow. I love that movie,” I said, jogging down the last few steps. “Plus, it’s been a while. So, yeah. I could watch it again. Will it bother you if I work on an assignment while we binge?”

“Not at all.”

“Great. I’m going to go grab my stuff and then make some popcorn. You want any?”

“Sure,” she told me. “Thanks.”

I nodded and hurried back up the stairs. When I returned, Thalia was laughing over something Fat Amy was doing on the screen. I smiled, hoping for some serious bonding time with my roomie as I passed by to get snacks in the kitchen.

A few minutes later, I returned with my arms weighed down with two tubs of popcorn, two drinks, and a bag of sour gummy worms that I only shared with people who I genuinely wanted to be my friends.

“Here you go,” I said, setting the treats I had prepared for her on the end table beside her.

“Wow. Is all that for me? You are just too much.”

I smiled, only to shiver as I passed back by her to claim my own spot on the opposite end of the super-long couch. Noticing that she had the fireplace running underneath the television, I rubbed my arms to warm them.

“Thank goodness you have the fireplace going. It’s kind of chilly in here, isn’t it?”

Thalia merely shrugged. “It doesn’t really heat anything, sorry. I just like the ambiance.”

“Oh. Well, in that case...” I grabbed the throw draped over the back of the couch and pulled it onto my lap before placing my computer on top of the blanket and opening it.

Settled in, the two of us watched in silence for a while, Thalia

occasionally commentating, and me stuffing my face with popcorn as I alternated between glancing up at the movie and trying to concentrate and research the tenure process for professors on campus. Some students had been complaining that the curriculum from the faculty who'd been around longer was growing stale. And I wanted to learn how rigorous their tenure process was and what policies were put in place to keep their teaching superior and worthwhile before I started my article.

On the other end of the couch, Thalia laughed again. I glanced over, chewing on my thumbnail, and couldn't help but see all the similarities between her and Damien. They had the same features, same warm complexion, and light brown, whiskey-colored eyes. Same dark hair and even the same nose. It was obvious they were related.

Which made me wonder again what was keeping Thalia away from him. My mind immediately shot to a bad, shared childhood where they were either abused, molested, or neglected together. But I didn't want to think about either Damien or Thalia going through that kind of hell.

With a wistful sigh, Thalia pressed a hand to her heart. "I just love Becca and Jesse together. Love is so awesome. Are you still depressingly single, Oaklynn?"

I pulled back with a slight scowl. "I wouldn't call it *depressingly* single," I started.

"What?" Thalia asked, glancing over curiously. "Has someone turned your head lately?"

I snorted out an amused sound. "Other than Damien...no," I muttered more to myself than her. But she heard me, loud and clear.

"Damien?" she repeated in surprise. "You mean, *my* Damien? My little *brother*, Damien?"

Crap. "Uh..." I sent her a guilty cringe before admitting, "I mean, you gotta admit, he *is* gorgeous. You can't really blame a girl for looking, right?"

My roommate blinked at me in surprise. "You did not just say that," she

uttered in horror because obviously, she *could* blame a girl for looking.

“What?” I asked, confused. “What would be wrong if Damien and I—”

“Um...*no*,” Thalia said in no uncertain terms.

“Seriously?” I cried, getting a little offended now. But, wow, why didn’t she think I was good enough for her brother?

Thalia pointed at me sternly. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“I...wasn’t,” I said slowly.

“Well, it’s just...not possible. I know he’s a sweetheart, but you shouldn’t even be thinking about my little brother like that. I forbid it.”

I gaped at her open-mouthed for a good five seconds before admitting, “You know... I don’t get you. What’s the story between you and him, anyway?”

Because the overly protective way she was acting right now didn’t mesh with how I saw their relationship. Sure, she acted like she loved and missed him, but she wouldn’t even let him *see* her.

“What do you mean?” she demanded. “There’s no story between us.”

“Then why haven’t you two talked in so long?”

She gasped as if offended. “*We talk!*” Setting a hand against her chest, she blinked at me as if I’d slapped her.

“Yeah?” I asked. “When was the last time you talked to him, then? And why did you run off the last time he showed up?”

“I didn’t run off.”

“You ran off so fast the door slammed behind you,” I said, lifting my voice. “He doesn’t even have your number anymore. And you didn’t tell him when you came back to town. Or that you rented out the room *he’d* been trying to rent out? Why are you avoiding him? What happened between you two?”

“Nothing! And I’m *not* avoiding him,” she scoffed, waving an unconcerned hand. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Oh, really?” I countered. “Then you’d stick around if I actually called

him over *right now*?”

When I lifted my phone in challenge, she lifted her eyebrows right back. “Go ahead. Call him.”

I hesitated, uncertain. She didn’t seem worried about me calling him at all. And if I saw Damien again, I’d just want to jump his bones. Which was probably not wise.

Slumping my shoulders, I dropped the phone and asked, “Then, how long has it been?”

“How long has *what* been?” she asked, shaking her head and avoiding the question a little too extremely.

I wasn’t going to be diverted off topic this time, though. “How long has it been since you last talked to Damien?”

“Hmm.” She tapped her chin in thought. “I’m not really sure. It doesn’t *feel* like that long ago.” She didn’t seem worried or concerned or sad about their estrangement at all.

“Well, I think you should call him,” I said. “I think he’d be *very* happy to hear from you.”

Finally, a glimmer of sadness drifted briefly across her features before she admitted, “Damien doesn’t hear me when I talk to him.”

And now, my heart broke for both siblings. “Well, that’s probably just a guy thing,” I offered, rolling out an unconcerned hand. “They rarely understand it when we have important shit to say. Their brains are just wired differently than ours. But I do know for a fact that he *wants* to hear you. He wants to understand. Hey, maybe I could just give him a message for you and say it in a way that finally goes into his ears and stays there.”

Eyes lighting with interest, Thalia stared at me in amazement before saying, “Would you really? You’d do that for me?”

“Sure, of course.” Man, I would *love* to be involved in helping them repair their relationship. “What do you want him to know?”

“That I love him,” she said immediately, only to pause with a slight

frown. “And I’m sorry. And...huh. I guess, that’s really it. *I love you and sorry.*”

See! I knew it!

Wishing Jay was around so I could crow in her face—Thalia *had* been the reason behind her and Damien’s estrangement, and now she wanted to apologize for it—I cleared my throat past my self-congratulations and furrowed my brow in concern. “I can definitely tell him that. But... What’re you sorry for?”

She gave a one-shouldered shrug and looked down at her hands, clearly not wanting to divulge. But then she admitted, “For leaving, I suppose. He was my favorite person on the planet, and I just...abandoned him here alone.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think he’s done okay without you.”

When she glanced up, all the sadness in the world seemed to glimmer in her eyes. “That doesn’t really make me feel better at all.”

Biting my lip, I winced. “Sorry. But, honestly, why did you leave in the first place?”

Because *that* was the main thing behind all this. I had a feeling her reasoning would answer so many questions that were burning a hole through me.

But Thalia was done opening up. Instead of confessing all, her gaze frosted as she turned her attention bluntly toward the television. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Thalia—” I started, wishing I could fix whatever was wrong. “It’s okay. I just want to help—”

In front of us, the television and fireplace both bleated out a popping sound before they went silent and blank.

With a yelp of surprise, I pressed a hand to my heart and rasped, “Whoa.” The light was still on in the kitchen, so I guessed, “We must’ve blown a

breaker by running the television and fireplace at the same time. Don't worry. I'll go check it out."

I remembered seeing the fuse box in the back, near the bathroom, so I made my way to the hallway under the metal stairs. But when I opened the door to the box, none of the switches were flipped in the opposite direction as the others.

"Huh," I said, running my fingers along them, just to be sure one wasn't even slightly moved.

The problem didn't seem to be a blown fuse, though, so I shut the door and returned to the front room...which was empty.

"Thalia?" I called, looking around just as a door upstairs slammed shut, making me jump. A moment later, "Gangnam Style" started to play through the floor above me.

I grimaced over her choice of songs and then sighed as I glanced at the blank television and dead fireplace.

I guess she really, *really* hadn't liked me pressing her about Damien.

Probably best not to tell her I'd already had sex with him.

Picking up the remote, I pointed it at the television and pressed the *power* button just to test it. When the screen immediately flicked on and went back to playing *Pitch Perfect*, I lifted a curious eyebrow and shrugged before tossing the remote down and curling back into my spot on the couch.

But when I glanced over toward Thalia's empty spot, I was only more hurt to see that all the snacks I'd brought her hadn't even been touched.

I couldn't concentrate on my homework after that at all, too upset by what had just happened and distracted by the annoying song she played on repeat above me. I flipped off the movie and then glared up at the ceiling.

That's it: I was going grocery shopping.

THE STORE CLOSEST TO MY APARTMENT DIDN'T HAVE MY FAVORITE BRAND OF French vanilla cappuccino K-Cups, and I was in a sullen enough mood that I decided not to purchase anything from them in revenge. And so I went back around the store, putting everything back that I'd already picked up, and I left empty-handed.

In my car, I didn't feel like going home, though, and I couldn't call Jay to whine about my roommate, plus I was pretty sure focusing on homework wasn't in the cards for the rest of the day, so I pulled up my phone and searched for other grocery stores in the area.

On my fourth try, I finally found my beloved single-serve brewing capsules—thank God—but of course, they'd been stashed up on the very top shelf, that I couldn't reach, even after I stepped onto the bottom, base shelf and stretched as far as I could go on my tip toes.

“Dammit,” I muttered, collapsing down to my regular five-four before noticing someone else in the aisle behind me.

With his back to me, he held a bunch of bananas under one arm and reached for a box of protein bars with the other. He had to be at least six feet, easy.

“Hey, tall guy,” I said, tapping on his back, only to realize—wow—he had a *nice* back. And a superb butt. Along with wide, perfect shoulders and a strong neck. “Do you think you could reach...?” But as he turned to face me, my mouth fell open. “Holy shit,” I ended up uttering instead.

OAKLYNN

Damien reared back, equally startled by my presence. “Oaklynn,” he said and then shook his head as if to clear it. “What’re you doing here?”

I swallowed as memories of our night together roared through me. I was suddenly back there on that desk with him slipping his hand under my knee to lever my leg higher as he stepped between my thighs.

My inner muscles clenched in anticipation and my breasts tightened, aching for him again.

God...

One time had not been enough.

“S-shopping,” I managed to fumble out as my chest heaved for more air. “You?”

But was it hot in here? This damn store felt like a sauna all of a sudden.

“Same,” Damien answered, lifting his bananas to prove it. And whew, even their hard, phallus shape was doing a number on me.

I needed sex again. I needed it, like, *bad*.

Except I’d been fine thirty seconds ago before I’d turned around and looked into his whiskey eyes. Sex had probably been the last thing on my mind.

Which meant, I didn’t just need sex at all, did I?

I needed Damien.

It didn't matter that he was dressed down as much as I was. Sporting a worn HaveU T-shirt and drawstring jogging pants, the man looked scrumptious, and I wanted to devour him whole.

"I live just around the corner," he was saying, motioning in some direction, who knew if it was north, east, south, or west. Who even cared? He was standing right in front of me, and he just lived around the corner.

His *bed* was just around the corner.

I started to wonder who I had to fight to get a spot in it tonight.

Because I would.

With weapons.

Jaylani's words zipped through my head. *The dude gives off serial-killer vibes. He has secrets in his eyes.* But at that moment, I didn't care what kind of skeletons were in his closet. I wanted his hands on me.

And then Thalia's face flitted by. *I forbid it.*

But not even her wish for me to stay away from him swayed me.

I needed Damien.

"Yeah, I tried shopping at the store closest to my apartment first," I heard myself telling him, motioning in some direction that might or more likely probably wasn't even close to the way that store lay. "But they didn't have my favorite K-Cups. So I tried another. And then another. Until, yay... Fourth time's a charm. There they are."

When I glanced up at them on the top shelf, Damien looked too.

"There they are," he murmured in husky agreement as he stepped closer.

I sucked in a breath and lifted my chin in order to keep looking into his eyes.

"So...how've you been? Your concentration still on track?" he asked, shifting closer until he'd basically boxed me in against the shelf full of assorted coffees. Then, he reached up past me, our faces only inches apart, before he pulled my K-Cups off the shelf.

Still keeping eye contact throughout all this, he rasped, “Here you go.”

I exhaled roughly. But God, even his voice did things to me.

My eyelashes fluttered as a wave of arousal suffused me. “Tha—uh... thank you.” Taking the cardboard box from his hand, I hugged it to my chest to hide the fact that my nipples were hard.

“No focus problems, then?” he pressed, remaining close and distracting me with his heat and smell.

“No...*what?*” I asked, wishing he’d just crowd me the rest of the way against the rows of coffee and take me right there.

Damien’s lips twitched into a knowing smirk. “The last time I saw you,” he reminded me. “You were having trouble focusing on classes. I was just wondering if I *really* helped clear that up. Or...” I swear he didn’t move a muscle, but suddenly, he loomed closer. “If you need me to make another go of it.” Lifting his hand to capture a lock of hair between two of his fingers, he wound the dark strands idly around his digits as he added, “I wouldn’t want anything to distract you from your studies.”

I started nodding dumbly even before he finished the sentence. “You know,” I said, my smile blooming. “Now that you mention it, I think you may be right. One more round just might be required after all. To make sure I got *all* of the distractions out of there.”

A white row of teeth appeared as he grinned. “Yeah?” he asked, beginning to unwind his finger from my hair, his hand moving lower as he went. “You think you need another round?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Definitely.” The bobbing of my head turned a little more insistent, and his eyes darkened with heat. His finger came free from my hair, and he not-so-accidentally brushed his knuckles across the front of my shirt, directly over the hardened tip of one breast, which told me I hadn’t been hiding shit from him.

“When?” he said, making my heart race.

I swallowed thickly, feeling my thighs heat. “Well, you’re in luck,” I

managed to say. “It just so happens that I have an opening tonight. I think I can...squeeze you in.”

He groaned and opened his mouth to respond, but a guy’s voice from two or three aisles over interrupted us, shouting, “Yo, Arch! Where’d you go, man?”

In front of me, Damien flinched and dropped his hand.

“Archie...?” A different male voice sang. “Oh, Archer...”

Rocking a step backward, away from me, Damien started to shake his head as if denying what he was hearing.

So I felt extra inclined to lift a finger. “Uh... I believe someone’s looking for you.”

“No,” he said, lying pathetically. “I don’t think so.”

“Archer!” both voices called this time.

Grimacing through a painful wince, Damien said, “They’re probably looking for *another* Archer. Someone whose first name is Archer, I bet.”

“Damien Archer...” The voices were getting insistent now.

Eyebrows high, I kept my lips pressed firmly together to hide my smile, which didn’t work at all, and I hummed out an amused, “Mm-hmm. You sure about that?”

“Fuck,” he muttered, looking defeated just as two college-aged cuties wheeled crazily around a corner down the far end of the aisle, briefly tilting the shopping cart they rode to the side on two wheels before they started toward us, one pushing while the other rode inside the basket with his arms and legs dangling over the sides.

“There he is!” the pusher shouted, setting one foot on the lower tray before pushing off with the other as if he were riding a skateboard.

“Archer!” the rider cried jubilantly, lifting his arms and sending us the sign of the rock horns. “What’re you doing, man?”

“Oh...my God,” I murmured, completely fascinated by the show.

“Dude,” the guy inside the cart scolded as they drew near and the driver

put one foot down to skid them to a stop right in front of us. “We’re supposed to be *shopping*, not picking up chicks.”

But as the cart came to a complete halt, he hopped out and landed directly in front of me.

“Howdy,” he greeted with a big flirty grin and a cocky, I-bet-you-want-me bob of the head. “I’m Keene. Rhymes with peen.” Holding out a hand for me to shake, he added, “Otherwise known as the star in your next wet dream. And you are...?”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed.

The boy was handsome, there was no doubt about that. He had a great, athletic body, dark, spiky hair, perfect mouth and nose, a yummy amount of scruff on his jaw, and sexily expressive eyebrows, like Charlie Sheen’s in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, but shaped way better and without the drugged-out look.

Yet the poor guy did absolutely nothing for my libido. He was a hoot, though, and I totally dug that.

Before I could respond, however, the other one hip-checked him out of the way, making him stumble off balance to the side.

“Sorry,” he apologized as he stepped in front of me and wiped a headful of rich, dark curls off his forehead. “He’s a moron.”

This one was tall, taller than Damien even. He had to be a good six feet and six inches, and he had the bluest eyes I think I’d ever seen.

“I’m Alec,” he started in the most adorably goofy manner that immediately made me want to hug him and ruffle that crazy, curly hair. “And I have no idea what your next dream is going to be about, but you’re definitely going to star in mine.”

“Oh my God,” Damien groaned from the side, pressing a hand to his forehead and clearly embarrassed to be associated with either of them. “Please make it stop.”

“Dude, whatever,” Keene said cheerfully as he smacked Damien in the

stomach. “You know you love us. Now, please give us hope that you have *any* skill whatsoever, and say you’ve already scored her name and number.”

Amused by the whole byplay but mostly by the horrified look on Damien’s face, telling me how badly he wished he could just crawl under a rock right now, I folded my arms over my chest and nodded to Keene. “Oh, he definitely has.”

As his mouth fell open in disbelief, Alec cried, “Sweet!” He wormed his way between Keene and Damien, bounding back into the conversation. “Way to go, Arch.”

Damien gave a short, harassed sigh and then motioned toward the other two as he glanced at me. “Roommates,” he explained before turning his attention to them and nodding his head in my direction. “This is Oaklynn.”

“Well, it’s nice to—Wait...” Keene paused dramatically, then pointed at me. “Did he say Oaklynn?”

“As in, *the* Oaklynn?” Alec asked over his shoulder.

Keene shook his head to clear it. “The Oaklynn who’s Archer’s new tenant and lives in—”

“Yes!” Damien cut in sharply. “She’s that Oaklynn.”

But Alec kept going. “So *this* is the Oaklynn you went to Taco Tuesday with?”

“Wow, I’m beginning to feel famous,” I spoke up, fanning my face as if embarrassed.

“Oh, you are,” Keene assured. “If our buddy Parker hadn’t attested to the fact that he saw you two *inside* the student union together, we’d probably be convinced you were just a figment of Archer’s wildest imagination.”

Squinting, I glanced at Damien. “Parker’s the drunk guy you had to take home, right?”

“Yes,” he confirmed and started to set his bananas into Alec and Keene’s cart, only to pause. “Wha...?” Swerving a dismayed glance toward his roommates, he demanded, “What the hell *is* all this shit?”

He pulled a Snickers bar up from between a bag of chips and a package of cookies and lifted his brows reproachfully at Alec and Keene.

“I call it pure deliciousness,” Alec announced proudly and grabbed the candy bar from Damien’s hand so he could unpeel the wrapper and take a big bite.

“What’re you doing?” Damien hissed, utterly aghast. “Don’t eat that before we *pay* for it!”

Alec spat the bite into his palm, looking properly chastised.

“Oh my God,” Damien groaned and pressed a hand to his brow. “You two are fucking hopeless.”

Keene glanced at me as he motioned toward Damien. “Please tell us you can pull that stick out of his ass? We’ve had no success ourselves.”

“You’re our only hope, Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Alec pleaded, then popped the bite of Snickers back into his mouth before Damien could stop him.

I blurted out a laugh, and Damien sent me a scolding glance. “Don’t encourage them.”

“Sorry! I’m sorry. I can’t help it.” I held up a hand to continue my apology because it was taking me longer than I wanted to stop laughing. “They’re just so cute.”

“Ha!” Keene cried, slapping Damien in the arm with the back of his hand. “Did you hear that? She thinks we’re—wait. *Cute?*”

Realizing cute was not the term he wanted to be labeled, he spun toward me with both hands lifted in outrage. “What the fuck? No woman calls me cute.”

I only shrugged. “Sorry. I guess you should’ve thought of that before you went and acted so adorable.”

But *adorable* was apparently an even worse term than *cute* in his hierarchy. Grimacing and clutching his chest as if he’d been shot, he fell a step back, unable to accept my compliment.

“It’s his cheeks, isn’t it?” Alec asked, reaching out to pinch Keene right

through his five o'clock shadow.

But Keene slapped his hand down. "Man! She called you cute, too."

Alec only shrugged. "I'll take cute," he told me, smiling as if proud. "Oh, hey. That box looks heavy. Why don't you put it in our cart?"

It literally weighed five ounces...if that.

"In fact," Alec went on. "You should just do the rest of your shopping with us. Safety in numbers and all that. I mean, you heard about that sophomore who went missing from campus, didn't you? Can't be too cautious these days."

When Keene lifted his brows and nodded encouragingly, I glanced between the two, feeling caught, before my gaze strayed to Damien.

His eyebrows wrinkled ruefully in one of those sorry-I-come-with-kids kind of apologies, and then he shrugged, telling me the decision was completely mine.

It wasn't like I had any other plans, except the ones that had obviously just fallen through with Damien, so I shrugged too. "Why not?" I said. "Sounds fun."

"Yeah, like a kick in the head," Damien mumbled under his breath, while Alec hooted, "Right on!" and wound an arm over my shoulders as he turned us away from the other two and started me down the aisle.

"Get the cart," he told Keene as he passed him, only to turn to me with a smile. "So what's your take on cereals? If there's not a cartoon character on the front of the box, it's not worth the effort, am I right?"

"Dude," Keene muttered, appearing on the other side of me and pushing the cart. "If you try to have the conversation with her about who'd win in a smackdown—Cap'n Crunch, Toucan Sam, Lucky the Leprechaun, or Tony the Tiger—I'm disowning you. End of story."

"Oh, that's easy," I spoke up as we rounded a corner. "Cap'n Crunch."

"*What?*" both guys shouted in utter dismay and lurched a foot away as if I were contagious.

“How in the hell could you even suggest that?” Keene demanded. “Tony has, like, biceps. And he’s a fucking *tiger*.”

“And Sam has a foot-long beak,” Alec contended, miming one from the end of his nose. “All he’d have to do is peck the other guys’ eyes out, and boom, game over.”

“But Cap’n Crunch is a captain,” I argued. “You don’t just get that rank without having some serious war strategies under your belt.”

Both guys blinked at me before Alec scratched his chin. “Huh. You know, she proves a good point.”

Keene only snorted and folded his arms over his chest, remaining loyal to his tiger. “Still. The guy’s gotta be—what—two feet tall. No way in hell is he taking down Tony.”

Laughing over their enthusiasm, I glanced around for Damien.

When I found him on the other side of Keene, dropping a jumbo pack of paper towels and disposable plates into the cart, he shook his head at me and mouthed, “*I am so sorry.*”

I just smiled because I was enjoying myself. Then I turned back to the guys on either side of me. “Of course, we’re all probably totally underestimating the Leprechaun,” I said. “I mean, he has magic powers.”

“True,” Keene and Alec cooed together, enlightened by the idea.

As we passed a shelf with candy on it, I saw a bag of sour gummy worms, so I snagged it and tossed it into the cart as well. This caught Alec and Keene’s attention, and they immediately swarmed, grabbing some worms for themselves along with Twizzlers, Kit-Kats, Honey Buns, Nutter Butters, and more.

As they filled their arms, I wandered over to Damien’s side and glanced up at him. “So... Our plans just got derailed, huh?”

“I can’t apologize enough,” he started.

“Don’t even try,” I assured, taking his forearm and squeezing, only to shudder over all the warm, toned flesh under my fingers. “It’s fine. I’m

having fun. Your roommates are—”

He snickered and finished with, “Cute?”

When we laughed together, Alec and Keene glanced over.

They gaped as they dumped their loot into the cart, only for Keene to blindly reach over and poke Alec’s arm. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“I...I...” Alec shook his head. “I think so, but damn... She made him laugh.” Finally, the boys glanced at each other. “I didn’t know he *could* laugh.”

“For real.”

“Ha-ha,” Damien muttered straight-faced and flipped up his middle fingers, one for each of them. “You two are hilarious.”

“So we were thinking of making spaghetti for supper,” Keene spoke up, smoothly ignoring Damien’s gesture.

Damien snorted. “With what ingredients? Twizzlers and Mt. Dew?”

“Now that’s my kind of spaghetti,” Alec declared proudly, thumping his fist to his chest with sincerity.

“Okay, so we’re going to order a *pizza*,” Keene corrected, keeping his eyes on me as if he hadn’t heard the other two. “Want to come over and eat with us?”

“Uh...” My gaze immediately shot to Damien, wondering how he felt about this. I definitely didn’t want to go if he didn’t want me there, but...

He lifted his brows curiously, awaiting my answer, and I lugged out a breath before nodding. “Okay, yeah,” I said. “I eat pizza.”

Both Alec and Keene cheered, “Right on!” They high-fived each other as if their team had just won the big championship, while I glanced up at Damien to discover the whiskey hue in his eyes had heated enough to make me dizzy-headed.

My breasts started to feel heavy under my shirt again, and my breathing went weak.

For a moment there, looking into his eyes, all I could remember was the

feel of his face in my neck as he let me cradle him through his orgasm.

I craved that connection again, that moment where I was his entire world, and he relied on me to get him through his next breath.

“Okay, so we’ll go pay for the groceries,” Keene was saying, motioning between himself and Alec. “And Arch, you can ride with Oaklynn to show her where our place is, right?”

Damien didn’t acknowledge him as he kept looking into my eyes. “I think I can manage that,” he murmured as he held out a hand for me.

I drew in a sharp breath, hoping the night ended the very way I’d wanted it to after all.

I started to accept his hand, only to remember... “Oh! My groceries.” I spun toward Alec and Keene. “They’re still in your cart.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” Alec waved out a hand, dismissing my concerns. “It’s on Hudson.”

Then he and Keene turned away and headed toward the check-out lanes.

Glancing at Damien as they left, I furrowed my brow in confusion. “Who’s Hudson?”

Damien chuckled. “Our other roommate,” he explained. “He had to work tonight so he just sent some cash along with us to help out with the shopping.”

I bit my lip. “And he won’t mind that he just paid for mine, too?”

Damien huffed out an amused sound. “He’d pay for yours before he would his own.”

I nodded—alright, then—only to wonder, “Just how many roommates do you have?”

“Only those three,” he said, tugging on my hand and leading me toward the exit.

*Only three...*I thought weakly to myself. Then I nearly whimpered in defeat.

With that many other people around, I suddenly couldn’t picture myself

getting a second helping of Damien tonight at all.

OAKLYNN

“**W**ow, this is a nice place,” I said with lifted eyebrows as I pulled into the driveway where Damien instructed me to park behind a dark truck.

For some reason, when I’d learned four college guys were rooming together, I had pictured a run-down apartment building. But this was, like, a *house-house*, in the suburbs, where people raised families.

It was a two-tone red and white brick split-level with a double car garage and freaking trimmed bushes in the front yard.

“Thanks,” Damien said, sounding proud. “I grew up here.”

“Wait...what?” I glanced toward the passenger seat, where it was still strange to see the guy I’d first known as my mysterious sexy jogger sitting. “You grew up *here*? As in *this* house, here?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “My parents retired early last year and moved to Arizona. They flip places for a living and rent out half a dozen apartments and such around town, so they were just going to rent this one out, too. But Hudson needed somewhere to stay because he couldn’t stand his then-roommate, and the other two wanted to move out of *their* childhood homes, so...I just kept the place for the four of us. Alec’s room was actually *my* childhood bedroom. Hudson’s in Thalia’s old room. Keene took on the old study, and of course, I’m in the master bedroom since I had first pick.” He

seemed vaguely smug about that until an idea must've occurred to him because his eyes flared. "But don't worry," he rushed to add, already lifting his hands to reassure me. "I redid everything from top to bottom, so it doesn't feel as if I'm staying in my parents' old room at all."

I blinked at him, stumped. "So... You grew up here?" I repeated stupidly.

He nodded. "Yep. And since Mom and Dad are retired, I took over maintaining and managing all the rentals for them." With a shrug, he added, "It's helped me get through school without needing an hourly-paying job."

I listened to him explain everything before repeating, "You seriously grew up in *this* house?"

He spilled out an uneasy laugh. "Why? Is that weird?"

"No," I rushed to answer. "Of course not. I think it's cool. It's just..." I shook my head, still flabbergasted. "It sounds as if you had a normal childhood."

His brows furrowed with confusion before he said, "I did." Then, he shrugged as a haunted look entered his eyes. "Mostly, anyway."

"And you..." I motioned to the front yard where the grass was neatly trimmed. "You don't have any bad, traumatic memories here?"

"No," he answered slowly, growing confused. "Am I supposed to?"

"Of course not. I'm sorry. It's just..." I laughed a little at myself and waved a hand to apologize for all my questions. "I had this thought stuck in my head that you had this traumatic childhood, and that's why Thalia was avoiding you now. Because seeing you again would hurt too much and remind her of the bad past you shared."

"Oh," he murmured, only to shake his head slowly. "Well... None of our bad memories happened here. Life here was good. Our parents were good. And our childhood was...ninety-nine percent good."

My lips parted with the need to ask about that other one percent, but for some reason, I knew it wasn't the right time.

"Oh. Well...good." I pressed my hands against my heart and nodded

gratefully. “That’s good. So are mine. I have good parents, too, I mean. They’re still home in Plano right now.”

He nodded along with me, and I could see the tension grow in his eyes because he must’ve sensed that my curiosity about him and his past was mounting. But I didn’t ask.

Instead, a horn honked, and I yelped in surprise, nearly jumping out of my skin.

“Jesus,” Damien breathed, shaking his head as if he’d been startled too.

A Jeep Rubicon screeched to a halt in the driveway next to us, and I could already hear Keene and Alec through the window as they hopped out.

Sending Damien an arched-eyebrow glance, I blew out a breath and announced, “Well, here we go again.” And I threw open my door to climb out.

“Your groceries, my lady,” Alec was announcing as he reached in and extracted two grocery sacks.

“Thank you,” I answered, only to add, “and I can really pay you back for these, you know. You didn’t have to—”

“Zppt!” Keene cut in, silencing me as he pulled out the paper towels. “We got you.” Then he lifted his voice, calling, “Yo, Arch! Catch!”

Damien easily snagged the rolls from the air and tucked them under his arm. Then he waited for me to put my sacks in my car before he led me to the door near the garage rather than the main entrance.

The side door spilled straight into the kitchen, where the other two followed us in and dumped their groceries on the countertops, which were remarkably clean for four dudes living there.

As Damien started to put things into the refrigerator, Keene and Alec turned their attention to me.

Alec was even rubbing his hands together in glee. “Tour time,” he announced. “We should begin in the living room.”

So that was where they led me, leaving Damien alone to put the groceries

away.

I glanced back at him uncertainly, only to pause and blink as soon as I reached the front room.

A television that was nearly as big as one wall hung facing two enormous couches that sat in an angled V-shape, while behind that stood a foosball machine.

Okay, *now* we were starting to look more like a bachelor pad.

“I’ll be right back,” Keene called, dashing off down the stairs to the lower level and disappearing, leaving me alone with the tall one.

There was little decoration in here. Most posters on the wall supported Haverick University and its football team, but there was one of a bull rider that advertised the previous year’s world championships junior rodeo.

Squinting at the rider’s face, I pointed. “Is that...Keene?”

“Yep.” Alec slid his hands into his pockets and grinned proudly. “He won two years in a row.”

My mouth dropped open. “Keene’s a freaking bull rider?”

With a wince, Alec shrugged. “Not anymore.”

Ooh, there had to be a juicy story there, but it didn’t seem like a good time to ask. So I vaguely murmured, “Hmm,” and turned my attention to the one shelf in the room. After reading Keene’s name on the two championship trophies on the top shelf, I picked up a five-by-seven picture of Alec and a girl with their cheeks pressed together. They had the same dark, curly hair and blue, blue eyes. Their smiles were even similar as they grinned.

“Is this your sister?” I glanced at Alec, and he glowed proudly, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Yep. That’s Hope.”

“Are you twins?” I asked, thinking it would be weird for two roommates—both Alec and Damien—to have twin sisters.

But Alec waved a dismissive hand. “Nah. She’s thirteen months older than me. Plus, we have different moms.”

“Oh...” Definitely not twins, then. I set the picture down and realized the

rest of the shelf was filled with old DVDs, not books.

“Wow. There’s more movies here than you can shake a stick at.”

As I ran my fingers along the various titles, Alec stepped up beside me. “Those are mine, too. I’m a bit of a movie geek.”

“I’ll say.”

He had eclectic taste, from classics to modern-day horrors, cheesy comedies, superhero action adventures, Academy Award winners, tear-jerkers, musicals, dramas, and even some independent films I’d never heard of.

At the stairs, Keene dashed up from the bottom part of the house, only to grip the banister and swing around to rush up to the second floor, palming something box-shaped in his hand that I couldn’t make out.

“Yeah,” Alec went on, shoving his hands in his pockets as if nervous. “I want to be on a film set someday and make movies.” Lifting his hand, he sang, “Producer. Which is why my college major is film production.”

“Seriously?” I asked with interest. “Hey, do you think you could film a mock-up news report for me sometime to add to a resume portfolio? I’m a journalism major in broadcasting.”

“No way!” Alec cried. “Of *course*, I could. That’s exactly the kind of shit I live for. And not to brag or anything,” he added, leaning closer to drop his voice. “But I’ve seen the camerawork your guys do over there, and they don’t have anything on me. I could edit a segment for you like you wouldn’t believe.”

I laughed and squeezed his arm gratefully. “That would be perfect. Here. Let me get your number, and we’ll set something up sometime.”

Damien entered the living room just as I made the offer.

He slowed to a stop, eyebrows lifting in question as he watched Alec accept my phone and begin to plug in his digits.

“You’ll never guess what!” I burst out, flying forward to give him an excited hug. “Alec’s going to film a mock-up news report of me. If I could

get this in front of my professor, I just know she'd finally let me have my own segment."

"Dammit, is Younger showing off his video collection again?" a winded Keene demanded as he appeared back down the stairs to join us. "Yapping on about his theory that you can tell how compatible people are by their taste in movies?"

"Hey! That's a *sound* theory," Alec growled as he returned my phone to me. When I lifted my brows questioningly between them, he explained, "I saw a study about someone predicting the likelihood of whether different couples would stay together based on various factors. And sense of humor was a major indicator. If two people think the same things are funny or inappropriate, they have a better chance of sustaining their relationship. So I just think you can apply that to *movie* preferences as well. Here..."

He frowned at his collection thoughtfully before reaching out and piling three DVDs into his arms. "If I said these were your three options of what to watch tonight, what would you pick?"

"Shit, Alec!" Keene blurted in dismay. "*Really?*"

When I glanced over, surprised by his tone, I found that his eyes were wide with worry before he cast a hesitant glance toward Damien.

I looked over as well, only to find Damien sending Alec an unamused scowl.

"Oh no," I groaned. "One of these is your favorite movie, isn't it? Or least favorite?" I asked Damien after a moment of taking in the fact that he looked *very* displeased.

I spun back to Alec, low-key panicking. "Now I feel pressured."

"Ignore Damien," Alec said, swiping out a hand. "This is about you. Which one appeals the most to *you*? And which one appeals the least?"

"I don't..." I looked over the covers, only to wrinkle my nose. He'd picked out *The Grudge*, the original *Ghostbusters*, and *The Sixth Sense*. "So...ghosts are my only options?"

“I’m just trying to prove that the content doesn’t matter. It’s about what dispositions you’re inclined toward.”

“Oh. Okay.” That made sense. With a nod, I took in the movies with more thought. “Well, *The Grudge* is immediately out. I don’t do scared.”

Keene snorted and bumped his elbow into Damien. “Neither does Archer here. Being scared makes him violent.”

I pulled back, instantly suspicious of the word. “Violent?”

“Yes, ma’am, your boy triggers toward *fight* when it comes to the fight-or-flight response. So... Word of warning, if you ever want to jump out from a closet and say *boo*, his instinct will be to throat punch first and ask questions later.”

“Oh, good.” I brightened, actually relieved to hear that. “I’m definitely the type to flee. It’d be nice to know you were hanging back to fight the monster and distract him while I got away because I have a feeling with all that jogging you do, you could outrun me in no time, which would make me the first to get caught if we were running away *together*.”

Damien gave me a reluctant grin and lifted an eyebrow. “Glad I’m useful for something.”

“So...no horror,” Alec spoke up, determined to make me choose a movie. He slipped *The Grudge* back onto the shelf. “Which one between these two?”

I bit my lip as I studied them. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “They’re both classics in my opinion. I can appreciate the humor in *Ghostbusters*. But...*The Sixth Sense*...” I let out a low whistle. “Just blew my mind. I loved it.”

So I pointed at it, making my decision.

“And we have a winner!” Keene cheered, lifting his arms in triumph.

Immediately spinning toward Damien, I demanded, “Which one would you have chosen?”

He shrugged as if also torn before he started to nod, and then admitted, “Same.”

That made my smile burst free. I mean, I’d already seen how compatible

we could be. He'd lit me *up* in that broadcasting room like I couldn't remember anyone ever doing so thoroughly before. But it was nice to know we could curl up on a couch and enjoy a movie together too.

Trying to hide how much his opinion mattered, I glanced at Keene and Alec. "What about you two?"

"*Ghostbusters*," they answered in unison.

Without glancing at each other, they fist-bumped.

"All the way," Alec added without a beat.

They were just so freaking adorable.

I glanced at Damien to share my feelings, and he rolled his eyes as if to say, *yeah, I know. My roommates are loveable goofballs.*

I bumped my arm into his lightly, sharing the moment before I spoke up, asking, "Y'all got anything decent to drink around here? Because I am one thirsty girl."

OAKLYNN

In the kitchen, Damien ordered a pizza on his phone while I popped open a canned Malibu cocktail and wandered my way around the tiled floor as I sipped, inspecting the appliances until I came across a strange-looking, gold figurine on the counter.

“This is...interesting,” I said, picking it up.

At first glance, I would’ve taken it for a kindergartener’s art project. I twisted it this way and that. Maybe it was a person with a beak-shaped head and really thin, bubble arms. But there were no hands and no feet, and the arms were longer than the fat, bubble legs.

But the surface was much too smooth to be hand-crafted. It looked as if it’d come from a 3D printer.

“Seriously?” Damien muttered with a disapproving scowl as he glanced up from his phone to see what was in my hand. Arching an eyebrow at Keene, he demanded, “I thought I told you to keep that damn thing in your room.”

Keene smirked proudly and lifted a finger to protest. “No. You told me to get it out of the *living* room. But I like it here. It makes for a good conversation piece.”

As Alec groaned, “Oh jeez,” and gripped his forehead, I returned my attention to the object in my hand.

“What is it, anyway? A...back scratcher?”

“It’s a model of a clitoris,” Keene announced proudly as he took it from my hand. “This here is the glans,” he explained as he pointed to the part that I had thought was an odd-shaped head. “The only visible part, it’s the little nub above the opening of your vagina?”

I blinked at him once before uttering, “I’m...aware of the area, yes.”

“Yeah, so...the rest of it is hidden internally in the woman. It wraps around the vagina and wasn’t discovered until the 1990s but no one knew the full shape of it until the 2000s.”

Truly boggled by how he knew all this information, I just kept blinking at him. “I...did *not* know that.”

Keene nodded, excited about sharing his knowledge. “It’s the only body part in humans that exists *solely* for pleasure. And it’s got upwards of 9,000 nerve endings.” Pausing to send me an arched-eyebrow glance, he felt the need to add, “The penis only has about two to three thousand.”

“Well...score,” I answered, nodding in appreciation.

“And did you know,” he went on, “that your clitoris gets engorged and swells with blood when you’re aroused, similar to what a penis does?”

“Well, I suspected *something* was going on down there,” I had to admit.

“And masturbation is actually *healthy* for you,” he announced.

I *would’ve* started to accuse him of mansplaining at this point, but he was honestly too eager with childlike enthusiasm to be in any way condescending or patronizing with his explanation. So I simply answered, “You don’t say.”

“Hell, yeah. For one thing, orgasms can increase pain tolerance. I mean, no way are you thinking about that toothache you have when you’re in the middle of coming, am I right?” He nudged his elbow my way until I nodded to agree.

“True.”

“And they increase immunity by releasing feel-good hormones, plus help us go to sleep easier while decreasing stress and bad moods.”

“Wow.” Lifting my eyebrows, I glanced down at the plastic clit in his hand and nodded in approval. Bending closer to it, I returned my attention to Keene. “Well, I’m sold. Where can I get me one of these suckers?”

Keene shook his finger as if I was being naughty. “No, the question is where can *I* get one.” Then, he jerked his expressive eyebrows up in invitation and sent me a flirty grin. “You wouldn’t want to be a pal and lend me yours for a night, would you?”

My mouth dropped open in surprise as I straightened. “Are you serious?” When I glanced at Damien to make sure he’d just heard this, he was already looking up from his phone with lifted eyebrows.

“Excuse me?” he demanded. “I don’t fucking think so.”

The good news was that he seemed as flummoxed and unimpressed by the question as I was, which meant...whew. At least he hadn’t brought me here, thinking he could just pass me around to all his roommates.

When I turned back to Keene, he’d lifted a hand to block Damien from his peripheral vision. “Hey. I was addressing the lady,” he scolded before he pressed a hand to his chest as if being sincere. Then, to me, he added, “I promise to take the utmost care of it, I swear.”

I shook my head slowly. “I cannot believe you spent all that time researching the clitoris just to segue it into a cheesy pick-up line.”

“Hey!” he cried, offended. “It wasn’t cheesy.”

“It was totally cheesy,” Alec seemed more than eager to inform him.

Keene scowled his way before turning back to me. “And that’s not why I did all the research. The female reproductive system is my specialty.”

I snickered. “Obviously.”

He huffed out an impatient breath. “I *mean*, occupation-wise. I’m a nursing major and want to work my way up to becoming an OB-GYN someday.”

“Oh.”

“My mom died because of an STD, so women’s health is kind of a big

deal to me.”

“Holy shit,” I blurted, suddenly remembering Damien mentioning something like that about one of his friends. He’d been talking about *Keene*. Touching his arm, I melted with sympathy. “I’m so sorry.”

“Eh.” He made a dismissive sound as if trying not to appear too depressed about losing a parent, but I could see in his eyes, it still bothered him. “It was back when I was nine, so I’m okay now.”

“Still,” I said, pulling him in for a hug. “You poor thing.”

Near us, Alec spoke up, “My dad died when I was eight.”

“What the hell, guys?” I cried. “You’ve *both* lost a parent?” I let go of Keene so I could pull Alec into a comforting embrace next. “That’s so sad.”

As soon as I stepped back from Alec, both he and Keene lifted their eyebrows toward Damien in silent challenge.

Realizing I’d just had my arms and boobs all over his roommates, I whirled his way as well, already wincing in apology.

But he merely lifted the phone in his hand. “Pizza’s on its way.”

“Thank God.” I exhaled in relief and skipped to him so I could include him in the hugs. “I’m starving.” Taking it a step further, I lifted up on my toes to kiss his jaw. “You’re such a lifesaver.”

He buried his nose in my hair and grabbed a handful of cloth at the back of my shirt as he returned the hug. So I stayed where I was when it ended, remaining tucked up against him with his arm around my waist.

After taking a drink from my liqueur, I motioned around the kitchen with the can. “So, uh...I love the house. For the longest time, I couldn’t understand why you rented out your aunt’s place and didn’t want to live there yourself since it’s so freaking nice. But—”

Alec abruptly started coughing after taking a sip from his own can, and Keene pounded on his back to help him out.

“You okay?” I asked in concern.

He nodded, eyes watering as he got himself back under control. “Yeah,

sorry. Went down the wrong pipe.”

“Excuse him,” Keene slugged him one more time for good measure. “Rookie freshman. Still has no idea how to drink properly.”

“As if *you’re* one to talk,” Alec shot back with a mean mug. “You’re not any less of a freshman than I am.”

“Wait.” I motioned between them with my Malibu. “You’re both freshmen?” My gaze shifted to Damien with lifted eyebrows. “You’re rooming with *freshmen*?”

He sighed sadly. “I’ve known them since I was eleven, and they begged to move in as soon as they graduated from high school. It would’ve felt like kicking the family pet in the gut to tell them no. But Hudson’s a junior with me, so he helps level things out.”

When someone knocked on the back door, Alec lit up and dove toward it eagerly. “Ooh! Pizza’s here.”

“What? *Already*?” I shook my head in confusion. “Didn’t you *just* order it?”

“Yeah, but we’ve got connections,” Keene answered as Alec braced all his weight against the door, blocking it instead of pulling it open.

“What the...?” I started to ask just as someone tried to come inside, only for Alec’s weight to make the door slap back in their face an inch later.

A little freaked out, I ducked behind Damien, seeking safety. When he reached back to take my hand, I relaxed enough to peer around his arm.

Still leaning against the door, Alec started cracking up, letting me know he was playing a prank and not actually concerned about whoever wanted to enter. His body heaved forward every few seconds as the person on the other side kept trying to get in.

Finally, the intruder laughed aloud before he yelled, “Stop blocking the door, ya immature dumbass, or I’m going to eat your damn pizza.”

“Oh, sorry,” Alec answered, opening the door suddenly in fake over-apology before the blond football god I’d seen on the billboard spilled into

the kitchen with a curse before he nimbly caught himself and straightened again.

“Didn’t see you there, man,” Alec continued to gush in mockery and even grasped Foster’s arm to help him straighten only to pause and point. “Hey... Ain’t you Foster Union? Oh my God, y’all!” he cried to the rest of us as he kept pointing. “It’s Foster Union, the football star.” Turning back to the guy who was holding two boxes of pizza and rolling his eyes, Alec waved his hands dramatically, fanning himself. “This is so cool; I’m completely freaking out right now! You had such a great game this afternoon. I mean, that play at the end where you fake threw and ran in for a touchdown instead was *classic*.”

As Foster merely grinned contagiously and started to blush, Keene joined the bit, hollering, “Sweet baby Jesus, it really *is* Foster Union! Damn, man, with zero interceptions and four touchdown passes, you’re like a god.” Gripping Foster’s arm, he begged, “Can you sign my panties? Please.”

When he actually pulled the waistband of his black jockey shorts up above the belt of his jeans and flashed them at Foster, Haverick’s football god sniffed, wholly unimpressed before he laughed in amusement and said, “Put those away, junior, before you hurt yourself.”

“I know, what a moron, huh?” Alec asked, sidling up alongside Foster and folding his arms over his chest as he shook his head sadly at Keene. “Poor kid thinks he can play with the big boys.”

Foster only sent Alec a sidelong glance that ended in a big smile. “Like you have any room to talk.” Shaking his head at both freshmen in amused exasperation, he asked, “How in the world do you live with these two, Arch?”

“I charge them double the rent,” Damien answered dryly, without missing a beat.

When I laughed at his answer, the pizza guy swerved his attention toward us in surprise, only to do a double-take as I stepped out from behind Damien.

His eyebrows shot up in interest. “Well, hey there,” he said with a questioning kind of smile. “You’re new.” Then his eyes widened, and he pointed at me. “Wait. Are you...? You can’t be...Oaklynn. Are you?”

“Oaklynn?” I shot back, sounding outraged. “My name’s *Stacey*.” Slapping a hand to my hip, I glanced up at Damien in disgust and demanded, “Who the fuck is Oaklynn?”

He opened his mouth at first, his expression blank as if he had no idea how to reply. Then he sent Foster a dark glance. “Thanks a lot, man.”

“I...” Foster looked cornered. His eyes were wide and panicked as he lifted his hands and backpedaled fast. “Fuck! I’m so sorry. I *meant* to say Stacey. Oaklynn’s just...”

“Standing right in front of you,” Damien drolled matter-of-factly.

Foster blinked at him. “What?”

Both Alec and Keene cracked up, no longer able to keep straight faces. When I joined in, leaning against Damien as I cackled, he started to chuckle as well, leaving only Foster to glance at us all, still clearly stumped.

“Isn’t she funny?” Alec demanded.

“I am so confused right now,” Foster admitted.

So I had mercy and set a hand against my chest to tell him, “You were right to begin with; I really am Oaklynn.”

“You were messing with me?” he echoed as if not understanding. Then he turned his attention to Damien. “And you took part in it? Except...you don’t mess with people.”

Damien only shrugged. “I think I might start.” Sliding me an impressed glance, he held up his fist for me to bump. “That was awesome.”

Glowing, I bumped my fist into his. “Thank you.”

Pointing at me, Foster glanced toward Alec and Keene with lifted eyebrows before he smiled wide. “Okay, I like her.”

“Right?” Alec agreed. “I think we should keep her for sure.”

Damien stroked a hand down my back as if to say, *too bad; you can’t*

have her, and the possessive move made my skin shiver with delight.

While, across the room, Keene sounded very uninterested as he muttered, “Yeah, she’s a hoot. Can we have our pizza now?”

Foster tossed the boxes on the table in an equally uninterested way, not even looking to see where they landed, so he could stick out his hand to me in friendly greeting. “I’m Foster, by the way.”

I nodded back as I shook with him, saying, “Glad to hear the billboards across campus don’t lie.”

Which made him groan. “Oh God. I hate those things. If I’d known they were going to plaster ten-foot-tall pictures of my face everywhere, I would’ve refused to sign the photo release.”

“Whatever. You know you like them,” Alec challenged as he and Keene descended on the pizza boxes and flipped both lids open. “Damn, man! How much did you eat?”

“Just a couple of slices.” Foster said and laughed before he smacked Keene in the shoulder just as he took a bite. “Dude. Pay up. I ain’t delivering this shit for free.”

“Mmph...oh yeah.” Keene dug into his pocket and came up with a wad of green. “There. Keep the change, sweet thing.” He patted Foster on the chest, leaving the cash behind as he withdrew his hand. Foster had to scramble to catch all the bills as they started to scatter and fall. Then, he carefully smoothed out each one, stacking them neatly while he counted, only to lift his eyebrows in surprise. “Hey, you actually tipped me this time.” Glancing at Damien, he guessed, “Hudson leave grocery money with them again?”

Damien lifted his brows and cocked his head to affirm it.

“That guy...” Foster sighed as he stuffed the cash away. “He never learns, does he?”

“He never *cares*,” Damien corrected.

“True story.” With a satisfied sigh, Foster stretched his arms out in front of him and then rolled his head on his shoulders. “Well, I gotta bounce. Got

another order in the truck I have to deliver. So, Oaklynn...” He smiled warmly and sent me a polite salute. “Glad I got to meet you.”

Leaning into Damien, I waved back. “You too.”

“Arch...” Foster lifted his brows once at Damien in farewell or maybe it was a congratulatory, *way to go*, kind of thing.

Either way, Damien answered with a bob of his head. “See you. Good game today.”

“Thanks. As for you two...” Foster turned to eye Alec and Keene severely. “Screw you, I’m leaving.” Flipping them off as he started for the door, he grinned gleefully and called over his shoulder. “Thank Hudson for the tip.”

“We hate you too,” Keene called back with a mouthful of pizza.

“Yeah,” Alec sang. “You suuuuck...”

Foster reached up and tapped the horseshoe above the exit as he left.

When the door closed behind him, Damien glanced at me in question. “Hungry?”

I looked up into his curious, whiskey eyes and melted. I’d never liked a guy more *after* meeting his friends, but his had somehow made Damien even more appealing to me.

They’d peeled away some of his mystery and revealed how sweet and personable of a guy he actually was, which was a bit of a shame because the enigma had been a rush. But the man they exposed was downright charming.

I really liked him. And that made everything so much more complicated. But instead of running for the hills, I smiled and answered, “I’m starving.”

OAKLYNN

The four of us ate in relative silence for a few minutes with me sitting on a stool at the end of the counter, Damien leaning against the counter near me, Alec slumped in a chair at the table, and Keene moving periodically from place to place around the kitchen, unable to stay still for very long.

I'd kicked off my flip-flops and was swinging my bare feet lazily as I polished off the piece I'd been working on.

But when I glanced at the box, only to find nothing but crust left, I moaned piteously, then told myself it was just as well; the two pieces I'd gotten had been so loaded with toppings I was actually pretty full. I didn't need to be *stuffed*.

"Oh God, that hit the spot," I announced, holding my stomach as I rocked back on my stool, hoping to make a little more room in there.

Snickering, Keene elbowed Alec, and together they looked at each other, chorusing, "That's what she said."

Good Lord. I sighed and sent Damien a wry glance.

In unison, we scoffed, "Freshmen."

Then we laughed, tickled that we nailed that so perfectly.

I was leaning toward him and setting a hand on his shoulder, enjoying the moment when the back door blew open again.

But instead of Foster—the pizza-delivering football player—reappearing,

some newbie I'd never met before, wearing chef whites, swept inside in a grand flurry, grinning broadly and spreading open his arms as he said, "Break out the good stuff, boys; we're celebrating tonight."

Since Alec was sitting the closest to him, the newcomer leaned down to grab the curly-headed tall boy by the face and smacked a loud, quick kiss straight to his mouth.

"Ugh!" Scrunching his face in disgust as the stranger pulled away, Alec batted his hands over his mouth as if to clean it. "Unwelcome touch! *Unwelcome* touch!"

The other guy merely patted his cheek affectionately and said, "I finally made commis chef."

Then he turned his attention to Keene. But instead of kissing *him*, he showed him his backside and started twerking at him.

Keene playfully smacked him on the side of the butt. "Sweet, man! Who the hell did you have to fuck to get that?"

"That's the thing. Absolutely no one." The commis chef opened his arms as he answered as if he was surprised by that fact too. "I got it all by my damn self because I'm just that awesome." Then he spun toward Damien and pointed at him with two hands, grinning contagiously. "Archie, you big lug, you. Come on, bring it in." He opened his arms again and stepped forward.

Damien met him halfway and accepted the full, open hug. "Congrats, man," he said, nodding out his pride as he pulled away.

His friend looked a little misty-eyed with joy as he patted Damien's cheek.

He was just as attractive as the rest of them with dark, messy hair that seemed as if he'd styled it by merely running his hand through it. But it worked for him. In fact, from the way he moved and wore his clothes, it didn't seem as if he put much effort into anything, and it made him seem more posh than if he'd primped all day. He was just one of those people who excelled without even trying.

He turned his lazy smile my way and tipped his head for half a second before opening his arms. “And, pretty lady I don’t know...” He lifted one eyebrow in invitation, silently asking if I was game.

I laughed and shrugged a *why-not* back at him. “Congratulations,” I offered, slipping off the stool to hug him as well.

“Thanks.” He sent me a rueful, almost boyish glance as he pulled away.

“So, what *is* a commis chef?” I asked.

“A commis chef...” he started smoothly. Slipping his arm around my shoulders as if he’d always done so, he turned us toward the table so he could focus on the pizza as he talked. “...Is just a fancy-schmancy way of saying junior chef.” And as he spoke, he flipped open the lid to one of the boxes. When he found only unfinished pieces of crust left, he turned to the second box.

“So basically I’ve moved up from *peeling* potatoes....” He opened up the second box to find only crust remains in there as well. “To *cooking* the potato.” He picked up the biggest piece of crust and took a big bite.

“Well, that’s cool,” I told him. “How long did it take you to get here?”

“Only, like, four months, when it can take upwards of two years for the average person.” He motioned toward me with his half-eaten piece of crust as he chewed. “And this is at Gusanos, which is pretty much the swankiest high-end place in town. *All* the food snobs rave about it. But at this rate, I’m thinking I can make *chef de parte*, also known as station chef, within the year.”

“Wow.” I lifted my eyebrows and nodded once. “Impressive.”

“Right?” He paused from stuffing the last bit of crust into his mouth so he could dust his fingers off on his hip before sticking it out for me to shake. “I’m Hudson, by the way.”

“I suspected you might be,” I answered as I took his hand. “You actually paid for my groceries tonight. So...thank you.”

“Did I?” His eyebrows lifted with interest, then his gaze warmed. “Well

worth the money, I'd say."

"We picked her up at the grocery store," Alec announced proudly.

Hudson glanced at him sideways before wrinkling his nose and countering, "No, you didn't."

"Hey!" Keene jumped in to back up his best friend. "Yes, we did."

But Hudson lifted one eyebrow and shook his head before pointing between them. "Neither of you two bozos are talented enough to land something *this* classy. Which leaves..." He veered his attention to Damien, who said nothing, just gazed back steadily.

Hudson's eyes widened, and he spun to me. "Oh shit. Are you Oaklynn?"

"Wow," I said, impressed by everyone's powers of deduction before it struck me that there was probably a very good reason why they already knew who I was.

Because *someone* had a big mouth.

I swerved my attention to Damien and arched my eyebrows severely as if scolding him, even though I wasn't really upset about it at all. "You just told *everyone* we hooked up, didn't you?"

I only wanted to see him squirm uncomfortably in reaction, but honestly, I kind of liked the fact that he'd wanted to brag about little ol' me.

And initially, he did freeze in a startled, *caught* kind of way as if trying to quickly come up with some kind of excuse for his actions.

But it was his friends' responses that totally caught me off guard. They froze as well, gaping at me as if I'd just taken my shirt off in front of them. The second piece of crust Hudson had just picked up slipped unnoticed from his hand and landed back in the box, while Keene's mouth fell open.

Alec was the first to recover as he shook his head and glanced at Damien. "You did *what*?"

Feeling all the heat drain from my face, I gaped back at the others before swiveling around toward Damien and wincing. "I just outed myself, didn't I?"

He cringed back apologetically.

Behind me, Keene cried, “Dude, there’s no way. You fucked her? No... Archer wouldn’t...”

Curious to hear what Archer wouldn’t do, I turned back. But Keene blinked at me in confusion before waving his hands and insisting, “Well, he’d at least *tell* us if he had.”

“That’s true,” Alec murmured, nodding as if to convince himself his friend was right. Then he held up a finger. “But more importantly, he doesn’t even do casual hookups. He’s got to date a girl for *months* before...”

But the longer he looked at me while talking, the slower his words came until he just stopped as if he no longer believed his own claim.

Keene smacked his arm encouragingly, though. “Yeah,” he spat. “Archer’s too uptight and straight-laced to screw anyone on a first date.”

When he glanced at Hudson to back him up, however, Damien’s third roommate merely lifted his eyebrows. “I don’t know,” he murmured, sending me an *atta-girl* smile. “With her dimples, he would’ve been absolute putty.”

Starting to feel the very discomfort I’d been hoping to stir inside Damien, I backed toward him uneasily. He caught my waist in a comforting grip and pulled me safely to his side as I tilted my head his way and asked from the side of my mouth, “What’s wrong with my dimples?”

This was the second time one of his friends had brought them up.

“Absolutely nothing,” he murmured before lifting his hand in a staying gesture to the other three. “Will y’all drop it, already?”

Except Alec had heard my question, and with a snort, he motioned to Damien. “Dimples are, like, his kryptonite. Put ‘em on a pretty girl, and they send him straight to his knees. Every time.”

“Oh, really?” I asked, turning my head enough to send Damien a curious glance.

Scoffing, he challenged Alec, “Name one girl I’ve dated who’s had dimples.”

Both Alec and Keene opened their mouths to retort, only to frown and press their lips back together. They glanced at each other in question before Keene swerved back, lifting a finger as if he'd come up with a name, only to drop his hand and scowl some more.

"I mean, we gotta mention Madisyn," Hudson finally said.

"Ooh." My brows lifted. "Who's Madisyn?"

The others only snickered, so I whirled toward Damien.

He huffed out an irritated sound and rolled his eyes. "I was eleven," he explained. "And she was twenty-six and married with two kids. We did not date."

"But, holy hell," Alec was more than eager to gush. "She was his first crush, and he had it so bad for her."

"Really?" I murmured, eager to hear more. "That's kind of sweet."

"Yeah. And you know how he only says about two words a year?" Alec went on. "Well, both words that year were *dimples*."

Keene elbowed him. "Hey, Damien?" he said in imitation as he addressed Alec. "How's it going?"

In answer, Alec sighed and fluttered his lashes dreamily as he glanced up toward the sky before placing both hands over his heart. "Dimples," he sighed.

"Oh Jesus," Damien muttered, not impressed. "I was not that bad."

"Yeah... You were," Hudson affirmed.

With an irritated sniff, Damien shook his head. "I hate you guys."

"I think it's awesome," I told him. "I can just picture eleven-year-old you, all shy and blushing, every time she walked by."

He glanced at me, and a zing of arousal pierced my nipples, making both my breasts tingle.

The guy might've been a timid kid, but he'd grown into a sensual beast, and now his stare alone was making my panties damp.

I sucked in a shaky breath, and his whiskey eyes heated, swirling with

interest as if they could see my hormones responding to him.

“So did you two really hook up or not?” Alec demanded, breaking into our moment. “I mean...when would you have even *done* it? Parker said you had to cut your date short to drive his drunk ass home. So there wouldn’t have even been time unless you two had just gotten it on right there on campus.” Eyes widening, he gaped in dismay at Damien before yelping, “Holy shit. On *campus*?”

As Damien tightened his jaw, warning Alec to shut up with his stare alone, I cleared my throat and found the kitchen cupboards to be incredibly interesting.

“I’m so impressed right now,” Keene admitted, glancing between me and Damien. “Sorry, Hud, but you’re out. Archer, you’re my new hero.”

Alec still couldn’t seem to get over this revelation, however. Mouth dropping into the perfect O shape, he turned his attention to me. “What did you do to our Damien?”

He sounded so accusing that I backed away. “I...I didn’t do anything. He...” Pressing a fist to my mouth, I shut up, not sure what else there was to say without incriminating myself *or* Damien.

“Alright, enough,” Hudson spoke up and snapped his fingers before motioning between Alec and Keene. “You two, with me. Right now. Daddy’s taking you out for ice cream.”

“Ooh!” Alec’s bright blue eyes lit up immediately. “I’ve actually been craving a root beer float like you wouldn’t believe. Can I get a float?”

“Sure thing, sport.” Hudson ruffled his hair affectionately as Alec passed by, already heading toward the back door. Except Alec was probably two or three inches taller, so he really had to extend his arm to reach the messy, brown curls.

Keene, however, glanced back toward me and Damien regretfully as if he didn’t want to leave us. “But—” he started to say until Hudson smacked him in the chest with the back of his hand.

“And throw this shit away, will you?” He motioned toward the pizza boxes still sitting on the table. “You know better than to leave a mess like that lying around my kitchen.”

Keene huffed out a disgusted breath but started to pick up the boxes and crumple them so they’d fit in the trash. “You always spoil Alec more than me.”

Hudson sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine. We can drive all the way across fucking town to get you those nasty nachos you love, too.”

“Really?” Keene instantly brightened. “Sweet.” Waving at me and Damien, he hurried toward the door as well. “See y’all later. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.” Pausing halfway outside, he leaned back in to grin mischievously. “Which pretty much means do all of it. And by the way...” He pointed at me. “I left a present in Arch’s nightstand drawer for ya just so you could.”

As he disappeared into the night as well, Hudson hissed out a long, exhausted sigh and ripped open his chef’s jacket so he could shrug it off, revealing a black T-shirt underneath.

“I swear, they’re a never-ending chore,” he claimed as he tossed the white jacket onto the back of a chair. Then, his gaze drifted to Damien before he lifted one finger in farewell. “Don’t worry, man. I got ’em from here. They won’t bother you two for the rest of the night.”

“Thanks,” Damien said quietly, his voice a subtle rumble that caused my hormones to twinge, despite how mortified I was.

“And Oaklynn,” Hudson added, making me zip my gaze to him just in time to catch him shooting me a wink. “You have no idea how nice it was to meet you,” he assured before he slipped out the door behind the other two, leaving Damien and me alone in the suddenly very quiet, very empty kitchen.

Turning to him, I finally gushed, “I am so sorry. I totally did not mean to out you like that. And I basically called you a dirty, rotten kiss-and-teller, too. That was just—”

“Hey,” he said softly, lifting his hand to slip a soft knuckle down my cheek. “It’s fine. You don’t have anything to apologize for. I usually *do* tell them everything. I just...” He blew out a long breath and glanced away briefly before his whiskey gaze returned, searing into me. “I wanted to keep this one to myself for a while and savor the memory before they went and—I don’t know—*cheapened* it with their...moronic humor.”

I sent him a rueful cringe. “I mean, we *were* kind of tawdry. Anyone could’ve seen us in those trees. God. Someone might have.”

Damien only shrugged. “Well, it didn’t feel cheap or tawdry to me. It felt...special.”

But as soon as he admitted that, his eyes flared guiltily as if he felt he’d just confessed too much.

My stomach tightened into guilty knots. “Was that really your first one-night stand?”

He didn’t answer, but the way he pulled himself up tighter and his eyes darkened in that mysterious, closed-off way of his, I could tell it had been.

And it made me groan. “Oh my God, Damien. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Making a face as if the question puzzled him, he asked, “Say what? *No*? Yeah, right. I wasn’t going to pass up the only chance I was given to be with you.”

I flushed, flattered that he’d wanted me as badly as I’d wanted him. I mean, I didn’t exactly have trouble catching a guy when I was interested in one, but I’d never reached quite so far out of my league for someone like *him* before, either.

“But we... I didn’t mean to make you break your moral code.”

“It’s not a *code*,” he assured. “I didn’t have some line drawn in the sand that I had previously refused to cross. I just...hadn’t done it before.”

I lowered my brows into a fake pout as I stepped closer and reached up to play with the front of his shirt, smoothing the cloth over his chest. “That’s too

bad,” I murmured. “For a second there, I kind of liked sounding potent enough to make you forget your own rules.”

He swayed forward, his heat enveloping me. “You’re definitely potent enough. I promise you that.”

Gripping two fistfuls of his shirt, I looked up into his eyes. “Well, I refuse to lead a good man astray from his securely placed principles.”

“They weren’t that secure.”

“Shh,” I murmured, letting him know I was going somewhere with this. And I sent him a coy smirk. “There’s only one way to fix this, you know.” When he lifted one eyebrow, I stepped closer until our chests nearly touched, our eyes were only inches apart, and our breaths drifted across each other’s lips. “We’re going to have to do it a second time so it can no longer be considered a one-night stand.”

His throat shifted as he swallowed, and his eyes swirled with desire. “You sure you’re willing to go through all that...just for me?”

My return smile was pure seduction. “It’ll be a trial, for sure, but I think I’ll manage to suffer through.” Smoothing my hands down until I found one of his, I hooked our fingers together and stepped back. “Show me to your room.”

Damien released a breath and nodded.

Squeezing my fingers, he led me from the kitchen and through the front room to the staircases. After taking us up, he guided me toward the last doorway on the right.

Pausing there to look back as if making sure I hadn't changed my mind, he hesitated, then furrowed his brow briefly.

"Er... Do you mind if I go in first? Make sure it looks decent enough for company."

"Why, Damien Archer," I gasped, acting scandalized. "Are you the type to leave your old underwear lying in the middle of your bedroom floor?"

"Not usually," he answered with a wince before adding, "but this *would* be the one time I did."

I chuckled. "Alright, fine." Waving him off, I teased, "Go hide all your nudey magazines."

He'd barely opened the door and started to slide into his room, only to pause and glance back at me, finally hearing what I'd just said. He started to shake his head to deny he had any such paraphernalia before he sent me a mischievous smirk and disappeared into the room, closing the door behind him.

Right before it shut, however, I lifted onto my toes and called, "Just don't

spray on any more cologne. You already smell amazing enough exactly as you are. Anything else would be overkill.”

“Got it,” I heard his muffled answer.

Grinning, I dropped back onto my heels, then silently squealed as I danced in place, unable to quite believe this was actually happening.

A moment later, the door opened wide and a slightly breathless Damien leaned against it, gazing out at me.

We spent a few moments simply staring at each other until I asked, “Permission to come aboard?”

His lips spread into a slow smile. “Permission granted.”

“Score!” After pumping a fist in self-congratulations, I turned all proper and fake curtsied him before straightening with a grin. His eyes danced with amusement, so I made sure to trail my fingers up his arm and over his shoulder as I passed by when he stepped aside to let me enter.

He sucked in a breath and turned with me, watching from the doorway as I meandered around his room and inspected every shelf and picture on the wall. He wasn’t a neat freak—there was a messy pile of papers on his desk, unevenly stacked books on the shelf, and a shirt hanging from the doorknob that led into the bathroom—but he kept the place tidy enough to impress me.

I paused when I saw a framed picture of what looked like Thalia’s senior year of high school. Picking it up, I smiled and shook my head fondly. “She’s so freaking beautiful.”

Damien didn’t answer but I could feel his agreement somehow. When I glanced over, he confirmed it by nodding.

I started to set the frame back only to notice that there were two bare spots in the wood where dust hadn’t gathered on the shelf. I covered one when I replaced the picture of Thalia and couldn’t help but wonder what had been in the other picture Damien had obviously just hidden right before I entered the room.

I was proud of myself for not even mentioning it, though.

His posters on the wall were of Will Farrell, a Rorschach Inkblot Test, and a poster that had some Edgar Allan Poe quote about boundaries or something on it.

As I came to a framed poster of Audrey Hepburn in the enormous *My Fair Lady* hat, I paused and pointed. “Hey! I swear, Thalia was looking for this very poster the other day, saying it was missing from her stuff.”

Damien pulled back, clearly startled. But then he shook his head and answered, “Uh...yeah. That used to be hers. But after she...” He shrugged lightly. “Well, I took it after she was gone. To remember her by.”

“Hmm,” I said, moving on. “Maybe that’s why she won’t talk to you now.”

He huffed out an inaudible laugh. “Well, please make sure to let her know I’ll happily bring it back if she’d be willing to talk to me again.”

Snapping my fingers, I pointed at him. “That reminds me. She does have a message for you.”

Straightening from the doorway and completely alert, Damien uttered, “She does?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I forgot until just now. But we were hanging out earlier this evening, and I was trying to coax her into talking to you again, but she was being her dramatic self and saying, ‘Damien doesn’t *hear* me...blah, blah, blah.’” I pressed the back of my hand to my brow to emphasize how much she’d exaggerated. “So I was like, look. I’ll make him listen to *me*. What do you want him to hear?”

Damien smiled in sad amusement. “And what did she say?”

I shrugged. “Not much really. Just that she loves you and she’s sorry for leaving you alone.”

His throat worked through a heavy swallow, and his eyes went tortured. But he nodded, letting me know he’d heard just fine.

“But she shut down completely when I asked why she left in the first place,” I went on, only to bat my lashes playfully at him. “*You* wouldn’t want

to tell me what happened between you two, would you?”

When his eyes clouded with panic, I knew he wasn't going to tell me shit.

So I lifted my hands. “Okay, okay. I get it. I won't force you to spill. They must be her secrets, huh? But just so you know, I'm keeping one from her, too. She became very irritable when I mentioned how attractive I thought you were. You have one overprotective twin sister on your hands, bud. So I decided not to tell her that we hooked up. You okay with that?”

When I glanced toward Damien, he winced as if it hurt to swallow, even as he said, “I'll support whatever you think best there. I'm fine with her knowing, but I definitely don't want to cause any strife between you two if you think telling her will cause problems.”

I sighed, worried that might be too late, and I turned my gaze back to his shelves, only to furrow my brow over the type of reading material he collected. And...uh... I wondered if I should be concerned about the sheer volume of serial killer books he owned. There were stories about Jack the Ripper, Jeffrey Dahmer, the Green River Killer, John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, the Night Stalker, the Mad Butcher, the BTK Killer...

The list just kept going.

Jaylani's voice suddenly whispered through my head: *The dude gives off serial killer vibes.*

A shiver skated over my skin until I reminded myself that *she* had the same macabre fascination, what with all those shows she'd been watching lately. So if anything, this only meant his tastes aligned with my best friend's, and therefore I should be as compatible with him as I was with her.

So ha! Take that, Jay.

When the only thing left to check out in his room was the bed, I did so slowly, building up the anticipation. He had maroon and navy blue sheets and pillows with a plaid cover to match.

And hanging from the bedpost of the headboard was a familiar-looking

slip of cloth that made me furrow my brow and point. “Is that my...?”

When I glanced toward him where he hadn’t moved from the doorway, he didn’t seem ashamed of putting my panties on display at all. In fact, his whiskey eyes glittered with pride.

“First thing I see every morning when I wake up,” he answered in a low voice that made shivers run through me.

God. This was becoming too much again. I was not well-versed in *too much*. I was a fun-time girl. Party, hook up, move on. That had been my motto.

Completely out of my depth with this guy, I picked up one of the pillows from his bed and hugged it to my chest, trying to muffle the impact he was having on me. But his smell rippled up from the fabric, and my body went into a state of hypersensitivity.

“So...” I said, drawing in a deep breath and trying to sound casual, even though every part of me was trembling with arousal.

Damien left the doorway to take a single, cautious step in my direction. “Did I pass inspection?”

I shrugged, still trying to play it cool. “For the time being.” Then, I took a step forward as well, holding my breath the entire time in anticipation.

Shaking his head, he eased closer. “I still can’t believe you’re standing in my room right now.”

Taking my turn, I shifted an inch toward him. “Why not?”

“I don’t know.” His whiskey eyes searched mine as if reading all my secret desires. “I kind of thought I may never see you again.”

I paused and tipped my head curiously. “But you’re my landlord.”

Lifting one shoulder, he narrowed the gap until only about two feet separated us. “I’ve had lots of tenants that I only met once and never saw again. And I didn’t want you to be one of those. I picked up my phone half a dozen times to text, but I didn’t know if it was okay to do that after a casual hookup.”

When he lifted his eyebrows in question, silently asking if it *would've* been okay, I merely sent him a mysterious smile. “What would you have said if you’d texted?”

His lips twitched, finding amusement. “Probably only that I wanted to see you again.”

Catching my breath, I squeezed the pillow against me tighter. “Say it now,” I commanded.

Damien’s eyes turned predatory. Moving in until only the pillow separated us, he whispered, “I want to see you again.”

“Okay,” I whispered back, almost too afraid to breathe lest I ruin this perfect, intense moment.

Reaching out to grip the pillow I was still clutching to my chest, Damien tugged gently, and I gave up control of it without protest, letting him slip it from between our bodies.

My lips parted as soon as it was gone, and he blindly tossed it back onto the bed, not watching where it landed because his eyes were too busy studying mine.

I swallowed hard, shivering as the heat from our two bodies swirled together.

He lifted one hand to catch the side of my throat, cradling it within his strong fingers before his thumb stroked slowly up the front of my windpipe.

My breasts grew heavy and achy while heated pressure filled the apex of my thighs.

From the contemplative look on his face, I wasn’t sure what he was deliberating until he released a breath and lowered his head so he could bypass my lips and press his open mouth directly to my neck. There, he sucked and licked with a merciless seduction that made me sob out a startled sound and arch up onto my toes.

I tipped my head back and gripped his shoulders to give him more access, and he captured my hips so he could lift me. My legs wound around his

waist, and he slid his palms around to my ass, anchoring me closer.

We both groaned as we came together. With me wearing thin cotton shorts and him in thin cotton joggers, I could feel every detail of his erection almost as well as if we were already bare skin against bare skin. And God, I swear he was hard enough to drill right through all that material. The head of his cock had already found my entrance. It pressed up into me intimately, demanding to be let in. I moaned and squirmed, wishing we were naked.

As if hearing my plea, he sat down on the edge of the bed, bringing me with him so that I could ride his lap.

My hips went on the offense, oscillating and grinding against his dick. Damien's grip bit into my ass, encouraging me to go harder.

His mouth ravished its way down the side of my neck until he reached my collarbone. His teeth nipped at the strap of my tank top until his hands streaked up from my bottom to catch the hem of my shirt and peel it up my torso. His fingers coasted over my rib cage, and his warm, rougher palms scorched my sensitive flesh.

Once my top was gone, I reached back to unhook my bra, and Damien was all too eager to assist, slipping the straps off my arms and growling when my breasts spilled free.

Lifting me off his lap so he could bury his face between my breasts, Damien pressed his lips against the bottom portion of my sternum and paused there. The way he hugged me against him and hid his face in the valley of my cleavage made it appear as if he was seeking comfort or solace. And that bit of sweetness in this wholly erotic moment made affection burn through the back of my throat. I hugged his face and kissed the top of his head, and he shuddered within my embrace.

Then, he twisted, whirling us until he was laying me flat on the bed and coming over me to shelter me with his body.

I buried my fingers in his hair, appreciating the new position, only to arch up and cry out when his hot mouth closed around one of my nipples.

Gasping, I pulled at the roots of his hair and bumped up my hips in demand.

He sucked the other one between his teeth, and I bit my lip, trying to tamp down all the sensations roaring through me. My hands let go of his hair to grapple with the back of his shirt, trying to pluck it out of my way, so I could feel as much of him as he had of me.

My struggle caused him to sit upright with a husky chuckle and a devastating smile before he pulled the shirt off completely.

I touched his horseshoe necklace with my thumb, pressing it against his warm flesh. He groaned and bent down to kiss the undersides of my breasts, then lower along my abdomen. I clutched at his back, marveling over all the slick warm muscles under my fingers.

When he reached my navel, his fingers hooked themselves into the waistband of my shorts. His tongue stroked lovingly over my stomach once before he lifted his face to look up at me.

Peering back into his seeking eyes, I gave him permission to proceed by lifting my hips slightly off the mattress. His lashes fluttered in delight and his nostrils flared as he started to peel my shorts down, never once taking his gaze off mine.

A hungry rasp grated from the back of his throat, and then his mouth was on me, between my legs with his insistent tongue diving straight to the core of my pleasure. I grabbed his hair again and dug the heels of my feet into the mattress while his fingers smoothed up the insides of my thighs and eased them further apart.

My legs fell open loosely, and I panted as I stared up at the walls of his room, focusing on the Edgar Allen Poe quote about how shadowy and vague the boundaries between the living and the dead were.

At that moment, I completely understood its meaning. The orgasms Damien could give me somehow felt as if they were draining the very life force from me, leaving me barely conscious and hardly hanging on. It made total sense why some called them the little death.

I wanted that again, wanted that nearly out-of-body experience of dangling on the brink of existence.

When I could feel it stirring to the surface, all my vitality gathering and converging to the center of my body, I tightened in preparation, only to shake my head and push at Damien's shoulders.

"Wait, wait..."

Because I wanted it all. I wanted him buried so deep that all I could feel was him.

He pulled back immediately and looked up, his gaze dazed and wild, his lips wet and shiny. His pupils were dilated, the black in them nearly swallowing all the whiskey. But he'd stopped.

"What's wrong?" he asked, sounding concerned. His large, warm hand slid over my hip in comfort. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, of course," I rasped, out of breath and already tugging at his shoulders. "I just... I need you inside me. I don't want to be empty when..." I thrashed my head, losing the words, so I just begged, "Damien, please..."

He nodded, already in action, kicking off his pants and returning to me. He came over me, his mouth near mine and his hips slotting their way between my thighs.

I whimpered gratefully when I felt the head of his cock at my entrance. He gripped my face in both hands and pressed his brow to mine as he shifted into position. Now, all he had to do was drive forward, and I'd be in heaven.

I nodded. "God...yes."

We both exhaled, our breaths mixing, and closed our eyes, ready for that sweet moment of entry.

Until I remembered. "Wait! Do you have anything?" I clutched his forearm, and he froze after pushing about an inch in.

My eyes flew open to find him gaping right back at me.

"Fuck," he gasped, and his hips retreated, making my pussy balk. I whimpered, and he grimaced in horror. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I can't

believe I completely forgot. I—”

He broke off as soon as he sat upright, and when his gaze met mine, I knew I wasn't going to like what he had to say.

“What?” I demanded, anyway.

“I...didn't replenish my wallet after Tuesday,” he confessed, looking utterly devastated. “And I don't...”

My eyes flared with dread. “You don't *have* anything?”

But that... That couldn't be. This was a house full of four single, college-aged guys. There had to be *something*—

“Oh!” I jerked on Damien's arm, probably yanking it half out of its socket. “Didn't Keene say he left us a present in your nightstand drawer?”

Keene was the one who always made sure his friends were properly protected, right? Because of his mom. And I'd seen him hauling a box upstairs, one perfectly sized to hold—

Damien dove toward the drawer and yanked it open. “Oh, thank God,” he breathed, pulling out an opened box of condoms.

I exhaled roughly. “Whew, that was close. Remind me to give him a juicy, wet kiss the next time I see him.”

Damien glanced up archly in the middle of ripping open a package and extracting a latex ring. “His mouth isn't getting anywhere *near* you,” he stated firmly.

Kind of liking the possessive growl in his voice, I smiled back, taunting, “But these grateful lips need to give *someone* a big, ol' thank you kiss.”

His gaze heated. “I'll tell him how good it was,” he promised before leaning in to claim the kiss for himself.

I hummed in delight and opened my mouth to him. But the moment his tongue thrust between my teeth, his cock also plunged, spiking between swollen, sensitive muscles.

It felt so good for him to finally be right where I needed him that my first spasm rocked through me, setting off another and another until I was full-on

coming. He grunted in surprise, and I couldn't seem to stop igniting, breaking my mouth from his so I could sob openly and clutch him for dear life as all the pleasure and life inside me flooded from my pores.

Damien wrapped me in his arms and held me through it until I finished with a sob and buried my face in his throat, mortified.

“Sorry, sorry...” I panted, unable to stop the shaking in my limbs.

He cupped my head and pressed his mouth to my temple. “What the fuck are you sorry for?” he asked, sounding half-amused and yet half-concerned. “That was hot as hell.”

Pulling my face back to look into his eyes, I blinked in confusion.

He chuckled huskily and pressed his mouth to my jaw. “Feel free to come whenever you want.” Then he leaned in close to my ear to nip at the lobe before whispering, “However many times you need. For however long you must.” Pulling back to send me a dazzling smirk, he bragged, “I’ll just be over here, tallying them up and feeling awesome.”

“God,” I breathed, stroking a hand affectionately over his hair as I gazed back into his seeking eyes. “You are just too good to be true.”

“Yeah?” he asked, his cocky grin only growing broader.

Then he pushed deep inside me, and I realized he hadn't killed me yet. My toes tingled with renewed pleasure and all the hot spots lit up inside me again.

“Yes...”

There was still more life in me to give, yet.

OAKLYNN

“...**S**o we decided not to talk again until she and Scarlett worked things out,” I said, stuffing a Twizzler into my mouth.

It had to be past midnight, but I’d yet to go home. I wasn’t sure why. Maybe I was lonely and craving some kind of connection with someone after the day I’d had, giving up Jay for a while and accidentally pissing off Thalia.

But I liked being around Damien. He was good company. I felt strangely connected to him right now, and I wasn’t quite ready to break the bond by leaving.

My body was still flushed and glowing, completely satiated, after our last round. But it had definitely worn me out. When I’d mentioned how hungry I was, Damien had popped out of bed and gone foraging for food. Now, we were lying on our backs, naked on his mattress, with our legs sticking up and feet propped against the wall above his headboard, drawing shapes onto the sheetrock with our toes as we ate from the pile of junk food sitting between us that Keene and Alec had picked out at the store earlier.

“Damn,” Damien whistled as he unwrapped a mini Kit Kat and took his turn, drawing a shape with his big toe. “I don’t know how I’d handle staying away from my friends for any amount of time just to keep from losing a girl. I mean, life wouldn’t be right without those morons around.”

“Not to mention we’d have to buy our own condoms,” I reminded him

before lifting my Twizzler. “And candy.”

He laughed and glanced over. “True story,” he said, only for his gaze to grow tender as he reached over to trace the outline of my face with his finger. “But still,” he added, almost sadly. “I’ve known them since I was eleven. They’re...family now. It’d feel like losing a part of myself if I had to lose one—or all—of them. I’m sorry you had to give up your Jaylani for any amount of time.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, already missing my bestie. “She and I have known each other since Kindergarten. But...it’s only temporary. Ooh!” I pointed at his bare big toe that was still making a circle on the wall. “Peach. That’s a peach for sure, right?”

“No.” He groaned pitifully. “And don’t say *peach*. That’s just going to make me think of your sexy, peach scent—and your ass—and I’m going to get hard again. Besides, this is supposed to be an apple. App...le.”

As he drew it again for clarification, I rolled my head along the bed to glance over at him. And then, because I was feeling feisty, I whispered, “Peach,” as sexily as possible.

He groaned again, but this time, it was with arousal.

The next thing I knew, he’d snagged an arm around my waist and was tumbling me toward him until I rolled over all the candy stationed between us and ended up on his lap, straddling his waist.

Screaming out a laugh, I pressed a hand against his pecs to regain my balance, only to widen my eyes when I realized what I was sitting on.

“Shit, you weren’t lying,” I breathed, rolling my hips to take in just how hard he’d grown under me. Beginning to grind against his erection, I arched my back and groaned, stretching in preparation for what I hoped was a rough, fulfilling ride. “Now I know that all I have to do is say *peach* to get you right where I want you.”

His hands slid up the tops of my thighs. “True story,” he agreed huskily just as he rubbed both of his thumbs against me, attacking my clit from dual

pressure points.

I gasped and arched my spine so far back that I could feel my hair tumble down my back and spill over his thighs from where he still had his legs lifted with his feet braced against the wall. One of his thumbs slipped inside me.

“Fuck,” I rasped. “Condoms. We need more condoms.” But when I scanned the expanse of rumpled blankets beside us, I discovered a disaster of epic proportions. Sugar, candy wrappers, plus both opened and unopened condom packages littered the mattress everywhere. “Wow, we really made a mess.”

Damien glanced over as well, his thumb still wedged between my slick folds. Then he glanced up at me as I found a package that still had a prize inside it and snagged it up.

“Worth it,” he decided with a slow smile.

2:00 AM

I lined up a row of sour crawlers on Damien’s bare abdomen as if they were stuck in a traffic jam.

Deciding they looked really delicious there like that, I leaned in and snagged one with my teeth before sucking it into my mouth.

“I really love these things, you know,” I said as I chewed and glanced up to find him watching me with a look of complete, engrossed captivation on his face.

“So I see,” he murmured.

Propped on his pillow, he had one arm resting behind his head and the other hand splayed possessively on my hip as he watched me play.

I started to crawl the gummies up his chest toward his neck, parading one piece of candy at a time. “I tried to share some of mine with Thalia at home,

and she said thank you and everything, like she actually wanted some, only to end up not touching a single one. It kind of hurt my feelings. I don't just share these things with anyone, you know."

After grabbing the one at his throat, I paused it at his mouth, offering him a bite.

Damien parted his lips to accept. He chewed, and then his throat worked as he swallowed.

"She has no clue what she missed out on," he told me as he cupped the back of my head and hauled me in for a kiss.

4:30 AM

"You awake?" I asked through the dark.

Damien and I had cleared the bed, turned off the lights, and crawled under the covers. Then, we cuddled and talked some more, mostly about school. But I'd gotten drowsy and fallen asleep for a while.

But now I was awake and reliving our night together through all the aches in my satisfied body.

A hand smoothed over my ass, and a hoarse rasp answered, "Present."

I smiled and cuddled closer, nuzzling my cheek against his chest. "This has been nice."

He grunted and tightened his grip on my bottom before pulling me in snuggler. Then he found the gumption to answer, "Yeah."

I WOKE THE NEXT MORNING TO WARM FINGERS WRAPPED AROUND MY BREAST. When a thumb stroked across my nipple, my pussy sparked with need.

I gasped and bowed back against the firm, heated chest behind me.

Feeling morning wood against my ass, I whimpered and squeezed my eyes shut harder.

“What time is it?” I asked, refusing to lift my head from the comfortable pillow under my cheek.

“After ten,” Damien answered, which caused my eyes to fly open in surprise.

“Holy shit.” I couldn’t believe I’d slept in that long.

The hand on my breast paused. “Do you need to be somewhere?”

Still foggy-headed and not wanting to move, I asked, “What day is it?”

“Sunday.”

Oh, thank God. “No. I’m good.”

And the hand moved again, commencing its massage. I ground back against his hardness, and a second later, I heard the sound of a condom package being torn open. His hot length abandoned my cheeks briefly, before he returned, curling a palm around my hip and angling me so he could start to enter me from behind.

“Fuck,” I choked out, gripping the sheets in front of me and holding on as all that glorious pressure filled me. “Yeah, I’m good right here,” I said.

And I began to undulate my hips, riding his cock as we made love on our sides, spooned together and still half asleep.

11:00 AM

The next time I woke, I let out a heavy yawn, knowing I was going to be up for good this time.

“Okay, I’m going to need to eat soon before I pass out,” Damien announced next to me.

I lolled my head across the pillow, still trying to recover all my senses.

He lay on his back, stretching his arms over his head and forcing me to focus on the bulges in his heavenly biceps. Then he dropped his hands to the sheets that were covering him from the navel down.

Still distracted by his pecs, I licked my lips before answering, “I think I remember seeing some honey buns in the snack pile last night. I bet they’re still in here somewhere.”

He glanced at me in interest and arched his eyebrows. “Seriously? So we wouldn’t even have to leave the room?”

There was something so boyishly adorable about his delight that I stroked a hand over his beard, unable to resist. “Stay right there.”

Then I rolled away and draped half my body off the bed, scavenging through the mess until, “Jackpot!” I called and lifted the box.

Needing a little sustenance myself, I sat cross-legged beside him and worked to open the box before extracting two packages of glaze-frosted cinnamon swirls.

“Here you go,” I said, grinning with pride as I handed him one.

He looked into my eyes gratefully as he slipped the honey bun from my hand. Then he very purposefully tossed it back over the side of the bed and onto the floor again. “Oops,” he murmured, staring straight into my eyes. “It slipped.”

I blinked at him, unable to believe he would do such a thing, but then I realized I must’ve just flashed my bare ass at him when I’d leaned over the bed, and I snorted, rolling my eyes.

“You are such a perv.”

He batted his lashes playfully. “A very hungry perv,” he agreed.

After an entire six-pack of honey buns had been devoured, I announced, “And now I want a shower.”

With my belly full, I was suddenly very aware of all the stale sweat left over from our marathon night together.

Damien glanced over as he licked some glaze off his thumb from his last sweet roll. “I have a shower,” he said. “And water.”

I snorted out an amused laugh but then managed to straighten my face as I lifted one eyebrow. “But do you have soap?”

Wincing as if he needed to think about that, he squinted at me before slowly replying, “Yes, ma’am...I reckon I can scrounge up something for you.”

“Well, then...race you to the bathroom?”

He blinked as if he didn’t understand the question, then he suddenly dove into action, scrambling off the bed.

I half-screamed, half-laughed, and dove after him, tugging at his leg to hold him back. “Wait! That’s cheating.”

11:45 AM

“Isn’t having your own private bathroom so nice?” I asked before moaning and letting my head fall back as Damien massaged my scalp with his shampoo. I didn’t even care that it smelled super masculine; his hands felt too damn good for anything else to matter.

“I didn’t have a bathroom to myself until I moved into your brownstone,” I added. “I was even an only child; you’d think I wouldn’t have to share. Except my parents didn’t have a master bath in their room, so I grew up with my mom’s bras hanging from the towel rods and Dad’s beard hair clogging the sink. But this...this is awesome.”

“It’s been a while since I shared with anyone,” Damien admitted behind me as he carefully began to rinse my dark strands with water. “I had to share with Thalia for a while, though, so yeah...I totally get you with the bra thing. There were just...so many of them. After a while, I swore they were reproducing on their own.”

“Right?” I asked, turning to face him. “I’m even a girl with boobs, and I’ve never left bras hanging around everywhere like that.”

“Mmm,” he hummed in interest as he glanced down at my breasts before lifting his hands to cup them. “I have a feeling I wouldn’t mind seeing your bras. Though, they’d probably leave me perpetually turned on.”

I smiled and smoothed my hands up his wet chest. The urge to kiss him overwhelmed me, so I pulled his face down and tugged his lips to mine.

12:00 PM.

“I like these dual sinks,” I said, wrapped in a towel and standing next to Damien as we faced his vanity while he wiped fog off the mirror.

“Thanks. I had the entire bathroom redone after my parents moved out, but I’ve never actually used both sinks at once until now.” He winked at me in the reflection when we made eye contact in the glass. “Thanks for giving that one over there purpose.”

I glowed from the affectionate gesture and started to brush out my hair with the comb he’d let me borrow. “You’re welcome. That’s what I’m here for.”

With a husky chuckle, he snuck over to my side and wrapped his arms around my waist so he could kiss and nuzzle the back of my neck. “Reason number one why I should keep you, huh?” he teased.

Except the word *keep* made me go stiff with surprise.

I'd been having so much fun with him, living in the moment and enjoying every second for what it was, that I hadn't thought about the future or any kind of permanence or even what this meant for us now. But the fresh reminder was a wake-up call.

What *were* we doing? I'd learned loud and clear last night from his friends that he didn't do casual flings, and I'd slept with him anyway, probably giving him the message that I was open to something more.

But...was I?

I actually didn't know.

I suddenly felt panicked and overwhelmed.

I'd used his shower, and water, and soap, and now his comb was in my hair. That was boyfriend/girlfriend shit right there. Had I just unknowingly entered into a monogamous relationship with a guy for the first time in my life and not even realized it?

Sensing my distress, Damien glanced at me and froze. Horror grew in his expression. "I didn't mean..." he started immediately. "I was—it was just a joke. That's all."

I nodded. "O...okay," I answered jerkily. But now reality was back, and *I* wanted to know what we were. Fuck. I didn't even know what I *wanted* us to be.

Because I'd had a great time, too. I didn't want this to end. And my instincts were screaming for me to grab hold of such an amazing guy and just keep him. But *this* had not been on my agenda at all.

I had goals.

Plans.

Boyfriends were an obstacle I didn't want to deal with for the next two years.

But, oh my God, Damien made the idea sound *really* appealing. I was pretty much convinced he'd be *worth* strings and complications and obstacles.

Which was why I needed to think about this.

“I... I’m going to go put some clothes on,” I announced abruptly, pointing back into the bedroom and hoping I didn’t sound too scared, like I wanted to escape. Except I needed a moment right now.

He nodded immediately. “Yeah. Of course.” But the worry swimming in his eyes told me that he thought he’d messed up. He even opened his mouth, and I knew—I *just knew*—he wanted to ask if I was okay. But then he pressed his lips together, forced a tense smile, and settled for nodding.

I wanted to assure him that nothing was wrong—he hadn’t messed up. If anything, he’d been too amazing—but I was still freaked out by the barrage of emotions attacking me, telling me how much I liked him.

“I’m just going to trim my beard,” he added as he opened a drawer and pulled out an electric razor to give me a moment alone. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Okay.” I nodded and made sure to run my hands across his bare back as I passed by to reassure him. He sucked in a breath and glanced over his shoulder at me with whiskey eyes full of hope and fear.

In the bedroom, I shut the door behind me, then rushed to pull on my clothes as the buzz of his razor echoed through the closed door.

Once dressed, I crossed my arms over my chest and then began to chew on my thumbnail, with no idea what to do now.

I was so sure I’d be able to think straight as soon as I had my clothes on, but the entire room smelled like him, and I was more confused now than ever.

The man had invaded all my senses.

Hugging myself, I glanced around, hoping to spy something to ground me and help me think logically. But the first thing I spotted was the pair of panties I’d given him hanging from his bedpost.

He’d put them there on purpose so he could see them every morning when he woke. To think of me, first thing.

Damn, this was too heavy. I'd only wanted one night of no-strings sex to help clear my head. But now, everything was cloudier than ever.

And why did the thought of losing him freak me out more than keeping him?

When my gaze landed on his shelf full of serial killer books, I decided this uncertainty was completely Jaylani's fault.

She'd been absolutely convinced something was wrong with him, and now that my senses were screaming *yes*—don't let that boy get away—that little seed she'd planted was growing, preventing me from just accepting it for the amazing start of a relationship that it probably was.

I dropped my hands to my sides and drew in a breath to calm myself. But then my gaze landed on the picture of Thalia, or more aptly the empty space next to it. There was no denying he'd specifically taken some small frame off his shelf to hide it from me before letting me into his room. But why? Who had been in that picture?

And just what was he keeping from me?

This was something I needed to figure out before deciding to give an actual relationship with him a chance.

The best recourse here was to simply *ask*. But then, I didn't want to act suspicious and accuse him of... Well, I don't even know what there was to accuse him of.

So asking wouldn't work.

Which was why I turned into a stupid spy.

With a quick glance at the door to the bathroom, I hurried to his desk and shuffled through a few papers to see if he'd simply tucked the picture under the pile. Then I opened all the desk drawers.

After that, I dropped to my knees and glanced under the bed. But the only thing under there was a pair of dusty, abandoned, lime-green running shoes and a folded display board—probably from some old science fair project.

Shoving my way back to my feet, I checked his bookshelves, dragging

my fingers over his serial killer books next, thinking maybe he'd tucked the picture frame in there somewhere, under the guise of another hardback.

But nothing.

Turning my attention to the large wooden chest at the end of his bed, I bit my lip, more tempted than I knew I should be. The razor was still going full bore in the bathroom.

Dammit. I was such a bad house guest.

Dashing to the trunk, I knelt before it and pressed my fists to my mouth to keep from reaching for the lid.

It was probably locked, but after a whimper of defeat, I reached out anyway.

The chest opened without a lick of protest.

Holding my breath, I peered inside and got a big whiff of cedar wood.

Three-quarters full, it contained papers and books, like maybe old school projects.

And on top of the mess sat a manila folder, lying diagonally as if it'd been carelessly dropped inside with big red letters on the front that said *evidence*. The tab read *case file* followed by a string of numbers.

Unable to hold back, I reached forward to open it with one finger, hoping to get the tiniest peek inside.

But the photograph that lay paper clipped to the top sheet had me gasping and jerking away so hard that I lost my grip on the trunk lid and it snapped closed with a loud thump.

Yelping out a panicked screech, I landed on my ass in the middle of the carpet and pressed a hand to my rapidly thumping heart as I used the other to brace myself against the floor. But damn...what the hell kind of person would have a picture like *that* in their bedroom?

And that's when I finally noticed Damien standing in the open doorway to the bathroom, watching me.

DAMIEN

Oh fuck.
Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

A wave of dizziness assailed me as my brain scrambled for a million excuses to give Oaklynn that would wipe the petrified look of terror off her face. Because I was pretty sure this was it; she was going to leave me for good, and my body was already going into shock over the loss.

Wondering how much she'd seen and how much I needed to explain, I took a step forward, already prepared to plead and beg. But she whimpered and scrambled backward away from me, crab-crawling in retreat until she ran into the wall.

I pulled up short and swallowed thickly.

She was scared.

Of me.

That was the worst possible scenario, and it made my chest hurt.

The image of her cowering on the floor away from me as if she honestly believed I might hurt her was going to be imprinted on the inside of my brain for the rest of my life. And every time I had a nightmare, it'd be one of the top five scenes to reappear.

Willing to do anything to wipe that fear off her face, I hoarsely rasped, "Oaklynn?"

She shook her head, breathing hard, and it seemed to take all the bravery she had to look up at me. “I—I’m sorry. I snooped. I know I shouldn’t have —”

“No,” I broke in softly. “It’s okay. It’s alright. Don’t even worry about that.” I lifted my hands in the surrender position, hoping to calm her, but she flinched as if I was going to strike.

A sob got caught in my throat, and I sucked in a painful breath, hating this more than I could remember hating anything in the last decade.

Still all the way across the room from her and frozen in the bathroom doorway, I wilted down onto my knees so I could get on her level. “Are you okay?” I asked, my voice shaking.

Oaklynn blurted out an incredulous laugh and shook her head jerkily. “Are you kidding me right now?” she demanded and started to point toward the chest. “I... That... Just what the fuck *was* that?”

“What did it look like?” I diverted elusively.

“I mean, I didn’t stare long enough to get the full picture, but it looked like a snapshot of a dead body—a bloody, naked, mutilated female body—inside some kind of cop or detective case file.”

Okay, then. So she hadn’t seen everything.

And though I strongly knew I should *tell* her everything, I just as strongly knew I wasn’t going to. It would ruin the perfect night we’d had together. And besides, she’d had enough of a surprise with the picture alone. I couldn’t completely terrify her right now with all of it. She’d never talk to me again.

But this...this, I could rectify.

I hoped.

“Well, that’s what it was,” I admitted.

Oaklynn’s eyes flared again in disbelief. She pressed a hand to her chest and shook her head. “But *w-why* do you have it?”

“Because...” I started and then took a quick breath before saying, “I’m a forensic psychology major.”

Except my major wasn't why I had the file.

When Oaklynn sent me a blank look, I nodded my head slowly, hoping to help her connect the dots. I started to crawl toward her, and thankfully, she didn't shy away this time, so I came in until I was about five feet away before stopping again. "And as a forensic psychology student, I study criminal behavior and case files in the hopes of catching..."

"Murderers," she said slowly before she exhaled and let her shoulders sag. "Wow." After another moment, she pressed a hand to her chest. "So that was just a...a *fake* police file to help you play mock detective, or whatever? For a class?"

I winced. "Not...exactly. It wasn't fake. That was a real picture of—"

"Ack! No." Lifting a hand to stop me, she grimaced and pulled her face back to shake her head. "God. That's awful! Why in the world would they let you see something so...?"

"Well..." I started slowly. "If it's the kind of thing I'll be dealing with after I graduate, I guess I better start preparing to see that kind of stuff now."

"Dear God," Oaklynn breathed, setting a hand against her chest. "That is just..." She made a face, letting me know she didn't understand my choices in career goals at all. But then she let out a breath. "I don't even want to pretend to know why you would put yourself in that kind of position where you'd be forced to see that kind of stuff daily. Though it does explain all the psychology classes you're taking."

I tipped my head curiously. "How do you know I'm taking a lot of psychology classes?"

She waved a hand. "Doesn't matter." Looking a lot less scared now, she began to wring her hands. "What I should explain most is why I was snooping in there in the first place."

"You don't have to explain—" I started.

But she lifted a hand, stalling me. "Yes, I do. I was going through your personal shit, Damien."

I shrugged, more concerned about her *not* leaving than caring about her curiosity.

But she admitted, “I was looking for the missing picture.”

I furrowed my brow, utterly confused. “What picture?”

She pointed across the room to the shelf where there was an obvious blank space next to Thalia’s senior picture, and I immediately cringed.

Damn.

Busted.

“There’s a blank space on your shelf,” Oaklynn told me. “And there’s no dust in a small section there, where it looks as if a picture frame was recently sitting. Which means, you must’ve taken it down right before I came in. You didn’t want me to see whatever was in that picture.”

I swerved my attention back to her and stared in half-frozen horror and half-frozen awe. But she’d figured that out *way* too easily.

“So...” She went on without waiting for me to scramble up some kind of bullshit answer. “I couldn’t help but wonder, *what is he hiding?* Because everything with you was going way too well. I mean, last night was... perfect.”

Heat filled my face because it’d been perfect for me too. So perfect, in fact, that the idea of losing her scared the fuck out of me.

“Which, by the laws of nature, means there has to be some kind of dark, awful, twisted secret you’re keeping from me,” she concluded.

I huffed out a laugh, half-full of amusement, half-full of guilt. “I don’t know if it’s that twisted,” I couldn’t help but admit. “Although it’s definitely not bright and happy.”

When Oaklynn merely lifted her eyebrows, awaiting more of an explanation than that, I pressed a hand to my forehead and glanced at her regretfully. “It’s...”

God. I should just tell her.

So I did.

“Someone close to me was murdered.”

Oaklynn blinked and then furrowed her brow in confusion. “Okay,” she said slowly because that probably only left her with more questions and no answers.

I nodded, letting her know I would keep talking. “Yeah. And I...I’m the one who found the body.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed, blinking at me once before shaking her head. “Are you serious?”

I shifted my head up and down silently as memories assailed me. The blood, the panic, the total devastation. The fear of not knowing what to do.

The loss.

“Damn, Damien,” Oaklynn murmured sympathetically. All fear gone, she crawled toward me to pull me into her arms for a hug. “That’s awful. When?”

Resting my head on her shoulder for a moment, I ignored the question, and soaked in this closeness before I lifted my face and added, “The murderer was never arrested, and that...” Letting out a harsh sound of regret, I shuddered. “That has bothered me for years.”

She nodded, totally understanding. “Of course. It would bother me too. And now I get why you’re majoring in Forensic Psychology,” she realized. “You want to catch the killer.”

I gave a jerky nod. “I mean, yeah... I would *love* to catch the son of a bitch. And it *was* the driving force behind my decision in majors. But I know the likelihood of solving a cold case like that is basically zero. I just... I don’t know. I’d like to do for another grieving family what couldn’t be done for mine, you know. I want to give them answers and closure and justice. And I want to get as many of those monsters off the street as possible so they can’t destroy another life again.”

“Oh, Damien,” she breathed. She stroked a hand over my hair, and I shuddered. “You have such a good heart.”

“I’m really sorry for scaring you,” I promised, watching her face carefully

to make sure she was no longer afraid. “That is the last thing I would ever want to do. Okay? I would put myself in harm’s way before letting you get hurt.”

Her expression fell, and guilt clouded her features. “I’m sorry that I thought you could possibly be—”

“No, don’t be sorry,” I urged gently and took both her hands to run my thumbs over her knuckles. “I *want* you to question shit like that. Listen to your instincts. Always. Call me out on anything you think feels off. Because I *have* kept things from you, and it’s good that you could sense that.”

A burst of fear filled me as I pictured something happening to her the way it had Thalia. My grip on her fingers tightened and I spoke even stronger, “There are some truly awful, evil things out there. Stay sharp and alert. It’s what’ll keep you safe and alive.” Lifting a hand to cup her hair, I pressed my brow to hers and closed my eyes. “But you have nothing to apologize for with me, I swear.”

“Okay.” Oaklynn pulled away slowly, and when I reopened my eyes, she was studying my face thoughtfully. “So the picture you took from your shelf last night...”

I winced, already bracing for her to ask. The worst problem was I wasn’t sure how I would answer if she asked to see it now.

“Yeah?” I asked slowly, my voice hoarse with reservation.

“It was of the person who died? The murdered person you found.”

I exhaled, beyond relieved. Then, I gave a jerky nod, guilty because I knew I was still being less than honest with her for not just showing her the damn picture.

But she didn’t ask, and I couldn’t offer. I wasn’t ready to lose this closeness between us just yet. I *liked* her. A lot.

Besides, Thalia hadn’t told her either. I had a feeling my sister was enjoying the facade, getting to play like she was alive again, making a friend, having someone to talk to... It’d feel like I was taking that away from her if I

told Oaklynn the truth too soon. I mean, why the hell would she continue to live there after learning her roommate had been murdered nearly ten years ago?

“Alright, then,” she said, and sent me a reassuring smile, letting me know she wouldn’t prod further.

Relieved that I had more time, I surged forward and pressed my mouth to hers. She laughed against my lips until I hooked a hand around the back of her neck and sealed us together more firmly.

And her laugh turned into a moan as she gripped my hair. We rose to our knees, desperate to get closer. But it wasn’t enough. I stood up, gathering her into my arms, and I carried her to the bed.

“I REALLY SHOULD GET HOME,” OAKLYNN SAID.

Draped completely naked and utterly limp over my chest as she recovered from our last round together, she sighed contentedly and lifted her head to look up at me. “I have homework I need to get done before tomorrow.”

My arm on her hip tightened, and I pulled her snuggler against me, even as I nodded and said, “Okay. I guess I do too.” Though, I’d gladly put it off for another hour or two—or ten—to get more time with her.

Smiling over my contradicting reactions, she leaned in to kiss my chin. “I had fun, though. Thank you for last night...and half of today.”

“Thank *you*,” I returned, sitting up when she did. “I enjoyed it too.” With a shrug, I added, “All except for that moment when you thought I was a sadistic murderer who kept pictures of my bloody, mutilated victims in the chest at the end of my bed.”

“Oh my God! I did *not* think you were a murderer,” she screeched in defense, whacking me with a pillow before she found her bra and started to slip it on.

I tilted my head and lifted an eyebrow, sending her a disbelieving glance.

She positioned the bra into place and then gave in as she met my glance. Shoulders slumping, she confessed. “Okay, fine. For, like, half a second, I contemplated the idea that *maybe* you might be dangerous.”

When I flat-out laughed over her admission, she threw up her hands helplessly and cried, “I’m sorry!”

I lifted a hand and shook it in forgiveness. “No, no,” I assured. “It’s okay.” I’d rather she be paranoid than in true danger. As she pulled up her panties, I reached out to gently touch her hip. When she looked up in surprise, I peered back beseechingly. “Promise me you’ll always stay safe like that.”

“I will,” she murmured, gazing back and lifting her hand to cup my face. “But damn... This death really affected you, didn’t it?”

I swallowed thickly. “Quite a bit, yeah. But I got help to deal with it. I’m okay now.”

“Good.” With a soft smile, she leaned over to press a compassionate kiss on my forehead. “I seriously can’t believe Jaylani tried to convince me you were full of red flags. You’re nothing but a big marshmallow.”

I sat up straight, kind of hurt by that revelation.

As she turned to find her shorts and shirt in the mess of clothes, candy, and condom wrappers on the floor, I said, “She thought I was full of red flags? Why?”

“Oh, you know...” Oaklynn gave an offhand shrug with her back to me as she bent to pick up her shorts. She waited until she was shimmying them on before glancing over. “From the whole way we met with you bursting into the apartment and claiming you were my landlord and everything. She thought I should’ve gotten some identification to prove you were really who you said you were before just believing you.”

As she talked, she found her tank top and slipped it on as well, so I decided to put my shorts on too.

“And then, because of whatever is going on between you and Thalia and how she refuses to even talk to you, Jay thought up some crazy idea that you weren’t really her brother at all but some stalker ex who was trying to use me to get to her. Which is ridiculous because why wouldn’t Thalia just tell me that? She...”

Her words slowed to a stop as she turned back to me because I was slipping my driver’s license and student ID from my wallet.

“Damien Archer,” I said, showing her my picture and name. “Age twenty, turning twenty-one in January. Address: here. Junior at Haverick University, majoring in Forensic Psychology, and—”

“Oh Lord,” Oaklynn groaned, placing her hands over mine and gently lowering the cards. “Put those things away, will you? I know you are who you say you are.”

“But your friend made some damn fine points,” I argued as I slipped my ID back into my wallet before pausing to catch sight of an unopened condom package on the floor. Rushing to bend down and put that into my wallet too, I then tossed it onto my bed and turned back to Oaklynn. “I *do* sound shady when you put it that way. Which makes me wonder why the sam hell you came home with three guys last night that you ran into at a grocery store without any protest—*two* of whom you’d never met before and one you’d had exactly four encounters with.”

“Are you serious?” she said with a degrading scoff. Stepping forward to lift her chin and defend herself, she said, “I agreed to come home with you last night because Alec and Keene were complete goofballs who wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

With a wince, I tilted my head. “True. But you couldn’t have known that for sure.”

Lifting her eyebrows archly, she argued, “Oh, I knew. And as for you...” Easing even closer, she lifted her hand to run the tip of her fingernail in a slow circle around one of my nipples. “Well, you told me to trust my

instincts, didn't you?"

When she lifted her brown, brown eyes, I swallowed thickly. "Yes, ma'am, I did."

Her smile was slow, and it pitted her dimples deeply. "Then, what was I supposed to do when my instincts were screaming for me to fuck you senseless because I knew you were gonna give me a night I'd never forget?"

With a groan, I stepped closer and cupped her hair in my hand. "All I know is that I'm glad you listened."

Her chuckle was pure sex. "You're damn right you are." Tilting her chin up, she nipped at my lips playfully with hers. "But go ahead and play overprotective alpha. Your concern's pretty sexy."

Growling, I snagged an arm around her waist and pulled her flush against me. "Must keep woman safe," I said in a lame caveman impersonation.

She threw her head back and laughed, and I took that opportunity to sweep in and kiss the length of her throat.

The laugh quickly turned into a moan, and her arms swept around my neck as she lifted her face for another kiss.

Heat suffused me, but this wasn't just about physical arousal. I *cared* about Oaklynn. I liked being around her. I wanted to protect her. I even enjoyed talking with her. Yes...*me*, the quiet one who usually avoided conversation at all costs. She made me want to spill everything inside me.

And that was dangerous when I was still keeping such a big secret.

Before I could coax her back toward the bed, Oaklynn broke away with a regretful groan. "I really have to go."

Knowing better than to press my luck, I nodded and took her hand. "I'll walk you out."

"And maybe help me find my shoes, too?" she added with a laugh.

I glanced down at her bare feet and groaned. "God, even your toes know how to turn me on."

When she purposely wiggled them at me, I sent her a fake, narrow-eyed

glare. “Tease.”

Oaklynn laughed again and bumped her shoulder into mine before walking us toward the door. “Let’s go see if the rest of the world is still standing.”

I sighed and followed her. “If we must.”

In the hall, we heard voices from the kitchen. I would’ve rather avoided them, but Oaklynn said, “I’m pretty sure I left my sandals in there.”

I was too, so I couldn’t protest. I followed her down the steps and through the living room, only to nearly bump into her at the entrance to the kitchen when she plowed to an immediate halt.

“Whoa there.”

When I peered over her shoulder, I found everyone present and loitering. And I’m not just talking about my three roommates, everyone. *All* my friends were here.

After taking a moment to regain her composure, Oaklynn waved at the six other guys and finally stepped into the kitchen. “Morning,” she greeted. “Or probably afternoon by this point, huh?”

“It’s 2:30,” Parker told her from the stool where he was sitting with a laptop perched on his knees.

I sent him a scowl because that hint of a smirk on his face was annoying as hell.

“Oh,” Oaklynn said slowly at first. “Oh wow. I really should be getting along then. Uh...has anyone seen my sandals?”

“They’re right here,” Alec piped up helpfully, rushing to the stool where Parker was planted and pulling them out from underneath so he could deliver them to her.

“Thank you, Alec,” she gushed gratefully, flashing her dimples as she retrieved them from his hands. “Are we still a go for video making?” she asked as she slipped them on.

“Definitely.” He brightened, grinning big. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Great. You’re the best.” Turning her attention to Hudson who was the only one relaxing in a chair at the table, his feet propped up on another chair, she squeezed his shoulder.

“And Hudson,” she said. “Nice to meet you. Congratulations on that promotion.”

He briefly covered her hand with his own. “Thanks, darlin’.”

“Foster.” She slapped at his arm with the back of her hand, acknowledging him where he stood leaning against a counter.

When he smiled and nodded back, murmuring, “Ma’am,” she leaned past him to grin at the next guy over.

“Keene.”

Keene blew her a kiss, and her gaze swiveled across the kitchen to Parker sitting on the stool.

“Parker?” she asked slowly to make sure she remembered his name correctly.

After he saluted her with two fingers, she heaved out a breath in relief and finally focused on Thane who was leaning against the counter next to Parker.

“Which means you’re the only one I haven’t met yet.” Stepping forward, she held out her hand. “Hi! I’m Oaklynn.”

“Thane,” he greeted with a warm, friendly smile as he stepped away from the cabinets to take her hand. “And yeah, I hold a lot of onlys in this crew. Only one who’s graduated already. Only one under six feet tall. Only one to have a steady girlfriend all the way through high school. And the only one from our original grief group who didn’t lose someone close to him.”

The last identifier seemed to catch Oaklynn off guard. “O—oh,” she fumbled out as she glanced back at me curiously. I could tell from that one look that she was full of questions, but thankfully she held back and returned her attention to Thane. “It sounds as if you’re one of a kind, then.”

“Oh, that I am,” he assured.

He continued to smile at her pleasantly but when his gaze shifted to me, it

cooled dramatically.

Oaklynn took a step back as if uncomfortable by his iciness toward *me*. “Well, it’s nice to meet you.” She waved as she retreated until she bumped into me.

I caught her waist, steadying her, and she looked up at me over her shoulder with big brown eyes that said *help*.

Murmuring, “I’ll walk you to your car,” I steered her toward the back door, and she nodded, hurrying to comply even as she waved and called out a general *bye* to everyone.

In return, they waved back and said goodbye together.

As soon as we were outside, and I’d shut the door behind us, she sent me a look. “Was it just me, or was that—”

“Weird,” I answered bluntly. “Yes, ma’am, it was.” Smoothing a hand down her arm, I assured her, “But don’t worry. It was about me, not you.”

She snorted and turned to face me once we reached her car. “What? Are you in trouble for bringing a girl home?”

I laughed softly. “No. But I’m sure they have questions.”

Rolling her eyes playfully, she lowered her gaze to my bare chest and then lifted a hand to smooth her palm over one pec. “Snoops.”

“Definitely,” I returned, picking up a lock of her hair and playing with it.

Her gaze lifted to mine. “Want to come back to my place with me and hide from them for a while?”

“Yes.” I stepped close to leave with her right then.

She snickered and nudged me away. “Chicken.”

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in again. “Damn straight.”

We kissed slowly and lazily, in no hurry to separate, but then Oaklynn nudged me back once more with a knuckle to my gut. “Alright, Archer. Enough stalling. Get back in there and face the music already. I gotta go.”

“Okay,” I said softly and took a step back to give her room to get into her

car. "Drive safe."

She rolled her eyes, then beamed her dimples my way as she climbed behind the wheel. "Bye."

DAMIEN

I stayed there, watching Oaklynn reverse from my driveway and leave, and I didn't start back for the house until she'd disappeared around the corner.

Feeling a strange sense of loss in the center of my chest, I rubbed at my sternum and sighed, before turning away and trudging reluctantly toward the door.

I didn't even get it closed behind me before Thane snarled, "What the fuck are you thinking?"

Not ready for him to start in quite that soon, I jarred to a halt and looked up.

"You had sex with her?" Thane accused hotly, storming toward me as he gripped his head. "Jesus, man. This is wrong. This is so incredibly wrong."

I swallowed thickly, rocking a wave of guilt like none other and yet also unable to feel sorry about what I'd done. "It's not *that* wrong..."

He made it sound as if I'd been unfaithful or forced her against her will or something.

Thane lifted a single condemning eyebrow, and I suddenly felt shittier than if I *had* done the worst thing imaginable.

"It's fucking wrong," he snapped.

"Hey," I said quietly and lifted a hand to calm him down. "It's fine. It's

okay. I can assure you she's legitimate and not some lying con artist."

"Well, then that only makes this *worse!*" Throwing up his hands, he exploded, "Because now *you're* the liar. *You're* the bad guy, Damien. I mean, Jesus. Do you not even feel any remorse at all for lying to her?"

"Of course I do!" I snarled, scowling. "But how the hell am I supposed to tell her something like this? She honestly has no idea that she—" I cut myself off and wiped a shaky hand over my mouth. "It will change...everything."

And I wasn't ready for that.

"Well, *not* telling her trumps—"

"What?" I challenged, cutting him off. "Flipping her entire world on its axis? Because that's what I'll do. Everything she thinks she knows... It'll all suddenly be wrong."

"That doesn't excuse you for keeping the truth from her," Thane argued. "And every time you stick your dick in her, your villainy grows... exponentially."

"I told her *some*," I hedged, even though I knew he was right. I'd fucked up royally. "Hell, I told her *most* of it. Just not..."

"What? The single most important detail?" Thane demanded with raised eyebrows. "That her roommate's not even alive."

"I *will* tell her," I said quietly, even though a sick queasiness worked through my stomach just thinking about how that conversation would go. "I'll tell her."

With a disbelieving snort, Thane lifted his eyebrows and pointed. "You better. And don't have sex with her again until you do."

"But that doesn't have anything to do with—"

"She trusts you with her body," Thane broke in hotly. "And you are breaking that trust by *lying*. By purposefully not telling her something you should've mentioned the very first time you met her."

My gut burned with shame, and I lowered my face. "Okay."

"No more sex," Thane repeated.

“Alright,” I snapped defensively.

He lifted his eyebrows severely. “You got me?”

“I got you,” I muttered before glancing around at the others, who were all uncharacteristically quiet and avoiding eye contact while I was being lectured.

“And thank you very much, you fucking cowards,” Thane snapped, pointing at all of them next. “I’m so glad you called *me* over to be the bad guy and slap some damn sense into him.”

“Well, you’re the *only* one of us who speaks hard truths so well,” Parker taunted with a challenging sneer.

“Oh, shut up,” Thane muttered, only to turn back to me and open his arms. “Alright, bring it in now so you know I still love you.”

I blew out a reluctant breath but then hugged him hard, admitting, “I’m sorry. I know I fucked up.”

And I knew I’d disappointed him. Nothing felt worse than disappointing Thane. I could handle disappointing my own parents ten times over before disappointing him. He was the center of my moral compass. I’d always followed his advice.

“It’s not me you need to apologize to. But I mean, I know *why* you did it.” He pulled away and then rolled his eyes before admitting, “Those dimples even got to me, man. I’m telling you...” He blew out a sharp whistle. “She is one fine specimen.”

I nodded reluctantly, only to confess, “Every time she looks at me, I just...”

“Trust me, I get it,” he assured as he set a hand on my shoulder. “I’ve been there before, remember. Falling for that special someone eclipses everything else.”

I glanced at him in surprise.

But *falling*?

I hadn’t even considered that idea. Except now that he’d said it out loud, I

knew it was true.

Which only made my situation hurt more.

I blew out a long, shaky breath.

Having *the talk* with Oaklynn was going to leave me ruined.

“Do you want one of *us* to tell her instead?” Thane asked. We all knew that “one of us” meant *him*. And it would’ve been so easy to let him take this on.

But... “No,” I muttered, glancing at him gratefully. “I need to be the one to do it.”

He nodded in agreement and patted my arm before letting go of me. “And the sooner the better,” he encouraged. “Okay?”

I glanced at the others, and finally, they began to send me commiserating glances, one by one.

“You got this, man,” Hudson rasped, lifting his foot from a chair to tap the side of my leg encouragingly with his shoe.

“Yeah,” Alec agreed. “Oaklynn’s the sympathetic type.”

“She’ll understand why you couldn’t tell her sooner,” Keene finished for him.

“And hey, maybe she’ll *thank* you for being the one to enlighten her to her abilities,” Foster guessed with a shrug.

“Or maybe she’ll hate his guts,” Parker replied more realistically.

To which Thane smacked him on the back of the head. “Really?”

“*What?*”

As the others harassed Parker for his honesty, I turned away to start from the kitchen, only for Thane to call, “Hey. Where’re you going?”

I glanced back as the others paused to watch me in concern.

Lifting a shoulder, I admitted, “I just... I don’t know. I gotta go think about what I’m going to say.”

“Well, this is what you say,” Keene started, only for Parker to snicker in derision.

“He doesn’t want to hear your lame-ass suggestion that probably only involves trying to get into her pants, ya idiot.”

Keene whirled to scowl back. “How did you know it involved sex?”

I shook my head, amused by their byplay yet equally depressed by what I had to do.

This time, no one noticed as I slipped from the kitchen and headed toward my room. But as soon as I opened the door and stepped inside, Oaklynn’s scent—our scent—wafted over me, and my chest squeezed painfully.

How the fuck was I going to tell her?

Suddenly, all I could picture were her large, frightened, dark eyes as she peered up at me and said, *There’s a blank space on your shelf.*

With a wince of regret, I went to my bed and sat on the edge before leaning down and digging my hand between the two mattresses. When I pulled out the photo, it was still intact and in pristine condition.

Two faces grinned back at me. One was mine from back when I was ten. The other that was tipped lovingly against mine made my stomach clench. I ran a finger over her cheek and chin, memorizing the lines so I’d never forget them.

“I miss you,” I admitted in a choked voice.

Then I tucked us back between the two mattresses, out of sight, before I hunted up my phone.

But once I found it and opened Oaklynn’s contact, I didn’t admit to any big confessions. I merely texted,

I want to see you again.

Within seconds, three dots popped up, and I sucked in a breath, anticipating her response before, damn, there it was.

Okay.

Yes!

I bit my lip and demanded,

When?

Her answer was coy and teasing and left me antsy with yearning, yet it still made me smile affectionately and shake my head.

I'll let you know.

SO AS I WAITED FOR OAKLYNN TO CONTACT ME AND LET ME KNOW WHEN WE could reconnect, the days passed in a blur of classes and homework. The only excitement came when I had to call a plumber for one of my rentals after a kid flushed a handful of Legos down the toilet.

I still had no idea how to tell her about Thalia—probably because I refused to think about all that—but I definitely didn't seem to be under any kind of pressing timeline either because, by Saturday, I'd convinced myself that two nights had been her limit, and she didn't want anything else to do with me.

I truly doubted I'd ever see her again.

Then, Alec made everything worse by asking if I had a problem with him meeting up with her so he could film her mock newscast. And that stung. She'd contacted him and agreed to meet with *him*, but *I* still hadn't heard shit.

When it came time for them to have their session, I decided to distract myself with a paper I needed to write. I was so deep into the project I almost didn't hear the timid tapping that came at my door until it turned into a full knock.

My laptop was perched on my bent knees, half a dozen opened books littered the mattress around me, and an uncapped highlighter was stuck between my teeth as I transcribed a book title into my bibliography.

“Yeah?” I said without glancing up. I slipped the highlighter free to mark the line I wanted to quote.

I was expecting one of my roommate’s voices to answer, so when a feminine one asked, “Too busy for company?” my head zipped up so fast I was surprised I didn’t give myself whiplash.

“Hey,” I said in shock as I blinked Oaklynn into focus, where she remained poised at the entrance. “What’re you doing here?”

She motioned to the mustard yellow suit jacket and matching pencil skirt she was wearing over a cream-colored blouse before she lifted a flash drive in her hand. “I just finished my mock news report with Alec. He said he had a backdrop and all his equipment here, plus I knew where he lived so...it seemed like the best place to meet.”

“Ah.” When she kicked the black high heels she’d been wearing off into my room and then followed them inside, stepping toward my bed, my gaze dropped to her legs and then back up again. “How’d it go?”

“Great,” she answered with a smile as she found a cleared spot on the mattress near my feet to sit. Lifting the flash drive, she added, “I talked about the missing girl flyers posted around campus and why the administration hadn’t done anything to address them.”

My eyebrows rose. “You actually asked them?”

“Of course. They said campus police investigated it and discovered that Hailey Junges—the girl—actually emailed all her professors saying she wouldn’t be back, so I guess she just dropped out and left without telling her roommate.”

“Really?” I exhaled in relief. “Thank God.” I’d been worried about her, to be honest. I’d started to think she’d met the same fate as Thalia.

“Yep,” Oaklynn went on cheerfully. “Then Alec edited the segment and everything right in front of me, and man...he wasn’t lying about his skills. That boy is talented.”

I nodded, murmuring, “Yeah, he is,” as she curled her feet around to tuck

them under her and placed her hands in her lap.

“So...” she said when I didn’t contribute anything else to the conversation. “This looks fun.” She glanced at the thick textbooks surrounding me.

“Thrilling,” I agreed dryly before rubbing my forehead. “I’m writing a paper for one of my psych classes.”

Her gaze lifted back to my face. “What’s the paper about?”

I scratched my jaw when she scooted close to rest a hand on my bent knee. “We were supposed to address a psychological theory and then expound on it until we basically came up with a new one. And I chose the broken window theory.”

Oaklynn picked up a book and moved it out of her way so she could inch closer. “I haven’t heard of that before. What’s the broken window theory?”

“Well...” I blew out a breath. “It’s the idea that buildings with broken windows encourage more crime and civil disorder in that neighborhood, like loitering, vandalism, and breaking and entering. And I was building on that by exploring the idea that this might also be the case with humans, not just... buildings.”

“So, like... if someone has a black eye, it’s easier for the next person to come along and disrespect them?” Oaklynn guessed with a slight squint.

“Exactly,” I said, pointing my highlighter at her. “I was just reading about this performance artist named Abramovic from the 1970s, who did an experiment where she agreed to stand still, doing nothing amid a crowd of people for six hours straight. And in that time, they could do whatever they wanted. She had a table of over seventy objects set up, calling them objects of pleasure and destruction.”

Oaklynn grimaced, already guessing where the story was headed. “Do I even want to know what they did to her?”

I shrugged. “At first, it was fine. They would just reposition her arms, wrap her in string, and pour water on her. But then someone touched her—

you know—inappropriately. And from that point on, it was like *game on*. Someone cut her neck and drank her blood. They tore some clothes off her, put her on a table, and stabbed a knife into the wood between her legs. Someone wrote *END* on her forehead. And a loaded gun was put in her hand and held against the cut on her neck.”

“Lord.” Lifting her hands to stop me, Oaklynn shook her head. “I don’t think I want to hear anymore. Did they kill her?”

“No,” I reassured. “But someone had to intervene and settle them down. It’s still freaky to me, though, how putting normal, everyday people in a certain kind of environment can totally change them into...”

“Monsters,” Oaklynn murmured, finishing the sentiment for me with a shudder. Rubbing her arms as if chilled, she shook her head. “I cannot comprehend why you want to examine the darker side of the human psyche for a freaking living. I’d have nightmares for life.”

“Honestly,” I murmured with a shrug. “I think I did it because I wanted the nightmares to stop.”

Lips parting in surprise, Oaklynn shoved more books out of her way and scooted right up to my side. “And did they?” she asked as she reached out to run her knuckles gently along my beard.

“Mostly,” I told her, closing my eyes briefly and turning my face in toward her hand. “Learning to understand what you fear most and giving it a name is the biggest factor in diminishing its power.” Then, I winced. “I mean, I still get them every now and again. But I know how to handle ’em better now.”

“It was pretty bad, wasn’t it?” she guessed with a cringe. “What you saw.”

I nodded. “It was the worst thing I’d ever lived through.”

And yet I was growing worried that having her hate me might rank right up there with it.

Running my gaze over her longingly, I admitted, “I didn’t think I was

going to see you again.”

She sent me a confused frown. “I told you, you would. I just needed a minute.”

I knew I didn’t deserve even that from her. I had to tell her about Thalia, and let *her* decide where that left us. But I’d missed her so fucking much these last few days. And I was greedy. I just wanted a little more time with her before all hell broke loose.

“Well... It’s been a minute,” I said, tugging her into my lap.

She drew in a sharp breath and met my gaze. “Yes, it has.”

As she leaned toward me, I sat up from the headboard where I’d been relaxing to meet her lips. But before we could kiss, a knock sounded on my door.

DAMIEN

“Hey,” Hudson called from the doorway, still wearing his chef’s whites. With an amused grin plastered across his face as if he enjoyed cockblocking me, he lifted his brows in greeting.

I sent him a hard scowl, silently ordering him to scram, but all he did was lean his shoulder on the doorframe to get comfortable.

“Think you two can push pause for a bit?” he asked with a wicked grin. “I brought some leftovers home from the restaurant, and they need to be eaten now while they’re still fresh.”

“Ooh!” Oaklynn straightened with interest. “Did you just say food? *Free* food?”

Winking at her, he murmured, “You know it.”

“Count me in,” she started, only to pause and whirl back, finally remembering what we’d been doing.

Appearing torn, she bit her lip, so I sent her a soft smile. “Raincheck?” I murmured.

Relief flooded her gaze. Bobbing her head, she crawled off the bed to hold a hand down to me. “Just as long as it’s not for two years.”

“Deal.” I chuckled and took her fingers.

When we turned to head out of the room together, Hudson was still leaning against the door frame, watching us with a strange expression. We

had to pull up short to keep from running into him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, thinking he looked worried, which wasn’t an emotion that Hudson often entertained.

But all he did was shake his head as his gaze slid sympathetically to me. “Nothing,” he murmured as he backed away to let us out. Then, he grinned wide as he transferred his gaze to Oaklynn. “Go ahead and get started. I’m just going to change out of these real quick. I’ll meet y’all down there.”

“Okay. But no promises that there’ll be anything left by the time you make it,” she teased with a grin.

“Dimples,” he swore as he clutched his heart in both hands and continued backing his way across the hall toward his own bedroom. “For you, I would gladly starve.”

She only laughed as he shut the door between us and then returned her attention to me. “He is such a flirt.”

“Trust me, I’m aware.” I slid a hand around her waist and tugged her up against me to remind her that it was me she wanted as we started down the steps and toward the opening of the kitchen.

And thank goodness, she didn’t call me out for my possessiveness. She simply rested her head on my shoulder and cuddled closer as we entered the kitchen, only to find it already occupied.

“Mmph... Oh my God...” Alec called with his mouth already full. After waving us closer, he motioned toward the table in front of him where he and Keene were gathered around a buffet of sorts, stuffing their faces. “You need to try this. It’s actually pretty good for fancy shit.”

“What *is* it?” I asked, wrinkling my nose when I couldn’t immediately identify anything.

“Let’s see...” Keene answered as he pointed to each item. “I think Ivey said this was smoked salmon with red onions. And this over here is avocado toast, while that there is some kind of pasta... Shit, I don’t know. It’s just good, so sit down already.”

“Works for me,” Oaklynn announced, hurrying forward. But as soon as she sat next to Keene and started to fill a plate, she groaned, “Oh man, I bet this would taste awesome with wine.”

“Yo, Arch...” Keene motioned toward the cupboard where we kept the liquor. “Get some wine, will you?”

Since Oaklynn had requested it first, I complied. Except I had no idea what kind of wine people drank with salmon.

Thankfully, I only had to stand there blankly, staring at our selection for like five seconds before Hudson blew into the kitchen, changed into jeans and a T-shirt.

“Grab the Chardonnay,” he suggested, coming over to help without me even having to ask.

“We have Chardonnay?”

“Damn straight. I always keep some around. Here...” He slung an arm over my shoulder and reached past me with his free hand, snagging the desired bottle from the top shelf.

As he was pulling it down, however, he leaned close and whispered, “Dude, you are so fucked.”

I glanced over in confusion, and he sent me another sympathetic glance. “You two are already invested. At this point, it doesn't matter *when* you tell her; she’s going to fucking leave your ass when she learns the truth.”

I swallowed thickly, and agony plopped heavily into my stomach.

“I say put off the whole reveal for as long as you can,” he suggested quietly before turning away with the bottle and lifting it in celebration. “Who wants a drink?” he called cheerfully as if he hadn’t just ruined my life.

As he paused to collect some wine glasses from another cupboard, the three already seated at the table cheered. And Hudson went about serving them while I found a spot next to Oaklynn to quietly slip down beside her.

When she glanced at me with a smile, I tugged her chair against mine until our thighs pressed against each other, and I wrapped an arm around her

waist, deciding to cherish what doomed time we had left together.

Around us, the other three were chatting as if life was great.

“Hey, try the chocolate on your toast,” Hudson suggested. “It’ll blow your mind how well chocolate pairs with avocado.”

While Alec grimaced and covered his avocado toast with his hand to protect it, Keene spoke up with a full mouth. “You know what else pairs well with chocolate?” Wagging his brows, he answered himself. “Sex.”

Alec glanced at Oaklynn. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I honestly thought he was going to say strawberries.”

She laughed and leaned back against me. “I did too.” As I tethered her closer and kissed her hair, she rested the side of her head affectionately against mine.

“And now I want sex,” Keene whined. “That’s it.” He tossed down his fork, finished with his salmon. “Let’s go out and hunt us up some women. Archer...” He glanced my way, then frowned at how I was wrapped securely around Oaklynn. “Never mind. Younger, Ivey...” Nodding at both of them with an encouraging grin, he coaxed, “Come on... You know you want to go with me. We can wingman each other.”

“Can’t, sorry,” Hudson said, dusting toast crumbs off his hand and picking up a napkin to wipe his mouth.

“What do you mean, you *can’t*?” Keene demanded irritably as Hudson picked up a glass of wine to take a sip. “You’re always game for a night of lady hunting.”

“Yeah, well...” Hudson shrugged apologetically as he swallowed and set his cup down. “I think I’m kind of dating someone now.”

“You’re *what*?” Oaklynn laughed as she lifted a hand. “You *think* you’re dating someone?” When she lowered her hand again, she rested it on my forearm which was wrapped around her waist as if my skin was where her fingers belonged. “How can you not know for certain?”

I had to agree with Hudson, though. I kind of thought I was dating

someone, too, but I wasn't sure how *she* viewed the situation. Hoping I could get an answer to that question before the night was over, I tucked my face in toward the back of her neck and burrowed my nose through her silken, dark hair until I found her nape. There, I kissed her flesh lovingly.

As she tipped her head back against me, letting me know she enjoyed the attention, Keene asked, "And who the fuck are you maybe dating?" at the same time Alec wondered, "Since when?"

"Since Monday." Hudson didn't seem invested in the conversation at all as he drizzled chocolate over a piece of avocado toast. "And her name's Genesis. I met her at work."

"Ooh, cool name," Oaklynn said as she reached out to accept the slice when Hudson passed it to her. "I like it."

Hudson sent her a half-grateful smile, half-wince while Alec wondered aloud, "So why don't you bring her around some time and introduce us?"

With a shrug, Hudson went about fixing himself toast with drizzle. "Because I don't want to."

"Wow," I spoke up, offended. "Sorry, we're such an embarrassment to you."

"Trust me," Hudson said, glancing my way as he licked dripped chocolate off his finger. "It's not you."

Alec leaned toward me and Oaklynn, whispering, "It's totally Dugger."

"Hey." Keene backhanded him in the gut. "Suck it, fucker. I'm awesome."

Meanwhile, Oaklynn moaned in pleasure as she took a bite of her toast. "Oh my God. This is so good. Damien, have you tried this with chocolate yet?"

She held it up and slightly over her shoulder to offer me some, so I leaned in to take a bite.

"It's not any of you," Hudson assured us as I chewed and nodded my head in approval. "It's one hundred percent her. She's...simply put...a

bitch.”

Oaklynn sputtered out a laugh, gripping my arm as she did. “Oh my God,” she said. “Wow. Why are you dating her, then?”

Keene snorted, choosing a piece of avocado toast for himself before drawing on it with chocolate. “Isn’t it obvious?” He flashed the letters S-E-X that he’d written with the chocolate. “Great sex.”

“Uh...” Hudson made a face in disagreement. “No. There’s actually been no sex yet.”

“Dude,” Keene shrieked in outrage. “Then, why the fuck are you dating her?”

“Because I basically *have* to.” Hudson hitched up his shoulder with one of his casual, no-nonsense shrugs. “Her dad owns the restaurant.”

“I’m lost,” I admitted, shaking my head.

Oaklynn pointed back at me in agreement. “Yeah, me too. Shouldn’t sneaking around with the boss’s daughter be a reason *not* to date her? Because you could get *fired*?”

“You would think,” Hudson admitted with a heavy sigh. “But as soon as she noticed me in the kitchen and started flirting with me, I was warned by, like, *everyone* to never tell her no or do anything to upset her. I guess she wanted some other guy from the kitchen a couple of months before I started there, but he had a wife and turned her down.” Lifting his brows severely, Hudson finished with, “He was fired the next day. Which means I’m going to do whatever the fuck she wants in order to *keep* my damn job.”

“Then... You’re just going to keep dating her until...when?” Keene demanded, shaking his head in confusion. “Until you two are married with five kids and a house in the suburbs?”

Hudson merely gifted him with one of his classic shrugs. “I don’t mind kids. And what’s wrong with the suburbs?”

“This is terrible,” Alec exclaimed, beginning to look genuinely freaked out. “You can’t just let her do that to you, man. She’s going to take complete

control over you, and we'll never see you again."

"Oh my God," Hudson sputtered in amusement. "Will y'all relax? This is not that big of a deal. She's a spoiled little rich girl who gets everything she wants and grows bored with her toys about as soon as she gets them. And that's all I am to her. A shiny new toy. So why not simply let her play for the five-minute attention span she'll give me, and then let her move on of her own accord? She gets what she wants, I keep my job—which is what *I* want—and we both go away happy. No harm done."

"Uh, I wouldn't be too sure about that, bud," Oaklynn said, her voice filled with complete disagreement. "I mean, you're prime real estate. I don't see this girl moving on any time soon. You're way too laid back and accommodating."

He tilted his head in confusion. "You say that as if it's a bad thing."

"It's not," she assured. "For *Genesis*. If she's really the spoiled, rich girl you're describing, then she's going to just *love* how you'll do whatever she says. Because girls like that... They don't really want boyfriends. They want Ken dolls they can position and dress up however they please. And you're the perfect type to just sit back and *let* her."

When she leaned against me after talking as if seeking comfort, I hugged her close and kissed the side of her face.

But Hudson merely sighed as if not that concerned. "I guess I better start naming those five kids, then."

"I wouldn't bother," Alec said, drizzling chocolate along his finger. "I'm sure she already has."

As he licked it off, Keene snickered and nudged Hudson's arm. "You are so fucked. This is awesome."

"It's *sad* is what it is," Oaklynn muttered. "I mean, how can you just be in this relationship because *she* wants it? What about what *you* want?"

"I'm *getting* what I want," Hudson assured. "I want to keep working at Villa de Gusanos."

“Wait, wait.” Oaklynn lifted her hands, sounding as if she was trying to keep in a laugh. “I’m sorry, but did you just say *Villa de Gusanos*? Seriously?”

“Yeah. Why?” Hudson shook his head, confused.

Oaklynn snickered. “You know that means worm village in Spanish, right?”

Alec snorted out a laugh. “Is that a specialty there, Ivey? *Worms*?”

Keene cackled along with him, and the two leaned against each other, giggling uncontrollably.

Hudson merely shook his head and said, “Gusano is the owner’s last name, you assholes. And I think he’s Italian.”

“Ah,” Oaklynn murmured with a knowing nod. “So the *de* is D-I, not D-E?”

“No. It’s D-E,” Hudson corrected.

Which only made Oaklynn frown and tip her head. “But articles in Italian are D-I, not D-E.”

“Yeah, well...” Hudson huffed out a long-suffering sigh. “The owner’s an ignorant asshole who probably just thought it sounded cool. I don’t know. I don’t really care. I just know they make a damn fine eggplant rollatini, and working there is going to put me on the map.”

“Eggplant. Bleh...” Alec made a face of horror.

“It’s the most respected, accredited, prominent restaurant in town,” Hudson kept talking over him. “So *that’s* where I need to be right now. If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere.”

“But only if you give the owner’s daughter a special taste of your *own* worm.” Keene snickered, making both him and Alec start laughing all over again before they high-fived each other.

Only for Keene to nudge Alec silent and squint questioningly at Hudson. “Wait, wait, wait. So your new girlfriend’s name is Genesis *Gusano*?”

“G-g-golly...” Alec jumped in. “That’s a lot of G’s.”

“Please tell me her middle name is Grace.”

“Or Gianna.”

I shook my head and sighed at them, while Oaklynn cried, “I can’t believe you two. How can you joke at a time like this? One of your best friends is basically being *blackmailed* into dating someone.”

But hearing that spoken aloud only made the two morons crack up more. “Blackmailed by the g-g-glamorous worm queen.”

Oaklynn sniffed irritably. “Ain’t you even remotely worried about him? I mean, what if he meets the woman of his dreams and falls in love with her but can’t do anything about it because he’s stuck with Cruella de *Genesis*?”

“Oh, honey,” Hudson drawled, flashing her a flirty smile. “That’s definitely not gonna happen. You’re already taken.”

“*¡Madre mía!*” she muttered under her breath, before growling, “None of you even care, do you? Damien!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, kissing her hair in reassurance. “Don’t worry; I got this. Whenever Ivey’s ready to pull his head out of his ass and escape this girl, I’ll help him.”

“Thank you,” she said, gripping my arms more snugly around her and then tipping her head to the side for a kiss on the cheek, which I readily gave her. “You’re the best.”

All the while, Keene was snorting. “Yeah, because Archer’s a freaking *expert* on scaring women away.” Glancing at Alec in question, he asked, “What are some of the reasons they leave him again?”

“Oh, oh...” Lifting a hand, Alec raised his voice an octave as if to imitate a woman’s as he said, “He’s just so closed off and doesn’t know how to open up to me.”

“He wouldn’t even share a single drawer with me or let me leave a toothbrush at his place,” Keene joined in, quickly followed by Hudson.

“If only he *talked* more.”

“I mean, I really wanted to make it work with him,” Alec carried on,

setting a hand on his hip and thrusting his chin up and chest forward. “But I just never knew what he was *feeling*.”

“He’s *such* an asshole,” Keene added.

Swallowing, I started to sweat, hoping none of these dipshits were feeding Oaklynn any reason to look at me differently.

But all she did was scoff. “I don’t know why *any* of you think you’re bright enough to make fun of Damien. He’s the only man in this room right now who’s actually using his brain.”

“Oh, honey, that’s not his brain he’s thinking with,” Keene assured her. “He just wants to get back into your panties tonight.”

“Well, guess what?” she sassed back as she surged to her feet to scowl down at him. “It worked.”

Then she turned her back to him so she could face me directly. “Come on, baby. Let’s go to your room.” And she held a hand down to me. “I’ve had enough of these clowns for one evening.”

Beyond relieved that she still chose me even after all the crap the guys had just revealed to her, I immediately took her fingers and stood, more than ready to follow her anywhere.

Until Hudson folded his arms over his chest and snorted. “And you accused *me* of being stuck under some chick’s complete control.”

Sending him a stern glance, I said, “Enough.”

Immediately, the other three guys in the room cleaned up their act, clearing their throats and straightening in their chairs.

Oaklynn sent me an admiring glance over her shoulder as she led me out of the kitchen. “Just so you know, it impresses the hell out of me how you can make them behave with a single word. I want that kind of superpower.”

“You have a better kind of superpower,” I assured her as I came up close to wrap a hand around her waist and kiss the side of her throat.

Grinning mischievously, she turned to face me while walking backward. “Mmm. I do like the sound of that.”

To test her abilities, she reached for the front of my jeans. And just like that, her magic fingers made my dick go achingly hard.

Growling, I picked her up. She hummed appreciatively and wound her legs around my waist.

A second later, her mouth was on mine, our tongues were tangling, and I was jogging up the steps blindly to get her to my bed as fast as possible.

OAKLYNN

Once we hit my room, I set Oaklynn on her feet and shut the door behind me with my foot as she started on the top button of my shirt.

My hand settled on her hip, palming a lush curve, and I studied her eyes that were focused on my chest.

“Hey,” I murmured seriously. “I’m sorry if they upset you.”

Oaklynn glanced up in surprise. “They didn’t. Truth be told, I was more worried *for* them. From the way you tensed against me when they started in on you, I was mildly afraid you would hurt *them*. They should honestly be thanking me right now for sacrificing myself and being so willing to distract you from your murderous thoughts. Because, mmm...” Licking her lips as she refocused on my chest that she was exposing one button at a time, she purred deep in her throat. “Distracting you is definitely going to be quite a sacrifice for me.”

Then she grinned and leaned forward to kiss my chest directly over my heart.

Sucking in a breath, I wound my fingers through her hair and watched her lavish my pecs with her lips and tongue.

“There really weren’t as many girls as they made it seem,” I blurted before I could stop myself. “I mean, honestly, only one said all that to me. One semi-serious girlfriend. That’s all. And maybe what she said was true,

but—”

“Whoa,” Oaklynn halted me, looking up in bewilderment and catching my hands. “Just stop right there, partner. You don’t actually think I took anything they said *seriously*, do you?”

When she looked at me like that, it was hard to think that she ever would, but my heart had nearly stalled in my chest when the guys had been going on. I could suddenly picture Oaklynn saying those very words to me someday. And I didn’t like the image. Not at all.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, not really wanting to admit how much it had bothered me.

But she could already tell.

“Hey. Newsflash, Archer,” she whispered, cupping my face between both of her soft hands. “I was already vividly aware of how quiet and reserved you can be, and I’m still here, alright?”

I swallowed and nodded, comforted by her words. Pressing my brow to hers, I closed my eyes and rasped, “Okay. Good.”

“And that other girl was wrong about you hiding your feelings, anyway,” Oaklynn went on, brushing her thumb over a tiny scar on my cheekbone, just under my eye. “You might not scream them from the rooftop, but you don’t hide them. If someone’s paying attention, they can see exactly what you’re feeling.” Then she smiled into my eyes. “Fortunately for me, I love to watch you.”

Then she leaned in and gently kissed the other small scar I had on my face, this one on the other side and lower, toward my mouth, just above the start of my beard line. The move was so sweet and gentle, I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “I don’t want this to be casual between us.”

“Do what?” Oaklynn reared back, her eyes wide as they met mine.

She opened her mouth to say something, but I caught her hands. “Just hear me out.”

Oaklynn blinked once and then quietly said, “O...kay.”

“I totally respect that you want to focus on classes and not get caught up in any dating drama. I feel the same way. So I wouldn’t take up much of your time. I just...well, you need to take breaks every now and again, right, otherwise you’ll overload, and your schoolwork will suffer from *that*. I’m just asking that you come to *me* during those breaks and not go to someone else.”

“So...” Her brow crinkled as she considered my proposal. “You basically just want to continue doing exactly what we are now but with the reassurance that it’s exclusive.”

My lips parted when I realized she was right. But what the hell; I could handle that scenario. “Yes, ma’am,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “And that’s really *all* you want?”

“Well...” I shrugged sheepishly. “If you decided tomorrow that you’d prefer to be in a serious relationship, then okay, I’d be all in.”

“God, Damien...” When her gaze filled with pity, my stomach plummeted.

She was going to reject me, I could see it in her eyes. I tightened my fingers around hers and added, “I could be a low-maintenance boyfriend. The lowest. You could forget about me for a week—or two...fuck...*three*—and I’d still be right here, where you left me, whenever you needed some company again.”

“Jeez, no,” she groaned. “That sounds awful. You’d be completely settling. And you should never settle when you want more, Damien. Don’t just accept crumbs from *anyone*.”

“But I really like your crumbs,” I coaxed playfully, smoothing my hand up her arm. “I’d rather feast on your scraps than turn to anyone else for a full-course meal.”

Oaklynn frowned immediately. “Excuse me? You won’t be turning to *anyone* else for anything, thank you very much.”

I grinned, liking her possessive side.

“Then you better lock this down and not let me get away,” I encouraged, smiling cunningly as I drew her closer. “I mean, I’m a pretty hot commodity. An awkward, closed-off, noncommutative ass who makes a lady’s best friend think I’m full of red flags. What more could a girl ask for?”

She rolled her eyes over my dry joke and caught the front two halves of my shirt in her fists as she stepped closer and lifted her face as if angling for a kiss. “You’re making this too easy for me.”

“No,” I countered. “I’m compromising.”

“Or...” she said as I started to slip the mustard-colored blazer off her shoulders. “You’re settling.”

I grinned. “Or... I’m making the entrance to my web look as enticing as possible.” Lowering my mouth to within an inch of hers, I taunted, “Otherwise, how will I ever trap you right where I want you?”

Murmuring a sound of assent without saying an actual word, she closed her eyes and pressed her mouth to mine.

I kissed her back, pouring everything I had into it, using whatever means was in my arsenal to keep her around and hopefully get her to fall to the same level that I already had.

“I’m in this,” I swore to her when our lips broke apart for air. “I’m so fucking gone for you, Oaklynn Vargas; I want you any way I can get you.” My mouth pressed against her jaw. “And if this is your way...” I placed kisses along her throat. “Then I don’t want to know any other.” At her ear, I whispered, “Just say yes,” before my teeth nipped at the lobe.

“Oh God,” she groaned, throwing her head back and gripping my shoulders.

I cupped her face in my hands and looked into her eyes. “I’m going to need a *yes* or *no* on this one, sorry.”

She swallowed audibly and then bobbed her head once before blowing out a shaky breath. “Yes,” she agreed. “Of course, we can keep whatever this is between us exclusive. But damn, Damien...” She gave a strangled laugh.

“Whatever idiot woman said you didn’t know how to open up was completely whack. Because this... This...” She shook her head, unable to say more.

I smiled into her eyes. “I’m like one of those prickly, exotic flowers, I guess. I only open for the sun. And she...” Leaning intimately closer, I admitted, “Was not my sun.”

“Holy shit,” Oaklynn breathed. “I’m going to need you to get inside me, like, *now*.”

With a chuckle, I answered, “Yes, ma’am.”

I pressed my mouth to hers, and the kiss that followed was long and thorough. Our lips stayed connected until I finished unbuttoning the front of her shirt and she finished on the front of mine. It wasn’t until I broke away to kiss the side of her neck that I found the zipper on her skirt and eased it open.

Then I hooked my fingers into the loosened waistband and tugged the material down until it started to fall on its own.

Oaklynn’s head tipped back as she hissed out a breath. Taking advantage of all that exposed flesh, I cradled the backs of her shoulders tenderly and pressed my mouth to the base of her throat. As I nibbled along her collar, my thumbs dipped in along the inside of her arm, near her armpits.

She made a hungry sound deep in her throat and started to fumble with the zipper of my jeans.

I moved my attention south, coming across the strap of her bra, and while my teeth attacked one and pulled it off her shoulders, my fingers slipped the other side down.

Her breasts spilled out the front, and I growled in delight, dipping my face to kiss her sternum between the two.

Oaklynn gave up on my pants and clutched my head as I palmed the outside of her breasts, massaging them as I lifted and brought them closer together. When I swirled my tongue around one nipple, then closed my mouth around the bud and sucked sharply, she jerked and tightened her grip

on my hair.

I lavished the twins more, skimming the backs of my knuckles down the center of her abdomen as I did before falling to my knees and pressing my lips between her hip bones, near her waist.

“Damien,” she gasped, gripping my shoulders.

My kisses fell lower, dangerously low. Oaklynn started panting and making whimpering sounds.

When I reached her pubic bone, I paused and looked up at her face.

She looked down with flushed cheeks and her lips slightly parted, her breaths coming out roughly. Her gaze was clouded with desire.

Still staring into her eyes, I found her knees and slid my hands around to the back until I was using only my index fingers to slowly draw a line across her flesh.

Her lashes wavered and she choked out a raspy sound.

That’s when I let my gaze fall to her pussy. The insides of her thighs were damp with wanting me.

Desire rippled along the center of my spine, and I couldn’t hold back anymore. I leaned in and kissed the top of her clit.

She pulled at my hair, gasping.

I gripped the backs of her thighs roughly, anchoring her closer as I dipped my tongue in to massage the length of the slit between her legs.

“Damien... Damien,” she called in short, stuttered cries. “Oh my *God*.”

Hungry to be inside her, I backed her toward the bed until she bumped into it with the backs of her legs.

There, she tumbled down with a surprised gasp, and I ripped my mouth from her in a flash, crawling up the mattress after her. I was positioned between her spread, bent knees and pulling myself free from the gaping opening of my jeans a second later. My gaze fell to the place I was about to join with her.

Her labia was swollen and blooming, fully aroused and ready for me.

Pleasure spiraled through me, gripping my testicles and making my cock pulse thickly. I wrapped my fingers around the base and started to bring myself forward, a shudder of anticipation rippling through me as I watched a bead of cum form.

Suddenly realizing my dick was bare and uncovered, I froze, muttering, “Shit.”

My head zipped up, and I focused on the nightstand too far away at the head of the bed.

Only for Oaklynn to grip my arm. “It’s okay,” she assured, still breathing hard. “I got...I got on the pill.”

I lowered my gaze to hers in surprise, and she sent me a timid wince. “I had a feeling I wasn’t going to be able to stay away from you.”

My lips parted in absolute honor.

Body still buzzing with pleasure that she’d done that—for me—I thrust inside her.

Oaklynn cried out and her body bowed under the shock of my invasion. Her inner muscles clamped around me and immediately started to contract. Without a layer of protection between us, I felt it much more vividly than ever before, and I nearly went crossed-eyed.

On the bed, Oaklynn grabbed the sheets under her and gritted her teeth as she came.

I pumped my hips steadily, watching her face as I worked her through her pleasure.

Once she finished, her back collapsed onto the mattress, and every ounce of tension in her went limp.

I smiled, still buried deep, and stroked a warm, loving hand up the outside of her thigh.

Eyes fluttering open, Oaklynn gazed up at me, looking drugged, only to cringe. “Sorry. I couldn’t wait.”

“Not a problem,” I assured and started to slide from her body.

But she tightened her thighs around me, resisting. “No... Wait.”

I stroked her hip and sent her a private wink. “Trust me, huh?”

She looked into my eyes and loosened her grip.

Clutching her hips as I pulled free, I said, “Now...roll.”

“Oh God,” she moaned, realizing where I was going with this. But she readily complied and rolled onto her stomach, where I hoisted up her bottom. It was so tight and round and pert that I had to smooth both hands over it lovingly in appreciation.

“Fuck,” I breathed. “Every single part of you is perfect.”

“Damien,” she sighed.

I shook my head and spent a minute just running my hands over her, across her ass, and down the center of her back, along the curve of her hips. I wanted to touch her forever.

But my cock grew more insistent than my fingers, and I cradled the sides of her ass in my hands to center the head of my dick at her entrance.

Oaklynn glanced over her shoulder at me, and I stared into her dark, lovely eyes as I pushed inside, going slow enough to make her mouth drop open and her cheeks flush.

“Oh,” she started, languidly rolling her hips to get into the groove of my lazy pace. “*Oh...*”

Hissing, she turned forward again so she could rest her brow on the mattress. Her fingers bit into the sheets, and her pussy grew wetter.

I glanced down at her ass that I was holding between my hands and then dropped my attention to my cock repeatedly entering her.

“Fuck,” I choked out.

“Please...please...” she sobbed, beginning to squirm for release.

This was it, I realized. This was where I was meant to be. With Oaklynn. Inside her and making her arch and beg as I worked her back up toward another orgasm.

Unable to deny her anything, I slammed into her harder and began to

pump faster, pounding until we created a slapping sound.

Oaklynn bore the upper portion of her body deeper into the bed and began to wail.

Her inner muscles tightened, and I gritted my teeth, responding with a brutal orgasm that claimed me by the balls and held me captive until I could come no more.

Reality returned to me in a flash, like blinking open my eyes. Oaklynn was slumped on the bed, the fine line of her spine curved slightly as if she wanted to curl onto her side and pass out.

My hands were still gripping the sides of her ass as if I was trying to crush it.

I let go, cringing over the red marks I'd left behind, and backed away, pulling out of her.

"Oh my God," she breathed, curling into a ball and then lifting her head to glance up at me. "Oh my God. How do you...? Every time?"

I touched her hip, petting it gently.

"You're my sun," I said simply.

She smiled drowsily, then dropped her head to the mattress and closed her eyes with a sigh.

"I'll be right back," I said.

Disappearing into the bathroom, I cleaned myself, then grabbed some toilet paper for her.

Back in the room, I paused by the bed and held out the tissue. "Here you go."

"Hmm?" Her eyes opened, and she focused on my gift. "Oh. Thanks."

She cleaned herself, and then we curled up under the covers, facing each other on our sides.

Her expression was tender as she lovingly reached out to trace her fingers through my beard and along my jaw.

I turned my mouth to kiss her knuckles, then cuddled my cheek into her

palm.

When my gaze returned to hers, she still looked introspective.

“How long do I get you this time?” I asked.

She smiled lazily. “How long do you want me?”

My first instinct was to say *forever*. And the fact that I wanted to say it didn’t even freak me out. I’d honestly never felt more sure of anything in my life. She was it for me.

I knew there was still plenty left to learn about Oaklynn, but I knew with all certainty that I *wanted* to learn it. I wanted to share the rest of my days with her.

I didn’t want to scare her off, though. So, hedging my bets, I squinted hesitantly and asked, “The rest of the weekend?”

Oaklynn squinted back as if there was no way she was going to agree to such a thing, but then she blew out a breath and said, “I think I can swing that.”

My eyebrows shot up in shock. “Really?”

She laughed. “Really.”

I groaned and tugged her up flush against me. Her naked breasts melded against my bare chest while our legs entwined and lips clashed. I cupped her face in one hand and wrapped my arm around her waist with the other, then pressed my forehead to hers, closing my eyes and simply living in the moment.

And just when I thought I couldn’t feel any more satisfied and content, Thane’s voice echoed through my head.

You’re the bad guy here. And every time you stick your dick in her, your villainy grows... exponentially.

A shudder rocked through me, and my eyes flashed open. Being her villain didn’t even seem possible to me. I would bleed and die for this girl. She was becoming my entire world. Her happiness meant everything to me. How could that be bad for her?

Oaklynn's eyes fluttered open as well and her brow furrowed in concern. "You okay?" she asked, pressing her palm against my chest, right over my heart.

Put off telling her for as long as you can, Hudson had advised. She's going to leave your ass when she learns the truth.

I couldn't lose her. Not yet. So I nodded and sent her a reassuring smile. "I'm great. You make everything great." I lifted her hand from my heart so I could press our palms together and intertwine our fingers. "What about you? You doing okay? Need anything?"

"I'm great too," she said. "Though I'm thinking a nap sounds pretty nice right about now."

"I could definitely pass out for a while after that," I agreed with a drowsy grin.

Her eyebrows lifted entreatingly. "Spoon?"

"Hell, yes," I answered.

Oaklynn rewarded me for my answer with a glimmer of her dimples. And twisting around, she pressed her bottom into my lap. I looped an arm around her waist as I rested my chest against her back. Then we both sighed in unison, and silence fell between us.

Just when I started to nod off and I was sure she was already asleep, her slurring voice whispered, "You want to know a secret?"

My heart jerked in half-anticipation, half-anxiety. "Yes."

She patted the hand I had resting on her hip. "I'm really glad you didn't let me wait two years for this like I wanted to."

I smiled without opening my eyes. "Do you want to know a secret?"

"Definitely," she said.

"I would've waited more than two years for you," I whispered. "Without question."

DAMIEN

Oaklynn was true to her word and stayed the full weekend. But early Monday morning, she had to hurry back to her apartment to change and get ready for classes. So I walked her out to her car as the sun was beginning to rise.

Before opening her door, she groaned out a fake sob and leaned against her car to squint up at me. “I’m not ready to go back to school and real life again. These two days were so nice.”

Stepping in, I wrapped my hands around her waist and leaned against her as I grinned. “They were, weren’t they?” Dipping my head, I pressed my mouth to hers, and Oaklynn hugged me as she kissed me back.

“Next time, you should just bring a change of clothes,” I suggested. “Then we could ride to campus together and squeeze in another hour or so of paradise before class.”

She hummed out a sound of agreement and added, “Throw in my favorite cappuccino, and you have a deal.”

“I think I can swing that. I do know exactly where they’re located in the store.”

“Yes, you do.”

I was proud of myself; I didn’t ask when I’d get to see her again, even though my curiosity was killing me. I was well and truly addicted to this girl.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long.
By noon, she'd already sent me a text.

Hey, when's your lunch break?

Sitting up straight in the booth I'd been slumped in, I glanced across the table toward Parker who was completely ignoring me and absorbed in something on his laptop. Fully prepared to desert him if need be, I wrote back,

Having it now. What about you?

Ditto. Are you on campus?

My heart rate picked up over the anticipation of seeing her again. I answered immediately.

Yep. Basement of the student union. Southwest corner booth in The Stable.

The Stable was a burger joint, but if she didn't like hamburgers, I'd gladly go somewhere else to meet her.

But she answered,

Ooh, that sounds good. Want some company?

I exhaled in relief.

From you? Always.

After she told me she'd be right there, I sat up straighter, feeling fuller and happier inside, and I set my phone down, eagerly waiting.

Five seconds later, I was already glancing around, looking for her.

Without lifting his face from his laptop, his fingers flying over the keys as he spoke, Parker demanded, "What?"

I returned my attention to him and frowned in confusion. “Huh?”

He paused typing to click the enter button then moved his finger around the touchpad. As he worked and kept his attention on the screen, he told me, “You’re vibrating like a kid on Christmas morning.”

Funny, because that’s exactly what I *felt* like.

“Oaklynn’s going to join us,” I said.

Parker jerked his gaze up and furrowed his brows in displeasure. “Do I need to bounce?”

“What? No. Of course not.”

The look he shot me was full of question, doubt, and censure. “So you’ve told her?”

“Told her...?” I repeated, wondering how he knew I’d been considering telling her that I loved her—because that had been the only thing on my mind all day—until I realized... “Oh! You mean, about Thalia? No,” I started uneasily. “But Hudson said not to because—”

“Whoa!” he exploded in dismay. “You’re listening to fucking Ivey now? Oh Jesus, man. No. The only advice you should ever accept from Ivey is which position is best to sprawl in when jacking off. He is *not* the source to go to when you need a clear conscience.”

“Then, what?” I snorted. “I should listen to *you*?”

Parker made a horrid face. “Absolutely not. I’d probably keep my mouth shut and never tell her shit either. I’m saying listen to *Thane*. Thane knows what’s up when it comes to taking the high road, and he said to be honest with her.”

Leaning forward, I hissed. “But if I listen to Thane, I lose her.”

“Dude...” He arched an eyebrow and leaned forward as well. “If you have to lie to keep her, you don’t have her *now*.”

He was right, and pain seared through my gut in a nauseating wave.

It was so overwhelming that I didn’t even notice Oaklynn approaching until she was standing right there.

“Howdy.”

I jumped and looked up, only for panic to crowd my throat. She looked so good. So fresh and happy. Her dimples were on full display, her black hair was glistening sleekly, and her dark eyes were alive with pleasure as if she was actually glad to see me.

And it was all a lie because she didn't know what I was keeping from her.

For a moment, I felt so shitty that I couldn't even answer. And she just stood there, starting to wrinkle her brow in question as she glanced between me and Parker as she held a tray in front of her with a lunch plate on it and a backpack strapped to her shoulders.

Parker spoke up before I could, nodding his chin in greeting and sliding over in his half of the booth to make room for her next to him.

“Hey. I hope you don't mind having a third wheel for your lunch date.”

Relief flooded her gaze at his invitation, and she stepped forward to set the tray beside his laptop before slipping off her book bag and seating herself. “Not at all,” she answered. “If anything, I'm the third wheel interrupting *you* two.”

Parker winked. “Best interruption I've had all day.”

With a laugh, she picked up a French fry from her plate and brought it to her mouth as she turned her attention to me. “Hi,” she started, only to frown curiously as she chewed. Leaning toward me, she reached out her hand. “Are you okay?”

I reached back, meeting her fingers halfway across the table before I covered them with my other hand.

“I am now,” I said as I smoothed my thumb over the soft skin covering the back of her palm.

But my reassurance didn't seem to reassure her. Her eyebrows lowered more. “What *was* wrong?”

I hissed out a breath and shook my head. My gaze slid to Parker who was watching me with lifted eyebrows before he returned his attention to his

laptop.

“I just...I was remembering something I needed to do that I really don't want to do,” I fumbled out evasively.

Oaklynn's face filled with sympathy. “For one of your tenants?” she guessed.

I tipped my head thoughtfully and said, “Actually...yes.”

“Well...” She patted my arm and then took her hands off me so she could pick up the cheeseburger she had on her plate. “My philosophy is to get the unpleasant stuff over and done with as quickly as possible so you can move past it faster.”

“Yeah.” I sent her a sad smile as I watched her enjoy her food. “Good advice. Hey, did you turn in the sample piece that Alec helped you with yet?”

“Sample piece?” Parker asked with interest.

When I explained Oaklynn's major and how Alec had helped her videotape a mock news report, Parker turned toward her curiously. “A broadcasting major, huh? That's funny; I was just debating on whether or not to get involved in the procurement of this minor network that was going up for sale.” Resting his chin on his hand thoughtfully, he watched her for a response.

When she sent him a perplexed glance, I explained, “Parker's a sales and acquisitions guy. He buys and sells companies for profit.”

“Ah...” She tore her gaze away from me, only to wince at my friend. “Well, then... I don't know. We were just learning in class the other day that the FCC was changing some federal policies, and with so many costs rising from *that*, all the smaller TV broadcasters were really scrambling to stay afloat. If you're not some major magnate in a big media company, I don't know how beneficial a small network would be right now.”

“Hmm...interesting,” Parker murmured. Lifting a finger in her direction, he turned back to the screen of his laptop and started typing madly. “In that case, I think I'll *add to cart* and...buy.”

“Wait...*what?*” Spinning to gape at me, she pointed to Parker. “Is he serious? He didn’t just buy a broadcasting company, did he?”

I shrugged. “Probably, yeah.”

“But...” She was still gaping at me, trying to wrap her mind around the concept, when Parker spoke up again.

“And...sold again,” he announced. “To the handsome big media company in the corner.” Slipping the laptop shut, he turned to send her an appreciative glance. “Dimples.” Leaning toward her, he slapped a quick kiss on her cheek. “You just scored me twelve grand right there. Thank you.”

“Uh...”

She blinked at him once, completely speechless before he added, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go celebrate by taking off the rest of the day.”

“Er...okay.” Oaklynn reluctantly stood to get out of his way so he could slide from the booth.

“Thanks again,” he told her, nudging her arm before glancing down at me. “And Archer.” He pointed at me sternly. “You do right by this lady, you hear?”

I swallowed thickly, knowing what he meant, even as I nodded. “Later, man.”

He tipped his chin at her one last time before strolling off.

I was still staring after him when Oaklynn spun to me. “Is he for real right now? He honestly just bought and sold...?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “He’s some kind of financial wizard. The guy sneezes and makes fifty grand. It’s crazy.”

“I’ll say. Wow. And he’s a student here? Taking *classes?*”

I shrugged. “I kind of doubt he’ll make it to graduation. He’s incredibly bored with college. But he’s a senior, so... Who knows? He might stick it out.”

“Good gravy,” she murmured, shaking her head in awe. “And how long have y’all been friends? Has he always been this...?”

I shook my head. “No. He started just like the rest of us. But then he took the payout from his parents’ deaths and invested...very wisely.”

“Wow,” she murmured thoughtfully before lifting a finger. “And didn’t your friend... Thane...?”

“Yeah?” I asked, my stomach tightening at the mention of him because it aggravated my guilty conscience.

“He said something about all of you being in a...*grief* group together?”

“That’s right,” I rasped, my stomach knotting with guilty twinges. “That’s where the seven of us met.”

“Oh.” I could see her brain whirl, trying to connect the dots and make sense of things.

“What?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Nothing. I just... I forgot all about Thane saying that until just now. None of you ever strike me as...grieving. But Parker does. He...” Squinting, she tipped her head and studied me. “He has a certain *heaviness* around him.”

I blew out a breath and nodded. “Yeah,” I admitted. “He’s always struggled with it more than the rest of us. But he lost more too. I mean, his parents were the only family he had, and when they died...”

“Damn,” Oaklynn said, pressing a hand to her heart. “The poor guy.”

“The last time he saw them, he had a fight with them,” I admitted. “Said he hated them and shit like that. All because they wouldn’t let him get a dog.”

“Well, fuck.” Wincing, Oaklynn gripped my arm. “That would mess me up too.”

I nodded.

Her gaze turned to me, and my nerves wrenched painfully because I knew what she was going to ask right before she said, “So the reason *you* were in the group...?”

I swallowed down a painful knot in my throat.

“Was it because of the person who was murdered? The one you found?”

My attention fell to the top of the table, and I knew I should tell her now.

She really deserved to know. But when I glanced up again, a voice inside me begged, *not yet*.

I just needed a little more time with her.

Nodding, I flipped my palms face up, seeking her grip, and she readily accepted my fingers, squeezing them sympathetically.

“How old were you?”

“Ten,” I answered. “But I’d turned eleven by the time I joined the group.”

She winced in understanding. “It must’ve been pretty traumatic.”

Hissing out a long breath, I gave her another nod. “I didn’t want to admit how strongly it affected me, but after my parents made me go to counseling, I could finally tell just how low I’d gotten by how much it helped.”

“I’m glad you went, then.”

“Yeah. Me too,” I admitted, only to catch sight of something over her shoulder. A familiar mustard yellow color I’d seen Oaklynn wearing just this morning when I’d kissed her goodbye at her car.

Glancing past her, I focused on the large television screen on the wall, where the university network was giving their midday report. Blinking at her face on the screen, I shook my head.

“Wow. I didn’t know your news report was going to air on the campus feed.”

“Huh?” Oaklynn wrinkled her nose and turned to see what I was watching. “Oh my God,” she cried. “Oh my God.”

Jumping from the booth, she turned to face the television fully, holding both hands to her mouth and watching with wide eyes.

Once the piece was finished, and they’d moved on to talk about the weather, she turned to face me in frozen shock.

“Oh my God,” she uttered yet again and motioned to the television. “They just played me on the campus news. On T.V.! How is this happening?”

I laughed. “So you didn’t know?”

“Of course not. I just turned the flash drive in to my professor this

morning to ask if she thought it'd work as a good piece for my *portfolio*. I didn't expect... This is just...wow. I was on the motherfucking campus news."

"And you did amazing," I said, sliding from the booth as well to stand with her.

"I did, didn't I?" she breathed, still clearly in awe. She laughed at herself and shook her head. "I mean, I must have if they decided to air it, just like that. Oh! I can't wait to tell Alec. I think he'll be jazzed to see his work on the big screen too."

"Definitely," I agreed, checking the time. "He should be between classes now if you want to catch him."

Shaking her head, she reached out and grabbed the front of my shirt. "I'll tell him later. Right now... I want to celebrate with *you*."

The heated intent in her eyes made my stomach clench. Arousal raced across my flesh as I edged closer. "What did you have in mind?"

Her gaze slid over my chest and down before slipping its way back up to my eyes. "When's your next class?"

"Not until two."

Nodding, she said, "That'll do." She let go of my shirt in order to snag her food and backpack. "Follow me."

I'm pretty sure I swallowed my tongue as I nodded mutely and gathered my things as well, down for whatever she had in mind.

She smiled, killing me with her dimples, and together, we rushed from the student union.

"Where are we going?" I asked, fairly certain the broadcasting room she'd taken me to last time wouldn't be quite as abandoned as it had been before.

"Library," she answered over her shoulder. "They have a personal health room near the bathrooms."

I nodded, tightening my grip on her hand, and feeling my body prepare

for hers.

She glanced at me as if checking to make sure I was still okay with the idea, and my blood swam faster. Seeing the look in my eyes, she flushed, her cheeks brightening with pleasure and her smile blooming with excitement.

By the time we burst through the entrance of the library together, I was already primed to go. Oaklynn and I glanced at each other again, and it felt so damn good to see that she was as eager for it as I was. We smiled, lavishing in that all-consuming connection we shared.

The door to the health room came into view.

I leaned toward Oaklynn. “What if it’s already occupied?”

She tilted her face back. “It wouldn’t dare.”

I snickered, and she tightened her grip on my hand. We approached, and the sign next to the door read *vacant*.

God bless that vacancy.

“Yes,” Oaklynn hissed in agreement as she plowed ahead, tugging me after her.

If anyone was watching, it’d be obvious what we were doing, and I couldn’t help but glance around. When I actually made eye contact with the student employee stationed at the front check-out counter, she blushed and quickly looked away.

“Shit. I think that girl knows what we’re doing,” I hissed. “That one that’s always at the front desk.”

Oaklynn opened the door and yanked me inside.

“Don’t care,” she said, shutting and locking us in, only to whirl toward me.

We both dropped our bags together, and she cupped the back of my neck before drawing my face down to hers.

The moment our mouths locked, her hands were all over me, one winding its way up into my hair, the other racing over my chest and around my back then down toward my ass.

“Mmph,” I exclaimed against her lips and then rushed to catch up, hiking her up so I could set her on a wide wall shelf that stretched across the length of the room. And just like that, I didn’t care who knew what we were doing in here either.

She parted her thighs, making room for me to step between them, and I pulled her closer, to the edge of the shelf, until we bumped together, her heat ramming against my aching erection. I ground into her, savoring the idea of what was to come.

Oaklynn tugged impatiently at my shirt, wanting it gone. I jerked it off before peeling down the straps of her top, and while she leaned in to suck on one of my flat nipples, I guided one of her breasts free into my hand and began to massage it.

When she bit down lightly, I grunted and jerked against her, bumping into her pussy hard enough that she gasped and started on my fly, unzipping me.

She was in jeans too, so I did the same for her. When we reached into each other’s pants, she wrapped her fingers around me while I pressed mine into her.

We both tightened, getting each other off for a minute before she breathlessly demanded, “Now. Oh my God, now. I can’t...I can’t wait anymore.”

And while she hopped off the shelf to remove the rest of her pants, I busied myself with digging a condom from my wallet. I’d just finished suiting up by the time she was perching herself back onto the shelf.

Her eyes lifted to me in question when she saw the condom. But I shrugged and said, “Easier clean up.”

“Oh. Right. Good idea.” She nodded and sent me a smile as she spread her legs open, inviting me in.

The wetness on the insides of her thighs glistened in the overhead light, and my mouth began to water. I wanted to lean down and taste her so bad, but she was focused on my cock. She reached out and wrapped her fingers

around it.

Eager to get inside her, I braced a hand against the wall near her head and stepped close as she drew me forward. Then I hooked my other hand under her knee to help steady her on the shelf.

“It still amazes me that I’m able to take all this into my body,” she murmured as she lined me up at her entrance, watching in fascination as we pressed close, ready for penetration.

Then her gaze lifted to mine. “And how fucking good it feels in there.”

A shudder rippled through me as I entered her, pushing in steadily so she was forced to experience every inch. Her eyes flared, and her lips parted. I kept watching her expression as her body accepted and adjusted to the invasion, greedily swallowing my length and demanding more.

She pressed the back of her head against the wall and nodded at me. “So...fucking good.”

I paused once I was most of the way in, and she released a breath as if she thought the most intense part was over. So I shoved deeper, catching her off guard, and she whimpered.

“Damien...” She clutched my arms and her breasts bobbed as a shiver swept over her. “Please....”

The pleasure and need on her face was my undoing. I moved, fast and hard, nailing her to the wall and gripping her tightly so she didn’t fall.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tipped her head back, sobbing, “Yes...”

Her thighs trembled, mine began to burn. Sweat trailed down the center of my spine. It glistened on her brow. Pressure built in my testicles, and Oaklynn tensed.

I reached between us and brushed my finger against the nub of her swollen clit. She sucked in three successive breaths, whimpered from between gritted teeth, and then fell apart, her body pulsing around mine in tight contractions that made me lean in and press my forehead against the wall next to where she was grinding the back of her head. And I released

hotly.

We both finished at the same time, sagging against each other and breathing hard.

OAKLYNN

I blew out a shaky breath when Damien finally pulled away.

He ran a smoothing hand over my hair and kissed my temple. “You okay?” His eyes were warm with affection as they met mine.

I nodded, even though I felt jittery and nervous as if something big and momentous had just shifted between us.

Taking me for my word, he turned away to discard his condom and pull his jeans back into order before bending to snag his shirt off the floor. And all I managed to do was melt my way off the shelf, where I landed on wobbly, unsteady legs.

My shirt and bra had never actually been removed and were wadded around my torso, so I spent a minute cursing through the untangling process, then yanking everything back into place.

By the time I finished, Damien had put himself together and was kneeling in front of me, waiting with my jeans hanging over one shoulder and my panties in his hands, readying them for me to step into.

I paused, completely affected by the sight. I mean, not only was it a sweet gesture, but seeing his tanned, masculine fingers spreading the delicately feminine cloth open was sensually intimate in a way that made my hormones shudder in renewed arousal.

He looked up into my eyes. And I grew wet all over again.

But I controlled myself. Placing a hand on his shoulder, I stared back as I lifted my foot and eased into the first leg hole before following with the second. He stood as he slid them up my thighs and over my bottom before fitting the waistband around my hips.

Our eye contact never wavered the whole time. And that's when it happened for me. I fell...hard.

"You're going to be so bad for my GPA," I found myself admitting with a sad shake of the head. "I can tell."

His brow furrowed in question as he snapped the jeans open for me to climb into next. "What do you mean?" he asked, only to grimace and then curse. "Dammit, you're skipping class right now, aren't you?"

"No, not at all." I shook my head as I stepped into the jeans and waited until he pulled them up over my hips and then zipped them closed for me before I added, "You just convinced me to give this full-fledged, one hundred percent, all-in relationship thing a try, is all."

Damien paused on the top button and lifted his face, to blink in surprise. "Do what?"

Feeling strangely demure all of a sudden, I bit my lip and then got excited about how shocked and pleased he appeared. I sent him a hopeful smile and bobbed my head. "I mean, can't hurt to try it out, right?"

He started to nod slowly in agreement, only to stop as a worry crinkle formed between his eyes. "Are you sure, though?" He stepped close and sent me an intense stare as he set a hand on my waist, where his fingers curled possessively around my hip. "Getting serious with someone wasn't what you wanted. What about your pact to forego dating and only concentrate on school? I don't want *you* to settle either."

I drew in a deep breath, relishing the concerned glint in his gaze because it reassured me that he cared about what *I* wanted, too, and a part of me couldn't bother with worrying about how he *might* affect my future. He was my *now*, and I was going to enjoy my *now* to the max.

So I merely shrugged. “Well, you’re already a distraction,” I explained. “And technically, my pact was to stop partying and messing around with multiple guys. Which I’ve done. I haven’t been to one rager yet this semester. And there have been no other guys. Just you. I figure one specific person *has* to be better than a whole string of them.”

Damien instantly nodded to agree. “Especially if that *one* helps you study, quizzes you the night before every exam, plays audience during your practice news reports...” Tugging me up against him, he gazed hungrily into my eyes. “And relieves your stress levels when you’ve been cramming too much.”

I laughed at his offer, then, hissed out a happy sigh. “Why do I have a feeling I’m going to be the most stress-free girl on campus by the end of this semester?”

As I trailed the back of one finger along the side of his face lovingly, he chuckled and pressed his brow to mine, nipping at my lips with his before asking, “So... The next time Keene tries to talk me into going out with him to pick up women, I can turn him down because... I have a girlfriend now?”

Girlfriend?

God, that’s exactly what I was agreeing to, wasn’t it?

I’d never been a *girlfriend* before. Never had a steady boyfriend or dated anyone long enough to call them exclusively mine. It seemed so new and foreign, and yet...

I really, really liked the idea of being *Damien’s* one and only. Because now, he was mine.

Lifting my brows sternly, I teasingly smarted back, “Yeah, you *better* answer like that, Buster.”

He was *my* man now. No other horny bitch was getting near him.

Damien grinned, pleased by my jealous streak. “And am I allowed to take you on actual dates?” he pressed. “Text you good morning? Good night? Happy afternoon?” He kissed my cheek softly before pausing near my ear to murmur, “Walk through campus with my arm around you?”

I shivered in delight and turned to peer into his whiskey gaze. “I mean... if you insist.”

“Oh, I do.” Burying his face in my hair, he inhaled deeply and guided me toward the exit so he could open the door for me. “I am going to pamper the fuck out of you.”

After smoothing a hand down his chest, I crossed the threshold, only to jar to an embarrassed halt when I immediately made eye contact with the student assistant working at the circulation counter. Her eyes were wide as they shifted between Damien and me when he stepped out behind me next.

“What?” he asked, gripping my hip.

I swallowed. “I think you were right. That girl at the desk totally knows what we just did.”

Damien immediately glanced over, and the girl froze for a moment before blushing furiously and spinning away to appear busy doing something else.

When he started to shake as if silently laughing about it, I rammed my elbow back and caught him in the gut.

“It is *totally* not funny.”

But as I hurried away, Damien only laughed outright and kept pace with me to the front doors. “I *told* you she was watching us when we went in.”

“Yeah, well, I was a little preoccupied then.”

Damien only laughed more before blowing out a breath and admitting, “I regret nothing,” as he looped an arm over my shoulders so he could tug me close and kiss my hair.

I couldn’t disagree. “Me neither,” I admitted, sighing out my acceptance. I leaned my head over to rest it against him as we made our way outside. “But now I should probably start heading toward my next class,”

He checked his watch and answered, “Fuck. I need to get to mine too.” When he glanced up again, his eyes were lifted in question. “What’re you doing tonight? Can I take you out to dinner? *After* all your homework is done, of course.”

I laughed. “Wow. You are diving right into this, aren’t you?”

He only shrugged. “Gotta take advantage while I can before you change your mind and kick me off boyfriend duty for good.”

Sending him an arch look, I pointed. “Pick somewhere good, then, because this is definitely your probationary period.”

“Mmm.” Humming in interest, he lifted his eyebrows. “Challenge accepted. Think you can be ready by seven?”

I lifted one shoulder. “I only work this afternoon until five, so yeah, I can swing that.”

“Great.” Eyes warming with pleasure, he leaned in to press a quick kiss to my lips. “Wear something nice.”

He started to pull away with a happy grin, only to come back and give me a second, *longer* kiss.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and put everything I had into it.

Damien was breathing hard, and his eyes were slightly unfocused when he stepped back. “Tonight,” he promised before winking and turning away to stroll off.

I heaved up my shoulders and then released a big, dreamy sigh as I watched him go.

But, damn...

He certain knew how to leave girl eager for more—

“Oh my God!”

Yelping out a startled scream, I whirled toward the voice screeching behind me.

When I found Jaylani there, I hissed out my relief and pressed a hand to my heart. “Cheese and crackers, woman. You gave me a heart attack.” Then I remembered...*ooh!*

“Jay!” I launched myself at her to give her a huge hug. “I can’t believe you’re here! I’ve missed you so much.”

There was a ton I hadn’t told her, too. We needed a serious catch-up sesh.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said distractedly, gripping my arm to yank me off the sidewalk to get out of the way of a group of girls walking past. “Me too. Was that your psycho killer landlord I just saw eating your face?”

“Uh...” I blinked over her accusative tone, only to snap, “You really need to stop calling him that. Damien wouldn’t hurt a fly. And he—”

“Oh my God,” she uttered, clutching her stomach as if nauseated. “You’ve *slept* with him, haven’t you?”

“And by the way,” I went on, ignoring that question. “You know all those psychology classes you saw him going to? That’s because he’s a forensic psychology *major*. He wants to catch bad guys, not become one.”

When I rolled my eyes at her, she only snorted and lifted her eyebrows right back at me.

“Or...” she countered. “It’s because he already *is* a merciless serial killer, and he takes all those classes to learn how to stay hidden so others can’t catch him.”

“Wow.” I heaved out a sigh. “You don’t give up, do you? Listen, he’s only interested in catching murderers because someone close to him was murdered, and the killer was never arrested.”

That finally caused Jay to falter and lower her brows. “Say what now?”

“I think it was his aunt,” I started, only to lift a hand so she didn’t go quoting me on that detail, though I felt pretty confident I was right. “She makes the most sense, anyway. He said it was someone close to him, and she —”

“Wait.” Jay waved her hands to stop me. “Wait, wait, wait. Back up. So someone in his life was seriously *murdered*? Yeah... I need details. Stat.”

I gave them to her eagerly, and the only question she had after hearing everything was, “So he knew who the killer was?”

I squinted. “What? *No.*” Where had she gotten that idea?

“But he said the killer was never arrested, right?”

“Yeah...” I drew out slowly, squinting at her. She was starting to get on

my nerves about this whole situation. “Exactly. Because they don’t know who the killer *is*.”

She rolled her hand impatiently. “Or... he said it that way—instead of, *the killer’s identity was never discovered*—because he knew who the murderer was, as in maybe your boy actually did it. And he escaped jail time somehow.”

“Jaylani... Sweetie...” I said, pressing my hands together to beg her. “Damien didn’t kill anyone. He’s becoming a criminal psychologist in the hopes of someday *catching* the killer because no one else could figure out who it was. No one knows *who* did it.”

“But—”

“I mean, you just need to *meet* him,” I added, lifting my voice to speak over her. “And spend, like, two minutes in his company. Then you’ll understand a hundred percent what I’m saying right now. You’re no longer being cute and funny with this. It’s gone too far. And now, you need to give your paranoia a rest.”

“And you need to stop looking at him through your damn vagina,” she countered. “Start thinking with your brain here, O. Not even his *sister* wants to be around him.” Pointing at me, she demanded, “Did you even *ask* her why that is?”

With a groan, I shook my head. “Thalia’s too protective. She only ever says good things about him. And then diverts the conversation the rest of the time.”

Jay snorted. “Probably because she’s too scared of what he’ll do to her if she says anything bad.”

“Then why does she never *act* scared? Huh?” I demanded, completely over this conversation. It seemed to be another repeat of the beach, and I didn’t need to hear it again. “She’s the most vivacious, spirited person I know, bursting with buoyant, dramatic vigor. I mean, she’s a big avoider of questions. It’s kind of hinky how noticeably she won’t answer some things I

ask. But never, not once, has she been fearful, *especially* when it comes to Damien.”

“Really? Hmm...” Jay tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Maybe *that’s* what’s going on, then.” Stepping closer, she lowered her voice to ask, “Do you think maybe *she* killed the aunt, in defense of her brother?”

“Oh my God, *stop!*” I said, scoffing at her ridiculousness, even though... okay... *Something* horrible had to have pulled the siblings apart, and the aunt was dead, and Thalia wouldn’t say shit about any of it.

Jaylani’s eyes widened suddenly as she gripped my arm because her idea seemed to grow merit in her head.

“Just hear me out here,” she said. “*Thalia* being the killer would explain why she doesn’t want to see her brother anymore. I’m not sure if I’d be able to look *you* in the eye after I had to kill someone for you. I’d totally do it, sure, but you gotta admit...” She shrugged out a wince. “It’d change things between us.”

I shook my head. “Except Thalia’s no more a killer than Damien is. She’s way too...innocuous. Besides, Damien would never let me room with a murderer.”

Unless it was an accident. Or in self-defense.

Ugh, this was bad. Jay was beginning to drag me into her crazy conspiracy theories right along with her.

Something *was* fishy between Damien and Thalia, though.

“Okay, so maybe she *could* have,” I admitted, going along with Jay’s hypothesis just for the heck of it. “But it’d have to have been a total accident. I can’t see her *purposely* trying to harm someone.” Then, I snapped my fingers. “Except, no. That doesn’t make sense. Why would Damien want to hunt down murderers to this day if he already knew who’d done it?”

Jay merely shook her head. “Wow. These Archer siblings really have you...” When her words trailed off abruptly, and a blank, thoughtful expression filled her face, I slumped in defeat.

“Oh Lord. What now?” I muttered.

She gripped my arm—hard—and sent me the oddest, eeriest glance I’d ever seen before. “You said it was their aunt who was murdered, right?”

“I mean...” I winced. “I think so. That’s my guess, anyway. Damien only said it was someone close to him and that he was the one who found the body. And their aunt’s the only family member I *know* who’s died since she’s who left the apartment to them. He said his parents are retired and living in Arizona, so...yeah. It’s gotta be his aunt. Right?”

“The aunt...” Jay confirmed slowly, shifting her head up and down in serious thought before she added, “whose place you’re currently living in.”

The uncanny way she watched me made me pause and straighten. “What’re you saying?”

“Did good ol’ Damien ever happen to tell you *where* he found this dead body?”

As a shock of cold rushed up the back of my neck and made my arms prickle with goosebumps, I slowly answered, “No.”

“Huh,” was all she murmured as if she knew a secret.

I started to shake my head insistently. “No. Don’t you *even* suggest it.”

“You know that haunted tour on Bridleway that Raina invited you to go on with her?”

“Yeah...?” I started slowly, not liking where this conversation was heading.

“Well, that place where they paused on the tour—saying it was haunted by some college girl who was murdered there—was a brownstone... somewhere right around where you live.”

I blinked once. Then twice. “Somewhere *around* where I live?” I started slowly. “Or was it the very brownstone I live in *now*?”

“I have no idea,” she confessed, biting her lip. “They all look the same to me, and it was a year ago...and dark out. It could’ve been a different apartment five blocks away...or the one you’re in now. I honestly couldn’t

say.”

“Jay!” I screeched and slapped her arm in outrage. “Oh my God. Why didn’t you say something the day we saw the vacancy sign in the window together?”

I mean, someone merely dying there would’ve been bad enough, but...the idea that they’d been murdered and were still hanging around...

Nope.

I didn’t do haunted.

I shuddered abruptly and shook my head, rubbing my chilled arms as I glanced around suspiciously at everyone walking past on the quad. I hated even the *topic* of ghosts. It was like talking about spiders, and then suddenly, you felt things crawling all over you.

I currently felt a million dead eyes just *staring* at me.

And Jay was merely shrugging as if it was nothing. “Truth be told, it didn’t even cross my mind until now. Because I don’t believe in that shit. You know this.”

Mouth dropping open with incredulous outrage, I lifted my hands. “Well, then why are you bringing it up *now*? Just to freak me the fuck out?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on. It’s not really *haunted*. But what if it is the place that everyone talks about, where that college chick was killed? Who knows what kind of *living* spooks you could get loitering around and peeking in the windows in the hopes of catching some kind of freaky, paranormal activity? That doesn’t sound safe at all.”

My mouth dropped open as I gaped at her.

For the longest moment, I couldn’t breathe or even think past such a horrifying thought that the very roof I slept so peacefully and soundly under each night could be the epicenter of a grisly murder scene that still haunted my boyfriend to this day.

But then, reality returned, and I snorted. “Wait. No. This isn’t even possible. Damien would’ve *said* something. Hell, *Thalia* wouldn’t even be

staying there if it was true. I mean, why...why would she? Who *would* be able to live where their aunt was brutally murdered? And aren't landlords legally *required* to reveal unexplained activity in a place they rent out to prospective tenants?"

Jay shrugged, looking confused. "Why? The ghost part is just an urban legend. Though, you'd think lover boy would've at least given you the common courtesy of telling you if someone had been freaking *murdered* there. And that the killer had never been caught. Gah." She shuddered. "I hope they changed the locks." Shaking her finger at me, she added, "See. I told you he wasn't trustworthy."

"That just..." I blew out a long breath and hugged myself. "No. Nope. No one died in my apartment. I absolutely refuse to believe that. The place is just too..."

It was too good to be true.

Ah, shit. It *was* too good to be true.

I swallowed thickly, feeling suddenly unwell.

"It's the nicest place I've ever lived in," I finished weakly, wincing at Jaylani.

"Yeah..." She made a regretful, sympathetic face. "Probably because they had to remodel afterward...especially if the blood splatters were too—"

"Good Lord, please stop," I begged. "It can't be true. It just...*can't*." Shaking my head insistently, I deduced, "You said it was a *college* girl, right? From ten *years* ago? Well, that would make this girl—what—somewhere between twenty-eight and thirty-two today. That sounds way too young to be Damien's aunt. So yeah...no. Your haunted house story has to be about someone else, in some *other* apartment."

Jaylani lifted her eyebrows as if telling me to wake up and smell the flowers. "You do know my aunt, Shaniece, is only two years older than me, right?"

"Shut up," I muttered, hating her logic.

Because it totally destroyed my theory that there was no way on earth the haunted brownstone was *my* apartment.

But Jay wasn't finished. "And why is your rent so cheap, anyway, huh?"

My shoulders slumped. I couldn't think of another answer for that.

Whimpering out my defeat, I hugged myself and glanced at my best friend.

I really needed to find out who in Damien's family had died, and *where* she'd been murdered.

For my own peace of mind.

OAKLYNN

When I returned home after classes and work, I pulled into the parking spot behind the brownstone and took a minute to simply stare up at the back of the building, studying it for any sign of otherworldly anomalies.

But it looked perfectly normal. It was just an apartment, like all the other apartments around it.

The only thing *not* normal was my jittery nerves. Because Jaylani had managed to fluster me beyond repair.

“Thanks a lot,” I muttered to my absent best friend. “Make me afraid to live in my own home. Really appreciate it.”

Huffing out a breath and letting my irritation with her take over—so I wouldn’t have to think about my wussy-ass fear—I grabbed my book bag and climbed from the car.

At the back door, I unlocked all the bolts, then paused to look at the black-coated key with the letter A on it sitting in my palm.

When *had* they last rekeyed this place?

Didn’t matter. I was letting my own imagination get the best of me. I just had to stop thinking about this.

But as soon as I opened the door and glanced into the short, dimly-lit back hall, anxiety rushed over my skin, prickling my flesh.

“Gah, this is crazy,” I muttered to myself and purposely stepped forward, only for the door to close at my back, making me hesitate with a thick swallow.

The place just seemed so quiet today. Like resoundingly quiet.

I hated it when things were too quiet.

So I hummed to myself as I clomped down the hall with my steps echoing way too loudly underfoot. Once in the open, my muscles relaxed some, but instead of going straight upstairs to my room, like I usually did when I got home, I veered toward the kitchen.

There, I heaved out a breath and plunked my bag and purse on the kitchen island before heading to the front window and whipping open the curtains all the way.

“Better,” I announced to myself.

As I turned back to face the rest of the first floor, I saw movement in the corner, right at the base of the stairs where all the shadows seemed to be collecting.

Stumbling back, I belted out a short scream, only to clutch my chest and sag against the island when Thalia emerged.

Playfully lifting her hands in surrender, she called, “Boo,” before snickering over my reaction and heading toward the couch, where she plopped down lazily just outside the line of sunlight that was streaming in through the window.

“Fuck,” I gasped, still trying to get my heart back inside my chest. “You gave me a damn heart attack.”

“So I see,” she murmured in amusement. “You’re still shaking.”

“God.” Blowing out a relieved breath, I turned away and started toward the cabinets, needing a stiff drink. “I did not hear you coming down the stairs.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Behind me, the television turned on, and Thalia began to surf through

stations.

“Not your fault,” I assured her as I frowned up at the vodka I’d been intending to drag down. “I’m just in a jumpy mood today.” But with my roommate around, acting normal, I suddenly felt better.

I shut the cabinet door, leaving the vodka on the shelf, and decided I was hungry instead.

“I’m going to make a sandwich,” I called over my shoulder. “You want anything?”

“No thanks.” Thalia heaved out a sigh, and the television turned off again, leaving me to believe she hadn’t found anything she liked. “I’m not really hungry.”

Furrowing my brow at her, I watched her tip her head toward the couch cushion and rest her cheek on it as she yawned. She looked worn down. “You do eat, don’t you?”

Thalia rolled her eyes and cattily shot back, “Only on full moons.”

“Funny,” I said sarcastically. She and her brother definitely shared the same dry sense of humor.

But thinking of him reminded me of our date we had planned and the fact that we were *together* now. Thalia would freak out if she knew we were a couple.

Except it felt worse *not* telling her.

I bit my lip as I opened the refrigerator and pulled out some mayo and sliced ham. Maybe I could just test the waters.

“Guess what? I’ve got a hot date tonight,” I announced as I hauled the pile of sandwich fixings into my arms to the island counter. “Any suggestions about what I should wear? I think we’re going somewhere fancy.”

“In that case, totally go with the little, black wrap dress that ties on the side with the matching two-strap heeled sandals. You’ll look like dynamite in that.”

“Uh...Okay.” I tipped my head her way, wondering when she’d ever seen

me actually *wear* that outfit. I don't think I'd put it on once since moving here, which would mean she would've had to have gone through my closet at some point.

Huh.

Distracted by the fact that I had such a snoopy, invasive roommate, I didn't notice her standing from the couch until she was yawning loudly and stretching her arms over her head. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I'm beat. I think I'm going to take a long soak in the tub and then nap it out."

As she began to lower her arms, however, I swear I caught a glimpse of a bruise on the inside of her elbow as if she'd had a blood draw go wrong.

I blinked, wondering if I'd seen it correctly or if it had been a trick of the light. "Okay," I murmured distractedly. "Sounds good."

But as she headed for the stairs to leave me alone down here, all my fears resurfaced, reminding me why I was so jumpy and scatterbrained in the first place.

And just as she reached the base of the stairwell, my curiosity got the best of me.

"Hey, Thalia...?" I said.

"Yeah?" She paused with her hand on the railing as she glanced back.

"Do you mind if I ask...when did your aunt die?"

Her eyebrows shifted in confusion. "My *aunt*?"

"Yeah," I encouraged with a nod. "The one who used to live here, in this brownstone, before you did."

"Aunt Iris?" Tipping her head in confusion, Thalia only blinked at me. Then, she said, "What makes you think she died?"

"I..." My mouth fell open, speechless for a good five seconds before I sputtered, "Uh, b-because..." I exhaled heavily to gather my senses, then I pointed at her. "I thought you said she left this place to you and...and Damien."

"When she *moved*, yes," Thalia explained, gaping at me as if I were

insane. “She went to Florida and decided to just leave the apartment to us instead of selling it. Oh my God, she’s not *dead*.”

“Oh! I...” The way she was gaping at me as if I’d lost my mind made my confidence plummet, so I stopped trying to explain myself and simply settled for apologizing. “I’m so sorry. That was a really morbid assumption, wasn’t it?”

“I’ll say,” she muttered, shaking her head as if to clear it.

I felt like a massive idiot. Lord, but Thalia *hadn’t* said the woman had ever died, now that I thought back on it, or that she’d left them her place in a *will*.

I’d really stuck my foot in it this time.

“You are so weird,” Thalia announced before shaking her head sadly and jogging up the stairs.

I huffed out a deflated breath and glanced at my half-made sandwich, only to brighten with relief because this meant no one had died in *my* apartment at least.

Thank God.

The place Jaylani had heard about must be somewhere else.

But now, I was more curious than ever to know who’d been murdered in Damien’s *family*.

Unless...dammit. He hadn’t said it’d been a relative, had he? He’d just said it was someone *close*. I’d simply assumed—like I apparently liked to do—that it was a family member.

Hell, for all I knew, it could’ve been a guy—not a female—like a best friend.

There was no way I could ask, though. With something that traumatic, I was just going to have to wait—patiently—until he felt like opening up and *telling* me.

However, maybe there *was* something I could figure out on my own. Like where this supposed haunted apartment really was. Wouldn’t it be freaky if it

ended up being, like, right next door?

Sandwich prepared, I settled myself on a tall chair at the island and took a bite before I pulled up my phone and clicked into an internet search engine.

But after looking up the university's haunted tour on Bridleway, it just pulled up a flyer, advertising the time, date, and location of where it started. It didn't give a map of the actual stops or mention specific people or places.

So I texted Raina to ask if she knew, but when she answered, she wasn't any help because this upcoming Friday was going to be her first time taking the tour.

After that, I turned more general in my search. I typed in *haunted*, *Westport*, and *Texas* in my search engine. From there, I found a house for sale near Fort Worth that supposedly had nine ghosts in it. So I revised the search, adding the word *apartment*, but that only led me to a Hill House Manor in Gainesville.

I deleted *haunted apartment* and exchanged those words for *ghost*. But that brought up a story about a ghost hunter in Westport, *Connecticut*.

There was nothing paranormal suggested online about this town at all. Which only made me realize just how paranoid I was being.

"I really *am* weird," I muttered to myself.

I couldn't believe I'd let one little rumor that my best friend *might've* heard get to me so strongly.

With a sigh, I tossed my phone down, only to jump when it buzzed with an incoming text as soon as it landed.

Gritting my teeth over my rattled nerves, I picked it up again, brightening when I saw that it was from Damien.

I got us a reservation at the worm village. But it's for six. Is that too soon?

When I glanced at the time, I realized that gave me less than half an hour to prepare. "Shit."

I immediately sat down what was left of my sandwich, not wanting to spoil my supper.

I can do six,

I answered.

Great. I'll pick you up at a quarter 'til, okay?

I bit my lip as I replied.

Actually, can I meet you at your place? Thalia's here, and I still haven't told her that we're together yet. That might be an awkward pre-first-date conversation if she caught you picking me up.

It took him a bit longer to answer, but finally, he said,

That's fine. See you here.

From there, I rushed up the stairs to prepare.

When I passed Thalia's room, I could hear the soothing melody of "Only Time" by Enya being played quietly inside, and I had to smile.

I honestly adored my roommate. Her style and flare for life was just so nice to be around. I hoped someday I'd be able to tell her about me and Damien. Hell, I hoped I could help the two of them reconnect.

Out of all the people I had met in Westport so far, they might be my favorite two. I didn't want them to be at odds anymore.

I debated briefly on whether I should tell Damien about that bruise I'd seen on her. But, then...it might've been a trick of the light. And even if it hadn't, that didn't necessarily have to mean anything concerning. It really could've just been from a legitimate source. Or, hell, I got bruises all the time from simply bumping into shit. I didn't want to worry him without any real evidence of anything bad actually happening.

So I turned my mind to our date and hopped into the shower before dolling up my face and making sure I smelled strongly of the peach scent he seemed to like.

Finally, I changed into the little black dress Thalia had recommended, and I slid on my shoes. By then, I needed to get my ass into gear and head toward Damien's place.

My heels clicked loudly enough on the hardwood floor of the hallway that when I passed Thalia's room, she called through the doorway, "Have fun."

"Planning on it," I called back. "Don't wait up."

She laughed. "Now that's what I'm talking about."

Growing giddy about my night, I hurried to my car, unable to stop grinning as I climbed in.

When I pulled into Damien's driveway ten minutes later, he must've been waiting at the window because the front door opened as I parked, and sexiness incarnate stepped out.

He was wearing a brown suit jacket and slacks to match with a leather belt and off-white shirt that was unbuttoned way too low, like, maybe three buttons had been left open. But, damn, it looked good on him.

As he strolled out toward my car to meet me, my mouth started to water. It was beyond miraculous to me that this stunning being had not only given me the time of day, but he actually wanted to be my boyfriend.

I had to be the luckiest girl on the planet.

My stomach jumbled with nerves, and I didn't even know why. Everything just felt so suddenly real. I was with the most amazing guy, and I wasn't sure what I'd done to earn this right.

Finally opening my car door, I whistled at him as I stepped out. "Whoa, Archer. You clean up...real nice."

"Thanks," he started with an intimate smile, only to slow to a stop when I shut the door behind me and pulled my hand purse to my waist in front of me.

His eyebrows lifted as he took me in from head to toe.

“Fuck,” he finally breathed before his gaze lifted to mine. “Are you sure we really need to go out? Because I can order something in, and we could just—”

“Oh, hell no,” I told him in no uncertain terms and even lifted my index finger to show how serious I was. “I got all dressed up for my first date ever. You are not taking this away from me.”

Damien quirked up a single eyebrow. “First date ever?” he asked slowly.

“Yeah, well...” I shrugged lamely and motioned around me. “I’m more of a casual, hook-up kind of girl. Meet in a big group and then peel off from that with someone who strikes my fancy. Boyfriends and dating were never really my thing...until you.”

He heaved in a deep breath, and I could tell my response affected him.

Coming toward me, he reached out his hand. I accepted his fingers, and he squeezed mine warmly as he looked deeply into my eyes. “I’m the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet.”

“Funny,” I murmured, lifting my other arm to trail a finger along his hairline and simply enjoy the texture. “I was just thinking that about me.”

His whiskey eyes gleamed in approval. Then he hitched his head toward his truck and tugged on my hand. “Come on,” he invited. “I’ve got a girlfriend I need to impress with her first date ever.”

HUDSON WAS WORKING WHEN WE ARRIVED AT VILLA DE GUSANOS, AND HE personally delivered our meal to us, something we let him choose that he called a cheese and beef crepe. After all the candlelight, and stringed instruments playing, and tiramisu dessert, I rested my head on Damien’s shoulder as he walked us out to his truck.

“Best first date ever,” I announced as I ran my fingers up his chest to play

with the deep opening of his shirt, only for him to slip a hand around my waist and kiss my hair.

“Date’s not over yet. That was just the appetizer.”

From there, he took me to the beach, and we walked along the boardwalk until we came across an arcade, where we played some air hockey and ball toss. I was laughing over how soundly I’d thrashed him at the ball toss as we approached his truck afterward when he tightened his grip on my hand and whirled me to face him.

“Oh!” Not expecting the move, I gasped as my chest bumped into his, but all he did was curl his hand around to the base of my spine to anchor me there.

“Stay the night with me,” he entreated, lowering his face to mine.

I looked at his mouth, craving a taste, only to lift my eyes to his and tease, “I don’t know. Do I really want to be the type of girl who gives it up on the first date?”

“I bought your favorite French vanilla cappuccino K-Cups,” he coaxed.

And that was it. I was flat-out gone for this boy.

“Sold.”

But I didn’t just stay that night. I ended up staying over on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, too.

Damien was true to his word about not letting my schoolwork fall behind. We each had some textbook chapters to read in our respective classes, so on Thursday, we curled up together on his couch and silently read next to each other.

But when Friday rolled around, we had to have a night apart.

It was Keene’s nineteenth birthday, and Parker had this private room at some club reserved for just the seven of them.

Damien had invited me to go with him, anyway. But I had to work semi-late, readying the set for the broadcasting department’s monthly live report. Besides, I didn’t want to be the only girlfriend there.

Damien *did* talk me into going for a walk with him on the trail earlier in the afternoon before I clocked into work, though. And on our brisk hike, I actually got sweaty. I'd never gotten sweaty while walking with Jaylani before. But a walk with Damien obviously meant a faster pace, accelerated heart rate, and freaking sweat.

He looked happy as he kissed me goodbye at my door, though, so I decided a little sweat was worth it.

I grabbed the front of his shirt as I kissed him back and demanded against his mouth, "Don't forget that you're already taken while you're at that club with a horde of desperate, drunk girls clamoring for this sexy body of yours, alright?"

"Never," he promised before swatting me on the ass. "I'll call first thing in the morning and check in."

I pointed after him as he started away. "You better."

He winked back, and I think I sighed dreamily.

But he was just so...awesome.

If I'd known having a boyfriend was going to be this great, I would've started going steady with them as soon as I'd hit puberty.

Except it was probably Damien himself that made it so good, which meant it was just as well that I'd waited until I'd met him.

Grinning over my luck, I let myself inside the apartment.

It'd been a few days since I'd spent more than five minutes here—which had been mostly just to rush in and back out again after grabbing a change of clothes—so the air felt almost stale as if the place was abandoned.

Thinking Thalia must be gone again to *wherever*, I flipped on a light and hurried up the stairs. I needed to shower, stat, before heading back to campus for work.

When I passed by my roommate's door, however, I jumped in surprise when I heard her hard voice blare from within.

"I said *no!*"

Eyebrows shooting up, I slowed to a stop and totally eavesdropped, moving my face closer to the door.

“I can’t believe you’re blowing me off again, and no, I don’t fucking care if it’s for your wife. That’s actually worse. You said you were *leaving* her... Yes, you did, you lying sack of shit.”

My mouth dropped into a deep O as I lifted a hand to cover my lips. But holy shit, was Thalia seeing a married man?

This was juicy.

“Josh...” she growled in disgust, and I had to mouth his name back to myself.

But it definitely sounded like married Josh was going back on his word to her. The dirty, rotten bastard.

Give him hell, Thalia, I silently encouraged.

“Yeah, well... I’d like to see how many craft fairs she’ll want you to take her to when she learns you like fucking students in the backseat of the car she got you for your birthday.”

Oh...snap! He was a teacher, too? This was bad. This was really, really bad.

Unable to stop listening, I edged even closer to the door, eager to hear more.

“No...no...” she insisted hotly. “That’s not a threat. I don’t make threats, *professor*.”

Damn. This just kept getting spicier by the second.

Whatever answer the professor gave must’ve been bad because she barked out a harsh laugh. “Oh, well... Now who’s threatening whom? Look, asshole. You can’t do this to me. You promised...”

A sob echoed through the wood, making me press a hand to my throat.

Dropping her anger that quickly, Thalia’s voice broke as she pleaded, “Josh...please. I need it. I need it so bad; you have no idea.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. Well, that didn’t sound as much like a

booty call as it did a drug addict trying to score her next buy.

Just what the hell kind of mess had Damien's sister gotten herself into?

"No..." she sobbed before screeching, "Worthless dickhead," and something—like her phone maybe—smacked against the wall near the door that I practically had my ear pressed against.

With a gasp, I reared back and heaved out a hard breath.

Inside the room, I heard Thalia crying.

Dammit. She was hurting. It no longer mattered what disaster she'd gotten tangled in, I couldn't handle knowing she was in pain.

Fisting my hand briefly in indecision, I pressed my knuckles against my mouth before stepping forward and knocking softly on the door.

"Thalia?" I called gently. "You okay?"

In response, Carly Rae Jepsen blared abruptly from her room; her way of telling me to fuck off.

Well...alright, then.

I guess she didn't want to talk about it.

Thoroughly iced out, I turned away and clomped to my room, miffed by her rejection.

I planned on telling Damien all about it, though. If Thalia was getting involved in something that could get her into trouble, I couldn't keep this to myself.

Except he deserved a night out with the boys first.

I'd tell him in the morning.

DAMIEN

The club was loud and crowded, and there was no Oaklynn in it.
I wasn't impressed.

It was strange how fast she'd filled up my entire life. Not having her around made everything strangely...empty.

I was the second to arrive at our swanky private room, behind Parker. When the waitress he'd been flirting with turned as I walked in, asking me what I wanted to drink, I just wanted to spin right back around to go find my girlfriend.

"Just water, thanks," I said, smiling faintly.

She nodded and left, only for Foster to replace her, blowing through the doorway with wide eyes.

"Y'all won't believe this," he started, pausing just inside the entrance. Bass pulsed through the walls in muffled waves as he announced, "I was just at the convenience store, filling up my truck on my way here."

"Wow. That *is* a shocker," Parker answered dryly.

Rolling his eyes, Foster otherwise ignored him and hurried forward. "And guess who I ran into there. Malena Ortiz."

I lifted my eyebrows over the name. Because Malena was Nova's mother, and Nova had been Thane's steady girlfriend all the way through high school.

They'd broken up when she hadn't gotten accepted into Haverick, and

she'd had to move away to attend college.

It had left Thane devastated. But he'd never said a single bad thing about her, which was why I'd always kind of thought they'd find their way back to each other once they graduated.

Except Thane had been out of school for five months now, and there'd been no mention of her from him once.

"And?" Parker demanded, lifting his eyebrows when Foster didn't divulge anything past seeing Nova's mom.

"And she said Nova's..." Foster winced. "Nova's engaged."

"Oh, fuck," I breathed, while Parker cursed up an even bigger storm, slamming down his half-empty glass of bourbon and surging to his feet so he could pace the floor and run a harassed hand through his hair.

"So what do we do?" Foster demanded. "We can't just keep this from Thane. But how the hell do we tell him the love of his life is fixin' to marry someone else?"

Hearing a choking sound from the doorway to the room, I glanced over and froze.

"I think you just did," Parker announced next to me.

Foster whirled around and winced. "Man," he started, gripping his head in regret while Thane just stood there, looking dazed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

Thane lifted a hand, halting him. "No, no," he assured. "You're fine. It's fine. I just... I mean, wow." He blew out a long breath and set his hands on his hips. "So Nova's getting married, huh?"

Foster, Parker, and I gathered around him.

"Well, that's...that's...good," he said and glanced at us, forcing a big smile. "I'm happy for her. I'm glad she's found—you know—someone to spend the rest of her life with." But his voice broke on the last word, and he spent half a minute trying to clear his throat.

"And we've been apart for—God—over four years now. It's healthy that

she's moved on and...and..."

"Jesus, man," Parker barked, interrupting him. "This is *us* you're talking to. Drop the polite bullshit and just say what you really feel."

Thane's face broke. "Christ," he uttered, breathing hard and gripping his head. "I need a drink. I'm going to need a lot of fucking drinks before the end of this night."

"Now that's what I'm talking about." Parker nodded in approval and slung an arm around Thane's shoulder to usher him to the table where he had an entire bottle waiting.

But when they reached it, Thane couldn't seem to wait for his own glass to be poured. He snagged Parker's abandoned Glencairn and tossed its contents back with one swallow.

Foster glanced at me and winced. "This is going to be bad."

I whimpered out a helpless groan and nodded. Thane was usually our group's conscience, and without him working on all four cylinders to keep us in line, there was no telling what kind of evening we were about to have.

AN HOUR LATER, FOSTER AND I WERE THE ONLY TWO SOBER IDIOTS IN SIGHT. Since Parker was paying out the ass for this room, none of the waitresses batted an eyelash about serving minors. So Thane had waved the two freshmen over to join him for a drink as soon as they'd arrived, to which Alec and Keene were more than excited to partake, while Parker *always* imbibed, and Hudson just followed the crowd.

Which left babysitting their drunk asses up to me and the star quarterback, who didn't drink during the season.

Stopping next to me, Foster set his hands on his hips and shook his head. "Why did he have to have a birthday on Friday the freaking thirteenth?"

I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head sadly as a conga line

went jamming past us, consisting of Thane in the lead, then Keene, followed by some waitress who'd deserted her duties to hang with us, and then ending with Alec in the back, twerking pathetically. Hudson and Parker were over at the couches, with their feet kicked up as they drank bourbon and smoked cigars.

"I'm way too sober for this."

Foster sent me a cautionary glance. "Don't you even dare think about abandoning me for alcohol right now. I am not babysitting everyone by myself."

I only shrugged. "Or you could join us," I offered.

He sniffed. "Man, I have a game tomorrow. Besides, who'd make sure everyone got home safely?"

"Uber?" I guessed, only to snap my fingers and point at him. "Or we could make Ohrley rent a long-ass limo and haul us around town until we sober up."

Foster's eyes lit up as he pointed right back at me. "Or a Hummer? Or... oh!"

"Party bus," we said together.

"Yes!" Foster agreed. "I'd totally get drunk in one of those."

We grinned at each other just as Keene peeled away from the conga line and came racing toward us, yelling, "Arch. Yo, Arch!" He jumped onto my back and tried to ride my shoulders until I shook him off, and then he said way too loudly for someone who was standing right beside me, "Why don't you call that hot señorita of yours and invite her over to party with us? I want to celebrate my birthday with Oaklynn."

I sent him a hard glance. "Yeah, I don't think so. She's not getting anywhere near you right now."

"What? Why?" he cried, lifting his hands in dismay.

"Probably because you'd hit on her and beg for a lap dance," Foster answered helpfully.

Keene's eyes went wide. "Wait. *Could* she give me a lap dance?"

"Yo, I want one from her too." Parker lifted a finger to include himself just as Alec tumbled onto the couch between him and Hudson to ask for a puff on his cigar.

Sending the curly-headed drunk a dirty glance, Parker scoffed. "Junior, don't even *ask* for shit like that until you start growing some hair between your legs. Leave my damn cigar alone." He batted Alec's hand down when the freshman tried to reach out and just coax it from his fingers.

Next to them, Hudson blew a smoke ring and said, "If anyone deserves a lap dance from Vargas, it's definitely me. I have to listen to her and Archie go at it every night through the damn wall. I now know the exact sound she makes right before she comes, and I'm telling y'all, it's so fucking hot I've woken up with blue balls this entire week."

"None of you motherfuckers is getting a lap dance from my girlfriend," I announced loudly, spreading my arms wide to make sure they all understood.

"Lap dance, *yes!*" Thane cheered from the side of the room where the waitress was grinding on him in a dirty dance. "Move that thing, darlin'."

Intrigued by how raunchy things were turning over there, Keene abandoned me and Foster to join Thane. "Ooh, wait for me."

"I still can't believe you're the only one of us who has a girlfriend," Hudson continued, only to hand over his cigar without hesitation when Alec turned to *him*, begging for a puff. "I mean, shy, chubby Damien who couldn't even *talk* in the presence of a girl just scored the hottest chick on campus. Seriously, I am so proud."

"Hey, aren't you supposed to have a girlfriend now, too?" Parker leaned past a sputtering, coughing Alec to ask.

A dumbfounded expression crossed Hudson's face before he nodded. "Oh yeah. I guess I do."

Next to him, Alec grabbed his mouth and began to heave before he spewed all over the floor between them.

“God...dammit,” Parker cried, surging to his feet and backing away to avoid the mess before he zipped an accusing glance to Hudson. “Why the hell did you give him a cigar?”

Hudson waved an unconcerned hand. “Eh, the boy’s got to learn somehow.” And he blithely took a sip of his bourbon as he remained relaxed and chilled where he was, lighting a new cigar without thought.

Foster and I started toward Alec in unison to take care of him, until Keene and Thane cheered suddenly from the other side of the room.

The blitzed waitress was giving them a personal show and was in the process of pulling her top off over her head.

“Ah, jeez,” Foster grumbled before glancing at me. “You want to flip for it?”

No way was I going near Miss Strips-A-Lot. “You get her,” I said. “I’ll take care of Younger.”

“Oh, thank God,” he breathed, nodding his agreement before we parted ways and went to clean up the two different disasters brewing on opposite sides of the room.

I took Hudson’s first cigar away from Alec and steered him toward a trashcan while Foster tried to coax the girl into putting her shirt back on, only for her to grab his face between two hands and kiss him full on the mouth.

Yep, I decided, puke duty was definitely better than that.

But seriously, Oaklynn was going to enjoy hearing all about this tomorrow, I was sure.

IT WAS BEYOND EASY TO CONVINCING PARKER TO RENT US A PARTY BUS BEFORE the night was over, but neither Foster nor I decided to get drunk with the rest of them after all.

The waitress whose name I never learned came with us—Parker covered

her wages for the rest of the night since she'd left work early—and Thane ended up crying all over her, talking about Nova and how much he couldn't believe she was getting married.

But the girl was surprisingly sympathetic; she petted his head and told him about some boyfriend she'd had who'd left her for someone else, and the two of them agreed together that love sucked ass.

Meanwhile, Alec and Keene got super hyper. They tried their turn on the two dance poles in the bus, only ending up on their asses, laughing uproariously before they begged to stop at a convenience store so they could stock up on candy.

Hudson and Parker started some philosophical discussion about the growing amount of artificial intelligence in the world.

And despite how the ear-splitting music, strobes, and neon glaring colors from the black lights were giving me a headache, Foster and I played poker that thankfully wasn't for money because he kicked my ass every round.

It had to be well after one—or maybe three—before the bus pulled up to the front of my house.

Alec and Keene had their arms wrapped over each other's shoulders and were trying to sing Bakar's "Hell N Back," but were totally butchering it. Thane and the waitress were passed out and spooning on one of the couches together, and Hudson had started talking with the bus driver, trying to convince him that he needed to take up the chef profession.

"Alright..." Parker glanced up to call from the laptop he had perched on his lap, where he'd been working for the past hour—probably making another fifty grand tonight alone. "Archer, Ivey, Dugger, Younger. Here's your stop. Everybody off."

"Oh, man," Keene gushed, leaning heavily against Alec as they stumbled toward the door together. "This was a hoot. Thank you, guys. Best birthday ever."

Alec snorted as he leaned right back against Keene. "Heh... You said

birfday.”

“I did not. I said birfday.”

Shouting out a laugh, Alec pointed. “You did it again.”

“Motherfucker,” Keene muttered. “I know how to say the word birf...”

When Alec slapped his knee, unable to stop giggling, Keene scowled. “Shut up.”

Then he paused in the opened doorway of the bus, to turn back and wave. “I love you guys. Seriously.”

“Yeah, we love you too,” Parker groaned impatiently. “Now, get off the damn bus already. I can only take so much of your awful singing.”

“Roger that.” Keene saluted him and tipped backward out of the bus, bumping into Alec as he went, until they both stumbled and lost their balance, tumbling into the night with a howl of curses.

Foster glanced at me with a wince. “You sure you got them okay?”

“Hey, he has me to help,” Hudson assured, waving everyone off as he stepped from the bus next, only for his curses to echo back inside as well. “Dammit, you two. Why haven’t you picked yourselves up off the goddamn ground yet?”

Foster slapped a hand to my shoulder. “Yeah... Good luck with that.”

I sighed and sent him a glance before waving a farewell to Parker and thanking him for funding the night. Outside, my three roommates were littering the front yard like drunken yard ornaments, but at least they were all sitting upright and attempting to stand again.

Setting my hands on my hips, I shook my head. “It’s literally fifty feet to the front door, guys. Come on. You can do this.”

They grumbled and groaned but finally managed to stand and make it to the door that I already had unlocked and opened for them.

“Oh, hey,” Alec cheered as he crossed the threshold and pulled a handful of candy from his pocket. “Look what I found.”

“Score!” Keene agreed, stealing one from his palm. And they both began

to chew as I escorted them down the stairs to their rooms.

“Mmm. These crabby patties are delicious,” Keene announced, glancing seriously at Alec.

And Alec nodded back with an equally grave expression as if nothing was as important as what they were currently discussing, “The green parts are the best.”

“What is that, anyway? Lettuce?”

“Or sweet pickles.” Alec popped the green part into his mouth and chewed before his eyes lit up. “Yeah, I think it’s sweet pickles.”

Keene frowned at first before he brightened. “It *is* sweet pickles.”

“Wow,” I said dryly, setting a hand on each of their backs. “I really hate to break up this stimulating conversation, but, uh, this is where I leave you.”

Fortunately, they seemed fine with that. Alec even hugged me and thanked me for cleaning up his vomit. Keene told me he loved me again, and then they both trudged into their respective rooms.

I shook my head and had to smile as they closed their doors behind them.

Then I bounded up the stairs to check on Hudson. He was passed out on his bed, fully clothed, and curled around one of his pillows. I stepped into the darkened room to pull off his shoes for him before covering him with a blanket.

And from there, I finally retired to my own room. Inside, I slumped onto my bed and pulled up my phone to text Foster and tell him I had my wards safely tucked away.

He wrote back, calling me a lucky bastard because he had no idea how to get the passed-out waitress home.

I chuckled and took my turn to wish him luck.

Still smiling, I started to exit the messaging app, only to pause and bring up Oaklynn’s name instead.

I wanted to leave some kind of message for her to read when she woke up, something a little funny, a little sweet, and a lot erotic to reassure her that

I hadn't done anything with any other girl. She was the only one for me.

I ran my thumb affectionately over her name, trying to think up the perfect line, when the text bubble on her side of the conversation appeared with three little dots in it, telling me she was awake too and also thinking about me.

My heart rate accelerated, eager to read what she had to say. But then, I checked the time and hesitated, thinking she should be dead asleep right now.

It was after three.

The witching hour.

A rash of cold dread rushed up the back of my spine just before her message finally appeared.

SOS. COME NOW.

I was dead asleep when it happened.

I'd stayed later at work than expected, getting everything just right at the studio, so that I'd basically collapsed in bed as soon as I'd gotten home.

Which meant I was deep into my REMs when a door banged shut down the hall, jerking me from my comatose state. Next, really loud rushing footsteps followed before the door banged again.

I groaned and rolled onto my side, silently cursing Thalia in my head. *Jus' go back to sleep*, I would've begged aloud if my brain had been awake enough to actually form speech.

Then, through the wall, I heard muffled begging. "No...no. Please... Stop! I said *no!*"

My eyes flew open wide.

What the...?

"Get your damn hands off me. What do you think you're—"

The question was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream that felt as if it were right in the room with me.

I flew upright, suddenly wide awake.

"Thalia!" I gasped, whipping off my sheets and scrambling off the super-high mattress.

Blood thundered through my head as my heart rate roared into overdrive,

rushing so fast that it momentarily blinded me. But I hurried through the daze in the direction of the door, anyway, and found the knob in the dark by feel. Ripping it open, I shot into the hall and dashed to her room.

She was still screaming as if something was killing her.

“Thalia. Thalia.” I pounded on her door. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

The screaming abruptly stalled out with a gurgling kind of choke.

“Oh my God.” I reached for the doorknob. But I couldn’t get in. I was locked out. “*Thalia!*”

I knocked again. “Please, just answer me.” My voice began to shake. Hell, all my limbs were shaking. “What’s wrong?”

Through the door, I swear I could hear labored breathing, like a death rattle. I stepped closer. Something was being dragged across the floor, I swear. Or maybe she was crawling, trying to reach me.

“If you can’t talk, pound on the floor,” I tried. “Tap. *Something!* Just let me know that you can hear me. That you’re okay.”

Or play your damn music at full blast. Tell me I’m weird. Warn me away from your brother. Anything!

God, I just needed to know that she wasn’t dying in there.

But only a single thud followed as if she’d given up on trying to crawl and had simply collapsed fully on the floor.

And that was it for me; I was getting help.

I darted back to my room, flipped on the light, and found my phone. Ripping it from the charging cord on the nightstand, I hurried back toward Thalia’s door, opened the phone app on the way, and three buttons later, the line rang.

“911,” a female voice answered promptly. “What’s your emergency?”

“I...I think my roommate’s...” Dammit. I had no idea what had happened to my roommate. “Something’s wrong. She woke me from a dead sleep, screaming bloody murder. Like someone was hurting her. I think someone might have been with her; she was begging them to stop. And now she won’t

answer. Her bedroom door's locked, and I can't get in. I...think something bad happened."

"Okay, ma'am. What's your address? We'll get someone to you right away."

"Uh..." Oh God. The address?

It took my brain a moment to function and remember where I freaking lived.

After I stuttered out what I think my correct location was, the dispatcher said, "Alright. Thank you. Could you give me a call-back number as well in case we get disconnected?"

I rattled off my cell phone number, and then the lady returned to my situation, asking more questions, getting some clarity on what exactly was happening.

Gripping my hair, I answered her and pressed my forehead to the door, slapping at it a few times in the hopes that Thalia would just answer. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed she was okay.

"So you think someone might've been in the room with her?" the dispatcher asked, coming back around to that question. "Do you think they're still in the house with you *now*?"

My eyes sprang open, and I jerked away from the door to glance both ways down the hall. Because, fuck, I'd been so worried about Thalia being alright that I hadn't even thought about the *intruder*. I hadn't heard anything else from *anyone* else, so it'd been easy for me to forget a possible third person being around.

But now...

Now, I freaked out.

When both directions on either side of me seemed to lead to dark, creepy ends, I hugged myself and started to breathe harder.

"I...I don't know," I admitted, backing into the wall opposite Thalia's door as I kept glancing both ways down the hall, unable to stop. "I...I was so

worried about Thalia I didn't think to... Oh God. What if he's still here? I don't...I can't check the apartment for anyone else. I just can't. I'm too..."

Oh boy, I was starting to get light-headed. The fear was freezing my senses, and black spots were skulking in at the edges of my vision.

"That's okay," the dispatcher assured me in a calm, steady voice. "I'll stay on the line with you until an officer arrives. Is there a lock to the room you're in now?"

A room? What a good idea. Get to a damn room.

"Just a second," I told the woman.

I focused on the beacon of light spilling from my open bedroom doorway and started to tremble. I couldn't step toward it. It seemed so far away, and the darkness at the end of the hall down there led to the roof access—a perfect place for some home invader to hide out. But I couldn't stay *here* either.

Sending an apologetic glance toward Thalia's door and hoping I wasn't abandoning her, I boosted my courage and then dove forward, my bare toes pounding against the hardwood floor as I raced toward my room.

Once inside, I slammed the door shut and locked it with fumbling fingers.

Breathing hard, I announced into my phone, "Okay, I'm in my room with the door locked."

"Good," I was told. "Your officer is on his way, less than five minutes out."

"Okay. Thank you."

Feeling much more secure in here with my own things surrounding me and the outside world locked out, plus help on its way, I searched the room, checking the closet, bathroom, and under the bed.

No bad guys were anywhere.

Keeping the dispatcher on the phone, I pulled up my messages app and started to text Damien like crazy.

SOS. COME NOW.

My place.

“Ma’am?” the dispatcher asked in the middle of my composition of a third frantic message. “Are you still there? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, ma’am, sorry.” I shook my head, flustered when my phone started to vibrate with an incoming call from Damien. “I was just texting my boyfriend.”

Can’t talk,

I wrote after declining the call.

I’m on the other line with 911.

What the fuck is happening?

he demanded two seconds later.

Are you okay?

I’m okay. But I think Thalia’s hurt. Maybe. I don’t know.

I bit my lip, hoping that didn’t upset him too much. He hadn’t even gotten to talk to her since she’d returned to town.

I was freaking out, though, and so I kept typing, needing him here with me *now*.

She was screaming and screaming and screaming. Then she stopped and her room’s locked, and I can’t get in. I don’t think she was alone either. She was begging someone to stop. And now I don’t know if anyone else is in the apartment with us or not. I’m really scared.

On my way,

he answered.

Keep texting. Let me know you're okay.

My lips trembled into a smile, glad he was coming, glad he was worried about me, glad I was no longer dealing with this alone. Tears flooded my eyes at the release of relief.

When I sniffed over them, the dispatcher said, "Ma'am?"

"Yeah, sorry," I mumbled as I wiped the back of my hand across my nose. "I don't know why I started crying. I can't seem to help it."

"It's okay," she assured me while I texted Damien, letting him know that my new dispatcher friend was being super nice and supportive. "Your body will do strange things when the adrenaline kicks in."

I nodded and kept sending Damien inane little comments, sometimes throwing out a, "*I hope she's okay,*" or, "*I don't like this.*"

He never replied but I saw that each text was being read almost immediately, so I figured he was busy driving.

Mere seconds after the dispatcher told me the officer was on the scene, I heard muted knocking from the front door downstairs.

Disconnecting with her, I typed out a quick

Cops are here,

to Damien and tossed the phone onto my bed before throwing open my bedroom door and rushing down the hall.

At the stairs, I gripped the railing tight to make sure I didn't trip and fall in my haste, and I streaked across the room to unlock the regular door, deadlock, and then chain.

And I was never so glad to see a uniformed officer standing on my front steps as I was then.

"Oh, thank God," I breathed, pulling back to let him in.

"Ma'am." He stepped just over the threshold and stopped, already sliding his flashlight from his duty belt so he could flip it on and shine brightness

into all the corners of the room. “You called about a domestic disturbance and possible home invasion?”

I shuddered, thinking it sounded wholly ominous when he said it like that.

“Yes, sir.” Already starting away, I waved for him to follow. “Can we check on Thalia first? I’m most worried about her. She hasn’t made a peep since she stopped screaming and I heard a thump on the floor.”

“That’s fine.” The light kept swinging around the room behind me as he followed me toward the stairs. “Is your electricity out?”

“No. Sorry.” I flipped on the switch at the bottom of the stairwell. “I was just in a hurry to get down here.”

It felt surreal leading him up the steps. I wanted to rush him and yell *hurry*, but he was methodically checking everything out as we went, and I guess that was the safest approach, so I couldn’t really complain.

“Here it is,” I said, knocking on the door when I paused in front of it. “Thalia?” I called hopefully. “The police are here.”

When absolutely no sound came from within, I glanced at the man, silently demanding help.

He stepped forward and tapped on her door with the end of his flashlight. “Ma’am?” Pausing, he glanced at me. “What’s her name again?”

“Thalia,” I said. “Thalia Archer.”

He started to turn back as if to knock again, only to pause with his mouth open. The butt of his flashlight froze midair, and he turned back to squint at me. “Come again?”

“Her name’s *Thalia*,” I enunciated more clearly and slowly this time. “She’s actually the owner. I’m renting the second bedroom right there from her.”

When I pointed down the hall, he glanced over, only to turn back to me with a suspicious narrowing of the eyes.

It skeeved me out majorly. Hugging my arms over my chest because I suddenly remembered I was in my freaking pajamas, I unnecessarily added,

“I messaged her brother, and he should be on his way now. He co-owns the brownstone with her.”

The officer shook his head slightly. “And you said her name was *Thalia Archer*?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir. Do you know her?”

He blinked once before growling, “Fucking unbelievable.” Turning away slightly in disgust, he ran a hand over his hair and muttered to himself, “Damn college kids and their stupid stunts.” Whirling back to me, he snapped, “It’s a felony to prank call 911, you know that? I could arrest you for this.”

I pulled back aghast. “Wha-what are you talking about? This isn’t a prank. I *heard* her scream. Just get the damn door open, and you’ll see for yourself. She’s *in* there. Right now.”

“Gah,” he hissed, no longer listening to me. “I should’ve realized *this* was the place. And it’s Friday the 13th, too. I should’ve fucking known better.”

My mouth fell open, unable to believe what I was hearing. Spreading my hands wide, I demanded, “What the hell does the date have to do with anything? My *roommate*’s in trouble.” Motioning wildly, I cried, “Break the fucking door in already!”

“Hey, you need to just calm down,” he warned sternly. “Besides, I graduated from high school with *Thalia*. This joke isn’t funny to me. Not at all.”

“You...what?”

The dude looked like he had to be at least thirty; he was practically freaking *bald*! How in the world could he have gone to high school with *Thalia*...who was only twenty?

I waved my hands, pushing past his weirdness. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. But I know my roommate screamed, and I can’t get into her room to check on her. So I’m worried as fuck that she’s hurt...or worse. Are you going to help me or not?”

He opened his mouth, looking torn, which really pissed me off. But before he could answer, I heard a frantic voice from below shout, “Oaklynn?”

“Damien,” I breathed in relief before I shot off down the hall, away from the cop, and headed for the stairs.

“Hey!” he called after me.

But I waved a hand back at him, explaining, “It’s okay. It’s my boyfriend.”

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, Damien was already there. I launched myself forward, and he caught me against him, pulling me tight as I wound both my arms and legs around him, trembling in relief.

His hands shook as he patted the back of my hair. “You okay? Are you okay?” he asked from a voice that also wasn’t very steady.

When he pulled his face back in order to cup my cheeks and scan my expression in worry, I nodded. “Yeah. I’m okay. I’m okay now. But Thalia...”

“Sir?” the officer called down the stairs.

Damien lifted his face and looked up. “What’s going on?” He sat me down so I could stand next to him, but we each kept our arms securely wrapped around each other.

“We got a call from this residence claiming there was a possible prowler on the premises and that one of the occupants might’ve been attacked.”

Nodding, I grabbed Damien’s hand and tried to drag him up the stairs with me, explaining, “Thalia screamed. And there were thuds. She was begging someone, asking them to stop. And when I got to her door, she wouldn’t answer, but I could hear movement and these sounds inside like she was in pain. Something’s seriously wrong. I just know it.”

When Damien resisted my efforts to pull him along behind me, I glanced back and shook my head. “What’re you doing?”

He looked suddenly pale. And sick.

“Are you the homeowner?” the cop asked, interrupting our moment.

“Do what?” Damien rasped in a hoarse voice, only to shake his head and glance past me, focusing on the officer. “Uh, yes, sir. I am.”

“You got a key for this room?”

“I...” Appearing shaken to the core, Damien closed his eyes briefly, shook his head, and then cleared his throat. “Yeah. Yes, sir.” He fumbled in his pocket before pulling out his key ring. “Right here.”

Avoiding eye contact with me, he shifted to head up the stairs, leaving me behind.

Blinking at him in dismay, I shook my head and rushed to follow.

In the hallway on the second level, the officer was tipping his head as he watched Damien hesitantly approach the door to Thalia’s room. “You’re Damien, right?” he asked. “Damien Archer, Thalia’s little brother.”

Damien nodded and paused with the keys as he glanced over.

The cop pointed. “I think I met you once. I took Thalia to a homecoming dance our junior year, and you were there when I picked her up. Damn...” He shook his head and let out a low whistle. “You really grew up.”

Tipping my head, I glanced between the two and grew totally confused. I wanted to snap my fingers and hurry Damien along to open the door already. Thalia was inside. Why the hell were both he and the officer reacting so slowly as if there wasn’t an emergency?

But then...the things the cop was saying.

They didn’t add up.

He was acting as if he was a lot older than Damien. Hell, he *looked* a lot older than Damien.

But...shouldn’t they be the same age if Damien and Thalia were twins?

“You know,” the cop said, motioning toward me with his head. “She thinks—”

“I know,” Damien broke in, interrupting abruptly, then he visibly winced as he turned the lock in the door. “I never told her. So her call to you was legitimate, I swear. She just doesn’t know any better.”

“Excuse me?” I broke in, furrowing my brow in utter bewilderment. “What’re you talking about? *What* don’t I know? Damien!”

My boyfriend finally glanced at me, and his eyes were so full of guilt and apology that I reared back in surprise.

“I’m sorry,” he said simply, his voice cracking on the word and his chin trembling. “I am so fucking sorry.”

“Sor...” I started to repeat, shaking my head.

Dear God. What the hell was he fixin’ to show me?

Releasing a heavy breath, he kept his head turned away to face the hallway, not Thalia’s room, as he turned the knob and then pushed the door open.

I burst past him, rushing inside and crying, “Thalia? Are you...?” only to fall to a confused halt.

Mouth falling open, I turned in a slow, full circle, unable to believe what I was seeing.

But the room was empty.

And not just empty of people. It was stark, stripped-bare, utterly *void*. There was no carpet on the wooden floor, no bed, no shelf, no decoration, no nothing. It was just four blank walls, a floor, ceiling, window, closet, and an open door that led to the bathroom.

I rushed to the closet and peered inside.

Empty.

So was the bathroom.

At the window, I shoved aside the curtain to find that the seal was securely locked. No one had snuck in or out through there.

Shaking my head, I turned back toward Damien, but he had backed away from the entrance and was resting his tailbone on the wall in the hallway, his hands planted on his knees as he bent over and breathed heavily as if he was about to have a panic attack.

The officer stepped inside and glanced around curiously, but he moved

carefully as if not wanting to upset the room.

I shook my head, unable to make sense of any of this. “I don’t understand.”

The cop glanced out the door toward Damien, but my *boyfriend* appeared to be too rattled to answer me. So the officer winced back at me and pulled a phone from his pocket before looking something up.

As soon as he found it, he turned the screen to show me.

A strange feeling washed over me as if I knew whatever I looked at was going to change my entire life. But I stepped close, anyway, to read the title of the online news article that he’d pulled up.

College Student Found Dead in Apartment.

My ears filled with an insistent buzzing, and my vision wavered, but I blinked to make sure I was reading the text under it correctly.

And just in case I wasn’t, the cop went and announced, “Thalia Archer was murdered—in this very room—ten years ago.”

“**B**ut I...I... No. That can’t be possible,” I told the officer. Dismissing him because what the fuck did he know—he thought I had freaking prank called him—I spun toward my boyfriend. “Damien?”

Except Damien looked completely wrecked as he slowly lifted his head and straightened. “I’m sorry,” he croaked, his gaze full of apology. “I...I can’t.” Then he slipped away from the wall and stumbled for the stairs.

“Oh, no, you fucking don’t,” I growled, rushing after him. I streaked into the hall, but he’d already disappeared down the steps. “Damien. Dammit, I need answers.”

I thought he was just going to walk out on me completely and leave the apartment, but once I reached the bottom of the stairs, he was still in the living room, hands on his hips and shaking as he paced in a small circle.

He lifted a finger as he tried to get himself under control. “J-just give me a second,” he finally managed to gasp out. “Please. I couldn’t breathe up there.”

But I didn’t have a second. “What the hell is going on?” When he glanced at me but couldn’t seem to say anything, I demanded, “Is Thalia really dead? She’s been dead for ten *years*?”

He flinched at the question, but then he pressed a hand to his abdomen

and nodded.

“And she died *here*?” I pointed to the ground under me.

Damien had to close his eyes as he bobbed his head in affirmation. Slumping down to sit on the arm of the sofa, he rested his hands on his knees as I pointed up the stairs. “Then who the hell did I rent the room from? Who have I been *living* with for the past two months?”

But obviously, I hadn’t been living with anyone. There was no bed, no dressers, no nothing for another person to be rooming with me.

“I...” Shaking his head, Damien winced as he met my accusative stare. “I don’t...I don’t know how to answer that.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know how to answer that?” I exploded. “*Someone’s* been impersonating your sister. Don’t you even care to know who it is?”

He heaved out a helpless breath and sent me a begging glance. But I had no idea what he was begging for.

“You said you rented the room from *that* girl.” He pointed toward the picture on the wall.

I nodded. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he repeated. “So that’s Thalia.”

I shook my head, “Then...she has a twin?”

“No. She doesn’t have a twin. There are no twins.”

“But Thalia’s...dead?” I asked bluntly because something wasn’t adding up here. None of this was making any sense.

Damien grimaced as if he’d just been stabbed. He even set a hand against the center of his chest before nodding.

“Just what’re you suggesting?” I demanded. “That I rented a room from a *ghost*? That’s crazy! I’m not fucking crazy.”

“I know that,” he rasped, lifting his hand to calm me down as if I was getting too *crazy* for him. Then he took another moment to calm *himself* before he nodded as if ready to finally talk logically.

“Hey,” the officer said quietly as if afraid to interrupt us.

We glanced at him where he’d paused at the bottom of the stairs.

“You got a key for the attic?” he asked Damien.

Wincing through a swallow, Damien nodded and dug into his pocket before tossing his entire key ring over. The officer caught it and then disappeared back up the stairs.

I returned my attention to Thalia’s brother.

He nodded to me as well, then blew out a long breath and spoke in a patient tone as he explained. “We... My parents and I had the whole apartment remodeled about five years ago and started renting it out then. But...” Shaking his head and wincing, he glanced at me. “No one’s ever stayed over a month. They hear footsteps at night. Doors slamming. Floors creaking. Cold spots. Unexplained music playing. Things moved from one room to another. And sometimes...screaming.”

When I flinched, he winced with me. “I know Thalia died,” he said. “But... I don’t know if she ever completely left.”

I snorted out a disbelieving sound and shook my head, refusing to buy this bullshit.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I shook my head harder and glanced away, only to turn back and nail him with a pointed glare. “So you’re saying the place is haunted. And you actually *believe* that?”

“I... I don’t know what I believe,” he admitted, shaking his head and looking slightly lost. “But... You knew things about her,” he insisted. “Things like her stealing popcorn at the theater, our aunt owning the apartment before us, the picture in my room being hers. Hell... You described her mannerisms and taste in music perfectly. It’s clear you’ve had *some* kind of contact with her.”

“Damien, I don’t see dead people,” I stated firmly. “I’m not the kid in *The Sixth Sense*. The woman I assumed was Thalia was a true, living person. I talked with her. I joked with her. I watched movies with her. And tonight... I

heard her scream like—”

“Like she was being murdered?” Damien cut in softly.

I shuddered and shook my head. “No...No. She’s not...”

She couldn’t be dead.

“Did anyone *else* ever see her when you did?” he asked, making me frown in thought. “Jaylani?” he guessed. “Anyone?”

“Well, no. But...”

“Did you ever touch her? See her outside the apartment? Watch her eat or pick something up?”

Mind racing, I tried to come up with something to prove to him that the woman I knew couldn’t be a ghost. But... I had nothing. I hadn’t ever touched her. In fact, the one time I’d gotten remotely close to her, I’d felt cold. And she’d never eaten around me. I wasn’t even sure if I’d seen her actually holding a remote to turn on the television. My back had always been to her when she’d flipped through stations.

She hadn’t answered the door for me that first day; she’d called for me to come in. She hadn’t lifted a brush but made me paint the whole wall. She hadn’t taken money from me; she’d merely instructed me on how to send it to Damien.

Hell, no one else had seen her when I had either. Damien had come the closest when he’d heard the door slam, but apparently, all the other occupants before me had heard doors slamming and music playing as well.

“Oh God,” I uttered, clutching my stomach. “I rented a room from a freaking poltergeist.”

Damien opened his mouth to answer, but footsteps on the stairs made him stop and stand from the arm of the couch, facing the officer as he appeared.

“Well, I checked out the entire upper floor, attic, roof patio, and balcony,” the cop announced, tossing Damien’s keys back to him. “Everything looks clear. I’m gonna walk around the property on the outside ground level, and if that’s fine, I’ll just head out.”

Nodding at him, I forced a grateful smile and said, “Okay. Thanks for coming out. And...I’m sorry about...”

I motioned to the ceiling, but he waved a dismissing hand and shook his head. “It’s okay. Clearly, you didn’t know.” Sliding his gaze across the room, he sent Damien a condemning glance. “*Someone* should’ve told you.”

In response, Damien wiped both hands over his face, looking stressed.

I bitterly muttered, “Yeah,” and narrowed my eyes at him as I kept my arms tightly crossed over my chest.

Damien dropped his hands and met my gaze, his shattered expression making my own chest hurt. We stayed that way, staring at each other—me glaring accusingly, him begging forgiveness with his puppy-dog eyes—until the cop walked out, leaving us alone.

As soon as the door shut behind him, I asked, “Why *didn’t* you tell me?”

His eyes went watery with regret as he lifted a helpless hand and let out a mirthless laugh. “How the hell was I supposed to tell you something like that?”

“*How?*” I snapped. “Oh, I don’t know. How about, *no, you didn’t rent a room from my sister; because she’s fucking DEAD.*”

I knew saying it out loud would make him flinch. And petty, vindictive me, that’s exactly why I did it. To hurt him. Because he was *killing* me right now.

I’d been falling for him, and he’d done nothing but lie to me.

“The first time I met you,” he started defensively. “I thought you had to be some kind of con artist, lying to scam me.”

“Scam you out of *what?*” I cried incredulously.

“I don’t *know!*” he cried back. “That’s the biggest reason why I let you stay. I... I was going to play along to figure out what you wanted.”

I scoffed out a resentful laugh and shook my head. Then I glanced at him to ask, “And the *smaller* reason you let me stay? Because you just wanted to fuck me?”

“What? *No!*” His eyes flared with horror.

“Oh, so you *didn't* want to have sex with me the first time we met?” I charged, knowing that was a damn lie.

When his gaze flooded with guilt, I snorted acerbically and folded my arms over my chest so I could roll my eyes and shake my head with authority. “Which means you didn't tell me I was a schizophrenic who saw people that weren't really there because you were worried I *might* not sleep with you after that.”

“Oaklynn...” he scolded softly and stepped toward me. “Come on. You know better than that.”

But I held up a hand warding him off. “The only thing I know about you right now is that you're a fucking liar.”

Damien pulled up short and all the color drained from his face. I thought he was going to start bawling, but he sucked in a breath and lifted his gaze to me with bright red misery ringing his eyes. “The *other* reason I didn't say anything during our first meeting was because I wanted it to be true.”

“You wanted *what* to be true?” I asked, shaking my head. “You wanted me to be able to see ghosts?”

He nodded sadly. “Yes. Every single other tenant made impossible claims about unexplained activity here—and there *have* been a lot—but you were the first one who said you actually *saw* her. That you talked to her and interacted with her. So I thought—”

When he broke off abruptly, I shook my head. “You thought *what?*”

He sighed sadly and looked down at his hands before admitting, “I thought you could help me.”

“Help you?” I whispered.

With a nod, he glanced up. “Her killer was never caught. We have no idea who did this to her, and I...” Taking a breath, he motioned toward me. “You know that file and picture you saw in my chest at the end of my bed? That's a copy of her case. And that picture... That's what he did to her.”

“Oh God,” I uttered and pressed both hands to my mouth.

Damien nodded, agreeing with my horror. “I did go into my major hoping to find her killer. It’s all I’ve wanted for ten years. And to suddenly meet someone who *might* have the ability to simply *ask* her...”

He shrugged as if he couldn’t expect to be hated for that wish.

And he wasn’t.

I despised him for the lies.

“Yet not once did you ever ask me to do that for you?” I said.

“Because...because...” When he glanced at me as if asking me to read his mind, I shook my head, having no idea what he was trying to say.

“Because why?”

“Because I *liked* you,” he said simply. “And you had no idea what you were capable of. I—I didn’t want to scare you off. And so...getting to just *be* with you grew more important to me than learning the truth about Thalia. I’d lived without finding her killer for ten years. I knew I could suffer through the not-knowing. But I couldn’t handle losing you. And this... This was going to change your entire life.”

He was definitely right about that. Nothing was ever going to be the same again.

Panicked and petrified by that thought, I sniffed at the few tears that were starting to fall, and I glanced away as I miserably wiped at them.

“How could I be the person who flipped your entire world upside down?” he asked softly.

“Oh...” I drew out sarcastically as if all my questions had been answered. “So you stayed quiet for *me*. To protect my tender little feelings? Is that it?”

What bullshit.

I scoffed out my disbelief and ran a hand through my hair as I glanced away again to keep a bigger monsoon from streaming down my face.

But when Damien didn’t respond, my curiosity got the better of me, and I glanced back, only to find him staring at me as if I’d just walloped him in the

head with a sledgehammer.

“Jesus, you’re right,” he uttered. With a slight shake of the head, he admitted, “I didn’t do it for you at all, did I? I did it for me. Oh God...” He gripped his head and bent slightly, taking a step back before he lifted his gaze back to me. “Oaklynn...”

“Wha...what do you...? *Explain*,” I demanded with a shaking voice.

He straightened to his full height and met my gaze with bleak, lost eyes. “At first,” he started slowly, “I wanted to protect myself. If you were trying to scam me and hurt me, I was going to be ready for it so you couldn’t. But then...then...” He shook his head as his face crumbled with pain. “Then, when I realized you were legit and you honestly didn’t know she was gone, I didn’t tell you because...because... You’re right. I wanted you, and I wouldn’t get to be with you if you found out the truth. But after that, it just...”

He pressed his lips together and winced as he swallowed before he began to rock himself slowly. “It got real, and I fell in love with you.”

All the heat drained from my face, and it left me cold straight down to the depths of my soul.

“No!” I growled, pointing at him. “Don’t you fucking dare say that to me.”

But he shook his head as if there was nothing else he *could* say. “I fell so fucking hard that I got scared,” he admitted. “I knew you were going to leave when you found out. I knew I was going to lose you. And I...” He shook his head jerkily. “I couldn’t lose you. So I...I...”

When his voice seemed to catch in his throat, I wiped a tear from my cheek and whispered, “You *what*?”

His gaze slid back to me, and he looked to be in shock. A dazed, guilty shock. “So I tried to make you fall too,” he grated out, “in the hopes that maybe you’d forgive me when you learned the truth because your feelings for me would...would override my stupid silence. But...”

Shaking his head, he squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth before he cracked his lashes open so he could face me directly when he said, “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking about you at all. It was always about me and getting what *I* wanted. And I...”

Pressing a hand to his heart, he looked broken and sincere as he added, “I swear, it didn’t feel this awful and selfish as I was doing it. It felt as if that was what I *had* to do to keep from losing everything. But it was wrong, no matter what I thought, and I... I’m so sorry, Oaklynn. I’m so sorry for doing this to you. You don’t deserve it. Not at all.”

He sniffed and wiped a hand over his face as tears glazed his eyes. Then, he glanced away as he waited for my response.

But I didn’t give him one. I couldn’t. Everything inside me hurt too much.

So I hugged myself and started to cry.

“Oaklynn...” he rasped in sympathy and stepped toward me. But I blocked him again with the power of my palm.

“No,” I said simply. “I think you need to leave.”

“But...” He shook his head, even as he stopped in his tracks. “I... I can’t leave you here like this. Not now. Please. Ask me anything but that. You’re upset and shaking. Tonight’s been—”

“I said to get the fuck out!” I boomed.

Above us, the lights flickered ominously.

Protective big sister must not like me yelling at little brother.

At the moment, I was too pissed to care.

So I snarled, “Cut it out, Thalia. Don’t you start with me either.”

She was on my shit list too. She’d made me think we were friends. That she was *alive*.

More tears gushed down my cheeks as I realized the friend I’d made was dead.

When the lights abruptly stopped flickering under my command, I arched

an eyebrow at Damien.

“As you can see, I can handle your sister. I’ll be fine. Just as long as you’re gone.”

He wanted to say something. I could see it in his eyes; he didn’t want to leave. But he knew he didn’t have a winning argument against me. His eyes filled with tears, and his jaw shifted. “Are you sure? If you don’t want to be alone, I can—”

“I said *go!*”

“Okay,” he finally rasped in a hoarse voice and took a step back. “But call if you need...anything. And if you want to move out after this...”

I hissed, interrupting him by lifting a hand. “I just learned I can talk to ghosts. Can you just...let me digest that for a minute?”

“Of course,” he answered, quickly wiping at the wetness on his cheeks. “Sorry, I...” He dropped his hand and sent me an aching pain-filled smile. “I’m just really sorry, Oaklynn. About everything. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you.”

“Well, you failed at that, so...”

When my eyes started to well all over again, Damien’s features crumbled.

I covered my eyes with my hands and groaned, “God. *Why* are you still here?”

When I dropped my fingers to glare, he winced at me with fear in his eyes. “Are we...?” he tried to ask. “Are you and I...?”

But he couldn’t get the whole question out, and that was a good thing. I probably would’ve thrown something at him if he dared to ask about our relationship status right now.

“Get...out.”

Clamping his mouth shut, he bowed his head and nodded. Then he silently started toward the door. I glared after him the whole way until he was gone and the lock clicked quietly behind him.

Completely ruined, I wilted onto the couch and sobbed as hard as my

body would let me.

OAKLYNN

I was so upset with Damien and his lies and betrayal that I think I cried for a good hour before I remembered I was alone in a notoriously haunted brownstone.

I was alone in the home where someone had been brutally murdered.

A shiver went up my spine as I recalled the screams and begging and choking sounds that had come from Thalia's room. That was how she'd sounded when she'd died.

And the door to her room was probably still standing wide open at this very moment.

The air around me seemed to grow charged with an eerie silence. I hugged myself and glanced left, then right. Everything looked completely normal, yet my breathing started to escalate. I wanted to leave, but I had nowhere to go.

Damien's place was absolutely out of the question. Jaylani would never believe my story. She'd call me crazy and probably try to have me seek professional help. I didn't know Raina well enough to unload something like *this* on her.

And honestly, I was too frozen with fear to even move.

Hell, I was almost scared enough to call Damien and make him come back to get me. He'd been rocking enough guilt when he'd left; he'd

probably do just about anything for me right now.

But honestly, my phone was upstairs, and there was no way I could go up there right now.

I was gearing up to have an epic meltdown when a muffled voice from above called, “Oaklynn? Is that you?”

I gasped, jumping clear out of my skin because it was Thalia’s voice.

Thalia who was dead.

It couldn’t be a live human impersonating Thalia either. I’d seen her empty room; where the hell would she have hidden this whole time? The police officer had just searched everything up there, too, and hadn’t found anyone else on the premises.

Footsteps landed on the stairs. “Girl, what’re you doing up at this time of night?”

When she appeared, she was wearing an overly conservative, button-down pajama top with little sloths on it and matching flannel pants. Yawning, she scratched the back of her mussed hair as if she’d come straight from bed, and she trudged barefoot toward the couch to slump down on the other end.

I gaped at her for the longest second, wondering what was wrong with me. Maybe I had a tumor in my brain, and all this was in my head.

But she looked so freaking real. And nothing else in my life felt muzzy or off. It was all clear and normal.

When she stopped fussing with her hair and dropped her hands into her lap to give me some sleepy-eyed attention, I cleared my throat, realizing I needed to speak.

“I, uh...sorry if I woke you. I just... I couldn’t sleep.” She was acting as if I hadn’t just yelled at her to leave the lights alone and that she hadn’t just awoken me from a dead sleep with her screams of terror.

So...maybe she didn’t remember the other stuff we’d gone through tonight. Hell, maybe she didn’t know she was...

Dead.

Going with that theory, I decided to just treat her like my roommate. Like a normal, living roommate.

“I had a fight with my boyfriend,” I admitted.

Thalia sucked in a sympathetic breath. “Damn, honey. I’m sorry. Did he cheat?”

Wiping residual wetness off my cheeks, I shook my head. “No.”

She scooted a little closer, beginning to look worried. “Hurt you?”

“What? *No.*”

“Call you fat? Degrade you? Cross a personal boundary?”

I winced.

Because when she said it like that, it sounded as if I had a stellar boyfriend because I knew Damien would never do *any* of those things.

“He lied,” I cut in before she could convince me that I was being ridiculous for getting upset with him in the first place. “He kept something major from me that is going to change my life as I know it.”

“Huh...” Thalia looked stumped by that. “Well, that’s not good either,” she admitted as she brought up a fingernail to her teeth to chew on. “It sounds as if he was preventing you from becoming your true self.”

“Yeah,” I admitted glumly. “I mean, I’m still me,” I added after a moment. “But...different.” I really didn’t know how to explain it. “I’m just... confused,” I concluded with a sigh.

“Well...” Thalia started as she bent her legs up to rest her feet on the couch and hug her knees to her chest. “Whenever I feel lost, like I’m questioning my own existence, I like to go back to my roots.”

“Your roots?”

She nodded. “Yes, ma’am. That’s the perks of having a solid, supportive family. They’re always there when you need them to remind you who you are. You said you had good parents, didn’t you?”

“I do,” I admitted, smiling as I thought of them. But they were six hours away right now.

“Man...” Thalia murmured nostalgically. “Whenever I’m feeling down, I just want to go home and ask my mom to make me some saganaki. She always made that for us when we were glum.”

Curious about this woman who would also be Damien’s mother, I asked, “What’s saganaki?”

“Oh my God.” Thalia rolled her eyes and rubbed her stomach. “Fried cheese. You cut it up into these thin slices, drag it through some flour, and then fry that sucker to perfection. It’s a Greek dish.” With a roll of her eyes, she added, “My mother clings to her Greek roots. But I guess with a maiden name like Thanopoulos, maybe it’s required.”

I smiled over her joke, beginning to miss my own mom with her Latin roots.

“I think I *will* call my mom,” I said to myself. “First thing in the morning.”

Thalia didn’t need any more explanation than that. She merely nodded. “Good. You should. But until then...want to finish *Pitch Perfect* with me to help you get back to sleep?”

I couldn’t press her to ask how she knew I’d already been to sleep once tonight. I couldn’t come right out and ask about the screaming, the empty bedroom, the fact that she was no longer alive.

Because I really didn’t want to upset the harmony we had going. At the moment, I just wanted to make it through the night. And she was offering to help me.

So I let her.

“I’d like that. Thanks.”

The next thing I knew, the television along with the faux fireplace flickered on, and the movie began to play exactly where we’d left off the last time we’d watched it together.

“Here,” Thalia called before a throw pillow came lobbing my way. “Get comfy. We can fall asleep on the couch like we’re having a regular old

slumber party.”

I nodded. “Sounds perfect.”

Dragging the lap blanket off the back of the couch, I wrapped it around me and laid down with my head on the pillow that my ghost roommate had just given me. Glancing over, I saw her doing basically the same thing on the other end of the wrap-around couch.

We smiled at each other, and then simultaneously returned our attention to the movie.

I knew it was strange; the only person who’d alleviated my fears was the very spirit haunting my apartment. But it worked, so I appreciated the company.

And I fell unconscious probably within the next fifteen minutes, sleeping deeply.

When I woke, it was morning and my phone was sitting on the arm of the couch next to me. Thalia was nowhere to be found.

I nodded, getting the message.

“Okay,” I called aloud. “I hear you.” Tucking my unruly hair out of my face, I sat up and glanced toward the daylight coming in around the edges of the curtains. Then I checked the time on my phone.

At ten on a Saturday morning, Mom would be doing laundry, stripping beds, gathering all the towels around the house, and digging out Dad’s socks from between the couch cushions. So she should definitely be around.

When I called, she answered on the third ring.

“Hey, baby girl,” she answered breathlessly. “It’s so good to hear from you.”

“Hey, Mom.” I closed my eyes and exhaled in relief. It was good to hear from her too.

“So how’s college?” she asked. “Have you been on any more news reports? Dad and I watched the YouTube recording of your first one at least twenty times, I swear. You just did so good.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, warming with affection. “And yeah, I should be getting a segment on air every other week now. We plan to record my next report on Tuesday.”

“Oh my goodness, *Oaklynn*. That’s amazing. I’m so proud of you. We’re both just so...very proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I repeated, wishing I was sitting in her kitchen instead of half the state away. I really missed her today.

“So...what’s up?” she asked, somehow knowing I needed some serious guidance right now.

“I... Well...” When I stalled out, not sure what to say next, she sighed.

“Uh oh. What’s wrong, baby girl? Is it Damien?”

“Damien?” I repeated in surprise, wondering how she could even know that. “What makes you think anything’s wrong with Damien?”

“Well, he’s technically your first serious boyfriend. There’s gonna be a learning curve with that. So...what did he do?”

I bit my lip, not sure if I wanted to malign Damien to my parents quite yet.

After a good night’s sleep, the only wrong thing I could accuse him of was trying to protect himself from getting hurt.

Besides, he wasn’t what my brain was revolving around right now.

So I said, “Mom...?”

And she answered, “Yes, dear?”

“I have a strange question.”

“I’d be surprised if you had a normal one.”

“Hey!”

She laughed. “Joking, I’m joking. What’s your strange question, darlin’?”

I bit my lip, not wanting to ask it now, but then my curiosity got the best of me. “What are your thoughts on...ghosts?”

“Ghosts?” She sounded as if she’d been struck from left field on that one.

I closed my eyes and pressed a hand to my head, then shrugged.

Because...what the hell. I'd already started the conversation. "Yeah. Do you, maybe...believe in them?"

My mother was quiet for a moment, then she exhaled loudly. "I'm going to tell you a story. About your dad's grandma, Emilia."

"Ooh! Yaya..." I said, remembering her with a fond smile. "I used to love it when she would come and have tea parties with me. Oh God, she taught me how to make the *best* tea. What did she have me put in it again...?" I snapped my fingers. "Cinnamon! That's it."

And now I was craving Yaya's *Té de Canela* recipe.

Mom was quiet for a moment before she said, "Sweetie, Emilia died twenty years before you were born."

"What?" I dropped my phone from my suddenly limp hand.

Fumbling to retrieve it before she hung up on me, I pressed the receiver back to my ear in time to hear, "...It started when you were four. You'd say you wanted Yaya to come back and play tea with you. That's exactly what your father said he used to call her, too. Yaya. And when he asked you more about her, you described her perfectly, saying she wore a coral and pearl necklace and smelled like lemons, which was what he remembered most about her as well. Except no one had ever mentioned her to you before. There was no possible way you should've known any of that or even who she was."

"Oh God," I uttered.

"But what really shook your father," my mom went on, "was when you told him that she had a message for him; that she'd seen him take her La Catrina figurine, but it was okay because she wanted him to have it, anyway."

"So..." I asked. "Had he really taken the figurine?"

"Of course. He said he only intended to borrow it and show it to one of his school friends, then put it back, but then she died, and he could never return it."

"Wait." I frowned. "Are you talking about the little knickknack that's sitting on the mantle in the front room?"

“The very one,” Mom answered. “Until you passed that message along to him, he’d had it hidden away in a chest for years, too guilty about taking it in the first place to let anyone know he had it. But when you told him she was okay with it being with him, he finally brought it out and put it on display for everyone to see.”

“No way,” I croaked. “That is just...” I could literally feel my hair start to crawl. “Jesus, Mom. I can’t freaking believe this. Why in the world did you never *tell* me any of this before?”

“Well, frankly, honey... It kind of freaked me out,” she admitted. “And I didn’t want to freak *you* out too. I mean, you never went through anything like that again, so apparently, you must’ve outgrown *whatever* it was.”

After blowing out a long breath, I answered, “Except...I don’t think I have. Mom, something really strange happened to me here.”

There was a pause, and then my mother released a breath. “Oh Lordy. Who did you see this time?”

Well, Thalia had been right; calling my parents had made me feel a lot better. After talking everything through with Mom, something inside me calmed. I knew I could handle whatever came next.

And refusing to be afraid of my own bedroom, I walked up the stairs.

The hallway was still *not* my favorite place in the brownstone. But reminding myself that the monster in the darkness was just Thalia, I felt better.

The door to her room had been shut. I tried the handle, only to find it locked again.

That was fine. I didn't want to go in there and see the eerie, empty walls, anyway.

"Thalia?" I called hopefully, wondering if I could just get her to appear whenever I wanted.

But no one answered.

So I trudged to my room and took a long shower.

That night, I slept in my own bed, and everything was okay. Except Thalia didn't show herself to me for the rest of the weekend.

Damien stayed away too. He didn't visit, didn't call, didn't text.

I had told him to get out, so he'd followed my order to a T, giving me all that space that I had demanded.

I wasn't sure what to think of that. I was still confused where he was concerned.

But, just because I got nothing from the Archer siblings didn't mean I had no visitors at all.

On Sunday afternoon, a knock on my door had me curiously wandering to the front window to peer out the curtain and see who it was.

And the six guys gathered on my front step immediately had me groaning.

"Are you freaking serious?" I muttered aloud as I went to the door and threw it open.

Damien had sent his *friends* to talk to me? That felt low. Lower than low. Because I really liked his friends. Even though, technically, they'd lied to me just as much as he had.

I hadn't been dating any of *them*, though, so their deception didn't feel quite as traitorous or traumatic.

Folding my arms over my chest, I sent them all an aggrieved glower. "What?"

Alec and Foster immediately cringed back with shame-filled eyes.

"Just so you know," Thane started, lifting his hands in surrender. "Damien didn't send us. He has no idea we're here. And this has nothing to do with him, okay?"

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Why do I find that impossible to believe?"

"It's true," he insisted. "We're here to apologize for not telling you either. I mean, we all knew and stayed silent. That wasn't fair to you."

I chewed on the inside of my lip as I went around, taking in all their expressions. When I saw varying degrees of apology and some outright guilt, I loosened a little more.

"So he told you what happened?" I asked.

"Yeah," Thane answered softly.

"Not that he *had* to," Foster spoke up. "He's been such a mess that it was

fairly obvious you found out the truth. I have honestly never seen him this destroyed before.”

I swallowed thickly, just as Keene agreed with a snort. “No doubt. If falling in love hurts that bad, count me out.”

Hugging myself, and determined not to feel anything from hearing how miserable Damien was, I shied a step back.

But Thane saw me flinch.

“Hey, no,” he cut in. “We aren’t here to advocate for Damien, I swear.”

Parker scoffed. “Then why the hell *are* we here?”

“For Oaklynn,” Thane stressed from between gritted teeth as he sent Parker a hard glance. “To see if she needs anything and to apologize for our part in lying to her.”

“Yeah...” Parker drew out with an encouraging roll of his hand. “But we’re only doing all that in the hopes of buttering her up so she’ll want to forgive *Archer* next.” Glancing at me dryly, he added, “Don’t listen to Eisner. He thinks he can be all sanctimonious and high-road right now because he’s the only one of us who outright told Damien to be honest with you. But even *he* wants you to forgive Archer.”

“Hey, I tried to give her a subliminal message to tell her what was up,” Alec argued and lifted his eyebrows at me as if I should *praise* him or something. “Remember the ghostly movie choices I gave you the first night you were at our house, huh? That was me trying to point you in the right direction. So I should be forgiven just as much as Thane is.”

“Not me,” Hudson spoke up with a non-apologetic shrug. “I outright warned him to keep it from you for as long as possible because I knew you were going to drop him flat when you found out the truth.”

“I didn’t drop—” I started to defend myself, only to break off abruptly because I wasn’t sure *what* I was going to do about Damien.

“So you *will* forgive him?” Foster wondered hopefully. “Eventually?”

“Look.” I hissed out a sigh and unfolded my arms to lift them

defensively. “I don’t know, okay. Right now, I’m just trying to get used to the fact that I—”

I broke off with a gnashing of my teeth when Carly Rae Jepson started playing from above us in Thalia’s room.

“Yep. I’m out,” Alec announced, backing away from the others with lifted hands. “Oaklynn, I love you. But I can’t... I hope you forgive Damien. I mean, me,” he added quickly. “I’ll edit as many news reports for you as you want, no matter what. But I don’t do the ghost thing. To me, they belong strictly in the movies. Not real life. ”

And with that, he turned away and jogged off down Bridleway.

“Scaredy-cat,” Hudson called after him.

“Thalia locked him in the back bathroom on the first floor for about five minutes once,” Keene explained to me. “He hasn’t come back since.”

Meanwhile, Thane was scratching his head as he glanced up at the second-story window above us. “That really is freaky how she does that.”

“Oh, man,” Foster said, smacking Hudson in the arm. “Remember that time when we were helping Arch move some shit up into the attic, and those two chairs on opposite sides of the room just...tipped over toward each other at the same time for no reason?”

Hudson cringed and hitched up his chin in acknowledgment. “I still have nightmares about it, yeah. Thanks for the reminder.”

I smiled softly as I watched them talk. It actually made me feel better that they knew what was up and were so accepting of my new...skills.

Listening to them made it seem almost normal.

“So...are you just going to keep living here?” Keene wanted to know, trying to glance over my shoulder and into the apartment. “With a...?”

Foster smacked him in the gut to get him to shut up. “Dude.”

“What? I’d be fucking freaked out if I were her.” His gaze shifted to me. “Why *ain’t* you freaked out right now?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Maybe because it’s just Thalia.” I wasn’t

sure how else to explain it. “She’s, like, the farthest thing from scary I’ve ever met. And I thought she was alive when I first met her. It’s pretty easy to just...keep thinking of her that way.”

“So are you going to ask her who killed her?” Thane wanted to know.

I blinked at him in surprise.

“I...” I’d been thinking about myself and my “new” abilities so much that I hadn’t even considered hunting down her murderer.

But now that Thane had asked, I knew it was the noble next step.

“I mean, I can try to,” I answered. “But she’s kind of the queen of avoidance. If she doesn’t want to tell me something, she won’t.”

They all gave a sad but understanding nod.

Finally remembering my manners, I took a step back, opening the door wider. “Hey, y’all can come in if you want; you don’t have to stay standing there on the front stoop.”

All five of the remaining men took a collective step backward, away from the door.

“Uh...no,” Thane declined for them with an uneasy laugh and wave of his hand. “We’ve all experienced unexplainable incidents in there, so we’re good, thanks.”

“I don’t know how Damien can handle going inside at all,” Keene said.

“Seriously?” I asked, amazed. “I’m telling you, Thalia wouldn’t hurt a fly. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

“Yeah, she’s a regular old Casper,” Parker muttered. “The woman screamed bloody murder at me the one and only time I tried to enter her room.”

Shaking my head, I scoffed. “And you called poor Alec a chicken.”

“Hey, he was the first to take off,” Hudson defended with a shrug. “That’s just the law of the pecking order.”

With a soft chuckle, I shook my head. “Alright. Go ahead and stay out there. You’re only going to make me feel that much braver.”

“Trust me, you’re the fucking *ruler* of bravery right now,” Thane assured. “We are legit in awe of you.”

I straightened and felt my face heat, flattered by the compliment. “Really?”

“For sure,” he added with a small bow. “And I know we didn’t come here to talk about Damien, but... He absolutely hated knowing you were over here, dealing with this by yourself. So if you ever need anything, please know you can come to any one of us, okay? We *will* help you.”

I blinked away tears as I sent them all a grateful smile. “Thank you,” I said. “Just you coming here now has already helped a lot. I was beginning to worry that nothing would ever be the same again, that I’d be this super freak with horrible supernatural powers I couldn’t tell anyone about, and...and... I was just scared that life as I knew it was over. I’d never be able to go back to the regular, old, normal me again. So it’s really nice that you’re not treating me like I’m a...”

“Oh, darlin’,” Thane said, stepping forward with his arms open to hug me. “This doesn’t change who you are at the core. You’re still you. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Any time.”

As he patted my back, Parker scoffed. “Can you tell he volunteers as an inspirational life coach with dysfunctional teens?” Tugging on Thane’s shoulder as he finished hugging me, he added, “Now step back, man, and give the rest of us a turn with her, will ya?”

“Alright, alright.” Thane let go of me and moved out of the way with a good-natured laugh. “I can share the love.”

When Parker stepped up next, with lifted eyebrows to ask if it was okay if he hugged me as well, I nodded and opened my arms.

“Just for the record,” he told me as he pulled me close. “I already thought you were weird. I mean, you gave awkward, quiet *Archer* the time of day.

But this...yeah, this doesn't make you any stranger than that."

"Of course, it doesn't. It makes you a badass," Hudson added, jerking Parker back so he could hug me next. "And the one person who's going to understand most just how truly awesome and unique it makes you is Damien."

"Ivey," Thane warned with a hard tone.

"I know, I know," Hudson stepped back with his hands lifted in surrender. "No endorsing Archer. I just had to get that out there. I'm done now."

Keene popped forward next. "Psycho ghost whisperer or not, I'd still do you," he swore with an ornery grin.

"Wow, thanks," I said dryly, only to grin and roll my eyes as I hugged him next.

"You are such a moron," Parker muttered, shaking his head as Keene stepped back.

"What?" Keene demanded. "I made her smile, didn't I?"

I glanced toward Foster who was hanging back almost shyly. But he stepped forward readily when we made eye contact.

"This paranormal stuff isn't as out-there and rare as you think," he assured. "I have a cousin who, I swear, is reincarnated from our grandma. And you could help a lot of people with what you can do. I mean, hell..." He shrugged awkwardly as he pulled me in for a hug. "Once you get this superpower of yours nailed down and figured out, maybe you could find my little brother for me. His body's still lost somewhere in the Gulf."

My lips parted in surprise.

But *help* people? I hadn't even considered that idea.

Foster sent me a seeking, hopeful glance as he stepped back, and I nodded to him. "I like the sound of that," I said. "Thank you."

My life wasn't ending at all, I realized.

It was just beginning.

OAKLYNN

The entire conversation I'd had with Damien's friends left me thinking for the rest of the day.

And that night, while I was tucked into bed and unable to get to sleep, I chewed on my fingernail indecisively.

It had really hurt to learn that Damien had kept something so huge from me. He'd had no right. I mean, this had been information about *me*.

On the other hand, I knew without a doubt that he would accept this new side of me. Hell, he already had before I even knew I had it.

That wasn't something I could say definitively about Jay or anyone else. She was the biggest skeptic I knew. I couldn't picture her *ever* believing this.

But he had *lied* to me.

How could I ever trust him again?

It got real and I fell in love with you.

As his confession echoed through my head, tears filled my eyes. I had a feeling that wasn't something he'd ever told another girl before. And sadly, I think I felt the same way.

"God, you are so stupid," I told myself as I grabbed my phone and dialed his number.

"Oaklynn?" he answered almost immediately with this aching gut-wrenching rasp of hope in his voice.

I closed my eyes and ground my teeth through my agony. Then I exhaled and jerked my lashes open. “You have some really persuasive friends, do you know that?”

There was a pause before he cursed under his breath. “Did they bother you? Fuck, I’m sorry. Which one was it? I’ll kick his ass.”

“Actually, it was the whole six-pack.”

“Wait... *All* of them?” he said in surprise. “Even—”

“Oh, Thane led the charge,” I answered, knowing that’s who he’d believe would be the least likely to approach me. “And it was all in the name of issuing their *own* apologies for keeping the truth from me, too.”

“I’ll tell them to leave you alone. I swear. I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“They were fine,” I assured. “They actually made me feel like less of a freak for having these new powers.”

Damien took a moment to quietly answer, “You’re not a freak. You never were and never will be. Oaklynn...”

He was going to try to get all personal and then coax me into forgiving him, I just knew it. And maybe I’d needed to hear his voice more than anything else, but I wasn’t sure about completely forgiving him yet, so I broke in abruptly, changing the subject.

“So I have a question.”

“Okay...” he answered uneasily.

“You said you had the file on Thalia’s case, right? Does it have *everything* about her murder investigation in there?”

“I, uh...I’m pretty sure it does. Why?”

“Just curious,” I answered, “But did there happen to be any suspects named *Josh*, by chance?”

“Josh?” he asked, sounding confused.

“Yeah.”

“No. Not at all.”

“You sure?”

“I’m positive. I have the file memorized from front to back. Who’s Josh?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted honestly. “It’s just...Well, when I *thought* Thalia was still alive, I overheard what sounded like a phone conversation she was having with someone through the door to her room.”

After I told Damien what I’d heard, he admitted, “That definitely sounds suspicious, but I don’t remember her mentioning any Josh. I’ll search around and see if I can figure out who he might’ve been.”

“I will too,” I added readily.

But Damien sounded hesitant when he replied, “You really don’t have to —”

“I want to,” I cut in bluntly. “For Thalia. I know this sounds stupid, but...” Tears filled my eyes. “She became my friend. And she deserves justice. Besides, there’s a fucking murderer out there. What if he’s killed other people since her? We need to catch him.”

“Fuck, I’m not going to convince you to let me look into this *alone*, am I?”

“Nope,” I said, glad he knew better.

“Just... Whatever you do, be careful,” he warned. “There’s a psychopath at the end of this trail. He didn’t just kill my sister; he fucking mutilated her. And to be honest, I don’t want you anywhere near that.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assured. “Trust me. Researching shit is my major, remember?” But saying that aloud made me wince. “Which makes me feel like a complete failure at the moment, but whatever.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you just type Thalia’s name into any online search engine, and about a million hits come back, detailing what happened to her. And I didn’t look into her once.” I’d looked up Damien on social media and researched ghosts in town, but I hadn’t once considered checking into my own roommate. “What the hell kind of investigative journalist does that make

me?”

Damien grew guiltily quiet before saying, “I really am sorry I didn’t tell you. There were a million opportunities, and I talked myself out of confessing every single time.”

“Yeah, well...” I sighed dismally. “I probably would’ve thought you were loony if you *had* told me. But just so you know, it turns out you’re not the only person who kept my abilities a secret from me.”

After I shared my mom’s story with him about Yaya, he groaned and said, “Shit. I’m sorry, Oaklynn. Has *anyone* in your life been honest with you?”

“It makes me wonder,” I agreed with a mirthless laugh, only to grow somber so I could add, “I don’t know why, but your lie wrecked me *way* more than my mom’s did.”

“Fuck,” he breathed from a broken voice. “It’s absolutely killing me that I did this to you. I wish I could... *Is* there anything I can do to fix this? Because I will do it. I will do...anything.”

“Wow.” I blew out a low, impressed whistle. “Kind of a lot of power you’re giving me there, Archer.”

“Newsflash, Vargas,” he shot back with a sexy, husky chuckle. “But you’ve always had this power over me. From the very first moment you aimed those dimples my way, I was yours. I’ve been yours from the absolute beginning.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I hugged myself and blinked out a tear. “Damn you, Damien. Stop being so fucking nice and perfect and amiable right now. I’m trying to hate you.”

He cleared his throat remorsefully. “Sorry. I...sorry.”

I hissed out an amused sound. He was still doing it, but I adored it, so I didn’t say anything else.

“You’re not alone, are you?” he spoke up suddenly. “I just... I can’t handle the idea of you going through this alone. Did you at least call Jaylani?”

I know you two are supposed to be on a break, but this seems bigger than that. You need her. I mean, nothing's ever made me feel better like having my asshole friends around being stupid and annoying and just...wonderfully supportive."

I sniffed and wiped at my eyes. "You do have some pretty awesome friends."

"Borrow them whenever you like," he offered immediately. "Especially any of the ones that live with me. They're playing foosball right now at full volume, and I can tell Keene's been winning. He is so obnoxious and annoying when he wins at foosball. I wouldn't mind a decent break from him for a while, to be honest."

I laughed. "I might take you up on that, then, because there's no way in hell I can tell Jay about *any* of this. She is an adamant denier of all things *other*."

"What about that other girl? Lainie? Or Rainy? Or..."

"Honestly," I muttered before huffing out a long breath. "The only person I want to be around right now is...sadly...you."

After a beat, he quietly said, "I could come over. Do you want me to come over?"

The hope in his voice made me cringe and start to crumble. But then I held firm and said, "No. Not a good idea. I'm not ready to forgive you yet, and if you came over right now, I'd just end up having sex with you."

"I wouldn't let you do that," he swore.

I sniffed. "As if you'd be able to stop me."

"Good point," he agreed after a moment, and I could literally hear the wince in his voice. "I wouldn't."

"Oh, I know. But... Could you stay on the line with me until I fall asleep? I think I could handle that."

His voice cracked as he answered, "I would be honored."

"Could you tell me about Thalia," I asked.

He was quiet for a second before he rasped, “Of course. What do you want to know?”

“Everything,” I said. “Whatever you couldn’t tell me before.”

“Well...” He blew out a long breath. “She was ten years older than me, but...she was my entire world.”

I swallowed thickly, hearing the sadness in his voice.

“I was a shy, insecure kid who didn’t know how to make friends. My parents tried to put me on a couple of ball teams, but that just made me feel worse. It seemed so easy for the other boys to get along with each other, and I couldn’t figure out how they did it. Thalia got me, though. She liked being a star who put on a show, and I liked following her around like a fan, always willing to be her captive audience.”

“So she was the outgoing extrovert to your shy introvert?” I said.

“Definitely. But it wasn’t always about her. She’d do things with me that I liked too: take me to my favorite movies, go to eat at my favorite restaurants, play my favorite board games. Which made it hard on me when she moved into Aunt Iris’s brownstone for her freshman year of college. I really missed having her around all the time. It never got better either. She grew more involved in university stuff, and it felt as if I never saw her anymore.

“Then, one time when she was home, borrowing money from the parents, she stopped by my room to say hi, only to find me moping around, wishing the next Rick Riordan book would release early. So... Wanting to cheer me up, she offered to let me come stay with her for a week or so over winter break. Then, we’d go home together to open presents on Christmas morning.”

Realizing the story was heading toward her death, my stomach tightened. “Damien,” I said softly, trying to let him know he didn’t have to talk about it if he didn’t want to.

But he kept going.

“I was so excited to get her all to myself for a while. It was December,

Friday the thirteenth, and my mom dropped me off in the back that evening after school got out, only to take off before I'd even reached the door. It was locked, but I had a key so I let myself in.

“The island wasn't there back then, and we had this long, ten-foot table in the kitchen part instead. Thalia had some donuts sitting on it. She knew they were my favorite, so I started to eat them, thinking they had to be for me.

“And while I was standing there, stuffing my face, I heard a thump upstairs. I didn't think much of it. I remember looking up and calling her name to let her know I was there. Then I heard footsteps. I thought it was her, but when she never came downstairs, I got curious and headed up.”

“Damien, you really don't have to—”

“She was still alive when I found her.”

“Oh God.”

“He'd stripped her naked and raped her, then cut her from sternum to pubic bone, straight down the middle. Plus, he slit her wrists, her throat, and ankles...like some kind of lab experiment, like he was dissecting a...frog...or something.”

I shook my head and clapped a hand over my mouth as tears filled my eyes.

“Her eyes were open, but I don't think she could see anything anymore. She wasn't able to speak either. All she did was gasp out this wheezing sound, and then... She died before I could even turn back around and get help.”

“Holy shit, Damien,” I breathed. “So that was probably the killer, escaping out the roof exit that you heard. Fucking hell, you're lucky he didn't go after you too.”

“Probably,” he admitted in a lifeless voice. “Didn't feel very lucky back then, though.”

“I can only imagine,” I admitted pathetically. “I am so sorry. How the hell are you able to go near this place?”

“Oh, I didn’t for the longest time,” he admitted openly. “I couldn’t. But joining the grief group helped. It was honest-to-God the best thing I ever did. It introduced me to my core group, and now I have friends I know I can trust with anything. Plus, I can talk about Thalia and remember good things about her. I only wish I could figure out *who* did it. And why.”

I bit my lip, and my gut burned with the need to help him figure it out too.

“Maybe this Josh person will lead us to some answers,” he said.

And I nodded immediately. “Yeah. Hopefully.”

“I used to be consumed with wanting to find him,” he admitted. “I read all the serial killer books, made one of those evidence boards with pictures and string on it. The remains of it are still under my bed. And I called the police department weekly, then once every few months after they turned it into a cold case. My friends made me get into running so I’d have another hobby, but nothing was as important to me as getting my sister some justice.”

“What finally made the obsession stop?” I asked because I certainly hadn’t seen this preoccupied side of him.

“It was the strangest thing,” he answered. “I was running one morning and came to her brownstone where I always turned around, but when I glanced over, I saw a face in the window that shouldn’t have been there.”

Realizing he was talking about me, I exhaled slowly.

“You were the first person who could’ve helped me get some real answers, and all I had to do was just *ask* you for help. But instead, I found myself wanting to enjoy simply being around you. I started to *forget* about Thalia for longer stretches of time, and instead of being so eaten up with needing to find her killer, I wanted to just focus on living life and getting to see you again.”

“Oh, Damien,” I mumbled sadly.

“I know,” he agreed. “Being too afraid to tell you the truth fucked me over, but... You gave me a new purpose and taught me there was more to life. I think I really needed that. So I want to thank you. Just... Thank you for

showing me that I actually want more than just justice. Thank you for *everything*. Despite all the regrets I'm having right now, getting to be with you for the time I did is not one of them."

From the point on, I burst into tears like a leaky faucet.

AFTER CRYING MY WAY TO SLEEP, I WOKE THE NEXT MORNING WITH DAMIEN still on my mind.

I turned toward my bed stand and reached for my phone. The line remained open, and I could hear Damien's heavy, even breathing on the other end.

I smiled, honored that he'd kept his word and hadn't hung up on me.

"Good morning, Damien," I whispered. And when that had absolutely no effect on him at all, I whispered, "I love you." Because after last night, there was no stopping me from loving him. He was the undeniable axis of this new world in which I now rotated.

Then I quickly disconnected the line before I actually woke him up.

After showering and changing for the day, I went down to make myself some breakfast, knocking on Thalia's door as I passed.

"Morning, roomie. Rise and shine."

But she didn't answer.

I hadn't heard from her since she'd soothed my nerves on Friday after my big revelation...other than the music she'd played for the guys when they'd stopped by.

I wished she'd talk to me again.

I was ready and eager to start solving her murder now.

SINCE I HAD A BREAK BETWEEN CLASSES FROM NOON TO TWO, THAT'S WHEN I dove in.

I returned to the library. Except just stepping foot inside the front doors brought back all the memories of the last time I'd been here with Damien.

We'd been so delirious with happiness then, sneaking off to celebrate my news report.

But God, that felt like a lifetime ago.

Not sure where else to go for the next step in my mission, I headed toward the information counter.

The girl at the front desk was the same one who'd seen me and Damien sneak into the health room.

She was busy helping someone else when I walked up, and she had her back to the counter fetching something from a cabinet behind the desk.

When she turned around, she held a stapler. "Here you go, professor."

"Thanks, Waverly," the man answered, accepting it gratefully. "I'll get this right back to you."

When he turned away, I could see a stack of papers that looked like posters tucked under one arm. He didn't seem to realize I was there, so I had to back up abruptly to get out of his way as he mumbled something to himself and carried on as if he were stuck in his own world.

I glanced after him, watching him trudge to a bulletin board not far away and bend down to awkwardly set his posters on the ground. Then he meticulously picked up one sheet and began to staple it to the board.

When I turned back to the service desk, Waverly's eyes widened at me before she shifted a glance to the door of the health room and back.

Yeah, I wanted to say, I'm *that* girl.

But instead, I flashed her a bright smile. "Hi. Waverly, is it? I have a strange request."

"Okay..." she answered slowly, looking beyond suspicious.

"So I'm renting this room down on Bridleway near The FroYo Palace," I

started. “And I just learned a college student was murdered in that very apartment, like, ten years ago.”

“Oh, you mean the Haunted Brownstone,” Waverly answered as if she knew all about it. When I sent her a questioning blink, she shrugged. “I grew up in Westport. I was eight or nine when Thalia Archer was killed.”

Behind me, a clattering bang made me jump out of my skin.

I whirled around to see that the man at the bulletin board had dropped his stapler. His mumbling grew louder as he rushed to pick it up.

I turned back to Waverly, and she shrugged. “My mom wouldn’t let me ride my bicycle more than a block away from home for, like, a year after that.”

With an affected shiver, I said, “I bet. The killer was never caught, right?”

“They never even had a viable suspect,” Waverly answered with a sad shake of the head. “It was all so crazy. Nothing like that ever happens here, so everyone was super paranoid for a while. I think the university instituted a campus-wide curfew that stuck for the entire semester.”

“Wow,” I said. “Well... I, uh, I stumbled across this box of old stuff in the attic,” I lied because I didn’t feel as if I could come right out and tell her that I’d gotten my information straight from the mouth of a dead girl. “And I think it’s some of *her* stuff, you know...”

Waverly shifted closer with interest. “Really? Wicked. So have you ever seen any paranormal activity? I hear freaky stuff happens there, like, all the time.”

I shrugged out a hesitant wince. “Well... Yeah,” I admitted. “I might’ve seen and heard some...things.”

Eyes growing wide with awe, Waverly murmured, “That is so cool.”

“I guess,” I agreed with a wince. If you were the type of person who actually got into that. “But at least she seems to be a friendly ghost, so...” I shrugged. “I don’t know if it means anything at all, but I found some papers, like, letters maybe...”

And I almost bashed myself over the head for that really vague, confusing explanation. Library Girl was going to see right through me.

But Waverly seemed wholly invested in whatever I had to say. Leaning forward, she nodded. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. And it made me think she was having some kind of...relationship, possibly...with a married professor on campus. And she was threatening to expose him to his wife.”

Waverly gasped. “No way. And *that’s* why he killed her?”

I shrugged and bit my lip. “I don’t really know. I don’t know if he’s even the one who killed her, but... It kind of sounded like it *could* be him.”

“It does.” Bobbing her head in agreement, Waverly seemed totally on board with the idea. “That *definitely* sounds like something that should be explored.”

“Right?” I agreed, pointing at her. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. So I was wondering how I could go about getting a list of all the faculty on campus ten years ago who had the first name Josh.”

Eyes widening more, Waverly leaned in and whispered, “Was *that* his name? The married professor who—”

When I nodded, she shifted back again, looking stunned. “This is big,” she said. “If we could figure out who he was, we could solve a ten-year-old murder mystery.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, only to make a face. “Or it could be a dead end.”

“I’m going to research and see what I can come up with,” she stated decisively.

“That would be awesome,” I said, getting excited. “Can I give you my number so you can let me know what you find?”

“Sure.”

She pulled up a post-it note and pen, and I jotted down my name and number before handing her the sheet.

“I’ll get right on this,” she swore, lifting the paper to let me know she

meant business.

“Thanks. I really hope we can find something. To give Thalia a little peace, you know.”

“And her family too, I bet,” Waverly agreed.

Exactly. I swallowed painfully as I nodded, thinking of Damien. I really wanted to help him solve this since he’d wanted it so badly for the past ten years.

“Looking forward to hearing back from you,” I called as I waved farewell to Waverly, who waved back as she answered the service desk phone that started to ring.

And that was that. I’d officially become a criminal investigator.

Feeling pretty awesome and proud of myself, I turned away to start for the exit, only to trip over something on the floor and nearly go sprawling onto my face.

After catching my balance, I glanced back to see what had tripped me, only to discover that the guy who’d been putting up the flyer with a bunch of beakers, test tubes, and dollar signs on it had left Waverly’s stapler abandoned on the middle of the floor in front of the bulletin board.

Gah. Some people.

I mean, way to burst my groove, man.

I picked up the stapler with an aggravated sigh and returned it to the counter, handing it back to Waverly, who smiled gratefully and murmured, “Thanks,” before answering a question on the phone.

And finally, I left the library, still feeling hopeful but maybe not quite as cocky and cool as I’d originally been.

Still. I had a feeling Waverly and I were going to get to the bottom of this, and sooner rather than later.

We were going to find Thalia’s killer.

OAKLYNN

For the rest of the day, I was lost in thought, unable to stop wondering what to do about Damien. I didn't want him to think that I would just excuse all his bad behavior and allow him to lie to me at will. But...I also wanted to forgive him.

I kept remembering the look on his face when he'd unlocked the door to Thalia's room. It had taken all his willpower not to run away. This whole thing had to have been pretty traumatic for him.

I mean, who really knew *how* you were supposed to act during a time like this?

I fully believed he'd just been doing the best he could. Although, I kind of *had* to believe that, otherwise I'd have to question every intimate moment we'd ever shared.

And I definitely didn't want to question those. They had been too real and meaningful. I'd fallen for him just as much as he'd fallen for me. And if I'd known something about him that would change his entire world, I honestly don't know how I would've told him either.

But the bullheaded stubbornness inside me absolutely wouldn't let me forgive him *today*. If I was *going* to, then he had to sweat it out for at least...a week.

Except I missed him *now*.

He'd spoiled me too much. All that time with him made me want to be around him more. I ached for the slightest glimpse.

And as soon as I got home that evening, strangely not scared—just lonely—Damien was the first person I wanted to call.

But I refrained and worked on homework—alone—before I made myself supper, went upstairs, put some pajamas on, then climbed into bed to scroll through my phone for a while.

I had tried all evening to start a conversation with Thalia, but she was being irritatingly quiet.

Just before I put my phone on the charger for the night, a text came in from Damien.

Good night.

I hissed out a long sigh, not sure if I should even answer. But then I typed out a quick, "*Night,*" and closed my phone app.

After turning off my bedside lamp, I settled down on my side and stared at the window where the soft glow of streetlights filtered into the room.

"Night, Thalia," I said aloud. "I miss you, too."

When she didn't answer, I closed my eyes.

Sleep didn't come immediately, but it felt as if I'd just dropped off when something jostled my shoulder roughly.

"Oaklynn!" A familiar voice whispered with urgency. "Come on, Oaklynn. Wake the fuck up. *Now.*"

A suddenly frigid chill swept over me, and I groaned, tugging the blankets higher over my shoulders. "Damn, Thalia. I'm trying to..."

Remembering that Thalia was no longer alive and therefore should *not* be nudging me awake, my eyes flew open. "Wha—?"

Before I could even finish the word, she warned, "Shh..."

Her face appeared in front of me, and she looked scared shitless.

"He's...in...the house," she whispered, trembling uncontrollably as her

gaze slid to my bedroom door.

I opened my mouth to ask what the hell she was talking about, but then I heard it. The wooden floorboards of the hallway creaked as if someone was sneaking past my damn door.

“Hide. *Now*,” Thalia commanded, her voice no longer quiet or guarded. “No fucking way is this prick doing to you what he did to me.”

Wait. *What!*?

Before I could ask if she meant what I thought she meant, she shoved at my sheets, and I felt the pressure as if she’d physically pushed me.

“Go!”

So I went. Without question.

I rolled off the side of the bed and landed with a silent thud on all fours on the carpet. My heart was racing so fast, it rushed through my ears, making it impossible to hear anything else.

And yet I still managed to make out Thalia’s voice when she told me, “Under the bed. Roll. *Roll!*”

I rolled, and the bed skirt brushed my face as I made my way under the mattress.

Once I was flattened on my stomach in my secure spot, I lifted my face enough to see the closed door that led into the hall. My breathing was so hard it sounded as if a tornado was approaching.

“Shh...” Thalia advised. I glanced over to find her lying on her stomach next to me, hiding as well. “Maybe he’ll think you’re not here and leave. Just breathe. Nice, even breaths.”

I opened my mouth to ask her who was in the hall when I heard the latch to my door click.

Attention zooming around, I watched in horror as my bedroom door silently creaked open. It paused briefly as if to make sure the sound didn’t wake me, then it continued until a boot stepped into the room, with dark pants covering the leg.

“Through your nose,” Thalia assured me. “Slow, quiet breaths.”

I went dizzy from how hard I concentrated on breathing silently through my nose.

“You’re doing great.”

I glanced at her, unable to stop shaking and wishing I could ask what the hell was happening and who was currently sneaking into my room.

The boots approached and halted inches from my face.

I held my breath, trying not to whimper.

Above me, the bed jerked as the blankets hanging down shifted abruptly as if maybe my guest had just whipped off the sheets and stabbed...the mattress.

A whispered curse followed.

The boots shifted as if he were looking around the room, searching the darkened corners for me.

“Phone, purse, and car are still here,” he mumbled in a strange guttural voice. “Meaning, *you’re* still here, aren’t you, little mouse? Just hiding from the cat in some hole in the wall, I bet. Let’s see... Are you...?” He moved away from the bed and finished with, “In the closet?” at the same moment he ripped the closet door open.

But I wasn’t in the closet, asshole. Try again.

Except he did try again. In the bathroom.

While he was in there, Thalia warned me, “He’s going to look under the bed next. Get ready to crawl out the other end and run, okay? I’ll try to distract him.”

“No, wait...” I hissed, reaching for her. “Don’t leave me. Thal...”

But my fingers caught air as she disappeared.

From behind me, that creepy voice announced, “There you are,” just as a hand wrapped around my bare ankle.

I shrieked and kicked out, hoping to dislodge him. But he merely caught my other ankle as well.

“Got you now, little mouse.”

He started to pull me out, and the carpet burned against my resisting skin.

Pain screamed along my stomach, elbows, and knees as I tried to grab hold of the fuzzy fibers under me, but I couldn't catch a good grip.

I managed to get one foot free, though, and I kicked him somewhere in the face, I think.

But that only caused him to shout out his anger and come back at me with fingernails that dug into my calves and raked through my flesh.

“Thalia,” I screamed. “Thalia, help!”

I was more than halfway dragged out from under the bed when the lights suddenly started to blink on and off. All the doors in the room banged shut and open and shut again, and my favorite ghost on the planet must've done something physical to my intruder because he suddenly cursed, “What the hell?” before abruptly releasing my legs.

“Now!” I heard Thalia shout over his shrieks of fear. “Oaklynn, go now. *Run!*”

She didn't have to tell me twice.

I rolled out from under the bed, scrambled to my feet, and streaked toward the door.

The lights were still flashing on and off, messing with my vertigo. My attacker was screaming as if the hounds of hell were after him, and my heart was beating so fast, I'm surprised I didn't have a damn heart attack.

I clutched the wall as I pounded down the stairs.

My phone, purse, clothes, and shoes were all upstairs, still in my room, but there was no way I was going back for them.

I did have the presence of mind to remember that I always left a spare key to my car hanging from a hook next to the back door, so I darted that way and snatched them as I passed by, unlocking the door, then shoving my way outside and hitting the electric locks on my car as I sprinted to the driver's side.

The lights in my upstairs room were still blinking eerily by the time I got my car started, so hopefully that meant Thalia continued to keep our visitor occupied.

Throwing the gears into reverse, I peeled out of my parking spot and then cranked it into drive before burning rubber and getting the hell out of there.

I didn't even think about where I was going; I just drove straight to Damien, sobbing uncontrollably the whole way.

The lights were off at his place, and the driveway was filled with automobiles, so I parked at the curb.

There were no other vehicles driving by on the road or behind me, so I was pretty sure I hadn't been followed.

But I stumbled out of the car as fast as I could, anyway, and raced up the front walk, barefoot, to frantically knock on the door and then find the doorbell to ring it a dozen times in a row, not letting up until I saw an interior light come on.

I knew I was hysterical and hyperventilating, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't remember ever being this scared in my life.

As soon as the door opened and I heard a startled voice saying my name, I launched myself at it, clinging pathetically and sobbing, "Damien."

But his chest felt all wrong. It wasn't nearly as filled out as Damien's, and his arms weren't nearly as muscular. Didn't matter. I latched onto the body, anyway, trembling uncontrollably and unable to stop crying.

I was so out of it. I couldn't see much but movement, vague blurs of color, and outlines of people.

"Here, sweetie," I finally heard what I thought was Hudson's voice rumbling beneath my ear. "Here's Damien for you."

From there, I was passed off into another set of arms, and finally, everything felt right.

This body felt like Damien's, smelled like Damien's, and it curled possessively around me like Damien would.

I'd found my way home.

"Damien," I sighed, melting against him and thankfully able to start settling down now. I rested my head on his shoulder and wrapped my arms around him like glue.

He held me back just as tightly, saying, "It's okay. I'm here. Shh... Everything's okay now."

DAMIEN

I didn't know what to expect when I was awoken by the doorbell peeling repeatedly partnered by the incessant knocking in the middle of the night. Maybe one of the guys—Thane drunk and missing Nova, Parker drunk and missing his parents, or Foster anxious about the big game he had coming this weekend.

But when Hudson reached the door just a few steps ahead of me and Alec and Keene, I was definitely taken aback by the hysterical Oaklynn who came flying through the entrance and latched herself to him as she shrieked my name.

“What the...?” I hurried forward, and Hudson met my gaze over her shoulder as he turned her into the room.

“Here's Damien for you,” he said as kindly as possible before he relinquished her into my waiting arms.

“Oaklynn?”

She didn't answer, simply curled herself into me so willingly that I closed my eyes and cupped the back of her head, holding her to my chest with everything I had.

She was finally home.

But she was also delirious and wildly upset, shaking hard enough to rattle my teeth. Her tears soaked my shirt, and she didn't seem to have any idea that

she was barefoot and wearing nothing but a spaghetti-strapped camisole and pink panties.

I stroked her hair, needing her calm. “Shh...” I soothed as gently as possible. “It’s okay. I’m here. Everything’s okay now.”

And over the next few seconds, her hold on me loosened and her hiccupping, stuttering breaths began to even.

“Dude,” Keene spoke up as he glanced down at her legs. “She’s bleeding.”

“Fuck.” I bent and hooked my arms under her knees before picking her up off the ground. “Oaklynn,” I murmured as I carried her into the kitchen and sat her on the table so her legs were hanging down and I could step back and see where she was hurt.

Scrapes coated both knees and shins. A handful of deep scratches were gouged into her right ankle. Blood dripped off her elbows. Her cheek looked scuffed. And red was soaking through the front of her cami at her abdomen.

I cupped her face tenderly in my hands and forced her to look into my eyes. “Baby, what happened?”

But she couldn’t seem to focus on my face. Her lips were trembling, her eyes were still glazed with shock and trauma, and she merely blinked at me repeatedly.

“She can’t talk yet,” I told the others as I pulled her back to my chest and hugged her. She burrowed against me and wrapped her arms around to grip fistfuls of the back of my shirt.

My friends gathered close, all of them also in their nightwear with their hair askew from sleeping. But their eyes were opened wide with worry.

“Alec,” I said, hitching my chin in the direction of my room. “Get a shirt or something for her, would you? And Keene...” He stepped forward eagerly, ready to help. “Find the first-aid kit.”

As he rushed off behind Alec, I added, “Hudson...”

All I had to do was glance at him for him to nod and start backing from

the kitchen. “Calling in reinforcements,” he promised before he also raced away, leaving me alone with Oaklynn.

Smoothing a hand over her hair, I exhaled roughly, not sure what was going on, but glad she was here and alive.

“Any better yet?” I asked as I pressed my lips gratefully to the top of her head.

She nodded and finally found her voice. “I... I’m sorry for coming here. I didn’t know where else to go. Actually, I didn’t even think... After I got in the car, I just ended up here.”

“Hey, no,” I assured, smoothing a hand over her hair. “It’s okay. You did the right thing. I wouldn’t want you to go anywhere else.”

“I got a shirt and shorts with a drawstring from your room,” Alec announced as he breathlessly rushed back into the room.

“Thanks.” I stepped away from her to take them from his hand, and his eyes flared with embarrassment as they shifted to Oaklynn.

“T-thank you,” she told him from a shaky voice as she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear with equally shaky fingers.

The color of her nipples was clearly visible under the light cloth of her top, and the French cut of her panties showed off the awesome curve of her thighs.

Alec cleared his throat and turned his back on us to give her privacy before answering, “Of course. Anytime.”

“Can you lift your arms?” I asked as I held up the shirt to pull over her head.

She rolled her eyes even as she raised both hands and said, “I can dress myself, you know.”

“Yeah, well, humor me,” I told her. “I need to do something to feel useful here.”

After sheathing her with one of my old 10K race shirts, I pulled her hair out through the head hole and smoothed it down her back as I smiled

tenderly.

She gazed back with red-rimmed eyes that seemed grateful and appreciative...but also still pretty traumatized.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead before kneeling in front of her and holding open the shorts for her to step into next.

She glanced down at the way I was holding them, and for some reason, I knew she was remembering that moment in the library's health room when I'd held her panties for her.

I knew I'd always remember it too; it had been the very moment I realized she was everything to me.

Tears flooded her eyes as if it hurt too much for her to recall, though.

Yet, she still slid off the table to place a hand on my shoulder and step into the shorts.

I tugged them slowly up her legs, wincing at all the scrapes and cuts I had to pull them over.

Keene exploded into the kitchen, nearly plowing over Alec as he entered.

"Got the first aid kit."

I took it and pulled it open, while both Alec and Keene crowded in on either side of Oaklynn as she crawled back onto the table. They sat next to her as I knelt in front of her and started with her legs, wiping them down with antiseptic.

"Thalia didn't...she didn't do all that to you, did she?" Keene asked when I moved to her elbows next.

I glanced up in surprise, not even considering the idea.

"What?" The question seemed to startle Oaklynn too. She blinked at Keene as if he were insane. "No way. She would never. She *saved* me, actually..." When I swerved my attention to her, she met my questioning glance with a wince, and said, "She saved me from the fully-living human who broke into the apartment and attacked me."

"Say *what*?" I lifted to my full height, and Hudson appeared at the

entrance of the kitchen, phone in hand.

Oaklynn glanced at her captive audience and bit her lip before she explained the entire story. When she finished by saying, “I’d be dead right now if it wasn’t for your sister,” legitimate tears filled my eyes. “She saved my life.”

“Jesus,” I choked out as I yanked her into my arms and held her tight, trembling with relief over the fact that she was okay but gritting my teeth with rage, wanting to hurt the fucker who’d broken into the brownstone.

When I buried my face in her hair, she petted my back and said, “I’m okay. Seriously, I’m fine now.”

“Should I call the police and ask them to come over and take a report?” Hudson asked in the middle of typing something on his phone.

I answered, “Yes,” at the same moment Oaklynn shook her head. “No. Please don’t.”

I whirled to her. “What do you mean, no? Yes, we’re calling the fucking police. Someone attacked you.”

“And this would be my second call to them in—what—four...five days. The last time an officer took a report from me, he said he’d arrest me if I pranked him again.”

“But neither call was a prank,” I insisted. “That cop believed you by the time he left.” Then I motioned to the claw marks around her ankles. “Besides, your skin is probably still under that fucker’s fingernails as we speak.”

Oaklynn let out a whimper of protest. “I just don’t want to have to explain how I escaped from my attacker.”

“Saved by a ghost *does* sound a little out there,” Alec agreed with a wince as he circled a finger around his ear, making the crazy sign.

When I sent him a dirty scowl, he quickly lifted his hands. “Not that I don’t believe her. I’m just saying...”

I turned back to Oaklynn and took her fingers. “We need to report this. What if they can figure out who broke in?”

“Yeah... About that.” Oaklynn cringed before she ducked her face and admitted, “I, um, I’m actually pretty sure I already know who it was.”

My eyes narrowed, and my protective instinct kicked in. “Who?” I growled.

Because tonight was going to be the last night the bastard drew air into his lungs.

But Oaklynn only winced some more. Then she glanced around at the other three in the kitchen and rasped, “I think it was...Thalia’s murderer.”

“Uh...” Hudson lifted a hand, looking very skeptical. “I have questions.”

But I merely shook my head. “What makes you think it was the same guy?”

She paused before answering, “Because when Thalia woke me up to warn me that someone was breaking into the apartment, she said no fucking way was she going to let the prick do to me what he’d done to her.”

“Oh Jesus,” I choked out, gripping my head and spinning away from the others to deal with the dizziness that assailed me. “Oh fuck.”

I’d seen with my own eyes what had happened to Thalia. It would haunt my memories until the day I died. But to imagine the same person who’d done that to my sister now targeting Oaklynn...

Nausea claimed me, and I had to rest my hands on my knees to catch my breath.

“But why would he go after *you*?” Keene was asking.

I straightened and turned back to the conversation, answering for her, “Because she got a lead on who the fucker might be from something Thalia told her.” Meeting Oaklynn’s concerned eyes, I growled, “You started asking around campus about this Josh guy today, didn’t you? *Son of a bitch...*” I gripped my hair and met her worried gaze. “You must be on the right track, and he found out about it.”

“Wait, I’m lost,” Hudson admitted. “What did you find out from Thalia? And who the hell is *Josh*?”

After Oaklynn explained her lead, Keene shook his head. “So who did Library Girl talk to about it?”

“I don’t know,” Oaklynn admitted, looking slightly worried. “I’ll stop by the library first thing in the morning once I reach campus and—“

“Oh, you’re not going anywhere near campus tomorrow,” I swore.

Not when a murderer was there, intent to make her his next victim.

“Damien.” She sighed impatiently. “I have a test tomorrow. And a news report to film. I can’t miss either.”

Before I could argue with her about it, the back kitchen door burst open.

Oaklynn screamed and launched herself at me.

I caught her in my arms and twisted so that my body was physically between her and whoever was entering.

But as soon as Foster stepped inside with a purple suitcase, he pulled up short and lifted his hands.

“It’s just us.”

Thane and Parker piled in after him.

“Hey, sweetie,” Thane greeted immediately, going to Oaklynn first and tugging her from my arms so he could give her a big hug. “How’re you doing?”

“I was very nearly killed by an intruder before being saved by a ghost, so—you know—as well as can be expected, I suppose.”

“The back door was hanging wide open,” Parker reported. “The front was still locked and bolted with the chain in place. There was blood smeared on the carpet in her room where he tried to pull her out from under the bed and stab marks on her mattress. Other than that, the place looked untouched.”

“No one was lingering inside *or* out,” Thane added as he let go of Oaklynn, who immediately sought me again.

I pulled her back into my arms as Foster brought the suitcase forward. “I grabbed your phone, purse, shoes, book bag, and a change of clothes. But if you need us to go back for anything else—”

“No, that’s...” Oaklynn waved a hand as words failed her. Then her eyes filled with tears. “Y’all have done more than enough. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Hey, you’re one of us,” Parker assured as he brushed his thumb tenderly over the bruised scrape on her cheek to wipe away a tear. “We look after our own.”

Her chin trembled as she glanced up into his eyes, and then she leaned against me and burst into tears. “I’m sorry. I just...”

Unable to contain her emotions, she turned to bury her face in my chest.

My own tremor went through me, and I almost started sobbing right along with her. I could’ve lost her tonight. She could’ve met the same fate that Thalia had.

Except my dead big sister had saved her.

I didn’t even know how to process that.

“That’s it,” I announced, glancing around the kitchen at my worried friends. “I’m going to get her into bed. She’s still pretty shaken. I think some sleep will help.”

“Yeah, man.” Thane tapped my arm. “Good idea. You go take care of her. We got this out here.”

I had no idea what they meant by *this*, but I nodded and accepted the suitcase that Foster passed over to me. Then I ushered Oaklynn from the kitchen, and she followed blindly where I led.

Once we reached my room, I asked if she wanted to sleep in something different. But she pulled my shirt tighter around her and insisted, “I want to stay in this. It smells like you.”

She lifted the cloth to her nose and breathed it in, only to pause with a squint before she repeated, “It smells like you...”

Her gaze rose to mine in surprise.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I smelled him,” she said. “Tonight. He smelled like...chemicals. Like a

darkroom. Like some of the journalism majors who develop their own pictures.”

I froze, not liking the sound of that. Just how close was this guy to her out there in the real world? “You think he’s a journalism professor?”

“I…” She shook her head. Then frowned. “I don’t know. I just know he had a very distinct smell.”

“We’ll figure it out tomorrow,” I swore. “For now, let’s just try to get some rest, okay?”

She nodded wearily and let me lead her to the bed. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to sleep again, but I *would* like to curl up on a soft mattress with about a million blankets on top of me.”

“You got it,” I assured. After I turned down the covers, she climbed in readily, and I tucked them right back over her.

Sitting on the mattress near her hip, I smoothed her hair down as I looked into her eyes which were still puffy and red. “Do you need anything else? A drink? Snack? More blankets?”

She shook her head, only for her gaze to move to my bookshelf. “So that picture you hid from me,” she started, focusing on the blank spot I still had up there. “It was of *Thalia*?”

“Yeah, but…” I exhaled before reaching down to pull the photo out from between the mattresses. “It was how *I* looked in it that I was trying to hide from you,” I admitted as I handed it over.

She flipped it around and sucked in a breath. “Oh my God. You were so cute and pudgy. Just look at those cheeks.”

I smiled vaguely. “Yeah.”

“Thalia looks exactly the same, though,” she added, glancing up. “I definitely would’ve had questions.”

I winced and scratched the back of my neck uncomfortably. “I’m sorry I let you assume we were twins.”

Oaklynn shrugged as if it didn’t signify before she sighed sadly. “It seems

so strange to me that I didn't know her while she was alive. Her personality's just so big and encompassing. I never would've guessed that she..."

"It doesn't sound like she's changed much," I admitted, glad for that. It would've sucked if she'd turned into a bitter, revenge-seeking spirit.

"Good," Oaklynn slurred, and her lashes wavered. "I'm glad I got to know the real her at least."

"Me too," I agreed.

When she shut her eyes completely, I leaned down and kissed her brow. She murmured an exhausted sigh, and I pulled away to stand up and leave, not really wanting to go but also curious to hear what my friends were planning in the kitchen.

As soon as I turned my back to the bed, however, Oaklynn sleepily asked, "Where are you going?"

"Oh." I paused and hung onto the doorframe as I glanced back. "I was just gonna crash on the couch tonight."

But she shook her head and reached out her hand. "Don't you dare leave me alone right now."

My heart jerked with joy, but I hesitated. "You sure?"

"Damien..." her tired voice warned. "Get in this bed. Right now."

That was all the prodding I needed.

Closing the door behind me, I returned to the mattress and lifted the covers to crawl in beside her.

Oaklynn immediately curled around me, and together, we sighed in unison.

It'd been way too long since we'd last cuddled like this.

"There," she murmured, already half out of it. "Now, I can sleep." And she went completely lax against me.

Gathering her close, I kissed her temple and then shuddered out a breath before a host of tears filled my eyes.

"Thank you," I rasped hoarsely, hoping I wasn't holding her too hard.

“Thank you for not dying tonight.”

I don't know what I would've done without her.

Without saying anything, she stroked my forearm and went back to sleep.

From there, I curled myself around her and thanked whoever was listening for keeping her safe and okay.

When I woke, my head was nestled on a firm, warm chest, my arm was slung across a flat abdomen, and one of my legs was thrown over a solid thigh with my knee coming to rest against a firm, phallic-shaped bulge.

Realizing I was wrapped around Damien, and he was hard as hell, I felt my pussy clench and then tingle in response, already preparing for all that delicious hardness.

My eyes fluttered open.

“Morning,” he rumbled under me from a sleep-logged voice as he stretched his arms over his head.

My knee shifted across his erection, and I nearly whimpered in need when it flexed under the contact. It’d been five days since he’d last been inside me.

That suddenly felt like *way* too long of a wait.

Lifting my face, I glanced up into his whiskey eyes. “How did you know I was awake?”

He smiled affectionately and drifted his fingers along my cheek. “Your eyelashes moved against my chest.”

“Oh.” I slumped my head back onto him until I could hear his steady heartbeat under my ear. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long.” He ran his hand over my hair. “Did you get any real rest?”

“More than if I’d stayed anywhere else,” I admitted.

His voice went hoarse as he answered, “Good.”

I turned more fully into him, no longer just curled up against his side but legit lying half on top of him. Resting my chin on his chest, I looked up into his eyes which sparkled with curiosity and hope.

“You know, I was going to make you suffer through *at least* another week before I forgave you for lying to me about Thalia, but you’re making it incredibly hard for me to hold out that long.”

When I smoothed my hand over his lap and then gripped him tightly through his shorts, he sucked in a breath and arched his back, his gaze going unfocused as he ground his teeth together.

“I’d be okay with you forgiving me now,” he confessed.

“Mm-hmm,” I agreed as I began to stroke him through the cloth. “After last night, I suppose you deserve a shortened sentence because of the way you took me in and didn’t argue with me when I didn’t want to call the police, and...for not arguing with me this morning when I tell you I *am* going to class today.”

At that last one, he wrinkled his brows and opened his mouth, probably to protest, but I slapped my hand over his mouth and started to straddle his lap, making sure my breasts slid up against his chest as I went.

“Trust me, Archer,” I warned him, letting go of him between the legs, so I could grind my pussy down on his cock instead. “You *want* me to forgive you.”

He heaved in a breath and shook his head insistently, groaning when I sat up to pull off the oversized shirt I was wearing along with the cami I had on under it. “Damn, you play dirty.”

But that sure didn’t stop him from reaching up to cup me in his hands and roll my nipples between his fingers.

“You know you want me,” I taunted, only to gasp when he pinched me

just enough to shoot pleasure down between my legs.

“I do,” he agreed before catching my waist and rolling me across the mattress until he was on top and pinning me to the bed. His eyes seared into mine. “But I don’t just want you today. I want you tomorrow and the next day and for the rest of my life. I can wait a week for your forgiveness if that’s what it takes to keep you alive and away from campus today.”

I started to scowl at him, only to gnash my teeth through a gasp when he ground his cock into my mound. “Oh God, I...Dammit, Damien. I’m *going* to school.”

And where the hell did he get off, using my own dirty tricks against me?

“I think that’s a bad idea,” he argued as he peeled off the shorts and panties I was wearing. “Can’t you just wait?”

“Until *when*?” I demanded, only to clutch his shoulders as he smoothed a hand between my legs to find me wet and aching. “Until he’s caught? What if it takes another ten years? I...mmm... I can’t live in a...fuck... I can’t live in a bubble forever.”

Damien didn’t immediately answer; he was too busy shedding his shorts and then returning to me. Once he was poised back between my thighs and cupping my face in both hands with the head of his dick pressed insistently at my opening, he looked into my eyes and said, “Thinking about you going anywhere near there today scares the shit out of me. Don’t you realize you hold my heart and soul inside you now? I will do anything to protect that.”

“Damien...” I whispered, swallowing thickly.

With a desperate rasp, he pressed his forehead to mine and pushed inside me.

I gasped, and the rest of our discussion was put on hold. I lifted my hips to meet each plunge, gripping his ass and holding him deeper and longer each time he thrust forward.

“Fucking hell,” he groaned. “I missed you, Oaklynn. I missed you so damn much.”

I nodded, beyond words, but feeling the exact same way.

Our bodies met and retracted, gaining a rhythm that had my senses soaring sooner than I wanted to get off. I wanted the pleasure to last, forever and ever, but the peak rushed up to snag me before I was ready.

And the next thing I knew, I was bucking under him and gritting my teeth, struggling against the orgasm as it claimed a part of me that I swear Damien would own for the rest of my life.

“God...” He collapsed on top of me, limp and drained and breathing hard.

I wrapped my arms around him and held him close until our bodies settled.

“I’m so sorry I lied to you, Oaklynn,” he whispered with his face nestled against my hair.

I exhaled and touched his cheek. “Don’t ever keep anything from me again.”

He shifted his face back and forth insistently. “I won’t. I swear.”

“Alright, then. I forgive you.”

“Thank you.” He lifted his face and looked up into my eyes. “And thank you for coming to me last night. You’re the air I breathe. I felt like I was suffocating without you. I love you that fucking much. But the idea of you going to class, of possibly getting hurt... Fuck, you wouldn’t just be putting yourself in danger today. You’d be risking what I value most. And I can’t... I just...”

When he squeezed his eyes shut, I cupped his face in my hands. “Hey...” I murmured before I traced his jaw with my fingers. “I love you too.”

His eyes flew open, and he drew in a harsh, dazed breath.

“And it scares me just as much as it scares you,” I added. “But we’ll be safe. We’ll do this any way you want to, we won’t take chances, and everything will be alright. Okay? I don’t plan on dying today.”

“I want to be able to track your phone at all times,” he insisted. “And if I can’t be with you, you’ll let one of the other guys hang out with you. You

don't go anywhere alone.”

“Deal.”

He still looked sick with worry, but at least he nodded, giving in. “Okay.

Grinning, I looked around his face, then plastered my mouth to his, kissing him hard.

AFTER SHOWERING AND DRESSING, DAMIEN AND I LEFT HIS ROOM, HAND IN hand.

In the kitchen, Foster and Parker were there with Hudson and Alec, and all four were gathered around the table, poring over an oversized piece of paper that had chicken scratch marks written on it.

Damien and I both jerked to a stop to blink at them in astonishment. “Do I even want to know what y’all are doing?” he asked.

“Strategizing our game plan,” Foster announced with a big grin as he straightened to lift his attention from the sheet. Using the marker in his hand, he started to point. “Here, we’ve put together all our class schedules, and it looks as if we can have someone keeping Oaklynn company for every minute of the day except during this ten to eleven o’clock block right here.”

As he tapped on an empty square on the sheet, I blinked, stumped. “But how did you get my schedule?”

Foster tipped his face in confusion. “Why did we need your schedule? We just needed someone available to be with you whether you were in class or not.”

Next to me, Damien scowled. “But what makes you think she’s even *going* to campus today?”

Hudson snorted. “Because she said she wanted to last night, and pushover that you are, there was no way in hell you were going to be able to talk her out of it.”

As Damien scoffed, I grinned and ran a finger teasingly up the center of his chest. “You have some very perceptive friends, Archer.”

He grumbled irritably under his breath, only to shut up when I cupped his face and drew his mouth down to mine for a kiss.

Just as he lassoed an arm around my waist and tugged me flush against him, Keene shuffled into the kitchen, still wearing his sleep shorts and looking half-awake as he carried an empty mug.

“Hey, hey,” he warned. “None of that. Not unless you got some lip action for me too.”

When he leaned in, fluttering his sleepy lashes and puckering his mouth, I grimaced and placed a hand on his forehead to push him back. “Dude. No... Ew.”

But his idea of getting something to drink did sound good, so I slipped out of Damien’s arms to dart to the Keurig machine in front of Keene. Opening the cabinets above it, I yanked down a cup and set it under the spout before digging through the drawer underneath to find one of the cappuccino brewing capsules that Damien had bought for me.

As I slotted it in, Keene finally seemed to realize what I was doing.

Scowling, he glanced at Damien. “Archer...” he whined. “She just cut in front of me.”

“Survival of the fittest, man,” Damien answered distractedly as he wandered to the table to get a look at the schedule. “I can skip my ten o’clock class,” he said, frowning down at everything. “And I’ll take this hour too.” Grabbing the marker from Foster, he marked through Parker’s name for the one-to-two o’clock block so he could write in his own.

“Hey,” Parker argued. “That was the only time I had to play bodyguard.”

“But I’m free that hour,” Damien shot back, not caring, while Keene came over to lean against the cabinets right next to me and scowled impatiently as he waited for his turn.

“That smells really good,” Foster announced, wandering over as well to

peek at what I was making. “What is it?”

“Cappuccino,” I answered with an encouraging nod. “You want some?”

His eyes lit up, and he flashed his billboard smile. “Hey, yeah. Thanks.”

“Of course.” As I retrieved a new K-Cup and mug, I told him. “You’re going to love it, I promise.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...” Keene waved his hands as I removed my cup, only to replace it with Foster’s. “He can wait for his—dammit.”

Completely ignoring him, Foster and I grinned at each other.

“Some people...” he told me, shaking his head in disapproval. “They have no patience, I swear.”

“No doubt,” I agreed, playing along and loving it when Keene only huffed louder.

He was such a hoot to mess with.

Across the room, Hudson glanced our way and pointed at himself. “Yo, make me a cup of that too.”

“And me,” Parker spoke up.

“Son of a bitch!” Keene flung his mug onto the counter, completely giving up on the idea of getting a drink any time this morning.

I laughed, only to grimace at the pain that stretching my cheek muscles brought.

My smile dying a sudden death, I lifted my fingers to my scraped bruise, and memories of the night before assailed me until I was right there, under that bed again, hoping I wasn’t about to die.

But damn. Standing safely here in this kitchen, surrounded by Damien and his friends, I’d forgotten about last night.

At the table, Damien met my gaze worriedly, knowing exactly where my mind had just gone. I forced a smile to reassure him and took a sip of my drink.

Next to him, Alec asked, “What about the girl from the library? She probably needs to be warned too. I mean, if the killer went after Oaklynn to

silence her for knowing too much, why wouldn't he go after Library Girl, too?"

"If he hasn't already," Parker said with his usual dour humor.

"Oh God." I pressed a hand to my abdomen. Poor Waverly better be okay.

When Damien straightened and started forward to comfort me, Keene hissed out a tired breath. "Alright," he grumbled moodily, definitely needing some coffee already. "I don't have class until ten. I'll head to the library as soon as it opens to check on Library Girl, plus see who all she talked to about this."

"Thank you," I gushed gratefully and kissed his cheek. "You're the best. Here..." Removing Foster's cup as soon as it was done, I handed that to him as I told Keene, "You go next."

He brightened and rushed to slot his cup into the machine before anyone else could jump ahead of him.

My phone vibrated from my pocket, and I pulled it free to check the message, just as the back door opened, admitting Thane.

He looked harassed and half-put together, tucking his collared shirt into his pants as he came in. "Okay, what did I miss?"

"Everything," Parker informed him dryly. "Thanks for being on time."

Thane glanced down at the schedule sheet on the table and lifted his hands in dismay. "Y'all started without me?"

"Oh! Hey...shh!" I broke in, waving my hand madly. "Waverly just texted me."

And thank God. It was nice to hear that she was still alive.

"Who?" half the people in the room asked.

"Library Girl," I explained, to which most of the guys responded with, "Ah..."

"Well, what does she have to say?" Alec asked.

"Let's see..." I read through the message silently before explaining, "She

said there wouldn't be any faculty and staff directories from ten years ago, since they're only online and are updated regularly to stay current, and they stopped making paper copies twelve years ago. So if someone did work there then, but doesn't now, it wouldn't be in the online directory. But she *did* get a copy of the twelve-year-old paper directory from the Special Collections librarian and has been going through it all night. She's about halfway done and will give me the full list once she is."

"So, if our killer started working there ten or eleven years ago and quit *since* then, we're screwed," Parker, the pessimist, realized.

I only shrugged. "It's better than nothing."

"It is," Thane agreed encouragingly. "Ask if she can give you what she has so far. We'll split up the names and start researching them now."

"Good idea." I nodded and started to type out my reply when more suggestions came in.

"Did she talk to anyone else besides this Special Collections librarian about your search? And what's his first name, anyway? How long has *he* worked there?"

"And don't forget to warn her to be careful," Keene tossed in.

"Okay, I'm just going to call her." This list was getting too long to type that much. Holding up a finger for silence, I put the call through, and Waverly answered two rings later.

"Oaklynn?" she said, sounding confused.

"Hey," I greeted cheerfully. "Do you have a minute?"

"Um, I guess. What's up?"

Ten minutes later, I hung up with her, feeling slightly guilty about how much I'd freaked her out.

"Well, she admitted that last night she thought some white car had followed her home," I reported. "But her dad had been outside, working in the yard when she'd pulled into the driveway, so the car gunned the engine and sped past."

“Damn...” Hudson whistled, shaking his head. “Close call.”

“And she told me she planned on staying home today because of my warning,” I added. “But she was going to keep going through the directory.”

“What about—” Alec started, but I held up a finger to silence him because I wasn’t done yet.

“Also, the Special Collections librarian is a female who’s only worked on campus for three years,” I said. “And she’s the only person Waverly asked about getting the directory, plus she said she didn’t even mention what the directory was *for*. So...that’s a dead end.”

“But if news didn’t spread from her, then... How did this bastard know you were looking into him?” Damien asked.

I glanced at him and shook my head, confused. “The only people I mentioned it to were you and Waverly.”

“I didn’t say anything to anyone,” he swore.

“The prick didn’t even tell *us*,” Parker confirmed.

A jolt of terror crept up the back of my neck.

“Well then, I’m officially terrified.”

“**I**t’s not too late to change your mind,” Alec assured me as he tagged along to my first class of the day. “I can take you back to our place right now. Just say the word.”

I sent him a dry glance and ignored the sensation of a million creepy eyes watching me. “We’re already here; we’re doing this. Besides...” I spread my arms to encompass everyone around us, walking toward their own classes and sitting on benches, drinking from to-go cups, while more lounged on the grass, engrossed in their phones. “Everything is absolutely normal.”

When someone screamed, we both jumped and whirled toward the sound, only to find some guy lifting his girlfriend—or whoever she was—up over his shoulder and spinning her in a circle to make her scream out another laugh of delight.

I pressed a hand to my chest and turned back to Alec. “Absolutely normal,” I repeated.

“Yeah...” he muttered, cringing as he scratched the back of his neck and glanced around warily. “Except it feels like we’re being freaking watched.”

“That’s just the paranoia,” I promised, not letting him in on the fact that I was experiencing it too.

“Well, whatever it is, I don’t like it.”

I patted his arm as we approached Hill Hall. “I know. I owe you so big

for this. I owe *all* of you. But I have to be here. I have a test at ten and a news report to give right now that I *cannot* miss. It took me a lot of work to steal Blaire's beat from her."

"I can film you from the house," Alec coaxed as he followed me into the journalism building.

That actually enticed me. He was truly a master at filming and editing.

When I sent him a glance, tempted, he lifted his eyebrows and nodded back, silently adding, *You know you want to.*

Jostling myself back to reality, I slashed my hands adamantly as we entered the Journalism building. "No. No... I'm here. I'm doing this. Besides, I could've been completely wrong about the intruder being Thalia's killer anyway. It was probably just some random burglar who..."

"Who didn't steal anything," Alec tossed out too logically for my taste as he jabbed holes all over my theory. "And searched the brownstone until he found only *you.*"

Gah, I really had been targeted, no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise. I could claim that I'd misheard Thalia or misunderstood her all I wanted, but whoever had tried to pull me out from under my bed had been there for me, end of story.

When I shuddered and hugged myself harder as we stepped onto the stairs, Alec touched my arm. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

But it was a scary situation, no matter what he said.

I looked up at him and actually opened my mouth to request that we head back to the house. Except we'd already made it to the second level and were approaching the main door to the broadcasting room, where one of my professors poked his head out the door and barked, "Vargas! There you are. Get in here. We have problems."

Alec and I exchanged a cringe. Too late now; this day was starting whether I was ready or not.

"The cameraman decided to go with the volleyball team to their next out-

of-town game, at the last minute,” my professor announced irritably, probably wishing he wasn’t also the head producer of the campus broadcast station. “So we’re going to have to make do without him. And can you manage your own face? The makeup artist dropped out of school yesterday.”

I nodded as I entered the fray of college staff students rushing around everywhere in a frenzy, preparing for the next news report. Ready to dive in and join them, I swung my book bag off my shoulder and sat it by my desk as I glanced at Alec who’d curiously followed me inside.

“I can handle my own makeup, no problem,” I told the professor before motioning toward Alec. “And it just so happens that I have a film production major with me today if you need someone to run the camera.”

AND THAT WAS HOW I MADE IT THROUGH MY FIRST HOUR OF THE DAY without a hitch.

Alec had a blast directing everyone around to shift lighting and reorganize the studio floor for the best fit, and by the time he was done, my professor was begging him to change his degree and come work in the journalism department.

“As if I’d really take him up on that,” he told me with a scoff as he walked me from Hill Hall and toward the history department, where we were supposed to meet Keene. “Do you know how much more movie producers make than *news* cameramen? Seriously.”

I smiled, glad his mind was successfully distracted away from my situation. Now, if only *my* mind would latch onto something else, too. It still felt as if someone was following us and watching our every move.

When my phone buzzed, I brightened, hoping it was some good news from Waverly. But even better, it was Damien.

How'd first hour go? Did Younger stay close like he was supposed to?

I smiled, my attention diverted at last.

Everything's fine. Alec was awesome. Stop worrying so much.

Up ahead, Keene appeared, and he lifted a hand to wave as he approached.

"Everything good?" he asked when we all walked close enough to meet.

"It was...*amazing*," Alec gushed. "I filmed Oaklynn giving another report, but at the studio this time, and holy shit, it was like I was the top director or something. I said, *move that*, and people actually moved shit. It was such a rush."

"Dude!" Keene slapped Alec's arm in reprimand. "You were supposed to be watching our girl, not messing around with cameras."

"Hey," Alec muttered, insulted. "She's fine. Look."

When he motioned to me, I waved and smiled at them.

Keene sighed heavily and pushed Alec away, dismissing him, only to throw an arm around my shoulders and wink at me. "Don't worry, darlin'. I'll watch you *just right* this hour."

"Dear Lord." I rolled my eyes as Keene tipped up his chin at Alec.

"Yo, man. I got it from here. What're you waiting for? To pass her leash off or something?"

"Oh, no, you didn't," I scolded indignantly and elbowed him in the ribs away from me.

As he bent and coughed, clutching his side, I turned to Alec and gave him a big hug. "Thanks for the company."

His cheeks brightened in pleasure as he answered, "Anytime." Then he sent his roommate a frown and flipped him off. "Later, moron."

"Damn," Keene said as he straightened with a wince. "I don't know why I'm supposed to be guarding *you*. You got a mean left elbow, Vargas. You

should be fucking guarding *me*.”

That actually made me feel better, but I still had to warn him, “Just don’t be an ass, and I won’t have to use it on you again. Got it?”

He blew out a breath, still rubbing his stomach, and kept in step with me as I took off. “Deal.”

At the history building, he followed me inside, only to pause at the doorway to the lecture hall. “So I guess I’ll just sit out here all hour, like a good guard dog, until you come out again?”

I shrugged. “If you want to. Or you could come in. They don’t assign seats or take roll call or anything. The class is so big no one would know if you don’t usually attend and aren’t enrolled.”

“Works for me,” he answered, following me into the room. “I don’t want to be bored, sitting out there alone for an hour with nothing to do.”

And he definitely didn’t plan on being bored in here with me. As soon as he slumped lazily into the seat next to mine, he hitched his chin in greeting at a girl in the row in front of us who glanced over her shoulder to check him out.

“Howdy,” he greeted with a grin. “You new to this class? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here before.”

Flushing out a giddy laugh, she replied, “That’s exactly what I was going to say to you.”

“What...a coincidence,” he rolled out in a smooth voice as he leaned forward in his seat to flirt with her shamelessly.

I sighed and shook my head as I pulled out my laptop to take notes.

SO MY SECOND CLASS OF THE DAY WENT OFF WITHOUT A HITCH AS WELL.

Plus, I’m not sure how, but Keene walked out with phone numbers from three different girls. It probably had something to do with the fact that he had

to insert himself into the class discussion and pick an argument with some guy that was making a sexist, bullshit point.

Humorously enough, the professor never even questioned Keene's enrollment.

"Dude, you're a better wingman than any of the other guys," Keene praised as we headed toward the English building next. "This is a record." He whistled, impressed with himself as he fanned out the slips of paper with the various phone numbers on them and nodded his approval. "We might just have to keep you around after all."

"As if you had a say," I told him dryly.

When my phone buzzed again, I let out a groan. "Seriously, Damien," I grumbled aloud as I pulled up the screen to see who'd messaged me. "Are you going to check in after every class? I'm fine."

But even as I complained about his persistence, I had to secretly admit it felt really nice to have someone care and worry about me as much as he did.

So how many bones am I going to have to break on Dugger for his inappropriate behavior toward you?

I grinned before answering,

Very few, actually. He was too busy flirting with all the other girls. I think I'm losing my appeal.

Hardly,

Damien replied.

He must've finally learned you're off limits, and if he values his life, he'll leave you alone.

Hmm. Maybe. So do I finally get YOU as my escort at the end of this next hour?

Damien's answer was immediate.

Or you could have me now.

We'd already had this discussion, though. I didn't want him—or *any* of the guys—skipping class just to follow me. I was surrounded by a campus full of people. Even if we were right and my attacker was some professor with the first name of Josh, I was sure I was fairly safe here.

The killer would have to be crazy to strike in the middle of the day when anyone could see something.

Nope,

I told my boyfriend.

You're picking me up at eleven at the front of the English building as planned.

“Well, Professor Joshua Dudley is officially crossed off the list as a suspect,” Keene announced as he read something on his phone just as we reached the English building. Glancing at me, he explained, “The dude died last year.”

I winced for poor Dr. Dudley. But at least he wasn't a killer. And thankfully our list of suspects had grown smaller.

At the door to my technical writing class, Keene paused me before saying goodbye. “Now, don't forget, you're supposed to wait for Archer at the front doors when you finish this class,” he said. “Alright, young lady?”

“Really?” I asked dryly. “I got this, Dad. You can go now.”

“Okay, okay.” He lifted his hands in surrender as he backed away. “But are you sure you have enough lunch money?”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “Thanks for reassuring Damien by following me around campus,” I told him. “I owe you big.”

He blew me a kiss and began to back away. “Stay safe, Vargas.”

Heaving out a breath as he strolled off, I turned and entered the classroom.

The professor—Dr. Thornburg—was at the front, passing out the midterm as I entered. He was one of the few instructors on campus who still gave written, paper tests. And strangely he wasn't old; the guy was fairly young.

But everyone had their own quirks, and he liked trying to decipher awful student penmanship, I guess.

“Take a test,” he called as a group of us entered together. “Take a seat! And take your time. But get to work.”

As I waited in line to retrieve my exam, Dr. Thornburg made eye contact with me and said, “Miss Vargas! Do you mind sticking around after class so I could have a word with you?”

“Uh...sure.” Confusion swamped me because—A—I had no idea what this might be about and—B—I wasn't aware that he'd even known who I was.

But he only sent me a grateful smile as he handed me my test. “Thanks.”

Taking the stapled sheets, I found a seat and dug up my pen before I got started.

This was a big exam, and it counted for a fourth of my grade. It wasn't something to shrug off, by any means. Except my brain kept going stir-crazy through the whole thing, wondering what he wanted to talk to *me* about, then wondering what his first name was.

The paranoia made my test time lag, and I was one of the last people left in the room by the time I finished.

Hoping I hadn't just bombed my entire midterm, I stood and dragged my book bag with me as I carried the finished sheets to the front of the class.

Dr. Thornburg glanced up as I approached. “You can go ahead and head up to my office right upstairs,” he said, as he accepted my stapled papers and filed them into a folder. “I'll meet you as soon as I get the last one of these.”

“Okay.” I nodded and pulled up my phone as I left the room. Shaking off the heebie-jeebies, I told myself I was in public. Nothing was going to happen.

Change of plans,

I texted Damien, knowing he was going to shit bricks if I wasn't waiting right at the front door when he got here after his own class.

Dr. Thornburg wanted to talk to me, so I'm going to be just upstairs in his office. But I'll still meet you at the front door as soon as I'm done.

I tucked my phone away before he responded, knowing he'd see it soon enough with how often he kept contacting me. Then, I hooked my book bag strap over my shoulder as I found the stairs and hiked up to Dr. Thornburg's office.

I didn't know which one was his, but the assistant pointed the way and told me it was okay to go on in and have a seat.

I nodded and bit my lip as I approached the door. A sign hung from the wall next to the entrance, congratulating him for ten years of service at the university. *Ten years*, I paused before forcing myself to step inside, feeling as if I were infiltrating a murderer's lair.

I sat uneasily in the chair in front of his desk, hoping he'd arrive soon, so we could get this over with. Tapping my knee, I glanced around and settled my gaze on the picture on his desk. It was of him with two young kids and what looked like a wife.

Pretty family.

Didn't answer what he wanted to talk to me about, though.

Gaze moving on, I paused at the nameplate next to the photograph and immediately sat upright in alarm.

His name was Dr. J. T. Thornburg.

Starting to think my paranoia might be warranted, I pressed a hand to my chest as my heartbeat sped up. My attention started to dart everywhere.

The first initial of his first name was J. He was married. He'd worked here for exactly ten years. And he wanted me to stay late after class to *talk*.

That's when something Thalia had said the very first time I'd met her filtered back through my memory.

You know, there's a hot, young professor that just started this year, teaching Technical Writing.

I bet she'd been talking about Thornburg.

Had she actually *known* him, though? Or started an affair with him? Then been murdered by him?

I wasn't sure. But I was starting to really freak out.

Surging to my feet, I decided I didn't need to know why he wanted to speak with me. But when I whirled around to leave, there he was, right in the doorway, stepping inside.

I gasped and pulled up short.

He didn't notice, his attention was down as he flipped through some files.

"Thanks so much for staying behind," he started before he even glanced up. When he did, he only sucked in a sympathetic breath and added, "Ouch. That's a nasty scrape you have there."

I froze and touched my cheek as he walked past me to sit behind his desk.

Feeling like I couldn't leave now unless I wanted to look like a freak, I slowly sank back into my chair. "Uh, yes, sir. I...I tripped. Over a shoe. Got some major carpet burn."

"I'll say." He sat down the file, plus his briefcase satchel, on his desk before pointing at his own eyes. "I whipped up a neat little shiner myself. Was playing ball with my kid last night, and he got me right here."

I blinked, focusing on the spot he pointed to. I never would've noticed it before, but yeah... He did have a slight bruise...right where someone might've kicked him when he was trying to drag them out from under a bed.

Fear skated up the back of my spine, and I silently tried to ease my phone from my pocket so I could text an SOS to Damien.

"So have you ever considered tutoring?" he asked, jarring me from my spiraling thoughts.

For a moment, I blinked at him blankly as if I didn't understand English.

But after I replayed his question through my head, my mouth dropped open in outrage. "You think I need a *tutor*?"

What the hell? And here, I'd been proud of all the hard work I'd done for his class so far this semester.

Dr. Thornburg chuckled. "No, no." He waved his hands. "Not for getting a tutor; for *being* a tutor. All the papers you've turned in have been impressive, and I think others could benefit from your skills."

This time, I was more confused than when I thought he was telling me I needed help. I could understand *that* more than someone telling me that I was excelling and should help others.

"Really?" I blurted, wondering if this was some kind of trick, a ploy to relax and get me into his web before he struck.

"Yes, ma'am," he was saying before he blathered on about all the opportunities it would bring, even talking about how I could get paid.

Except none of it felt right. I didn't like this. I needed to know once and for all if he was Thalia's murderer or not.

So right in the middle of his awesome sales pitch, I blurted, "Did you know Thalia?"

"I..." His words stalled, and he tipped his head as he frowned at me in confusion. Then he answered, "Er... You mean, Thalia *Archer*?"

And that was all I needed to hear before being thoroughly panicked. But seriously, after ten years and all the students that had passed through his classes, surely there'd been more Thalia's than Damien's Thalia.

Beginning to hyperventilate and see everything through a blackening blur, I surged to my feet, gasping, "I...I have to go."

From there, I rushed out of the office, determined to escape him.

"Miss Vargas!" he called after me, but I didn't even glance back.

I ran for all I was worth, streaking past the startled secretary to find the stairs before hustling down them at top speed.

I bumped into other students and apologized without pausing to make sure everyone was okay. When I reached the front door where I was supposed to meet Damien, he wasn't there yet.

Afraid that Thornburg was going to find me, I kept going, sprinting across campus blindly.

I ran without thought or direction for a good five minutes before I found a copse of trees to duck into between the chemistry and biology buildings.

Then, and only then, did I dare turn back, breathing hard and trembling.

No one was chasing me.

Certainly not my Technical Writing professor.

God, I was such a moron.

The guy was probably as innocent as could be, and I'd flipped out like a scalded cat.

Cringing, I peered out from the safety of the trees, but I didn't see anything suspicious.

I was truly losing it.

But going out there and meeting Damien back at the front doors of the English building no longer sounded good to me. In fact, staying on campus another *minute* didn't even appeal.

With a glance down, I realized I was still holding my phone. So I decided to text him and let him know where to come and get me so he could finally have his way and just take me back to his place.

I fumbled my way into the texting app with trembling fingers. My breathing was loud and harried from running, but I was still able to hear the sound of a twig snapping behind me, letting me know I wasn't alone in the trees.

Before I could turn, however, something heavy and hard bashed against the back of my head.

As I slumped toward the ground and everything went dark, I heard a familiar voice say, "Caught you, little mouse."

DAMIEN

I cursed the whole time I hauled ass toward the English building.

I couldn't believe Oaklynn had agreed to meet with *any* professor alone in their office today.

When I saw her again, I was going to—

Well, I was probably going to kiss the fuck out of her in relief.

But then I'd give her a proper lecture for scaring the shit out of me.

She wasn't waiting at the entrance when I arrived, so I went inside and found the faculty offices on the third floor.

The secretary there asked if she could help me, so I motioned toward the closed door marked with Thornburg's name, saying I was only waiting, and I sat on the couch right outside his office so Oaklynn would see me first thing when she exited.

I sat there for nearly fifteen minutes before the door reopened and a man in his mid to late thirties exited, looking as if he was going to lunch or something.

Standing expectantly, I peered past him, searching for my girlfriend, but I didn't spot anyone else in the office.

"Hi," he greeted, pausing in front of me since it was more than obvious that I'd been waiting for *his* door to open. "Can I help you?"

"Uh...yes, sir." I squinted at the *Dr. J.T. Thornburg* nameplate on his

door before looking at him and needlessly asking, “Are you Dr. Thornburg?”

“I am. What’s up?”

“Well, I... I just...” Motioning toward his office, I said, “Sorry, I thought you were meeting with Oaklynn Vargas right now.”

His eyes lit up, recognizing the name. “I was,” he confirmed. “But she left quite abruptly. I was actually a little worried about her. She looked... terrified.”

I caught my breath, going on immediate alert as I glanced around for danger. “And you don’t know what scared her off?”

Taking in the initial J in his name and the tenth anniversary sign on his door, I swerved back to him just as he winced as if guilty, and I noticed a slight bruise around his eye.

“She asked me about—”

Cutting himself off from his own statement, he tipped his head and squinted at me. “Say... Are you Damien Archer?”

“I...Yes, sir. Why?”

He stepped eagerly forward. “I’ve actually been hoping I could talk to you some time. I wanted to get all my ducks in a row and gather as much research as I could first, but...”

“Talk about what?” I asked suspiciously.

With a slight wince as if he didn’t know how I’d take his answer, he said, “I’m interested in writing a story about Westport’s only unsolved murder case.”

I took a step back, jolted by the idea. “You want to write about my sister.”

He nodded eagerly, only to pause. “Though maybe you’re already aware of my intentions. It took me off guard when Miss Vargas asked if I knew her, but learning that she’s *your* friend...”

“Oaklynn asked if you knew Thalia?” I demanded. “And how did you answer?”

“Well...” He blinked in confusion before admitting, “I never really got to. She ran off before I could. But no... I never actually met her, even though I know we must’ve been on campus at the same time. She died the first year I came to Haverick.”

I nodded, squinting at his door plate. “What does the J stand for in your name?” I asked, not caring how random the question must seem.

“Er...Jason. Why?”

I shook my head. “No reason. I just... I need to go.”

“But—”

“I’ll get back to you later about that book,” I called as I rushed off, knowing Oaklynn must be running scared right now.

Dammit, she should’ve waited before coming back to campus. Her nerves were too raw and frayed.

Pulling up my phone, I called her, but it rang through to voicemail.

With a curse, I brought up her location. It showed that she was still on campus at least, not too far away, near the science buildings, but she was nowhere near here.

I jogged in that direction, ignoring the slight jump of fear in my pulse. There was no reason to panic yet. As soon as I found her, everything would be okay, and I’d be able to breathe again.

When I drew close enough that my dot was covering hers on the app, however, I furrowed my brow and glanced around.

No one was here.

Stepping into a nearby group of trees, I squinted into the shadowy depths. “Oaklynn?”

I glanced back at the map on my phone and zoomed in closer until our dots barely separated. Then I walked in the direction of hers, only to look up once more and curse.

She wasn’t here.

Exiting the app, I clicked on the phone and called her.

When I heard buzzing in the grass at my feet, my blood ran cold. Her phone lit up the ground, signaling an incoming call from me.

But no.

No, no, no, no.

I shook my head to deny it even as I bent to pick up her abandoned phone. But she couldn't be gone. Not Oaklynn.

Black spots danced in my vision, and my head went light.

Not sure what else to do, I group-texted the others.

She's gone. Oh fuck, she's gone. I can't find Oaklynn.

Parker was the first to reply.

Where are you?

Fingers shaking as I typed, I answered,

The grove of trees between Crimper and Dane.

Did you track her phone?

Keene asked next.

YES, DIPSHIT!

I really had no patience for stupid questions right now.

I tracked it straight to the ground under the trees between the fucking chemistry and biology building. But she's not here.

On my way,

Hudson wrote next, followed by the rest of them who told me to sit tight.

But I couldn't just stay here. This was the only place I knew Oaklynn wasn't.

I started to stride away, out into the open, so I could look in every direction, only for Foster to come jogging up.

“Hey,” he called breathlessly. “What do you need me to do?”

“I don’t know,” I growled. “I don’t fucking *know!*”

“Okay, well, the first thing *you* need to do is breathe. Alright?”

When he clasped my shoulder in support, I hissed and shrugged him off growling, “I don’t need...” But he was right.

We couldn’t find Oaklynn if I lost my head to the fear. I nodded and sucked in a long breath.

Keene was the next to jog up, his face sheet white with dread. “I dropped her off at the door to her Technical Writing class, I swear to God.”

“I know, I know,” I said, waving him silent. “She made it through that with no problems. But then she went up to the writing professor’s office for a meeting, and he said she lit out of there like her tail was on fire. But from there... I don’t know. She came here for some reason. I found her phone in the grass right over there.”

When I lifted it, the other two swallowed audibly and cringed.

Alec, then Hudson, and Parker showed up next.

Thane was still across town at the high school where he was a counselor, so I didn’t expect him at all.

But the others... I already started to feel better with them around.

“Where are all the possible places she could be?” Parker asked. “Her brownstone? Damien’s place? The student union? Cafeteria? A friend’s?”

“I can check out our place,” Alec spoke up before waving us off and hurrying away.

“She has a close friend named Jaylani,” I said. “But I... I don’t know how to get a hold of her.”

“On it,” Parker said, pulling his phone from his pocket and beginning to research.

“I picked her up from Alec when they were leaving Hill Hall,” Keene

said. “Maybe she left something there and went back for it.”

“I’ll go,” Hudson said, lifting a hand to volunteer before he took off as well.

Which left Foster asking, “Does she have any chemistry or biology classes today? Why would she come *here*?”

“No,” I said. “She should be on her lunch break now until two.” And the student union was in the complete opposite direction.

“Damn,” Foster mumbled while Oaklynn’s phone buzzed in my hand.

When I glanced down and saw Waverly’s name, I cried, “Wait!”

Parker lifted his face from his phone as both Foster and Keene surged forward, demanding, “What?”

I think I have something,

the message on Oaklynn’s phone read.

“It’s Library Girl,” I told them. “She’s got news?”

“Well, what does she have?” Keene demanded.

“Shh...” I waved him quiet. “She’s still typing.”

“Just finished going through the list...” I read aloud when the next message popped up. “And now she’s writing some more.”

“Oh Jesus,” Parker groaned. “Is she one of those people who has to send a whole new message after every breath?”

“Shut up!” I hissed, even though I had no idea why I wanted everyone to be silent. I didn’t need silence to read a fucking text.

But the insistent buzzing in my brain was already making everything else muzzy. A little silence would help me think clearer.

Professor Zweifel has the first name Joshua,

Waverly wrote next.

“Professor Zweifel?” I asked, lifting my face after reading that one for the guys. “Who the fuck is Professor Zweifel?”

Keene and Foster shook their heads, utterly clueless.

But Parker winced. “Oh, hell no. He’s not that creepy chemistry guy who’s always putting up those flyers around campus, looking for test subjects for his nutty research experiments, is he?”

Oaklynn’s phone buzzed again.

And he was in the library putting up flyers right when you came in to ask me for help tracking down the killer. He would’ve heard...

The rest of the message didn’t show up on the lock screen of Oaklynn’s phone, but I’d already read enough.

“Ohrley, I think you’re right.” I glanced up at the other three and shook Oaklynn’s phone. “This is our guy.”

Holy shit. I had a name for the man who’d killed my sister. After ten years of not knowing—of looking everywhere—I finally had a name.

And he now had the love of my life in his possession without her phone.

“Jesus.” I swayed, worried I was already too late. “We gotta fucking find him.”

“Well, the chemistry building’s *right* there,” Keene said helpfully.

Good point. I surged toward it, heading straight through the trees to reach the building.

“If this is the test subject flyer dude we’re talking about,” Foster said, dogging my heels. “I know a guy on the team who went to him for some extra cash. Said the professor did most of his experiments and shit in the basement.”

The basement. Check. I could find the basement.

At the edge of the building, I spotted a backdoor that was obscured by a bunch of tall bushes and had a loud air conditioning unit running next to it.

I hurried to it and pulled on the handle. But it was locked. So I started to turn away, only for Keene to grab my arm and jerk me back.

“Dude, is that blood?” he called over the noise.

When he bent down and wiped his finger over the concrete pad in front of the door, he stood and showed me a drop of red coating his skin.

“Still wet.”

“Motherfucker,” I breathed before whirling away and taking off running until I found a door into the building that wasn’t locked.

Inside, the others piled after me, and we all went in separate directions until I heard Parker shout, “Found the stairs going down.”

I did an about-face and rushed that way, grabbing onto the banister so I could leap down three stairs at once.

“Jesus, man,” Parker warned as I passed him by. “Don’t break your damn neck before we find her.”

Ignoring him, I glanced both ways down a concrete-lined, echoing hall.

“Split up?” Foster suggested.

“Dugger and I will go this way,” Parker said, grabbing Keene’s arm and jerking him to the left.

Foster and I went right. I checked the first door; it led into a dingy supply closet. Foster checked the next; something full of computers and motherboard systems.

The third was locked. So I knocked on it.

Next to me, Foster leaned close to the wood. “Dr. Zweifel? Are you in there?” he called.

There was a pause, making me think no one was inside, and then a muffled voice answered, “I...I’m busy right now, sorry.”

Foster and I blinked at each other in shock.

Then Foster leaned close again. “I was just wondering if I could sign up as one of your test subjects.”

“Oh, sure, sure. But I’ll need you to come back later. I’m in the middle of an experiment right now.”

“But this is really important, Professor. I—”

“I said come back *later!*” the voice snapped impatiently.

I shook my head and met Foster's worried gaze. "Fuck this." And I rammed my shoulder into the door with all my might.

I probably dislocated it in the process. But I didn't much care.

"Hey, hey!" the professor's frantic voice shouted from within. "What are you doing? Stop that."

I was fixin' to rush the door again when Foster grabbed my good arm. "No, wait," he said, examining the frame. "I reckon we can kick it in if we go together. On three."

I nodded, and he did the countdown.

At three, we roared as one and karate kicked the door in.

When the frame splintered under the pressure, we went tumbling inside, piling through the entrance and onto a heap on the floor.

"Oh dear," I heard the professor say just before I jerked my head up.

And there, across the room, was Oaklynn, stripped down to her bra and panties with thick Velcro strapped across her chest and legs to trap her to what looked like an ancient operating table. Her head was flailing, her face was bright red, and her eyes were wide with terror as tears streamed down her cheeks. Muffled protests shrieked through the gag around her mouth as her gaze met mine. But worst of all was the line of blood forming down the center of her chest as if someone had sliced into her flesh along her sternum.

My attention shot to the man still clutching a bloody surgical scalpel in his hand.

"You're dead," I snarled.

He shook his head and started to back away as if he thought he might actually escape me. But I charged with a furious roar.

As I struck, shoving him back with both hands, he lashed out, jabbing at me with his blade. I was too incensed to feel any actual pain, but I'm pretty sure he caught me in the gut. All I experienced was white-hot fury that boiled in my abdomen as we tumbled to the ground.

Landing on top, I watched the back of his head crack against the concrete

floor, and I started to swing almost immediately, smashing my fist into his jaw once, twice...I lost track of the amount of times I hit him.

I knew he jabbed at me again, sticking me with his knife in the hopes of fending me off. But I was so hyped up on emotion, it only registered vaguely as an irritating nuisance.

This guy had killed my sister. He'd mutilated her, cutting her in places that no one should ever be cut, invaded her body, taken away all her beautiful plans for a full, long life, and from the looks of it, he'd been intent on doing the same thing to Oaklynn.

I could tell the moment that he passed out; his head lobbed to the side and his arms slumped limply to the floor as he stopped resisting.

But I punched him again, once for every nightmare I'd had after watching my sister die, once for every tear I'd wept, missing her and wishing she'd come back, once for every new tenant I had watched flee in terror because Thalia had been taken from this earth so horrendously that her spirit had never found peace.

He'd caused all of that. He'd taken more from me than anyone else ever had. And the fact that he'd dared to take Oaklynn too was the final nail in his coffin.

I balled my hands to pummel him again, but as I wound my arm back, a firm grip caught my wrist, stopping me.

"Archer, man, stop..." A familiar voice penetrated my consciousness. "You got him. He's out. It's okay now."

I shuddered, blinking at Professor Zweifel's bloody, battered face, a little alarmed that I'd caused all that, and I chuffed out a traumatized sob before I fell back to sit next to him, needing a moment to calm down before I did anything else.

Parker's hand remained solid and supportive on me as he added, "You did good, man. You caught her killer. You avenged your sister. And you saved the girl."

The girl?

Remembering that Oaklynn was still strapped practically naked to the table, I lifted my face and started to glance around. “Oak...?”

“She’s okay. Foster’s got her. She’s sitting up and moving all her limbs. She’s going to be just fine.”

I needed to see her for myself, though, so I started to stand until a strange force inside me sat me right back down.

I blinked, swaying slightly, unable to understand why I couldn’t just get up.

Shaking my head in confusion, I glanced around instead, searching the room until I spotted a bare-chested Foster slipping his T-shirt over my girlfriend’s head to cover her as she sat upright on the table she’d just been strapped to, her free legs dangling down the side.

She looked shaken to the core. Her eyelids were heavy as if she’d been drugged. Her entire body was trembling, and blood immediately soaked through the front of Foster’s shirt once she got it on. But she was alive and upright.

On the other half of the room, Keene was gripping his hair and walking in a tight circle as he talked on the phone. “Yeah, we’re in the basement of Crimper Hall on Haverick campus,” he was saying into the receiver. “Yes, people are hurt. Send an ambulance. There’s blood and...” His worried gaze strayed to me, only for his eyes to widen. “Oh shit, Archer. You’re...”

I glanced down to where he was looking, only to find my own shirt covered in blood.

“Damn. Is that mine?” I began to ask, strangely dazed by the sight of all of it on me before I finally spotted the scalpel that the professor had been holding when I’d first come into the room.

It was sticking out of my side.

“Fuck.” That wasn’t supposed to be there. I reached to remove it, but my hand felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds and I couldn’t seem to move any

faster than a sloth.

“Don’t let him pull that out!” Keene, the nursing student, shouted, and Parker caught my hand.

“Whoa, whoa. Hang on, bud. Let’s not remove it just yet.”

I wavered unsteadily, swaying as my vision dimmed.

Parker caught my shoulders, steadying me.

Oaklynn screamed my name.

I lifted my head to find her while Keene ordered into his phone, “We’re going to need more ambulances. Send *all* the ambulances.”

And then, there was my girl, falling onto her knees in front of me, her eyes wide with terror, while tears streamed liberally down her face.

“Damien?”

“You okay?” I slurred, reaching for her face, only to realize my hand was bloody.

When I paused to frown at it in confusion, she gripped my wrist. “Me? I’m not the one with a fucking knife sticking out of my stomach.”

I shook my head, not wanting to think about that because I was finally starting to feel it, and it really hurt.

“I... I’m sorry I...” With a wince, I paused before adding, “Sorry I let him get you. Sorry I...”

God, even talking hurt.

“What?” Oaklynn sobbed, clutching my face in her hands. “You found me. You *saved* me. You... Damien? No. Don’t close your eyes.”

I tried to lift my lashes, but they felt so heavy. I couldn’t keep them open no matter how hard I tried.

“Stay with me,” Oaklynn begged. “Don’t you dare—Damien...? *Damien!*”

“**W**hat...the hell?”

To my left, Keene snorted out an aggrieved grunt and fell back in his chair.

Glancing over, I watched him scowl and shake his head irritably at the muted television on the wall above the seating in the hospital’s waiting room. “How does he *always* get all the damn credit?”

I turned to look as well. My head felt heavy and drowsy, but when I focused on the screen, I was able to see *me*, wearing nothing but Foster’s bloody T-shirt as he carried me from the front door of the university’s chemistry building.

The rest of the scene was flooded with red and blue lights as EMTs, firefighters, and police crowded the footage.

Below the scene, the news ticker read, “*Star Quarterback Saves College Coed and Solves Ten-Year-Old Murder Mystery.*”

“Oh geez,” Foster uttered in grimacing mortification from the other side of the room as he glanced up as well. “Really?”

“Wow, you certainly know how to steal the limelight, don’t you?” Parker accused teasingly.

“I didn’t... This isn’t...” Foster motioned speechlessly at the television, clearly wanting to deny it all, but Parker sniffed out an amused sound and

bumped his arm into Foster's.

"Dude, relax. I'm joking."

Foster's shoulders slumped inside the too-tight scrubs that the hospital had given him. To me, it only made his chest and shoulders look more defined and...superhero-ish.

I started to smile in amusement, only for the news report to show two stretchers being loaded into the back of a pair of ambulances.

Knowing one held Damien, and we still hadn't heard back on how he was doing, I shuddered in worry, hoping he was okay.

Hudson who'd been sitting directly to my right with his arm securely latched around my shoulders tugged me closer to him in reassurance.

"He's going to be okay," he said.

But Hudson hadn't been there. He hadn't seen the knife sticking from Damien's *body*. He hadn't seen all the blood. He hadn't watched the love of his life go completely lifeless and slump forward in a heavy heap.

Lifting my hand as if the move was becoming habitual already, I gently pressed my fingers to my sternum. Through the cloth of the scrubs I'd been given, I could feel the gauze and surgical tape that covered my own injury.

They'd slapped some glue on me, patched me back together, and given me a pathetic amount of medicine, then sent me on my way.

Professor Zweifel had gotten four inches of me sliced open before Foster and Damien had started pounding on the door and distracted him.

I could still remember the fear and utter panic when he'd started. I think my adrenaline had been pumping so hard and I'd been so scared about being tortured and killed slowly that I hadn't really felt the laceration as much as I might've if I'd just accidentally cut myself. But I could feel a dull throb echoing through me now. I could feel all the pain, especially from the back of my head, where he'd initially bashed me unconscious.

My painkillers were definitely wearing off.

Except I didn't want to take any more. I wanted to be awake and alert for

when someone showed up to tell us how Damien was. The freaking concussion they said I had already made me feel groggy enough.

“Hey, can we turn the volume up?” Thane asked, pulling my attention back to the television.

Alec stood since he was the tallest, and he fiddled with the side of the screen for a moment until we heard, “Authorities aren’t yet releasing the name of the student who was attacked and saved from the basement of Crimper Hall on Haverick University campus earlier today, but the assailant has been identified as Professor Joshua Hughes Zweifel, a long-time chemistry instructor who’s notoriously known across campus as the test subject collector.”

Parker snorted. “The test subject collector? Who the fuck has *ever* called him that?”

“Shh...” Keene hissed, batting him quiet so he could hear the rest of the feature. “They’re going to mention me next. I just know it.”

“According to colleagues,” the anchorwoman continued, “Zweifel was trying to create chemical enhancements to advance health and awareness for aging Alzheimer patients. But his research went too far. After striking today’s victim over the back of the head and knocking her unconscious, Zweifel allegedly dragged her into Crimper Hall through a hidden back door and into the basement, where he typically performed his experiments.”

When I shuddered at the memory, Hudson pulled me closer, and Keene reached out to grab my hand. I glanced at the two of them gratefully, glad for their support.

“By the time she came to,” the reporter went on, “Zweifel had strapped her against her will to an examining table and was beginning to cut into her with a scalpel as he confessed to the killing of another past student, Thalia Archer, who was murdered ten years ago this December in her apartment along Bridleway in the historic brownstone district. Archer’s murder had been yet unsolved until a search at Zweifel’s residence this afternoon

provided detailed evidence that should unequivocally tie him to the scene of her murder.”

“Yes!” Keene cheered, lifting his hands in victory while Thane whistled and Foster clapped. “They really got the fucker.”

“Justice for Thalia,” Hudson murmured with an approving nod. “It’s about damn time.”

Alec glanced at me. “Damien’s going to be so relieved.”

I nodded, even as tears filled my eyes, hoping he survived to actually *hear* it.

But what was taking them so long to come back to us with an update? Something had to be seriously wrong if he’d been in surgery this long.

“Also found in Zweifel’s home,” the anchorwoman went on, “were human remains, along with a room full of personal effects belonging to Hailey Junges, who was reported missing from campus by her roommate in late August.”

“Oh shit,” Thane breathed in horror.

I pressed a hand to my chest, feeling awful. “So she didn’t just drop out.”

“The bastard killed her too?” Keene gulped with wide eyes.

“He must’ve cleared out her dorm and emailed all her professors, impersonating her,” Foster concluded.

“Reports say that a handful of Zweifel’s past subjects have already come forward since the terrifying scene erupted on campus,” the woman on the television added.

A college-aged girl’s face popped onto the screen with a microphone in front of her. “He made us sign a nondisclosure agreement,” she started in a shaky voice as she wiped at her eyes. “So I didn’t think I could talk about it, but the drugs he gave us were like paralytics, and while I couldn’t move *or* talk, he would touch and undress me. One of my friends said he even...raped her. But the stuff he gave us was so addictive that we just kept going back for more because...we needed it.”

“Sick bastard,” Thane sneered. “Thank God he’s finally behind bars.”

“I heard he even carved his name into one girl’s thigh,” the interviewee added, as she wiped her wet cheeks.

“See, I don’t get that,” Alec spoke up, shaking his head. “He’s a chemistry guy. Why *cut* on people? A biology professor...maybe. They’d be more interested in human anatomy, but...a chem buff?”

“*That’s* your takeaway?” Parker asked with an incredulous squint. “This psycho drugged, raped, and *killed* people. But you want to know why his special interest was chemicals?”

Alec shrugged out a weak wince. “Good point.”

“Authorities have even answered the question of how Zweifel was able to gain access into Archer’s brownstone a decade ago when they realized the professor’s *brother* lived right next door to her and had a roof patio within jumping distance to Archer’s,” the news reporter was saying.

“Well, son of a bitch,” Hudson breathed. “Damien could never figure out how the killer got in *or* out. The locks on the ground level were all secure.”

I shivered and rubbed my arms, wondering if I’d ever actually *locked* the roof door.

“I still can’t believe ten years of questions have all been answered in one day,” Thane murmured, shaking his head in amazement, only to jump when his jeans began to ring.

When we all glanced his way, he rushed to stand and pull his phone free. But when he saw the screen, he winced. “Damn, it’s Archer’s parents again. They’re not going to like hearing that we haven’t heard anything yet.”

As he walked from the waiting room to answer the call, I debated whether I should call my own parents. But I was doing okay, and the local news here probably wouldn’t reach that far, so I didn’t want to alarm them just yet.

I had to hear if Damien was okay first.

On the television, a picture of Foster’s face flashed across the screen, one of those professional shots of him in his football jersey.

“It was by pure happenstance,” the news reporter stated, “that a couple of students witnessed Zweifel dragging the victim’s prone body into Crimper Hall and decided to investigate until they caught the professor mid-attack. Among these heroes of the day is our very own Haverick star quarterback, Foster Union...”

And they went back to showing the footage of a shirtless Foster heroically carrying me from Crimper Hall as they started the segment over again from the beginning.

“Oh, hell, *really?*” Keene complained with a wince. “With that again? Shut that damn thing off. They didn’t mention me *at all.*”

As Alec stood to turn the television off, Foster threw up his hands in defeat. “Hey, I don’t know where they got the idea that I single-handedly saved the day. I never even talked to a single reporter.”

“You know, I’m the one who called the whole thing in,” Keene said, jabbing a finger into his own chest. “The paramedics arrived in time because of *my* quick thinking.”

“I *hope* it was in time, anyway,” I mumbled as I drew in a shaky breath. “God. Why are they taking so long?”

“Hey, hey,” Hudson kissed my temple. “He’s going to be okay. Archer’s tough. He’s got this.”

“He better,” I sobbed and started to cry again, not sure what to do without Damien in my world.

“Darlin’, don’t lose hope yet,” Thane said softly as he reentered the waiting room to come and kneel in front of me. “If they’re still back there with him, that means he’s still alive. He’s still fighting.”

“But it also means he has to be seriously *hurt*,” I argued.

Thane’s expression welled with worry, and I buried my face in my hands until a familiar voice I wasn’t expecting called, “O? Oh my God, Oaklynn! You’re okay.”

I glanced up to see a frantic Jaylani plowing her way into the waiting

room. Thane moved aside so my best friend could jerk me from my chair and to my feet in order to wrap me in a big hug.

“Girl, you gave me a fucking heart attack.”

“I... I’m sorry.” It felt so good to have her here, though, that I pulled her close and hugged her back. “I didn’t think—today’s just been so crazy.”

“I almost lost my mind when I saw you on the news, all bloody and being carried toward the back of an ambulance. And when you didn’t answer your phone...”

I blinked. My phone. Glancing around, I admitted, “I don’t even know where it is.”

“I, uh, think the police might’ve taken it as evidence,” Foster admitted with a cringe.

I shook my head, wondering why *that* of all things would be evidence, but Jaylani jerked me back to the present, demanding, “You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, sis. Namely the fact that all the news reports claim that this roommate of yours—Thalia—was murdered ten fucking *years* ago.”

Shit. I winced. “Oh, yeah... That.”

Lordy, but how was I even going to begin to tell Jay about Thalia?

Reading my expression, she released a breath and cringed right along with me. “Ah, jeez. Please don’t tell me you’re seeing ghosts again.”

My mouth fell open. “*Excuse me?*”

With a heavy sigh, my best friend took my hand and led me toward a chair. “We should probably sit for this.”

“Jay?” I asked, blinking at her in astonishment before I pointed in warning. “Don’t you dare...”

But she dared.

“Remember that girl, Lizzy Maine, that we met when we were, like, nine or ten?”

“Oh God,” I grimaced, already shaking my head. “No. Please don’t say it.”

“I thought she was just an imaginary friend you made up, and you had a really vivid imagination with that whole story about her being a runaway and hiding from her abusive dad so we couldn’t tell any adults about her.”

“Jay...” I breathed in utter astonishment. “Why the hell didn’t you *say* something?”

Jaylani only shrugged. “I don’t know. It was exciting. I just wanted to play along. I thought it was fun to sneak her food and try to hide her from everyone. I mean... I usually ate the food myself when you weren’t looking. But then, a few months after you stopped seeing her and said she must’ve gotten away and found somewhere nice to live, I heard my parents say the name Lizzy Maine, so I asked them who she was.”

Sucking in a breath, I shook my head and covered my mouth with my hands before rasping, “Her dad killed her after all, didn’t he?”

Jay winced apologetically and nodded. “About five years before we ever met her.”

“Damn...” One of the guys breathed from across the room.

I was too busy gaping at my best friend to take in the rest of the reactions around us. Finally, after a moment of letting all this sink in, I demanded, “Why’d you keep this from me?”

“Come on, O,” Jay pleaded pathetically. “It would’ve broken your heart to learn she never got away from that monster. You thought we *saved* her. I...I couldn’t do that to you. Besides...” She shook her head. “You never went through anything like that again, so I thought maybe it was just a phase that you grew out of.”

“A phase?” I shrieked in dismay, gaping at her in betrayal. “You’re unbelievable. You even knew my apartment was quite possibly haunted and didn’t tell me *then*. Did it not occur to you that my roommate might not have been of the living *either*?”

“Well...no,” she admitted with an apologetic wince. “You had me convinced it was the aunt haunting the place. And you didn’t mention

experiencing any paranormal activity, so I just shut up about it so you wouldn't get freaked out."

"But...but...you've always—*always*—been an adamant nonbeliever."

"No. *You've* always been the adamant nonbeliever," she countered. "And I didn't want you dropping me because you thought I was crazy." When my mouth opened, she winced in apology. "And you obviously had no idea what kind of abilities you had. I didn't want to scare you. So I just acted as if it was a bunch of malarkey to keep you from thinking *I* wasn't off my rocker."

"Oh, Jesus." Pressing a hand against my brow, I told her, "You're just like Damien. That was the big secret he was keeping from me, too, by the way. You know, all that stuff you were suspicious of him about...?" When Jay nodded, I said, "He didn't know how to tell me his sister was already dead, the same way you couldn't tell me about Lizzy Maine. God. This makes it official. Every important person in my life kept this from me."

Wasn't that just lovely?

Jay squinted as she glanced around at Damien's friends. "Where is lover boy, anyway?"

Tears filled my eyes all over again. "He was stabbed," I sobbed. "Professor Zweifel stabbed him when he showed up to save me. He could be dead right now, and it's all my fault."

"Oh, sweetie, no..." Jay insisted as she popped from the chair to pull me into a big hug.

"Yeah, that's bullshit," Keene said. "None of this was your fault. He—"

"Guys," Thane broke in suddenly.

I looked up to find a doctor in the doorway, looking weary as he took a surgical cap off his head to address us.

With a gasp, I surged to my feet. "Is he...?" Unable to finish the question, I squeezed my fingers around my lips and held my breath.

The doctor nodded at me and answered, "We finally have him stable."

Around me, all the guys murmured their relief. Alec hugged Keene.

Foster pressed a hand to his brow and blew out a relieved breath. Parker and Thane clasped hands as if congratulating themselves. And Hudson threw an arm over my shoulder, hugging me close in support, which I was grateful for because my knees suddenly felt like jelly.

“We had four puncture wounds to address,” the doctor was saying, “All to the liver. It was touch and go there for a while, but we were able to locate all the bleeders and get him patched back up. Thankfully, the liver starts healing itself as soon as it begins to bleed, so I expect a full recovery. But for now, we plan to keep him under close observation in the ICU for the next twenty-four hours at least.”

I nodded and clutched Hudson’s hand for dear life. “C-can we go see him?”

The doctor sent me a soft smile. “His anesthesia should start wearing off any time now, so I expect he’ll wake soon. I’ll allow one person to go back with him so he’s not alone and can see a familiar face when he comes to.”

I whirled toward the others, already begging with my expression.

Parker rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Vargas?” he grumbled. “Of course, we’re going to let you be the one.”

“Thank you.” I sagged in relief and followed the doctor back to a single-occupancy room where a ton of machines were alive and working.

A nurse was already in there with Damien, and she turned when the doctor showed me in.

“Right on time,” she greeted. “We just got the breathing tube out, and he’s already been giving signs of waking up.”

“Can... Can I hold his hand?”

“Sure.” She invited me closer.

I lurched forward, immediately taking his fingers. His face was blanched; I’d never seen him look so pale. And his hand was chilly.

I squeezed my fingers around his, trying to share some of my heat with him, and his hand shifted within mine.

“Damien?” I breathed hopefully, lifting my attention to his face.

His lashes twitched as if he was trying to open them, then his lips parted before he pressed them back together and darted out his tongue to wet his dehydrated mouth.

“Oaklynn...” he rasped weakly just as his lashes parted to show me those amazing whiskey eyes of his.

“Hey,” I whispered, feeling tears on my cheeks as I smiled in return and brought his hand to my mouth to kiss his knuckles. “Welcome back.”

“You’re okay?” he asked weakly.

“Me?” I sniffed in surprise before waving out a dismissive hand. “I’m completely fine. They glued me back together, patted me on the back, and sent me on my way. I just had a little flesh wound. *You’re* the one we’ve all been worried about. You’re in the ICU right now, if you didn’t know.”

Confusion filled his face before he glanced around the room in wonder. “Wow. I guess I am.” His free hand moved to his abdomen. “That fucker stabbed me.”

“I know,” I said with a small laugh. “Four times too. But they think you’re going to heal just fine. All you gotta do is take it extremely easy for the next little while.”

He nodded and then squinted before asking, “And Zweifel? Is he...? I didn’t kill him, did I?”

I shook my head. “No. He’s already been treated and transported to jail. The police searched his house, and they found enough evidence to charge him with Thalia’s murder.”

Thinking that was enough for him to hear for now—I’d mention the rest later—I watched his eyebrows lift in interest.

“We caught him, then? We really got him?”

Smoothing my fingers over the back of his hand, I nodded. “We got him.”

“God... oh God.” Tears filled his eyes. “You have no idea... All these years... She finally has justice. Because of you, Oaklynn. Jesus, I can’t thank

you enough.”

“Well...” I shrugged ruefully. “I reckon we can call it even after the way you saved my life. Thank you for looking for me when I went missing.”

“Always,” he assured. “I love you.”

I shuddered and said, “I love you too.” Leaning down, I pressed my mouth to his softly.

He hummed out a sound of approval and touched my cheek.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” he murmured, looking into my eyes when I pulled back. “I almost don’t know what to do with my life now.”

I chuckled. “That’s easy. You start living it.”

Interlacing my fingers with his, he said, “As long as I can live it with you.”

Nodding, I decided that was a pretty damn good plan. “Deal.”

EPILOGUE

OAKLYNN

“**I** think you need to take me shopping,” Damien announced abruptly. “For a new outfit.”

I lifted my gaze from the text message I’d been reading from my mom and glanced across the interior of his truck to where he was sitting behind the wheel and paused at a red light.

“Maybe two,” he said, tapping his fingers nervously against the steering wheel, only to release the brake and steer us through the intersection when the light turned green.

“Why?” I asked, shaking my head cluelessly, only for my eyes to light up. “Oh my God. Do you have an interview? For, like, some kind of forensic psychologist job.”

He glanced at me in bewilderment before saying, “No. Oaklynn... Thanksgiving is in *three* days. Your parents will be here in two. I need to look presentable. To impress them.”

“Oh...pfft.” I waved out a hand, completely unconcerned. “Don’t even worry about that. They’re going to love you.”

“I mean, are you sure?” he pressed, still looking worried. “We’ve been dating less than two months, and we’re already living together, spending Thanksgiving together, plus making our two sets of parents meet each other. You don’t think they’ll worry that we’re rushing anything?”

“Hey, we’re not announcing that we’re pregnant or getting married or anything like that. So yeah...no, not rushing.”

“But...” he countered uneasily.

“Trust me,” I reassured, quieting him by placing my hand over his. “We’ll be fine. And besides, the only reason our two parents are meeting is because both sets offered to come *here* for Thanksgiving. So it’s just as well that they meet since we’re in this for the long haul...” Glancing at him, I lifted my eyebrows. “Right?”

Finally, his eyes changed intensity from worried to satisfied. “Yes, ma’am, we are.”

As soon as he tangled his fingers with mine, I added, “Besides, I’m meeting *your* parents for the first time, too. Do *I* need to get a new outfit?”

He huffed out a harsh laugh. “Absolutely not. You tracked down their daughter’s murderer. They already think you hung the moon.”

“Well...” I flushed sheepishly and rolled my eyes. “That was more of a *group* effort, and besides, you saved my life from a murderer, so...”

“So nothing,” he insisted as he turned down a side street and then pulled into the tight parking spot behind his aunt’s brownstone. After killing the engine, he turned to face me. “Zweifel would still be out there and free, hurting people, if you hadn’t learned the name Josh or that he was a professor at Haverick. He’s been caught and put behind bars because of *you*.”

Okay, when he worded it *that* way...

“That was kind of awesome of me, wasn’t it?”

“Mind-blowing,” he agreed as he smoothed a hand down the side of my arm.

I grinned at him, only to glance toward the back door and heave out a long breath. “It feels weird being back here.”

“You don’t have to go in,” he started quickly.

But I lifted my hand. “No... No, I want to. I... Well, I need to say goodbye to...the place.”

This was where I'd met Thalia.

Where my life had changed completely.

Where I learned I had supernatural abilities.

Where I'd met Damien.

This apartment would always hold a special place in my heart.

I mean, I hadn't been back since I'd almost lost my life to a sadistic murderer here, but I was going to miss *parts* of it.

It still hurt, knowing Thalia was gone, though, and that she'd never actually been here to begin with. I wished I'd gotten to know her while she'd still been alive, but I guess... I was honored to have met her at all.

Heaving out a breath, I opened the door, ready to say goodbye to my room, and oh...the first and only bathroom I'd ever had to myself. Plus the window...the very window that had shown me my first glimpse of Damien.

I was definitely going to miss that window.

"You think we brought enough boxes?" I asked as I climbed from the truck and grabbed a travel caddy full of cleaning supplies to haul out with me while Damien reached into the bed to lug out the empty boxes.

"Hey, take it easy," I warned when he lifted the entire stack. "You're still recovering."

He sent me a dry glance. "They're empty boxes. I think I got it."

"Just be careful," I said, starting after him like a worried mother hen.

"I am. And to answer your question, yes, I think we brought more than enough. The guys and I have picked up so much of your stuff over the past few weeks that you barely have anything left here at all. Today's mostly just going to be cleaning up."

Cleaning up for the next tenants who would live here.

Since I had decided to stay with Damien permanently, we were going to spiff up the brownstone today for someone else to rent it.

At the back door, Damien paused before opening it. "You sure you want to help with this?" he asked. "You don't have to come inside if you don't

want to.”

“No, I want to,” I assured. “I need at least one last visit. For closure.”

Damien nodded in understanding, then opened the door to step inside. I followed a bit more slowly.

It smelled musty and abandoned.

Which broke my heart.

“I’ll go up and clean the rest of your stuff from your room,” Damien was saying as he entered the living room. “Do you want to get started cleaning the kitchen?”

“Sure,” I answered in a sad, empty voice, only to heave out a breath and ask, “Are you sure she’s gone? None of you guys have witnessed *anything* when you’ve come back for stuff?”

“Nothing,” Damien answered, cringing sympathetically. “I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know why he was apologizing. It was supposed to be a good thing that his sister’s ghost was no longer haunting anyone. It meant she’d found her peace and moved on. Her soul was at rest.

I just would’ve liked to have said goodbye first.

Nodding at Damien to let him know it was okay that his sister was truly gone, I gasped when I heard her voice floating down the stairwell.

“Oaklynn? Is that you?”

“Oh my God...” I breathed. Blinking in surprise, I peered past Damien’s shoulder, and my lips parted when I saw her step off the landing and stroll up behind him. “Thalia?”

Damien’s eyes grew and he whirled around. When his shoulders collapsed and he glanced back at me in question, I swallowed, wanting to cry when I realized, “You can’t see her, can you?”

He shook his head, only to turn back and whisper, “Where is she?”

Thalia walked right up to him and smiled into his face with watery eyes before lifting her hand to cup his cheek in her palm. “It always hurts to see how much he’s grown and moved on.”

Damien must've felt the chill because he reared back before touching his cheek right where she had.

"She's right there," I said needlessly.

Thalia sighed and dismissed him before turning to face me. "Now, can you understand why I prefer to think of him as the adorable, sweet ten-year-old I left behind?"

"So... You know what you are?" I asked in surprise.

She sent me an odd look. "Why would I not know what I am?"

"Well..." I blinked at her repeatedly before demanding, "Why didn't you tell *me*?"

Thalia merely shrugged. "If you couldn't figure it out on your own, it didn't seem like my place to tell you."

I heaved out a reproachful breath. "So you just left it all on Damien's shoulders?"

Damien glanced at me. "You're talking about me?"

As I nodded, Thalia asked, "Do you think it would scare him if I told him hello?"

"Scare him?" I repeated with a confused frown. "Just how the hell do you plan on telling him hello?"

When the overhead lights began to flicker, Damien lurched closer to me. "Okay, that's freaky."

The lights immediately stopped dancing. "Sorry," Thalia gritted out with an apologetic cringe.

I touched Damien's arm. "She says sorry. She didn't mean to scare you."

"I'm not—" he started, denying any kind of fear. But then he stopped himself and nodded. "Just a little more warning next time would be nice."

Turning to face Thalia's general direction, he waved. "Hi...Thalia," he greeted in a suddenly hoarse voice. "I miss you."

When he slowly held out his hand in front of him, Thalia stepped close and wrapped both of hers around his fingers. I could tell the exact moment he

could feel the contact; he sucked in a deep breath and his face went red with emotion.

“I *really* miss you,” he grated out, and two tears chased each other down his cheek. “Nothing’s the same without you around.”

“Dammit,” Thalia moaned and pulled her hands away, turning her attention to me so she couldn’t see him anymore. “I can’t talk to him. It’s just going to ruin my makeup.”

I shook my head, frowning slightly. “How is it even *possible* to ruin your makeup?”

Thalia sent me a sharp frown. “Shut up.” Then, she blew out a long sigh and sent me a forgiving stare. “I haven’t seen you around,” she admitted softly. “I was beginning to wonder if you were still of the living or not after that last visitor was here.”

“Oh!” I said. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I’m fine. I guess I should’ve let you know I’ve been staying with Damien since then, but... Honestly, I thought you were gone.”

I bit my lip, hoping she didn’t freak out about the fact that I was dating her brother.

“I’m going to be moving out of here permanently today,” I added hesitantly, “so I can move in with him.”

For the longest moment, Thalia didn’t react; just blinked at me. Finally, Damien tipped his face my way and whispered, “How’s she reacting?”

“How am I reacting?” Thalia repeated before her face lit up with excitement. She threw open her arms wide as if to hug me, but she didn’t take a step closer. “I’m freaking the fuck out,” she said and laughed. “But, yay... It’s about damn time.” Then she winked. “Told you we’d end up being sisters.”

I grinned over at Damien. “She approves,” I started to report, only to realize what she’d just said. “But...wait. *What?*” I spun back to blink at her. “Oh my goodness. You really *did* say that. The first day we met. I didn’t

think you were being *literal* though.”

Thalia rolled her eyes. “Well, obviously.”

“But... How did you know?” I shook my head, utterly confused. “I hadn’t even *met* him yet. Oh my God, can you see the freaking *future*?”

Dude, that would be so handy if—

Thalia scoffed, ruining my grand plans to make a fortune from her abilities. “Of course not. Don’t be weird.”

Right. Because being able to see and communicate with dead people was completely natural and normal... But thinking they had any kind of foresight was just plain crazy.

Sure.

“I just see more than you living folk do,” she explained.

Which made me shake my head, utterly lost. “I don’t understand.”

“When I met you,” she started patiently, “I could see your soul, too. And it...” She closed her eyes and drew in a deep, fortifying breath as if refreshed. Then she reopened her lashes and smiled at me in approval. “It contains the missing pieces of my little brother that he needs to help him balance his life into becoming the best possible version of himself.”

“Wait. So you...” I glanced at Damien. He didn’t say anything, though his eyes were full of questions. Swallowing, I turned back to Thalia. “Are you saying... Damien’s my *soul* mate?”

Thalia shrugged. “In a manner of speaking, I guess. Sure. We could call it that. I just knew that the two of you would mesh well together. In everything. And so... I had to make sure you at least met him.”

I lifted a confused eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“I mean...” Thalia waved a hand in dismissal. “You were talking about needing a place to stay *right* when you were walking by *my* apartment, and you didn’t notice the very clear sign in the window. So, of course, I had to play some music in the hopes of catching your attention.”

“Wait...*what*?” My mouth fell open.

Thalia lifted her brows at me. “Be honest; did I pick a good enough song to draw you in or what?”

“I... I mean, *yeah*,” I uttered, trying to make sense of this. “Since it worked.”

When I swerved my amazed attention to Damien, he shook his head in question. “What? What worked?”

“The day I got this place, your sister heard me talking about needing somewhere to stay while I was walking on Bridleway past the brownstone, so she played some music to get me to glance over and notice the vacancy sign in the window.”

His mouth formed a small O. “No way.”

As I nodded, Thalia started talking again. “Of course, I *meant* for you to call the number on the sign and speak to Damien directly, but...when you knocked on the door and actually *heard* my voice...” Her eyes glittered with tears. “I got a little greedy.” With a rueful shrug, she admitted, “It’s been *nice* getting to talk to someone again. I missed that.”

I wiped at my own eyes, starting to get emotional too. To hold it off as best that I could, I turned away from her and focused on Damien.

“She drew me into this place on purpose,” I told him. “So I could meet *you*. Because, apparently...” I rolled my eyes and laughed a little, feeling weird for admitting, “She could see something in my soul that she knew would connect well with yours.”

When he tipped his head as if needing me to repeat that because he was sure he’d misheard me, I nodded. “Yes, sir. Your sister totally hooked us up. Matchmaker ghost in the house.” But saying that aloud made me scowl in confusion. “Except...” I whirled toward Thalia and flipped my wrist, pointing an upside-down finger at her. “That doesn’t make sense. You warned me to stay *away* from him.”

“Well, *yeah*...” she agreed with a roll of her eyes. “I didn’t want you to have to suffer through a boring, straightforward, drama-free romance. I mean,

you gotta admit it was more thrilling to sneak behind your roommate's back so you could get busy with her little brother, am I right?"

"But..." I blinked, stunned to be hearing this. "What if I'd actually respected your wishes and kept my distance?"

Thalia snorted. "Come on," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "A naughty, rebellious thing like *you*? I don't think so."

"Seriously?" I cried, pulling back in offense. I wasn't *that* defiant.

"What?" Damien asked again.

I glanced at him, my mouth still open in surprise. "We got played. She planned out our relationship from the get-go."

He merely shook his head, smiling fondly. "Sounds like Thalia." But then he hissed out a long breath and shook his head sadly. "I wonder why she's still here, though."

That *was* a good question. When I turned to Thalia for an answer, she merely blinked at me as if she didn't understand what I was asking.

"Oh hell." My stomach dropped in concern. "You're not, like, stuck here—this way—forever, are you?"

Thalia slapped a hand to her hip and scowled. "Hey! What's wrong with me being this way?"

"Nothing!" I rushed to reassure her. "I just...I'd imagine it gets lonely after a while."

Thalia shrugged and finally began to look a little sad. "Time doesn't exactly work the same here," she tried to explain. "But yeah... You're the first person I've been able to talk to since transitioning over. And okay, *maybe* it'd be nice to—I don't know. I know it's *possible* to move on, but I also know I *can't* until all my unresolved issues are taken care of."

"Well..." I straightened. "Maybe I—we—" I glanced toward Damien as I motioned between us— "can help you resolve all your unfinished business so you *can* move on."

Damien stepped forward eagerly, and I took his hand.

“What kind of unfinished business does she even *have* left?” he asked.

“I don’t...” I turned toward Thalia in question. But when she merely stood there, looking all thoughtful and otherworldly, I realized, “You can’t tell us, can you?”

Her shoulders heaved, and she exhaled sadly.

“No, that’s okay,” I rushed to add. “We got this. We can figure out what you still need, and we’ll help you get it. Okay?”

I glanced seekingly toward Damien, and he nodded readily to back me up.

But then he winced. “What else could she need, though? You already delivered a goodbye message to me from her. We caught her killer, and he’s —”

“You did *what*?” Thalia screeched and veered closer, blasting both Damien and me with a rush of cold air.

As he pulled back and rubbed his arms, I lifted my hand to hush him.

“Wait.” Focusing on Thalia, I said, “Did you not know? Oh my God, Thalia. I didn’t even think to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Zweifel,” I started, making her shudder away in revulsion. “We caught him. He’s in jail, and everyone knows what he did to you. You’ve been avenged. He’s going to pay for the rest of his life for hurting you.”

“You...” Her eyes filled with tears, and she lifted her hands to her heart. “You figured it out?”

I nodded and glanced at Damien, reaching for his hand. He took my fingers, and I turned back to Thalia. “Little brother here actually tackled and fought him for you. He was a true hero.”

“He...” Glancing at him, Thalia spilled out a watery laugh and shook her head. “I always knew he was a good kid. Shy, sweet Damien. He grew up so well. His soul just...sparkles.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, only to gasp when the room suddenly started to grow

unnaturally warm, and a brightness opened above Thalia's head. "Wha...?"

"What the fuck is happening?" Damien whispered, gripping my hand as he glanced around. "Is it just me, or is it getting hot in here?"

"It..." I shook my head, refusing to believe what I already knew was happening. But then Thalia started to transform. "Oh God," I rasped. "She's turning transparent. Why is she turning transparent?"

"Because she's moving on," Damien murmured, wrapping an arm around me and tugging me close.

"But..." I stepped forward to stop her until Damien tightened his grip on me, keeping me with him. "No! You can't leave just like that," I entreated. "Not yet. I... I just...I just met you, like, *truly* met you. I need..."

I needed to stop being selfish, I guess. Because this had nothing to do with me.

Thalia merely gave me a careless shrug. "It's my time." Blowing me a kiss, she said, "I'm glad I got to meet you, though. And I'm confident that you'll be good for him. I love you both...so much."

"Oh my God," I sobbed, covering my mouth with both hands. "We love you too. Thalia... Thank you. Thank you for bringing us together. Thank you for saving my life. Literally. I don't... I don't know what path I'd be on right now without you but I know it wouldn't have been as good as this one. How can I ever repay you for that?"

"You already have," she murmured kindly as she started to rise into the air and float toward the light, fading more and more the higher she ascended. Then she shrugged and tossed me a flirty wink. "But... I wouldn't be opposed to you naming your firstborn after me."

With a watery laugh, I rasped, "Deal."

And Thalia disappeared completely.

The light promptly faded away, and the temperature in the room returned to normal.

Turning toward Damien, I buried my face in his shoulder and sobbed, "I

think I just killed your sister.”

He laughed gently and smoothed down my hair. “No,” he assured me as he kissed my brow. “She was already gone. A long time ago. You just helped her go where she needed to go. You *freed* her.”

I looked up at him through tear-stained eyes and sniffed to clear my nose. “So you’re not mad at me?”

“God no.” He touched my face lovingly. “Why in the world would I be mad at you? You just saved my sister from being trapped here eternally. I’m in total *awe* of you...”

When I smiled at him gratefully, big enough that I knew I was showing him those dimples he liked, he released a breath and grasped a piece of my hair to smooth it tenderly between two fingers.

“I love you, Oaklynn Vargas,” he swore. “Your soul really does complement mine.”

My tears only ran thicker. “I love you too,” I wept and threw my arms around him for a full embrace. “I’m going to miss her, though.”

“That’s okay.” He stroked my back lovingly. “I’ll be right here, missing her with you.”

When I pulled back, I looked up into his eyes and drew in a deep, fortifying breath. “Well... What now?” I asked.

His eyebrows arched briefly. “Now... We get back to living,” he reminded me. “For Thalia.”

I nodded, liking the sound of that. “Oh!” I said before I forgot. “I, uh, I kind of agreed to name my firstborn after her, as she was floating away.”

Damien’s mouth formed a small O before he hissed out a breath and flushed. “I’d always kind of thought of doing that myself.”

“Really?” Biting my lip, I sent him a shy but seeking glance. “Well...” I admitted. “I do like kids.”

When surprise flashed across his features, I lifted a halting hand. “But I totally need to grow up a little more, graduate from college first, and settle

into a full-time job—one that hopefully involves me being the star anchor of a big-name news network—and... I don't know... I'm not opposed to the idea of marriage. Someday, though. Not, like, tomorrow or anything."

Damien sent me a slow, devilishly pleased smile. "And I'd like to catch my first serial killer first. But then..." He shrugged.

I grinned big. "Then...Baby Thalia?" I guessed.

He looked into my eyes and nodded. "Baby Thalia," he agreed as he cupped my face in his hands.

When he drew me in for a long, perfect kiss, my lips met his eagerly.

Together, we stood in the very apartment whose vacancy sign had changed my life forever, and we started a new future together.

I knew I'd never be the same again. But I definitely liked where my path led from here.

THE END

*Be on the lookout for
Hudson's story next
in The Seven Series.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda writes romance fiction from YA to adult and contemporary to fantasy.

Published since 2010, she first went through a 2-year writing correspondence class in children's literature from The Institute of Children's Literature, then graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, English with an emphasis in creative fiction writing from Pittsburg State University.

A farm girl, her parents had a dairy, and she was youngest of eight. Now, she lives with her husband, two daughters, a cat named Holly, and nine cuckoo clocks in southeast Kansas, USA where she works a day job as a library admin and cataloging assistant.

She started out reading with the Baby-Sitters Club, then moved on to Sandra Brown, Linda Howard, Julie Garwood, and LaVyrle Spencer in high school. But these days, she's all over the place with her romance reading tastes.

FIND HER ONLINE AT WWW.LINDAKAGE.COM

