



WILLOW HADLEY

*Everything
Will Be
Alright*

Charlotte Reynolds Book Two

**EVERYTHING WILL BE
ALRIGHT**

CHARLOTTE REYNOLDS BOOK TWO

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To my moon sluts. I wouldn't have made it through this year without you, and I definitely wouldn't have finished this book.

You guys are the best.

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CHARLOTTE



“ARE YOU READY TO GO?”

I frown over my shoulder, finding Sebastian leaning against my door frame with his arms crossed. His mouth quirks up in a half smile as his eyes glance around my room. I know it looks like something exploded in here. I’ve been frantic all morning, and there are clothes strewn all over the floor, my bed, and desk chair.

“Shut up,” I whine, turning away from him to face my reflection again.

He snickers. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to.” I sigh and brush my hands down over my skirt. “I’m really nervous, and I can’t decide what to wear.”

Sebastian steps hesitantly into my room, careful not to step on any of the clothes dropped haphazardly on the floor. He stops behind me, meeting my gaze in the mirror as his grin widens in amusement. “I thought you already picked your outfit last night.”

While he played video games downstairs all afternoon yesterday with Elliot, Liam, and Remy, I spent hours going through my closet, choosing what I thought would be the

perfect outfit. They teased me for it, periodically begging me to hang out with them instead, but I thought I'd be saving myself a lot of time and frustration this morning.

"I did, but..." I trail off and shrug, spinning around to face him directly. "I just feel really stupid."

"Charlotte," Sebastian says softly. "You look beautiful. It honestly doesn't matter what you wear."

I love my guys, but I figured they'd all say something similar if I asked their opinions. They're way too biased and oblivious. I was super confident in my outfit choice last night, but now? Not so much. I can't believe I was ever excited about starting school. I'm terrified to face so many new people.

"Most people just wear, like, jeans and tee shirts to school though, don't they?" I furrow my eyebrows. "I'm going to make myself stand out."

He runs his gaze over my clothes. Even though I've changed a million times over the past hour, I ended up putting on my original chosen outfit. A soft, pink tulle skirt, a white blouse with quarter-length sleeves, and the cutest pair of pink ankle-strap wedges. I spent forever curling my hair and doing my makeup. In hindsight, it's complete overkill.

"It wouldn't make a difference," Sebastian whispers. He runs his hands down my arms slowly, twining our fingers together while keeping his mismatched eyes locked on mine. "You're so fucking stunning, you'd stand out no matter what."

My lips part and my cheeks flush, but I can't bring myself to break eye contact with him. Sebastian flirts with me all the time, just like the other guys do. But it's usually pretty innocent. Not like this. God, wasn't it just a couple of days ago

that I swore to myself I wouldn't flirt back or ever confess my feelings? Why does Sebastian have to test my resolve so soon?

He drops my hands and chuckles nervously, killing the moment. "Seriously, you have nothing to worry about. You look perfect, and it doesn't matter what anyone says. The guys and I will have your back all day."

A tiny smile forms on my lips. I know he's right about them having my back. "Thank you."

"You want me to help you clean this up?" he asks, gesturing vaguely to the mess around the room.

"No, thanks." I shake my head, still feeling anxious despite his kind words. "I'll worry about it after school."

After double checking I have everything I should need for the day, I grab my bag and follow Sebastian downstairs. Arthur's in the kitchen, dressed for work and pouring coffee into a thermos. He looks at us and smiles.

"First day of school!" he exclaims, grinning maniacally as he claps his hands together. "Are you guys excited?"

Sebastian snorts. "Excited isn't really the word I'd use."

"That's fair." Arthur chuckles, stepping forward to place his hand on Sebastian's shoulder. "Your mom would be so proud of you, kid. And I'm really proud of you too."

After a few seconds, Sebastian clears his throat and mumbles, "Thanks."

It's been a couple of years since Sebastian's mom died, but I know all too well how the grief and pain of losing a parent can sneak up on you. No matter how much time has passed. I reach out to squeeze his hand, and he twines his fingers with mine in response.

Arthur faces me with a sad smile, placing his free hand on my shoulder like he did to Sebastian. “Same for you, kid. I know I’m not your dad, but I can’t tell you how happy I am to have you here and how proud I am. If anyone gives you any trouble at school or you feel like you’re getting too overwhelmed, call me. I’ll leave work the second you need me. Okay?”

My throat feels thick, and I lose all my words. Arthur’s been extra overbearing the past couple of days ever since I had my big breakdown and told him and the guys the awful details about my past with my mom and how I ended up in juvie. His constant worrying isn’t annoying though. I wish I could tell him how much it means to me every time he checks in with me. It’s been so many years since I’ve had anyone looking out for me—aside from my social worker, Anne. It’s really nice, and such a relief, knowing Arthur, Sebastian, and the other guys care about me so much.

“Okay,” I finally manage to squeak out.

My uncle nods, glancing back and forth between me and Sebastian. “Junior year. I can’t believe it. Alright, let me walk you out before I say anything else too sappy or embarrassing. Unless you guys want me to whip you up something to eat?”

I try to hold my laughter in, but Sebastian doesn’t bother to hide his amusement. Arthur is basically useless in the kitchen. I’ve been cooking most of our meals since I moved in earlier this summer.

“No, thanks. We’ll just stop somewhere with Gray,” Sebastian says.

Arthur follows us outside, briefcase and thermos in hand. I’m excited to see Grayson standing in his front yard next door with his moms, Evelyn and Ava. He looks exhausted, and

slightly irritated as his moms fuss around him. When I meet his eyes, he gives me a small smile.

While his moms chatter with Arthur and Sebastian excitedly, I approach Grayson and brush my fingers lightly over the back of his hand.

“Morning, Princess,” he whispers. His springtime eyes scan me from head to toe, and his face lights up with a smile as he presses his tongue against his lip ring. “You look really pretty.”

“Thanks.” I giggle softly. Making sure nobody is listening to us, I lean closer and whisper, “Are you feeling any better today?”

He shrugs, and I squeeze his hand. Grayson suffers from depression, and he was feeling really low all day yesterday. He confessed to me when he’s having a really rough day like that, all he wants to do is sleep and keep himself shut away from everyone around him, and that every tiny little thing just wears him out. I wish this was something I could fix for him, but I know all I can do is show him I’m here for him and let him know he’s loved.

Sebastian groans, and I look up to see what I’ve missed while paying attention to Grayson.

“Just one picture!” Evelyn grins, waving her phone at us.

I smile at her excitement and laugh at the guys’ not-so-thrilled reactions. I don’t think I’ve taken a ‘First Day of School’ photo since probably fourth grade. I squeeze Grayson’s hand again and touch Sebastian’s arm, glancing back and forth between them. “Please, guys?”

They look at each other over my head, simultaneously sighing in defeat.

“Alright,” Sebastian grumbles.

We move to stand in front of Grayson’s front door, and I situate myself in between the guys. Grayson wraps his arm around my waist, and Sebastian stands close enough for our arms to brush. I smile genuinely at the camera while Evelyn takes what’s probably a lot more than just one photo.

After Arthur and Grayson’s moms wish us luck and tell us to have a good day one last time, the guys and I get into Sebastian’s car and begin making our way to school. We stop at Starbucks at Sebastian’s suggestion, and I get an iced chai latte. Grayson and Sebastian don’t really like Starbucks, so it’s incredibly sweet of them to stop there just for me.

While they talk and devour the muffins and croissants they ordered for themselves, I quietly sip my drink and stare out my window in a daze. I’m getting more and more anxious about school. Not so much about my classes—I’m excited for those. I’m dreading being stared at by so many strangers, and I know it’s inevitable I’m going to see Mike and Madison. I only hope I’ll be lucky enough not to share any classes with them.

“Where’s your head, Princess?” Grayson tugs on one of my curls.

I smile at him over my shoulder, glad to see he’s at least feeling good enough to be playful. “Just hoping I don’t have any classes with Madison or Mike. What do you think my chances are?”

Madison Taylor is the junior class president, and she gave me a tour of the school earlier this summer when I first registered for classes. She was rude and judgmental, and she said some terrible things about all five of my boys. Especially Remy and Sebastian. Mike Everette is a guy in our year who’s unfortunately on the football team with Elliot. The first time I

hung out with the guys after moving here, we went to an arcade where Mike and his friend started a fight with Remy. I ended up breaking Mike's nose in Remy's defense, and later we learned that Mike had been telling people it was Remy who punched him.

"Even if you do, just ignore them," Sebastian says. He shoots me a strained smile. "I know that's easier said than done, but they're not the only assholes we go to school with, unfortunately."

His statement should make me feel worse, but instead, I feel more resolved. My friendship with the guys is solid, and I've met a few other people we go to school with who seem pretty decent too. I just need to focus on them and enjoy my classes, and everything should be alright.

My newfound assurance vanishes the moment Sebastian drives into the school parking lot. It's already more than half-full of cars, and there are students crowded around the front of the main building. A lump forms in my throat, and I make sure my expression stays blank so the guys can't see how terrified I am.

Sebastian parks near the center of the lot, and Grayson hops out to open my door for me.

"You got her bag?" Sebastian asks Grayson. When Grayson nods and slips my bag over his shoulder alongside his, Sebastian digs his phone out of his pocket. "Cool. I'm gonna text the guys and see if they're here yet."

I'm too anxious to cause a fuss over Grayson carrying my bag, and I don't complain when he threads our fingers together as we walk toward the front of the school. Sebastian walks on my other side. It may be silly, but I feel safe and much more at ease being in between two of my guys. Still, I can't help but

let my gaze dart around to take in our fellow classmates as we pass.

Some people look over at us, but most let their eyes skim over our group with only mild interest. I don't know why I had it in my head that everybody was going to gawk at me and make a huge deal about me being new and knowing the guys, but it's a huge relief to see most people—at first glance, anyway—really don't care all that much.

Just before we walk into the building, someone runs up behind me and sets their hands on my shoulders.

“Morning, gorgeous,” they whisper into my ear.

I spin around and grin at Elliot, throwing my arms around him without hesitation. He laughs and hugs me back, sliding his hands down to rest on my hips when I pull away. I know I saw him just last night, but that already feels like so long ago. Plus, on a day as overwhelming as today, I desperately want to be near *all* my guys.

“Good morning, Elliot.” I sigh happily, staring up into his blue-gray eyes.

He takes in my outfit, letting his eyes scan me from head to toe slowly, and he bites his lip as he groans. “Damn, you look hot today. You dress up just for me, gorgeous?”

I giggle and smack his arm, but I feel my stupid cheeks warm in embarrassment. Elliot's the worst about teasing and flirting with me, even though I know his comments are mostly innocent or harmless. But the messed up part of me can't help but love the attention he's giving me, especially in public like this.

“Come on.” Sebastian shoves Elliot roughly, an annoyed expression on his face. “I told Liam and Remy we'd meet

them at Charlotte's locker.”

When we exchanged schedules a few weeks ago, the guys told me my assigned locker is in the same hallway as Liam's, and it's also the most central for everyone's first classes of the day. So, it's the most convenient spot for everybody to meet up before and after school.

Elliot wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me close to his side. We walk through the hallways together with Grayson and Sebastian trailing behind us. The school is even more crowded inside than it was outside, and I have to remind myself this school is way smaller than my last two. It probably only seems bigger compared to the classes I had in juvie. Besides, the last time I was here several weeks ago, the hallways were totally empty.

I nearly squeal in excitement and relief when we turn a corner and I catch sight of Remy and Liam leaning against some lockers further down the hallway. They're laughing and talking together, and they don't see us right away. Not until we walk over and stop right in front of them.

Liam looks over first, his entire face expression lighting up when his caramel eyes meet mine. Remy's smile is more subdued, but his dimples are showing. The two of them are the tallest of all the guys. Even though I'm wearing heels, they still tower over me.

“Morning, guys!” I greet them excitedly. It's much easier to talk and forget my nerves when I'm with all five of them.

Remy steps in front of me, bringing his hand up to brush a strand of hair away from my face. His fingers trail down my cheek and jaw until his thumb brushes over my bottom lip. My breath catches and my stomach flutters, and I can't focus on anything except for the crazy-intense look in his icy blue artist

eyes. His black framed glasses don't detract at all from the passion in his gaze.

He leans down, and for one insane second, I think he's about to kiss me. Right here in front of the other guys, in the middle of a crowded hallway at school. But he stops a few inches away from my face, his fingers still stroking along my jaw and bottom lip.

"Hi, baby," he whispers in a deliciously husky voice.

Remy hasn't called me *baby* since I freaked out and had a nightmare the other night when all the guys slept over. I didn't react so well, which definitely wasn't Remy's fault. But hearing him call me that here, and *now*, while lighting me on freaking fire with his touch? Oh my god. I'm surprised I don't combust or melt into a puddle at his feet.

Instead, I release an embarrassingly high-pitched giggle and stare up at him like an idiot. I'm completely incapable of responding like a normal person or forming actual words. Remy's lips curve into a smug little smirk.

I force myself to look away from him, grimacing when I see the looks on the other guys' faces. They're all scowling at Remy.

Liam clears his throat, thankfully breaking up the awkward moment. Giving me a nervous smile, he gestures to one of the lockers beside him. "This one is yours, Charlotte. Do you wanna try the combination and make sure it works?"

Desperate for any change in subject, I nod eagerly and take my bag from Grayson so I can pull out my planner. I wrote my locker number and combination in the front, along with all our class schedules. Sebastian teased me relentlessly when I did it, but I want to start this year off being organized and prepared

for anything. It also gives me some peace of mind, knowing I'll be able to check where any of the guys are throughout the day whenever we're at school.

My locker opens on my first try, and I close it again with a smile. I'm happy to see I didn't end up with a broken one like I had at my last school. The only thing I have to put in it for now is my gym bag.

For several minutes, the guys talk and joke around. I stay quiet and listen to them, taking solace in their proximity and the sounds of their voices. Some kids glance at us curiously as they walk past, but nobody bothers us. I know it's still early, but the day is shaping up to be okay so far.

When the first bell rings, my shoulders stiffen, and I glance up at Sebastian in a panic since he's standing right next to me. He offers me an easy smile, and Grayson shoves Remy out of his way so he can grab my hand.

"Let's go, Princess," Grayson says with a chuckle. "You're in first period with me and Seb."

CHARLOTTE



THE RELIEF I FEEL AT HAVING SEBASTIAN AND GRAYSON WITH me in my first period world history class lasts for all of two seconds when we walk in.

“Line up along that wall, please!” the teacher exclaims with a wild grin, pointing to the far side of the room where a couple other students are already waiting. According to my schedule, her name is Ms. Wilkins. And she is way too exuberant this early in the morning.

Sebastian pulls me to the opposite end of the wall from the other students, and he stares at the classroom door with a grim expression. “For fuck’s sake, I hope she doesn’t make us do some dumbass ice breaker with the class first thing.”

I can practically feel the color drain from my face in horror as I imagine having to stand in front of a bunch of strangers to talk about myself or something equally awful.

“Don’t worry, Princess,” Grayson whispers. He still looks sleepy and not as lively as usual, but I know his smile for me is genuine. “It won’t be so bad, and we’ll be out of here in an hour.”

Sure, but then I’ll still have six more classes to get through. I don’t say that though. I nod so Grayson knows I

appreciate him, and I remind myself that I'm not alone in this class. Not like I will be in second period—the only class I don't share with at least one of the guys.

Students trickle in slowly, lining up against the wall with us. I squeeze closer to my guys so I'm squished between them, and Grayson keeps his hand on my back. I don't recognize any of our classmates until Zack walks in.

I met Zack and his friend Ethan earlier this summer while I was on a not-date with Elliot. He's tall and broad with crazy-messy brown hair and freckles covering his face and arms. Zack, Ethan, and Elliot are on the football team together, and Elliot told me they're his only teammates he really likes. Zack is laughing with another guy when he walks into the class, and our eyes meet as he crosses the room to stand against the wall. His eyes light up, and he waves. I can't help smiling and waving back.

“Do you know him?” Sebastian whispers to me, going tense at my side.

Before I can begin to wonder about the angry tone of his voice or open my mouth to answer, a girl stops in front of us and gasps as she grins up at him.

“Oh my god, Seb?” Her smile widens as her eyes wander up and down his body. “Holy crap, you got so tall. And you're freaking muscular!”

Now it's my turn to go tense at Sebastian's side. I turn my head slowly to see him stare at the girl like a deer in headlights as his cheeks flush bright red.

“Hey, Summer.” He chuckles.

I haven't noticed him grow taller since I moved here, but it's definitely possible he grew a few inches between the end

of school last year and me moving in with him. Plus, maybe I haven't noticed as easily since I've spent pretty much every day with him the past couple months.

What I do know for sure is I really, *really* don't like this Summer girl noticing anything about Sebastian.

"You're doing yearbook again this year, right?" she asks flirtatiously, still making it super obvious she's checking him out. She's really pretty with tan skin, hazel eyes, and straight brown hair. And unlike me, she's wearing jeans and a tee shirt like a normal person.

"Uh, yeah. Probably." Sebastian gives her a crooked smile, rubbing the back of his neck. I can't tell if he's into her the way she's clearly into him, or if maybe he feels uncomfortable and is only trying to be polite.

Either way, I can't help the way my heart beats painfully in my chest. I've been agonizing for weeks over my feelings for the guys and how wrong it is to be in love with all five of them. While focusing on myself, my feelings, and my will to ensure I never cross the line of being more than friends with any of the guys, I completely failed to imagine they might be interested in other girls.

Realistically, what the hell did I expect? Sebastian, Grayson, Remy, Liam, and Elliot are all extremely attractive, so of course other girls are going to notice them. Even if the guys like me back a fraction as much as I like them, it's not like they're going to wait around and stay single forever if I'm never going to act on my feelings.

The bell rings, thankfully putting an end to this nightmare of watching another girl hit on Sebastian for the time being. Summer smiles and moves to an empty spot against the wall beside another girl, a few people down from where Sebastian

is standing. The second she walks away, he jerks his head sideways to stare down at me.

I look away, not wanting to see the dumb, guilty look on his face. More than any of my guys, Sebastian is absolutely off-limits. Anything romantic between us will always be impossible simply because we live together. We might not be blood-related, but Arthur being his step-dad makes him something like my cousin. Just thinking that makes me feel sad and weirdly nauseous, but that doesn't make it any less true.

“You okay?” Grayson whispers, brushing his fingers against mine.

“Mhmm.” It's the closest thing to an actual word I can manage. I force myself to keep my eyes forward instead of on either of the guys. At least I know my expression won't give anything away. It's still a habit to hide my feelings, especially when I'm upset.

“Welcome, welcome!” Ms. Wilkins says loudly, clapping her hands until everybody goes silent. She introduces herself and grabs a painted blue mason jar filled with popsicle sticks from her desk at the front of the room. “Are you ready to find your seat for the unforeseeable future?”

A few students groan. Ms. Wilkins explains that while she's calling role, each of us will pick a popsicle stick from her jar with a number indicating which seat will be ours. The chances I'll end up sitting next to Grayson or Sebastian are low, but I keep my face blank and anxiously wait for our names to be called.

Sebastian and I are some of the last students standing, since our last name is Reynolds. There aren't any tables left

with both seats open, but the seat beside Grayson at a desk near the front of the room is still vacant.

When my name is called, Sebastian bumps his elbow against mine. If we were in private, or if it were us and the rest of the guys, he'd probably grab my hand or do something a little more affectionate. With so many eyes on us, I understand his reluctance. I still take comfort from the small, friendly touch he gives me.

I pull my stupid popsicle stick from the jar and frown at the number fourteen. My table is near the back against the wall to the right, and my eyes dart anxiously in that direction. My nerves settle the slightest bit when I see Zack sitting in the seat beside mine. At least he's not a total stranger.

"Hey," Zack says quietly when I set my bag down and take my seat.

I offer him a timid smile and focus my attention up front to see where Sebastian's going to end up sitting. It's petty and ridiculous of me, but I'm happy that Summer girl doesn't have an open seat at her table. She's sitting with another girl at the table to my right, oblivious to me as she watches Sebastian as intently as I am.

Sebastian somehow snags the spot next to Grayson, and they laugh and high five when Sebastian walks over to sit down. It's really funny and cute. Even cuter when they turn in sync to look at me, silently checking to make sure I'm okay. I grin and give them a thumbs up.

"Still pretty tight with Elliot and his group then?" Zack asks, chuckling softly.

After pulling my planner, a pencil, and a brand-new notebook from my bag, I meet Zack's eyes and nod. I remind

myself of how nice he was when I met him, even if it was a couple months ago. And I need to get better at talking to people besides the guys, so this is the perfect opportunity to practice not being a complete weirdo. I can totally do this and have a normal conversation with a classmate.

“Yeah, we’re super close.” I pause for a second and force myself to be brave and just *talk*. “I’m really glad you remember me because I’m really bad at meeting and talking to new people, so today is kind of, like, one of my worst nightmares.”

Oh, god. Was that too much? Am I seriously only capable of silence or word vomit when I’m with someone I don’t know very well?

“Hell yeah, I remember you!” Zack laughs. He grins as he gets his things from his bag. “That one time we hung out was awesome. I’m kinda bummed we didn’t run into each other more over the summer. Then again, practice has been kicking my ass so much I’ve barely had time or energy to do anything else.”

My whole body relaxes, and I feel myself smile. Maybe I’m not such an anxious freak after all. Or maybe Zack’s just nice. Either way, he’s talkative and open, so I feel way more comfortable than I did even a couple minutes ago.

“What position do you play?” I ask to be polite. Not that I have any clue what any of the positions actually *do*. Or any idea of how football works. I’d probably try to learn it better if Elliot had any interest, but he’s only on the team because his dad forces him into it. I know he plays left tackle.

“Defensive tackle,” he says proudly.

I nod like I know exactly what that means. Is that different from Elliot's position? Isn't tackling just...tackling? Luckily, Ms. Wilkins forces our attention up front while she talks about herself and the class. We get a whole bunch of stupid 'first day of school' papers like a class syllabus and a student code of conduct form, and we're also given our textbooks. Even though this stuff is pretty boring, I can't help feeling a little excited when I read down the list of subjects we'll be covering in class over the year.

Once we get past all the boring stuff, Ms. Wilkins begins the actual lesson. The room stays relatively quiet. Aside from a few whispered voices here and there, all you can hear aside from Ms. Wilkin's voice are pens and pencils scratching against paper. It's easy to lose myself in the lecture and take notes.

It might sound dumb, but I missed this. The classes I took in juvie were loud and crowded, and it was impossible to focus or learn anything unless I found myself lost in a book. The teachers didn't really care about teaching us, and my fellow delinquents didn't care about learning. I love being back in a normal high school setting, and I know I'll never take the opportunity for granted again.

"Stop staring at him!" the girl sitting next to Summer at the desk to my right giggles. She's trying to whisper, but she's giggling too hard to keep their conversation completely private.

I subtly glance sideways to see Summer grinning down at her paper where she's been taking notes. "I can't help it. And come on, you can't deny Sebastian Reynolds has gotten insanely hot over the summer."

My body tenses, and I grip my pencil so hard it snaps. It takes pretty much all of my control not to lunge over to the table beside me and scream at Summer that Sebastian is *mine*. Even though logically that would be fucking insane. And also, because Sebastian isn't mine. Not the way I desperately want him to be, anyway.

“Have you forgotten he's also a complete psycho?” Summer's friend asks, still giggling.

My head jerks to the side as my hands tremble angrily. I don't bother trying to be subtle or hide the fact I'm listening to them while I glare daggers at Summer and her friend. Stupid girls. They don't know anything.

Summer shrugs, looking up to smirk at the back of Sebastian's head. “Right now, I'm pretty sure I don't mind.”

Before I do something incredibly, unforgivably stupid like throw a punch at one of these girls in the middle of class, Zack places his hand firmly over mine atop our table. My skin flushes in surprise and embarrassment when I turn to meet his eyes.

He gives me a sympathetic smile and pats my hand as he whispers, “You've gotta block them out. Otherwise, you won't make it through the day, killer.”

I nod slowly, lowering my eyes to the table. It's definitely better that he caught me and stopped me before I made a huge scene in class, but it's still humiliating to have someone new see how crazy I can get.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

“Don't mention it.” Zack pulls his hand away from mine. Lowering his voice and leaning a little closer, he whispers, “I've watched Elliot and his friends get into fights dozens of

times to defend each other whenever someone makes a dumbass comment like that.”

That makes me sad, but it doesn't surprise me. The guys warned me they had issues with a lot of people at school. “People suck.”

“Yeah, they do.” Zack chuckles and pulls a second pencil from his bag. Before he hands it to me, he gives me a teasing smile. “I've seen you wield a fork as a weapon. Promise you're not gonna stab Summer or Mikayla in the eye if I give this to you?”

A surprised laugh escapes me, loud enough to draw most of the class's attention. Too many eyes turn in my direction, including Sebastian's and Grayson's. A blush creeps up my neck and cheeks, and Zack snorts beside me as he wordlessly hands me the pencil.

“Is there a problem?” Ms. Wilkins asks me with a thin, displeased smile.

I shake my head quickly, incapable of forming any words in my state of embarrassment. Thankfully, she jumps right back into her lesson like nothing happened. Sebastian continues glaring daggers at Zack until Grayson shoves him and forces him to turn back around.

The rest of the hour passes quickly without any more drama. I manage to tune out Summer and Mikayla, fully focused on taking notes. Zack is diligent with his notes too, and I remember Elliot telling me how important it is for players to keep their grades up during football season. He doesn't care about being on the team, and confided in me how stressed it makes him.

For the last five minutes before the bell, Ms. Wilkins gives everyone the opportunity to start reading ahead on the next chapter in our textbooks, which is our homework for tonight. Nobody actually does that, taking the chance to chatter quietly instead while they pack their bags.

I write down the assignment neatly in my planner before packing my bag too. There's no point in trying to read the next chapter with only a few minutes to spare, especially when the room is noisy.

“What class do you have next?” Zack asks, smiling when I hand him back his pencil.

“Honors English. What about you?”

He has gym class next. He pulls out his schedule for us to compare, and I open to the front of my planner where I have mine and the guys' neatly labeled. Zack kindly doesn't call me a nutcase when he sees their names and schedules in my book, and he seems genuinely disappointed when it turns out we don't share any other classes together.

Someone taps my shoulder, surprising me. For a rage-filled second, I think it's going to be Summer or her friend. But when I turn, I find it's the guy sitting directly behind me. He's grinning widely as he leans across his desk. If I wasn't startled or wary—like I almost always am when it comes to new people—I might admit he's attractive. He's broader and more muscular than Zack and my guys are, and he has pretty blue eyes, a buzz cut, and smooth, dark skin.

“You're new here.”

He says it like a statement, not a question. So, I'm not really sure how to respond. I give him a forced smile. “Yep.”

His eyes dart to Zack questioningly, so I turn to look at him too. Zack rolls his eyes. “Charlotte, this is Jude. He’s on the football team with me.”

“Nice to meet you, Charlotte. Has Zack asked for your number yet?” Jude’s smile widens, turning almost predatory. “If not, can I call dibs?”

My expression stays blank as I stare at him, but my guard goes up. If this is what he considers flirting, it’s way too aggressive. And I’m really not sure what to say. Obviously, I’m not interested, but should I be polite or just stay silent? God, why is dealing with most people so hard?

“She’s Elliot’s girl,” Zack says in a warning tone.

I whip my head around to look at him with my eyebrows raised. He winces, his eyes quickly darting to the front of the room where Sebastian and Grayson are sitting before he turns to me again with a shrug. I can’t decide if I should feel ashamed, surprised, or offended that Zack’s making assumptions and speaking on my behalf.

Am I seriously that easy to read? My feelings for Elliot and Remy were probably made obvious enough the one time I met Zack over the summer, and he watched me silently freak out over another girl calling Sebastian hot, like, half an hour ago.

“Elliot Spencer? For real?” Jude asks with a laugh. He looks me over, still wearing that ravaging smile. “Good for him.”

My face feels so hot, I’m pretty sure it’s bright red. And I’ve decided I’m way more offended at the way this Jude guy is looking at me and talking to me than I am about Zack. I’m sure Zack only said something to defend me and warn his

teammate to back off. He's been nice to me all class, and he never made me feel weird about any of my obvious issues.

"I—" I start to speak, to admit that Elliot and I are just friends. But it hurts too much. Because I wish we *were* more than friends. My tongue gets stuck to the roof of my mouth, and words fail me.

"That means you have a thing for football players though, right?" Jude teases flirtatiously.

Before I can think better of it, I narrow my eyes at him. "I have a thing for *Elliot*."

Too late, I wonder if Elliot might be upset that people are assuming we're together. Especially his teammates since he has to deal with them on an almost daily basis. Of the five guys, Elliot's the only one who straight up told me he didn't want to be more than friends with me. That he didn't want to ruin our friendship, or our friendship with the other guys. While he might not be the most popular person in school, he's still a football player. Lots of girls probably want to date him, and I'm ruining that for him.

Even if the idea of him being with someone else makes me feel like I'm being stabbed in the heart, I don't want to make things more awkward or difficult for him at school.

"Wait—" Mikayla, the girl sitting beside Summer who made the comment about Sebastian being a psycho, turns in her seat so she's facing us with a wicked grin on her face. "You're the girl who broke Mike Everette's nose, aren't you? I heard you were dating Remy Oliver, but you broke up with him for Elliot. Is that true?"

Jude roars with laughter and says something about Mike being a pussy, but I've stopped listening. This is exactly why I

can't be trusted to talk to people or go anywhere in public. I always ruin everything effortlessly with only a few stupid words. While Jude, Mikayla, and Summer laugh raucously together, all I can do is sit and stare back at them with a blank expression.

“Leave her alone, guys.” Zack grumbles at them.

The bell rings, thank god. I jump up from my seat, so glad I decided to pack my things when I did. Before I take a step forward, Grayson's right there in front of me. I breathe out a sigh of relief, leaning into him and allowing him to throw my bag over his shoulder.

“You okay, Princess?” he asks, wrapping an arm around me as he glares at anyone still laughing.

I nod, silently begging him to get me out of this classroom before I really lose it and go completely psycho on these people. As he pulls me along to the door of the classroom, I spare a quick glance at Zack so I can wave goodbye.

He waves back, smiling apologetically. I force myself not to look at Jude, Mikayla, or Summer, but I can still hear them laughing and talking about me.

CHARLOTTE



“ARE YOU OKAY?”

Sebastian grabs my shoulders and pulls me aside the second Grayson and I step into the hallway. He leans down so his face is only inches from mine, and I bite down the hysterical giggle building in my throat. His mismatched eyes are fierce and protective, and it’s impossible for me to do anything other than nod.

“Good,” he grunts. He peers at Grayson over his shoulder for a second before turning to pull me down the hallway. While keeping his arm around my shoulders, he says, “I couldn’t tell if those dicks were fucking with you or not, and Grayson was worried I’d punch someone if I walked to the back of the room to check on you. I can’t believe you didn’t get to sit next to one of us.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” I squeak.

Grayson walks on my other side, threading his fingers through mine. He squeezes my hand and raises his eyebrows when I turn to look at him. “You sure, Princess? You had that look on your face when they were laughing. The one where you get really quiet and don’t show any emotions.”

I was definitely uncomfortable during the last few minutes of class, and I didn't get the greatest vibes from Jude, Mikayla, or Summer. My face feels warm as I recount everything they said. "I don't think they were making fun of me, exactly. They were wondering if I was dating Elliot or Remy."

"What did you say?" Grayson asks as Sebastian's arm tenses around me.

No way am I admitting that I might have accidentally given the impression I'm with Elliot by saying I have a thing for him. I look straight ahead, keeping my face blank as I attempt to shrug my shoulders nonchalantly. "Nothing."

Sebastian and Grayson share a look, which makes me frown. I really don't want them to worry about me. All in all, my first class really wasn't bad. I'm not dreading going back tomorrow or anything.

"Seriously, guys. I'm fine. Zack's really nice, and the class seems like it will be interesting."

"How do you know Zack?" Sebastian asks harshly.

"Oh, I met him through Elliot." I tilt my head up to meet Sebastian's eyes and smile. "If I couldn't sit next to you or Grayson during class, I'm glad it was him."

It doesn't seem like anything I've said has reassured Sebastian. He looks pissed off. I want to tell him he doesn't need to worry about or baby me, and he definitely doesn't need to be jealous of Zack. I don't want to give him the wrong idea either. I tell myself for the millionth time that nothing's ever going to happen between me and Sebastian.

"That Summer girl seemed into you," I say coolly. As a reminder to him and to myself.

Sebastian's eyes widen like a deer in headlights. Grayson coughs and tugs on my hand as he stops walking. Pointing at a classroom to our right, he quickly says, "There's your English class."

Even though we've been walking together this whole time, I haven't been paying attention to our surroundings at all. I doubt I'd be able to retrace my steps back to my last class on my own, that's how focused I've been on my guys, my thoughts, and our conversation.

"Thanks for walking me."

Should I hug them? Is that weird now that we're here at school? I mean, they're already holding my hands and putting their arms around my shoulders. When I glance around the hallway, I realize people are subtly watching us. Way more people than first thing this morning. My heart stutters in my chest at the horrific realization that this might fuel more rumors about me dating the guys.

I step away from Sebastian and Grayson so fast it seems to startle them. They blink at me, and I give them an awkward smile as I head into my class. "See you later!"

It's not until I'm standing at the front of the room, staring at a group of strangers, that I realize I'm totally on my own. With all the drama and excitement over the past fifteen minutes or so, I managed to forget this is my only class I don't share with any of the guys. Most of the seats are already full, but students are still trickling into the room.

"Just take a seat anywhere you'd like," the teacher tells me kindly from behind her desk. I didn't notice her at first, and my brain scrambles to remember my schedule. Her name is Mrs. Townsend, I think.

Panic rises in my chest as I glance around the room frantically. When my eyes land on someone with bright, aqua blue hair, I force myself to take a deep breath and focus. Benji's sitting at the back of the room by himself, his table otherwise empty. I sort of know him. Better than I knew Zack. I've met Benji twice—once at the beginning of summer when I got ice cream with the guys at the place he works, and again the other day when Grayson and I ran into him at the mall.

I approach his table slowly, noting the tables in the classroom fit four students with two on each side facing each other. Benji looks up from his phone—which he's not even trying to hide—when I stop beside his table.

“Oh, hey!” he says, smiling in surprise.

“Hi.” I smile back anxiously and swallow down my nerves as I force my words out. “Can I sit with you? I don't know anyone else in here.”

“Yeah, sure.” He gestures to the three empty seats at his table, and I nearly faint with relief as I collapse into the chair next to him.

“Thank you so much,” I say. I still feel anxious, but Benji is really nice. While I pull my planner, notebook, and some pencils out, I smile at him. “You dyed your hair again. It looks really good.”

The aqua really makes his blue eyes pop, and the longer, shaggy style makes him look effortlessly cool. His lip and septum piercings definitely help with the vibe.

“Thanks.” He laughs, running a hand through his bright locks. “I did it last night. My mom was pissed. She hated the green, and I might have accidentally stained our bathtub again.”

Running a hand over my dirty blonde hair, I giggle. “You’re brave. I would be terrified to dye my hair like that.”

“Your hair is way too fucking pretty to dye it like that, anyway.”

I jump at Alex’s voice, and he grins down at me before sitting in the empty seat across from mine. He’s not wearing a beanie today like he was at the mall when I met him with Benji over the weekend, and I’m struck by just how cute he is. I’d honestly forgotten. His dark brown hair is styled to look perfectly messy, and his hazel brown eyes are brighter and warmer than I remember.

“Hello,” I say. But my voice is so damn quiet, I’ll be surprised if he hears me. I struggle to get any more words out, even to say thank you like a normal person would at a compliment.

“It’s awesome you’re in this class with us,” he says.

Another girl plops down in the seat beside Alex just as the bell rings. She squints at me like she’s confused. It takes me a second to recognize her, so I wonder if she’s trying to place me too.

“Hi. It’s Emily, right?” I smile nervously. She looks even cooler and more badass than Benji with her long, scarlet red hair and matching lipstick, nose and eyebrow piercings, and her perfectly executed smoky eyes.

I met her along with Benji when I first moved here, but only briefly. She was working at the ice cream shop then. While hanging out with Grayson, Benji, and Alex at the mall the other day, I learned she’s Alex’s cousin.

“Barbie!” Emily snaps her fingers like she’s finally realized where she knows me from. She grimaces a second

later and says, “Shit. Sorry, what’s your actual name?”

“I’m Charlotte,” I whisper since the teacher’s talking at the front of the class now. She’s introducing herself and pulling out the class list, just like the teacher did in my first class. I’m only half listening while I silently congratulate myself.

While it sucks I don’t share this class with my guys, I’m not alone in here. I know three people, at least a little, and they’re not being jerks so far. And for the most part, I’ve been talking like a normal person. Even in my first class. I might have experienced some awkward moments, but I’d call my morning a success. If I’d been put in this situation a few months ago—a new school with new people—I’d probably have had a panic attack already, and I doubt I would have been able to speak a word to a single person. It’s eye opening to realize how far I’ve come. All because of Arthur and my friends.

“Holy shit,” Emily hisses quietly. I look up diagonally across the table at her. She’s looking at something on the floor while she fusses with her backpack. When she looks up, she meets my eyes and makes a face. “Are you seriously wearing heels at school? How the fuck are you not dying? My feet would be killing me by now.”

I make a very unflattering snorting noise and grin at her. “It’s not that bad. I’ll be sitting down most of the day.”

She nods slowly and shrugs. “Fair point.”

When Mrs. Townsend begins calling role, I realize with a sinking feeling of dread she’s making everyone stand and introduce themselves. A guy on the other side of the room stands first, says his name loud enough for everyone to hear, and tells us the title of the last book he read by our teacher’s request.

As we go down the list and everyone stands up and repeats the process, I'm kind of surprised and excited to see nearly every student in this class reads for pleasure, and not just for school. Only a few people name books that were obviously for a class last year, and the books mentioned by everyone else range vastly in different genres. I've never been in an honors class, or any kind of advanced class. But my excitement level is slowly rising despite feeling anxious to talk in front of the class.

When Mrs. Townsend calls my name, I wipe my sweaty palms on my skirt and slowly stand. I take a deep breath and force myself to look at the teacher instead of around the room at the rest of the students. If I make eye contact with anyone else, there's zero doubt in my mind I'll completely freeze up.

"Hi, I'm Charlotte. The last book I read was *Red, White, and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston."

Mrs. Townsend gives me a genuine smile, and then looks down at her list to call out the next person's name. I sigh in relief and quickly sit down. That wasn't terrible. I managed two complete sentences in front of a group of at least twenty people. My social worker, Anne, would be proud. Arthur will be too. It probably makes me a loser, but I'm seriously excited to be able to tell my uncle how well my day's going. If I can make it through this class, the rest of my day with the guys will be a piece of cake.

The teacher spends most of class going over the syllabus, talking about the books we'll read, and explaining what most of our projects will be. It sounds like we'll have papers due every other week with our first one due next Friday. Mrs. Townsend also talks about peer editing and encourages us to form editing and critique groups with the people at our tables.

We're given the last twenty minutes of class to talk to the people at our tables and to brainstorm our first papers. The assignment is to write about a classic novel and argue whether or not it's still relevant in today's society.

The second we're given permission to talk, the room explodes with noise as everyone begins speaking practically at once. I spend a few moments looking around the room, and consider pulling my phone out to check if any of the guys have texted me. I haven't glanced at it since we arrived at school.

When I see Mrs. Townsend looking around before stopping at one of the tables near the front of the room, I decide it's not worth getting caught. I share my next class with Liam, anyway.

"Hey, so...I kind of have a weird question."

I look up at Benji's vague statement, keeping my face blank. He's been nice to me, so I try not to jump to conclusions about what he could possibly want to ask me that could come across as weird. If he wants to know if I'm dating Elliot or any of the other guys, I hope I don't freeze up or say something idiotic like I did in my last class.

Benji turns his chair so he's facing me better, a nervous smile on his face. "Since you're friends with Grayson, I was wondering if he mentioned anything to you about the band? Uh, the band we were talking about forming, I mean?"

"Oh." I feel myself relax. Benji and Alex mentioned at the mall they were thinking of starting a band with Emily, but they're having trouble finding a guitarist. Grayson seemed like he was interested, but we haven't talked about it since we left the mall. First, we were distracted by hanging out with the guys. And then I ended up kind of ruining the rest of the

weekend when I had my nightmare and freak out during our sleepover.

“Who are we talking about?” Emily asks, leaning across her desk.

Alex gives me a smile that makes butterflies stir in my stomach. Which is horrifying. I’m already in love with five different guys. My *best friends*, no less. How can I suddenly find another guy cute too, and get butterflies just from seeing him smile? Something is seriously wrong with me.

“Grayson Brooks plays guitar. We ran into him and Charlotte at the mall the other day, and he’s pretty fucking amazing. He likes the same kind of music we do too. Benji and I asked him if he’d be into starting a band with us.”

“Really?” Emily raises an eyebrow, appearing intrigued. “I’ve always had a feeling he was secretly cool. I’m more surprised you ran into him without the rest of his crew there.”

Benji gives her a look and clears his throat before giving me the same nervous smile as before. “So?”

“Well, we didn’t really talk about it.” I shrug apologetically. “But you should text him. He seemed excited by the idea when you guys mentioned it.”

“You sure?” Alex asks me, his mouth still quirked with that disarming, gorgeous smile. “He and his friends can be a little, uh, intimidating. We just don’t wanna bug him if he’s not really feeling it.”

“Definitely sure.” I can’t help smiling back, even though internally I’m screaming at myself that I’m a traitor and that something is seriously very wrong with me. “I bet the rest of the guys would be really encouraging too.”

Mrs. Townsend stops beside our table, surprising us. She smiles at each of us in a way that makes it clear she knows we weren't talking about our assignments. "How's it going over here?"

"Pretty good, I guess." Emily shrugs like she's bored.

"Have any of you decided which novel you'll be writing about?" our teacher asks kindly.

Alex shakes his head, and Benji scribbles in his notebook as he clears his throat. "Not yet. Still thinking it over."

"What about you, Charlotte?" Mrs. Townsend asks.

As soon as she mentioned the assignment, I knew what I wanted to write about. Having her attention fixed solely on me makes me feel anxious and fidgety, but I try to remind myself of how well I've done today with talking to strangers and acting mostly normal. Maybe I can just pretend I'm talking about books to one of the guys...

"Um, *Anne of Green Gables*?" I don't mean to phrase it as a question, but at least I didn't lose my words entirely.

"Interesting," she says. And she sounds like she really means it. "Do you know yet if you're going to argue it's still relevant to today's society?"

"Definitely relevant." I nod excitedly without thinking. When Mrs. Townsend grins broadly and gestures for me to continue, I take a moment to put my thoughts into words. "Even though the foster system today is different from how orphanages used to work, Anne's story isn't so different from someone in foster care who's given a chance even when they're considered too old to be desirable for adoption or a foster family."

I'm momentarily amazed at myself for saying so much without stumbling over my words even once. Before I can wonder if maybe I've said *too* much, or revealed too much about my personal life in front of multiple people, Mrs. Townsend adjusts her glasses and hums like she's impressed.

"Well, I'm certainly looking forward to reading your paper," she says. She looks around the table at Benji, Alex, and Emily. "As for the rest of you, keep brainstorming."

She leaves us to check on the next table. Emily, Benji, and Alex are staring at me, and I'm careful to keep my face blank while I wait for one of them to say something.

"How the hell did you come up with that so quickly?" Benji laughs.

Should I be honest? Or should I be super vague, and maybe make something up? My words tumble out of my mouth before I fully decide. "I—I spent some time in a group home. And *Anne of Green Gables* is one of my favorite books. I've read it at least a hundred times."

"I'm doing *Pride and Prejudice*." Emily shrugs like I didn't just admit something deeply personal. I wish I could tell her how much I appreciate that. "Enemies-to-lovers is still one of the hottest tropes in the romance genre more than two hundred years later. Can't get more relevant than that."

Alex taps his pencil against his desk and smiles at me. "I don't know that I've read any classics that weren't assigned reading at school. Maybe we can exchange numbers, and you can help me come up with an idea for my paper?"

"Sure," I squeak. My face feels hot, which means I'm probably blushing. Ugh.

“Good idea.” Emily turns to her cousin, a wicked grin lighting up her face. “We should all exchange numbers with Charlotte. Since we’re going to be critique partners and everything.”

He frowns at her, but he doesn’t say anything. When all three of them pull their phones out, I rattle off my number quickly. With a nervous glance in Mrs. Townsend’s direction, I ask, “Aren’t you guys afraid of getting caught with your phones out?”

“Not really,” Benji says. “Most of the teachers here don’t care as long as you only have it out during downtime like this. Just be careful during lectures, tests, and things like that.”

We only have a couple minutes left of class, and I have everything I need written in my planner and notebook. I decide to risk checking my phone. It feels way too long since I’ve seen or talked to the guys, even though I saw them this morning.

I grin when I see several messages, most of them from our group chat. Apparently, they don’t care much about getting caught with their phones at school either. I also have a few texts from Sebastian and Grayson from first period where they were checking to make sure I was okay sitting with Zack.

While I’m reading through the messages, I get texts from Alex, Emily, and Benji, so I add their numbers to my contacts. Right before the bell rings, I get a surprise text from Liam.

My class just got out early, so I’m coming to meet you and walk you to pre-calc. Hope that’s okay. I just don’t want you to feel anxious or worry about getting lost.

A silly grin spreads across my face. How do I always forget how sweet and considerate every one of the guys are? I

text him back, *My knight in shining armor. Can't wait to see you!*

Is that too flirty? Are the heart emojis too much? God, probably.

I jump when the bell rings, even though I was expecting it. After quickly shoving my stuff into my bag, I smile awkwardly at my new acquaintances. Emily grabs her backpack, salutes me, and calls out to me over her shoulder. "See you around, Barbie."

Benji walks beside me on our way out to the hallway. Even though I feel like I've more than met my quota for talking to people outside of my friends and family for the day, he's been nice to me. I don't want to just walk away without saying anything.

"Hey, so, I'll talk to Grayson about the band thing. But you should really text him."

He smiles and nods. "Yeah, thanks. I think I will."

As soon as we step out of the room, I catch sight of Liam and my heart nearly leaps out of my chest in excitement. He's standing alone, smiling at me from across the hallway. He's so tall, muscular, and insanely good-looking with his auburn red hair and freckles.

It's all I can do not to run to him and leap into his arms. But I don't stop myself from hugging him the second I step in front of him. He wraps his strong arms around me, and I bury my face in his chest. God, he smells good.

"Hey. You alright?" he asks in concern.

I nod, refusing to pull away just yet. "I'm good. I know it's dumb, but I just really missed you."

His arms tighten around me, and he rests his head on top of mine. “I missed you too. I always miss you when we’re not together.”

Oh, no. I can feel my resolve to keep my feelings to myself crumbling. First I send a somewhat flirty text, and now this? I am so doomed. My heart literally aches as I force myself to pull a few inches away, and I smile sadly up at him.

“I guess we should probably get to class.”

LIAM

FUCK, I'M AN IDIOT.

The forced smile Charlotte gives me when she pulls away makes me want to kick myself. Why did I have to say that? Yeah, I miss her whenever she's not around, and I'm constantly thinking about her. But it's obvious she doesn't think about me like that, so it was a really fucking cringey thing for me to say.

Charlotte and I rarely get to hang out one-on-one. I'm pretty sure I've spent less time alone with her than any of the guys, which is why I've been excited about our pre-calculus class. It's the only class I have with her, and none of the other guys are in it to steal her attention. Now I've probably ruined everything with my overeager comment.

"Uh, yeah. You're right. Let's get to class." I chuckle awkwardly and rub a hand over the back of my neck.

She walks silently at my side. I'm careful not to touch her, even though I'd love nothing more than to wrap my arm around her and pull her to my side. She's small, sweet, and so fucking precious. Every time I hug her, I feel like she fits in my arms perfectly.

“So, how were your first two classes?” I ask, desperate to cut through this awkward tension between us.

Her eyes light up as she turns her head to grin at me. Just like every other time this girl’s ever fucking smiled at me, my heart jumps into my throat and my face flushes. I hate that I’m always blushing in front of her. She has to know I like her, which makes it a million times more embarrassing to constantly realize she’ll never feel the same.

“They were actually really good! Do you know Zack Philips from the football team?” she asks. When I nod, she smiles wider. “Well, I sat next to him in history. He was really nice. And, well, this is kind of embarrassing. I overheard some girls talking about Sebastian, and Zack kind of caught me before I flipped out on them. He didn’t even make me feel weird about it or anything.”

I stop walking and stare down at her in concern. Charlotte is a lot like Sebastian when it comes to controlling her anger. She’s quick to lash out when she’s defending someone she cares about, and I can imagine what those girls might have said about Seb that set her off.

After Seb’s mom died, he got into fights all the time. The guys and I took plenty of hits too, constantly trying to calm him down. Halfway through freshman year, a kid named Josh Pelzer made a disgusting joke about Seb’s mom. Seb beat the shit out of him so badly, Josh was in the hospital for weeks. My parents paid for his medical bills. When I lied and said I’d started the fight and Seb was covering for me, my parents were quick to shove money at the problem without any further questions.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. People here are the worst. I know it’s easier said than done, but you really can’t let their comments

get to you.” I’m pretty sure Charlotte knows about Josh, even if she doesn’t know all the exact details of how everything went down. “That was really cool of Zack though. He’s a good guy.”

Most of the guys on the football team are douchebags. They’re always hazing Elliot and fucking with the rest of us. Zack Philips and Ethan Montgomery are sadly the only exceptions.

Charlotte grimaces and nods. “Yeah, I know. It was stupid to get worked up too easily. You guys warned me people would probably say things like that.”

Someone bumps into her on their way past, and I quickly reach out to pull her to my side. When she doesn’t move away, I call it a win and continue walking to our next class with my arm thrown protectively around her shoulders. “What about your English class? I know you were nervous about it.”

“It was really good!”

She talks for a few minutes about sitting with Benji, Alex, and Emily, and how they want to form a band with Grayson. I know them because we’ve all gone to school together forever, but not very well. I’m a little surprised Grayson didn’t mention the band thing, but it’s seriously fucking nice to hear Charlotte talk about her experience with her first couple of classes. She was quiet when she first moved here. Honestly, she still is most of the time. So, I know it’s a huge deal for her to open up and be vocal. The fact that she’s already making new friends this easily on her first day of school makes me happy too. The rest of the guys might be jealous or worried, but Charlotte needs as many people in her corner as possible.

When we reach our pre-calculus classroom, we stop outside in the hallway. We still have a minute before the bell

rings. Charlotte looks up at me with a shy smile and her cheeks flushed pink. “Sorry I rambled so much.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I can’t help myself. I’m way too weak for this girl. I reach out to brush a strand of her hair behind her ear, and I smile when her cheeks redden further. “I love your voice. You can talk to me about anything, and I’ll be happy to hear it. I’m really glad you’re making new friends already, and that you’re having a good first day.”

“I love your voice too,” she whispers.

She looks embarrassed the second the words are out of her mouth, so I try not to grin like an idiot. I know she didn’t mean anything by it. She always blurts out cute and funny shit when she’s nervous or when her words don’t quite catch up to her brain. Still, any compliment from her is enough to make me feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

“Come on.” I smile, nodding at the door of the classroom.

Charlotte walks in ahead of me. I glance at the teacher’s desk and grin when I notice Mr. Sidwell. He was my geometry teacher last year too, and he’s pretty chill.

“Oh my god, Charlotte!”

I’d recognize my twin sister’s voice anywhere, even when she’s screeching like a banshee. I look up to find Olivia sitting in the center of the room, waving wildly at my best-friend-slash-dream-girl.

“Hey, Olivia.” Charlotte waves back, walking over to take the empty seat beside my twin. I chuckle under my breath and quickly snag the seat behind Charlotte before anyone else can.

“How was the rest of your summer? I can’t believe I never ran into you again,” Olivia says. She glances in my direction

and blinks like she's only just noticed my presence. "Oh. Hi, Liam."

Even though we're twins, Livvy and I aren't very close. We never hang out or talk much unless it's about something important or just in passing. Honestly, I barely saw her this summer. The last time we talked for longer than a few minutes was earlier in the summer after she ran into Charlotte and Elliot downtown. Charlotte clearly made an impression on my sister, which is both sweet and hilarious. The two of them are nothing alike.

I give my sister an amused smile just as the bell rings. I set my backpack down and lean forward, brushing some of Charlotte's hair off her shoulder. "You good?"

Charlotte turns in her seat and smiles at me as she nods. "Yeah. Thanks, Liam."

Always so fucking sweet. How can I not be into this girl? I don't blame the guys either, even if I disagree with the way they want to go about dealing with their feelings for her. In my opinion, none of us are good enough for Charlotte. But if she somehow, for some reason, ever decides she likes one of us as more than a friend, I know for certain it will never be me.

I'm also all too aware of Olivia's eyes on us, along with her smug smile. The second Charlotte turns around, I flip my sister off. The last thing I need is for her to make a stupid comment that will make Charlotte uncomfortable. Thankfully, the bell rings, and Mr. Sidwell starts talking right away.

Like me, most of the people in our class already know him. There are only a couple of students, Charlotte included, who have never had a class with him before. He doesn't make us do any stupid introductions or ice breakers since he's aware we

mostly all know each other. For Charlotte's sake, I'm glad for it.

Class passes quickly. We take a test to gauge our knowledge, and then we go over a short lesson to review some basics. After that, we're given a list of problems to solve and turn in by the end of class. Since we're allowed to help each other and talk while working, the room quickly becomes noisy.

Charlotte spins around in her seat to grin at me. Before I get a word out, Olivia starts talking at Charlotte a mile a fucking minute. I'm only mildly surprised when Charlotte reciprocates. Granted, Olivia still does most of the talking. But for Charlotte, it's a lot. I'm caught up watching her and my sister talk about how they spent their summer vacations, different music and makeup products they like, and how happy Olivia and Ethan are together, I almost don't notice Mr. Sidwell walking around to check people's work until he's only a few desks away.

I quickly scan the list of problems on the board and scribble out the first few solutions on my paper. Math is easy and straightforward, unlike subjects like English or art. I've always done better in my math and science classes, so it's fairly easy for me to solve the problems we're given.

Mostly, I'm still focused on Charlotte and Olivia. It's pretty amazing to me that they can talk to each other so easily. It's like they've known each other for years, which is pretty fucking incredible. Even though my twin and I aren't the closest, I still know my sister almost as well as I know Charlotte and the guys. If I wasn't seeing this friendship somehow blossom out of nowhere right in front of my fucking eyes, I'd never believe it.

"Wow, you finished them already?" Charlotte asks.

I look up to find her leaning over my desk, staring down at my paper. I grin at her and flip my paper so she can copy my answers if she needs to. “Yeah, they’re pretty easy.”

Her eyebrows furrow, which is fucking adorable. Olivia laughs. “Liam’s always been like that with numbers. So, if you ever need a tutor...”

The tone of her voice turns flirtatious, so I give her a warning look. Mr. Sidwell walks over to check our work and make small talk for a few minutes. He welcomes Charlotte to Somerset High School, recognizing her as a new student, and he tells her and Olivia to try again on a few of their problems.

As soon as he leaves our group to check on another student, Olivia huffs and snatches my paper off my desk so she can copy my answers. Charlotte gives me a pleading look, so I chuckle and get up to crouch beside her desk to help her with the assignment.

I should have known Charlotte would be too sweet and smart to want to just copy my answers. She’d rather learn how to work through them herself. I show her where she went wrong on her problems before, and patiently explain the easiest way to solve them. She listens attentively, her gaze focused intently on her paper. With our faces close together, I keep getting a whiff of her hair. I know it probably makes me really fucking creepy, but I absolutely lean closer to her than necessary. She smells really fucking good. Like vanilla and sunshine.

I’m almost disappointed when we reach the final problem. I clear my throat and rub the back of my neck, forcing myself to move slightly away from her. “You got it?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Liam.” Charlotte grins happily. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

The insecure part of me wants to say she'd be just fine without me. She has the other guys. But I'll stick around for as long as she'll have me.

“What class do you have next, Charlotte?” Olivia interrupts yet again. Not that I mind all that much. I turn into an idiot around Charlotte, so it's good to have a buffer. And it's always good for Charlotte to have more friends.

“Um, psychology, I think.” Charlotte pulls her planner out and flips to the front where she keeps her schedule. She hands it to my sister, who almost immediately pouts.

“Aww, boo. It looks like this is our only class together.” Olivia inspects Charlotte's planner a little more closely, quickly noticing she has my schedule as well as the rest of the guys' printed and stuck in the front too. “Oh my god, you have all the guys' schedules here too? That is cute. I should have done that with Ethan's.”

Charlotte blushes, but I agree with Livvy. Even if she's teasing. The guys and I thought it was the cutest shit when we realized Charlotte did that. Any time she says or does anything corny involving any of us, none of us is ever embarrassed by it. Eventually, I'm sure she'll realize just how much we worship her and adore every single fucking thing she says and does.

“Hey, we have English together next, Liam!” Olivia exclaims. When she reaches out for a high five, I snort and high five her back. If she wants to pretend we're closer than we are to make Charlotte like her more, I'll go along with it.

“At least we all share the same lunch period,” Charlotte says to me. “Back at my old school, we had three different lunch periods because the school was huge.”

That would seriously suck balls if I didn't have lunch with her and the guys every day. School isn't bad for me, not like it is for Remy and Sebastian. Even Grayson and Elliot have it hard at times. I'm invisible for the most part, which is how I like it.

"I know you have your little misfit gang or whatever," Olivia says to Charlotte, though she doesn't say it rudely. "But I really wanna introduce you to my captain at lunch. Her name's Brooke. She's a senior, and she's cool. I already told her about you, but it'll be good for you to meet face to face."

"Um..." Charlotte trails off and clamps her mouth shut, her expression going blank. I know the second she wipes her emotions away like that, she's uncomfortable and trying to hide that fact from the people around her. I'm not even sure she does it consciously anymore. She's so conditioned to hide how she feels after the shit her mom put her through for years.

I'm pretty sure I know what my sister's getting at, and I give her an irritated look. "Don't drop shit like this on her, Livvy."

Olivia furrows her eyebrows and pouts. "But Charlotte's much prettier and cooler than most girls on the squad. It would be no big deal to bump one of the freshmen."

"The squad?" Charlotte asks quietly.

Rolling my eyes at my twin, I turn to Charlotte and lower my voice. "My sister's trying to get you on the cheer squad for some reason. Is that something you'd be into?" It doesn't seem like the sort of thing Charlotte would like. I can't picture her as a cheerleader, even though she'd no doubt look hot in the uniforms. But who knows? I could be wrong.

Charlotte's brows furrow, and she quickly shakes her head. "I don't think so."

"It's not that bad," Olivia whines.

"I would be way too nervous," Charlotte tells her, wincing apologetically. "I'd probably throw up the first time I had to perform in front of people. Our MMA trainer Adrian's been trying to talk me into competing, and I told him the same thing. Having an audience like that just freaks me out."

"MMA?" Olivia does her banshee-screech again, looking Charlotte over with a shocked expression.

A smirk forms on my face, but I keep my mouth shut. Charlotte's obviously a girly-girl. Maybe even more than Olivia. She loves anything pink and frilly, and she's always wearing dresses and heels. To people who don't know her, they'd never be able to guess that this tiny, beautiful girl can kick pretty much anyone's ass. Just thinking about seeing Charlotte training and fighting turns me on. I try to make sure I always go to the gym on the same days she does. Not only because I like helping her with her pre-training workout, but because it's always amazing to see her fight. She already had a lot of natural talent before she met Adrian, and she's gotten pretty fucking good since she started training with him a couple months ago.

Mr. Sidwell calls everyone's attention up front, putting an end to our conversation. We hand our work in, and he lets us know what our homework assignment for the night is. Sooner than I'd like, the bell rings. Even though Charlotte and I didn't get to talk much—thanks to the lesson and my sister butting in—I'm disappointed to leave her side this soon. My chances of scoring a seat next to her at lunch are pretty low.

Olivia follows us out of class, still trying to convince Charlotte to talk to her cheer captain.

“I guess I can meet her,” Charlotte says hesitantly. “But I really don’t think I’d be any good at cheering.”

“Not true.” I smile, wishing I was brave enough to hold her hand or wrap my arm around her again. “You’re athletic and competitive enough that you’d probably be good at any sport. Plus, you’d be easy to throw in the air for stunts and shit.”

“See? Listen to my brother.” Olivia giggles, linking her arm through Charlotte’s. Our class is in the opposite direction from Charlotte’s, but I guess Olivia’s gonna walk her to class with me.

We’ve only been walking through the hallway for a couple minutes when someone slaps me on the back. I turn to find Elliot grinning at us. He only gives Olivia and me a cursory glance before settling all of his attention on Charlotte.

“Hey, gorgeous.” He spins Charlotte away from Olivia and into his arms, leaning down to kiss her cheek. “Did you miss me? I thought about you all morning.”

He’s so damn smooth with her. With his actions and his words. I watch Charlotte’s eyes and smile light up as her cheeks redden. She’s obviously affected by him, and she’s just as happy to see him as he is to see her. I can’t help feeling both envious and impressed at how easy it all seems for Elliot. I wish I had his confidence.

“I—” Charlotte squeaks, her voice cutting off as her blush deepens. Her eyes dart between me and Elliot like she’s worried. I force myself to smile, hoping to put her at ease.

If she likes Elliot, I don’t want her to feel guilty about it. He’s always flirting with her, ever since day one of her moving

in with Sebastian and Arthur. But now that he's actually trying to make a move and isn't insisting we all stay just friends with her, I'm sure he's going to amp up the flirting a fuckton. Seeing her reaction to his charm makes me think it's probably only a matter of time before she's his girlfriend.

Elliot smirks, keeping one arm around her waist as he throws her backpack over his opposite shoulder. "We should get to class. Gotta make sure I get a seat next to my girl." He looks up and winks at me. "Don't want Liam or Queen Livvy to be late either. We'll catch you guys at lunch."

He walks away without another word, pulling Charlotte along with him. Like an idiot, I stand there in the middle of the hallway while I watch them leave. My chest feels tight, but when Charlotte looks back over her shoulder, I keep that dumbass smile glued to my face. I'm not mad at Elliot, and I'm definitely not mad at Charlotte. I can only be pissed at myself for catching feelings for her when I knew nothing would ever happen between us. It's probably better I get used to the idea of her dating one of the guys sooner rather than later. Surely, it'll hurt less that way.

"Um, what the fuck was that?" Olivia asks in a quieter version of her banshee screech.

I sigh and turn around, heading to the nearest staircase. Since we have our next class together, I'm not surprised when Livvy follows me, lightly punching my shoulder to get my attention.

"What?" I ask irritably. I really don't need her to make me feel more pathetic about my friend-zone situation with Charlotte.

"Are Charlotte and Elliot together?" Livvy whispers.

“Not yet.” I shrug.

My sister sighs in relief. “Okay, good! Then you still have time to make a move.”

“Just drop it.” I groan. “Charlotte and I are just friends. That’s all we’ll ever be.”

She smacks my arm again, which I choose to ignore. “Oh, please. That is such bullshit. You were staring at her obsessively the entire class. You flirted with her too, and it was seriously adorable. So, don’t try to give me any bullshit about not liking her.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like her,” I say without thinking. Taking a deep breath, I turn and walk a little faster so it’s harder for her to keep up. “I just said we’ll never be anything more than friends.”

“Liam,” Olivia says exasperatedly. She pushes me to the side of the stairs, far enough away we can have a somewhat private conversation while everyone around us continues making their way to their classes. “Please talk to me. I know we’ve grown distant over the past few years, but you’re my twin. I wanna see you happy. Charlotte seems cool and sweet, and I think you’d be great together.”

I don’t want to lie to her. Like she said, she’s my twin. Sometimes I hate that we’re not closer. But how the hell am I supposed to explain the situation my four best friends and I are in with Charlotte? “It’s complicated.”

“Try me.” Livvy crosses her arms, raising her chin defiantly.

Glancing around the stairwell anxiously, I lower my voice. “Just promise not to make a big deal out of this, and do not fucking say anything to Charlotte. The guys and I sort of have

this...deal. We all like Charlotte, so we came up with these rules. None of us are allowed to kiss her or tell her we like her, and we can't get in each other's way. The guys are competing to see if they can get her to admit she likes one of them first."

Olivia gapes at me, her eyes comically wide. "Are you serious?"

It sounds stupider saying it out loud to someone not in our group of friends, and I can't help but feel embarrassed. "Shut up. You don't get it. Charlotte's just—she's fucking perfect. I can't blame the guys for being into her when I'm crazy about her too. And we don't want to fight with each other over her either."

"Oh my god." Olivia groans, slapping a hand to her forehead. "Charlotte needs a girlfriend more than I realized. You guys are the biggest idiots in the universe."

"I know." I grimace.

The bell rings, which means we're late. We finally begin to make our way up the stairs to our class together. Livvy's silent beside me until we reach the top of the steps, and then she bumps her elbow against mine.

"So, the guys are competing. But you're not? Even though you admit you're crazy about her?"

I meet my sister's eyes and shrug sadly. "She'll never pick me. So, what does it matter?"

She has more in common with Remy and Sebastian than the rest of us. I can't compete with that sort of connection. And Grayson and Elliot are much cooler and more fun than I am. They never have a problem talking to her or making her laugh. I'm just the idiot who constantly blushes and stumbles

over his words whenever I'm around her. Or else I geek out and go into tutor mode.

“Don't sell yourself short. I'm gonna help you with this.” Olivia strides ahead of me in the hallway, pausing to spin around and make a face at me. “And your dumbass friends too.”

CHARLOTTE



BY THE TIME THE BELL RINGS FOR LUNCH, I'M EXHAUSTED.

“You hungry?” Sebastian smiles at me, brushing his hair out of his mismatched eyes.

“A little.” I shrug. Honestly, I'm just ready for a break. My first few classes were great, and I managed to make it through and talk to people like a normal, functioning human. But being social and more talkative than usual has seriously drained my energy.

When I reach for my backpack, Elliot grabs it first and tosses it over his shoulder with a way-too-sexy smirk on his face. “Don't worry. I'll carry your bag for you, gorgeous.”

Sebastian scowls at him, and my heart stutters nervously. I shove past the rest of the students leaving our psychology classroom and make my way into the crowded hallway. I don't know the way to the cafeteria, but I'm sure I can find it easily by following everyone else. Still, I slow down for Elliot and Sebastian. Even if I can barely force myself to meet their eyes.

They've been acting ridiculous. Elliot flirting with me is nothing new, but he's out of control today. I swear he's trying to kill me. Every touch, every word, and every action from him all day has given me so many butterflies, I'm surprised I

haven't thrown up or fainted at some point. If I hadn't already made an idiot of myself by giving some of his teammates the impression Elliot and I are together, the way he's been acting with me will probably cement that rumor in a lot of people's minds.

And then there's Sebastian. I was able to sit between him and Elliot in psychology, which I was happy about at first. But every single time Elliot so much as looked at me or said a word to me, Sebastian would glare at him or say something argumentative and aggressive. It made it hard to pay attention to the lesson because I felt anxious and guilty the whole time.

I hate that Sebastian acts so jealous of the other guys sometimes. And I hate that he, Elliot, and the others make it hard to keep my feelings for them hidden.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Elliot and Sebastian following close behind me. They look like they're pouting, but at least they're not fighting. Even though it makes my heart hurt, I continue walking ahead of them and hope I'm heading in the right direction.

Soon enough, we arrive at the cafeteria. It's loud, chaotic, and stupidly crowded already. I've done pretty well all day in my classes and the hallways, but seeing so many people in one cramped area like this makes me feel extremely anxious.

My mind momentarily takes me back to juvie. I can't help it. The noise, the smell, the layout of the cafeteria, it's familiar in the worst ways. There were always too many kids crammed together during meal times, it was harder for the guards to supervise us. I can't count how many fights I got into during meals while I was there.

"Hey." Remy's deep voice brings me back to the present, and I turn to see him staring at me worriedly. He places his

hand gently on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Suddenly, everything feels okay. Sebastian and Elliot are still right behind me, and I’m sure Liam and Grayson will find us any second. The guys have helped me through so much, and they’ve been there for me from the moment I met them. As long as I keep my romantic feelings for them to myself, I know I can rely on them to help me through situations like this. They’re my kindred spirits, and the best friends I could ever ask for.

“Just thinking about juvie,” I whisper to Remy.

He nods empathetically. “It won’t be so bad once we get through the lunch line.”

When he wraps his arm around me, pulling me protectively to his side, I don’t try to stop him or pull away. I’m way too weak for him. For all of the guys. I won’t let myself act on my feelings, but it’s impossible to fight it when they flirt with me or touch me. I’m constantly desperate and greedy for their attention.

“How have your classes been?” Remy asks. It’s a simple question, but his deep voice and the way he’s holding me make me swoon. He quickly glances over his shoulder at Sebastian and Elliot, his mouth curving up into the tiniest of smiles. “And what’s got you two pissy?”

Sebastian flips him off without answering, so Remy rolls his eyes and returns his attention to me as we walk over to the lunch line. It’s super long, and it looks like we’ll be waiting a while.

“My classes have been good,” I say. “Really good, actually. I think I’ve tired myself out by talking so much.”

Remy's smile widens until his dimples reveal themselves. In case I didn't already have enough butterflies swirling around my stomach, he leans down and kisses the top of my head. "That's fucking awesome, baby. I'm proud of you."

"We all are," Sebastian says, moving to stand on my other side. He gives me a crooked smile. "Why don't you just chill out during lunch? You know the guys and I won't mind if you're quiet."

I smile like an absolute fool, my heart feeling all warm and fuzzy. After meeting Sebastian's eyes, and then Remy's, I turn around to grin at Elliot. "You guys are so wonderful."

None of them tease me for my cheesy comment, and that makes me feel even more loved and appreciated. The line moves slowly, the three of them talking about their classes while I stay quiet and keep watch for Liam and Grayson. Remy keeps his arm around me, gently stroking his long fingers over my shoulder.

Several minutes later, Liam and Grayson finally walk through the main doors of the cafeteria. I stand up straight and wave at them, hoping nobody makes a big deal about them cutting in line to join us. Grayson sees me first and waves back, but someone steps in front of me and Remy, blocking my view. I look up to find Jude from my history class smirking at me.

"What's this?" Jude asks. His gaze bounces between me, Remy, and Elliot. "Why are you all over Psycho Freak if you're Elliot's girl, huh?"

The guys tense up, and my cheeks flame. I knew it was a mistake to talk to Jude about Elliot, even if it was only for a second. I should never have said a word to him. I can't think

of anything to say that'll make him leave us alone, and I pray the guys don't do something like start a fight with him.

"Back off, man." Elliot grunts.

"Just trying to help you, bro." Jude snickers. "If your girl's already tired of you, she needs to know she has better options than your psycho friend here." He looks at me and points at Remy. "You know this guy killed someone before, right? He's probably a fucking serial killer. He's a psychopath."

My vision turns red, and I clench my fists in anger. It doesn't matter if he hits on me or says anything about me. But Remy doesn't deserve this.

"Charlotte." Remy's deep voice cuts through the violent fog I'm stuck in, and I blink up at him. He grips my chin gently and leans down to press his forehead to mine, keeping his voice low so only I can hear him. "Don't listen to him. Don't worry about me. Just block him out, baby, and stay with me."

I'm pretty sure him calling me baby is my new favorite thing. It also does a really good job of calming me down. I nod my head and snuggle into his side, refusing to look in Jude's direction again. I hear him laugh as he walks away. Grayson and Liam finally join us, so I find myself surrounded by all five of my guys. They're all much taller than me that the rest of the cafeteria is thankfully blocked from my view.

"Hey, Princess." Grayson strokes his hand over the back of my head. "Jude fucking with you guys already?"

"Figures we wouldn't get through one day." Liam sighs.

"Well, maybe if Elliot hadn't told his teammates that Charlotte's his girlfriend..." Sebastian trails off, an angry scowl on his face.

“I didn’t!” Elliot protests, shoving Sebastian. “I haven’t told anyone she’s my girlfriend, and I haven’t flirted with her anymore than the rest of you fuckers.”

He’s definitely flirted with me more than Liam, Grayson, and Sebastian have today. Remy’s probably tied with him at this point. It’s not worth mentioning. I don’t want them to fight. Not about anything, but especially not about me.

“Stop,” I whisper. “It’s my fault. He was hitting on me in first period, and Zack mentioned Elliot to make him back off. And then I just kind of...word-vomited and made it sound like we’re together. I’m sorry.”

Elliot tugs on a strand of my hair, a mischievous grin lighting up his face. “Why are you sorry? Jude was the one being a dick.”

As much as it hurts me, I *have* to say it. I can’t be selfish or pretend I can keep Elliot to myself. I take a deep breath and force the words out. “If people think I’m your girlfriend, it’ll make it harder for you with other girls. Girls who could *actually* become your girlfriend. That goes for all of you. I don’t want to ruin things or get in your way.”

Every one of the guys gets an intense look on their face, and they glance around at each other for a few seconds before settling their attention on me practically in sync. I’m careful to keep my face blank while I wait for one of them to break the silence.

I’m certain all the guys like me back, probably as much as I like them. It’s pretty obvious most of the time, but I assumed they all felt the way Elliot did. That our friendship is more important. That *their* friendship with each other is more important than fighting over me. But something has obviously changed. Elliot, Remy, and Sebastian have acted weird all day.

Even Liam was a little flirtier than usual in class earlier. Maybe it's because they're anxious about being back at school, but the way they keep looking around at each other makes me think it's something else.

I'd bet anything they've talked to each other about me. About liking me as more than a friend. I'm filled with a mix of horror, giddiness, embarrassment, and annoyance. It sucks to think they talk about me to each other behind my back, but I get it. They've known each other a lot longer than they've known me, and it probably makes it weird for them if they all have romantic feelings for me. It doesn't mean they don't care about me or respect me as their friend.

On the other hand—what could they possibly have said that's making them think it's a good idea to flirt with me this much in public all of the sudden? They've accepted my past and everything else about me, but this is much different. If they knew I was in love with all of them, what would they think of me? Would they be disgusted?

All I know is there's absolutely no doubt in my mind it would change our friendship if they knew. If they really knew how deep my feelings were, and if they knew how confused I am all the time. And it wouldn't be a change for the good. They might distance themselves from me, maybe even stop talking to me entirely. God, what if Arthur finds out? He'd probably have a meltdown and send me to an all-girls Catholic school. Or at least demand I go to therapy a million times more often than I already do. Because it's not right. It's not normal to feel like this.

What am I going to do if one of the guys asks me out? Or, god...if all of them ask me out or try to make me choose between them? I *can't* choose, so the choice will have to be

none of them. What if my rejection hurts them too much, and they decide that's the reason they don't want to be friends anymore?

This is a disaster. Everything was simpler in the summer when all we had to worry about was having fun and getting to know each other. Now I feel like losing them is inevitable, for one reason or another.

“Would you guys move already? You're holding up the line,” the person standing behind our group says.

The guys all move at once, walking ahead in the line and pulling me with them. Sebastian hands me a tray, and I find myself practically squished between Remy and Grayson while we line up to get our food. Grayson reaches over to squeeze my hand. When I meet his springtime eyes, he smiles nervously.

“Don't worry, Princess. Almost everyone at this school is an asshole. A few new rumors aren't going to change anything.”

And that's the end of that awkward conversation. For now, at least. He makes it sound so simple. I just hope he's right.

I try to put the whole issue aside and tell myself I can worry about it later. I still have lunch and three more classes to get through. The guys fill up their lunch trays with everything that's available, but I can't help staring at the food in disgust.

The options are cheeseburgers and tater tots, or burritos with rice. That doesn't sound bad, but everything looks and smells terrible. The women serving the food look like they'd rather be anywhere else, and they toss a burger and tots onto my tray carelessly. It's not any different than any school lunch I've had in the past, and it's definitely better than what I had to

eat in juvie or at the group home. Even when I lived with my mom, I didn't eat that great because money was always tight. But I'm definitely spoiled after living with Arthur all summer. Even though I cook most of our meals, I've never had access to healthy food or pretty much any kitchen appliance I could need or ask for. Just thinking about going back to a diet of cheap, crappy food makes me want to cry.

"There's a table over there that looks empty." Liam nods toward the far corner of the room. He's right, thankfully. There are only a few people scattered at the surrounding tables too, so hopefully it will be fairly peaceful and quiet while we finish lunch.

I follow close behind Liam and Grayson with the rest of the guys behind me. We've barely taken a few steps when two guys walk past and purposely knock into Grayson, causing him to drop his lunch tray. His food splatters everywhere, making a huge mess.

"Faggot," one of the guys says to Grayson. He and his friend laugh and high five before walking away like nothing happened.

"Are they serious?" I hiss, my furious gaze following their retreat. It all happened so fast, I didn't have time to react or even think of saying something to them. My fingers are itching to throw my tray at them, but I force myself to stay still.

Grayson looks pissed, but not surprised. None of the guys look very surprised, honestly. Sebastian grimaces and raises his eyebrows. "You alright, dude?"

"Yeah." Grayson sighs. "I'll meet you guys at the table."

When I realize he's heading back into the line, I step in front of him. "Wait! I can come with you."

“You don’t have to,” he says. I know he’s more upset than he’s letting on when he presses his tongue against his lip ring, forcing it to jut out.

Remy takes my tray from me and nods. “Let her go with you. We’ll meet you guys at the table in a few minutes.”

Grayson doesn’t move, and I rush over to his side and thread my fingers through his. He squeezes my hand, so I know he appreciates the small show of support. We walk to the end of the lunch line in silence. Thankfully, it’s not as long as it was when we first got to the cafeteria. We shouldn’t have to wait too long this time around.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I whisper. Grayson nods, and I grunt angrily. “I was about two seconds away from chucking my tray at the back of their heads.”

His mouth curves up into an amused smile, and he looks down to meet my eyes. “That would have been fucking awesome to see, but please don’t get suspended over me. Especially this early in the year.”

“It would be worth it,” I whine.

He laughs and pulls me into a hug, tucking my head under his chin. “I fucking love you, Princess.”

Oh, boy. I am such a freaking goner. I know he just means he loves me as a friend, but why does he have to be so sweet? Why does he have to hold me in a way that makes me melt into a puddle, and why does he have to smell so good?

“Who were those guys, anyway?” I ask, trying to change the subject and distract myself from the fluttery feeling in my chest.

Grayson shrugs. “Dunno. I’m pretty sure they’re not even in our year, but it happens all the time. Didn’t you know

having two gay moms automatically makes me gay too?”

That might be the most ignorant and idiotic thing I've ever heard. Now I *really* wish I would have thrown my tray at those assholes. It's honestly amazing that people can still be disgusting and homophobic in this day and age. Grayson's moms are some of the most incredible women I've ever met. I'm glad Grayson has parents who love and care about him, and it seriously infuriates me that anyone would ever say anything negative about his family. I hug Grayson tighter and breathe angrily out of my nose. "People are fucking stupid."

He murmurs in agreement and grabs a tray when the line moves up. While he fills up his new tray, I watch on in silence and let my mind wander. I feel awful for getting excited about school. The guys warned me all summer that the people here are terrible. I've only made it halfway through the day, and already I've heard people insult Grayson, Remy, and Sebastian. If anyone ever knew about my past, they'd probably say similar things about me. Sure, there are a few people that seem nice, but I'd be foolish to trust anyone completely the way I trust my kindred spirits.

Once he has his lunch, Grayson and I start to make our way to the table where the rest of the guys are waiting. I keep my eyes down while we're walking. If I see those guys who bumped into Grayson again, I don't know if I can trust myself to stay calm. I also don't want to know if anyone's watching us, and I don't want to attract the attention of people like Jude, or Elliot's other teammates I met earlier this summer, Mike and Tim.

"Charlotte!" Olivia calls out.

I look up and spin around to see her walking briskly in my direction, dragging another girl behind her. I laugh quietly and

wait for them to approach. She's different from Liam even though they're twins. She's much louder and more exuberant, and it doesn't seem like they really have much in common. But for some reason, I feel almost as comfortable around her as I do with my guys even though I've only met her a couple of times.

"Hi," I say quietly, still smiling in amusement when she and the other girl stop in front of me.

"I'm so glad I caught you!" Olivia's practically bouncing on her toes, and she gestures to her friend with a dramatic flourish. "This is Brooke, the captain of our squad. I've been dying for you to meet her."

My amusement and excitement at seeing my maybe-potential-friend evaporates, and I stare at Brooke in slight alarm. I have no idea where Olivia's gotten the idea I'd be interested in cheering. Cheerleaders are pretty and confident, and they demand the attention of a crowd. That sounds like one of my worst nightmares. Liam says he thinks I'd be good at the sport because I'm semi-athletic, but throwing punches sounds a hell of a lot different than doing flips and smiling at hundreds of people.

"Nice to meet you." Brooke smiles. I look her over quickly and determine she fits the image of a cheerleader. Tall, beautiful, flawless, confident, and friendly. "Olivia said you're new here and that you might be interested in joining the squad?"

"Oh, um..." What do I say? I don't want to offend her or Olivia. Obviously, I have nothing against cheerleaders. But I would make a terrible one. "I—I've never cheered before."

"That's okay." She shrugs. "We're full right now, but we typically re-open try-outs in October. Some of the girls on the

squad only want to cheer because their boyfriends are on the football team, and they quit as soon as the season's over. So, if it's something you're thinking about, you have plenty of time to practice. Olivia thinks you'd make a great addition, and she's usually right."

"You're so nice," I blurt out. Ugh, god. My stupid brain never comes up with the right words when it really counts.

Brooke and Olivia laugh, and Brooke smiles brightly as she shrugs. "Thanks. I'll let you get back to lunch with your beau, but I hope to see you around. Don't be a stranger!"

She turns around, and Olivia squeals and gives me a quick hug before following after her captain. As soon as they leave me, I turn around to search out Grayson. He's standing right behind me, a huge grin splattered across his face.

"I have so many questions," he says.

"Shut up." I laugh, smacking his arm lightly.

The guys are all waiting at the table for us, and I squeeze into the empty spot between Liam and Sebastian while Grayson takes a seat across from me between Remy and Elliot. It takes a lot of effort not to grimace at the tray in front of me. The food somehow looks even more unappetizing than it did before.

"My sister still trying to rope you into joining the cheer squad?" Liam asks playfully.

I shrug in exasperation. "Apparently."

After Grayson repeats what Olivia and Brooke said, Liam tells the guys about my conversation with Olivia during our math class and how she brought up the cheer squad. I really like Olivia a lot, and it would be nice to get to know her better. I love hanging out with the guys, but I've never had a

girlfriend. I hope Olivia won't be upset or angry that I'm not more interested in cheerleading.

It's too hard to put my thoughts into words, so I stare down at my gross lunch while the guys talk around me. My burger is cold, and I mostly nibble at the tater tots and sip my water.

"Not hungry?" Remy asks, reaching across the table to tap his knuckles against the side of my tray.

The guys are wolfing down their lunches, so they obviously don't feel the same about the food as I do. I don't want to sound like a spoiled brat either, so I shrug. "I'll just eat when I get home."

Elliot pulls his backpack into his lap and unzips it, giving me an uncharacteristically shy smile. "I have a few protein bars if you'd rather eat one of those. I know the cafeteria food isn't great."

It's sweet of him to offer, and even sweeter that he obviously noticed my issue with the food. I give him a genuine smile and whisper thank you as I reach across the table to accept one of his protein bars. He carries them with him all the time lately. The guys usually eat a ton no matter what, but Elliot's pretty much always hungry now that the football team has almost daily practices. Our fingers brush when I take the protein bar. It's such an innocent touch, but it still makes my skin tingle and my heart beat a little fast.

"If you're worried about Olivia," Liam says, turning in his seat to face me better. "I swear that's just her personality. She's pushy and annoying about everything. I'm pretty sure her pressuring you into cheerleading is her way of saying she wants to be friends."

"Really?" I ask hopefully.

He grins and nods, and the rest of the guys mumble their agreements. Grayson snickers and adds, “It’s kind of fucking hilarious you and Livvy hit it off. She hates us.”

“She doesn’t hate you guys,” Liam grumbles defensively. “She just, uh, has different interests than we do?”

It’s nice of him to defend his sister. I know they’re not that close, which is really a shame. If Olivia and I eventually become friends, I hope she and Liam can rekindle their relationship. When I was younger, before my dad died, I used to wish I had a brother or sister. Liam and Olivia have no idea how lucky they are to have each other.

“Well, I want to be her friend, but I’m not sure about cheerleading.”

Sebastian nudges his elbow against mine and gives me one of his adorable crooked smiles. “Have you thought about any other extracurriculars? Arthur will start bugging you by the end of this week about adding a few to your schedule to put on college applications.”

I raise my eyebrows at Sebastian. This is news to me, but I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Arthur can be really goofy when he tries to get into ‘dad mode,’ but hounding us about school and extracurriculars sounds like something he might do. I really haven’t thought about it. Aside from going to the gym and training with Adrian, I never considered any after school activities. Thinking about university as a realistic option for my future is still something I haven’t completely gotten used to.

The more I think about potential extracurriculars I might be interested in, the more I start to panic. And then I remember that Summer girl from our first period world history class. I

narrow my eyes at Sebastian and ask, “So, you’re doing Yearbook Club as your extra-curricular, then? With *Summer*?”

Sebastian blanches, and the other guys go very still. I shutter my expression and keep my face blank, but inside, I’m cringing hard at myself. I’ve been getting frustrated at Sebastian for acting jealous, and here I am, doing the exact same thing. Based on the guys’ reactions, there’s obviously something I’m missing.

Is Summer Sebastian’s ex-girlfriend? None of them have had girlfriends since I met them, but I’ve never been able to bring myself to ask any of them about past relationships. All five of them are insanely attractive, so it would be stupid of me to assume they’ve never had girlfriends before.

“Summer talked to you?” Remy asks Sebastian in a low voice, raising his eyebrows in shock.

“She was practically all over him this morning,” Grayson says. When Sebastian shoots a nasty glare in his direction, Grayson shrugs. “Well, she was. It was fucking bizarre. She was talking about how muscular he is and shit.”

The guys continue to exchange unreadable looks with each other. I’ve never felt out of the loop with them before. Not even the first night I spent hanging out with them at Arthur’s house. I feel stupid and insecure, and I’m terrified to ask any questions because I’m not sure I’ll like the answers. So, I stay quiet and lower my gaze to the table.

“Charlotte.” Sebastian practically growls my name. I turn to find him leaning close to me, his mismatched blue and brown eyes wide and worried. “Yearbook is an easy club for me because I can pretty much spend the whole year taking photos and fucking around with my camera. And Summer is

just...she's just a girl we've known forever, and she's in Yearbook Club too."

I tilt my head and consider my words carefully. Does he really think I'm stupid? He and the guys wouldn't be acting like this whole thing with Summer talking to him was a big deal if she were just a random student. And honestly, I shouldn't care. Sebastian and I can't be together, and it's incredibly embarrassing and pointless for me to be jealous or upset that a girl is showing interest in him. On the other hand, he's supposed to be my best friend. It's hurtful and insulting that he's not telling me the truth.

The bell rings, signaling the end of the lunch period. It went by quickly, and it turned out to be mostly miserable. The fact that the one time of day I get to spend with all five of my kindred spirits was ruined by a long line, shitty students, and inedible food seriously makes me sad. I really hope every day doesn't turn out like this.

When I stand up and grab my tray so I can throw away my mostly-uneaten lunch, I frown at Sebastian. "You don't have to lie to me, you know."

He opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, but I walk away before he manages to get anything out.

GRAYSON



“WHY’D YOU HAVE TO SAY THAT?” SEBASTIAN HISSES AT ME.

I sigh in exasperation and shrug. Pointing out that Charlotte was literally in class with us when Summer approached Sebastian *and* that Charlotte was the one to bring her up in the first place is no use. Sebastian loses his mind pretty much any time Charlotte’s involved, and I have a feeling he’s only going to get worse after the agreement we came up with yesterday at our dumbass secret meeting.

“God, I hate when she’s pissed at me.” Seb groans, staring after Charlotte. She’s walking to the nearest trash can to dump her lunch, and Elliot’s right behind her. Figures he’d steal the moment to talk to her alone.

“Chill, dude.” Remy rolls his eyes. “She’s only pissed because she knows you’re trying to keep something from her. I doubt she’s actually upset about the shit with Summer.”

I have no idea if he’s really that oblivious, or if he’s only saying that to fuck with Seb. It’s pretty damn obvious Charlotte was jealous. And why would she be jealous that Summer was flirting with Sebastian unless she liked him? It’s times like this I feel sure I’m right about everything. I know Charlotte’s into all of us, and it would be fucking awesome and perfect if we could all be with her and get over ourselves.

But I'm worried Remy's going to act spiteful after yesterday, especially toward Seb. The guys are all acting fucking stupid. All day, they've been trying to one-up each other, and I have a feeling they're only going to get worse. I also worry it's going to irritate Charlotte or make her pull away from us, which is the opposite of what the guys are hoping will happen. They're too blinded by their competitiveness with each other and their insecurities with Charlotte to realize they're way more likely to push her away by bombarding her with too much attention.

"We have our next class together, so I'll talk to her." I toss my backpack over my shoulder, wave at Remy and Seb, and quickly walk over to where Charlotte and Elliot are talking. Liam's standing a couple feet away from them, awkwardly rocking back and forth on his heels. It's obvious as hell that's Elliot's flirting with Charlotte. He's playing with her hair and smirking at her. No matter how hard she tries to keep her expression devoid of emotion, she can't hide the blush rising on her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Elliot asks me when I approach, an arrogant grin splashed across his face. "Is Seb too scared to confront Charlotte himself?"

Charlotte narrows her eyes at him, and her cheeks redden further. I roll my eyes. If Elliot's going to act like an asshole and try to make Sebastian look bad, that's only going to put him in the doghouse with her too. Fighting with each other is the stupidest thing we could do if we're trying to make Charlotte like us. Too bad my friends are morons.

Deciding to ignore his question completely, I smile at Charlotte. "Ready for class, Princess?"

She nods, forcing a tiny smile. My heart drops when I realize how upset she really is. At the start of lunch, she was happy and chatty. She mentioned how great her day was going, and it sounds like she's been making some new friends too. She's shutting down now, keeping her emotions locked up tight. She still does that when she's sad or anxious, and I hate to see it.

I'm probably the worst person to try to comfort her. It's fucking pathetic to admit, even to myself, but hearing Charlotte finally tell us what happened to her that originally got her locked up in juvie a couple nights ago really sent me into a downward spiral. I'm still not feeling that great, and I worry I'm gonna say something that'll make her feel worse. When all I really want to do is shut my brain off and sleep, it's hard to focus on school and the drama surrounding my best friends.

"Here," Elliot mumbles, handing me Charlotte's backpack. I toss it over my shoulder without question, watching him gaze at Charlotte regretfully. His cocky demeanor has completely disappeared, so I'm sure he's picked up on Charlotte's mood too.

Desperate for some form of contact with her, I thread my fingers through hers and pull her along down the hallway to the science wing. "You think they'll let us be lab partners?"

"Hopefully," she whispers.

Even if she's being quiet, at least she's talking. I squeeze her hand and give her a teasing smile. "I'm not sure you should be hoping for that. I'm a slacker who's gonna make you do all the work and then swoop in to take all the credit."

She giggles, and the sound is like music to my ears. While I'm busy trying to think of another dumb joke I can make, she

sighs and leans into me. I drop her hand so I can throw my arm around her shoulders, glancing down at her in concern.

“Lunch really sucked. I think we’re gonna have to come up with a new plan because I can’t go through that every day.”

So, she’s not just upset about Seb and the rest of us being jackasses. “What do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Are we allowed to eat anywhere outside of the cafeteria?”

“Technically, sure. We can spend our lunch period anywhere on campus as long as we have passes. We’re just not allowed to take the lunch trays out of the caf.”

She doesn’t say anything else or ask any more questions, but her expression brightens. I take that to be a good sign, and I let myself enjoy holding her close to my side while we walk. We’re some of the first students to arrive at our chemistry class. The teacher, Mr. Dormund, enthusiastically hands us our textbooks with a stack of papers before insisting we sit wherever we want.

I make a beeline for a table at the back of the room and hope like hell we don’t share this class with any of Elliot’s teammates. Or worse, Madison Taylor. Madison is our junior class president, and she was an asshole to Charlotte earlier this summer when she was forced to give her a tour of the school. She’s always been a huge pain in the ass for the guys and me. Several times over the years, she’s made shit up to get us in trouble. She’s nosy as fuck too. She found out about Remy’s juvie record and everything that happened with his dad only a few weeks after he moved to town, and she was quick to spread the news.

She's also one of the first people who started spreading rumors about me being gay. That shit hasn't stopped since fifth grade. It pisses me off for my moms' sake more than anything. I'm not gay, but even if I were, that's nothing to be ashamed of.

"Can I ask you something, Grayson?" Charlotte asks.

Her voice is soft and muffled, but I'm so fucking attuned to anything she does and any sound she makes that I automatically go still so I can focus all of my attention on her.

"Anything, Princess." Not for the first time, I wonder if I'm overdoing it with the nickname. Usually, she seems like she likes it. But sometimes, it's still hard to tell what she's thinking. I can't help doubting myself.

She looks away and finishes pulling a few things from her backpack before setting it under the table beside mine. I twirl my pencil in my fingers and watch her carefully, patiently waiting for her to verbalize whatever question she has for me.

Charlotte huffs like she's annoyed and furrows her eyebrows, turning in her seat to face me directly. "I feel dumb for asking, but it's going to drive me crazy if I don't. Is Summer Sebastian's ex-girlfriend?"

"No." I laugh in surprise. And then I feel like a dick for laughing. What else is Charlotte supposed to think after the way we all acted at lunch? I clear my throat and lower my voice so nobody overhears us as people continue to trickle into the room. "She's just a girl Sebastian used to have a crush on."

While that might be the truth, it's definitely an understatement. Seb was fucking obsessed with Summer for as long as I can remember. He used to stalk her Instagram page at least once an hour and talk about her incessantly. The guys and

I always gave him a hard time about it, but Sebastian hasn't brought her up even once since Charlotte moved here.

"That's it?" Charlotte asks. She doesn't sound convinced.

I don't want to lie to her, but I don't want her to feel insecure either. This is such a weird fucking situation, and I have nobody to explain my feelings to. I *want* Charlotte to like Sebastian, just like I want her to like me. Unlike Remy and Elliot, I don't want to purposely ruin shit between Seb and Charlotte or make it even more difficult for them. It's hard enough I'm trying to figure out how to orchestrate some sort of weird group relationship, and Charlotte and Seb's shared guardianship with Arthur complicates everything even more.

"Well..." I trail off, worrying my tongue against my lip ring anxiously. "It wasn't exactly mutual. She's never willingly talked to him before today."

Something flashes in her eyes, and her mouth twists like she's in pain. She quickly schools her expression, but not quickly enough. How am I supposed to make her feel better? I can't tell her Seb likes her. It's not so much that I care about the stupid rules the guys came up with. I just don't want to confuse Charlotte.

I want to talk to her about my idea. How the guys and I feel strongly about her, how I hope she feels the same way, and how we might potentially all be in a relationship with her together. But I'm fucking terrified of rejection, and I'm terrified she'll freak out and think I'm messed up for suggesting something insane. How do I even go about asking if she likes us, anyway?

"Do you think he still likes her?" she asks in a quiet, heartbreaking voice.

“No,” I say confidently. I lean forward, hoping she can read the sincerity in my eyes. I’m sure Sebastian’s confused about the attention from Summer this morning, but I know without a doubt he only has eyes for Charlotte now. “Definitely not.”

Her cheeks turn pink, which is both adorable and a huge relief. Whether she’s embarrassed that her feelings for Sebastian are obvious, or she’s simply affected by *me*, I’ll take her blush as a win.

“Are there any girls or ex-girlfriends I should be worried about?” she asks, her voice rising in pitch. Her face is nearly as red as a tomato, so she’s definitely embarrassed.

I try really hard not to smile. Really though, she might have just as well admitted she’s crushing on me and the guys. “Not really. The guys will be pissed I’m telling you anything, but if you don’t mind keeping this between us...”

“I promise.” She nods her head rapidly, and a chuckle escapes my throat.

“Well, I’ve never had a girlfriend, and neither has Liam. Seb dated a girl named Lauren in eighth grade back before his mom passed. She goes to school here, but she hasn’t talked to any of us in years. Elliot’s had a few girlfriends. Nothing serious, and never for longer than a month or two. And Remy was seeing a girl for a while last year. Katie. She went to another school, and when she found out about Remy’s past, she freaked out and broke up with him.”

I don’t mention that I’m the only one of the guys who’s never kissed a girl. Even though Liam’s never had a girlfriend, he was somehow the first of us to lose his virginity. It was a drunken hookup during a party Olivia threw at their house in freshman year, but still. Sebastian and Elliot are virgins like I

am, but they still have loads more experience than I do. Maybe I am fucking delusional for thinking we can all happily share Charlotte between us.

Charlotte hums thoughtfully. I reach over to squeeze her hand in support. I hope telling her this shit made her feel better rather than worse. I hate to think of keeping anything from her. She's supposed to be our best friend, first and foremost.

The warning bell rings, and I peer around the classroom. Most of the tables are full, but everyone's avoiding us like the plague. That's just fine with me. When I realize Mike and Jude are sitting together at a table near the front of the room—with Madison Taylor and her best friend Mikayla, no less—I barely stop myself from groaning in dismay. It's like I've fucking jinxed myself for hoping I wouldn't share any more classes with them. At least they're across the room, making it harder for them to fuck with us during class.

“Mind if we sit here?”

I turn away from glaring at my douchebag classmates to face Benji and Alex. I was so caught up worrying about Madison and those football assholes, I didn't notice them walk in.

“Uh,” I glance sideways at Charlotte. I don't care if they sit with us, but I don't want to make Charlotte uncomfortable. I think she's okay with these guys. She seemed pretty cool about hanging out with them at the mall the other day, at least.

“Oh, hi.” Charlotte smiles sweetly at them. “Yeah, no problem.”

Alex grins and practically shoves Benji out of the way to take the seat across from Charlotte. Benji sits across from me, and I lean back on my stool as I glance back and forth between

them. They seem like good guys. I had fun hanging out with them at the mall the other day, but I'm not really used to being friendly with people outside of my group.

“How's the rest of your day been?” Alex asks Charlotte.

To my surprise, Charlotte's cheeks flush a rosy red color, and she makes a squeaking sound before blurting out, “I love school.”

The guys chuckle while I stare at Charlotte, completely stricken. Is she flirting with Alex? When she first met me and the guys at the beginning of summer, she was always blurting out random shit any time she tried to talk to us or answer our questions. She's gotten a lot better, but she still does that pretty much any time we're too obvious about flirting with her.

I must be making a pretty weird face because Alex briefly turns to me and says, “We had English with Charlotte this morning.”

Logically, I know I should be glad for that. The guys and I didn't say as much to Charlotte, but we were all really fucking nervous for her to be in a class alone without any of us. The guys and I aren't good enough with English to qualify for an honors class, otherwise I know one of us would have tried to move our schedule around to be with her. It should be a relief to know she found people she sort of knows in that class. Especially people who have been nice to her.

Instead, I'm filled with this panicky feeling that's making it hard to focus on my thoughts, and I jump when the second bell rings. I don't think I feel jealous, exactly—even though Alex is making it very fucking obvious he's interested in Charlotte, and she's looking at him the same way she looks at me and the guys after she's been caught checking us out.

Charlotte's the hottest girl I've ever seen in my life. I see her pretty much every day, and sometimes looking at her still feels like a punch to the gut. So why wouldn't other guys at our school take notice of her? And if a decent guy like Alex were to ask her out, what's to stop her from saying yes? If Charlotte's worried about fucking up our friendship or about the guys and I fighting over her, she might jump at the chance to date someone she can have a normal relationship with. Someone who's not fucked up and complicated like the guys and I are.

"I was gonna text you, but I guess I can just ask now." Benji grins bashfully at me from across the table, keeping his voice low.

"Huh?" I shake my head, processing his words slower than normal. Mr. Dormund is talking at the front of the class, but I'm not paying attention. Not at all. I'm way too stuck in my head and wondering if I should share my concerns with the guys. But what if they just panic and do something even more stupid than decide to compete over who can get Charlotte to confess her love for them first?

Should I, like, discourage Charlotte from dating anyone else? If I'm excited about the idea of sharing her with Sebastian, Elliot, Liam, and Remy, then I should be fine with her dating other people outside of our group too, right? God, this is fucking complicated. Maybe I should talk to my therapist about this.

"The, uh, band we were talking about the other day?" Benji whispers, rubbing the back of his neck. "Would you still be interested?"

"Oh, shit. I completely forgot." I grimace apologetically. His face falls, making me feel like a dick. Honestly, I was

really stoked about the idea of starting a band with them. Benji and Alex like a lot of the same music I do, and they're surprisingly easy to talk to. They're different from my best friends, but not bad different. "I had a, um, family emergency over the weekend, so the band thing kinda slipped my mind."

Charlotte turns her head in my direction, her forest green eyes filling with guilt and sorrow. I reach under the table where no one can see and squeeze her hand to comfort her. She knows I'm talking about the sleepover at her and Seb's house and how she ended up telling us about all the bad shit that happened with her mom. She *is* my family though, and she's way more important than making new friends or starting a band. I refuse to feel bad that my thoughts were on her above everything else the past few days.

"Sorry, dude," Alex says sympathetically. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." I smile at him and Benji before turning to Charlotte. "Everything's perfect." Her cheeks turn pink, and a sweet smile curls at her lips. I squeeze her hand again and tell the guys, "I'm definitely still interested in the band thing."

It becomes impossible to ignore Mr. Dormund after that, especially because he walks all over the room while he talks. I'm pretty sure he does it to make sure nobody's fucking around and to get more people to interact and participate in shit. But who knows? Maybe he's just an energetic guy. I keep an eye on Charlotte pretty much the entire class period, smiling like an idiot while she takes meticulous notes and appears to hang on Mr. Dormund's every word. I knew Charlotte liked to read, and she's mentioned several times how excited she was to start school. But I had no idea just how big of a nerd she really is. It's fucking adorable.

By the end of class, I've managed to make plans with Benji and Alex after school later this week. We're gonna chill at Alex's place and play music together, just to see if this band thing could realistically happen. When Alex invites Charlotte along too and jokingly suggests she sing with us, she giggles without agreeing or disagreeing.

As torn as I feel over her potentially hanging out with Alex and getting a crush on him—or really, any guy who's not me or one of my best friends—I make a mental note to ask her in private later if she wants to go to Alex's house with me. It'll be nice to have her there. While I'm looking forward to it, I'm also nervous to hang out with people outside of our group. It also might help me figure out my feelings about Charlotte—and sharing—if I spend more time around her and another guy who seems like he's interested in her too.

“You have art history next?” I ask Charlotte when the bell rings. It's definitely not creepy that I've memorized her schedule better than my own, right? At least I know the rest of the guys memorized it too. Fuck, she *has* to know how crazy we are about her.

She nods, giving me this gorgeous smile that makes me wish I was brave enough to lean in and kiss her. Has Charlotte ever kissed anyone or had a boyfriend before? She's never mentioned anyone, but that doesn't mean shit. After our conversation at the beginning of class, I'm painfully aware of my lack of experience.

I grab Charlotte's bag on our way out so she doesn't have to carry it, and Benji and Alex stay on our heels until we reach the hallway. While Benji says he'll see us later and takes off in the opposite direction from us, Alex walks with us on Charlotte's other side.

“Art history, huh?” Alex asks Charlotte, subtly checking her out before giving her a flirtatious smile. “Do you like art? There’s a pretty sick gallery downtown, and a really cool modern art museum about an hour from here.”

Oh, fuck. Is he asking her out? *Now?* He sure doesn’t waste any fucking time.

“Really?” Charlotte asks. God, I wish I knew what she was thinking. “I didn’t know that. I do like art, but the only other option for sixth period was public speaking.”

A chuckle escapes me, and Charlotte elbows me playfully in the side. Public speaking would have been a nightmare for her, so I’m glad she managed to snag something else. Still, imagining her reaction when the counselor gave her those options is pretty funny.

Someone grabs my shoulder, and I turn to find Remy behind us. I grin at him, and grab Charlotte’s arm to make her turn around too.

“Hey, baby.” Remy smiles at Charlotte, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “Heading to class without me?”

His nickname for her is new, but when I see the partially-enamored, partially-embarrassed look on Charlotte’s face, it’s pretty clear she likes Remy calling her baby. At least as much as she likes it when I call her Princess.

“Here,” I say, handing Remy her backpack. My next class is in the opposite direction, so there’s no point walking Charlotte any further to class now that he’s here. “I’ll see you guys after school.”

Remy nods, offering me a friendly smile, and Charlotte waves at me and Alex. I didn’t realize he’d stopped with us. I half expect him to keep walking alongside Charlotte with

Remy, but he stays by my side instead while his gaze follows them.

“My next class is this way,” I say apologetically, pointing my thumb over my shoulder in the opposite direction.

“So’s mine,” he admits sheepishly. “Can I ask you a question, man?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I know Charlotte’s your friend, so this is probably weird or inappropriate.” He clears his throat. “Is she, uh, dating Remy Oliver? I’ve heard a few rumors, and he just called her baby. I just don’t want to make an ass of myself or piss him off by hitting on her, you know?”

At least he’s being up front about the fact he’s hitting on her. That’s a good thing, right? I still don’t know how to feel about that, but it is kind of insulting to realize he doesn’t see me as competition when it comes to Charlotte. At least, not compared to Remy.

“Rumors?” I ask in a low, dangerous voice.

He holds his hands up defensively while we walk side by side down. “Dude, you know people at this school suck. I know not to believe every damn thing I hear. But just so you and your friends know, people are saying she’s cheating on Elliot Spencer with Remy. Or the other way around? I’m not sure. Your group has always been solid, and Charlotte seems like a fucking sweetheart, so I didn’t buy that shit for a second.”

“Ah, fuck.” I sigh. I shouldn’t be surprised. Remy and Elliot have been the most open and obvious about flirting with Charlotte, and she was seen in public alone with both of them by assholes from our school this summer. Sebastian’s probably

going to lose his mind when he hears this, and I dread seeing Charlotte's reaction.

At least I was right about Alex being a decent guy.

"Thanks for telling me," I say. I hesitate for a few seconds before adding, "Charlotte's single right now."

He grins like it's Christmas fucking morning.

CHARLOTTE



AS SOON AS WE WALK INTO OUR ART HISTORY CLASSROOM, THE teacher throws her arms around Remy. “Oh, my favorite student! How was your summer, dear?”

Ms. Fallows is this tiny, frail looking woman with long, shiny silver hair. Remy towers over her with the most adorable smile on his face as he hugs her back. Even though so many of the people we go to school with are awful and say terrible things about him, it makes me incredibly happy to see that clearly not all of the teachers feel that way.

We’re the first students to arrive in class, and I turn away from Remy and our teacher to inspect the room. Instead of regular desks, Ms. Fallows has these low tables set up around the room with fancy cushions in mismatching patterns for seating. There’s a lot of art covering the walls, you almost can’t see even a speck of drywall anywhere. The whole room feels artsy, warm, and inviting. After introducing me to Ms. Fallows, Remy pulls me to the back of the room to a smaller table in the hopes no one will end up having to sit with us.

“Favorite student, huh?” I whisper teasingly.

Remy grins, not even trying to hide the fact that he’s staring at my legs when I carefully sit down on the cushions. As much as I try to smooth my skirt down, it still rides up

fairly high on my thighs. I'm totally blushing like an idiot when he sits down beside me, scooting close so we're barely a few inches apart.

"All the art teachers are like that with me. It's kinda nice," he says.

He says nice. I say it's the sweetest thing in the world.

We're quiet while we wait for everyone else to show up for class and for the bell to ring. Today has been great in a lot of ways, but I'm glad I only have one more class after this one. I'm exhausted and overwhelmed from socializing and dealing with anxiety. I'm sure I'll get used to being back in school like this after a couple of weeks, but for now, I'm ready to go home and relax where I feel safe.

I don't recognize anyone else in our class, even after Ms. Fallows finishes calling attendance. It's probably because elective classes like this one are mixed with students from every grade.

The beginning of the class is the usual boring introduction, but Ms. Fallows seems quirky and fun. When she dims the lights and pulls up a projection screen to show us different works of art from different periods we'll be studying throughout the year, I adjust to make myself more comfortable. I pull my knees up and twist slightly to the side so I'm turned toward Remy. My knee bumps his, and he looks down with his usual, intense stare.

I'm used to the way Remy looks at me with his icy blue artist eyes. But I still haven't gotten used to the way his attention makes me feel. Like little sparks of electricity are shooting across my skin, like my heart's expanding until my chest feels tight, and like my stomach is full of warm embers burning me up from the inside. Part of me hopes I never get

used to it, that I always feel this needy pleasure during moments like this with him.

I expect him to eventually turn away, to refocus on the screen up front. Instead, he slowly reaches his hand out and brushes his fingertips against the top of my thigh. I inhale sharply, tingles racing up my spine, and watch intently as he gently traces a line between a few scattered freckles.

“Your skin is so soft,” Remy says in a deliciously husky voice. His fingers are calloused from his summer job doing landscape work. It’s wonderfully torturous, feeling him touch me. I wonder how it would feel for him to continue touching me like this, softly. For him to move his hand further up my skirt.

The unbidden thought makes me jerk upright, and I look up in a panic. We’re in the back of the room, and it’s dark enough that nobody can see what we’re doing. And we’re really not even doing anything. Remy’s touch is mostly innocent. *I’m* the one turning it into something bigger in my head.

Then again, we almost kissed at his house the other day before Grayson walked in on us. And he’s been calling me baby the past couple of days, which is definitely not the sort of nickname you give a friend. He’s making it clearer than ever that he’s interested in me romantically.

“Charlotte,” he says. He hasn’t moved his hand from my thigh, but there’s a hint of nervousness in his voice.

I turn to look at him, captivated by his passionate gaze once more. His mouth turns down in a worried frown as he slowly pulls his hand away.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

About Katie, I nearly blurt out. And then I blanch, wondering why the hell that's the first thing to come to my mind. My brain is so muddled from Remy's attention, the conversation Grayson and I had earlier about the guys' pasts, and the way they've all been acting since this morning.

Truthfully, I am curious about the girl who broke up with Remy when she found out about juvie and his dad. I can sit here and tell myself it's because I'm angry on his behalf that someone he probably cared about would judge him harshly. Really though, I know it's just because I'm selfish and need reassurance that he doesn't have feelings for her anymore. Bringing her up now would be the dumbest thing I could do.

"I heard there's a modern art museum about an hour from here." My face heats up as soon as the words are out of my mouth. I guess it's not the worst thing I could have said, but I still seriously hate my brain sometimes.

"Yeah, there is." Remy grins widely, making his dimples appear. He ducks his head, reaching his hand up to ruffle his hair. He looks almost bashful when he meets my eyes, which is something I rarely see from him. He's usually stoic and focused. "We can go, if you want? I bet my grandma would let me borrow her car if she knew I was taking you out."

"Okay," I squeak.

Did Remy just ask me out? *Did I just say yes?*

While a small part of me is so excited that I want to burst, I can't stop the flood of guilt rushing through my body. How can I go out with Remy when I'm stupidly in love with Grayson, Sebastian, Elliot, and Liam too? And what about Alex? Sure, I barely know him, but he's so cute, and he's given me plenty of butterflies today. He was the one who told

me about the museum in the first place, and I'm pretty sure he was trying to ask me out. Right in front of Grayson, no less.

I bite down on the end of my pencil and stare worriedly at the projection screen up front. Ms. Fallows is talking about a painting of a field of flowers. A Monet painting, I think? I haven't been paying attention for several minutes, so now I'm completely lost. God, I hope we're not quizzed on everything she's saying today.

"You are so fucking pretty," Remy whispers, chuckling quietly. He brushes a few curls over my shoulder and asks, "Is it okay if I draw you right now?"

"What?" I hiss, whipping my head around to frown at him. "You're not going to pay attention to class or take notes?"

He shrugs, this infuriatingly sexy smirk on his face. "I'm listening. And you'll let me borrow your notes, right?"

Grayson made a joke about making me do all the work in our chemistry class too. These boys are seriously lucky I love them so much. I narrow my eyes at Remy, but I don't argue or disagree when I turn around to try to catch up on the lesson. From the corner of my eye, I see Remy pull a sketchbook from his bag.



"DO I GET TO SEE IT?" I ASK AFTER CLASS, NODDING AT Remy's sketchbook after he closes it.

He laughs and opens it again, flipping to the page he spent most of class working on. I still can't believe Ms. Fallows didn't catch him. I wonder if she'd even care all that much since Remy's apparently one of her favorite students.

The sketch he made of me isn't finished yet, but it's already gorgeous. My heart races while I stare at it, just like it did when he showed me the other drawings he made of me when we were at his house the other day. He's incredibly talented, and I'm still in awe that this is how he sees me.

"What do you think?" Remy asks.

I look up to find him smiling at me, his artist eyes full of warmth. I smile back, wishing I could explain what it means to me to see his artwork. How flattered I feel that he's made me his subject again. "Aren't you worried you'll get bored of drawing me?"

"No," he says, full of confidence.

My words fail me completely as I stare up at him, butterflies fluttering in my chest and stomach. I'm terrified I'm going to ruin things between us, either from pushing him away or from encouraging his affections too much. It's such a hard line to balance. If I wasn't just as in love with the other guys as I am with him, and if I wasn't worried about hurting their feelings and destroying their friendships with each other, it would be easy to fall into a relationship with Remy. Completely effortless. We have so much in common, and we understand each other perfectly.

"You ready to get to class?" Remy asks, breaking the intense silence between us.

I nod rapidly, not bothering to fight it when he hefts my bag over his shoulder. Most of the guys have been carrying my bag and books for me all day whenever they have the chance. It's cute and sweet of them, I can't bring myself to ask them to cut it out. Remy and I have P.E. next, and so does Elliot.

We have to stop by my locker on our way so I can grab the gym bag I brought to school with tennis shoes, a sports' bra, and deodorant. I'm not sure if we're getting uniforms today and dressing out, but I want to be prepared, just in case. There's no way I can do any sort of physical activities in the outfit I'm wearing.

We walk into the gym just as the bell rings. There's a large group of students scattered around the space, and I anxiously search for Elliot in the crowd. I see him standing with Ethan, Olivia's boyfriend, just before a middle-aged man blows a whistle.

"Girls line up on the left, boys on the right." The man gestures to each side of the gym, hurrying people along. There's a long table at each end where we'll be checking in for attendance and receiving our uniforms and locker assignments.

"You gonna be okay, baby?" Remy asks.

I nod, incapable of forming words. I try to tell myself it won't be so bad. The line will move quickly, and I'll be back out here with the guys in just a few minutes after I change my clothes. Remy reassures me that he and Elliot will wait for me right outside the locker room if they can, and he squeezes my hand before heading over to line up with the other guys in our class. I keep my face blank and my head held high as I make my way over to the left, lining up behind a group of girls who are talking and laughing together.

It's not until I'm standing right behind them that I recognize two of the girls. Summer, the girl from my history class who Sebastian allegedly used to have a crush on, and Madison, the junior class president who gave me a shitty tour of the school when I first signed up for classes earlier this summer.

Madison was in my chemistry class with Grayson too, but she luckily sat on the other side of the room so I didn't have to interact with her. I bite my tongue when she turns in line to meet my eyes. The last time I talked to her, during the tour, I barely managed to keep myself from punching her because she was talking shit about my guys.

"You're the new girl, right?" Summer asks me before turning to Madison and their other friend. "She's in my history class, and I think she's friends with Sebastian Reynolds and Grayson Brooks. Isn't that crazy?"

The third girl giggles nervously, her eyes darting between me and her friends. I swear, if any of them say anything rude about my friends—

"Mike told me she's dating Elliot Spencer, and that she's sleeping with Remy Oliver behind his back," Madison says, sneering at me. "She's probably sleeping with that whole fucked-up group of freaks."

I shouldn't be surprised to hear someone say that. Especially someone as awful as Madison Taylor. But I can't help feeling shame and embarrassment rush through me. What she's saying isn't true, but part of me wishes it was. This is just a reminder of how messed up I am, how wrong it is that I want something like that.

"Wow, I didn't realize girls slut-shaming other girls was still a thing."

I turn to find Emily standing behind me, a terrifying look on her face. A tiny smile pulls at my mouth, seeing her staring these girls down like this. I knew I liked Emily the moment I met her. She's so badass and unapologetic, and it seriously means a lot she's coming to my defense when she barely knows me.

“Nobody’s slut shaming anyone,” Summer and Madison’s friend squeaks.

“Sure, Brittany.” Emily rolls her eyes. To me, she says, “Let’s get away from these bitches and go to the back of the line, Barbie.”

I don’t hesitate to follow her to the back of the line, not looking back at the other girls once. Once we have some separation from them, I clear my throat and force my words out. “Thanks, Emily.”

She waves her hand and grunts. “Those girls are the worst. Especially Madison. She’s always sucking up to the football players and cheerleaders like we’re stuck in the fucking nineties. And the teachers love her for some reason.”

“Yeah, she gave me a tour of the school earlier this summer when I first moved here.” I laugh and shake my head. “I ended up flipping her off and ditching her.”

“Nice.” Emily cackles. She nods at my heels and teases, “So, are you gonna run in those things or what?”

“Nah, I have other shoes.” I grin. We’re quiet for a moment, though there’s a low hum of noise throughout the entire gym from so many people talking while they wait in line. I try to think of something to say to Emily to keep a conversation going. She’s been nice to me. “So, Alex is your cousin, right?”

I cringe as soon as the words are out of my mouth. It’s the first thing I thought to ask her, but I don’t want her to think I’m only asking about Alex because I’m interested in him. Especially not after she heard what Madison was saying about me and the guys.

“We’re honestly more like siblings at this point.” She shrugs. “I’ve been living with my aunt and uncle since I was twelve. My mom died when I was little, and my dad’s in prison.”

She sounds so nonchalant, and she does a good job of keeping up a tough exterior. But I wonder if maybe she’s more bothered by her situation than she’s letting on. I know from experience it’s easier to pretend like everything is fine, even when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“I live with my uncle too,” I say. “My dad’s dead, and my mom is...”

When I trail off, unsure how to finish my sentence, Emily gives me a small smile. Like she realizes we might have more in common than either of us expected. “Gone?”

“Gone,” I agree. It’s a better word than any to describe my mother. I try not to think about her if I can help it, but occasionally, I can’t help wondering where she is now. If she regrets anything, or if she even thinks about me anymore.

We reach the table and check our names off the attendance list with the female gym teacher, Mrs. Singh. She assigns us lockers right next to each other and hands us our locks and new gym uniforms. Maroon shorts and a white tee shirt with the school’s name and eagle mascot on it.

Inside the locker room, it’s way louder than it was in the gym. At least, it feels that way. Emily and I don’t talk while we find our lockers and change, and I’m careful not to make eye contact with any of the other girls in our class. Madison, Summer, and their friend have lockers further down the row from us, and I hear them laughing about something. I try to tell myself they’re not laughing at me, but I can’t help feeling self-conscious.

After I finish tying my hair up in a ponytail, I follow Emily out into the gym. Elliot and Remy stand huddled close together right outside the girls' locker room, waiting for me just like they promised.

“Hey.” Elliot grins when he looks up at me. His eyes travel down my body to my legs. “Damn, you look hot.”

My cheeks flame as I recall waking up during our sleepover the other night, only to hear Elliot and the rest of the guys discussing how hot I looked in my ‘little shorts.’ My gym shorts aren’t *that* short, but it’s just like Elliot to say something dumb and flirty in public to embarrass me and make me lose focus.

“Shut up,” Remy mumbles, punching Elliot in the shoulder.

Emily snickers at them, shooting me an amused smile. The two teachers for this class call everyone back to the center of the gym to give a quick intro of how the class will work. Starting next class, we’re expected to change immediately and meet up in the gymnasium for attendance and warm-ups before splitting off into two groups. Every few weeks, we’ll get to pick between two sports or activities to determine which group we’ll be in. And every other Friday, we have to run a mile and be timed for it too.

Today, the teachers tell us we can either spend the rest of class walking around the track outside or working out in the weight room. I don’t know what our options will be next class, but when I see Madison and her friends heading outside to the track, picking the weight room is an easy decision.

Looking at Elliot’s biceps, I admit to myself there’s another very motivating reason to choose the weight room.

The weight room is surprisingly spacious. Elliot explains that the football team uses it before practice, so that makes sense. Some of the bigger guys in our group take over the area with the free weights while a couple of girls flock around them, and Emily heads over to a treadmill.

“This will be good,” Elliot says to me. “If you can get a good workout most days during class, you can probably cut back on how many days you go to the gym every week. Even then, you can focus more on your classes with Adrian when you are able to go.”

That’s a good point. I’ve gotten used to going to the gym three or four days a week, but that probably won’t be realistic now that school has started up. Eventually, I’m going to be too tired or have too much homework to make it a priority. When I figure out what I’m going to do about an extracurricular, it’ll be even harder to get to the gym very often to train with Adrian.

“Will you help me?” I ask sweetly.

Elliot grins wolfishly, and Remy chuckles. “Of course we will.”

Remy heads over to a bench press that hasn’t been claimed yet for him and Elliot so they can trade off and spot each other while they lift. Elliot sets me up on a machine that has a perfect view of the bench, where I’ll totally be able to subtly ogle my guys while I work out. I’m not sure if Elliot realizes it too, but I keep my mouth shut.

After making sure I know how to use the machine, Elliot leans close to me. So close, his lips almost brush my cheek. I stay still, forcing myself to remain calm even though his nearness makes my heart race.

“Remy said he’s taking you on a date,” Elliot whispers.

I flinch, pulling my head back enough to meet Elliot’s gray-blue eyes. He doesn’t look angry or upset. Honestly, he looks more curious than anything. But what am I supposed to say? The whole thing with Remy and the art museum was sort of a misunderstanding. I think. I can’t believe Remy already went blabbing his mouth the first chance he got!

“I—” My words fail me. Oh, god. This is it. This is the moment the guys start to fight and decide I’m not worth being friends with anymore.

“It’s okay,” Elliot reassures me, his voice surprisingly soft. “I’m not as jealous as I thought I’d be. I can take the competition.”

The competition!?! I open my mouth to ask what the hell he’s talking about, but my brain refuses to let me speak. It dawns on me that I had the right idea when I was internally freaking out during lunch. They’re totally trying to make me choose between them. I didn’t realize they would be so crass as to consider it a fucking *competition* with each other. I should have known better. As sweet as they are, they’re still a bunch of idiotic teenage boys.

“Besides.” Elliot backs up, a crooked smirk pulling at his mouth while his eyes light up mischievously. “You’re gonna wear my varsity jacket on Friday, right? We have our first game, and all the guys’ girlfriends usually wear something with their boyfriend’s number on it. Some of them even paint it on their cheeks.”

He brushes his fingertips over my cheek when he speaks, dragging his thumb down over my bottom lip. I narrow my eyes at him, feeling conflicted. As much as I like the idea of wearing his jacket and number to show support for him during

his game, I hate that he's putting me on the spot. Plus, that's probably going to start more rumors, isn't it?

And now that I know he's probably only asking me because of this stupid 'competition' he mentioned, I can't help feeling sort of hurt. Like, how do I know he's being genuine and not just trying to one-up the other guys?

"Maybe I will," I finally say. I'll have to think about it more, and not when my thoughts are scrambled.

Elliot looks happy, I can't imagine he'd be more excited if I had actually said yes. He quickly kisses my cheek before turning and running over to the bench press with Remy.

I spend the rest of class alternating between a few different workout machines while I watch the guys, wondering how the hell I'm going to survive the rest of this year without ruining everything with them.

SEBASTIAN



“I DON’T HAVE PRACTICE TODAY FOR ONCE, THANK GOD.” Elliot sighs. “But Victoria’s still demanding I come home straight after school so I have time to do my fucking chores and finish my homework before my dad gets home.”

“It’s the first day.” Liam frowns. “I doubt any of us has much homework.”

Elliot nods, but there’s nothing any of us can say to fix things. His step-mom’s always coming up with bullshit excuses to make things harder for him. The chores she makes him do are completely pointless considering they have a maid who works six days a week. Victoria doesn’t even pretend to like Elliot, but she’s always made an effort to appear like she’s the perfect wife and step-mother in front of Elliot’s dad.

As controlling as Victoria is, Elliot’s dad is much worse.

“We can all hang out another day this week,” Charlotte says softly.

My eyes jump to her, and I can practically feel the rest of the guys directing their attention to her too. We’re standing beside her locker where we all agreed to meet up before and after school every day. It’s only now I’m realizing the guys

and I have formed a semi-circle around Charlotte. My guard goes up, and I grit my teeth as I glance around at my friends.

How was I so fucking stupid to miss how enamored they are with her? How did I go all summer without realizing she's become the center of their universe, just like she's become mine?

"Thanks, gorgeous." Elliot reaches out to tug on the end of Charlotte's ponytail, making her giggle.

She still has her hair up from gym class, and it looks like she's wiped most of her makeup off even though she's wearing her same outfit from this morning. Either way, she still looks fucking beautiful. My fingers twitch with the desire to photograph her. With makeup, without, wearing whatever she wants...it doesn't matter.

Is that how Remy feels? Why he draws her so often? When I glance to my left to glare at him, I find him staring at Charlotte with an intense expression as his eyes rove up and down her figure. I want nothing more than to punch him and tell him off for looking at her like that, but at least he's not touching her like Elliot is.

The only reason I'm keeping my mouth shut about Elliot flirting with her right here in front of us—like he's been doing all day—is because I feel bad for him. His relationship with his dad and step-mom constantly makes me realize how lucky I am to have Arthur.

"What other days this week are you free from practice?" I ask, forcing a smile. Yeah, I'm jealous, and I'm pissed off he and the other guys keep flirting with Charlotte and that we agreed to this stupid competition to see who she likes the most between us. But he's still my best friend. They all are. No

matter what, I need to remember that so I don't let this thing with Charlotte come between us.

Elliot shakes his head, his shoulders drooping. "I've got practice every other day this week since our first game is Friday. I won't be able to hang out or anything until Saturday. It's such bullshit."

We all grumble our apologies and agree that it's bullshit. Elliot doesn't even like football. His dad forces him to play, and his schedule is probably going to be even more impossible this semester now that he's on the varsity team.

"Well, we'll plan something for Saturday, okay? And we'll be at your game Friday night," Grayson says.

Without having to say anything to each other, we all begin making our way outside to my car. Elliot throws his arm around Charlotte's shoulders, pulling her close to his side. I clench my fist and bite my tongue. Watching the guys flirt with Charlotte all summer never bothered me this much. Not when I thought they were just messing around or being friendly. But now that I know they're all serious about wanting to date her, I feel like I'm seconds from raging the fuck out every time I see one of them so much as touch her.

"And you're still wearing my jacket and number, right, gorgeous?" Elliot asks Charlotte.

She drops her gaze to the ground, but she doesn't pull away from him or show any sign of how she feels about him or his request. Does she realize if she wears Elliot's letterman jacket, people will assume even more than they already do that she's his girlfriend?

"I said maybe," she mumbles.

"Good enough for me." Elliot grins.

We stop at my car, and I continue biting my tongue while Elliot, Remy, and Liam say goodbye to Charlotte. They take so fucking long, you'd think they're saying goodbye for longer than one night. It's not like they won't see her tomorrow morning, and I'm sure they'll text her tonight.

Then again, I have to admit I'd probably be the same way if I didn't live with her. In a lot of ways, I'm fucking lucky I get to see Charlotte more than any of them. I love that she's always nearby, even if she's hanging out in her room or reading. I love knowing she's sleeping just down the hallway from me every night, so I know she's safe and happy. I love seeing her first thing every morning before she's had time to get ready, when her hair's messy and she hasn't put her contacts in yet. All those small, intimate moments are mine. Something I don't have to share with any of the guys. Charlotte's spent more time with me than any of them. She knows me better than she knows any of them. So, she probably knows how perfect we'd be for each other, right?

"You okay, Sebastian?" Charlotte asks.

I jump, realizing the other guys have walked away—Elliot to his truck, and Liam and Remy to Liam's SUV, leaving me alone with Charlotte and Grayson. They're staring at me in concern, waiting for me to unlock the car so they can get in.

"Yeah, sorry." I chuckle awkwardly. After I push the button on my key fob to unlock the doors, Charlotte hops into the passenger seat while Grayson climbs into the back.

We're quiet on the drive home. Through the rearview mirror, I see Grayson texting someone. I don't think it's Charlotte though because she's staring out the window instead of at her phone. My curiosity is piqued, and I figure it's a safe topic to bring up to break the silence. I'm anxious and worried

that Charlotte's still mad at me about Summer. The guys think I'm being ridiculous, but she sure seemed angry at lunch. We haven't really had a chance to talk much since then, and I'm not sure how to bring it up with her.

"Who are you talking to?" I ask Grayson, clearing my throat. Charlotte turns in her seat to look at him, so she must be curious too.

"Alex Flores." Grayson shrugs. It takes me a second to place the name. Alex is some emo kid we go to school with, but I've never talked to him much. He usually hangs out with his cousin and another guy. They're not assholes like most of the people we go to school with though, at least.

"About the band?" Charlotte asks with a smile.

"Uh huh," Grayson mumbles. He meets my eyes in the rearview mirror and grins at my confused expression. "Alex wants me to join a band with his cousin Emily and their friend Benji. They like the same kind of music I do, so I thought it might be cool. Better than joining some lame after-school club I have zero interest in."

That sounds really fucking awesome. Something like that would be perfect for Gray. We talk about what kind of music they want to create, what instruments the others play, and when and where they're gonna get together for band practice. Even though she's quiet, Charlotte pays rapt attention and watches us talk with a smile on her face.

When I park in front of my house several minutes later, Grayson gets out on Charlotte's side so he can open her door for her. She thanks him and asks, "Are you hanging out for a little while, or do you need to go home right away?"

“My moms won’t be home for a while, so I can come over,” he says.

For as long as I can remember, Gray and I always hang out after school. Arthur doesn’t usually get home until around five or six, and Ava often works late. Evelyn’s schedule depends on her clients, so there’s no telling what time she’ll be home most days.

“Good!” Charlotte smiles brightly. I grab her backpack for her before she can and carry it inside. It’s not heavy, but it’s just one simple thing I can do to show I care about her. After Grayson closes the front door behind us, Charlotte mumbles something about changing her clothes before rushing upstairs to her room.

“You hungry? I know lunch sucked,” I say to Grayson, heading into the kitchen with him. We always have the best snacks and shit stocked in the cupboards ever since Charlotte took over grocery shopping.

Grayson grabs some homemade guacamole from the fridge while I grab some tortilla chips, and we sit at the island to devour them. With a glance toward the stairs, Grayson lowers his voice and says, “I think lunch was rough for her. More than she let on, I mean. We’re used to it, but I know she was having a really good day for the most part before all the bullshit we dealt with during lunch. She asked me about eating somewhere else outside of the cafeteria from now on.”

“We might have to try and figure something out.” Getting passes for all six of us will probably be a pain in the ass, but I don’t want Charlotte to be upset or uncomfortable if I can help it. I’d do anything to make her happy. I check to make sure she’s still upstairs before I sigh and admit, “I’m sure I didn’t

help make lunch any easier today when she brought up Summer and put me on the spot.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “Don’t beat yourself up too much, dude. I’m sure Elliot or Remy would have frozen or said something stupid if any of their exes were brought up. And it’s not like you even have any actual history with Summer.”

“Did you talk to Charlotte, or...?” I keep my voice at a whisper. Charlotte’s always sneaking up on us, and I’d probably die if she overheard us talking about this.

“Yeah. I told her Summer’s just a girl you used to have a crush on, and that you’re not interested in her anymore.” Grayson says.

Even though he said he would talk to Charlotte, I can’t help but feel surprised. My gut churns with guilt. If the situation had somehow been reversed, and Grayson asked me to reassure Charlotte that he doesn’t like another girl, I’m not sure I would have done it. Because that could potentially hurt my chances with her. Grayson admitted he likes her, maybe he even loves her, and he helped me out, anyway. It makes me feel like such a dick to realize that he still values our friendship above everything else, including this ridiculous competition over Charlotte we’ve started.

“Thanks, Gray,” I say sincerely. And because he’s my best friend and I can’t really talk to anyone else about this, I widen my eyes and ask, “That was fucking crazy though, right? Summer flirting with me this morning? I swear, I thought I’d entered the Twilight Zone or some shit.”

He bursts out laughing, and we quickly turn toward the stairs like Charlotte’s going to appear out of thin air. She’s still upstairs, so thankfully she hasn’t overheard us.

“So fucking weird,” he agrees.

“Is it stupid for me to be pissed off about it?” I grimace. “Like, she never fucking paid attention to me or talked to me for years, even though she knew I liked her. And now I’ve met Charlotte and have zero interest in anyone else, and Summer suddenly decides to flirt with me? If she had said something about my muscles last year, I probably would have jizzed in my pants on the spot. This morning, I had no idea what to say. It was fucking awkward, dude.”

“Nah, I get it.” He laughs. “If she keeps saying weird, flirty shit, just try to ignore it. And if you decide you might still like her, just, I don’t know...be careful about hurting Charlotte’s feelings.”

My heart stutters painfully in my chest, and I feel a weird mixture of relief and worry. “So, you think Charlotte was jealous, then?”

“Oh, yeah. She was definitely jealous.” Grayson gives me a crooked smile. I want to ask if he thinks Charlotte likes me. But after I was such a dick to him yesterday about her and about never having kissed a girl before, I don’t want to be insensitive. Especially when he’s been so fucking helpful and understanding with me about my feelings for her. While I’m still debating how to respond, Grayson’s expression turns more serious and thoughtful. It’s like he can read my fucking mind. “I’m not saying she likes you or any of the rest of us. But I think over the summer, she got used to kind of being the center of our circle. I think she’d be upset if any of us started dating someone for a lot of reasons. It would fuck up our group dynamic, and she’s just gotten comfortable and started feeling at home here.”

He's probably right about that. Sometimes it's hard for me to look at the big picture. I've been so focused on how I feel about Charlotte and how we could possibly make a relationship happen while we both live under the same roof and share Arthur as our legal guardian. I haven't thought about how she feels about anything or anyone other than me, and I've been blind to my best friends' feelings too.

"You don't think it would change our group dynamic if she started dating you? Or one of the other guys?" I grumble quietly.

"Not really." He shrugs. "The six of us would still be as close as we are now. And try to really think about it without getting jealous or worked up. If Charlotte started dating Remy, Elliot, or Liam, wouldn't you be the least bit happy for them? They're like our fucking brothers. Charlotte's the best girl any of them could end up with, and you know they'd be good to her too. It would be a million times better than her dating some random dude from school, that's for sure."

"No," I rasp. My throat feels thick, and I feel this awful, panicky feeling in my chest. I have to swallow several times before I can get any more words out. "See, this is how I know I like her more than you do, Grayson. Just thinking of her being with anyone, even you or the other guys, makes me want to fucking punch something and then disappear. I can't even think of eventually being happy for her and someone else when all I feel at the thought of that is fucking heartbreak and betrayal."

He rolls his eyes, obviously disagreeing with me. He doesn't get it, doesn't feel as deeply for Charlotte as I do. Remy and Elliot are my real competition, anyway. They've made that clear after today.

“Either way,” Grayson says. “You’ve gotta stop acting fucking jealous and crazy. You’re going to end up pushing Charlotte *and* the guys away.”

Now, he’s probably right about that. I know I need to be better. I open my mouth to apologize for being an asshole yesterday and today. I should probably apologize to the rest of the guys too. The sound of a door closing upstairs cuts me off, and Grayson and I turn to watch Charlotte come down the stairs. She’s changed into a pair of shorts and a tee shirt. It’s seriously incredible she looks just as stunning wearing something simple as when she’s all dressed up like this morning.

“Sorry I took so long.” She smiles shyly. “I forgot I left my room a mess this morning, so I was cleaning up really quick.”

I snicker and tell Grayson about walking in this morning to find Charlotte’s room looking like a tornado went through it with her clothes strewn about everywhere. While we tease her and make her laugh, the three of us finish off the tortilla chips and guacamole. After we’re done with our snack, we head over to the couch.

Charlotte sits between us and pulls out her phone to read a book on her Kindle app. Since she’s adamant she doesn’t want to watch something, Grayson and I decide to play video games. It’s nice being with them like this. My best friend and the girl I’m in love with, away from school and all the drama and bullshit we have to deal with.

Within half an hour, Charlotte falls asleep. She ends up leaning against me, her head on my shoulder. I can’t stop grinning like an idiot, desperately trying to hold still so she doesn’t wake up and move away.

Around four o'clock, Grayson pulls out his phone and grunts. "My mom's home, so I'm gonna head out."

"Okay," I whisper. I'm still smiling at Charlotte. A loose strand of hair has fallen across her face, and I carefully brush it back behind her ear. And then I brush my thumb over her cheek again. Her skin is so damn soft, and she's so fucking pretty.

Grayson stands up and kicks my foot, and I tear my eyes away from Charlotte to glare at him. He snorts and shakes his head. "Try to think about what I said, okay?"

I know he means about being happy for Charlotte and whoever she might end up dating. I can't make any promises about that, but I can promise to not be such a jealous and insensitive jerk to the people I care about most in the world.

"Yeah, okay. I will."

CHARLOTTE



I STARTLE AWAKE AT THE SOUND OF SEBASTIAN'S LAUGHTER. It takes my disoriented brain a second to realize I must have fallen asleep. When I lift my head, I realize there's a blanket draped over me. Sebastian's sitting at the other end of the couch, my feet propped in his lap. He's watching me with a crooked smile on his face, and I self-consciously wipe my mouth in case I was drooling.

“Were you watching me sleep?” I ask groggily.

“What? No.” He shakes his head defensively, his cheeks reddening. “I was watching TV. I just looked over when I realized you were awake.”

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I sit up and pull my feet from Sebastian's lap as I stretch my arms above my head. God, I'm still completely exhausted. I didn't realize I was tired until I sat down with the boys when we got home. Hopefully I didn't sleep for too long.

“Grayson already left?” I ask, looking around for my phone. I find it sitting on the coffee table in front of us, and I smile as I reach out to grab it. The guys always set my phone or glasses aside when I fall asleep like this, and it was really sweet for Sebastian to grab a blanket for me.

“Yeah, a while ago,” Sebastian says. “Arthur just got home. He went upstairs to take a shower.”

Oh, good. That means I can't have been asleep for very long. I unlock my phone, intending to text Grayson and apologize for falling asleep when I made a big deal about asking him to come over and hang out. I blink when I see an alarming number of unread messages though, my stomach fluttering with panic.

I have messages from Grayson, Liam, Remy, and Elliot, which isn't very surprising. I have a text from Alex too, making me feel a mix between guilt and excitement. Most of the unread texts are from Olivia. Nineteen of them!

“Oh my god.” I giggle, quickly reading through them. Most of the messages are links to TikTok videos, and the rest are basically text-versions of Olivia yelling at me that we need to hang out and catch up so we can cement our new best friend status as soon as possible. She's also demanded I make an Instagram account if I don't have one already.

Sebastian scoots closer to me on the couch, trying to read over my shoulder. “What is it?”

I show him the texts from Olivia, still giggling wildly. “She's insane, but sweet. She sort of reminds me of Elliot. When I first moved here, he was always saying stuff about me and him being best friends who just didn't know each other yet.”

“He's such an idiot,” Sebastian says, his tone playful and affectionate.

I text everyone back, except for Alex. I feel weird texting him while I'm sitting next to Sebastian, even though Alex didn't say anything inappropriate or necessarily flirty. His text

asking for classic novel recommendations is friendly, and probably completely innocent. Then again, I'm almost certain he was trying to ask me out earlier today.

Alex is really cute, but I don't have the experience or confidence to deal with this. Crushing on a guy from school while I'm simultaneously in love with my five best friends, I mean.

I've been thinking a lot since Elliot dropped the bomb about his and the guys' 'competition' revolving around me. I don't know the details of their dumb plan, and I don't want to. I've decided the best thing I can do is pretend to be completely oblivious to their actions and anything that vaguely resembles flirting with me. I won't bring it up, won't ask them to stop, and I definitely won't reveal my true feelings to any of them. I guess I'll have to be the same way with Alex too.

It's probably not the best plan, and I doubt the situation I'm in is going to magically go away any time soon. But at least if I pretend like I have no clue what they're doing or that they like me as more than a friend, it will delay the inevitability of losing them.

"You okay?" Sebastian asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Yeah." I nod quickly and lie, "Just wondering if I should make an Instagram account like Olivia said."

He grins broadly, his mismatched brown and blue eyes lighting up with excitement. "Sure, why not? You can post some of the photos I took of you this summer, and it'll give me an excuse to take more photos in the future. I need to start building up my portfolio for art school soon, anyway."

Sebastian's dangerous behind a camera. At least for me. Just thinking of having his full attention on me, capturing

photo after photo while his eyes burn into my soul makes my skin tingle all over. Every time Sebastian photographs me, I feel beautiful and powerful. He's much more confident with a camera in his hands, and in those moments, he has no trouble letting me know how attractive he finds me.

I smile shyly. Judging by his triumphant grin, Sebastian seems to take that as an agreement to let him take more photos of me. It's not like I could ever say no to him, even if it's definitely a bad idea to let him take my picture ever again. Just like how I can't say no to Remy whenever he asks to draw me. Sebastian and Remy are both incredible artists in their own ways, and I'm embarrassingly weak for them.

When I hear Arthur on the stairs, I stand up and head into the kitchen with the intention of picking out something to make for dinner. I'm still sleepy, but I'm getting hungry too. Which means Sebastian and my uncle will probably be ravenous soon.

"Hey, kid." Arthur pats my shoulder when he walks into the kitchen a moment later. He opens the fridge and grabs a bottle of water before he turns to smile at me. "How was school?"

"It was good. Really good, actually." I smile happily.

Even with the few hiccups I had to deal with, and seeing how some of the people at school treat the guys, overall, I had a really fantastic day. It's cheesy, but I'm proud of myself for getting through all of my classes without totally freezing up or freaking out. At my last two schools, I'd go weeks without speaking a word in any of my classes.

"That's great," Arthur says. "I want to hear all about it. You liked all your classes?"

He sounds genuine. I know he really would love to hear every minute detail about my day, and Sebastian's too. My uncle's always trying to show an interest in our lives and hobbies. I nod and think about where to start. Do I have a favorite class already? I liked all of my teachers, and I liked all of my classes for different reasons too.

While I'm mulling over my thoughts, Sebastian joins us in the kitchen and sits on one of the stools at the island. He frowns at Arthur and asks, "Are you okay?"

I look my uncle over in concern, frowning when I realize he's wearing gym shorts and a plain gray t-shirt. His hair's still wet from his shower, and his skin looks very red and blotchy. I didn't think anything of it when Sebastian mentioned he was taking a shower, but that's actually pretty unusual for Arthur. He never comes home straight from work and takes a shower. He doesn't even usually change out of his stuffy work clothes until way later in the evening.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Arthur chuckles, waving his hand dismissively. "I decided to start going to the gym a few days a week after work. I didn't realize I was out of shape, and man, I've really got to hand it to you kids. I don't know how you do it, going as often as you do. It's torture!"

Sebastian snorts, and I erupt into giggles. Poor Arthur. I give him a teasing smile and say, "It'll get easier. You just have to keep it up."

He shakes his head and sighs, tipping his head back to finish the rest of his water. While he and Sebastian chit chat about their days, I head over to the pantry to see what we have to eat. I should have gone grocery shopping over the weekend, but I was too caught up with the guys and thinking about school. I'll probably have to go sometime this week.

While I'm thinking of easy recipes I can whip up, I let my thoughts wander to lunch today. The cafeteria food was disgusting, and I'm not looking forward to repeating the experience of dealing with a crowded room full of assholes again either. Grayson did say we didn't *have* to eat in the cafeteria. He just said we can't take lunch trays out...

"Hey, Sebastian?" I call over my shoulder. "What would you think about me making lunches for us? So we don't have to eat the school lunch anymore."

"Yeah, sure," he says enthusiastically. I turn around to find him grinning at me. "Like I'd ever turn down any food. Especially something you've made."

I giggle nervously. "Do you think the rest of the guys would think it was weird if I made lunches for them too?" Even if we can't figure out a way to get passes for all six of us so we can spend the lunch period somewhere outside the cafeteria, bringing homemade lunches will at least cut down on the time we would normally spend waiting in line.

Sebastian laughs. "I doubt they'd think it's weird, but I'll text the group chat."

While Sebastian takes his phone out, Arthur watches us and mumbles something about teenagers these days being strange. I don't bother arguing with him, even if it's probably just *me* who's strange. My phone buzzes in my pocket several times, so I pull it out to see our group chat blowing up. I grin like a lunatic when I see the rest of the guys have all responded positively to my idea.

My phone lights up with Liam's name, and it takes me a second to realize he's calling me. My heart stutters, and I feel my cheeks get hot. It's silly, especially since I text him just as much as I text the other guys, and we see each other all the

time. But Liam has never called me before. I feel embarrassed at my reaction, especially since Arthur and Sebastian are watching me.

“Hello?” I answer in this bizarre, high-pitched tone that sounds nothing like my normal voice.

“Hey. I figured I’d call you since the group chat can get overwhelming with all of us talking at once,” Liam says. He sounds confident and casual. So unaffected by the fact that this is the first time we’ve ever talked on the phone. God, I’m ridiculous. “You know you don’t have to make lunches for all of us, right? I mean, that would be awesome. But I don’t want you to feel like we’re pressuring you or anything.”

“I don’t,” I say softly, a smile forming on my lips. He’s sweet and thoughtful. “I want to do it.”

“Can I help you then, at least?” he asks. He sounds slightly less confident than he did before. A little more vulnerable. And I realize maybe he wasn’t unaffected by calling me, after all. “Maybe we can go shopping together, and I’ll pay for everything? That way you’re not wasting your own money on food for us. It’s not fair to ask Arthur, either.”

Liam’s so considerate, but it bothers me that he always tries to pay for everything. I know he *can*, since his family is supposedly filthy rich. But I’d hate for him to think I expect it from him, or that I’m using him.

“You don’t have to. I can just use my allowance—”

“No.” Liam and Arthur speak at the same time, cutting me off.

I blink at Arthur, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks as I press my phone more securely to my ear. He didn’t overhear our conversation, did he? I don’t think Liam said anything

flirty or embarrassing, but I still can't help feeling self-conscious. Maybe Arthur just guessed at what I want to use my allowance for?

"It's not a big deal, Charlotte." Liam's voice softens. "It's really the only way I can help and show that I appreciate what you're doing. Besides, maybe grocery shopping can be our thing? That probably sounds dumb, but we never really get to hang out together. Just us, I mean."

Cue gigantic butterflies fluttering in my stomach while I try desperately not to melt into a puddle right here in the middle of the kitchen. I know Liam's sweet rambling probably falls under the broad umbrella of flirting that I really, *really* need to try to avoid. But he's right. We never get to hang out, and I've spent less time with him than I have with the other guys.

"Okay. That's a good idea. We can go grocery shopping after school tomorrow, if you want?"

"Really?" Liam asks incredulously. Like I'd ever be able to say no to him! "Awesome! I can't wait. We can just go straight after school, and I'll drive you home after."

After we finish our conversation and hang up, I stare back and forth between Sebastian and Arthur. Neither of them looks very happy, and I say a silent prayer that I didn't look like a blushing, bumbling moron while I was talking to Liam on the phone. Since Arthur protested me using my allowance, and Sebastian's always acting jealous of the other guys lately, I focus solely on my uncle while I summarize my conversation with Liam.

"I probably need to go to the store tonight too." I worry my bottom lip between my teeth and turn to look in the pantry again while I try to remember what's in the fridge and freezer.

“I don’t think I have enough ingredients to make six lunches for tomorrow, and I might need to get something to make for dinner tonight.”

“I’ll go with you!” Sebastian volunteers immediately.

Arthur furrows his eyebrows and rubs the back of his neck. After giving Sebastian a weird look, he walks over and places his hand on my shoulder. “How about you and I go to the store, and Seb can stay here? I wanted to talk to you, anyway.”

Uh, oh. Arthur’s going into ‘dad mode,’ which usually means an extremely awkward and uncomfortable conversation. I try to smile, but I’m sure it looks more like a grimace. “Okay.”

“We can pick up Chinese or something for dinner too. You’ve had a long day. You shouldn’t have to worry about cooking dinner tonight on top of everything else.”

“Chinese, huh? Way to undo all your hard work at the gym,” Sebastian teases.

“Today can just be a cheat day,” Arthur says. When Sebastian and I snicker obnoxiously, Arthur shakes his head at us and grunts. “Oh, shut up. We can’t all have the metabolism of a sixteen-year-old.”

CHARLOTTE



“WE SHOULD THINK ABOUT GETTING YOU A CAR.”

The comment comes out of nowhere, and I stumble slightly when I turn to look at my uncle. He walks past me like he didn’t just say something crazy, popping open the trunk and carefully placing the bags of groceries he insisted on carrying out of the store for me.

We went to Target first so I could get some containers in different sizes, plastic Ziploc bags, and enough lunch boxes for me and all the guys. I tried to use my allowance to pay for everything, but Arthur wouldn’t let me. At the grocery store, I made sure to only buy enough food and supplies to make lunches for tomorrow. I plan on making a Pinterest board later tonight so I can make a better shopping list for when I go to the store with Liam.

“I don’t need a car,” I say incredulously. “I don’t have my license.”

Arthur grins and closes the trunk. “You’ve had your learner’s permit for a while, haven’t you?”

I’ve had it since I was fifteen, but only because driver’s education was offered through my school at the time. I nod

slowly at Arthur and grimace. “Yeah, for over a year. But I never logged any driving hours...”

Because I went to juvie pretty shortly after getting my permit, and I haven’t exactly had a stable home or guardian looking out for me until recently.

My uncle’s eyes soften. “I should have thought about this sooner. If I’d taken you out driving more during the summer, you’d probably be ready for the test to get your license by now.”

“It’s okay. I really don’t mind asking for rides from Sebastian.”

He sighs and motions for me to get in before he does the same. He waits until I’ve put my seatbelt on to start the car. “That’s not the point, Charlotte. I’m your guardian just as much as I am Sebastian’s, and neither of you should be held responsible for each other. I love how close you are, and I’m happy you’ve become friends. But you should have as much freedom as he does, which means being able to drive yourself around whenever and wherever you’d like. As long as I know where you’re going, of course.”

I guess I can see his point. Most teenagers would probably think it’s unfair that Sebastian has his own car when I don’t, right? I really don’t see it that way. Even though I’ve been here a couple months, and I’ve really come to consider Arthur and Sebastian’s house *my* home too, sometimes I still feel a bit like an interloper. Sebastian’s always been an only child, and he’s been forced to share everything with me. His house, his step-dad, his friends, his car, his free time...everything.

I’m sure he doesn’t feel like that. He’s my best friend and my kindred spirit, after all. But I can’t help feeling that way,

and I'd hate to take anything else from him or make a fuss about 'fairness' between us.

"We'll start working on your driving hours this week. I'm certain I've got a copy of your permit in the file Anne gave me," Arthur says thoughtfully. He doesn't bother waiting for me to retort before turning to give me a cheeky grin. "We can talk about getting you a car after you've gotten your license."

There's no point in arguing with him, and there's no stopping the smile from spreading across my face. Arthur's been amazing to me from the very beginning when he picked me up from juvie with my social worker, Anne.

"Okay. Thank you." I stare at him quizzically and tilt my head. "Was the car thing what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Arthur winces. So, that's probably a no. He's a great pseudo-dad—accepting, non-judgmental, open-minded, protective, and thoughtful—but he's pretty terrible at talking about serious and awkward topics. If I wasn't worried about what he wants to talk to me in private about, I'd probably find his reaction hilarious.

"Not exactly. I've been stalling a bit," he admits. I assumed he was driving aimlessly since we're not heading toward home or the Chinese food restaurant he and Sebastian prefer. When he suddenly turns into the parking lot of an ice cream shop, he gives me a nervous smile. "Want to get milkshakes first? I know we haven't had dinner yet, but it might make talking easier."

There's a nervous flutter in my chest that probably won't be going away any time soon. At least Arthur's giving me a heads-up, somewhat. I secretly cross my fingers that he doesn't ask me about my relationships with the guys or guess

that I have unnatural feelings for multiple people. I can probably handle any other issue he brings up, but I think I might die of shame if he asks about that.

“Sure,” I say, desperately hoping my facial expression stays blank. “As long as we can get Mediterranean instead of Chinese for dinner?”

My uncle chuckles. “Deal.”

The line for ice cream isn't long. Arthur gets a plain vanilla milkshake, and I opt for mint chocolate chip. Instead of getting back in the car, Arthur suggests sitting at one of the picnic tables set up outside the shop. Since it's still warm enough out to feel like summer, and there's nobody else sitting outside that might distract or overhear us, I agree without any fuss.

It's awkward once we sit down, and mostly silent aside from the sounds of traffic and our milkshake-slurping. Arthur looks more and more uncomfortable as the seconds pass, practically turning green before my eyes.

“What is it?” I ask timidly.

He clears his throat and rubs his hand over his forehead—another of his nervous tics.

“Alright. I guess I really just need to spit it out.” He takes another deep breath, making the moment that much more dramatic. “Remy's grandmother called me, and she's concerned...”

“What?” I squeak, widening my eyes in shock. If I had to guess what Arthur was going to say, I'd have guessed a million other things before ever considering that. I only met Remy's grandma Wendy a few days ago. The day we had our sleepover. She was nice and sweet, and I honestly thought she

liked me. I don't understand why she would call Arthur about me.

"I know you've gotten close to Remy and the rest of the boys, and I'm not going to jump to conclusions or forbid you from dating. I'm also not going to pretend to be completely ignorant." Arthur grimaces, rubbing his hand over his face again. "Wendy's concerned that you and Remy might be more than friends, and she called to give me a lecture about making sure you're on birth control. Just in case."

"Oh, god." I choke on my words, wishing I could disappear. I was wrong before when I told myself I could handle any topic Arthur wanted to discuss as long as he didn't ask about my feelings for the guys. This is a million times worse. "I swear, we *are* just friends. I'm not—I'm not dating anyone."

Even if I kind of wish I was. Even if I definitely think of all five of the guys as more than friends.

Arthur sighs in relief, giving me an apologetic smile. "Listen, kid, I know I'm probably the last person on the planet you want to talk about this stuff to. I get it. I hope you know you can always talk to Grayson's moms about, uh, any issues with guys or dating. But you can come to me too, and I swear I'll never judge you. Wendy made a good point, that it's probably better to be safe than sorry. I promise I won't bring it up again or pry about your relationships, but maybe we can set up an appointment? If that's alright with you? I never want you to end up in a difficult situation that could have been easily prevented."

This is mortifying. For the first time since we left the house, I'm thankful he insisted Sebastian stay home. I don't care how much he begs to know what Arthur wanted to talk to

me about. I'm never telling anyone about this conversation, ever.

As embarrassed as I am, I know I'm lucky. My mom never talked to me about safe sex or anything remotely related to the subject. God, she didn't even talk to me about my period. I was completely caught off guard and traumatized when I started my period for the first time in sixth grade. The school nurse had to help me figure everything out. It's easy to think highly of my dad, but I was only nine when he died. Would he have talked to me about this stuff? I have no idea.

Arthur clearly feels uncomfortable, but he still pushed himself to talk about this with me. Honestly, that just proves how much he cares for me. My heart swells with emotion, and tears prick the corners of my eyes before I manage to blink them away.

"Okay." I nod quickly, my voice barely above a whisper. Agreeing to a doctor's appointment to talk about birth control is the least I can do. Arthur and Wendy might be right about being safe rather than sorry.

Another sigh of relief comes from Arthur. He takes a long sip of his milkshake, but I've totally lost my appetite. Even for ice cream.

"While we're on the subject of the guys..."

Oh, no. I thought we were done talking! My entire body tenses as I brace myself and stare at Arthur in alarm.

His expression darkens, and he lowers his voice. "I know they care about you, and I know you care about them. But they're still teenage boys. I want you to promise me that if any of them make you feel uncomfortable, or if you feel like

they're pressuring you into something, you'll let me know. Even if it's Sebastian, please tell me."

It takes even more effort to stop myself from crying this time. I know as idiotic as the guys can be—especially now with their ridiculous competition and all the over-the-top flirting—they would never, *ever* do anything to hurt me or cross any lines like that. But the fact that Arthur would take my side, that he feels so protective of me even though he's known the guys for years and his relationship with Sebastian is probably stronger than ours will ever be, makes me feel strangely warm and fuzzy.

"I promise."

My uncle visibly relaxes. I watch him carefully, not trusting he's not going to bring up any more terribly awkward subjects. I take a sip of my milkshake, but it's starting to melt so the texture is closer to cold soup than ice cream. Sighing quietly, I push it a few inches away and make a face at Arthur.

"Is there anything else you wanted to talk about? Or am I scarred enough for the evening?"

I'm mostly teasing, and I make sure to smile so he knows that. Arthur chuckles and shrugs apologetically. "There is one more thing, actually. But if you don't want to talk about it, I promise to shut up and leave you alone for the rest of the night."

"Alright." I nod resolutely. It can't be worse than Remy's grandma demanding I start on birth control. Right?

Arthur's quiet, like he's thinking carefully of what he wants to say. Eventually, he sighs and reaches out to gently place his hand over mine on the table. "We haven't really talked about your mom and everything else you told me and

the boys the other morning. I've been trying to give you some space, but..."

My first reaction is to feel confused. By the soft tone of Arthur's voice and the worried expression on his face, it's obvious he thought I'd be upset by him bringing it up.

"I didn't realize there was anything else to talk about," I say honestly. And then I realize how insensitive that probably sounds. All the stuff with my mom, Deanna, and the night I was arrested and first taken to juvie—that all happened so long ago. Yeah, I still have nightmares sometimes, and I'm still figuring out how to deal with the trauma in a lot of ways. But it's not fresh and painful for me to talk or think about most of the time. Telling Arthur and the guys everything was a huge relief. Like a weight was lifted from my chest. I never once stopped to think they might all still be upset after hearing my story. "It all happened so long ago now. I promise I'm okay. I've been trying to open up more in therapy."

Moving here was the best thing that could have happened to me. The connections I've formed with Arthur, the guys, Adrian from the gym, and even Grayson's moms—all these people who have become important in my life—it's helped me much more than I can ever express or explain. Today at school was proof of that. Just a few months ago, I would have struggled to speak a single coherent sentence to a stranger. Let alone several! I can't remember the last time I spoke up in a class either, if I ever did. I wish Arthur didn't feel like he needs to worry about me as much. I've come so far since the day he picked me up from juvie when I could barely say a word or make eye contact with him for more than a few seconds. Even with my romantic drama with the guys, I've never been happier in my life than I am now.

Arthur's jaw ticks like he's gritting his teeth, and he squeezes my hand gently. "That man—what you did was self-defense. You never should have been charged for anything. He should be in prison, and he should be labeled as a goddamn sex offender, Charlotte. The same goes for your mother and that woman she's friends with. It's not too late to press charges —"

He keeps talking, but there's suddenly this ringing in my ears that makes it hard to focus. It's like my brain is trying to reject what he's saying, and I feel so...stupid. So small and naïve. It's never once occurred to me that my mom or that guy I stabbed did anything illegal, or that I could press charges. I've never felt like I didn't deserve to be punished. I've spent so long despising myself, feeling sorry for myself, that even though I hated every second I spent in juvie and the group home in between my arrests, I just accepted that I deserved to be there. It's not like I didn't do anything wrong.

I almost killed that man. And it wasn't in self-defense, even if it started off that way. I stabbed him violently because I was angry at my mom and what my life had become, and because I was sick of feeling weak and helpless.

"I—" it's the only word I can manage before I lose my voice. I don't know what to say or how I'm supposed to feel.

"I'm sorry," Arthur murmurs, squeezing my hand again. "I know I'm overwhelming you. We don't have to talk about it all now if you're not ready. But I'm here whenever you are. *If* you ever are. Okay?"

All I can do is nod. That seems to be enough for Arthur, luckily, and he pats my hand before pulling away.

"In the meantime, would it be alright with you if I spoke to Ava about what you told us? I want to know what your options

are, legally, if you ever decide to pursue something.”

Grayson’s mom Ava is a lawyer, so that makes sense. She and Arthur are really close, and she’s been helping him with my case since I first moved here. She’s been helping him speed up the adoption process so he can become my permanent legal guardian.

After clearing my throat, I give Arthur a weak smile. “I’m pretty sure Grayson already told his moms everything I told you guys.”

He raises his eyebrows in surprise. “What makes you think that?”

“They were acting kind of weird when they took me to get my nails done yesterday.” I shrug. They were way more affectionate and upbeat than usual—and for Evelyn, that’s saying something. Plus, they kept giving me these sad, heartbroken looks every time they thought I wasn’t looking or paying attention. I don’t blame Grayson for talking to them. I love that he has such a great relationship with his moms, and I know he was upset when I told him what happened to me. “I really don’t mind. You can talk to Ava about it if you want to. I just...”

When I trail off, still having no idea how to explain the whirlwind of thoughts and feelings I’m experiencing, Arthur gives me an understanding nod.

“Alright. No more serious or uncomfortable discussions for the rest of the night. Deal?”

Thank goodness. I feel emotionally exhausted from the whole day, and I’m ready to go home and relax. I have a little bit of homework, and I still have the boys’ lunches to deal

with. But it will be nice to throw myself into that project to give my brain a nice distraction.

We throw our milkshakes away and head back to the car. Arthur hums along to the radio during the drive to our favorite Mediterranean restaurant. I ignore the worried side glances he keeps throwing my way and text Sebastian to see if there's anything special he wants to eat.

It doesn't take us long to order and get our food once we reach the restaurant. The lamb souvlaki, chicken shawarma, dolmades, and spanakopita smell so amazing. My stomach rumbles loudly, making Arthur laugh.

"Good call on the Mediterranean," Arthur says on our way home. "I don't need to consider today a cheat day now, right?"

"Well, you still had that milkshake," I tease. He pretends to glare at me, but my uncle's such an open book with his emotions, it's impossible not to see the amusement in his eyes. "But I'll keep that between us."

CHARLOTTE



“NO TORNADO TODAY?” SEBASTIAN TEASES FROM MY DOOR frame.

I giggle and stick my tongue out at his reflection in my mirror, quickly securing a white bow to the end of my fishtail braid. I’m as excited for school this morning as I was yesterday, and I’m luckily nowhere near as nervous. Now that I know better what to expect, I’m looking forward to my classes and seeing my friends.

I didn’t spend forever agonizing over my outfit choice either. While I’m still wearing heels—a super cute pair of tan wedge sandals—I decided to wear skinny jeans and a sleeveless white eyelet top instead of a skirt or dress.

“You look really pretty,” Sebastian says softly.

He has the most tender smile on his face, his gaze like a soft caress against my skin. I slowly turn around to face him, smiling back at him shyly as I try desperately to ignore the butterflies whirling around in my stomach. He always makes me feel beautiful and confident, and god, he’s so cute.

“Thanks.” I grin casually. Like I’m not internally swooning and punching myself for it.

After double checking my outfit, hair, and makeup one final time, I grab my backpack and follow Sebastian downstairs. Arthur's there, filling up his coffee thermos in the kitchen. He and Sebastian talk quietly while I take the six neatly packed lunches I made from the fridge and set them carefully in a tote bag.

Grayson's waiting by the car for us outside, and we're able to leave much more quickly this morning since his moms aren't waiting around to take pictures.

"So, what did you make us for lunch?" Grayson asks as soon as we're in the car. He gives me an adorable, teasing smile as he tugs lightly on the end of my braid.

"Nothing fancy." I giggle, swatting his hand away.

"Yeah, right." He laughs. Ignoring my weak protests, he opens the tote bag and pulls out the lunch box on top. The lunch boxes are fairly small, rectangular, and simple. I picked them because they're insulated to keep things cool and because they have different sections to keep food separated. Grayson smirks teasingly before opening the container in his hand, his grin widening when he looks inside. "God, you are such a mom."

I tried not to go too overboard, but, well...I still wanted everything to look cute. Chicken salad sandwiches cut into quarters, cheese cut-outs, pretzels, and raspberry macaroons are arranged carefully in their own respective sections.

Sebastian punches Grayson, shooting him a dirty look when we stop at a red light. "He means to say we appreciate it."

Before Grayson can open his mouth to argue with Sebastian or reassure me, I smile at them and say, "I know you

do. But seriously, is it too much? I don't want to embarrass you guys."

"No. We love it." Grayson leans forward from the backseat and kisses my bare shoulder. His lips are soft and warm, making the feel of his lip ring that much more noticeable. The delicious contrast makes me shiver, and I have to bite my tongue hard to hold in a gasp. Grayson chuckles almost inaudibly before leaning back in his seat. "The rest of the guys will love it too. You're so fucking sweet, Princess."

Sebastian looks grumpy as hell, but he doesn't lash out at Grayson for flirting. For once. Staring straight ahead at the road, he asks, "Do we know how we're gonna get passes for all of us? I can't think of a teacher who's cool enough to write six separate passes for more than just one day."

"Actually, I have an idea." The boys look at me in surprise, and I smile confidently. "I'm gonna talk to Ms. Kinsley first thing this morning. The new counselor? She was really nice when I met her over the summer to sign up for classes. If I explain how anxious I get around so many people like I did in the cafeteria yesterday, I think she'd write us passes, or at least help us come up with another solution."

They grin and tell me it's a good idea, which makes me feel better about the whole thing. I'm nervous to go to the guidance counselor's office, but it's worth trying to have a nice, peaceful lunch every day with the guys.

The others are waiting outside my locker when we arrive at school, and Liam very sweetly offers to let me keep my books in his locker so I can fit our lunches more easily in mine. All of them offer to walk me to the office before class, but Sebastian somehow ends up winning the honor. I keep my face blank and pretend to be oblivious to the way they fight

over me like a bunch of cavemen. Honestly, if I knew my way around the school better, I'd insist I go by myself.

"You really don't need to wait with me," I tell Sebastian when we reach the office. The warning bell for first period rings, and he stands beside me with a determined look on his face. I laugh at him and place my hand on his arm. "Seriously, I'll be okay. I'll get a late pass after I talk to her so I don't get in trouble. I don't know if you'll be able to get a pass for waiting for me."

He stares down at my hand on his arm with this tender expression that makes my heart flutter. When he looks up to meet my eyes, he gives me a shy, crooked smile. "You're probably right, but I still hate leaving you on your own."

"I'm not a baby." I roll my eyes, trying to play off the way he's affecting me. "I'll see you in class in a little while. Really, I doubt it will take long."

"I know you're not a baby," he says. He hesitantly pulls me into a hug, and I selfishly let myself relax in his arms until he holds me closer. Resting his head on top of mine, he whispers against my hair, "I just worry about you. After all the shit you've been through, I want you to be happy and safe."

Is that not the sweetest thing ever? I sigh and squeeze him tightly, rubbing my cheek against his chest. God, not only is he sweet and protective, but he's freaking hot and muscular.

Sebastian pulls away, but only enough to meet my eyes. His arms are still around me, and for a few moments, it's like we're in our own little world where nothing else matters. His mismatched blue and brown eyes are beautiful. I've never met anyone else with heterochromia, and I could probably stare into his eyes forever. When his gaze drops to my lips, a panicked giggle escapes my throat.

“I—” I jerk away from him, my gaze darting wildly around the hallway. People are walking past on their way to their first classes, and no one’s really paying attention to us. But if someone had noticed us, what would they say? There are already rumors going around about me dating Remy and Elliot. Sebastian and I are practically cousins, even if it makes me feel weird and sort of gross to think of him like that.

Arthur also made it totally clear on more than one occasion that anything romantic between me and Sebastian would be completely inappropriate and not okay in any way, shape, or form. Not to mention, I’m supposed to be acting oblivious to the guys’ flirting and their feelings for me. Why do I keep letting myself end up in these situations?

“I’m sorry,” Sebastian murmurs. I glance over at him, and my heart sinks when I see how devastated and embarrassed he looks. He breaks eye contact with me after barely a second and clears his throat. “Good luck with Ms. Kinsley. I’ll see you in class, alright?”

I nod quickly, and he turns and walks away without another glance. I can’t blame him. Not after we had such a sweet, intimate moment that I ruined by freaking out and rejecting him. With a remorseful sigh, I turn and open the door to the main office. It’s set up with a receptionist and waiting area in the center while the guidance counselor offices are to the left, and the principal and vice principal’s offices are to the right.

A woman who looks to be in her mid-twenties smiles at me from behind the reception desk, and I take a steadying breath before taking a step forward to ask for her help.

“Charlotte?” I turn when I hear my name, and I find Alex sitting alone in the waiting area. My heart skips a beat when he

smiles brightly at me, sitting forward like he's subconsciously trying to get closer. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, um..." My eyes dart between him and the receptionist. "I'm here to talk to Ms. Kinsley?"

"Me too," Alex says.

His lopsided smile makes my stomach flip, and my anxiety skyrockets when I struggle to form any words. I ended up texting him last night after I got home from shopping with Arthur, and we spent a couple hours messaging back and forth. He didn't really flirt much through our texts, which honestly made it easier to talk to him. He's interesting and friendly. Like Grayson, he's really into music and we like a lot of the same artists. He's been playing piano since he was six years old, and he's been playing guitar for about a year. I'm dying to hear him play, and sing too, but there's no way I'm brave enough to ask.

Aside from his interest in music, Alex likes reading. He hasn't read many classics, and he's not into romance like I am. He reads mostly horror and science fiction, and he admitted there are quite a few comics and graphic novels he's obsessed with. It doesn't matter to me that we like different genres. I've never had a friend who enjoys reading as much as I do, so I can't help but feel excited to talk to him about it.

I'm so crushing on this guy. If it wasn't totally obvious before, my reaction to running into him where I didn't expect is only further proof of that.

"Ms. Kinsley's running a few minutes late this morning," the receptionist says apologetically. "But if it's very important, you're welcome to wait here for her."

I only hesitate for a second before deciding to wait. The receptionist has me sign in at her desk, and then I take a seat beside Alex. Technically, I could probably come back later to talk with her. My question isn't exactly urgent. But I already built myself up to come here first thing this morning, and I don't want to lose my nerve by waiting longer. The final bell rings, marking the start of class. Which makes me officially late.

"Is everything okay?" Alex whispers, leaning closer to me with a look of concern on his face.

"Huh?" I blink, staring at him stupidly. Sitting next to him makes my brain feel fuzzy. I can't think of a thing to say or focus on anything except for how ridiculous I am for crushing on *another* guy when I'm already dealing with having feelings for five other people. "Oh, because I'm in the office to talk to the guidance counselor?"

Alex's mouth turns up in a smile, his eyes never leaving mine. "Yeah."

God, I'm an idiot. At least he's not calling me out for it and making me feel worse. "I'm fine. Everything's fine. I just wanted to ask Ms. Kinsley a question." I could explain the issues the guys and I had in the cafeteria yesterday, but I feel weird talking about the guys with Alex. And vice versa. They still don't know I've been texting Alex. "What about you? Are *you* okay?"

"Oh, yeah. I need to change one of my classes," he says. I must accidentally give something away on my face—selfishly worrying he's going to switch out of one of the classes we share. He grins and quickly explains, "Just my first period. It was supposed to be an advanced music class, but it's musical theater. No clue how that happened."

I'm impressed our school has such a vast array of elective classes, especially since it's the smallest school I've ever attended.

"Are you saying you don't like musicals?" I tease, giving Alex a shy smile.

"They're not for me." He makes a face. When I giggle, he leans close again and gives me a smile that is without-a-doubt flirty. "I might watch one with you though if you really wanted me to."

At a complete loss of how to respond, I giggle like an idiot and avoid his eyes. I'm so awkward, it's painful. Even if I wasn't filled with guilt for liking him—because somehow, acknowledging my feelings makes me feel like I'm betraying my guys—I have no idea how to flirt. I've never had a boyfriend. I'm only just getting used to having normal friends, for crying out loud.

"So." Alex clears his throat. I turn to look at him, still feeling incredibly stupid and shy. He smiles softly, thankfully changing the subject. "You and Grayson are neighbors, right? That's how you met? It's obvious you guys are pretty close."

Shoving down my illogical guilt, I smile back at Alex. Talking about Grayson is totally normal, right? Especially since he and Alex are going to be in a band together. "Yeah. Grayson lives next door to me and Sebastian."

His eyebrows furrow like he's confused. "Wait, you live with Sebastian Reynolds?"

I don't know why I assume people know that or know anything about my relationships with the guys. "Yeah. My uncle is his step-dad. I moved in with them this summer after, um..." I trail off, feeling my face heat with shame. How do I

begin to explain my life before moving here to someone I don't know? It was much easier with the guys. They understood me right away, and they never pushed me about anything.

Alex nods, his expression turning sympathetic. "It's cool. I remember you mentioning something about foster care, but you don't need to explain. My cousin lives with me too."

My first reaction is to insist that Sebastian isn't my cousin. But that would just make me sound weird, right? I mean, legally we *are*, no matter how different our relationship is compared to Alex and Emily. I shake the thoughts off and smile at Alex. It's sweet for him to be understanding, and it honestly makes me like him even more. Maybe someday, if we become friends and get to know each other better, I'll tell him about my past.

"I didn't realize you lived with Sebastian," Alex says, chuckling nervously. "I guess it explains how you're friends with all those guys."

Putting my guard up, I gaze coolly at Alex. He hasn't said anything outwardly rude about my friends. Honestly, he's been really nice. So have Emily and Benji. But Alex and Benji mentioned feeling intimidated by the guys, and I don't want things to be weird or awkward. I also want to make it clear right away that my loyalty lies with Grayson, Sebastian, Elliot, Remy, and Liam. I'll always be on my guys' side.

"I know people around here don't like them, and that they say terrible things about them." I speak softly, barely above a whisper. "But Grayson, Sebastian, and the rest of the guys are some of the best people I've ever met. They're my best friends in the world. People are wrong about them."

Alex stares into my eyes, and I refuse to let myself get distracted by how cute he is. He needs to see how serious I am if we're going to be anything even remotely close to friendly. His mouth tilts up in a half smile, and he nods. "Noted. I try not to make a habit of listening to rumors, anyway."

"Good," I whisper. His warm, hazel eyes are still locked on mine. The butterflies in my stomach are going crazy, and I don't think I could look away from him if I wanted to.

The door to the main office crashes open, smacking loudly against the wall. I jump in my seat and turn toward the commotion. Ms. Kinsley is there, looking like a hot mess as if she ran in here from the parking lot. When she turns to shut the door, she accidentally drops her purse. It falls to the ground, and everything inside it spills out. Her wallet, a hairbrush, lipstick, tampons, several pens, a planner, and something like a million bobby pins end up covering the ground.

Alex snorts beside me and puts his fist over his mouth to hide his amusement. He's probably never met her before, as she only started working as a counselor here this summer. She told me I was one of the first students she met when I put my class schedule together this summer.

"Oh, crap." Ms. Kinsley practically shrieks, bending down to pick up the fallen items from her purse. She's really sweet, but she's clumsy and awkward. I don't think twice before getting up to help her recover her things from the ground.

"Here you go," I whisper once we've got everything off the ground and back in her purse.

"Thank you so much!" We stand up together, and she smiles brightly at me. I'm a little taller than her, but only because I'm wearing heels while she's wearing flats. Her

frizzy red hair sticks out all over the place, and she takes a second to brush a few of the wayward strands out of her face. “Hey, Charlotte! How are you, you little chatterbox? And how’s your hunky uncle?”

She laughs wildly at her own joke, and I chuckle awkwardly along with her as I glance over my shoulder at Alex. He’s grinning like a jackass, enjoying the scene way too much. I feel simultaneously embarrassed for Ms. Kinsley and also extremely protective of the woman.

“Are you here waiting for me?” Ms. Kinsley asks, looking at me over her shoulder while she unlocks the door to her office. When I nod, she smiles. “Well, come on in, sweetie. It’ll take me a couple minutes to get my computer up and running.”

“Oh, um.” I point at Alex behind me. “He was here first. I can wait.”

Ms. Kinsley peers over at him, seemingly noticing him for the first time. She waves at him and says, “Sure, alright! Come on in. I don’t bite, and I promise I’m not as nuts as I look!”

Alex chuckles and stands up, bumping his elbow gently against mine as he steps past me. Once the office door closes behind them, I take my seat to wait patiently for my turn. Now that I’m alone and not distracted, I can hear people talking behind all the closed office doors. The receptionist looks busy, now that I’m paying better attention to her. She’s got tons of paperwork spread out all over the long desk behind the front counter area where I signed in, and she hums softly while she works on whatever it is she’s doing.

It feels like I wait a long time for Alex to finish talking to Ms. Kinsley, but it probably isn’t longer than fifteen minutes. In that time, the phone rings twice for the receptionist, and

another student comes into the office and signs in to speak to the underclassmen counselor.

While I wait, I can't help letting my anxiety build. What if Ms. Kinsley doesn't believe me about how bad the cafeteria is? What if she only agrees to write me a pass, but not all of the guys? I try to tell myself that if it doesn't work out, the cafeteria will already be a million times better than yesterday since we won't need to wait in the lunch line. Once we sat down at our table yesterday, people pretty much left us alone.

When Alex opens the door again and walks out of Ms. Kinsley's office, he gives me a gorgeous smile. "Got my schedule fixed. No more musical theater for me."

I want to make a joke or say something clever. I really didn't have much trouble talking to him over text, but in person, I'm a mess. I end up giggling, and then grimacing when no words come out of my mouth. Rather than embarrass myself further, I quickly scoot past him and all but run into Ms. Kinsley's office. He laughs quietly, and I cringe at myself for being such a freak when it comes to talking to people.

Ms. Kinsley's typing something on her computer when I close the door behind me. She greets me again, making another cheesy joke about me being quiet. I'm too busy looking around the office in awe to really pay attention to her. The last time I was here, it was absolute chaos. There were tall stacks of paper covering nearly every surface of the desk and floor, the cabinets were bulky and beginning to rust, and the overhead lights were glaring.

Now, everything is clean and organized. There's new furniture that fits the space more efficiently while giving the room a cozy feeling, and the lighting is softer. There are a few paintings, degrees, and certifications framed on the walls, and

a few cute little knickknacks set up on the desk, cabinets, and windowsill behind the desk. Ms. Kinsley's done an amazing job giving her new office a makeover, and she looks at home here.

“So, how can I help you, my dear?” she asks when I take a seat in the cushy armchair in front of her desk. “Are you having issues with your classes already? It's better to switch things around sooner rather than later, if that's the case.”

“Oh, no.” I squeak, quickly clearing my throat. “I love my classes. So far, anyway.”

“That's great.” She smiles, sitting back in her chair and giving me her full attention.

She patiently waits for me to get my words together, not pushing me or hurrying me to spit it out. I let out an embarrassed laugh, rubbing my sweaty hands on my knees. “It's kind of stupid, but I wanted to ask you a question?”

“I doubt it's stupid, Charlotte,” she says kindly. “Ask me anything.”

“Well, my friends told me if we wanted to eat somewhere outside the cafeteria during lunch, we'd need hall passes. I was wondering if you could write passes for all of us? Like, permanent passes.”

She leans forward, her expression full of worry. “I might be able to do that. Is there a reason you don't want to eat in the cafeteria?”

I feel like a goody-two-shoes who's ratting people out, but I'm completely honest when I tell her about my anxiety and the bullying the guys experienced yesterday. How Remy and Grayson especially were singled out, called terrible names, and how Grayson was even physically shoved on purpose so

that he dropped his tray full of food on the ground. Ms. Kinsley writes down all the guys' names, and she seems frustrated when I tell her I don't know the names of the students who ran into Grayson. Not so much at me, but just at the situation in general.

"Your friends didn't want to come in and talk to me about this?" she asks.

"No." I shake my head. "I'm not sure it would have occurred to them. They say they're used to it, that these sorts of things happen all the time here at school. I just thought, you know, at least finding a way to have lunch together somewhere peaceful and quiet away from everyone else would help cut back on a lot of it."

She continues scribbling something down on her notepad, humming to herself with a frown. When she looks back up, she gives me a comforting smile. "Well, I'm very glad you came to me. I'm sorry you and your friends have had issues with other students, and I hope you'll come to me again if another incident like this occurs."

I nod sagely. Really, my intention wasn't to come here and snitch on people. It just sort of happened that way.

"Have you seen the school library yet?"

My eyebrows furrow at the sudden change in conversation. I was supposed to be given a tour by Madison Taylor when I originally signed up for classes, but she did a terrible job of showing me around. I still haven't seen most of the school at this point, and I barely know my way around at all.

"No, I haven't."

Ms. Kinsley grins. "Ah, well, I have a feeling you'll be impressed. You're one of my book lovers, aren't you?" She

doesn't wait for me to confirm before gesturing excitedly. "The library here is fantastic. There are two levels, over two dozen brand new computers, a huge catalogue of books, and a wonderful full-time librarian. There are also a couple of reading rooms that students are allowed to rent out for study sessions or extracurricular club meetings. I don't see why you shouldn't be allowed to use one of the rooms during your lunch period. As long as you and your friends obey the rules of the library, don't eat or drink near the computers, and make sure to clean up after yourselves, I don't think there should be any issues."

"Really?" I grin, practically wiggling in my seat from excitement. That sounds like a dream, and much better than any solution I thought we'd be able to come up with. "Oh, the guys will be so excited. Thank you!"

Plus, a whole new library to explore? Hell, yes. I've become a regular at the local library in town, but it'll be nice to use the one here if I can too since it's going to be way more accessible.

Ms. Kinsley writes hall passes for me and the guys to use during our lunch period that are good for the entire first semester, and she writes another note for me to give to the school librarian after emailing her to request access for us to use one of the reading rooms during lunch. It all feels easy, and I hope the librarian is as nice as Ms. Kinsley says she is.

"Melinda will write you a late pass up front for you to give to your first period teacher," Ms. Kinsley says once we finish everything.

"Thank you so much!" I exclaim as I stand up from my seat. God, part of me wishes I could hug her. I'm glad I

decided to come talk to her. She's hands down the best counselor I've ever had.

As I walk out the door, she waves at me and says, "Come talk to me anytime!"

There's a ridiculous grin on my face as I walk into the main office area. The receptionist, Melinda, is on the phone, and there are three new people sitting in the waiting area. I do a double take when I see Alex sitting there again, and he gives me a cheeky smile.

I don't want to call him out in front of everyone, so I pretend to ignore him while I get my late pass from Melinda. I'm not surprised when Alex follows me out into the hallway, and I spin around to smile at him with my eyebrows raised.

"What are you still doing here? Shouldn't you be back in class already?"

He shrugs, his mouth curled into this delicious half-smile that's a mix between mischievous and flirtatious. "I wanted to wait for you to make sure everything went okay, and I was hoping you'd let me walk you to class. Anything to spend a little extra time together."

The smile hasn't left my face since I walked out of Ms. Kinsley's office, and it only grows bigger at Alex's words. "Well, that's sweet of you."

Our fingers brush repeatedly as we walk side by side down the hallway. He doesn't try to hold my hand, but the entire way to my history class, I feel sparks shooting across my skin at the innocent touch. Every time I glance sideways at him, silently wondering if he feels any sparks too, I find him smiling back at me.

CHARLOTTE



“ARE YOU STILL UP FOR GOING GROCERY SHOPPING together?”

I smile at Liam over my shoulder before grabbing the last of the books I need from his locker. Our locker now, I guess, since we’ve decided to share. “Of course! Why? Have you changed your mind?”

His eyes widen, and he shakes his head. “No, no. Definitely not. I wanna make sure you still want to go.” Remy and Elliot are goofing around together a few feet away while we wait for Grayson and Sebastian to meet up with us. Liam glances over at them before leaning closer to me, lowering his voice to a whisper. “I don’t want you to feel obligated.”

I definitely don’t feel obligated at all! I love cooking, and thinking of making lunches for the guys every day makes me feel useful and needed. Lunch today was great, too. Everything worked out with the reading room in the library. The librarian, Mrs. Lyons, was kind and accommodating, and the library was just as fantastic as Ms. Kinsley described. Not quite as magical as the public library downtown, but still a million times better than the library at my last school.

It was nice to have forty minutes alone with my guys to relax and decompress, completely uninterrupted by any of the

jerks we go to school with. The guys loved the lunch I packed. There's no way I'm backing down on this idea or going back to the gross cafeteria food.

“Don't worry.” I close the locker and turn around, tilting my head back so I can meet his eyes. Even when wearing heels, Liam towers over me. He's the tallest of all the guys. I can't help feeling tiny and precious next to him, especially when he's practically trapping me against the bank of lockers. My face feels warm the longer I stare up at him, and my smile turns shy. “I'm excited to hang out, even if we're just going grocery shopping. And I promise I don't feel obligated.”

“Okay, good.” He smiles, rubbing the back of his neck. Is he nervous for us to hang out alone? I mean, I guess I am too. But only a little, and only because I'm constantly struggling to hide my feelings. Usually, we always hang out with the other guys, but we've still spent a lot of time together over the past few months. I still consider Liam one of my best friends, and I'm happy for the chance to finally hang out one-on-one.

Elliot walks over, leaning forward with his arm braced on the lockers above my head. It brings us super close together, which makes me blush. Especially when he gives me a flirty smile and winks. “You nerds ready to go yet?”

Looking behind him, I see Grayson and Sebastian standing with Remy. Pretending to be completely unaffected by his charms, I shrug at Elliot nonchalantly and slip away from him to walk side-by-side with Grayson. Our group makes it out to the parking lot without incident.

It's not until everyone crowds around Liam's SUV that an awkward silence envelopes us. Liam looks irritated, but he doesn't say anything. Nobody does.

“Um...” I clear my throat, glancing around at the guys anxiously. Should I just say goodbye and get in? Are they all waiting for something specific?

“Well, I guess I should get to practice.” Elliot gives me a grimacing smile. My heart breaks for him. It’s not fair that his dad forces him to work so hard at a sport he has no real interest in. Even though Elliot tries his best to act like his normal, goofy self, it’s obvious to me that all these football practices are taking a toll on him.

“Text me when you get home?” I ask him quietly, offering the only comforting words I can think of.

His smile lights up his whole face, and he steps forward to pull me into a tight hug. I don’t hesitate to hug him back, even though I’m a little embarrassed that the rest of the guys are watching. This feels sweeter and more intimate than a normal hug.

Elliot slowly pulls away from me, still wearing a bright smile. When he steps back, Grayson steps forward and takes his turn hugging me.

“See you later, Princess.”

Sebastian and Remy say their goodbyes quickly, and the guys split off until I’m left alone with Liam. He gives me a shy smile before opening the passenger door for me. Which is totally unnecessary, even if it is really sweet.

“Anything in particular you wanna listen to?” Liam fumbles with his radio, darting nervous glances at me.

His nervousness starts to make *me* nervous at this point. I try to give him a carefree smile and shrug to put him at ease. “No, anything’s fine. Or we can talk.”

Liam practically punches the radio in an effort to turn it off. I have to bite my lip to keep myself from giggling. I feel bad for him, but I'm worried if I say anything or address why he's anxious, the conversation will lead to talking about our feelings for each other. It's not a risk I'm willing to take.

"So, how were your classes after lunch?" I ask innocently.

"Oh, uh, they were good." He taps his fingers restlessly against the steering wheel, glancing over his shoulder and at all of his mirrors as he carefully backs out of the parking space. "What about yours?"

Chemistry and art history weren't any different than yesterday. Grayson, Alex, and Benji were funny and talkative in the former, and Remy was as intense as ever—choosing to draw me again rather than listen to the lesson—in the latter. Gym was way more fun than I expected. Emily doesn't talk much, but she helped me avoid Summer and Madison in the locker room. After dressing out, going through attendance, and doing some warm-up stretches with the whole class, we were told to choose between two sports to focus on for the next several weeks. Summer, Madison, and Mike opted to play football outside, so Elliot, Remy, Emily and I picked volleyball inside the gym.

"Really good." I smile warmly. "I don't think there's a single class I dislike so far."

"That's great," Liam says. He opens his mouth like he wants to say something else or ask me a question, but he hesitates. I decide not to push him.

We end up stuck in line behind a few other cars who are trying to leave the parking lot, and I glance out the window at all the students still walking to their cars or meeting up with

their friends outside. When I catch sight of Olivia, I sit up straighter with a smile on my face.

She's walking between Ethan and Zack, heading into the parking lot in our direction. As they approach to walk past, I roll my window down and call out to them. Zack looks over at me first, a grin breaking out on his face as he elbows Olivia.

"Hey, Charlotte!" she exclaims. And then she blinks, looking over the car before jolting forward so she can peer around me to get a better look at her twin. "Liam! Oh my god! You guys are hanging out!"

She sounds shocked, and I can't figure out why. I guess she hasn't really seen me and Liam hang out outside of class, but she knows I'm friends with him, Grayson, Elliot, Remy, and Sebastian. Even if I hadn't been out with Elliot the first time I met her, we've talked enough since yesterday that she knows all about me living with Arthur and Sebastian and how close I've gotten to the guys.

Before I can decide if I should ask why she's surprised or to let her know about our plans to go to the grocery store, she squeals and jumps around in a circle. Liam sighs beside me, and Zack and Ethan snicker at her antics.

"Don't tease them, babe." Ethan wraps his arm around her shoulders and pulls her close to his side, smiling down at her affectionately.

She shrugs him off and leans into the car window, shooting her brother a smirk before wiggling her eyebrows at me. In a sing-song tone, she says, "Have fun. Text me later, Char!"

Without another word or glance, she skips past the SUV. Her boyfriend and Zack laugh again before waving at us and trailing behind her.

“Jesus,” Liam mumbles. His cheeks are so red, they nearly match his hair. The traffic in the parking lot eases up finally, and he drives forward.

Rolling up my window, I give him an apologetic smile. “Sorry. I didn’t know she’d be weird like that. I know you guys aren’t the closest, either.” Which I still think is sad. If I had a brother or sister—especially a twin—I like to think I wouldn’t have spent so long feeling alone. That some things might have been easier to endure the past few years.

“Not your fault.” He clears his throat, making a pained face when he glances sideways at me. “Livvy always makes a big deal out of nothing.”

My cheeks warm as I realize Olivia probably thinks Liam and I are going on a date. That idea doesn’t bother me so much—the messed-up part of me that’s crushing on six guys would love to go on a date with Liam—but the fact that he’s embarrassed makes me feel bad.

“It’s really cool you guys are getting along though,” Liam says quickly. “The girls she used to hang out with aren’t the nicest.”

Olivia hasn’t mentioned anyone to me aside from Ethan, Zack, and her cheerleading captain, Brooke. So, I have no idea who else she’s friends with or hangs out with most of the time. My phone buzzes in the front pocket of my backpack. Expecting it to be one of the guys texting me even though we just left, I quickly pull it out.

Instead, it’s a text from Olivia. It reads, “*Get that D girl!!!!!!!*”

I nearly choke on my spit as my eyes widen. Her text is accompanied by several eggplant and winking emojis. My

fingers tap furiously as I text her back. *“Omg stop! He’s your BROTHER!”*

“What’s wrong?” Liam asks worriedly.

If he was embarrassed by Olivia’s weird little freak out next to the car, I can’t imagine his reaction to her message. I keep my expression blank and wave off his concern. “It’s nothing.”

To avoid any awkward silences or conversations, I launch into a tirade about the school library and how it compares to the local library downtown. This leads me to talking about the book I’m currently reading and the books I still have left from my last library haul. And bless Liam, he listens and pays attention, showing interest the entire time I’m ranting.

Before I know it, we pull up outside the grocery store. For the first time since I started planning this whole thing and agreed to let Liam contribute by paying for ingredients, I feel shy and embarrassed for him to see how neurotic I am. After initially making a Pinterest board last night to get some general ideas for lunches, I made an entire schedule for the next two weeks and wrote out detailed plans for each day’s lunch. Even my list of ingredients to buy looks over-the-top, and there’s no way I’ll be able to hide it all from Liam.

“Is that your grocery list?” he asks.

His shock quickly turns to amusement as he watches me flip through the first few pages of the notebook I started using specifically for this. A quiet snort escapes from him before he bites his lip to hold his laughter in.

“Stop.” I giggle, folding the notebook so only the shopping list I need for today is visible.

“I didn’t say anything.” His tone is teasing as he holds his hands up defensively. “I should have known you’d go all out. Especially after seeing your school planner.”

Shrugging, I give him a timid smile and brush my braid over my shoulder. “I like making lists and planning things ahead of time when I can. It makes me feel less anxious. Like, I’m a little bit in control, I guess.”

His eyes soften, and he reaches across the center console to brush his thumb over my cheek. “That makes sense. I didn’t mean to make you feel embarrassed. I think it’s really cute.”

Cue a million butterflies, making it impossible to form a coherent response. Instead, I stare at him like an idiot with my lips slightly parted while heat flushes across my cheeks.

Liam cringes at my reaction, quickly yanking his hand back. “Sorry, I—”

“It’s okay,” I cut him off. And because I’m a coward and don’t know how to deal with this situation other than to avoid flirting or talking about our feelings at all costs, I open the passenger door and hop out. I’m several feet away from the vehicle by the time Liam gets out and catches up with me. To my relief, he doesn’t mention the awkward moment we just shared.



“ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE OKAY PAYING FOR ALL THIS?”

Liam rolls his eyes playfully and reassures me for about the millionth time. “Yes, I promise. It’s not a big deal. It’s the least I can do for you and the guys.”

My eyes roam over the cart as I check over my list one final time. We got a few extra things, and I still think I managed to stay under the budget I had in mind.

“And you’re sure you’re up for doing this every week?” I ask, turning to look up and meet Liam’s pretty brown eyes.

This time, he grins widely. His freckles stand out against his blinding-white teeth, and butterflies stir in my belly at the reminder of how attractive he is when he smiles.

“Definitely,” he says. “Even though it should have been kinda lame, just buying groceries and shit, I had a lot of fun. It was cool to see you nerd out in a totally different way.”

I stick my tongue out at him playfully, and we laugh. I’m glad he feels the same way I do. It *was* fun. I like grocery shopping anyway—feeling useful and like I’m contributing in some small way at home always gives me a comforting feeling—and Liam made it way more enjoyable than usual. He pushed the cart and grabbed anything I needed from all the highest shelves without trouble. Best of all, we just talked. About anything and everything random that popped into our heads, and it was incredibly nice. It makes me wish Liam and I would have tried to hang out like this sooner.

Over the last hour, it’s become glaringly obvious that there’s still so much I don’t know about Liam. And I want to change that. If I thought I was crushing before, I’m in real trouble now.

“So, what exactly do your parents do?” I ask while we wait in the self-check-out line. “You, Olivia, and the guys have mentioned they have a lot of money, but you don’t talk about them much.”

He shrugs like the subject doesn't interest him. "My mom inherited her money from her grandparents, and she spends most of her time traveling with her friends and planning social events. My dad's the CEO of a tech company. He travels a lot too, but when he's home, he's always working."

"Geez," I mumble. It really does sound like Liam never sees them. That makes me even sadder that he and his twin aren't close. I'm glad he has the guys, though I can't help but wonder if he still feels lonely sometimes.

"They're not bad people," he says softly. "They might be gone a lot, and they're pretty oblivious a lot of the time. But I know they love me and Livvy in their own way. They're always bragging about us to their friends, and they try to keep up with what's going on in our lives—even if they don't find shit out from us personally."

That's still sad, but I don't know how to express my feelings without making it sound like I pity him. He's so accepting of his family situation and his parents' neglect. The last thing I want to do is compare our issues with our parents, so I decide not to say anything. It's our turn in line, anyway, so we move up. Liam gently waves me off and scans everything for us, expertly bagging everything up and putting it all back inside the cart in record time. I force myself to shove aside my feelings of guilt at letting him pay for everything, and let myself enjoy his company and see him do what he can to show his appreciation for me and the guys. After all, that's what I'm doing by making lunches for the guys in the first place, right? Liam paying for things really isn't that different.

"Thank you so much, Liam." I throw my arms around him and hug him close the second he's finished paying, gently rubbing my cheek against his chest as I do.

He hugs me back tightly, and I look up to find him grinning. “Any time.”

Realizing someone’s waiting for us to move away from the self-check-out station so they can have their turn, I quickly pull away from Liam and walk with him outside to the car.

“So, we’re coming back Sunday, right?” Liam asks once all the groceries are loaded up.

I nod. I didn’t want to buy too much in advance just in case my plan doesn’t work out long-term. Plus, I don’t want to overstock the pantry and fridge at home. If I start a routine of going to the grocery store every Sunday, I’ll be able to shop for regular groceries for home, along with stuff to make lunches. Liam seems thrilled at doing this on a regular basis, which is obviously a huge bonus.

He tells me to get in the car and wait for him while he returns the cart. I do, checking my phone once I’m seated. Remy, Sebastian, Grayson, and Alex have texted me. So has Olivia. She’s blown my phone up with eggplant emojis and inappropriate gifs.

I don’t think I’m making a face, but I must be blushing when Liam gets into the driver’s seat. He takes one look at me and sighs. “Livvy still bugging you?”

“Uh...” I hesitate while deciding what to say. He can probably guess she’s still insinuating he and I are hooking up, and there’s no way I’m getting into that. “She’s bugging me about the cheerleading thing. I don’t know how to tell her no without offending her.”

It’s not a total lie. Olivia hasn’t shut up about me joining the cheer team with her since yesterday. I’ve hinted as much as I can that it’s not my thing, and I’ve warned her that I’m way

too shy and anxious to do something like that. I thought she'd lay off when I talked about MMA and training with Adrian. She seemed interested, but she still never let up about the stupid cheerleading thing.

Liam chuckles. "Yeah, she's stubborn as hell. You're gonna have to join a different sport or club and ignore her until she gives up."

Twisting my hands in my lap, I hum in frustration. "Maybe. I have no idea what club to join, and Arthur's pressuring me to join something. Sebastian's doing yearbook, Elliot's busy with football, Grayson's probably joining a band, and all Remy cares about is his art. I feel needy and clingy, but it's terrifying to think of doing something on my own."

"Well, what about me?" Liam asks, and it sounds like his feelings might be hurt. "I'm not in any clubs yet."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "Don't you play soccer? I guess I assumed you'd be too busy with that before too long. When does the season start?"

He seems surprised that I know that. A shy smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. "Not until next semester. Even then, I might not bother this year. It's not a very popular sport around here, which is why it gets shoved into the spring instead of fall. Some of the guys who are serious about football use soccer as a way to keep in shape between seasons."

"Oh." I'm not sure what else to say. I don't really know much about sports, and Liam doesn't sound all that disappointed at the prospect of not playing.

"Anyway," he clears his throat. "I'd be happy to join a club with you. The full list of school clubs and activities should be up on their website. Maybe we can look at it tonight and pick a

few you think sound interesting? Most of the clubs don't start getting together until next week, so we have time."

Another excuse to hang out with Liam outside of classes and away from the rest of our friends sounds perfect. Not to mention, it's a huge relief to know I won't have to do something alone that's outside of my comfort zone. I didn't realize I'd been freaking out about it, and about the idea that my guys all have their own things going on in their lives that have nothing to do with me. I worried starting school would inevitably create some distance between all of us, but everything seems to be falling into place perfectly so far.

"Deal!" I say enthusiastically, smiling brightly at Liam. "That sounds wonderful."

ALEX



“OH, SHIT.”

Emily and Benji stop talking and turn to look at me. Benji furrows his eyebrows and asks, “What’s wrong?”

I glance down at my phone and read the text over again. I swear my hands feel sweatier than they did a few seconds ago. “Grayson’s on his way over, and he’s bringing Charlotte. *Charlotte*. Fuck. Do I need to change? Shit, I need to clean my room.”

My cousin snorts and rolls her eyes, reaching over Benji to punch my shoulder. “First of all, you’re a dumbass. She’s not gonna go in your room, and she already saw what you’re wearing at school earlier. Second of all, why the hell are you acting surprised? We specifically invited Grayson to come over today.”

“Yeah, well,” I sputter. “I didn’t realize he was bringing Charlotte.”

I definitely would have remembered that. I’ve obsessed about her enough this week. I can’t help but perk up every time I hear her name mentioned. I’ve been bugging Grayson to come over every day since Monday, and he never once mentioned anything about bringing Charlotte along with him.

“She asked me yesterday.” Emily shrugs casually, like she’s not a fucking traitor. Why didn’t she mention this before? “She said Grayson was too nervous to come by himself, and she felt bad she couldn’t make it yesterday because she had therapy or some shit.”

Benji echoes the same question I have swirling around in my brain. “When the hell did she tell you that? I didn’t realize you guys talked.”

“We’re in gym class together.” Emily flops backwards, like that’s enough of an explanation. I have to peer around Benji to stare at her.

We’re hanging out in the basement, just like the three of us always do. The couch is super old, and it’s this funky olive-green color. But it’s comfortable as hell. Benji and I have been coming down here to play video games for years, long before Em moved in with my family. And now, it’s our safe haven and where we do pretty much everything together. Play video games, watch TV, listen to and play music, do our homework, talk about anything and everything. Whatever. If everything works out with Grayson, we’re hoping we can have our band practices down here too.

“And?” I ask impatiently. “That doesn’t explain how—”

“Oh my god.” Emily groans, cutting me off. “I get that you wanna get in this girl’s pants, but you need to chill. Seriously. She seems cool, but all you’re gonna do is freak her out or get your ass kicked by one of her friends. They’re crazy protective of her.”

I glare at her indignantly. “I don’t just want to get in her pants!” Not that I’d be opposed to that. Charlotte’s probably the hottest girl I’ve ever met, so obviously it would be a huge bonus. But really, I want to get to know her better.

I've tried asking her out. Twice now, though neither time worked out in my favor. She didn't flat out reject me, but she always seems shy and standoff-ish whenever I do anything that even resembles flirting with her. I don't think it's because she's not into me. I've definitely caught her checking me out at school, and she seems to like talking to me as much as I like talking to her. I get the feeling she's been through some bad shit from a few hints she's dropped and because of the way Grayson and his friends act with her at school. So, if she needs to take things slow, I'm totally cool with that.

That doesn't mean I don't want to do everything I can to impress her and make her like me.

"Did you even hear what I said?" Emily looks at me like I'm an idiot, making Benji chuckle. "You know, about her five very athletic and muscular guy friends beating the absolute shit out of you?"

I roll my eyes and scoff, even if I'm truthfully more worried about that than I let on. I try not to listen to stupid rumors at school, and I really try not to judge people. Grayson's cool, and his friends Liam and Elliot seem fine—even if they don't seem like the kind of people I have much in common with. But it's hard not to feel intimidated around Sebastian Reynolds and Remy Oliver. I vividly remember watching Sebastian get arrested at school in eighth grade, and I remember how people were talking for days about Josh Pelzer ending up in the ICU at the hospital after their fight. I've never talked to Sebastian much, but it's a pretty well-known fact he has anger issues.

Remy's another story entirely. He always looks cold and calculating, like he's a second away from flipping a switch. It's terrifying. In all the years I've gone to school with him,

I've never seen him smile or talk to anyone outside his group of friends. After reading the police report and news articles about what he did to his dad—they were shoved into everyone's lockers in middle school not long after Remy moved to Somerset—it's hard not to take people's warnings seriously when they call him a psychopath.

Still, Charlotte seemed serious when she told me people are wrong about them. For her sake, I need to do my best not to judge them based on their pasts or any rumors I've heard.

“They're not gonna beat me up.” I check my phone again, quickly texting Grayson back to let me know when he gets here since I forgot to respond back right away. “It's understandable they're protective. Sebastian's, like, Charlotte's step-brother, and Grayson's her gay best friend. Me and Benji would be the same way if some dude tried to hit on you, Em.”

Rather than look appreciative of me theoretically defending her honor, Emily scrunches her face up and flips me off.

“Wait, Grayson's gay?” Benji asks, tilting his head.

“Um, yes?” I'm about to say that everyone knows that, just like everyone knows he has two gay moms. Except, now I'm realizing I only assumed that was true because of rumors at school. I'm also not ignorant enough to think having gay parents automatically makes someone gay, so I'm suddenly a lot less sure of my assumption. The day Benji and I ran into Grayson at the mall last weekend was the first time I've ever had a legitimate conversation with the guy.

Emily and Benji share a look, and then Benji shakes his head at me. “I don't know. Maybe, but I don't really get that vibe from him.”

Benji's not out at school—most of the people we go to school with are small-minded assholes—but he's out at home and with my family. I was the first person he ever told, back when we were eleven. It's never made a difference to me or our friendship, and I'd never judge Grayson or anyone else for being gay either.

“He calls Charlotte ‘princess.’ I've heard him say it to her loads of times,” I say defensively.

My asshole cousin snorts. “Uh, hate to break it to you, Alex. That sounds more like a kink thing than a gay-best-friend thing.”

That makes me frown. Is she right? Grayson specifically told me Charlotte's single, and he didn't act weird or jealous when I let him know I'm into her. If he told me they were a thing or that he's into her, I'd back off. I'm not the kind of guy to steal someone's girlfriend, and Grayson's someone I hope I'll be able to consider a close friend someday.

“Whatever,” I grumble. “I'm gonna go remind my mom they're coming over.”

Em and Benji stay in the basement while I head upstairs. Before bugging my mom, I go to my room to grab my acoustic guitar. My keyboard's already in the basement, along with Benji's drum kit and Emily's bass. I'm not great at guitar yet, but I wanna be as prepared as possible for Grayson. I spend a few moments fucking with my hair, and I seriously consider changing my clothes. In the end, I decide Em's probably right, and I don't want to look desperate in front of Charlotte. Plus, I have no clue how far away Grayson lives. He could be here any second for all I know.

After finishing up in my room, I head to my mom's office on the first floor. She's a real estate agent, so she ends up

doing a lot of work from home. Just like I expected, she's at her computer when I find her. I tap on the open office door to get her attention. She glances over her shoulder for half a second before turning back to her computer with a sigh.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing." I roll my eyes. And then I quickly stand up straight and fix a smile to my face in case she catches me showing her an attitude. I swear the woman has eyes on the back of her head. "I just wanted to remind you about my friends Grayson and Charlotte coming over. We're gonna hang out in the basement to play some music."

That gets her attention enough to turn fully around to face me. "Today?"

I nod, keeping silent. I asked her if it was alright on Tuesday as soon as Grayson and I solidified our plans. But there's no way I'm going to mention that. My mom's always insanely busy with work shit, so I'm not surprised she forgot.

"Alright, that's fine." She looks down at her watch. "But Angela's bringing the twins over at six, so you guys will have to keep it down once they're here."

"Seriously?" I groan.

My mom glares at me, but it's too late to take it back. "Alex, you know family comes first. And your sister needs our help."

I bite my tongue and nod, even if I want to argue. It's already almost four, which only gives us two hours to hang out before my older sister brings my niece and nephew over. The twins—Rosa and Miguel—are two years old, and they're miniature nightmares. Em and I always get roped into babysitting. Angela's a bartender who often works late, and

the twins' dad isn't in the picture. I love my family, and I seriously wouldn't mind helping take care of my niece and nephew if it wasn't automatically expected of me.

When my phone buzzes in my pocket, I jump and pull it out. A text from Grayson tells me he's outside, so I force a smile for my mom. "Tienes razón, mamá. I'm sorry. I'll make sure everyone's quiet when the twins get here."

The second she nods, I turn and all but rush to the front door. My stomach flips at the thought of seeing Charlotte. Here, in my house of all places. Honestly, I'm equally excited to see Grayson play. From what little I saw at the mall last weekend, he's amazing. And I know he was just fucking around playing some covers.

They're standing right outside the door when I answer it. Grayson has his arm around Charlotte's shoulders. There's an uncomfortable pang in my chest when I think about what Emily said and the fact that I might have pegged their friendship all wrong. But honestly, it's none of my business. We're still getting to know each other. Yeah, I'm into Charlotte, and I'm not gonna hide that. Not when she seems like she might like me too, and when Grayson assured me that she's single. I'll take his word for it, for now.

"Hey!" I grin, opening the door wider.

Charlotte and Grayson smile back, and Grayson raises a guitar case with his free hand. "Hey, dude. Thanks for inviting me over. I'm seriously psyched."

"Same, bro." Guys say that to each other, right? I never really hang out with people aside from Benji and Em, and I can't help but feel like a fucking moron for panicking over a simple greeting. I clear my throat and step back so they have

room to walk in. “Em and Benji are downstairs in the basement.”

It’s not until Charlotte takes a step inside my house that I realize there’s something different about her. She’s several inches shorter, and the top of her head barely reaches my chest. My brain short-circuits while I process this.

“Wow. I guess I’ve never seen you without heels on.” I chuckle. I smile like an idiot and look her up and down, feeling a funny fluttering in my stomach. She’s wearing the same dress she wore to school, but she’s switched her heels out for a pair of white sneakers. I don’t know what it is about this girl, but I can’t get her out of my mind. Everything I learn about her just makes me want to know more. “You’re so fucking adorable.”

I don’t realize the sentiment has left my mouth until she giggles. Her cheeks turn pink as she smiles up at me. I really want to hug her, but I grip my acoustic guitar tighter to keep myself in check. A hug could maybe be considered friendly and casual, but not when I’ve asked her out and made it clear I like her. I’ve gotta remember to take this slow.

“Yeah, she is.” Grayson snickers. He doesn’t seem jealous or pissed. Nothing to give me any sort of hint he thinks of Charlotte as more than a friend, and some of my worry fades.

“You have anything else in the car you need to get?” I ask him.

He shakes his head, following me inside with Charlotte. “Nah, not if I can use your amp.”

“Cool, cool.” Nerves mix with excitement as I lead them through the house and down to the basement. Charlotte grabs my hand when we’re halfway down the stairs, and I stop to

turn and stare at her. She's a couple steps above me, bringing us eye level.

Grayson glances between us, kisses the top of her head, and scoots past us on the stairs. Charlotte's expression isn't giving anything away—she rarely shows emotion unless she's smiling, I've learned—and my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. Did I do something wrong? Is she finally gonna tell me she's not interested? Or does she want me to kiss her before we go downstairs with everyone else?

That last guess is definitely wishful thinking, but I can dream, right?

She waits until we hear Grayson talking to Benji and Emily, clears her throat, and gives me a tiny, embarrassed smile.

“Sorry, I totally made things awkward,” she whispers.

I brush my thumb over the back of her hand, since she still hasn't let go of me. Her skin is so damn soft. “You're fine. What's up, pretty girl?”

So much for taking it slow and trying not to make her uncomfortable by flirting so much. If I could punch myself in the face without making her think I'm insane, I would.

“Is it okay that I'm here?” she asks hesitantly. “I mean, I asked Emily, but I should have asked you too. I wasn't even thinking.”

A relieved laugh escapes me, and I squeeze her hand gently. “Of course it's fine. I was fucking thrilled when I found out you were coming. I would have invited you over myself if I knew you wanted to come. I just hope you don't get too bored listening to us play and nerd out about music.”

Her eyes light up, and a stunning smile spreads across her face. “I won’t get bored. I’ve been dying to hear you play, and especially to hear you sing.”

If that isn’t motivation to keep pursuing her—not to mention, a huge boost to my ego—I don’t know what is.

CHARLOTTE



“IT’S AFTER SIX O’CLOCK, GUYS! THE TWINS ARE HERE,” A woman’s voice calls down the basement stairs.

Alex groans, throwing his head back dramatically. He and Grayson stopped playing a few seconds ago so they could give each other feedback on the song they made up on the spot. It’s been incredible and fascinating to watch them the past couple of hours. It seems like they clicked instantly, musically. Everything has just flowed naturally between the two of them since we got here.

I already knew Grayson was good at guitar, but I’ve only heard him play cover songs before. I’ve never heard him play originals. Alex is as amazing on his keyboard as Grayson is on guitar, and the two of them almost immediately started writing a song together completely by ear.

And Alex’s singing voice is just—God, there are no words. His voice is the perfect combination of deep, raspy, and smooth. I got goosebumps and literally shuddered from pleasure when he first started singing. It was embarrassing. I’m really glad nobody noticed.

Benji and Emily are good too. Benji seems chill, so it’s really cool to see him show so much passion and energy while playing drums. Emily looks intense and focused whenever

she's playing her bass guitar, and she never stumbled or missed a note. She's quieter than the guys, but she seems like she's able to keep up with Grayson and Alex easily. She's probably the coolest girl I've ever met.

"Is that your mom?" Grayson asks.

"Yeah." Alex sighs, stretching his arms out and cracking his knuckles. "I'm sorry. I was stoked when you showed up earlier, I forgot to mention it. My older sister just dropped her kids off so she can get to work, and we have to be quiet now that they're here."

Emily sets her bass down and falls back onto the couch beside me with a quiet grunt. "Figures we'd get stuck with babysitting duty when things are going so smoothly."

Alex looks like he's pouting. It might be adorable if I didn't feel bad for him. Grayson slaps him on the back as he walks over to sit on my other side on the couch. He casually throws his arm around me and says to the others, "It's not a big deal. My moms let me borrow the car pretty much whenever I ask, so it's not like I won't be able to come over another day."

"Really? Whenever you want?" Benji asks. He's still sitting behind his drum kit even though he's mostly been watching Grayson and Alex for the past half hour or so. "That must be nice."

With a wry grin, Grayson shrugs. "To be fair, I don't ask all that often. Sebastian always drives me to school, and a couple of my other friends have their own cars."

I smile and snuggle closer to Grayson without thinking about it. It's been fun and eye-opening to see him like this. Doing something he's passionate about while opening up to a

totally new group of people. It's different than seeing him with the guys. Not necessarily in a good or bad way—it's like seeing a new side of him I don't fully know yet. He admitted he was nervous about coming over here, which is why I asked to tag along in the first place. It seems like he's feeling more comfortable now, at least to me.

When Alex sighs again and stands up to walk over to the couch, Emily scoots over so he can sit between me and her. My heart jumps in my chest at the realization I'm all snuggled up with Grayson in front of people I don't know super well. And worse, I'm hardcore crushing on Alex when I'm already stupidly in love with Grayson. It was easier to deal with my feelings while I was watching them and listening to them play music. It was like I was allowed to equally ogle them both without being called out for it.

“You swear you'll come back?” Alex asks Grayson, not appearing fazed in the slightest at how close we're sitting.

“I swear.” Grayson grins. He and Alex reach across me to fist bump each other. It's so cute that I can't help looking down at their hands with a goofy smile on my face.

“You guys have plans this weekend?” Benji asks.

I'm slightly surprised to realize he's including me in his question. I was worried earlier that I was overstepping my boundaries by showing up with Grayson. It's not like I can play an instrument or contribute anything other than support. But my new school friends have been really nice to me since I've been here, never making me feel weird for sitting and watching quietly from the couch. Alex brought me a soda earlier, double checking every so often to make sure I didn't want or need anything else.

“Oh, well...” I trail off, glancing at Grayson. He gives me an encouraging look, so I clear my throat and force the words out of my mouth. I’ve been getting much better at talking to people at school, and it’s usually pretty easy around Alex, Emily, and Benji anyway. “We’re going to the football game tomorrow night, and I think we’re doing something together on Saturday since it’s the only day Elliot doesn’t have practice.”

“And you’re hanging out with Liam on Sunday, right?” Grayson asks me, tugging on a strand of my hair.

“Just in the morning,” I mumble. I want to assure him he can come back for another band practice without me any time, but I don’t want to make him feel bad in case he’s still secretly nervous. Feeling put on the spot, I turn to Alex and blurt out, “You guys can come to the football game with us if you want. It will be fun!”

He grimaces. “Oh, um...”

Emily laughs at her cousin and peers around him to grin at me. “Football isn’t really our thing. Besides, I don’t think Alex wants to risk flirting with you in front of all your guy friends. He’s worried they’ll beat him up.”

My eyes widen, and my lips part in shock as I stare back at her. I can feel a blush spread across my face. I can’t believe she really said that. I mean, I’m sure she’s just teasing Alex the way anyone would tease their sibling or friend in front of their crush. Alex *has* made it pretty obvious he likes me, even if I’ve been doing my best to avoid responding to his advances the same way I’ve been doing with the rest of the guys.

But seriously. Oh my god! What do I even say? Do I laugh? Make a joke? Act like I’m stupid and oblivious? Should I defend the guys and insist they would never beat

Alex up? Truth be told, I'm not sure they wouldn't with the way they've been acting around me lately. Sebastian is more jealous than ever the past few days. I'm pretty surprised he hasn't gotten into a fight with Elliot or Remy this week.

In the milliseconds it takes me to panic and get all worked up in my head, Grayson roars with laughter while Benji snickers along with him. Alex looks simultaneously pissed and humiliated, and he cringes when our eyes meet.

"You're such an asshole, Em." Alex glares at his cousin before turning back to face me. "Sorry, Charlotte. Please don't listen to her. I'm not afraid of your friends, but I'd hate to crash plans you guys have already made together."

That's surprisingly sweet of him to say. Especially when I know he's embarrassed. I'm so anxious though, I can't think of a thing to say. Thankfully, Grayson rescues me before I accidentally blurt out something ridiculous.

"Don't worry about it, man." Grayson smiles at Alex and squeezes my shoulder lightly. "We'll figure out another day to practice. I'm excited to finish the song we were working on."

Alex sighs in relief and opens his mouth, but he's cut off by his mom yelling something else down the stairs. I'm pretty sure she's speaking Spanish, but she talks too fast for me to pick out any of the few words I know. He groans again, so whatever she says must not be good.

"Apparently, we have to help babysit now," Emily translates.

Pouting even harder, Alex explains to me and Grayson that his mom's a real estate agent and has some work to do tonight. Whenever the twins are too crazy, she needs Alex and Emily

to help her take care of them. Unfortunately, his dad travels for work a lot, so he's not here to help out tonight.

"That's alright." Grayson squeezes my shoulder again before standing up from the couch. He moves over to where he placed his guitar so he can start putting it away, and he gives me a soft smile. "We should get going anyway. Don't you still have some homework to do, Princess?"

His nickname for me gives me a tingly feeling in my stomach, just like always. I can't help feeling a tiny bit embarrassed when he says it in front of everyone else, even if nobody reacts to it. They're probably used to hearing it by now since Grayson calls me Princess at school.

"A little," I admit. I don't have any homework left that's due tomorrow, but I'd like to get ahead so I have more time to hang out with my friends over the weekend. Plus, I have dinner prepped for me, Arthur, and Sebastian.

"I should probably call my mom to come get me," Benji says.

Without hesitation, Grayson shrugs. "We can give you a ride if you want."

Benji bites his lip and glances back and forth between me and Grayson. He seems hesitant, so I try to give him a sweet smile. I don't mind stopping by his place on our way home, if that's what he's worried about. After a few seconds of awkward silence, he stumbles over his words. "Oh, uh, sure. Thanks."

If Grayson's as confused or thrown off as I am, he doesn't show it. He quickly finishes packing up his guitar, and walks back over to the couch to grab my hand and help me up. Once

we're sure Benji has everything he needs, we head upstairs together. Grayson keeps his fingers twined with mine.

At the front door, Alex stands in front of Grayson with his hands shoved into his pockets as he rocks back and forth on his feet. He shoots me a few brief glances and smiles. "So, uh, thanks again for coming. I had a lot of fun. Text me later?"

It's not totally clear if the question is directed toward me or Grayson, or maybe both of us. But we both nod, either way. Emily hugs Benji and says goodbye to us before quickly darting into the living room where it sounds like two children are playing. The nightmare toddlers—as Alex calls them, I'm assuming.

"Bye, Alex." My voice is practically a whisper, but I know he hears me when a radiant smile spreads across his face. I smile back, and let Grayson pull me outside to his mom's car.

The drive to Benji's house goes by quickly. He and Grayson talk about how their band practice went the whole time, laughing and tossing around ideas for a band name. I stay quiet as usual, only half-listening to them while I check my phone. I ignored my texts while we were at Alex and Emily's house, since I didn't want to seem rude or uninterested, and I'm not surprised to find a ton of messages from Sebastian, Remy, and Liam. I don't have anything from Elliot, which means he's probably still at football practice. Lately, their practices last until well after dark, so Elliot barely has time to look at his homework or decompress before he goes to sleep once he gets home. There are supposed to be some sort of state guidelines so that high school varsity football team practices can't exceed six hours in one day, but their coach is really good at finding loopholes.

Plus, I'm sure it doesn't help that Elliot's probably the only guy on the team who doesn't want to be there.

"You can turn here."

Benji's voice is weirdly shrill. Nothing like the casual, easygoing tone he's been using while talking to Grayson during the drive. The change is weird enough that I set my phone down and turn around in my seat to look at him. Benji won't meet my eyes, which is equally concerning.

Grayson keeps his mouth shut. When he turns right onto the next street, I peer curiously out the window. The second I realize we're in some sort of trailer park, I understand Benji's hesitation to have us drive him home.

Not that he should be embarrassed of where he lives. Not at all. But I get it. The apartment I lived in with my mom was horrible. Something was always broken, mice and cockroaches were a constant problem, and no matter how hard I tried to keep our space nice, the apartment building was always dirty and smelly. I'd probably cry from embarrassment if Arthur or any of the guys were to see it now.

As far as trailer parks go, this one doesn't seem so bad. It looks like the person who owns the lot at least tries to keep up with the lawns, roads, and any public areas. Some mobile homes look better than others, so it's obvious at least some of the residents here try to make an effort to make their homes look decent.

"Yeah, so, I live in a trailer." Benji laughs nervously. "I was gonna say something when you offered me a ride, but then I just..."

"Dude, we don't care." Grayson shakes his head, frowning at Benji in the rearview mirror.

I know he's genuine, and of course he's right. But I also know Grayson won't ever get it. Just like Sebastian, Liam, and Elliot won't get it. They've always had money. Even when they've had to deal with other hardships, none of them have ever had to feel the shame of having so little, of going hungry some nights, or wishing you could afford new clothes when kids at school start teasing you for wearing the same ill-fitting outfits day after day.

Gathering my courage to speak about my past, I clear my throat and turn around almost fully in my seat to smile kindly at Benji. "This is a lot nicer than where I used to live with my mom, and definitely nicer than juvie or most group homes. So, please, don't worry about it. Not with us."

My heart is pounding as the words leave my mouth. I've already hinted at my life pre-Arthur with him, Alex, and especially Emily. But this is the first time I've ever said anything concrete and outright about where I came from. Benji's eyes soften, filled with understanding.

"Thanks," he whispers simply. He doesn't need to say anything else. Glancing sideways out the window, he points up ahead. "It's that one. Number twenty-four."

His place is nicer than many of the other mobile homes surrounding it. The siding needs to be cleaned, but the front door has a wreath with sunflowers on it, and someone's clearly made an effort to grow a small flower garden in the front yard.

Grayson rolls down his window when Benji gets out of the car. He leans out a bit, grinning widely at our new friend as he waves. "Today was fucking awesome. See you tomorrow, dude."

Benji waves back, a much more open smile on his face. We wait until he walks into his house before driving away.

The car is silent at first, but it's not uncomfortable. Once we're out of the trailer park and back on the main road headed toward our houses, Grayson reaches over and threads his fingers through mine. His fingers are rough and calloused from playing his guitar, and the feeling of his thumb rubbing back and forth across the top of my hand is intoxicating.

"So, what did you think?" he asks, finally breaking the silence.

Assuming he's asking about the band practice and the music they all played together now that we're alone, I turn and grin. It's all I can do not to squeal in excitement. "It was amazing! I mean, I already knew how incredible you are with guitar, but hearing you make your own music along with Alex? It was next level. For real! Benji and Emily are great too, and if this is how well just one band practice without much direction goes, I can't wait to see how much better you guys get over time."

He laughs happily and squeezes my hand. "I love you so fucking much, Princess."

Butterflies erupt in my chest, and an embarrassing giggle escapes my throat. I know Grayson likes me. I *know* he does. But I also know he doesn't really mean anything by his comment. Not like that.

"It was really, really good," I say. How else can I possibly explain how blown away I am by his talent? It dawns on me that he might not feel the same way. It's usually pretty easy to tell how Grayson's feeling, but who knows? "How do you think it went? Are you happy?"

"Hell yeah." He laughs. "I was really fucking nervous before we got there, but it's weirdly easy to talk to them. I didn't think I'd ever feel like that around anyone except for

you and the guys. As for the music, I'm honestly in awe of how smooth everything went. They're good. And we like a lot of the same artists, so I think we're all on the same page as far as how we want to sound."

"I'm so excited for you," I say.

Grayson brings my hand to his mouth, kissing the back of my knuckles. I ignore the butterflies in my stomach and smile at him. When he lowers my hand, he glances sideways at me with an unreadable expression. "You seem cool with them too. Like, it seems pretty easy for you to talk to them."

"Yeah, they've been really nice." I'm not sure what else to say because the way he's looking at me is throwing me off. He knows I sit with them in my Honors English class, and Benji and Alex sit with us in chemistry every day. He's seen me talk to them plenty of times.

"What do you think of Alex?"

My brain momentarily combusts. He means what do I think of Alex's musical talent, right? Because I can't deal if he's asking me anything else. "Um, well, he's a good singer. And he's really nice."

Really nice. Jesus, can I not think of any other words? I'm like a freaking broken record, repeating myself.

Grayson chuckles teasingly, glancing at me sideways with a mirthful smile. "Yeah, he's good. You know he likes you, right? He asked me if you were single the other day."

Oh, god. This can't be happening. What do I say? I'm filled with a mixture of panic, guilt, shame, and the niggling feeling of rejection. Is Grayson hinting that I should go out with Alex? Is this his way of telling me he *doesn't* like me as more than a friend? I've been worried about the guys

confessing their feelings to me. I never thought about what I'd do if one of them confronted me about having feelings for someone else.

“I—” My throat feels dry, and my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. I can't force another word from my mouth, even if I knew how to respond.

“What?” Grayson asks, his smile becoming a smirk. “You think he's cute, don't you?”

The fact that he's teasing me—and making it obvious he's not bothered by me being attracted to another guy—seriously hurts my feelings. He has to know how awkward I feel, and he's putting me on the spot for no reason. I pull my hand away from his, folding my hands together in my lap anxiously. I want to tell him to stop, to end the conversation or change the subject entirely. All I can manage is to whisper his name in a raspy voice. “Grayson...”

“It's alright.” His voice lowers, taking on a tenderness rather than the teasing tone he was using before. When I look at him, his smile is more shy than cocky. “You can like him, and you can think he's cute. You think I'm cute too, right? And Sebastian? Maybe even Elliot, Remy, and Liam too, huh?”

“What—why...” I just, I'm speechless. Completely speechless. I stare at Grayson, and he looks normal and casual. But how can he be when he's basically just admitted he knows my secret? Knows that I'm in love with five people and crushing on a sixth? How can he speak to me so softly, look at me this tenderly, when he's obviously fully aware of how messed up I am?

“Don't cry, Princess.” Grayson reaches across the seat to brush his thumb across my cheek when we stop at a red light. I

didn't realize I was crying until he said anything, and that only embarrasses me further. I'm so overwhelmed. He clears his throat and whispers, "I didn't mean to upset you. I just wanted to tell you that it's alright. However you feel, I mean."

I whip my head up and stare into his springtime eyes. He looks open and genuine. Does he really mean that? That he knows how I feel about all of them, and that he's fine with that? I can barely comprehend the idea that anyone would accept that. But Grayson is one of my kindred spirits, and he'd never lie to me. Right?

A car blares their horn behind us, and Grayson curses under his breath as he breaks eye contact with me. The light is green, so the driver behind us is probably upset we weren't paying attention. The car is filled with a tense, awkward silence. Thankfully, we're only a couple minutes from home. I feel bad for shying away from Grayson, especially when I can tell he feels badly. But I don't know how to begin to untangle my thoughts and feelings or anything he said.

The second he parks outside his place, I jump out of the car. It totally makes me a coward, but my plan is to rush next door to my house where I can lock myself in my room before talking to Grayson or anyone else for a while. Sebastian and Arthur can wait a little longer for dinner. Grayson's quick though. He jumps out of the car and runs up behind me, grabbing my hand and pulling me back against his chest before I make it out of his driveway.

"I'm sorry, Charlotte." His voice is deep and raspy, and I can feel his breath stir against my hair. "Please, please don't be upset with me. I just—fuck. I've been meaning to talk to you, and—"

“Don’t,” I whisper. I don’t want him to be upset. I don’t want this conversation to have happened at all. Really, I’d love nothing more than to go back to how things were earlier this summer when we all pretended to be oblivious to our attraction to each other. Turning around slowly, I look up into Grayson’s worried, springtime eyes and rest my hand gently against his chest. “I’m too scared to talk about it. You all mean too much to me, and I don’t want to lose any of my friends.”

He nods slowly, never breaking eye contact. “Alright. But you’re never losing me, okay? No matter what.”

I hug him tightly, and he hugs me back. My heart pounds, and my mind is racing. But I believe him when he says I’ll never lose him. Peering up at him shyly, I offer him a wobbly smile. “Thanks for inviting me to your first band practice. I can’t wait until you get super famous, so I can tell people I knew you back when you first started.”

“Sure, Princess. Whatever you say.” He laughs, tugging playfully on a strand of my hair. Just like that, we’re back to normal. As anxious as I feel, it’s a relief to know we can bounce back easily. Grayson leans down and quickly kisses my forehead before stepping away from me. “Text me later, if you want. I’ll see you in the morning.”

With that, I head inside my house and spend the rest of the night silently replaying Grayson’s words over and over in my head.

CHARLOTTE



“HEY, ARE YOU ALMOST READY?”

Sebastian’s voice surprises me and makes me jerk my hand. I exhale through my nose in frustration and glare at his reflection through the mirror. He mouths sorry at me, but he’s grinning too big for me to think he means it.

“Almost. I have to redo this.” I point to my cheek, clicking my tongue in irritation. Sebastian chuckles, crossing his arms as he leans against my door frame to watch me while he waits.

It’s the first Friday of the school year, and we have a pep rally this morning. It’s also Elliot’s first football game of the season tonight. Even though he doesn’t like playing on the team, I think the hype has gotten to him. He seemed nervous and excited when he texted me last night, asking for the millionth time if I was going to wear his jersey number. I’ve been pretty coy about it all week, never telling him yes or no.

I’ve learned it’s a pretty big deal for a girl to wear a guy’s letterman jacket and jersey number on game days. Of course, some girls do it to get a certain guy’s attention, but Olivia said those girls are usually ridiculed pretty heavily by actual football players’ girlfriends. It might sound silly and old-fashioned, but wearing the number sixty-two painted on my

cheek today in Elliot's honor might as well be the same thing as me declaring we're going steady.

After Olivia first explained how it all works and will probably be perceived by people from our school, I was super adamant I wasn't going to do it. Jude and Mike have been really cruel at school every time they talk to me, constantly suggesting I'm cheating on Elliot. I've heard that a lot of his teammates have been giving him a hard time at practices for it. If they were only talking about me being a slut or whatever, I wouldn't care. But when Elliot's getting shit for something that's not his fault or remotely accurate, I can't help feeling angry and guilty.

But when I woke up this morning, it's like something in my brain snapped. I decided I don't care what anyone at school thinks. The guys have been telling me since I moved here—long before school started—that they don't care what people think of them either. We bonded for a reason, so what does it matter if people have a problem with me dressing up to support Elliot? He's my best friend, and I know it will make him happy.

Part of my decision definitely has to do with Grayson too, and what he said about however I feel being okay. In retrospect, I totally overreacted in the car with him. My stomach still writhes with nerves every time I think about what he said. It's more obvious than ever that he knows exactly how I feel about him, Alex, and the rest of the guys. He's way more observant than I give him credit for. But...maybe I've been expecting the worst from everyone without realizing it.

Maybe the rest of the guys would be understanding too. Maybe if I was honest and told them all how I feel—

“You’re wearing Elliot’s jersey number on your face?” Sebastian asks, cutting my train of thought short. I glance up at his reflection in my vanity mirror to find him staring at me in shock. “Is that a good idea? People at school already think you’re his girlfriend.”

So, maybe not too understanding. At least, not yet. But Grayson gave me a tiny kernel of hope that maybe it’s not wrong to have feelings for all of them. Or at the very least, maybe the guys discovering how I feel doesn’t automatically mean I’m going to lose them as my friends. I’m still scared and confused about the whole situation—and admittedly still aggravated at the stupid bet I’m pretty sure they have going about me—but I need to trust them. Maybe it’ll all be okay. Maybe they’ll be fine and understanding if they find out. Even if they’re not, maybe we can still find a way to work through everything.

Before I turn around to respond to Sebastian, I check my reflection one last time. It was hard to draw the numbers backwards on my cheek, but I think I did a pretty good job of keeping them straight. I used glittery red face paint that should last all day, even if I get sweaty later in gym class. I made my makeup a little more dramatic than usual, with thick cat eyes and bright red lipstick to match the paint on my cheek.

My outfit reflects our school colors too. I’m wearing a white tee shirt tied with a front knot, a black corduroy mini skirt, and my white low-top converse. I painted my nails red last night to match my makeup, and I’ve got my hair tied half-up, half-down with a bright red ribbon tied in a bow. I feel cute and confident, decked out to show my Somerset High School spirit.

“Yeah. I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I say to Sebastian. “People are gonna spread rumors anyway, right?”

It’s the most diplomatic answer I can think of. Sebastian’s always shown the most jealousy of any of the guys. Ever since our sleepover when I told them about my past, he’s been more protective and jealous around me than ever. I love him to death, but when he acts like that, it makes me too damn anxious.

“I guess,” he grumbles. He’s clearly not happy with my show of support for Elliot. I figure if I act like it’s not a big deal, none of the guys will say much about it to me.

Grayson’s waiting outside for us after we say goodbye to Arthur. He usually greets me with a hug, but this morning, he only gives me a small smile as he opens the passenger door for me. I pause before getting in to take a closer look at him. He seemed fine last night when we parted ways, and we texted a little before bed. But he looks like he barely slept at all. He has bags under his eyes, his hair is messy, and he seems a bit out of it as he stares out into the yard while holding the door for me.

“Are you okay?” I whisper. He doesn’t really look okay, but maybe he’s just tired. Maybe he’s having one of his bad days and doesn’t want to make a big deal about it. I really hope he’s not upset or affected by our conversation yesterday. I was pretty harsh and obnoxious when all he wanted was to have an honest conversation.

“Yeah, fine.” He gives me another smile, his lip ring protruding slightly like he’s pressing his tongue against it. That usually means he’s nervous. “Just tired. You look really pretty today.”

“Thanks,” I say quietly. He didn’t call me Princess like he usually does, and I’m trying really, really hard not to look too much into it. Sebastian’s in the driver’s seat, waiting for us. I feel flustered and worried about Grayson, but I’m not sure whether or not I should pry if he’s just having an off day. I quickly get in the car, smiling thankfully at him for opening my door.

He leans down and meets my eyes, smiling shyly. “Elliot will be happy when he sees you.”

With that, he closes the door. My heart pounds in my chest. I’m not sure how to take his comment. Yesterday, he all but said he knows I like all of them and find them cute. Is he... showing his support again? Is he jealous? He’s never acted jealous of the other guys with me, but who knows? Am I overthinking everything again, like I always do?

During our drive to school, Sebastian asks Grayson about the band he’s forming with Alex, Emily, and Benji. I told Sebastian a little about it when I got home last night, but it’s really cute to hear him ask Grayson himself. To show encouragement and enthusiasm for his best friend. This is exactly why I’ve fallen hard for these guys. They’re always supportive of each other, through thick and thin, no matter how different some of their interests and hobbies may be. It’s the sweetest thing in the world.

Listening to them calms me down, and I try to focus on the hopeful and determined way I felt when I first woke up this morning. After thinking over what Grayson said, I’ve decided I’m going to try not to stress so much about things with the guys. I still don’t plan on instigating anything romantic, and I won’t bring the issue up with any of them. But whenever they flirt with me, I’m gonna try to let it happen and not worry.

Easier said than done, I'm sure, but it's exhausting having to constantly worry about this mess.

By the time we make it to school, I'm feeling mostly good. A little nervous about Liam and Remy's reactions to seeing me with Elliot's number on my face, and still a little concerned about Grayson. I make a mental note to check on him throughout the day, and I tell myself the guys should understand that I'm trying to show my support for our friend.

"So, are we supposed to go straight to the gym, or...?" I ask Grayson and Sebastian as we head into school. They're carrying my bags so I'm empty-handed as I walk between them. They've been doing that all week before and after school.

Grayson shrugs, and Sebastian shakes his head. "Usually, they make us go to our first period classes to take attendance and shit. Otherwise, a lot of people would just end up ditching the pep rally."

That makes sense. I'm not really looking forward to it. The whole school crammed into the gym to listen to the marching band and to watch the football team flex? It sounds awful. I probably wouldn't be interested in going to the game tonight either if it weren't for Elliot.

There's a buzz of energy in the air as soon as we walk into the main building. Everyone is louder and more talkative than usual, and everywhere I turn, I see people decked out in red, black, and white. We navigate the crowded hallways in silence as we head to my and Liam's lockers to meet up with the rest of our friends.

Elliot, Remy, and Liam are huddled around the locker Liam and I share for our books, talking and laughing together. Elliot looks up first when we approach, his usual, fun-loving

grin on his face. As his eyes travel over me and finally land on the number painted on my cheek, his whole face lights up. Seeing how surprised and happy he looks gives me about a million butterflies, and it's worth it. All of my apprehension at going through with the small gesture quickly fades away.

“Morning, baby.” Remy’s deep voice captures my attention. I turn to him, tilting my head back to meet his intense, blue artist eyes. He’s smiling wide enough to show his dimples as his gaze dips to my cheek. “You trying to make us jealous?”

My face flushes, and I shake my head rapidly. Liam and Grayson chuckle from behind me. Realizing they’re teasing me, I force myself to relax. Sebastian’s the only one who seemed to have a negative reaction to me showing Elliot some extra attention. So, that’s not too bad, right?

“I can’t believe you really did it,” Elliot says in a reverent tone.

“Of course I did.” I smile confidently at him. “I’m proud of you. You’re gonna do great at the game tonight!”

He bites his lip, still smiling widely as he pulls me into a hug. With his arms wrapped tightly around me, I rest my head against his chest. He leans down close to my ear, lowering his voice to a whisper so only I can hear him. “I love you so fucking much, Charlotte. Thank you. God, I can’t even tell you how anxious I’ve been about today and this stupid ass game, and you...fuck, you just made everything a million times better.”

A lump forms in my throat, and I hug him tighter. There are a million things I want to say. I want to tell him I’d do anything for him to help him or make him happy. I want to say he’s made my life better too, every day since I moved here.

Craziest of all, I want to blurt out that I love him too. Instead, all I squeak out in response is, “You’re welcome.”

Pulling away slowly, he keeps his arms loose around me as he gives me an adorable, boyish smile. “Do you want to wear my letterman jacket? I know I bugged you about it before, but you really don’t have to.”

It’s not until then that I realize he’s wearing his football jersey, and I remember that Olivia told me the players are required to wear them to school on game days. The cheerleaders wear their uniforms too. Even without all the padding the football players have to wear during actual games—which I’ve only seen from pictures Elliot sent me—he looks good in the jersey. Big, strong, and muscular with broad shoulders.

Wearing his jacket will make a bigger statement than a little bit of face paint. But how could I possibly say no to him when he looks so sweet and hopeful? The attention he’s giving me and the affection in his gaze is intoxicating, and if none of the other guys seem to have a problem with it, I don’t see why I shouldn’t wear it.

“Yeah, okay.”

He punches the air triumphantly, making me and the rest of the guys laugh. “I left it in my locker. You wanna come with me to grab it, and then I’ll walk you to class?”

Nodding in agreement, I switch out the books in my backpack for what I need from my locker, make sure the guys are fine putting the tote bag filled with our lunches away, and hug everyone goodbye before heading to Elliot’s locker with him. It’s not like I’ll have to wait long before hanging out with everyone else. Elliot will be busy on the court with his team during the pep rally, but I should be able to stand with

Sebastian, Grayson, Liam, and Remy instead of my first period class without any issues.

Elliot very sweetly offers to carry my bag for me while we walk, threading our fingers together between us. This whole past week, whenever he's flirted with me, he's been super aggressive and arrogant about it. While it stressed me out, I can't help but admit it was also sort of hot. But this morning, seeing him like this—so sweet, shy, awestruck, and acting like a complete gentleman—it's swoon-worthy.

"I know you said you've been anxious, but are you at least a little excited about your game tonight?" I ask.

Elliot grins sideways at me, almost appearing a little embarrassed. "Honestly, yeah. Practices suck, but games are usually pretty fun. All the anticipation leading up to it gets me hyped, and winning is a huge high no matter what."

"Good! I'm relieved it's not all bad," I say. "It'll be the first football game I've ever seen. Liam promised to explain all the rules and stuff to me, otherwise I'd probably end up feeling lost."

He laughs, squeezing my hand affectionately. "Well, I hope it's somewhat fun for you. The games can drag on, and it might get cold tonight. So, make sure you dress warm, okay?"

I hadn't thought of that, so I'm grateful for the tip. When we reach his locker, Elliot gets that same excited, boyish grin on his face. He very carefully helps me into his letterman jacket, which is so big on me, it almost reaches down to the hem of my skirt.

"How do I look?" I giggle and flutter my eyelashes teasingly, holding my hands out to my sides as I twirl in front of him.

“Fucking gorgeous.” His voice deepens to practically a growl, making my toes curl. He runs his gray-blue eyes up and down my form, very obviously checking me out.

For probably the first time ever, I let myself enjoy the attention. I don't worry about hurting anyone's feelings, making anyone jealous, breaking apart the guys' friendships, or worry that something's wrong with me for having feelings for more than one person. And it's a wonderful feeling.

ELLIOT



“YOU REALLY DON’T HAVE TO. I SWEAR, IT’S NOT A BIG deal.”

Charlotte gets this determined expression on her face, a line forming between her eyebrows. It’s fucking adorable, and it makes me want to kiss her. To be fair, almost everything she does makes me want to kiss her.

“No way am I making you sit over there on your own,” she says.

Since it’s Game Day, it’s a requirement for the entire football team to sit together in the cafeteria during lunch. We’re supposed to go through the whole day showing school spirit and team camaraderie, and it’s fucking exhausting. It wasn’t so bad the last couple years when I was on the JV team, but varsity football has been ruthless. I haven’t played my first game yet, and I’m ready for the damn season to be over.

It doesn’t help that most of the guys on the team are assholes, and my dad’s been putting a fuckton of extra pressure on me to make sure we win our first game. All last night and this morning, I was filled with a nervous energy that made me feel like I was constantly about to throw up.

And then Charlotte showed up at school this morning and made everything better.

I've been bugging her all week about wearing my letterman jacket and painting my team number on her cheek like the other players' girlfriends do. Ever since the guys and I talked and made our deal last Sunday, I admit I've been way more obnoxious and aggressive than usual when it comes to flirting with her. Partially because I'm into her and hoping she's just as into me, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't also partially out of spite. Remy and Sebastian forced our group into this dumbass competition. I've honestly been too busy and stressed to focus much on how Charlotte's been taking it, but I guess I assumed she was secretly irritated by the attention she's getting from me and the guys.

After the way we've been acting and treating her, and especially after the shit people have been saying about her and making assumptions about her relationship with me and the guys, I never expected she'd go through with dressing up for me today. The second I saw her this morning—looking hot as fuck with her short skirt, her makeup all done up, and my number displayed proudly on her cheek, I swear I almost came in my fucking pants.

And as cheesy as it may sound, the moment I helped her into my letterman jacket and watched her spin and pose in it for me was probably one of the happiest moments of my life. I can't describe the way I felt watching her. So full of warmth and happiness. Full of awe that this stunning girl cares about me enough to do something as silly and traditional as wearing my stupid football jacket to support me. And full of gratitude to the universe for bringing her into my life.

All my nerves faded away after that, and it made dealing with the pep rally and my morning classes a breeze. I'm not that nervous about the game tonight whenever I think about it. All because of her. She's given me something good to focus on, instead of all the things I'm worried about.

"You're too nice for your own good sometimes," I tell Charlotte, wrapping my arm around her as we head into the cafeteria. It's fucking selfish of me to ask her to sit with me and the team, but I know it'll be easier for me if she's there by my side. The rest of the guys decided to eat in here instead of our library retreat in case Charlotte needs to get to them quickly if anyone fucks with her during lunch.

She leans against me, tilting her head up enough to meet my eyes with a gorgeous smile on her face. I'll never get over how damn pretty she is.

"It won't be so bad," she says. "Zack is kind of my friend, and Olivia will be there, sitting with him and Ethan."

That's a good point. I'll have to make sure we stay close to them, and hopefully that'll be enough of a distraction that Charlotte won't notice the rest of my teammates making crude gestures in our direction. The team sits at a group of tables pushed together in the center of the cafeteria. Typical, since they seem to think they're practically gods and the center of the universe.

It looks like most of the team's still in the lunch line or they haven't made it to the cafeteria yet. Most of the tables are empty, and I sigh in relief when I see Zack sitting by himself at the end of one table. I gesture for Charlotte to sit beside him, smiling as I watch her situate herself. My letterman jacket is so big on her, she's practically drowning in it. It makes her seem tiny and precious.

“Hey, guys.” Zack grins. He gives me a fist bump before focusing on Charlotte. “Spencer convinced you to ditch your crew for us today, huh?”

I hate being called by my last name. It reminds me too much of my dad. But the guys on the team think I’m enough of a pussy most of the time, so I’ll never complain about it to them.

Charlotte giggles and shakes her head. “I guess he did.”

While I take the lunches Charlotte packed for us out of her bag and place them on the table, I glance sideways at my teammate. Sebastian’s been grumbling about him the past week, saying he’s always flirting with her in their history class. It’s kind of hard to believe, considering he’s been in love with Olivia for years.

Not that she has any idea. I don’t think anyone does. Ethan’s been open about having a crush on Livvy for as long as I can remember. I’m pretty sure he asked her out every day last year after she broke up with her ex-boyfriend, even though she continually turned him down. It wasn’t until I was dragged to a party with the rest of the team last year that Zack got drunk and confessed to me that he’s been into her since he was a kid, but didn’t want to get in his best friend’s way.

Livvy and Ethan have been dating for a couple months, and they seem pretty solid. Ethan’s definitely a huge improvement over the guys she’s dated in the past. But now, I can’t help but wonder if it bothers Zack. He seems fine during practices and the classes I share with him, and it doesn’t seem like there’s any bad blood between him and Ethan. They’ve been best friends for as long as I can remember. But is he hiding how heartbroken he is whenever he has to sit back and pretend to be happy for them?

Is that the future I'm looking at with Charlotte and the guys? If she decides to pick one of us, are the rest of us gonna sit back and pretend like we're all okay with it, even when we're heartbroken and jealous? I know that's what we agreed to, but it sounds shitty and miserable. It's the whole reason I wanted to keep a boundary up between all of us in the first place. Keep her as our friend, so we'd never have to lose anything.

Though honestly, it's getting harder and harder to convince myself I could've kept that up for much longer. The more time I spend with her, the more I like her. Fuck, I might actually be in love with her. She makes everything shitty in my life seem not so bad. She makes every day brighter.

“What’s for lunch today, gorgeous?” I ask, ripping my box open. Every day gets better and better, and the nostalgia that comes along with unpacking a homemade lunch continues to give me a warm feeling in my chest. My mom always packed my lunch, writing little notes on my napkins for me to read in private. Charlotte’s might be a little fancier, and she doesn’t write notes on our napkins, but it’s just as sweet and meaningful.

Charlotte turns in my direction and smiles shyly at the lunch in front of me. Everything has its own little compartment, which is honestly fucking hilarious. I learned pretty early on in our friendship that she’s kind of a nut when it comes to organization. I just never thought that would extend to packing lunches.

“Smoked turkey, apple, bacon, and brie sandwiches, with crackers, cucumbers, tomatoes, and some yogurt on the side. Oh, and fresh lemonade.”

I've got two full sandwiches while she only has one. She's always great about making larger portions for me and the guys, and everything she's made for us for lunch all week has been filling and delicious. Leagues better than the crap the school gives us.

I take a huge bite of my first sandwich, groaning as the flavor hits my tongue. The second my mouth's no longer full, I blurt out, "Fuck, this is good. When we're married someday, please promise you'll cook every night?"

Charlotte giggles and smacks me, making me grin. It's not the first time I've said something like that to her, and it gives me a thrill when she doesn't shoot me down.

Right at that moment, Olivia and Ethan approach the table, and Olivia slams her bag on the table in front of us as she makes a face at me. "Eww, stop. You can't propose to my best friend like that."

Checking to make sure Charlotte's not overly embarrassed by the comment, I throw my arm around her and wiggle my eyebrows at Livvy. "Don't worry. I'm just giving my girl a heads up. When I pop the question for real, I'll be romantic as fuck."

Zack and Ethan laugh wildly, and Charlotte hisses at me in a shrill tone. "Oh my god, Elliot!"

"Wait, are you guys legit together now?" Ethan asks, smiling excitedly between me and Charlotte.

My heart stutters, and I turn to look at Charlotte. It's not fair of me to make her answer, I know. But today's been fucking perfect, being able to act like she really is my girlfriend. I wish she was. I also wish it wasn't so complicated with the rest of the guys. What if she says yes? Does that mean

I win, and that she likes me more than them? Or did I fuck up months ago by telling her we're better off staying friends when she came even the least bit close to admitting she likes me? She had to know wearing my letterman jacket and painting my jersey number on her cheek was a pretty big deal, right? Is the fact that she showed up to school the way she did a sign she still feels that strongly for me?

And fucking Christ. Why do I feel a mixture of hope, guilt, and dread at the idea that she *does* like me more than she likes the rest of the guys? Why can't I just be happy and excited?

"Oh, um..." Charlotte trails off, her cheeks reddening.

I'm about to give in and save her the trouble of answering when Jude fucking Foster leans over us with a cruel smirk. "Hey, cuckold. When you and your girl get married, is she still gonna fuck your friends in front of you? That'll sure be an interesting dynamic."

It's nothing I haven't heard all week from him and some of the other dickbags on the team. But the fact that he's saying it right in front of Charlotte is absolutely crossing a line. Anger swells in my chest, and I clench my teeth and my fists as I seriously debate standing up and punching him in his smug face. I'd probably get suspended and kicked from the team. That wouldn't be such a bad thing if I didn't have my dad to worry about.

"Wow. That was completely disgusting and uncalled for." Olivia sneers, leaning over the table to grab Charlotte's hand. Charlotte's gone deathly still, and her expression's blank. But I know her well enough to know she's probably just as close as I am to throwing some punches. I wonder if Olivia knows that too. The girls have grown really close in a relatively short period of time.

“And whether or not your comment has any merit, at least Spencer’s getting more action than you are.” Zack grins maliciously at Jude.

I can’t help but snort, especially when several guys sitting around the table laugh at Jude’s expense. It’s still disrespectful as far as Charlotte’s concerned, but at least the negativity of the conversation has moved away from her.

Jude flips Zack off, muttering something under his breath as he moves further down the table to sit with Mike and Tim.

“Sorry, gorgeous,” I whisper, hugging Charlotte to my side. Taking a risk, I kiss the top of her head. “You can go sit with the guys if you want to. You don’t deserve to deal with this bullshit.”

She doesn’t say a word, but she shakes her head with determination. That’s enough to know she’s not gonna give in and let them get to her. Feeling that warmth bubble up in my chest again, I hug her a little tighter.

The rest of the lunch period passes without any more drama. Talking with Charlotte, Zack, Ethan, and Olivia about insignificant things like homework and what we expect from the opposing team tonight makes the time go by much faster and smoother. It’s the best lunch period I’ve ever had where I was forced to sit with the team.

And with Charlotte by my side, continually giving me side glances and sweet smiles, I barely pay attention to the teammates who usually give me issues.



“So?”

I close my gym locker and stare at Remy blankly. “So, what?”

He rolls his eyes. It’s the first chance we’ve had to talk all day. Gym is the only class I share with him. I had Grayson and Liam in my class before this one, but we didn’t get a real chance to talk either. Game days are always kinda shitty like that. Lunch is usually the one reprieve I get where I can chill with all my best friends, and not hanging with them earlier threw me off. I’m so fucking glad I don’t have practice tomorrow. As soon as the game is over tonight, I’ll be free to hang out with them for a whole twenty-four hours straight.

“You and Charlotte,” he says, like it’s obvious. “She’s been wearing your jacket and jersey number like a fucking brand all day.”

That twist of guilt mixes with the excited anticipation in my stomach. As much time as we’ve spent together today, Charlotte and I haven’t talked about *us*. I don’t want to make any assumptions, but it’s pretty clear Remy and the other guys think Charlotte might be picking me.

“Come on,” I scoff. “You know she only did it to be nice. She’s always doing shit like that to make us happy.”

“It’s not really the same thing. Not when people at school keep assuming she’s your girlfriend, and you’re not denying it.”

I’ve never once told anyone that Charlotte’s my girlfriend. But also, yeah. Maybe I haven’t exactly denied it either. Luckily, our lockers are set away from most of the guys in our class, so our conversation is relatively private. I give him a look. “Like you wouldn’t do the same thing. Besides, people assume shit about you being with her just as much as they do with me. Hurry up and change so we can go meet up with her.”

The best part of gym class is being able to talk and hang out with Remy and Charlotte the entire period. Working out is easy, whether that means going into the weight room or playing indoor volleyball. It's a nice, relaxing way to end the school day. Nothing like working out with the football team, which is absolute hell.

Because today is Friday, the gym teachers are making us run a mile and timing us. It's gonna be a fucking breeze. The best part is, once we're done, we can pretty much do whatever the fuck we want until class is over.

"You know I asked her out, right?" Remy grumbles, slipping into his gym shirt.

I go still and look up from tying my shoes. I didn't know that, and I hope I'm not giving anything away with my expression. "Oh, yeah? Did she say yes?"

He nods, but he's still frowning. So, it's not all that cut and dry for him either, apparently. Asking her out isn't a bad move, though. Sebastian's idiotic rules say that we can't kiss her, and we can't tell her to her face that we like her. Remy found a good loophole. If she said yes to going out with him, then why's he getting pissy with me about Charlotte wearing my jacket and shit?

"What if Grayson's right?" I ask, lowering my voice. I've been trying not to think too hard about it, but I can't stop wondering what he meant when we all got together to talk about this. "What if she likes more than one of us?"

Remy slides his shoes on and shrugs. "She'd still have to pick one of us."

He sounds confident. But when Grayson phrased the question, like Charlotte could somehow possibly like us all

equally, he looked like he thought that was a good thing. Not another problem added onto this messy situation. Maybe I should talk to him, away from the rest of the guys.

In the meantime, Remy and Sebastian keep insisting we're gonna have to force Charlotte's hand. I'm not gonna let them win easily. Giving him a challenging grin, I shrug. "Guess we'll just have to keep trying to convince her she should choose one of us then, huh?"

Remy adjusts his glasses and flips me off before following me out of the locker room. We walk over to the entrance to the girls' locker room to wait for Charlotte, like we've been doing all week. We only have to wait a couple of minutes for her to emerge with Emily Castillo. Emily likes to repeatedly tell me I'm annoying every time we interact, and she usually sticks to hanging out with her cousin and best friend. Still, I've always thought she seemed cool, and it's nice to see Charlotte making more friends.

Emily's unimpressed gaze passes over me and Remy before she frowns at Charlotte. "Ugh, you guys are probably the type of people who run for fun, aren't you?"

Charlotte laughs and shrugs. I don't think anyone in our friend group necessarily enjoys cardio, but we work out regularly, and we're fairly athletic. Usually, Liam's the most fit of all of us. But right now, because of football, I'm in better shape than I've ever been. My six-pack is slowly but surely becoming an eight-pack, and I'm pretty sure Charlotte has a slight obsession with my biceps.

When Remy grabs her hand and smirks at me when she's not looking, I grin and pull my shirt up so my abs are on full display for our girl.

“Weightlifting helps, sure. But I sure as fuck wouldn’t be this ripped if I didn’t keep up with cardio too. You should keep that in mind, Remy.”

He gives me a nasty glare. It’s completely worth it when I realize Charlotte’s staring slack-jawed at my body. She’s seen me with my shirt off plenty of times, and she always makes it pretty obvious she’s attracted to me. That doesn’t make it any less satisfying every time it happens.

“Whatever,” Remy practically growls, aggressively pulling up his shirt to reveal his abs too. “I don’t work out half as much as you do, and I think I’m doing just fine.”

Charlotte turns to look at him, making it very clear she’s attracted to him too. Weirdly enough, seeing her check him out doesn’t bother me at all. Not when she was looking at me the same way.

“Ugh!” Emily pretends to gag, and then claps in front of Charlotte’s face to get her attention. When Charlotte looks up at her, her cheeks redden in embarrassment. Emily makes another face like she’s disgusted. “I’m gonna walk away before I throw up. But Charlotte, please just try to remember that *all* guys are morons. No matter how nice their abs look.”

“Thanks.” Charlotte laughs quietly, still appearing slightly frazzled.



THE MILE IS AS EASY AS I ANTICIPATED. MY TIME WAS SIX minutes and forty-eight seconds. I probably could have timed a little better, but I kept pace with Remy and Charlotte.

Neither of them is all that winded when we finish, since they're both used to doing more intense workouts at our gym.

“What do you guys want to do now?” Charlotte asks. She's got her hands on her hips as she paces back and forth beside the track to cool down. Her skin is slightly flushed from running, a few strands of hair have come loose from her ponytail, and there's a light sheen of sweat on her forehead. She looks seriously fucking hot, and I need to adjust my gym shorts before it becomes too evident to anyone where my thoughts are heading.

Remy's staring at her intently, his eyes running up and down her figure. “Whatever you want, baby.”

She preens at his nickname for her. For half a second, anyway, before she seemingly remembers I'm here. When she looks over at me with an embarrassed, guilty expression, I smile warmly to help her feel at ease. I've forced myself to ignore her reactions to us any time we flirt with her for long, since I never really thought anything would come from it. But now, it's honestly fucking weird to be aware of every little thing she says or does as a response to us.

“Well, it's nice outside,” she says quietly. Clearing her throat, she raises her chin like she's determined to shake off any of her embarrassment as she faces me and Remy head on. “Let's sit in the grass for a little while. At least until one of the teachers forces us to do something else.”

A few other people are doing the same thing, sitting in small groups in the grass while we wait for the rest of the class to finish running their mile. It's a better idea than going back inside the gym if we're gonna be sitting without doing anything else.

Remy and I agree, and Charlotte walks ahead of us to find a spot in the grass that's somewhat close to the bleachers without being too close to anyone else. Once she finds what she deems to be the perfect spot, Charlotte sits down in the grass and stretches her legs out as she tilts her head back to soak up the sun. Remy and I glance at each other, and I elbow him aside before quickly dropping to the ground to sit as close as I possibly can to our girl. Remy grits his teeth and flips me off before sitting on her other side, just as close as I am. I grin playfully at him before focusing my attention on Charlotte.

“You okay, gorgeous?” I ask quietly. She looks relaxed, sprawled out in the sun. But sometimes it's still impossible to figure out what's going on in her pretty little head.

She nods without opening her eyes. “Mhmm. Just thinking I'm gonna miss summer and all these warm days. Does it get pretty cold around here in the winter?”

“Not as much as it does up in the mountains, about an hour or so from here. But we still get a fair amount of snow,” Remy answers. “My grandma's boyfriend runs a snow plow business during the winter since landscaping jobs tend to die down once summer's over.”

“That makes sense.” She opens her eyes, turning to smile at him. She blinks when she realizes how close he's sitting, turning to look at me with her eyebrows furrowed. “What are you guys doing?”

Remy and I share another look, and I smirk. “Nothing, gorgeous.” I reach up to touch her hair and tug lightly on her ponytail before resting my hand around the back of her neck. Massaging gently, I deepen my voice. “Just sitting next to the most stunning girl in the fucking universe and wondering how

we got lucky enough to make her think we're worthy of her attention."

It's cheesy as fuck of me to say, and she keeps glancing between us like we're playing a trick on her. But as I continue to massage the back of her neck and shoulders, she slowly relaxes under my touch.

"That's right." Remy's voice is even deeper than mine as he brings his hand to her calf. He slowly runs his fingertips up her leg all the way to her thigh, groaning when she makes this soft, breathy sound. "Fuck, baby. You look so hot right now. I'm gonna draw you just like this when I get home later."

Jesus Christ. I expected him to flirt with her like I did, but I'm shocked at his boldness. Before my brain has time to process how I should feel or react, Charlotte moans quietly.

The three of us go very still. Charlotte tenses up, visibly cringing as she refuses to meet either of our eyes. "Oh, god. I'm sorry, I—"

No. I refuse to let her apologize. I may not know what the fuck we're doing right now, exactly. And I may be hard as a fucking rock—that sound she made is something I know I'm going to remember and replay over in my head for a long, long time. So, I'm probably not thinking all that clearly. But no way do I want her to feel embarrassed or ashamed about anything. Not with us, no matter what the situation is.

"Don't be," I cut her off before she can finish her unnecessary apology. I slip my fingers beneath the collar of her shirt and continue massaging her neck and shoulders. Remy's fingers are still grazing her thigh, and I decide to play off that. "You like us touching you like this, gorgeous?"

“Of course she does.” Remy chuckles. Charlotte groans again, so softly that it’s barely audible. When she does, she parts her knees, just a little. Remy very smoothly slides his hand to her inner thigh, and he croons, “That’s our good girl.”

Holy fucking shit. I’m gonna cum in my fucking pants if we keep this up. We’re not really doing anything. For crying out loud, neither of us has so much as kissed her. I’ve messed around with girls before, but I’ve never been affected like this. This moment is much more intense. It never occurs to me that it might be weird to share the moment with Remy. I had no idea the guy could be so fucking smooth.

“You guys…” Charlotte trails off with a whine.

“What do you want, Charlotte?” I ask teasingly, giving her a crooked grin. I’m about to kiss her. I don’t care if Remy kisses her after I do. Fuck Sebastian’s stupid goddamn rules.

She opens her mouth. Whether to tell us to fuck off, or to say something to make the moment progress further, I have no clue. Because at that moment, Mike and Tim walk by with Madison and Summer trailing close behind them. They’re a couple yards away from us, but it’s close enough to notice us sitting here, and close enough for us to hear them when Mike calls out, “Look at this. The slut, the cuck, and the psycho freak. You guys are perfect for each other.”

The four of them laugh and walk away, but it’s too late. The damage is done. Charlotte pushes us away and pulls her knees up to her chest. Her face is blank. The only sign that she’s embarrassed or upset is the faint blush on her cheeks.

“Hey, don’t worry about them. They’re assholes,” I say. I’m livid that one of my teammates once again called her a derogatory name. I’d be tempted to get up and punch him if I wasn’t panicked about Charlotte’s reaction. How pissed is she

gonna be at us once reality sets in? How much did Remy and I just fuck up by taking things too far?

“I—” Charlotte’s voice breaks, and she clears her throat. She briefly meets both our eyes before forcing a strained smile. “I think I’m gonna go inside and get some water. Maybe check on Emily...”

“Okay,” Remy whispers. He looks as terrified as I feel. But this is a good sign, right? She’s not yelling at us or making a big deal of what happened. She’s just making it clear she needs some space without saying it outright. That’s more than fair.

I stand up and brush my shorts off, reaching my hand out to help her up. To my relief, she accepts my assistance and even squeezes my hand before she walks away from us. Remy and I watch her retreat silently, never looking away from her until she’s back inside the gymnasium.

The second she’s out of our sight, I turn and punch Remy’s arm. “Dude, what the fuck?”

He hisses in pain and rubs his arm, glaring daggers at me. “Are you kidding me? Like that was entirely my fault.”

Well, no, it wasn’t. And maybe I started it, but he definitely escalated things. “Jesus fucking Christ. What were we thinking?”

CHARLOTTE



“Wow.” I STARE IN AWE AROUND THE FOOTBALL STADIUM AS the guys and I pass through the ticket entrance. It’s insane. I’ve never been to a football game, so I don’t have anything to compare it to. Still, never in a million years did I expect this level of chaos. It’s nuts to think I was here earlier today running a mile for gym class. The place has completely transformed in a matter of hours.

“Pretty crazy, right?” Grayson smiles at me. Like me, he doesn’t particularly like football, but the atmosphere is enough to get anyone hyped up.

“There are so many people,” I say, looking around in every direction. Our school isn’t that big, but the bleachers are filled to the brim. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many people in one place. The marching band and cheerleading squad are out on the field, prepping for their performances. It looks like a huge production for one high school football game.

“Well, a good majority of people from school are here, including teachers and staff. And plenty of their families are here too. Somerset is known for having a good team, so there’s always a good turn out,” Liam explains. He points to a section of the bleachers across from where we’re standing and adds,

“Plus, it looks like there’s a decent crowd from the opposing school’s team here tonight.”

I pull Elliot’s letterman jacket tighter around me, glad he suggested I dress warmly. It’s already dark out, but there’s a chill in the air. I switched out my skirt for black skinny jeans and threw a red sweater over my t-shirt. Elliot’s jacket makes me feel warmer than anything else, even if that’s just in my head.

Grayson and Remy decide to grab drinks and snacks from the snack booth while Liam, Sebastian, and I find seats. Luckily, we find an empty section of bleachers with enough space for everyone in our group about halfway up. We still have a really good view of the field, and Liam reassures me once again that he’ll help me keep up with what’s happening during the game.

“Are you excited?” Sebastian asks. He’s sitting close enough that our legs are touching, which I don’t mind at all. There’s too much going on for anyone to pay us any real attention, and I don’t recognize any of the people sitting near us, anyway. So, feeling brave, I scoot another inch closer to him.

“Actually, yeah.” I’m a little surprised at my level of excitement, to be honest. “I’m still nervous for Elliot. I wish I could see him before he goes out on the field, just to make sure he’s okay.”

“He’ll be alright.” Liam pats my leg. “He’s a good player, and he knows we’re out here supporting him. You probably gave him more than enough motivation today by wearing his jacket and number. That was really sweet of you.”

He doesn’t sound jealous or put out by me doing that, and it calms some small, anxious part of my soul. I woke up this

morning feeling tentatively hopeful and determined to relax when it comes to accepting my feelings for the guys. After the...*incident*...with Remy and Elliot during gym class, and hearing this reassurance from Liam, I'm starting to think Grayson might not be the only one who's open-minded enough to understand the way I feel.

"Uh huh. Sweet," Sebastian grumbles quietly under his breath.

Well, maybe not Sebastian. He's way too jealous of the other guys. Although, I guess I get it. It would be much harder for us to be together because of Arthur, who has forbidden anything of the sort. To any sane person, Sebastian and I being together would probably seem extremely inappropriate, even though we're not blood-related and didn't grow up together. We spend a lot of time together—more than I do with any of the other guys. But he flirts with me a lot less than they do, and he's always really careful about showing me any affection.

I've already crossed a few lines today. It's got me feeling reckless and a little on edge, but if I ever want to entertain the idea that it's okay to love more than one person, I need to keep taking baby steps. Right?

That's what I tell myself when I loop my arm through Sebastian's and snuggle up to his side. He probably needs some extra attention, anyway, after being grumpy about me and Elliot all day. At first, he seems a little surprised when he turns to look at me. But when I rest my head on his shoulder and beam up at him, he gives me an adorable, crooked smile.

He hesitantly wraps his arm around me and rubs his hand over my shoulder. "Are you cold?"

I laugh quietly and shake my head. Just to let him know I'm snuggling with him simply because I want to. A couple

months ago, I wouldn't have even been able to imagine doing something like this. Being bold and flirting with him, as subtle as my flirting may be. His mismatched brown and blue eyes light up, and he squeezes me gently.

Glancing sideways to check on Liam in case he looks jealous or upset, I find him typing on his phone, seemingly oblivious to the moment between me and Sebastian. Still, I don't want him to be left out either. I gently knock my foot against his to get his attention, smiling when he turns to me.

“Can we take some selfies? Please?” I ask.

Liam laughs while Sebastian groans. “Come on. Really? I brought my camera. Let me take your picture with that.”

I lift my head from his shoulder and give him a teasing glare. “Maybe. *After* we take some regular selfies together. Plus, some when Grayson and Remy come back!”

It's ridiculous that Sebastian gets bent out of shape about this. He hates any pictures taken with a phone, but especially selfies. The other guys love to tease him and call him an elitist. I've reminded him plenty of times that lots of people use their phones for professional photos and videos, and you usually can't tell the difference.

“Fine.” Sebastian rolls his eyes. “But only if you promise to walk around the field with me later. I've gotta get a few shots for Yearbook.”

“Deal!” I grin and grab my phone from my pocket, instantly pulling the camera up.

Sebastian frowns for the first several pictures I snap, but when I poke his side and snuggle close to him again, he laughs and smiles for several shots. Liam's a much better sport right from the start. He holds the phone for me to get a better angle,

taking both sweet and silly photos with me. Some of these will definitely be joining the photo collage I have up on my bedroom wall.

“Wow.” Grayson appears, laughing as he takes in the scene. There’s a stack of bags and boxes in his arms, presumably full of snacks. “Did you agree to let this happen, Seb?”

Remy steps up behind Grayson with a smirk, carrying a drink holder and even more snacks. Everyone moves over enough so there’s space for them to sit down.

“Shut up.” Sebastian laughs. “Charlotte wanted to take selfies with all of us. She wants some with you guys too.”

Grayson sits on Sebastian’s other side from me and leans around him to give me a grin. “I bet you could convince any of us to do just about anything for you, Princess. You know that?”

It’s said with a mixture of playfulness and affection. Normally, I’d smile or tease him back. Because it’s true, right? We’re kindred spirits. They’d do anything for me, just like I’d do anything for any of them. But after our conversation yesterday, and the way I’ve flirted with the guys all day today, is Grayson hinting at something more? Or am I freaking insane and hearing what I want to hear? My cheeks redden the more I think about it, and I force myself to stare straight ahead at the field. Anything for a distraction right now.

The guys start passing around the drinks and snacks. Remy hands me a hot chocolate with whipped cream, and Grayson gives me a pretzel. “We’re gonna go out to eat after the game’s over, so we didn’t think you’d wanna eat too much while we’re here. But let one of us know if you want anything else,” Grayson tells me.

The pretzel and hot chocolate are more than enough, and I thank them profusely. We'll probably be here for at least two hours until the game's over, and then we'll have to wait for Elliot to shower and change afterward. So, I'm not surprised to see the guys got a ton of food for themselves. Nachos, hotdogs, cheese fries, popcorn, and sodas are passed around between them while I nibble at my snack and continue to watch the field. I easily spot Olivia among the cheerleaders. Her hair's bright enough to make her stand out, even from this distance.

"How much longer until the game starts?" I ask.

Liam shrugs beside me. "Not long. It looks like the marching band is about to start their pregame show."

It looks like he's right, now that I know what to look for. Sebastian nudges my side and gives me a triumphant grin when I turn to meet his eyes. "Guess you'd better hurry up and get your selfies. I should probably get some shots down by the field when everything first kicks off."

I smile and stand up, peering on either side of me at Grayson and Remy. Grayson smiles widely when our eyes meet, but Remy—who's sitting beside Liam—is hard to read. He's not smiling, and his expression seems guarded. Still, even meeting his eyes makes my heart race a little faster. We haven't talked much since gym class earlier. I wouldn't say I've been avoiding him, but I'm definitely not brave enough to confront him about what happened between us and Elliot.

Neither of them kissed me, but it felt much more intense and lascivious than if they had. I don't think it was the way they were touching me. Not totally. Just the touching on its own could have been considered innocent. But god, the things they *said* to me. Both of them! I've never felt like that in my

life. Granted, I don't have the most experience with guys or sex, but I seriously doubt most girls my age have been in a situation like I was today. Having two guys I'm head over heels for sitting close and whispering naughty things to me while they gently caressed my body, I mean.

I shiver at the memory, realizing too late I'm still staring at Remy. He must notice my reaction because he gets this roguish glint in his eyes, and a grin spreads across his face until his dimples are showing.

“Come here, baby. I'll take a selfie with you.”

He reaches his hand out for me. And I must be out of my mind and asking for trouble because I walk over to him with zero hesitation. My heart feels like it's going to pound out of my chest, and butterflies wreak havoc in my stomach. There's this thrilling feeling of anticipation zipping through me as I approach him and wonder if he's going to do or say anything else like he did earlier today. As soon as I place my hand in his, he spins me around and pulls me down into his lap.

I make this awkward yelping sound in surprise which quickly turns into an embarrassed giggle. Remy wraps his arm around me securely and leans down to chuckle softly into my ear. “I was afraid you were mad at me.”

“No!” I squeak. “I wasn't. I was just...”

I trail off because I have no idea how to describe exactly what I felt after the incident in gym class. I was freaked out and embarrassed, obviously, and maybe confused. But there was never any point I felt anger toward Remy or Elliot. I liked what they did and what they said. Way too much, if I'm honest. Even if school was totally not the place for that sort of thing to happen, I wasn't mad at them. It never occurred to me

that the guys would worry I was, and I realize maybe that's why Remy's been keeping some distance from me.

“Good.” Remy's breath tickles my ear, sending shivers up my spine. “I know you think sometimes I get too intense, but tell me if I ever cross a line or make you feel uncomfortable. Okay?”

He's speaking quietly enough that I don't think the other guys can hear, but I'm pretty sure they're all watching us. A quick glance sideways confirms my suspicions—Grayson's watching us openly while shoving popcorn into his mouth, Sebastian's scowling with his arms crossed, and Liam's blushing and pretending like he's not watching and listening to us, even when he very clearly is.

“Okay,” I say, letting out a strangled laugh. I'm pretty uncomfortable now, but that's not really Remy's fault. It's because we have an audience and I have no clue what's going through the guys' minds. I don't know what Remy and Elliot were thinking either during gym class that made them decide to push boundaries.

At my answer, Remy slides my phone out of my pocket and opens the camera feature. I was so distracted by my feelings and hormones that I completely forgot the whole point of coming to sit with Remy was to get a selfie with him. He makes a goofy face into the camera, making me laugh and relax back against his chest.

We've only taken two photos when Sebastian stands up. He steps around Liam and grabs my hand, roughly yanking me up from Remy's lap. “Come on. Let's go down to the field so I can get some shots of the players when they run out.”

He doesn't give me a chance to respond. He pulls me along behind him, even when the guys yell out at him to calm

down. I follow him mutely, glancing back over my shoulder to see Remy glaring at Sebastian while the other guys look concerned.

I wait until we're halfway down the bleacher steps to jerk my hand out of Sebastian's. His grip was tight enough to hurt, so I rub my hand and furrow my eyebrows when Sebastian finally stops to turn and face me.

"What are you doing?" I ask, bewildered. "Why did you do that?"

Sebastian's expression rapidly changes from irritated to ashamed, finally landing on frustrated. "Do you like Remy?"

The question catches me off guard. I didn't expect him to ask me that, and especially not this blatantly. Panic rises in my chest, and it sounds like there's a ringing in my ears as we stare at each other. I'm a few steps higher than him, making us almost eye-level. That makes it even more intimidating, and I can't think clearly.

All I know is that I'm totally in over my head in this situation with the guys. Grayson got me all messed up by asking about my feelings yesterday, and it made me feel way too brave today with my interactions with the rest of them. But what was I thinking? What the hell am I supposed to expect going forward?

"Of course I do," I say after a long pause. I say it like it's the most obvious thing in the world, while trying really hard to ignore the wild fluttering in my chest. Oh, god. I think I might throw up. "I like all of you."

He rolls his eyes, like my statement's not worth giving a second thought. "Not like that. You know what I mean."

Yeah, I do know what he means. And my answer is the same. I like them all. I love them all. I don't see that changing any time soon because my feelings continue to grow deeper for each of them the more time we spend together.

I shrug, feeling defeated. I can't give Sebastian the answer he wants, and I doubt I'll ever be able to. "I'm sorry."

His eyes soften, and he takes a step higher so we're almost pressed together. Bringing his hand up to caress the back of my head, he sighs. "No, I'm sorry. I always lose my mind when the guys flirt with you. It fucking kills me sometimes."

Guilt writhes in my belly along with the rest of my conflicting feelings. I knew Sebastian would be jealous. I never should have flirted openly with the other guys in front of him. Or let them flirt with me, anyway.

"Try to remember they're your best friends," I plead. "They were your best friends way before I ever got here, so don't get mad at them because of me."

A tiny half-smile tugs at his mouth. Much more gently this time, he grabs my hand to thread our fingers together. "Don't worry about us. We'll always be fine. And remember that you're our best friend too, Charlotte. It doesn't matter that we haven't known you as long. You're stuck with us forever."

It's a sweet sentiment. I really hope he's right.

We walk the rest of the way down to the bottom of the bleachers at a much more composed pace, our fingers still intertwined. The crowds of people are still nuts, but most people are sitting in the bleachers. There are less people walking around the outskirts of the field since the game's about to start. Sebastian doesn't drop my hand until we reach

the track surrounding the field, and only so he can turn on his camera.

Not surprised in the slightest, he snaps a photo of me first. I laugh and pose for a few shots before we walk along the track. We don't talk much. It quickly becomes evident Sebastian's totally in his element as he turns in every direction to capture moments on the field between the cheerleaders and marching band as well as the crowds of people in the bleachers.

When we reach the area where the cheerleading squad is warming up and getting into formation on the track in front of the bleachers, I catch Olivia's eye. I smile and wave, assuming she's too busy to say hi. To my surprise, she squeals and waves back with her pom poms before sprinting in our direction.

"Five minutes, Olivia!" Someone calls out to her. I think it's Brooke, the head cheerleader, but I don't have time to look around and check before Olivia slams into me.

I laugh and hug her back, pulling away only when she does. "You're insane!"

She flips her high ponytail over her shoulder and grins like a lunatic. "I know. God, I'm so pumped. I freaking love football. Isn't this an amazing turnout?"

"Yeah, it's crazy." I look around the stadium again, still in awe that this is my high school. "This is my first football game, ever."

Olivia gasps. "Really? You never went to any games at your old school?" I'm barely able to shake my head in response before she jumps up and down and squeals again. "Oh, this is going to be so fun for you! Liam's probably got a

boner at the thought of being allowed to mansplain the game to you, and I bet Elliot's extra motivated after watching you parade around with his number and jacket all day! Girl, you'd better give him a big thank you when he helps win the game for us."

She waggles her eyebrows suggestively, and I grimace when I hear Sebastian huff in annoyance behind me.

"Hey, I'm gonna walk a bit further down to get some closer shots of the marching band," he says.

When I turn around to let him know I'll meet up with him in a couple minutes, it's obvious he's back in grumpy-jealous mode. I try to give him an apologetic smile as he storms past us.

"Geez, what's his deal?" Olivia asks, furrowing her eyebrows at his quick retreat.

I sigh and give her a look. "First of all, please stop talking about your brother's you-know-what. It's weird!"

She grins like the cat who got the cream. "His you-know-what? Oh, you mean his boner? Cock? Dick? Penis? I'm not sure which term you're partial to, but I'm sure I can think of more if you need help expanding your vocabulary."

"Oh my god, stop!" I'm probably blushing as red as a tomato, but it doesn't stop me from giggling like mad. Olivia is outspoken and bold. The opposite of me. She's been a lot of fun getting to know over the past week, and I can see her becoming one of my best friends.

"What?" She shrugs teasingly. "I'm trying to look out for you, girl. Help you get that D, even if it is my brother's. So, back up. What's going on with moody stepbro over there?"

My face twists when she refers to him as my stepbrother, but I don't bother correcting her. Our whole situation is just such a mess, and I don't know how to begin explaining it. But maybe I should try? Olivia seems so nice and cool, and she doesn't seem judgmental about me and the guys. Even if she's just joking around, she's mentioned me being with them or flirting with them on several occasions.

"Do you want to have a sleepover?" I blurt out.

With anyone else—especially someone I don't know that well—I'd probably be embarrassed. There was no real transition from what she asked to my seemingly random question, even if it made sense in my head after the direction my thoughts went. Luckily, Olivia gets me.

"Tonight?" she asks excitedly. Then her face falls, and she groans. "Ethan's sleeping over. His parents are out of town, and mine are always gone, so this was gonna be our first legit sleepover. He's planning this whole sweet, romantic thing, supposedly. But I can totally reschedule with him if you need some emergency girl time."

"No, it's okay." It's nice of her to offer to drop her plans, but I'd hate to ask her to do that so I can dump all my issues with the guys on her. "That sounds really sweet. Don't cancel on Ethan for me. I'll be fine. Sebastian and the guys are just..."

"Idiots?" she finishes for me with a smirk. I nod, and we laugh. "Well, let's plan something for next weekend, alright? We're way overdue for a sleepover, anyway. You can come over to my place, and I'll make Liam leave for the night so we can talk about boys without him hovering."

"That sounds perfect," I say quietly. I wish I could find the words to let her know how much I appreciate her and our

friendship, as new as it is.

Someone calls her name, meaning her five minutes are up. She sighs and suggests, “Before I get back, let’s go grab Seb again and make him take our picture together!”

Thankfully, he’s not far away. We find him snapping photos a few yards away from the squad, and he seems to be in a better mood. He’s more than happy to take our photo, and he ends up taking several of us together. He doesn’t stop until Olivia’s finally forced to rejoin the squad.

With an enthusiastic grin, Sebastian points out the bench on the field where our football team’s players wait when they’re not active during the game. The coach is there, along with two of the referees. Liam tried to explain all the different names and jobs for the refs to me, but it was too confusing for me to keep track. Sebastian suggests we stand as close as possible so we can catch a glimpse of Elliot once the team runs out onto the field.

“Hey!”

Sebastian and I turn at the same time to see Summer walking up behind us. My good mood immediately evaporates at the sight of her, quickly becoming replaced by jealousy and anger when I notice Sebastian’s cheeks flush at her approach.

“Hi, Summer.” He smiles at her shyly. The reminder that he ‘used to’ have a crush on her is like a knife to the heart. “Are you here to get some shots for Yearbook too?”

“Yeah.” She laughs, ignoring me. She doesn’t look at me even though I’m literally standing right beside Sebastian. “I’m here with my friends, anyway, so I figured why not?”

They haven’t had their official first meeting for the Yearbook Club yet, but Sebastian told me he’s on pretty good

terms with the teacher who runs it since she also teaches photography. The photographers in Yearbook Club are always encouraged to attend school events to take pictures when possible, and Sebastian volunteered since we were already planning on being here for Elliot. I didn't realize Summer was a photographer too, but I guess it makes sense. Why wouldn't Sebastian be interested in a really pretty girl he shares a passion like that with?

"Cool," Sebastian says politely. He glances down at me from the corner of his eye, appearing more nervous by the second. Is he nervous to talk to her, or is it because I'm here to witness it? Does he wish he was alone with her?

"Oh, hi," Summer says, focusing her attention on me. Like she didn't notice me until just this second. It's complete crap. "Charlotte, right?"

If I wasn't irritated at her presence and anxious about Sebastian's reaction to her, I'd laugh. We have two classes together, and she sees me every day. She ignores me in history class even though our desks are close together, and every day in gym, she openly laughs and talks about me and Emily with Madison Taylor in the locker room. Just today, she laughed when Mike made that dumbass comment about me, Remy, and Elliot after we were finished running the mile. Now, in front of Sebastian, she's going to pretend she has no idea who I am and fake being nice?

Instead of answering, I stare blankly at her. I'm not going to let myself get angry enough to the point of wanting to punch her, but I'm also not going to play along or give her the satisfaction of looking like a decent person in front of Sebastian.

“Um, well, we should get back.” Sebastian laughs nervously, running a hand through his hair.

Summer stands up straighter and faces him with a flirty smile. “Aww, really? You know we’re allowed to go out on the field by the benches if we have passes, right? I bet you could get some pretty amazing close-ups of the team. You’re the most talented photographer in our school!”

Shuffling his feet awkwardly, he shrugs. “I don’t have a pass.”

Her smile widens as she pulls a lanyard out of her coat pocket, which seemingly has the pass he needs. “Oh, Ms. Frey gave me an extra. I mentioned I might run into you at the game, and you know how much she loves your work.”

Anger swells in my chest at her silky, flirtatious tone and the suggestion that she was planning on trying to spend time with him tonight all along. Ugh, why does this have to be happening right now? Why did she have to interrupt us when we’d just made up after his bout of jealousy? At the same time, I realize how hypocritical I am. Sebastian is forced to watch the guys flirt with me every day when he’s technically not allowed to, and I’m shamefully in love with all five of them. How is it fair of me to be upset about him maybe-still-liking Summer?

Sebastian hesitantly reaches out to take the pass from her, giving me an apologetic grimace. “Fuck. I’m sorry, Charlotte. Do you mind?”

I try really, really hard to keep my face blank as I shake my head. Logically, I know for him, this isn’t really about Summer or choosing her over me. Nothing like that. He loves photographing people, and a crowded event like this is the perfect setting for him. He’s in his element, able to snap as

many candid shots as he wants. I also know he's already working on building his portfolio for art school, and it's much more likely he'll get better photos if he can get closer to the team and the field.

Leaning closer to me, he lowers his voice. "I swear I'll make it up to you. Do you need me to walk you back up to the guys?"

"She'll be fine!" Summer titters, waving her hand at me dismissively. "Come on, Seb, the game's about to start."

It's probably terrible of me, but I feel better when Sebastian gives me a pained look. Like he's really, truly torn about leaving me. I force myself to smile for him, and I whisper that I'll be fine finding my way back to our seats. Still, my heart feels like it's cracking in my chest when I watch him walk onto the field with Summer. When she touches his arm and says something that makes him laugh, I feel my throat get tighter and tighter until it's hard to breathe.

A booming roar and round of applause from the stands makes me jump, and I turn around to find the crowd cheering at something on the field. It's the kick I need to get myself out of here and back to the safety of my seats with the guys.

Trying to retrace my steps, I walk back past the cheer squad and try to find the stairs Sebastian and I came down on the bleachers. But everything looks the same, and it's too loud and crowded. Almost everyone is standing up in the stands, making it harder for me to catch sight of any of my guys in the sea of people. The marching band is out on the field, and the combination of their music and the sound of the crowd is deafening. I quickly become very overwhelmed with my surroundings, and embarrassing tears form in the corners of

my eyes when I freeze up with no clue of which direction to go.

A few people bump into me without realizing it on their way past me, either to the edge of the field, or to seats up in the bleachers. Panic claws at my chest as I stand totally still in the middle of the chaos.

“Charlotte!”

I look around wildly when I hear my name, nearly fainting in relief when I find Grayson waving at me. He’s walking down the steps of the bleachers. Not the stairs I’m standing in front of. It looks like I stopped too short. I rush over to the bottom of the stairs that Grayson’s making his way down, still fighting my way past way-too-enthusiastic fans and students.

The second Grayson and I reach each other, I throw my arms around him and bury my face in his chest. I feel dumb. Like such a baby for getting upset and overwhelmed. I was only by myself for a few minutes, so it shouldn’t have been a big deal.

“What happened? Where’s Seb?” Grayson has to yell for me to hear him.

I have to take several deep breaths, and even then, I struggle to form any words. Grayson lifts me up, holding his hands under my butt as he tilts his head so his ear is as close to my mouth as possible in an effort to hear me.

“H-he...Summer!” I stutter and stumble over my words, unable to form a complete, coherent sentence to help Grayson understand. “They went onto the field to take pictures.”

Grayson stiffens, holding me tighter. “That fucking dumbass.”

A whine escapes me, as well as a few stupid tears. It's humiliating. Grayson cradles the back of my head and shushes me softly. "Shh, it's alright, Princess. I've got you. He shouldn't have left you alone like that, but it'll be alright. Do you wanna go stand by the edge of the field to wave at Elliot? The team's about to come out. After that, we'll go sit with Remy and Liam, and we'll cuddle while we watch the game."

I pull my head back so I can meet his eyes, giving him a watery smile. Maybe I am being dramatic, and maybe I'm a huge, hypocritical baby. But god, it means so much to me that Grayson understands. Within seconds of finding me, he's already figured out exactly what I need in order to feel better. Just the fact that he came looking for me at all is enough to remind me of all the reasons I love him so much.

"Thank you," I whisper. I'm not sure if he hears me or not, but he seems to get what I'm trying to say either way. He doesn't bother setting me down until we reach the edge of the field, where he still stands close with his arm wrapped securely around my shoulders.

When the football team runs out a few moments later, another deafening roar from the crowd greeting them, I feel all my excitement and anticipation for the game begin to build back up. All the players look pretty much the same in their uniforms, but somehow, I'm still able to pick out Elliot with no trouble at all. I wave wildly when I see him, and so does Grayson.

Elliot's grin is big enough for us to see clearly, even with his helmet on. He waves back at us and blows me a kiss. I giggle and return the gesture, silently wishing him good luck. After he passes us, Grayson leads me back to our seats where I end up sitting snuggled between him and Liam while Remy

reaches over Grayson's lap to hold my hand. Grayson doesn't say anything to them about Sebastian or finding me in tears, but they seem to have some inkling of what happened, regardless. I wonder how much they were able to witness from up here.

There's a bunch of fanfare with the band, the football teams, and the cheer squads we have to sit through before the actual game starts. Over an hour passes before Sebastian finally rejoins our group. Nobody mentions him ditching me, or Summer, which I'm happy about. I want to forget about it and enjoy my first football game.

Nearly three hours after we first arrived, the game finally ends. Our team wins 64-28.

CHARLOTTE



“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?” ADRIAN SHOUTS.

I glare at him, too busy trying to catch my breath to answer him. I’m completely drenched in sweat. So much that it’s dripping into my eyes and making it hard to see. I swipe a hand over my forehead in irritation and attempt to throw another punch. Adrian blocks me easily, his scowl deepening as he makes a sound of frustration.

He’s been a jerk to me since I got here. It’s been nearly two weeks since I came to the gym, so I assume that’s why. Adrian is all about routine, and I broke ours. For the last several months, I’ve been coming to the gym every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday to work out and train with him. The last time I came here was a couple of days before the guys and I had our sleepover.

People always complain about Monday, but today was seriously crappy. The second week of school has barely started, and I’m already wishing it was the weekend again. If only so I can lock myself in my room and pretend everything’s alright and normal for a while. I practically begged Liam to drive me straight here to the gym as soon as the final bell rang today.

Things have been weird with the guys since the football game on Friday, and it's making me feel like I'm losing my freaking mind.

“Take a break. Get some fucking water or something,” Adrian snaps.

Flipping him off, I hop off the fighting platform and walk over to the corner of the room where my water bottle is. I spend a few minutes rehydrating and trying to calm down. Even if Adrian's being an ass, there's no reason I need to take my bad mood out on him. I came here to let out some of my frustration and to try to focus on something other than the drama with the guys. So far, all I've done is irritate Adrian and spiral into a shittier mood.

“So, are you going to explain what's wrong?” Adrian walks over to stand in front of me, crossing his arms with a scowl on his face.

He's a seriously scary-looking guy, at first glance. He's got to be close to six foot five, and he's massive with bulging muscles and tattoos covering his arms all the way down to his knuckles. There are even a few tattoos peeking out from the collar of his tank. The scruff along his jaw and the steely look he has in his blue eyes when he's training only help add to the intimidating façade. I've gotten to know him pretty well over the past few months, and I know he's a genuinely nice person with a heart of gold. The guys basically worship him, and I think he's been a wonderful influence and friend to all of them. I know he's been an amazing friend to me. Teaching me to fight and helping me grow physically stronger has helped me gain confidence in myself, and it's become such a fun and healthy way to handle some of my anger issues.

“I’m sorry.” I sigh. “I know it’s been a while since I trained. I’m just a little rusty.”

“That’s bullshit.” His eyes narrow into slits. “You’re sloppier, slower, and more distracted today than the first day you came here, and you’d never had any formal training before that. I get you’ve been busy with school and shit, so I can get over the fact that your scrawny ass missed a few workouts.”

I purse my lips at the word *scrawny*. Maybe when I first moved here, yeah. I was way too skinny and undisciplined. I’m still small now too, but I’ve gained close to twenty pounds since I moved in with Arthur. Most of that’s muscle, and I’ve never looked or felt healthier.

He pauses to grin at the look on my face, tapping at the side of his temple as he continues. “Whatever your problem is today, it’s in your head. So, you can either tell me what it is, or you can run on the treadmill for an hour and then take your issues out on the punching bags until your arms fall off.”

“Ugh, come on.” I groan. Anyone else might think he’s joking, but I don’t put it past him to scream directions mixed with insults at me until my arms fall off. Or until I pass out. Whichever happens first. “I’ll do better.”

Adrian shakes his head as he stares down at me with a pensive expression. It’s like he’s trying to see inside my head. I avert my eyes from his, turning to look through the window along the wall into the main area of the gym. I can’t see them, but I know Liam, Grayson, and Remy are still around. Elliot’s stuck at football practice, as usual, and Sebastian’s probably still at his Yearbook club meeting with *Summer*.

“Let’s head to my office. We’re overdue for a heart to heart, kid.” Adrian slaps my shoulder, nodding his head at the

door leading out of the training room.

My heart pounds in my chest at his words, even as I willingly follow him. It's not because I don't trust him. I feel really comfortable around Adrian, and I don't mind talking to him. He knows a little about my past, as far as me spending some time in juvie and group homes before I moved in with Arthur and Sebastian. I don't mind him knowing any of that stuff, or even some of the stuff with my mom.

Truthfully, I'm more concerned that if he pushes enough, I'm gonna blurt out the whole mess with the guys and how I'm in love with all of them. Somehow, that's way more embarrassing to think about admitting to Adrian. He cares about the guys a lot, like they're his little brothers. They've all confided things in him, and they're really close. I'm worried Adrian's going to feel defensive of them and end our training sessions altogether once he realizes I'm coming between the guys and jeopardizing their friendships with one another. I'm also worried I'll lose his respect. I've worked really hard since I started training here, and I love that he treats me like an equal. If I present such a stupid, girly problem to him, I worry his opinion of me will change.

We walk down the hallway at the back of the gym where the staff areas and locker rooms are. Since he's one of the managers here, Adrian has his own office. He opens the door and gestures for me to step inside, and I sigh in defeat as I do so. I take my time looking around the space before taking a seat in the cushy, dark blue armchair situated in front of his desk. There are a few trophies and plaques around the room, as well as a few photos on the wall of his time spent fighting professionally in the UFC. On his desk, there's a picture of Adrian with who I presume to be his parents and a younger brother. The photograph looks like it's at least a few years old

—Adrian appears younger and doesn't have half as many tattoos as he does now.

“Is that your family?” I ask, and he nods in confirmation. “I didn't know you had a brother.”

Adrian sits across from me at his desk. “Yeah, Declan. He's your age, actually. He lives out in California with my dad and stepmom.”

I nod mutely, unsure of how to continue the conversation. I tend to blurt out random things in moments like this, so I make an effort to keep my lips clamped shut.

Adrian raises his eyebrows and steeple his fingers together on his desk. “So?”

“So, what?” I shrug, playing stupid. “I already said I was sorry. I'm just in a bad mood today.”

Instead of calling me out for trying to avoid a real conversation, he smiles kindly. “You've been coming here for months, and I don't think we've ever talked about me. I'm assuming your boys told you about my past?”

Even though he doesn't seem angry, I can't help shifting uncomfortably. Both because he referred to the guys as *my boys*, but also because I feel some shame at knowing things about Adrian I probably shouldn't. I know he started fighting professionally when he was eighteen, and that he was just starting to get popular and make a name for himself when he got caught up in a drug scandal. He ended up going to prison for a couple of years for drug possession. But I know he's clean now, and has been for over three years since he got out and started working here.

“Yeah. A little,” I admit quietly.

“Then you probably know I used to be a stupid fucking kid who tried to throw his life away, and I spit in everyone’s face who tried to help me,” he says. “I don’t know all the details and shit of everything you’ve been through, but I know you’ve got at least as many demons as I do. So, I know better than anyone that a bad day or a shitty mood for someone like us can be a trigger that leads you down a really dark hole that’s really fucking hard to get out of.”

I slump down into my chair and lean back, looking down shamefully into my lap. He’s kind of right. All weekend, I’ve been making myself sick worrying about the guys and how I should deal with my feelings. Every time they argue, every time something happens that makes Sebastian pull away from everyone, the more I tell myself the guys are better off without me in their lives. All they’ve done all weekend since the football game is argue and throw unnecessary jabs at each other. It feels like it’s my fault. My fault for making them fight over me, my fault for not being honest about my feelings, my fault for letting them flirt with me and for making them think I’m interested in their advances, and my fault for being greedy in the first place.

Sebastian told me at the game that they’ll be friends no matter what, but he doesn’t know the truth about how I feel. I was an idiot to think it was okay to keep pushing everyone’s boundaries, by being so open to Remy and Elliot’s affections in front of everybody. Clearly, my behavior on Friday is what set everything off and made things messier.

“It’s just...” I trail off, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks. Adrian nods encouragingly, and I clear my throat. “It’s the guys. Things are so complicated, and I feel like I’m making things worse. They’re all acting like they’re mad at Sebastian,

which is definitely my fault, and now Sebastian's hanging out with this freaking girl named *Summer*."

"Summer, huh?" He grins. When I frown, he rolls his eyes. "Oh, come on, kid. I'm not going to pretend to be ignorant. You've got all five of those guys wrapped around your finger, and it's hilarious. If they need to throw a few punches at each other to figure their shit out with you, that's on them. They'll be fine, and so will you. And I seriously doubt you've got anything to worry about when it comes to some other girl."

"They're not just throwing punches." I furrow my eyebrows in frustration. "I'm pretty sure they have a bet going. To, like, see which of them I'll go out with or something. So, they're constantly trying to one-up each other when they flirt with me, and now there are all these rumors about us going around school. I don't care about that, but they do. One second, they'll be touching me, calling me pet names, and being all cute. Then they'll turn around and act surprised when someone calls me a slut, and they jump to blame each other. It's just getting worse every day, and we've only been in school a week. I'm scared of hurting their feelings. Or worse, ruining their friendship."

I'm still not sure what happened exactly, but Sebastian somehow found out about the weird, intimate moment I shared with Elliot and Remy during gym class on Friday. The only thing that makes sense to me is that Summer said something to him about it, which makes me feel bitter and conflicted. Sebastian flipped out at the guys about it on Saturday when we were all hanging out, which ruined the rest of the weekend. Saturday was supposed to be our day, the only day Elliot wasn't busy with football, where we could relax and put everything crappy aside for a little while to enjoy each other's

company. Instead, it set off all this drama and tension that's carried through to today.

"Christ, they're morons." Adrian snorts. "But that shouldn't surprise me. Have you called them out on their bullshit?"

"No." I take a deep breath, staring down at my shaking hands. It's too hard to meet Adrian's eyes. I won't be able to take it if he looks disgusted at what I'm about to admit. "If I did, I think they'd just force me to pick between them. And there's no way I could ever do that. Not when I feel the same way for all of them."

"Ah." That's all he says. God, I'd seriously love to disappear right about now. Adrian is the first person I've told about how I feel for the guys, and I still can't say outright that I'm in love with all five of them. It's pathetic. I guess it's as good a test as any, since I've been planning on telling Olivia at our upcoming sleepover. I'm seriously rethinking that decision now.

"I know it's wrong—"

"Stop." Adrian cuts me off. I hesitantly look up and meet his eyes with a grimace. He shakes his head at me. "I've got no right to judge you for shit, kid. And really, it's not all that surprising to hear you feel that way. The six of you are close, and you understand each other in ways nobody else ever will. So, you know, I get it. I also get what you mean about things being complicated, and I'm sorry kids at your school are being dicks."

"It's okay," I whisper. Mostly, I'm too shocked to say anything else. Adrian said he gets it. *He understands*. The relief I feel at his acceptance is overwhelming, I want to cry.

“Now, I’m not gonna pretend I have some magical solution, but I can still give you some advice.”

I’ll take any advice I can get. It’s pretty clear I have no idea what I’m doing. Pretending to be ignorant about the way the guys are acting isn’t working, and neither is winging it day after day.

“Ignore them and stop worrying so much about what they’re doing or how they’re feeling,” he says, like it’s simple and obvious.

I feel my eyebrows scrunch together, and I give him an unimpressed look. “That’s easy for you to say. I have almost all my classes with them, and we do practically everything together. Despite everything, they’re still my best friends. Plus, Sebastian and I *live together*, which is a whole other issue.”

“Make some more friends.” He shrugs. “You’re all too fucking intertwined in each other’s lives, and you need some distance. While they figure out how they’re gonna handle being in a shared relationship with you—if that’s what you want, that is—you need to do your own thing. Join a club they aren’t in, spend some time away from them. Focus on *you*. Do you have your license yet, or maybe a bus pass so you don’t need to rely on them as much for rides? What about kids at school? Are they all dickheads, or have you met anyone you’d be interested in hanging out with?”

It feels like Adrian’s slapped me, but in a good sort of way. Is he right? It sounds kind of obvious the more he speaks. The guys and I are extremely entangled and involved in each other’s lives, and that makes it hard to focus on anything outside of us or our group. It’s nice in many ways, but it’s probably not all that healthy either.

“My uncle’s helping me with my hours so I can get my license soon, and I have made a couple of other friends already.” Olivia and I have gotten close, mostly because she texts me almost constantly. But I really like Emily, Benji, and Zack too. They’ve all been really nice, and maybe it wouldn’t hurt to try and hang out with them more outside of school. “All the school clubs suck though.”

Liam and I looked through the list of clubs the other day. Our school system seems to focus most of its budget and attention on sports. The options for non-sport related clubs are limited, and I didn’t see anything I find interesting. We considered joining the environmental club, but they only get together once a month.

Adrian opens a drawer in his desk and pulls out what looks like a planner. He flips through the pages until he finds whatever he’s looking for, and then he looks up at me with a grin. “If you’re that desperate to fill your schedule, why don’t you volunteer here? I’m starting a mixed martial arts class on Thursday evenings, and you can be my assistant. I’ll make sure the guys know they’re banned during that time slot, so they won’t be allowed in the training room during the class.”

That sounds kind of fun, and my interest is definitely piqued. “Really? You’d want *me* as your assistant?”

“Sure. You’re good, especially for someone just starting out. It’ll be a wake-up call for any douchebags overloaded with testosterone who come in here thinking they’re hot shit when they immediately get their asses kicked by a little girl.”

I giggle at the memory of the first time I met Adrian when I was tricked into thinking I’d have to fight him. I surprised him and myself when I was able to knock him on his ass.

“Okay. That sounds pretty awesome. I’ll ask Arthur when I get home, but I’m sure he’ll be okay with it.”

After scribbling a note in his calendar and giving me a copy of the gym’s class schedule for the month of September, he asks if I’m feeling better enough to continue our original training session. Surprisingly, I am. I feel like a weight has been lifted from my chest. After telling Adrian about my feelings and dilemma with the guys, and especially after listening to his advice, it doesn’t feel like I’m stuck in this big, complicated web of problems anymore. Maybe I’ll feel differently tomorrow, and all my anxiety will return tenfold. But I’ve never felt this good after an actual therapy session, so maybe Adrian’s on to something.

After we leave his office, Adrian heads to the training room to wait for me while I go to the bathroom. I consider checking on Liam, Grayson, and Remy, but I decide they’re probably fine without me. When I walk out of the bathroom, I slam straight into somebody and almost fall back onto my butt. I hiss and rub my forehead where I collided with the person.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” I blink at Ms. Kinsley’s voice. She’s rubbing her forehead too, clearly in as much pain as I am, but she grins when she recognizes me. “Oh, Charlotte! Wow, what a coincidence! What are you doing here?”

“Hi.” I laugh awkwardly. It’s super weird seeing her outside of school. “Nothing, really. I mean, I work out here. I was just heading back to my trainer. What about you?”

“Ah, you know. New town, new job, new me. Dating’s hard enough at my age, so I figured getting a gym membership and trying to get in better shape couldn’t hurt. It’s my first time here, and I guess I made a wrong turn when I came out of the locker room.”

“Oh.” I smile. She always rambles, and she’s so clumsy. But she’s such a genuinely nice person, I can’t help but like her. “Do you want me to show you around?”

“Sure, that would be awesome!” We walk down the hallway toward the main part of the gym, and she asks, “So, you said something about your trainer? What are you training for?”

I explain how when I moved here, my friends got me into MMA since they’re all interested in the sport. At first, she’s surprised to learn that I enjoy something so violent and physical, but she’s not judgmental. She seems fascinated. Before I can point out some of the easier workout machines that might be more fitting for Ms. Kinsley’s first time here at the gym, Adrian storms out of the training room and stomps over to me.

“Well, take your fucking time, your majesty. It’s not like I have anything better to do than wait for your scrawny ass.”

So much for our heart to heart. It’s been, like, not even ten minutes since I left his office, and he’s already back to being an asshole. I cross my arms and glare at him before addressing my counselor. “Ms. Kinsley, this is my trainer, Adrian.”

His eyes snap to my side where she’s standing, and his expression transforms to one of shock and awe. His jaw drops, and a blush rises to his cheeks. I’d almost swear the guy has heart eyes as he stares at Ms. Kinsley. I can’t decide if it’s cute or hilarious. When I turn to see her reaction to him, she’s staring back at him in pretty much the same way.

“Oh. Wow, hi.” She giggles and sets her hands on her hips, bringing more attention to her exaggerated curves. “I’m Rachel. You can call me Rachel.” She attempts to brush her

ponytail over her shoulder, but she ends up overdoing it and hitting herself in the face with her hair.

So painfully and adorably awkward. It only gets worse when Adrian gives her a shy smile and practically purrs her name. “Rachel. Nice to meet you. Do you need any help? Need someone to show you around? I can help you out with whatever you need.”

Her face turns redder than his, and she lets out another high-pitched giggle. “That would be great, thank you. If you’re not too busy, I mean.”

“No, it’s no problem at all. Charlotte and I were just finishing up, anyway.” Adrian beams at her. And I swear, he actually puffs his chest out and flexes his arms.

I can’t help it. I’ve never seen Adrian like this. To see him fall apart within seconds of meeting Ms. Kinsley—especially after all the times he’s made fun of the guys for being the same way around me—it’s too much. I laugh quietly, and Adrian turns to glare at me before I can stop it or try to cover it up.

“Punching bags,” he barks, pointing at the door to the training room. “Until your arms fall off.”

ELLIOT



FOOTBALL IS FUCKING HELL.

I don't know what's worse. Waking up at four in the morning to run three miles before working out with the team before school every day, the constant pressure from my dad about my future and my position on the team, the fact that I'm forced to spend time with people I despise on a daily basis, or the grueling, two-hour practices after school where I practically fucking kill myself.

Only eleven more weeks and nine more games, assuming we don't make it to the State Championships. Then I'm fucking done.

Until next year, at least.

"You good, bro?" Zack Philips punches my shoulder lightly.

I nod, keeping my head down while I pretend to finish putting on my cleats. I'm good at football, even if I hate it. The better positions, like quarterback, are typically reserved especially for seniors on the team. For a junior, I'm supposedly pretty lucky to play left tackle. I'm in better shape than a lot of the guys on the team—even the ones who are bigger than me, or the ones who have been playing longer.

That doesn't stop them from trying to kick my ass on the field during practice. More than they need to, I mean. I'm still sore from practice yesterday and my workout this morning, but that's nothing new.

From the moment football practice starts for the season, I'm pretty much in a constant state of pain, stress, and exhaustion.

"You sure?" he whispers, glancing over his shoulder at the rest of the team still dressing out in the locker room.

"Yeah, I'm cool." I stand up and offer Zack a reserved smile. He knows as well as I do that Coach will probably be harder on me than a lot of the other guys, and he knows the seniors and some of the bigger assholes in our year will find joy in pummeling me on the field whenever they can get away with it. I'm also trying really hard not to show that it bothers me when my teammates call me a cuck or start talking shit about my friends. It's always worse when I react or try to defend them.

Coach shouts at us to get our asses on the field, and everyone enthusiastically makes their way outside. I trail behind my teammates, sticking near Zack and Ethan. They're the closest thing I have to friends on the team, and I appreciate that they never join in with the hazing I'm forced to endure. They've never once said anything derogatory about Charlotte or my friends either, at least where I can hear.

"Hey, cuck!" someone calls out. I grit my teeth and refuse to respond or react. It's the stupidest insult, but most of the guys think it's fucking hilarious to call me that ever since Mike and Tim started spreading bullshit about Charlotte sleeping with both me and Remy.

Not that we've done anything to make people think any differently. In fact, we've made things a lot fucking worse. Especially after the dumbass stunt we pulled on Friday during gym class. I should have known it would bite us in the ass when Mike, Tim, Summer, and Madison walked by and saw us messing around. They exaggerated, of course, saying we were seconds away from having a threesome in broad daylight in the middle of class, but it's their word against ours. Madison has been spreading that shit like wildfire through the school, and it's all anyone will talk about.

I haven't had a chance to apologize or really talk to Charlotte at all about it. It makes me sick that she's the target of these rumors, and it's all my fault. It was bad enough when the guys and I were flirting with her at school in front of everyone before the shit Remy and I pulled.

The really fucked up part of it all is that I've probably jacked off thinking about that moment between me, Charlotte, and Remy at least twenty times since it happened. It doesn't matter how guilty I feel for helping to fuel the rumors and for pushing Charlotte into that position in the first place. I still can't stop thinking about it or wondering what might have happened if we'd been in private when it happened.

Someone shoves me hard, and I look up with a glare. I usually try to keep my head down during practices and shit, but today, I might just snap.

"Did you hear me?" Jude Foster grins down at me. He's got almost half a foot on me in height, but he's a fucking pussy. I can lift twice as much as he can, and he throws up after conditioning drills at least half the time. If he pushes me too far today, at least I know I'll easily win in a fight against him.

“What?” I grunt, clenching my fists at my side.

His grin widens. He’s an idiot if he thinks he has any chance against me. Enduring my dad’s wrath for getting kicked off the team and suspended from school for fighting might be worth it just to wipe the smug expression from his face.

“Your slutty girlfriend’s outside. Guess none of your friends were around to satisfy her, so she had to resort to waiting around for you.”

My heart jumps into my throat. Is Charlotte okay? Did something happen? Why is she alone instead of with at least one of the guys? I shove past Jude, ignoring the peal of laughter from the team as I hurry ahead of them. Once I reach the field, I look around frantically until I spot Charlotte sitting in the front row of the bleachers.

She looks fine, but I can’t help thinking the worst. The past couple of days have been brutal with the rumors going around. She was irritated over the weekend, even if she didn’t say it out loud to me or any of the other guys.

“Hey,” I call out as I run over to her. My eyes roam over her, checking for any sign that she’s hurt or upset. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” She smiles shyly, standing up to step in front of me as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Hi, sorry. I wasn’t sure what the rules were, but Olivia said football players’ girlfriends watch during practice all the time.”

My brain momentarily combusts, and a grin spreads across my face as soon as I realize she’s okay. That maybe she’s here to see me for no other reason than that she simply wanted to. “Girlfriend?”

Her cheeks redden, which is fucking adorable. “I mean, I know I’m not your actual girlfriend. I thought maybe I could sit out here until your practice is over? And maybe we can hang out afterwards for a little while?”

I want to tell her she should be my girlfriend. That she’d make me the happiest, luckiest guy in the fucking world, and I’d cherish and adore her forever. That maybe I’m really not joking every time I mention us getting married someday. But I manage to keep my cool, giving her a small smile as I reach out to hold her hand in mine.

“Where are the guys?” I ask. Partially to check that nothing new is wrong, like I was initially worried about. But also, because the team’s words wriggle through my brain, poking at my insecurities. Is Charlotte here as a last resort, or because she chose to seek me out above everyone else?

“They went home, I think.” Charlotte shrugs. “I told them I was sticking around and not to worry about me. I thought you could use a friendly face out here for once. You’ve had it pretty hard the past few days, and we’ve barely had a real chance to talk since Friday.”

Something settles in my chest, even as my heart skips a fucking beat. I can’t help smiling down at her in awe. This amazing, sweet, gorgeous girl has been through some terrible shit, and people who don’t know her continue to put her down and make her life harder. And here she is, worrying about me? I don’t deserve her.

“Come here, gorgeous.” I pull her against my chest and hug her tightly, pressing my face to the top of her head. It’s everything when she hugs me back just as hard. God, I love her. I’ve been saying that for months, but I think I might really, actually be in fucking love with her. I don’t care that we’re

young or that things are kinda weird and messy with the rest of the guys right now. It's never been clearer to me than it is right now that she's the one. Charlotte Reynolds is it for me.

When Coach blows his whistle and shouts something about lining up for drills, I grudgingly pull away from Charlotte with an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I gotta go. You sure you're okay sitting here? It'll probably be a couple hours before I'm done."

She nods, a smile lighting up her face. "I brought a book, so I'll be fine."

I chuckle. Of course she did. A couple of the seniors on the team have long-time girlfriends who usually hang out on the bleachers while we practice, but Charlotte's the only one here today. It makes me feel really fucking cool to know she's here for me, and the guys on the team can suck my dick if they have anything to say about it. It's not like they have any girls out here supporting them.

Coach yells my name, so I quickly kiss Charlotte's cheek before hurrying over to the team.



THE SECOND PRACTICE ENDS, I TURN TO SPRINT INTO THE GYM. Usually, practice feels like it drags on forever. Today, it went by quickly and smoothly, for once, and I'm sure that's because of Charlotte. Every time I looked up to see her sitting on the bleachers, her nose stuck in her book, I couldn't help feeling happy. Knowing she was there for me, waiting to spend time with me, made all the difference in the world. She gave me something to look forward to, a reason to want to do well.

I'm finishing up with my shower and pulling my regular clothes on by the time most of the team enters the locker room. Ethan laughs at me and teases, "Where's the fire, Spencer?"

I flip him off with a grin. "Don't wanna keep my girl waiting any longer."

"You'll have to tell her to come to more practices," Zack says. "You were fucking great today, bro. Even Coach said so."

He did, several times. Coach Wade is friends with my dad, so I can't help disliking him on principle alone. He's not actually a bad guy, and he's a pretty decent coach, all things considered. But his friendship with my dad is one of the reasons he's always pushing me hard and griping at me about reaching my potential. He made it clear today that he was pleased with the effort and energy I brought to our practice, and he told me to keep it up. It was nice to hear, even if I have no real interest in football or being on this team.

It would be nice if Charlotte came to all my practices, but that's a lot to ask. I'm lucky she came to one, and that she came to my game. Fuck, I'm lucky to know her and call her my friend, period. Everything else is just a huge bonus.

Before I can slip my shoes on and run the fuck out of here, Ethan stops me by placing his hand on my shoulder. Quickly peering over his shoulder to see if any of our other teammates are paying any attention, he lowers his voice. "It's a good sign though, right? She wore your jacket and number on Game Day, and now she's here. The team will probably cool down with the name calling once your friends back off and admit you won."

I jerk back and stare at him like he's lost his mind. "What? What the fuck are you talking about?"

“It’s none of our business,” Zack hisses at his best friend. He grimaces at me apologetically and shrugs. “But Olivia told us you guys are betting on which of you Charlotte will go out with.”

“Shit.” Shit, shit, shit. If Olivia knows about our stupid bet—and how the fuck *does* Olivia know about it?—then there’s a very good chance Charlotte knows. Or if she doesn’t, she’ll probably figure it out soon. Those two have gotten really close in a really short period of time. Charlotte informed us they’re having a slumber party this weekend, and the guys and I aren’t allowed to be anywhere near the vicinity when it happens.

Should I come clean and tell her about the competition? It’s not really a bet, but I guess it’s close enough to call it that. She might be pissed, but the guys and I deserve that. I can’t guess how she might react. The whole thing is stupid, and the rules Sebastian insisted on are even stupider. Why are we competing for her, anyway? Charlotte’s not a fucking prize to be won. If she likes one of us, that’s all there is to it.

And if she likes more than one of us...well, shit. I don’t know. What do we do if that happens? It feels wrong to ask her to choose between us, if that’s the case. She’s *one of us*.

My brain’s been more messed up about the possibility she might like more than one of us ever since Remy and I messed around with Charlotte on Friday. That whole situation made me realize I don’t feel jealous of the guys. Not when they flirt with her. Not when they talk about liking her or wanting to be with her. And clearly, it doesn’t even bother me when I think about Charlotte kissing them or going fucking further than that with them.

Maybe something’s wrong with me. A normal person would say that if I don’t feel jealous about Charlotte and the

guys, I must not care about her as much as they do. But that's not true. I love her. Maybe Grayson doesn't feel jealous either. Maybe that's why he asked the question in the first place.

I've got to talk to him. As soon as possible, so we can figure this out. In the meantime, the guys and I seriously need to cut this shit out with our bet and cool it with the flirting. It's gotten out of control, and we've barely been in school more than a week.

I wave at Ethan and Zack over my shoulder without saying a word, quickly making my way outside. Charlotte's sitting in the same spot I last saw her, completely engrossed in her book. She looks focused and pretty. My panic slowly ebbs away every step closer I take to her. She calms me and makes me feel at ease whenever I'm around her, and I remind myself she showed up to my practice because she wanted to spend time with me. Even if that meant having to wait for hours.

"Hey." I stop in front of her, smiling like an idiot. I still feel a little nervous, but being near her is good enough to outweigh anything negative I might feel.

She blinks in surprise when she looks up from her book, and her whole face lights up with a smile when she sees me. "Hey! Wow, you're done already?"

A laugh slips out, and my grin widens. "Already? You say that like you haven't been sitting here for two hours, gorgeous."

"I guess I didn't realize. It only felt like a few minutes," she says, shaking her head in bewilderment. I hate reading, so it's always fucking crazy to me that she can sit and read a book for hours at a time without getting bored. Charlotte shrugs and gives me a bashful smile. "You did a really good job at your practice though!"

Another laugh rumbles in my chest, and I bend down to pick her up. She squeals and giggles when I toss her over my shoulder, and I continue to tease her. “I did a good job, huh? How would you know? I bet you didn’t look up from your book once since you got here.”

Her giggling is like music to my ears. I’m glad she knows I’m making fun of her, and that I’m not actually pissed. It means a lot that she was here no matter what. She could have slept through the practice, and I’d still have been just as happy. Careful not to drop her, I reach down to grab her book and toss it in her bag before throwing it over my other shoulder along with my duffel.

Charlotte’s fucking tiny and precious, and she weighs hardly anything. It’s easy to carry her all the way to the parking lot like that, and we continue teasing each other. I’m lucky she’s wearing jeans today, because I know she’d feel too uncomfortable to let me carry her like this if she was in a dress or a skirt.

I don’t set her down until we’re next to my truck. She leans back against the driver door, tilting her head up to meet my eyes with a mischievous smile. I lean over her, resting my arm over her head. I know I told myself earlier that the guys and I need to cool it with the flirting and competing for her attention, but it’s hard not to flirt with her. Especially when we’re alone like this. She makes it too easy.

“So, where do you wanna go, gorgeous?” I ask. “I’m all yours until I’m summoned home for dinner in an hour or two, and I’ll take you wherever you wanna go.”

“Hmm...” She taps her chin like she’s thinking about it. “The park? Or maybe we can just drive around. I really don’t

care where we go. Anywhere is fine, as long as we can hang out and talk.”

“Sounds perfect.” I bring my hand up to cup her cheek, and I lean down like I’m going to kiss her. I’m really fucking close to doing it, especially when I hear her breath catch as her eyes fall to my lips.

I could do it. I could just kiss her. I could ask her out, maybe even tell her I love her. Go big or go home, right? I’m positive she’d kiss me back. If the way she’s leaning closer to me—not to mention, the way she reacted to the way I touched her and talked to her with Remy on Friday—is any indication, she’s very interested in kissing me.

At the last second, I chicken out and kiss her forehead instead. I feel like a dumbass, but I’m worried about what might happen after the fact. Things are iffy enough between me and the guys right now, which sucks. I hate fighting with them about anything, but especially about Charlotte. Sebastian and Remy have made it clear they’re not interested in finding a different solution, so I need to talk to Grayson first. And if talking to him doesn’t get us anywhere, then maybe I need to talk to Charlotte and tell her honestly what we’re all feeling and going through.

“I’m not mad at you!” Charlotte blurts out.

I raise my eyebrows in surprise, and grin when I realize she’s blushing. I don’t know where her comment came from, but sometimes she blurts out random shit when she gets nervous or whenever her thoughts get too tangled. It might be one of my favorite things about her, even though she hates it. “Well, that’s good to know.”

She grimaces, laughing quietly like she feels awkward. “Sorry. I thought maybe you were worried. I know Remy was.

After the, um, *incident*, in gym class on Friday. I told him I wasn't upset or anything, but I haven't really had a chance to talk to you about it. I'm not even mad about the rumors people are spreading because of it. I mean, that sucks, but that's not your fault. Or Remy's. It was, you know, kind of nice, what you guys did. And, well, I don't want you thinking I'm secretly angry or blaming you for anything, and I really, really hate that you're all fighting with each other because of it."

It takes my brain several seconds to catch up and process everything she just threw at me. First, it's a huge relief to know she's not mad at me or Remy for what we did. I've been stressing about it. It's also an even bigger relief to hear she doesn't blame us for the new rumors. She's such a strong fucking person for that, and even more so for not giving a shit about the rumors in general.

Second, when the hell did she talk to Remy about what happened? That sly fucking bastard. It honestly wouldn't surprise me to find out he's kissed her already without telling any of us.

And last, I'm pretty sure she just admitted she was into it. Into messing around with me and Remy *at the same fucking time*. In public. Holy shit. *Holy shit*.

"Oh, god." She groans, covering her face with her hands. "I just word-vomited all over you. I—crap. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I laugh, pulling her into a hug. I'm kind of in shock, but I don't want her to feel embarrassed. I sway back and forth softly, holding her close, and I kiss the top of her head. And fuck, I'm grinning so hard, my cheeks hurt. "You can word-vomit on me any time you want, gorgeous."

She punches my arm, which makes me snort. But I don't let her go. Resting my cheek on top of her head, I lower my

voice to a soft whisper. “Thank you. I was worried, honestly. I’ve been meaning to apologize for how we acted. It was fun, but I never stopped to wonder if we were making you uncomfortable until after the fact. So, even if you’re not mad, I’m still sorry. As for the rumors, I swear I’d punch every fucking person who says anything bad about you if I wasn’t worried about getting kicked from the team. The second football season’s over though, all bets are off.”

“My knight in shining armor,” she laughs, shaking her head.

I pull back just enough to meet her eyes, using my fingers to tilt her chin up. Her smile is shy, her cheeks are pink and rosy, and her forest green eyes are so fucking beautiful that I could stare into them for hours.

“I’ll talk to the guys.” I clear my throat. “I hate fighting with them too.”

We should all know better by now that people at this school will look for any reason to talk shit about us. It’s usually Remy, Sebastian, and Grayson getting the brunt of it. We should have known Charlotte would be an easy target, being new and being the only girl in our group. We made everything worse when we decided to start our stupid bet.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

Now that we’ve gotten all that out in the open, I feel a lot more at ease. I can enjoy the afternoon in her company without worrying, and I’m excited. Walking around to the other side of the truck, I toss our bags in the back seat before opening the passenger door for Charlotte. While she’s buckling her seatbelt, something catches my attention from the corner of my eye.

I glance across the parking lot, and then I do a double take. A woman is staring back at me. She's got to be less than twenty yards from me, but it still feels like my eyes are playing tricks. There's nothing all that special about the woman's appearance—she's got long, dark brown hair, she's wearing jeans and a blue sweater, and she's standing next to a beat-up Honda Civic.

No. Nothing special at all. Except that she looks an awful lot like my mom.

“What's wrong?” Charlotte asks.

I whip my head back to stare at her, feeling lost and confused. “I—I don't know. I think...”

It's been eight years since I've seen my mom. Eight years since I've spoken to her. Almost seven years since I last heard from her, and that was only from a postcard she sent with no return address. It can't be her. Why would she be here now, after all this time?

When I turn around to look at the woman again, positive I'm mistaken and losing my mind, she's getting into her car. Without thinking, I take a few steps forward, like I'm going to walk over to her. I'm too late. She starts the car and speeds out of the parking lot without a backward glance.

ELLIOT



“TEXT ME LATER?” CHARLOTTE ASKS.

“Of course.” I grin. And because I’m an idiot who can’t get enough of her, I lean down to kiss her cheek. Even though I’ve already said goodbye, hugged her, and kissed her cheek twice before this.

She laughs and heads inside, waving at me one final time over her shoulder. After we left the high school parking lot, we ended up getting milkshakes from Sonic and going to the park like Charlotte suggested. We sat and talked, and it was really nice. We didn’t talk about anything all that serious, and we didn’t bring up the rumors or the moment between me, her, and Remy again.

I could spend every afternoon like this, and I’d be the happiest guy alive.

Checking my watch, I quickly head next door to Grayson’s house. My stepmom texted me a few minutes ago, warning me that I need to be home for dinner in forty-five minutes. It’s a generous timeframe, coming from her. Usually, I’m lucky to get a ten-minute warning. My dad is always pissed when I’m late, and Victoria doesn’t keep it a secret that she enjoys seeing him pissed at me.

But since I have a little extra time for once, I figure it's a better time than any to talk to Grayson about what the fuck we're going to do about Charlotte. I knock loudly on his front door, shuffling my feet nervously while I wait.

His mom, Evelyn, answers. Her eyes light up when she sees me, and she opens the door wider as she gestures for me to come in. "Hi, Elliot. I didn't know you were coming over."

I give her a charming smile and shrug. Grayson's moms have always been great to me and the guys. They're really supportive, and they always make an effort to make us feel at home whenever we come over. His other mom, Ava, has helped Arthur a ton with legal shit too. First after Sebastian's mom died, then when Sebastian got arrested for putting Josh Pelzer in the hospital, and now with Charlotte. I'm pretty sure Remy's grandma has asked her for legal advice too, and it's so fucking cool that she'd make the effort to help out in that way. I know that if I ever got into real trouble, I'd be able to reach out to Grayson's moms for help. No questions asked.

"Gray and I didn't have plans. I was dropping Charlotte off at home, and I figured I'd stop by and chill for a second. If that's okay."

She closes the door behind me and laughs. "You know you're always welcome. Gray's in his room if you want to head upstairs."

I quickly thank her before rushing up the stairs two at a time. I know my way around their house almost as well as my own. Grayson's house isn't quite as big as mine, but it's a lot nicer and homier. Every wall is covered in art or family photos, and every room feels warm, inviting, and lived in. Not like my house, which feels like a stuffy museum where I'm not allowed to touch anything.

By the time I make it to the top of the stairs, I can hear Grayson playing guitar. I consider sneaking up on him since he's not expecting me, and it would be fucking hilarious to scare the shit out of him. But I decide we don't have time for that.

Without knocking, I throw open his bedroom door with a grin. From his bed, Grayson laughs and stops playing. "Hey, dude. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know. I happened to be in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by." I close his door, kick off my shoes, and jump onto the end of his bed. Grayson grunts in annoyance before carefully placing his acoustic guitar on the floor.

"How's Charlotte?" he asks.

A dopey smile spreads across my face. "She's good. She's perfect."

"Cheesy motherfucker." He laughs and kicks my shin lightly before rolling his eyes. "Seb practically threw a fucking fit when she stayed behind at school to watch your practice."

That doesn't surprise me, but it's fucking irritating. "Whatever. He needs to get over it. She's *our* friend. Not just his. If she wants to watch me play football, or go to your band practice, or go shopping with Liam after school, that's her choice. I'm getting really sick and tired of him acting like a spoiled brat, and for making us feel bad for wanting to spend time with her."

Grayson nods along with me. "It's not fair, and he's making her feel bad about it too."

"Then he has the fucking balls to hang out with Summer Delaney? And he's gonna take her word over ours and Charlotte's about these dumbass rumors? Dude, it's fucked. He

can't say he's in love with Charlotte and get mad at us for feeling the same way, and then turn around and fuck off with Summer two seconds later."

I breathe angrily out of my nose, desperately trying to calm down. I didn't come over here to bitch with Grayson about Sebastian. This is our whole problem, anyway. We've been fighting for what feels like weeks, and it needs to end. Charlotte's all but begged us to stop fighting. After my conversation with her today, it's obvious she feels guilty and like she's constantly stuck in the middle of our stupid arguments.

"He says he doesn't like Summer anymore, but..." Grayson trails off, shrugging.

"Well, he needs to figure it out." If he still likes Summer, he needs to back off and calm the fuck down about Charlotte. I won't have him making our girl jealous or hurting her feelings. I glance nervously at Grayson, knowing I need to just spit out the question I came here to ask. But first, I say, "We shouldn't be competing for her. This whole bet was a really, really stupid idea."

"Agreed. I wasn't into the idea in the first place, but you, Seb, and Remy seemed pretty determined."

That's something, at least. If he's willing to cool it on the competition shit, hopefully that'll take some pressure off Charlotte. Now that I think about it, the guys and I were pretty shitty with the way we ambushed Grayson. He wasn't in the right state of mind to deal with us fighting about something stupid, and to drag him into a bet he didn't want to take part in makes me feel awful.

"I'm not saying I don't like her," he says defensively. "Because I do."

“I know.” Of course he does. Why wouldn’t he like Charlotte? Why wouldn’t anyone like her? It’s no wonder my best friends fell for the same amazing girl I did, and I can’t blame them. “I wanted to talk to you away from everyone else because...well, I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said.”

“What I said about what?” He furrows his eyebrows.

A nervous chuckle escapes my throat. It’s bizarre to be thinking this, much less saying it out loud. But Grayson’s my best friend. He’s like my fucking brother. I can talk to him about anything. Right?

“I think maybe Charlotte likes more than one of us,” I say in a rush. Raising my eyebrows at him, I add, “Like, maybe all five of us? And maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

Grayson sits up and stares at me with his mouth agape like I’ve lost my goddamn mind. When he bursts out laughing, I can’t help feeling like an idiot. I guess I should have kept my fucked-up thoughts to myself.

“Oh, fuck.” He places his hands on top of his head and grins widely, still laughing. I can feel myself mentally withdrawing, and I silently gather my shattered ego so I can make my excuses to leave and never talk about this again. At least, until Gray quietly exclaims, “Dude, thank you. Fucking *thank you*. I’ve been trying to figure out how to talk to someone about this for months.”

Months? Seriously? It only occurred to me a couple of days ago that I’m okay with the idea of Charlotte having feelings for more than one person. And I still don’t know how to process that or what that means as far as the future for our group. Before I can blurt out all my questions and insecurities, I need to make sure Grayson’s on the same page I am.

“So, it doesn’t, uh...make you jealous? Charlotte liking me and the other guys?”

“No.” He shakes his head, and he’s still smiling. I let myself relax, tension leaking from my body as giddiness builds in my chest. Grayson gets me. Just like I knew he would. “Actually, it kinda makes me happy. I went all summer wishing I could talk to you guys about it. I mean, think about it. It just makes sense we’d all fall for the same girl after all the shit we’ve been through together. Charlotte fit perfectly in our group from day one, and she’d be an amazing girlfriend for all of us.”

“Wait.” I blink and shake my head, sitting up straight on the end of the bed. “Are you saying you think we could share her as our girlfriend?”

He nods slowly. Why didn’t that occur to me as a possibility? It makes so much fucking sense. We’re basically doing that already, aren’t we? We’re all flirting with her, all splitting our time to hang out with her one-on-one when we can, and constantly doing everything we can to make sure she’s the center of our group and our focus. Most of us even have pet names for her.

This would be the perfect solution! None of us have to be left out this way, and we wouldn’t have to worry about fighting or fucking up our friendship. Nothing would have to change. Except, this way, I’d be able to kiss Charlotte whenever the hell I want without having to worry about hurting anyone’s feelings.

“I know it sounds nuts,” Grayson says when I’m quiet for too long. I didn’t realize I was stuck in my head until he breaks the silence. He continues speaking before I can reassure

him. “But I’ve been doing some research. Polyamory is fairly common these days.”

“Poly-what?”

Grayson laughs nervously and gets up from his bed to go sit at his desk. I hop up too, walking over to stand behind him. He pulls up a few different tabs on his laptop, spinning around in his computer chair to smile at me. “Polyamory. My therapist told me about it. It’s when multiple people are in a relationship together.”

He shows me a bunch of websites and forums he’s found, explaining different variations of polyamorous relationships. There’s even something called polyandry, which is when a woman has more than one husband.

“Shit.” I shake my head back and forth at the screen. I’m fucking impressed. Grayson’s much more observant than anyone else I know, and more self-aware when it comes to his feelings. He figured out that we all felt the same way for Charlotte, figured out how we could potentially make it work, and did legitimate fucking research. I’m abso-fucking-lutely on board. “So, how do we do this? Just, like, all ask her to be our girlfriend at the same time?” That seems simple enough.

Snorting, he spins around and gives me a look like I’m stupid. “Oh, yeah, that’ll go well. Sebastian threw a bitch fit because Charlotte wanted to watch your football practice today. He tried to fucking ban us from kissing her, dude. And Remy? He might be quieter than Seb, but he’s just as fucking intense and obsessed. Have you seen how many sketchbooks he has filled with drawings of her? He’s lucky she doesn’t think it’s creepy. I can’t see him agreeing to share her any more than Sebastian would.”

“You might have a point,” I admit. Except, Remy didn’t seem all that jealous when we were messing around with Charlotte in gym class. He seemed just as into it as I did. So, maybe there’s still hope. If we can get him and Liam on board, it might be way easier to convince Sebastian that this is a genius idea.

“Besides.” Gray sighs. “Charlotte freaked out at me the second I started suggesting any of this.”

“Dude.” I’m actually speechless for a second. Grayson was ballsy enough to talk about this shit with Charlotte? Even when he was too scared to say anything to me or the guys? I’m even more impressed than I was before, even if part of me feels bad for making him feel like he couldn’t come to me in the first place. “What the hell did you say to her?”

He raises his hands in defense. “Now, before *you* freak out, you can admit you’re cool with Charlotte being with me, right? And Seb, Liam, and Remy? The thought of her being into them doesn’t bother you?”

I take another second to consider the question, shaking my head when I realize the thought only makes me happy. If Charlotte likes me enough to be my girlfriend, I’m already insanely lucky. If she has four other boyfriends, who are also my best friends, that doesn’t really make a difference or take away from how happy I’d be to call her mine. I’d be happy for her, happy for them, and really fucking happy for myself. Win, win, win.

Giving me another cool, calculated look, Grayson takes a deep breath. “Okay. Because I’m pretty sure Charlotte also has a crush on Alex. And he’s definitely into her too. He’s already tried asking her out multiple times since school started.”

My heart drops into my stomach, and I'm filled with a mixture of panic and anger. "No. No fucking way. How can she like him? She doesn't even know him. What the fuck? Did she say yes to going out with him?"

"I don't think so," he says. "Charlotte hasn't said shit to me about him, and I doubt she's said anything to you or the rest of the guys either. But in our chemistry class, she's constantly blushing at everything he says, and she was practically drooling over him when we went to his house for our band practice the other day. He mentioned they text a lot, and he seems genuinely interested in her. He can barely keep his eyes off her when I see them in the same room together. It's kind of sweet."

"Sweet?" I spit venomously. "He's making a move on our girl, Gray. *Our girl*. Tell him to back off!"

He rolls his eyes. "Alex is a nice guy. If Charlotte likes him, who are we to say anything about it? If we're okay with her dating each other, then we should be okay with her dating other people too. Whatever she's comfortable with. After all the awful shit she's been through, Charlotte deserves all the love and support in the world. Logically, it wouldn't be that different—"

"Fuck logic." I don't know why I'm okay with Charlotte dating the guys, but I sure as fuck don't like the idea of her being with an outsider. *We're* her kindred spirits. That's what she calls us.

"Either way," Grayson says with a glare. "I'm not sure it matters. Like I said, Charlotte freaked out. After we left Alex's house the other day, I tried to tell her it was okay if she had a crush on him. And that it was also okay if she had a crush on me, you, and the guys. She refused to talk about it and almost

started crying. I felt terrible. I never meant to put her on the spot. I just...I wanted her to stop feeling guilty or like she has to choose between us all the time.”

Fuck. If Charlotte’s not okay with the idea of dating more than one person, there’s no hope for any of us at all. We’re bound to end up miserable. But maybe she was just worried? I latched onto Grayson’s polyamory plan so quickly, I didn’t really stop to consider how Charlotte might feel. She probably feels guilty and selfish, right? She shouldn’t, but monogamy is such a stupid fucking social construct. People are quick to judge and criticize anything that doesn’t fit into that bubble. Case in point, the dumbass rumors that Summer, Madison, and my teammates have been spreading around.

It’s not like I want to date any other girls, and I don’t think the guys want to, either. I want our group to stay solid. Just the six of us. Charlotte dating me, Grayson, Liam, Remy, and Seb. That’s it. They’re the people I love and trust most in the world. It would be perfect.

My phone alarm goes off, and I groan loudly as I turn it off. “Fucking Victoria. I’ve gotta get home, dude.”

Grayson nods sympathetically. He knows how shitty my dad will get if I’m even a few seconds late.

“Listen, I’m really glad I came over and that we talked.” I place my hand on his shoulder, giving him a genuine smile. “I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t talk to me or the guys. We need to stop fighting about dumb shit all the time. You guys are my family.”

He laughs happily. “Agreed. I promise to talk to you next time. You know I get stuck in my head sometimes, and shit gets hard.”

I do know it, and I fucking hate that for him. I know it has to suck.

“Text me later, okay? Maybe Charlotte just needs some more time. We’ll figure out how to talk to her, and how to get the rest of the guys on board.”

I’m confident we’ll figure it out, and that everything will turn out alright. This plan is way better than the competition bullshit Sebastian and Remy came up with. They’d be stupid not to see that.



“THERE HE IS!”

My dad’s booming voice echoes in the foyer. Alarmed, I drop my bags, straighten up, and hurry to close the door behind me. “I’m not late. Victoria said—”

Instead of berating me, my dad grins. It throws me off so much that all I can do is stare at him in stunned silence. I can’t remember the last time my dad smiled at me, and I’m desperately trying to figure out if this is a trick. What have I done wrong?

“Well, get in here, son.” He throws his arm around my shoulders and leads me through to the dining room.

It takes everything in me not to physically flinch or recoil. He’s never affectionate—not even to Victoria, at least where anyone can see. I feel like a pussy for my reaction. It’s not like my dad’s ever hit me, even if there have been plenty of times where I thought he might.

“What’s going on?” I ask. I try to keep my tone as casual and polite as possible.

Inside the dining room, the table's made up like it's set for Christmas fucking dinner. There are candles, the nice placemats are out, and there's a feast made up of all my favorite foods. Steak, scalloped potatoes, corn on the cob, and buttered rolls. My mouth waters as I take it all in, even as my confusion and panic dial up a notch. We never eat like this. Our cook usually makes really pretentious, fancy shit that I can't pronounce.

When Victoria walks into the room, wearing a sleek black dress, she smiles at me. If I didn't know her, I might think it was genuine.

What the fuck is happening? It's like I stepped into the Twilight Zone or some shit.

"Sit down," my dad orders. He points to the seat to his right, near the head of the table. I always try to eat as far away from him and Victoria as I can, but I don't want to push my luck and piss him off. Not when I have no clue what's happening.

"We're celebrating," Victoria says softly, taking the seat across from me.

My mind races. What the hell is today? It's not my dad's birthday, and I don't remember ever being included in celebrating Victoria's. Maybe it's their anniversary? Before I can think of any more guesses, my dad slaps me hard on the back.

"Your coach called me. He said between your effort during the game on Friday and your practice today, you're showing the most potential of any of the players on your team. He says you've got a shot at making quarterback next year, and he thinks you might have a chance of getting scouted this year if you keep it up. This is fantastic news! I'm proud of you, son."

“Wow.” I don’t know what else to say. On one hand, it’s really, really nice to hear my dad say he’s proud of me. I try really hard to act like I’m not bothered by the way he usually treats me. He always acts like he can’t stand me, and he’s told me many times over the years that I’m a disappointment. So, as much as I fucking hate him most of the time, it feels really good to hear the opposite from him for once.

On the other hand, I hate football. I don’t have fun playing it or watching it, no matter how good I might be. Maybe that makes me ungrateful, but even just thinking of being quarterback next year fills me with dread. Imagining being scouted and playing football for four more years in college makes me feel even worse.

“Thank you,” I finally say. My dad will never understand why I don’t like football or being part of the team. I’d be stupid to pick a fight or tell him I don’t want to play anymore. I decide to just enjoy the rare moment of feeling like he doesn’t think I’m a useless piece of shit.

While my dad enthusiastically fills my plate for me, Victoria titters from across the table and gives me a cold smile. Well, at least it’s good to know I haven’t gone completely insane. All is right in the world if Victoria still hates my guts.

“Your coach thinks your improvement on the team has to do with a girl,” she says.

I swear, I feel the blood drain from my face.

My dad chuckles warmly. “Ah, Elliot. I always hoped you’d turn out normal. I used to worry, but here you are—sixteen years old, playing varsity football, and you’ve got a girlfriend. God, I’ve never been prouder. So, what’s the girl’s name?”

The last thing I want is for my dad to show any interest in Charlotte. He'll start digging into her background, and then he'll use it against her and me. Just like he's done with my friends in the past. Whenever he brings up Remy or Sebastian, and their arrests, it's taken everything in me not to deck him. If he were to say anything negative about Charlotte, I really doubt I'd be able to control myself.

But I have to give him *something*, or else he'll get pissed and the whole evening will be ruined. Besides, there's no way for me to know how much Coach Wade's already told him. Clearly enough for my dad to know about Charlotte's existence and the correlation between her supporting me at the game and practice enough to make a big enough difference in my playing.

"Charlotte's not really my girlfriend," I say carefully. "She's a nice girl, but we're taking things slow."

It's not a lie. We are taking things slow. I haven't even kissed her yet, for fuck's sake.

That only makes him laugh heartily. "Nice girl, huh? She must really be something for a boy your age to willingly take it slow."

He insists on seeing a picture of her, so I grudgingly pull my phone out. I've got a ton of pictures of Charlotte saved, but I pull up one of the photos I took of her wearing my letterman jacket the other day. Even though I'm anxious as fuck, sitting next to my dad and talking to him about her, I can't help smiling like a lovesick idiot when I stare at the photo. She's so fucking pretty. So funny, smart, and sweet. She's everything.

"Well, someone's smitten." Victoria sneers, forcing me to drop my smile. Her sour expression smoothly transitions to one of amusement when my dad looks up.

“You should invite her over for dinner,” my dad says to me. “I want to meet the girl who finally managed to steer you in the right direction.”

The right direction being killing myself playing a sport I hate, I guess. But that’s what matters to my dad. Image. If he thinks I’m popular and have a girlfriend, then he can tell himself he’s raised me right. Even when he’s had no positive influence on my life at any point.

I wonder what he’d think if I told him I’m planning on trying to be only one of five of Charlotte’s boyfriends. That after today, I’m giving up on the whole idea of monogamy. I bet he wouldn’t like my image then, and he certainly wouldn’t be proud of me.

Dinner is tense and awkward while my dad continues to praise me for being ‘normal’ and asks me endless questions about the team. Every now and then, Victoria will comment with a cleverly disguised insult, which I’ve come to expect from her. The food is delicious, and I try really hard to enjoy my dad’s positive attention as much as I can. Who knows if this will ever happen again?

After we finish eating, my dad pours me a glass of scotch. I sip at it, pretending I’m enjoying it immensely while I continue to carefully respond to his questions and comments. Even when he’s in a good mood like this, anything could set him off.

But when Victoria excuses herself from the table, leaving me and my dad alone for the first time all evening, I decide to risk pissing him off. This might be the only chance I get to talk to him one-on-one, and I might never catch him in a good mood like this again.

Ever since Charlotte and I left school after my practice was over, I've been trying not to think about my mom. Now that hours have passed, I'm sure it was impossible that I saw her. The woman in the parking lot caught me off guard, but how can I really trust my memory of what my mom looks like? It's been too long since I've seen her, and my dad destroyed every picture we had of her and my siblings after she left with them. She might look completely different now, for all I know.

I didn't mention the woman to Charlotte. I'm sure she would have validated my feelings and helped me figure out whether or not it could really have been my mom. But she would have pitied me, and it would have put such a damper on our afternoon.

My dad's the only person I can ask. He'd know if she was back in town, right? He'd know if she was reaching out to see me, or if she was just coming around for child support for my brother and sister. With Charlotte, I was too afraid to get my hopes up, and I don't think I'm emotionally ready to deal with the anger I harbor toward my mom for leaving me. So, as fucked up as it may be, bringing her up with my dad right now is probably my safest bet. If he gets mad, at least I know what to expect.

“Hey, dad? Can I ask you something?”

He finishes off his scotch, immediately moving to pour himself another. “Of course, son.”

I rub my thumb over the ridges of my glass, staring into the amber liquid instead of making eye contact with him. “This is going to sound nuts, but I swear I saw mom today. There's no way she's back in town, right?”

When he slams his glass down, causing the alcohol to slosh over the sides and splash onto the dining room table, I

force myself to hold very still.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he barks angrily.

“After practice, Charlotte and I were standing by my truck. I didn’t notice her until I was helping Charlotte into the truck, but when I looked up, there was a woman staring at me from across the parking lot. She got in her car and drove off before I could talk to her. She looked like mom, and it freaked me out.”

He fumes silently, gripping his glass so tight, I’m surprised it doesn’t shatter in his hands. I gather enough courage to meet his eyes, keeping quiet while I wait for his response. We never, *ever*, talk about my mom. I doubt there’s a bigger taboo in our house. But I remind myself that I’m not doing anything wrong by telling him about what I saw today.

Eventually, he lets out a long breath and reaches out to roughly pat me on the shoulder. I’m surprised at his restraint and lack of anger, all I can do is gape at him.

“Thank you for telling me. I wouldn’t worry about it. Your mother has been impossible to track down, even after all these years. I doubt she’d come back here again. But keep an eye out, just in case. If you see that woman again, call me and let me know as soon as you do. Understand?”

I nod slowly, regretting opening my goddamn mouth. He’s keeping his tone light, and he’s obviously doing his best to keep his anger in check. That only makes me feel more suspicious and freaked out, and I think I might have seriously fucked up by mentioning the incident to him at all.

“Got it, dad.”

CHARLOTTE



“ARE YOU SURE YOU’LL BE OKAY?” ARTHUR ASKS FOR THE millionth time.

I nod silently, staring out the window as I twist my hands together in my lap. I’ve been trying to hide how nervous I am, but my uncle’s making it hard to keep my emotions hidden. Arthur wears his heart on his sleeve, and he’s made it extremely obvious he’s worried about me. Honestly, all he’s doing is making me more anxious.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” I say. For him, and for myself.

Of course it will be fine. Olivia is a sweetheart, and she seems genuinely thrilled about our sleepover. It took a lot of convincing for Arthur to agree to let me go to their house, and he still insisted on driving me even though Sebastian offered. He isn’t against me having a sleepover. I think he’s really happy that I’m making new friends at school. It’s just that he would have rather have me invite Olivia over to our house instead of the other way around.

I think Arthur’s feeling extra protective of me ever since learning about the stuff that happened with my mom. Plus, the last time I had a sleepover with the guys, I had a nightmare and woke up crying. It would be humiliating if that happened

at Olivia's house, but I don't think she'd make me feel bad about it.

"There won't be any boys at this sleepover, right?" he grumbles.

"No." I chuckle and roll my eyes. Arthur has asked me that a million times. Olivia is serious about making sure the guys are banned from the house, and I reminded my guys again today at lunch they're not allowed to crash or blow up my phone while I'm here. Liam and Sebastian are sleeping over at Grayson's house tonight, and I think the rest of the guys might be too. "Just me and Olivia."

After my talk with Adrian earlier this week, I've realized he was right about me needing a little more separation from the guys. Whether my feelings for them amount to anything in the future or not, it will be good for me to make more friends and to do my own thing away from them. The guys will always be my kindred spirits, but I don't want to be reliant on them all the time. Especially when things are weird and complicated right now.

To be fair, the guys have been fighting a lot less the past few days. Since I stayed after school to watch Elliot's practice and we finally had a chance to talk, they've cooled down a lot. I can only assume they talked about it without me around. While that might normally irritate me, I can appreciate the effort they've made. Less fighting, and their flirting has been less intense too. The stupid rumors Madison Taylor and some of the football guys started are still circulating, but it's pretty easy to ignore them when all the people I actually care about at school have taken my side.

"Well, please call me if something happens and you want me to come and get you. I won't hesitate or ask questions,

kid.”

My mouth twitches while I try really hard not to smile or laugh. It’s a little embarrassing. I’m sixteen, not six. But it’s also really, really sweet. I feel lucky to have Arthur as my guardian, and I know he means what he says. There is a comfort knowing that if I wake up from a nightmare or I decide I don’t want to be at Olivia’s house anymore for whatever reason, Arthur will be there for me in a heartbeat with nothing but love, support, and understanding.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

He nods, still watching the road. “It’s gonna be weird at home with you and Sebastian both gone tonight. Quiet.”

I don’t think we’re usually that loud, but I get it. I’d probably feel lonely too if I was stuck at home alone all night. There’s something about knowing someone’s there, even if they’re in another room, that makes me feel safer. Arthur’s been making more and more comments like this lately, especially when he brings up the fact that Sebastian and I will be graduating and leaving for university in less than two years.

“Have you thought about dating? If you had a girlfriend, you’d probably be excited to get us out of the house every once in a while,” I tease. It’s not the first time I’ve hinted strongly that he should get back into dating. As far as I know, Arthur hasn’t been with anyone since Sebastian’s mom, Adelaide, passed away almost two years ago. I know he’s been grieving—Adelaide was the love of his life. But Arthur’s still young. He’s not even forty yet. He deserves to find someone else to settle down and be happy with. The guys and I all agree, and even Grayson’s moms have been trying to set Arthur up with women lately.

“You might have a point,” Arthur mumbles.

I grin, surprised. Usually, he's quick to change the subject or insist he's happy being single and alone. That he's too busy with work or that he'd rather spend his free time with us. This is the first time he's even ever vaguely agreed with me, so I'll consider it progress.

When Arthur pulls up in front of Liam and Olivia's house, my smugness evaporates. All I can do is gape like an idiot at the massive home in front of me. I knew Liam and Olivia's parents were rich—I've been told they live in a mansion—but I still wasn't prepared.

It's probably the biggest house I've ever seen in real life, and it looks like something out of a fairytale. The long driveway follows a straight line directly to the front where it forms a circle around a fountain. The house is two stories with a stone and brick exterior, and there are flowers growing around the front of the house leading to the back. From the front, I can see what looks like a huge, white gazebo off to the left side of the house. The entire structure is stunning. I can't imagine what it might look like inside.

As he pulls around to the circular driveway, stopping outside the front door, I keep my face blank so he can't see how much I'm freaking out. I was nervous before—because I want Olivia to think I'm cool, which I'm definitely not, and because we're definitely going to talk about the guys and I *know* I'm going to end up admitting to her how I feel about all of them. But now? I'm wondering why the hell someone like Olivia would want to be friends with me. Why would *Liam* want to be friends with someone like me? I live in a nice house and neighborhood with Arthur, but thinking of the apartment I lived in with my mom compared to this massive, gorgeous mansion makes me want to cry from embarrassment and shame.

“Call me if you need anything. I mean it, kid.” Arthur gives me a stern look once he parks. Well, stern for him. It’s not an expression or tone that comes very naturally to him.

“I will. I promise.” I give him a nervous smile and move to get out of the car. As shocked as I am by the appearance of the house, there’s no way I’m backing out.

Before I can grab my bag from the backseat, Olivia throws open the front door and rushes down the front steps with an excited squeal.

“Oh my god, yay! I’m so happy you’re here!”

She throws her arms around me in a hug, making me laugh. Already, she’s putting me at ease. She’s always animated and loud, and it’s a relief to hear once again that she’s as excited about our sleepover as I am. When she pulls away, she throws her arms out and exclaims, “Gah! We’re going to have so much fun!”

I laugh and wave goodbye to Arthur as Olivia links her arm through mine and practically drags me into the house. The inside of the house is more gorgeous than the outside. It takes my breath away when I walk through the door, but I try my best to keep my face blank while Olivia chatters away at my side.

“—and after we do our nails, we can pig out on takeout and make ice cream sundaes. I made sure to ask our housekeeper to stock up on everything we could possibly need to make the ultimate sundaes!”

She has our entire night planned out. It’s silly, but everything she’s listed sounds fun. I’ve never had a girlfriend to hang out with like this. Getting my hair and nails done with

Grayson's moms is nice, but it's probably not the same as doing those sorts of things with someone my age.

"Thanks, Olivia," I say sincerely. "It's really nice of you to have me over and to plan everything out like this. To be honest, the only sleepover I've ever had was with Sebastian, Liam, and the rest of the guys right before school started. They didn't exactly do makeovers or anything girly with me."

"Oh?" She gets a wide, mischievous grin on her face and wiggles her eyebrows. "So, what *did* they do with you, hmm? Or should I say *to* you?"

I make a choking sound, stuck somewhere between horrified and amused. Reaching out to slap her arm, I giggle hysterically. "Shut up. It was totally innocent. Well, I thought it was. Until I woke up to hear them talking about my ass and arm wrestling each other to see who would get to sleep next to me."

She cackles, throwing her head back dramatically. It makes me giggle more. I haven't had anyone to really talk about the guys like this with. Even when I told Adrian about my conundrum of having feelings for all of them, it's not like I could gossip or share little stories and details about them and things they've done.

"Hang on." Liam appears in the foyer, startling me. I feel my cheeks flush from embarrassment as he walks over to me with a teasing smirk. "We didn't actually end up arm wrestling."

As much as I try, I can't think of a single thing to say. Under his gaze, I feel shy, and I completely lose all my words. It's ridiculous. I see Liam every day, and we've been spending way more time together lately. Between grocery shopping and going to the gym together, I can honestly say I've gotten to

know him better in the past two weeks than I did almost the entire first month I lived here. So, why the hell am I feeling shy? Maybe it's because I'm standing in his house, where I definitely don't belong, or maybe because I was caught talking about him with his sister.

“Oh, please. I'm sure you would have if Charlotte hadn't caught you guys. Morons.” Olivia snickers.

There's no doubt in my mind that she's right. If I'd kept pretending to be asleep that night, I guarantee the guys would have arm wrestled for a chance to sleep next to me. And I probably would have caught them saying more awkward things about me.

Instead of showing any embarrassment, Liam shrugs. He's still smiling at me, making me feel warm all over.

“Hi,” I whisper. Like an idiot. Like I didn't see him at school less than two hours ago.

His eyes and smile soften. “Hey, Charlotte.”

“Eww, gross.” Olivia pretends to gag. She's constantly joking around about me hooking up with Liam and the rest of the guys in the most vulgar ways, but seeing me and Liam say hi to each other is too much for her. Figures. She waves her hand at Liam in a shooing motion. “Time for you to go, brother dearest. This is officially a boy-free zone for the rest of the night, starting now.”

He rolls his eyes, lifting the duffel bag in his hand higher for us to see. “I was just about to walk out the door.” Turning to me again, he smiles sweetly. “Have fun, alright? I'll make sure to remind the guys not to text you unless it's an emergency.”

“Thank you.” I laugh. Liam gives me a hug, lingering longer than necessary, and then bids us goodbye and walks out the door at Olivia’s insistence.

Once we’re alone, Olivia grabs my arm and pulls me further into the house. “Come on! We’ll put your stuff in my room, and I’ll show you around. Then the real fun can start!”

“Okay.” I giggle, half from excitement and half from nervousness.

“By the way,” Olivia says, stopping right before we head up the stairs. She turns to face me with a small smile, appearing much calmer and more serious than usual. “I’m really happy you’re here too. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a friend that I feel like I can be totally myself around.”



“WOW, THIS STUFF IS AMAZING!” I TURN MY FACE, TESTING different angles in the reflection. I glance down at the products scattered all over Olivia’s vanity, trying to memorize the names of some of the unfamiliar brands. We finished peeling off face masks before using this amazing-smelling skin cream that left my skin smooth and glowing.

For the past hour since I arrived, we’ve been having a spa day. We painted each other’s nails, did facials, gave each other makeup and hair tips, and I showed her how to do a fishtail braid. Olivia had these fancy, fluffy white robes set out for us to wear over our pajamas. Too extra? Maybe, but it also made the whole experience much more fun.

“I know, right?” Olivia smiles beside me through the mirror. “My mom got it for me in Paris. I’ll ask her to bring

some back for you next time she goes!”

One of the biggest differences between Liam and Olivia, I’ve learned, is that they have totally different attitudes about their parents’ wealth. Liam never brings it up if he can help it, and he always seems humble and embarrassed about having money. Olivia’s nearly the opposite. It’s not that she brags about it, but she drops comments casually about being rich. Like she thinks it’s normal for everyone, and not just her. I don’t think either of them are wrong for how they handle it, but it is interesting to see more and more how different they are, even as twins.

“Wow, that would be cool. Thank you!” I exclaim. I’m not going to make a big deal of it if Olivia’s not, and I want her to know I’m grateful for the gesture. “So, I know your parents travel a lot, but do you and Liam ever get to go with them?”

She sighs, shaking her head. “Not really. They always bring presents back for us, but it’s like it never even occurs to them that we might want to gallivant around Europe with them during our school breaks. Well, maybe Liam doesn’t want that, but I sure as hell would love it! Sometimes it makes me angry that my parents can be oblivious and selfish. I know they love me and my brother, but most of the time, it’s like we’re an afterthought.”

“That sucks.” Traveling anywhere, especially to another country, would be incredible. I’ve never traveled outside of North Carolina because I’ve never had the opportunity. The fact that Olivia and Liam have the means to travel, and aren’t invited along with their parents, is pretty sad. Liam always makes it seem like he’s fine with the relationship he has with his family, but it breaks my heart that he and Olivia end up

feeling left out and unimportant. “I’m sorry they make you feel like that.”

Flicking a few of the makeup products on the vanity, Olivia forces a laugh and turns to give me a sad smile. “You probably think I’m a spoiled brat, right? Sitting here complaining that my rich parents won’t take me to Paris when you live with your uncle? I’ve never asked what happened to your parents.”

“First of all,” I say with a smile, spinning on the bench so we’re facing each other instead of the mirror. “Just because someone else has their own hardship, trauma, or tragedy to deal with, that doesn’t make yours any less valid. If I were in your shoes, I’d probably be mad at your parents sometimes. I don’t think you’re spoiled either. It’s not like you go around shoving your privilege in other people’s faces, and you don’t shit on people who have less than you.”

“Gah, you’re such a sweetheart! You’re gonna make me cry.” She pulls me into a hug. That’s another thing I’ve learned about Olivia—she’s a hugger. When she pulls away, she smirks playfully. “No wonder my brother’s totally in love with you.”

My heart jumps into my throat, and my face heats up. I should have expected her to say something like that. I’m kind of surprised she hasn’t brought Liam or the other guys up since I first got here, to be honest. But somehow, I’m still caught off guard.

Because I can’t decide how to reply, even though I know she’s probably just teasing me, I end up blurting out, “My dad’s dead.”

Her face falls, registering shock. “Oh, god. I’m sorry, Charlotte. I didn’t know...”

Cringing, I shrug. “It’s okay. Uh, I mean, it’s terrible and I miss him. But I’m mostly okay. I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that.”

She laughs, but it’s more from relief than any humor. “My fault for being sassy and bringing up Liam like that. I really am sorry to hear about your dad. Where’s your mom? I mean, I know you live with your uncle now.”

I trust Olivia. Almost as much as I trust the guys, which is crazy. So, I feel comfortable enough telling her about my past. The basics, at least. I swallow the last bit of nerves I feel at exposing myself, and do my best to keep my voice even. “I honestly have no idea where my mom is. After my dad died, things were pretty bad for a while, and she...well, she was pretty awful. Some stuff happened, and I ended up going to juvie when I was in my freshman year. When I got out, she was gone, and I was sent to a group home for a while. Until I got sent to juvie again for fighting. I moved in with my uncle and Sebastian right after I got out the second time.”

There’s a long, painful silence between us while Olivia gapes at me with wide eyes. Eventually, she shakes her head and says, “Holy shit. I—wow, I don’t know what to say.”

Feeling extremely awkward, and wondering if maybe I was wrong to have divulged this much so early in our friendship, I shrug and give her an apologetic grimace. In my heart, I don’t think Olivia will judge me for my past. But I could be wrong. It could totally change the way she looks at me.

Surprising me, she reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing it gently. “You’re probably the most badass girl I know for going through all of that, and still coming out of it being such a nice person. So many things make sense now.

Like, why you get along with my brother and all of his friends so well.”

“Thanks.” I laugh, squeezing her hand in return. “Yeah, I have a lot in common with the guys, and we really understand each other. I tell them they’re my kindred spirits.”

Her face lights up with a smile. “Aww, god! That’s adorable! Honestly, I’m a little jealous of what you have with them. I love Ethan, and I like to think we’re pretty great together. But I don’t think we’re kindred-spirit-level. Not even close.”

I can’t help giggling. Things could have easily gotten awkward or heavy, but they didn’t. She immediately accepted me and my past—even if I did keep things mostly vague—and she’s still keeping the conversation light. Hearing her compare her relationship with Ethan to my messy situation with my guys makes me realize she might already have a pretty good idea of what’s going on with me and them.

“You do know I’m not with any of them, right?” I ask, furrowing my eyebrows. “We’re just friends.”

She snorts and waves her hand at me dismissively, turning to pick up her phone when it buzzes on top of the vanity. “Friends. *Sure*. How about after we stuff our faces, you tell me the real truth about you and them? I’ve been dying to prod and ask questions pretty much since the first time we met. The delivery guy’s at the door with our food now.”

I groan, but only for show. I knew it was all going to come out at some point tonight. With the way things have been going, I’m not mad about it. If it was a relief to tell Adrian my secret, it’ll probably feel even better to get everything off my chest with Olivia. She gives me a teasing grin, and we stand up and make our way downstairs to get our food.

When she first mentioned getting takeout earlier, I assumed she'd want to get pizza or wings. That's my go-to with the guys when we have movie nights. Instead, Olivia insisted on ordering sushi from a super fancy Japanese restaurant downtown. I've only had sushi a couple of times, so I let her order everything since she seemed like more of an expert.

After tipping the delivery guy generously, Olivia grabs a bottle of wine and some glasses from her parents' wine cellar. I carry the food and follow her back upstairs to her bedroom. We could probably eat in the dining room or any of the several sitting areas in the house, but we agree it feels more sleepover-ish to keep to her room. There's tons of space there, anyway. She even has a couch and a huge flatscreen TV.

Once we make ourselves comfortable on her couch, Olivia pours us each a generous glass of red wine. I feel too silly to admit it out loud, but I've never tried alcohol before. I keep my face blank when I take the first sip, surprised to realize it tastes really good.

"We should totally be drinking sake instead right now, but this will have to do," Olivia says. After quickly showing me how to use the chopsticks for the sushi rolls and sashimi, she gives me a wicked grin. "Okay. Now that we have food and alcohol, spill. I want to know everything going on between you, Liam, and the rest of your crew."

Chewing slowly, I shrug. It's probably better to be blunt, right? Olivia is blunt about everything. "Technically, nothing. I haven't kissed any of them. But I'm totally, completely, insanely in love with all of them. I'm pretty sure they have a bet to see which of them I'll end up choosing. It's fucked up and overwhelming."

She sighs loudly and shakes her head. “God, they’re such idiots. They are totally betting on that, by the way. I forced it out of Liam.”

Thinking they might have a bet going about me and finding out I was right and they actually do makes all the difference. My feelings are hurt. Months ago, I asked them not to make bets behind my back. That if they were going to bet on something, no matter how stupid the bet may be, I wanted to be part of it because they promised I was one of them.

“I can’t believe them,” I say angrily. “They must think I’m pretty stupid. Like I wouldn’t notice them fighting over me, constantly fighting with each other, or how much they’ve suddenly started flirting with me?”

“Boys are dumb. When I talked to Liam, it was pretty clear that even they thought their whole plan was ridiculous. It seems like they haven’t been able to figure out another solution since they clearly all love you. Just like you love them.”

While we eat and drink, I tell her about every intense moment between me and all of the guys. The way Sebastian makes me feel when he photographs me and how he understands my grief over my dad better than anyone. The way Remy’s artist eyes light me on fire and how sexy and flattered I feel whenever I see a drawing he’s made of me. How Grayson makes me feel seen, accepted, and how my heart flips every time he smiles at me or calls me Princess. How Liam’s patience and softness makes my heart flutter every time he helps me with something or teaches me something new. And how Elliot makes me feel like the center of the universe and makes every day so much brighter and more fun with his enthusiasm. I even tell her about my crush

and growing attraction to Alex—how he texts me every day and shows genuine interest in learning everything about me, how he’s sweet and supportive of his friends and family, and how his voice literally makes me shiver from pleasure.

She shrieks, giggles, coos, and awws the whole time I’m talking, asking for more details and offering her advice and input all the while. By the time I get to telling her about what happened last Friday in gym class with Elliot and Remy, I think we both might be a little drunk.

“Oh my god!” She giggles wildly, slapping my arm in excitement. “I’ve known Elliot since kindergarten, so it’s pretty difficult to imagine him like that, but damn. That sounds hot.”

“It was,” I admit, grinning shyly. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it, even though it happened a freaking week ago. None of them have done anything like that ever since people started spreading those rumors about it.”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “Madison Taylor is a jealous, psycho twat. Even if the rumors were one hundred percent true and you were having a threesome with two hot guys in the middle of class, um...good for you? Like, that’s fucking goals. It’s not like she has any hot guys panting after her. She follows Mike Everette around like a desperate puppy, and he forgets her name half the time. It’s pathetic.”

Maybe it’s mean of me, but I can’t help roaring with laughter. Madison is awful. Luckily, I don’t have to interact with her much at school, and she’s easy enough to ignore even when I do cross paths with her.

“You don’t think I’m messed up?” I ask worriedly after our laughter trails off. “For being in love with all of them? I’ll never be able to pick between them, so their bet is pointless.”

“No, I don’t.” Olivia shoves the empty bags and boxes from our takeout out of the way now that we’ve finished devouring the sushi. While she refills our wine glasses, she says, “I don’t blame you. It’s obvious you have a unique connection with each of them, and they clearly feel the same way. It’s too bad society sucks so much and that people still think monogamy is the only valid type of relationship. It sounds like some of your guys might be open to sharing you.”

“Do you really think so?” I’ve barely let the thought cross my mind. Even when Adrian said something similar, I pushed the idea right out of my head. It feels too good to be true to think of being able to really have them all. “Grayson, maybe. But the whole thing with Elliot and Remy seemed more like they were feeding off of each other until they pushed too far. They haven’t tried anything like that again. And Sebastian is so jealous. I don’t even know how to bring it up with them. God, how could I ask them for something like that? It could completely ruin everything.”

Taking a long drink of her wine, Olivia hums thoughtfully. “Well, if you ever figure out how to ask and convince them they should all be in a relationship with you, let me know. I’ve been trying to figure out the same thing for months.”

“What?” I ask, raising my eyebrows in surprise.

Olivia gives me a nervous smile and tilts her head. “We’re officially BFFs, right? I mean, I feel like I can tell you anything. Especially after tonight.”

“Of course.” It’s not even a question for me.

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath, then takes another drink of her wine. “I haven’t told anybody about this. Before I started dating Ethan, Zack and I hooked up for a little while.

I'm still into him, even though he pretends nothing ever happened between us."

My mouth drops. Olivia's never hinted at anything between her and Zack, and I've never picked up on anything from him either. I know Zack and Ethan are best friends and do pretty much everything together, and Olivia and Ethan always seem happy and in love whenever I see them.

"What exactly happened? Does Ethan know?"

She shakes her head sadly. "He has no idea. It makes me feel shitty sometimes. I mean, it's not like I cheated on him since it happened before we were together. But he'd probably feel betrayed and like we lied to him if he found out now. Anyway, yeah. It's a whole mess. I was dating this guy last year. Chad. He was a senior, so he's already graduated. Anyway, we were together for seven months, and I thought he was the one. I was in love with him and thought I was lucky to be with him. He was popular, quarterback on the football team, and tons of girls had crushes on him. God, I lost my virginity to him and everything. Well, I found out he was cheating on me—and had been since we first started going out. Then I found out all my friends knew, and nobody had told me. It was humiliating. So, I completely freaked out and stopped talking to everyone I used to hang out with."

I reach out to squeeze her hand, and she offers me a thankful smile before she continues.

"I've known Ethan and Zack forever. I always thought they were really annoying. Ethan had been asking me out for years, and I repeatedly turned him down and told him it would never happen. Zack never acted like he was interested, but the two of them are always together. Anyway, I ran into Zack at a party last spring after I got super drunk, confronted Chad and

some of my old friends, and had a complete meltdown. Zack brought me home and took care of me. The next morning when I was sober, he told me he'd been in love with me since we were kids and that Chad was a jackass for treating me the way he did. That was the first time we hooked up, and *god*. Before Ethan, it was the best sex I'd ever had in my life. We kept hooking up in secret for a couple of weeks until he freaked out and told me we had to stop. Because he didn't want to hurt his best friend, who was also in love with me. He gave me this whole speech about how Ethan would be better for me than he would, and I was fucking pissed. I originally only agreed to go on a date with Ethan to spite Zack, and then...I don't know. Ethan turned out to be such a sweetheart. He's good to me. He makes me feel like a queen. The more time I've spent with him and the more I've gotten to know him, the more I've fallen in love with him."

"But you're in love with Zack too." I don't bother phrasing it as a question. It's obvious enough from the way she says his name, and the look on her face when she talked about their short tryst.

"Yes." She smiles sadly again. "Until I met you and saw you with your guys, I felt like I was being a selfish cunt for feeling like this. I'm happy with Ethan, so I figured I'd just go on pretending nothing ever happened with Zack. Sometimes it's hard because the three of us hang out all the time. But, I don't know. You've made me feel like it might somehow be possible to have it all. To have them both."

Just hearing her say that gives me even more hope too. It feels impossible, but maybe somehow it can work out. Maybe she *can* have both Ethan and Zack, and I can be happy with all of my guys. Even if things don't work out, even if they end up getting even more tangled and complicated, it's such a relief to

learn I'm not the only person in the world who feels the way I do.

“Wow. We were totally meant to be best friends all along, I guess.”

She laughs at my sentiment and pulls me into a hug. “We absolutely were.”

GRAYSON



“THIS IS SUCH BULLSHIT,” ALEX GROANS.

“Watch your language.” His mom puts her hands on her hips, giving him a stern look. She continues speaking to him in rapid Spanish, which I can’t follow. Alex nods and mumbles in response to her, but he still looks livid.

Honestly, I don’t blame him. This is our third attempt at having band practice, and it’s also the third time it’s been cut short. It’s not my place to say something, but damn. I’ve never been more grateful to be an only child. Alex’s older sister treats their parents’ house like a drop-in daycare.

After his mom finishes berating him and walks back upstairs, I turn to Alex with a grimace and make sure to keep my voice low. “So, I’m guessing we’re done?”

He nods, turning to kick the side of the couch. “I can’t fucking believe it. Every damn time. I asked her—several times—about us doing band shit down here. What are we going to do?”

We only managed about an hour today, which is still better than the twenty minutes we got to squeeze in on Thursday. Sure, Alex and I have been texting a lot the past couple of weeks since school started, and we’ve exchanged lyrics, ideas

for songs, and sample recordings. Things have been coming together great, but it's still not the same as working on music in the same room. Plus, we need to physically practice with Benji and Emily to make sure everything's cohesive.

"Do we have to babysit too?" Emily asks, setting her bass down to go sit on the couch. She seems irritated, but nowhere near as much as Alex does.

"No." Alex sighs. "She said we can still hang out down here if we're quiet. The twins are about to take their nap, and she doesn't have any work to do today." He turns to me and frowns. "I get it if you wanna take off, man. There's no point making you stick around if we can't play music."

Emily rolls her eyes. "God, stop being such a drama queen. Grayson's our friend now. We can hang out even if we're just watching TV or some shit."

I grin around at each of them. Emily continues to look mildly bored while Alex still looks pissed. Benji perks up from behind his drums and offers me a hesitant smile. "Do you still wanna hang out?"

It feels really fucking nice to hear them verbally confirm they see me as a friend, and not just somebody to fill a spot in their band. I've been having a lot of fun hanging out with them and getting to know them. It's also been really validating for me to realize I'm still capable and worthy of making new friends. The guys and Charlotte are my family. We'd do literally anything for each other, and I know they'll have my back for life. But at the same time, we're so close that it makes everything outside of our group seem terrifying. Sometimes, I get caught up in my head, worrying about the future and inevitably separating from my group when we grow up and go to college. Needless to say, befriending and forming a band

with Alex, Benji, and Emily has been really good for my anxiety lately.

“Yeah,” I finally answer, my smile widening. “I’m cool hanging out here, but you guys are welcome to come over to my house too. I know my moms won’t care. Plus, I have a pool.”

And it’s fucking hot as balls out today. It’s probably one of the last warm days we’ll get this year. The guys were talking about coming over later this afternoon to chill after Elliot’s finished with football practice. It’s only a little after noon now, so that still gives me plenty of time to hang out with my new friends and band.

“A pool? Are you serious?” Emily asks. When I nod, she smiles excitedly and jumps up. “Fuck yeah. I vote we go to Grayson’s house. I’m gonna go change now.”

She runs upstairs, making me laugh. Alex and Benji don’t seem as enthusiastic, which makes me worry. Until Alex asks, “Are you sure? That’s really cool of you to offer, but I don’t want you to feel obligated to invite us over.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. It’ll be awesome.” I smirk and add, “I bet I can convince Charlotte to come over too, whenever she gets home later.”

Just like I knew it would, that convinces him. He gets the same dopey, lovesick smile me and the rest of the guys get whenever Charlotte’s concerned. The more I’ve thought about it, and the more I’ve gotten to know Alex, the better I feel about letting him in. I don’t feel any more jealous at the idea of him being with Charlotte than I do the rest of the guys.

Elliot’s definitely not on board with Alex, but I figure there’s plenty of time to change that. I’m ecstatic he’s okay

with sharing Charlotte at all, and I've been on a high since he came over to my house to talk a few days ago. I've shared all of the sites, blogs, and forums about polyamory I've found with him, and we've been bouncing ideas back and forth about how to get Liam, Remy, and Sebastian to understand that a non-monogamous relationship with Charlotte is the only thing that makes sense for us.

We also managed to convince the rest of the guys to cool off about the bet to try to get Charlotte to pick one of us. We argued that we're stressing her out, even if she won't admit as much, and that all we're doing is fueling rumors about her at school. Sebastian was the first to agree—probably because he thought it might buy him time to get around Arthur's rules about dating her. But time is good for all of us. The last time I tried to talk to Charlotte about her having feelings for all of us, it didn't go well. I hope if we continue to let things between us progress naturally, and we stop putting pressure on her, she'll be more willing to open up and talk to me about it later.

Once I get my guitar packed up, we head upstairs. While Alex changes and asks his mom if it's okay for him and Emily to come over to my place, Benji and I go outside to wait by my mom's car.

Benji and I haven't talked much one on one. Not like I have with Alex. The day Charlotte and I drove him home was the most he's really opened up and told me anything about his personal life. He was kind of forced into it, so I'm not sure it counts. I'd like to become better friends with him, and I hope inviting him over and hanging out there will help with that.

“Do you wanna stop by your house to get a swimsuit?” I ask when I notice him shuffling his feet nervously.

He shakes his head, giving me an embarrassed smile. “I don’t have one. But I can watch you guys swim or whatever. It’s no big deal.”

Well, shit. That makes me feel terrible. I didn’t consider that might be an issue. “Oh. Well, you can borrow one from me if that’s not weird. We’re probably around the same size.” And if something of mine doesn’t fit, I’ve got a bunch of the guys’ clothes stashed at my house too. I’m sure Benji can borrow some swim shorts from any of them.

“Thanks,” he mumbles, blushing. Fuck, I hope I didn’t make him feel worse.

Thankfully, Alex and Emily rush outside to meet us before I can get stuck in my head and start spiraling over the guilt I feel at having another friend who’s less privileged than I am. Emily calls shotgun and hops in the front seat, and I’m somehow not surprised when she takes control of the radio.

The second I pull away from the curb, Alex clears his throat. “So, uh, you mentioned Charlotte’s not home?”

Emily snorts and shakes her head at her cousin. She really loves giving him shit about his crush on Charlotte. I grin at him through the rearview mirror and answer his underlying question. “She and our friend Liam go grocery shopping together and hang out for a while on Sundays. They started doing that because Charlotte decided to make lunches for our group for school every day.”

“What the fuck?” Emily scoffs, turning to look at me with a disgusted expression. “She makes lunches for you and all your guy friends *every day*? What kind of chauvinistic bullshit is that?”

I chuckle and shake my head, keeping my eyes on the road. “She likes cooking, and she likes feeling like she’s taking care of people. Plus, I think she was looking for any excuse to not have to eat the lunches the school provides.”

It’s part of what makes Charlotte so sweet and precious. We’ve all tried to repeatedly remind her she doesn’t need to make us lunches, but she insists. The more she spoils us, the more determined the guys and I are to spoil her and do whatever it takes to make her happy in return.

Benji laughs quietly from the backseat. “Charlotte seems so nice. I knew you and your group of friends were close, but I guess I didn’t realize just *how* close.”

“Yeah,” I say happily. Charlotte and the guys have been extremely supportive of me joining the band, and it would be cool to see how my new friends might interact with the guys. They don’t seem all that judgy, now that I know them a little better. “They’re basically like my family.”

The rest of the drive to my house is pretty chill. We mostly talk about music. Nobody brings up the fact that having band practice at Alex and Emily’s place clearly isn’t working out. I’d love to offer to have it at my house. It’s not like we don’t have the space, and I really don’t think my moms would mind—especially if I offer to soundproof whatever room we use. They’ve been really excited and supportive of my attempt at making new friends. But I want to ask them in private before I mention the idea to Alex, Emily, or Benji. I’d hate to get their hopes up for nothing.

Everyone gets quiet when I turn into my neighborhood. I can’t help gripping the steering wheel anxiously. Honestly, I’ve never thought of my family as rich. Not in comparison to Liam’s and Elliot’s, at least. But my house is loads bigger and

nicer than Alex and Emily's, and it probably looks like a mansion next to Benji's. So, I kind of feel like a huge dick even though it's not my fault for growing up the way I did.

"Damn. What do your parents do for work?" Emily asks, staring out the window with wide eyes.

"Uh, my mom Evelyn is a hairstylist, and my mom Ava is a lawyer."

I brace myself for any weird or ignorant questions about either of them being my 'real' mom, or whether it's confusing to call them both mom. It's usually inevitable with new people. But after a few moments of silence, it's clear they're not going to make any comments about me having two moms. Which is a pleasant surprise.

There's definitely a weird vibe when I park in front of my house, but I assume that's because they're nervous. I point out Charlotte and Sebastian's house next door, mostly for Alex's sake, and lead my new friends inside my house.

After kicking my shoes off and setting my guitar case down by the stairs, I walk into the living room with my friends since I hear something playing on the TV. I find my moms cuddled up under a bunch of blankets, surrounded by junk food while they stare at the screen completely mesmerized.

"Hey," I say loudly to get their attention.

Neither of them looks up from the screen. My mom Evelyn waves her hand at me. "Hey, sweetie. How was band practice?"

"Well, it got cut short again. I told my friends they could come over to hang out in the pool for a while. I hope that's okay."

That gets their attention. Their heads snap toward me simultaneously, and my mom Ava scrambles to pause the TV. She's the first one to smile and greet Alex, Benji, and Emily. "Oh, hi! Of course that's okay. You know any of your friends are welcome any time."

Alex jumps forward to shake hands with them as he introduces himself, and Benji and Emily follow his lead. They're being weird and formal. It's kind of funny, but I keep that thought to myself.

"What are you guys even doing?" I ask my moms, furrowing my eyebrows at their nest of blankets. "You realize it's almost ninety degrees out, right?"

"Oh, hush. We're binging *You* since the next season comes out soon!" My mom Evelyn laughs. Giving my friends a friendly smile, she asks, "I'm sorry to hear your practice was cut short again. Grayson says you have to babysit your niece and nephew pretty often?"

For a second, I feel embarrassed. I tell my moms almost everything about what's going on with my life and my friends' lives. The guys and Charlotte have never called me out or made me feel weird about it, but I don't know what my new friends will think.

"Yeah." Alex sighs. "My older sister can't afford daycare, so she drops her twins off a lot. Me and Em only have to help watch them if my mom's busy, but it makes it hard to do anything with the band there."

My parents share a look, and my mom Evelyn asks, "Well, why don't you practice here?"

"You can use the bonus room upstairs. We barely use it for anything other than storage for our Christmas decorations,"

my mom Ava adds.

“For real?” Alex asks. He looks shocked and hopeful. When my moms nod, he grins around at me, Emily, and Benji. “That would be sick. Can we see the room?”

“Sure.” I smile widely. This is seriously fucking perfect. I didn’t have to ask! I make a mental note to thank my moms profusely later. As I turn to lead them upstairs, I look at Benji and say, “I’ll grab you some swim shorts while we’re upstairs, if you guys still wanna swim.”

“Oh!” My mom Evelyn’s voice stops me, and I turn on my heel to raise my eyebrows at her. She gives me a smirk and laughs. “Charlotte’s out by the pool already.”

What? Why the hell isn’t she with Liam? And more importantly, why wouldn’t my moms tell me that right away? I may not have said as much to them out loud, but they know I’m crazy about her. I’m sure they know the rest of the guys are too. We all make it pretty damn obvious.

“What’s she doing here?” I ask. And fuck, I’m itching to run outside to see her. I don’t want to just ditch my new friends and leave them alone with my parents though.

“I don’t know.” My mom Evelyn laughs. “She came over about an hour ago with a plate of cookies as payment and asked if she could read by the pool. Like she needs an invitation. She’s such an angel.”

Both my moms get up to herd me and my friends into the kitchen, assuring us there are still some cookies left over. Emily looks way too amused at the entire situation, gladly following behind them, while Benji still looks nervous and Alex looks like he wants to go outside and find Charlotte as badly as I do.

It's really fucking selfish of me, but right now, I want to see my Princess alone for a few minutes before I have to share her with Alex and the guys for the rest of the day. I clear my throat and point my thumb over my shoulder, hoping my new friends won't be too pissed at me leaving them alone in the kitchen with my moms. I know they're gonna take the opportunity to grill my friends with a million questions, but the risk is worth a few minutes alone with Charlotte.

"I'll, uh, be right back. I'm gonna grab Charlotte and let her know you guys are here." That's a good excuse, right? I'm pretty sure everyone here knows she's shy, so it's not that weird to think she might like a heads up about people coming over.

Alex opens his mouth like he's going to offer to come with me, but Emily elbows him in the side. He scowls at her, and I take the opportunity to turn and rush out back before he or anyone else can join me.

"Make sure Charlotte's wearing enough sunscreen, Grayson!" my mom Evelyn shouts behind me.

Once I make it outside, I raise my hand to block the sun from my eyes and quickly close the sliding glass door behind me. It only takes me a second to spot Charlotte, lying stretched out on her front on one of the pool chairs. There's a stack of books on the ground beside her, along with her phone and a can of Coke.

I walk over to her slowly, grinning wider with every step closer. She's wearing sunglasses, and it looks like she's sleeping. She's got her head resting on top of her hands, and she doesn't move or react to my presence.

When I reach her, I stop and take a moment to admire her. It's even more obvious she's asleep now, and she looks

fucking peaceful and beautiful. She's wearing a bikini—even if it is a little more modest than the sort of swimsuits most girls our age might wear, she's still showing plenty of skin. I've seen Charlotte in a bathing suit tons of times by now, but it definitely never gets old. Her skin is so soft and creamy, a light scattering of freckles covering her arms and shoulders from the sun. Her legs look so long and enticing, even though she's short. And her curves. Fuck, her subtle curves are phenomenal. The second I focus my attention on her perfect, perky ass, I have to look away before I get a boner.

Kneeling beside her, I gently stroke my hand over her back and whisper, "Wake up, Princess."

She startles, and I move my hand to her hair. God, everything about her is fucking soft.

"Grayson?" she mumbles sleepily.

"Yeah." I lean forward to kiss her forehead. She giggles and gives me a bright smile. I love the way she reacts to me—*and* to the guys, whenever she doesn't think about it too hard. She's open and loving, and I know she craves the affection we're more than happy to give her. Feeling stupidly in love and giddy, I grin down at her. "I didn't expect to find you out here when I got home."

She pushes her sunglasses up on her forehead and smiles shyly. "Sorry. Is that weird?"

"No." I laugh. "I fucking love it, Princess. Best surprise ever. My moms said you don't need an invitation. So, come over here whenever you feel like it."

She hums happily, like she'll consider it. "I didn't think you'd be home until later, anyway. How was band practice?"

“Barely lasted an hour. Alex’s sister dropped her kids off again.” I shrug. Now that my moms agreed to let us practice here instead, I’m not that mad about it. “Alex, Emily, and Benji are inside, actually. I told them they could come over to swim and hang out, and my moms are gonna let us use the upstairs bonus room for band practice from now on.”

“Wow, that’s great! That’s gonna make things much easier, and I probably won’t feel weird crashing any future practices.” She sits up, reaching over to grab her phone. After checking to see if she has any messages, she gives me a nervous smile. “Do you think they’re okay with me hanging out in the pool with you guys today? Liam and Remy got a last-minute job offer from Remy’s grandma’s boyfriend this morning, so we postponed our grocery store trip for later this afternoon.”

“Of course they won’t care. Mentioning the possibility of seeing you was a selling point for Alex,” I tease. A blush rises to her cheeks, so I clear my throat and change the subject before I put my foot in my mouth and push her too far again. “Where’s Sebastian? At home, playing video games?”

Honestly, it’s a big surprise to see he didn’t take the opportunity to hang out with her alone since the guys and I were busy. He already sees her way more often than we do, since they live together, but I know he gets jealous and anxious any time she hangs out with one of us one-on-one.

Then again, this whole past week, Charlotte’s been trying to do more things without us. She casually mentioned that she doesn’t want to have to rely on us as much early in the week at lunch one day. I didn’t think much of her comment at the time. Not until she informed us that she was going to help Adrian with a beginner’s MMA class as his assistant where the guys

and I aren't allowed, and then she had her sleepover with Olivia—which we were also banned from.

The guys and I talked about it when they slept over here on Saturday, and I used it as an argument that we need to back off with all the hardcore flirting and give her some space. Sebastian and Elliot were the most freaked out, worried that she's trying to separate herself from us completely. I don't think that's what she's doing at all. It probably is a good idea for her to make more friends outside of our group. Just like making new friends and forming the band has been good for my depression and anxiety, I'm sure it's similar for her.

“No,” she says. “Arthur's been slacking on his gym routine, so Sebastian went with him this morning. I think they needed some time to hang out alone together, anyway. You know, some guy time without me around.”

Makes sense. I know Arthur and Seb love having Charlotte around—we all do—and they'd never regret having her move in. But they seriously used to do everything together, and time spent with Arthur like this will probably be really good for Sebastian. Make him chill out and realize that not everything has changed just because Charlotte became part of our lives.

“You wanna come inside and say hi to everyone? I was gonna show them the bonus room, and I need to grab something for Benji to wear.”

She nods and takes my hand when I offer to help her up. Threading my fingers through hers, I grin down at her. It doesn't matter how much time we spend together or how often I see her. It always makes me smile like a damn fool whenever I realize how short and fucking precious she is next to me.

“You weren't really gonna read all those books in one sitting, were you?” I ask teasingly as we head inside.

“Shut up!” She giggles and slaps my chest lightly. “I couldn’t decide which one to read, so I brought a few choices.”

I shake my head and snicker. “Such a nerd.”

Inside, it sounds like my moms are still talking to my friends in the kitchen. I squeeze Charlotte’s hand and lead her through the house. Just like I thought, they’re all standing around the island, eating Charlotte’s cookies while my mom Evelyn talks a mile a fucking minute about god-knows-what. Emily’s the only one who looks like she’s enjoying herself, but I’m proud of Benji and Alex for being good sports.

“Found her!” I announce with a laugh, lifting Charlotte’s hand between us.

Everyone looks up. Alex’s eyes snap to Charlotte, and his eyes nearly bug out of his head as he begins choking theatrically on his cookie. I have to bite my tongue to keep from laughing or smiling like a jackass. His reaction to seeing her in her bikini is fucking classic. It reminds me of the first time the guys and I went swimming with her earlier this summer, when she yelled at us after Elliot prematurely threw her into the pool with her glasses on.

Emily pats Alex roughly on the back, giving him a patronizing smile before she turns to us. “Hi, Charlotte. Your swimsuit is cute!”

“I—” Charlotte clamps her mouth shut and turns to look up at me.

Aside from the blush across her cheeks, she looks pretty calm and collected. But I know her well enough to know she’s probably panicking. She still rarely shows any emotion unless she’s let her guard completely down, and I know that’s

because of the way her mom treated her for years. God, it makes me fucking angry every time I think about it.

“What’s wrong, Princess?” I mumble softly. My only guess is that she’s embarrassed at Alex’s reaction, or she feels guilty that he’s checking her out in front of me.

“I forgot to grab a coverup before I came over here,” she says.

My eyes slide over her figure, and I grin smugly at her. It makes sense. We spent most of our summer running around our backyards, in and out of the pool. So, we were all constantly in our swimsuits. She used to be shy and modest about covering up when we first met her, but I guess she got used to it after spending a lot of time with us either in her swimsuit, or in gym shorts and a sports bra. It probably didn’t occur to her to grab extra clothes before she came over here.

I’m definitely not fucking complaining, but I hate that she’s back to feeling awkward. I want her to feel happy and comfortable all the time, and that includes whenever she’s with Alex or other people.

“Do you want to wear my shirt?” I ask, pulling at the hem of my tee. “Or I can run next door and grab a dress from your closet, if you want.”

Her eyes brighten, and a small smile tugs at her lips. When her cheeks redden further and her gaze dips to my chest, I realize she’s not going to tell me what she wants. She’ll say she doesn’t want to inconvenience me. So, without waiting for her to speak, I pull my shirt up over my head and tug it down over hers.

She giggles wildly, slapping my hands away so she can adjust my shirt on her own. When I step back, I probably have

the biggest, cheesiest smile on my face. My shirt is big enough on her that it hits her mid-thigh. She looks fucking sexy, her skin sun-kissed and her hair messy while she looks like she's wearing nothing but one of my old band shirts.

"Thanks, Grayson," she whispers.

"No problem, Princess." When I look up, my moms are sharing a conspiring smile while Benji and Emily look curious and maybe slightly surprised.

Alex is staring at me like I've betrayed him, which makes me feel like shit. I know he likes her. He's told me enough times, and I've never told him she's dating anyone or that I like her. I guess I've been waiting to see how Charlotte feels before I consider broaching the subject of polyamory with him. I don't know him well enough to guess at how he might react. It's terrifying enough bringing it up with the guys. I was lucky that Elliot ended up coming to me first.

"Can we see upstairs now?" Emily asks, breaking the awkward silence.

I nod and move to lead everyone upstairs. My moms go back to their Netflix binge, shouting at me to let them know if me or my friends need anything else. Once I reach the upstairs landing, I mumble at Benji to follow me to my room while Charlotte heads to the end of the hallway to the bonus room with Emily.

Surprisingly, Alex follows me and Benji. The second we're alone in the room, he shakes his head at me and hisses, "Dude, what the fuck! How are you so ripped?"

Benji snorts with laughter, and I raise my eyebrows. I don't know if I should feel confused, flattered, amused, or

relieved he's not just pissed at me for flirting with Charlotte in front of him.

"Uh, thanks?" I chuckle.

"Yeah, I wasn't expecting it either, to be honest," Benji says. He glances away from me quickly when his face starts turning red. Wait, is he gay? I had no fucking clue. You'd think I'd be better at picking up those sorts of cues since my moms are gay, but it never occurred to me. Am I making him uncomfortable by walking around without a shirt? Shit.

Running a hand down my chest, I shrug. I have some muscle tone, but I'm definitely not ripped. Not like Liam, Elliot, and Sebastian are. Not even close. "I go to the gym with my friends a lot. We do some MMA training."

I haven't been in once since school started. Adrian's probably going to kick my ass for that the next time I see him.

"Seriously?" Alex asks. "That's sick. Fuck, you could probably kick my ass."

"Was that ever a question?" Benji laughs.

Alex grins and flips him off. I chuckle and take the opportunity to brag about my friends. "I'm nowhere near as good or as ripped as the guys. Remy can lift more than I can, and he can easily kick my ass. Sebastian's probably the best at fighting, and Liam and Elliot are basically gym rats. Once football season's over, Elliot will probably boycott going to the gym for at least a month. And then he'll get pissed when he gains twenty pounds and loses his eight-pack."

They snicker, and I add, "Charlotte's getting pretty good too. She might end up being better than Sebastian soon. Our trainer just offered her a volunteer job helping him out with one of his classes."

“*Charlotte?* She does fucking MMA training?” Benji asks, gaping at me. “She’s so little and sweet. I can’t even picture it.”

Alex looks equal parts shocked and intrigued, and I grin at him as I respond to Benji. “Oh, yeah. She’s a scrappy little thing. Didn’t you guys hear the rumors about her breaking Mike Everette’s nose and two of his fingers? Fucking classic.”

“That really happened?” Alex asks. When I nod, he reaches up to rub the back of his neck with uncertainty. “We try not to pay attention to many of the rumors going around about her. Or about you and your friends. I’m sure you know what people are saying lately.”

I nod slowly. But fuck, what do I say? Yeah, people are exaggerating and assuming shit. None of us are dating Charlotte, and we’re definitely not sleeping with her. But that’s sort of the goal, isn’t it? At least for me and Elliot.

“Here,” I say instead, stepping over to my dresser and digging through it to find a couple of pairs of swim shorts. I toss one pair to Benji and nod at the doorway. “The bathroom’s two doors down on the left if you wanna go get changed.”

After he and Alex step out of my room, I quickly strip down to change too. I pull my phone out to send a text to the guys through our group chat, letting them know Charlotte and I are over at my house with Alex, Emily, and Benji. Just in case any of them want to stop by earlier or whatever.

Charlotte, Emily, and Alex are in the bonus room together when I walk in there a few moments later. Charlotte’s smiling happily, watching the others freak out from excitement that we’ll be able to practice here. I’m stoked about it too. The room is huge with windows overlooking the backyard and

pool. It'll be easy enough to move the boxes of Christmas decorations into the attic. I'll have one of the guys help me when they come over later.

When Benji joins us, I excitedly tell them my plan of where we can set up our instruments, and I suggest we make the entire space soundproof as soon as we can. I don't mention how much it might cost. My moms will probably pay for it, and if not, I know Liam will be more than happy to help me out.

"You guys have a car, right?" I ask Alex and Emily. I know Benji doesn't, but I haven't paid enough attention to know if they do or not. If they don't, I'm sure Liam or Sebastian will help give them rides over here whenever we can fit in band practice. And I'll ask Elliot to help move their instruments over here sometime this week. He's the only one of us with a truck.

"Yeah, a shitty one that we share," Emily says. Even if it's a shitty car, that makes planning things a hell of a lot easier.

"Cool, that's awesome." I grin.

While we talk about our new plans for the band—we still need to come up with a damn name, but Emily keeps vetoing everything we come up with—Charlotte stays glued to my side. She's quiet, so I'm sure she's feeling nervous and shy. I try to make her feel comfortable any way I can, and I make sure she knows she's being included in the conversation multiple times.

Eventually, Emily says she wants to stop talking about music and finally check out the pool. So, we head downstairs and outside. Barely a few seconds later, before any of us have put on sunscreen, Elliot lets himself into the yard from the back gate.

“Yo! What’s good?” he shouts. He goes to Charlotte first, pulling her into a hug before he smiles at me. “I was on my way over here to see if Seb wanted to hang out when I got your text.”

“Nice. Your practice let out early?” I ask. I didn’t expect him or the other guys to come over for a while, so I hope the band’s not pissed. I really want my new friends to get along with the guys.

A wicked smile spreads across Elliot’s face. “Yeah. Because Jude fucking Foster tripped over his own feet when we were running drills and broke his arm. It was the funniest shit I’ve ever seen, Gray. He’s benched for the rest of the season!”

Emily snorts. When we turn to look at her, she shrugs. “Jude’s a douche. I can admit that’s kinda funny.”

“You’re goddamn right he is!” Elliot exclaims excitedly, holding his hand out to high five her.

“That’s fucking karma, alright.” I laugh. Not only did one of our biggest bullies do something stupid to get himself hurt and all but kicked from the team, he also managed to cut their practice short so Elliot could have a free afternoon.

“It’s going to be really hard not to look smug during history tomorrow,” Charlotte says, a smile lighting up her face. She’s as messed up and violent as me and the guys are, and I fucking love it.

Elliot gives her a lopsided smile, letting his eyes run up and down her figure. He doesn’t try to hide it. And then the idiot glances sideways at Alex and smirks before reaching out to tug on a strand of Charlotte’s golden hair. “So, are we

swimming? I can rub some sunscreen on your back for you, gorgeous. Or anywhere else you might need it.”

I roll my eyes hard, laughing loudly when Charlotte makes a disgruntled noise and punches him.

“Please *try* to remember what we talked about.” I give him a look, keeping my wording vague on purpose. This is the first chance I’ve been able to hang out with Alex and Elliot together. It’s the first step in helping Elliot accept the fact that Charlotte has a crush on Alex, and I really hope it goes well.

Raising his hands in mock defense, Elliot gives me a wide grin. “I’ll try my best, Grayson. But no promises.”

REMY



“Ms. KINSLEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU IN HER OFFICE.”

It takes me a few seconds to recognize the name of the new guidance counselor. I shrug and take the office slip from Ms. Wilkins. Anything’s better than sitting through another boring history lecture. If I take long enough, I might be able to get away with not coming back to class before it’s time for lunch.

Some jerk from the football team slams his shoulder against mine as we pass each other through the doorway of the classroom. Usually, I’d roll my eyes or ignore him completely. I don’t know the dickhead’s name. But when I see Jude Foster behind him, his right arm covered in a cast, I let a psychotic grin spread across my face.

It’s his own fault he broke his arm and got himself benched for the rest of the season. It’s not like he can play with a cast, so he’s pretty much useless to the team. He wasn’t a top player to begin with, and it’s not likely he’ll get picked for the team next year. The guys and I have been dying laughing for weeks because of his misfortune, and we throw it in his face any chance we get.

Maybe that sounds harsh, but he absolutely deserves it. He’s always fucked with us. Especially Elliot and Grayson.

Sometimes karma can be so damn sweet.

The bell rings, and I chuckle when Jude sneers at me before slipping into the classroom. With everyone in their classes and the halls empty, I take my time walking to the main office. When I pass a poster advertising the homecoming dance, I pause to frown at it. The dance is still a few weeks away, after the football team's final game of the season. Posters started popping up all over the school a few days ago, and they mention the dance every day during the morning announcements.

Will Charlotte want to go to the dance? She hasn't mentioned it to me or any of the other guys, as far as I know. But Liam's sister Olivia is in the running for Homecoming Queen, so there's a good chance Charlotte will wanna go because of that. Besides, she's really into school and all sorts of girly shit.

Should I ask her? An aching pang shoots through my chest, and I quickly shove the stupid idea aside and continue my walk to the office. Even if she wants to go, I'd be the worst choice of date for her. Nobody would come over to us to talk during the dance because of me, she'd probably be picked on more than she usually is, someone would decide to start another dumbass rumor, and I can't drive. What am I going to do? Have my grandma pick her up, take us through the Taco Bell drive-thru, then drop us off at the school? Yeah fucking right. Charlotte deserves better.

She'll probably want to go with Elliot, anyway. Over the past month, it's become obvious they're perfect together. Even if they're not an official couple yet, it's only a matter of time. Every Friday, she wears his letterman jacket, and she stays behind at school to watch his practice at least once a week.

Their chemistry is insane too, which I've seen up close for myself. I can't be mad about it either because he treats her like a queen. The second football season's over, I have no doubt he'll focus one hundred percent of his attention on Charlotte.

Charlotte and I have chemistry too. That's undeniable. But I can't offer her the same happiness and security she'd get from dating Elliot. Or any of the other guys, really. I can't drive her anywhere or take her on dates. I can't buy her nice things. I can't give her the wholesome high school experience she wants and deserves.

Plus, Elliot's one of my best friends. While I may be jealous and heartbroken that I'm not the one she wants, I'm still happy for him. He and Charlotte deserve each other. They deserve to be happy.

It's almost a relief to realize I genuinely feel that way. We were all worried there would be bad blood if Charlotte picked one of us over the others. Seb's still in denial, and he'll probably stay that way for a long time. Especially since they live together. The guys and I have toned it down when it comes to flirting with her over the past couple weeks, ever since Madison Taylor saw Charlotte, Elliot, and me fucking around during gym class. That moment between the three of us was hot and way too fucking fun, and Madison managed to ruin it by twisting shit around and making Charlotte the topic of another scandalous rumor.

But since we stopped flirting with her at school, things have been nicer. Easier. Our friendship seems as strong as ever, and the guys and I aren't fighting as much. Plus, we all still get to spend time with Charlotte, and I constantly remind myself I'm just lucky that she considers me her friend. Sebastian acts like we did him a favor by cooling down with

that dumbass bet he insisted on. Like he's been given extra time to win Charlotte over or some shit.

Liam agrees with me that Charlotte becoming Elliot's girlfriend is inevitable. The rest of us need to suck it up.

When I walk into the office several minutes later, the receptionist gives me a wary look. She's on the phone, and she continues darting nervous glances at me until she finishes her call. That's generally the reaction I get from every teacher, student, and staff member around here. Some days, it makes me roll my eyes. Other days, it really fucking stings. I have a violent past, yeah, but I never get into fights at school. Not like the other guys do. Still, everyone acts like I'm split seconds away from going on a murder rampage.

"How can I help you?" the nervous receptionist asks as soon as she sets the phone down.

I hold up my slip and shrug. "Counselor wants to see me, I guess."

She hesitantly reaches out and takes the slip from me, careful not to let our hands touch. She reads it and points to the log book on the front of her desk. "Go ahead and sign in. I'll let Ms. Kinsley know you're here."

After quickly scribbling my name, I turn and take a seat in the waiting area. There's no one in here except for me and the receptionist, so I take my phone out without much care or worry. It's doubtful she'll say anything about confiscating it. Not when she seems scared of me.

The only notification I have is a text from Grayson. "*Did you wanna go to Elliot's game tonight or chill and play video games?*"

We always try to make it to Elliot's games. He doesn't have anyone supporting him except for us. His dad is the one who pushes him to play football, and then he doesn't bother showing up to the games. It's such bullshit. The only reason we're on the fence about tonight is because it's an away game, nearly a three-hour drive from here.

"Remy Oliver?"

I look up, finding a curvy woman with curly red hair standing in the door frame of one of the counseling offices. She's wearing a bright fuchsia dress that clashes horribly with her hair. She's also wearing these thick, obnoxious glasses that remind me of the pair Charlotte wore back when she lost her contacts earlier this summer. A smile tries to tug at my mouth, but I hold it back. Charlotte always speaks highly of this new counselor, but I'm sure this lady's read my personal file by now. There's no way she's gonna be as nice to me as she is to Charlotte, so I need to brace myself for a meeting full of contempt and judgment.

"Well, come in! Come in!" She beckons at me enthusiastically, even though I haven't bothered responding to her original question.

I stand up, stretching lazily and taking my time before slipping my phone back into my pocket and shuffling into her office. She hums cheerily and closes the door behind us, waiting until I sit in the giant, fluffy armchair in front of her desk to take her own seat behind her computer.

Looking around, I feel like I've walked into another dimension. I can't count how many times I've been in the counselors' and principal's office here since freshman year. I used to report kids who bullied me and my friends, and it always just resulted in stern lectures about controlling my

temper and trying harder to fit in. I'm all too familiar with the drab, gray walls of these offices.

Except now, Ms. Kinsley's office is bursting with color. From the walls, the chairs, the art she has hanging up, the knick knacks on her desk, and even her. For the first time in months, my fingers are itching to paint something other than the girl I'm in love with.

"How are you today?" Ms. Kinsley asks in a pleasant tone.

Feeling weirdly defensive, I glare at her and shrug. "I didn't do anything, so I don't know why I'm here."

She raises her eyebrows in surprise and shakes her head, a nervous, tinny laugh escaping her. "Oh, no. You're not in trouble. I've been meeting one-on-one with all the students in eleventh and twelfth grade since the first week. I don't like doing things in alphabetical order, so you randomly happened to fall on my list today. I just want to check in, see how your classes are going so far, and maybe talk about any long-term goals you have so we can make sure you're heading in the right direction."

She's certainly caught me by surprise, and now I feel like an asshole. "Oh."

Ms. Kinsley laughs and clicks something on her screen. "So? How are you liking your classes so far?"

I shrug. She only raises an eyebrow at my non-answer, so I sigh. "Fine, I guess."

"Hmm." Her eyebrows scrunch together as she frowns at her computer. "Well, it looks like you're excelling in your advanced art, art history, and gym classes. The notes from your teachers there are positive, and you're averaging an A in those. However, you're on track to receive a failing grade in

the rest of your classes. Can you tell me why you think that might be? It's early enough in the year that we can turn this around, but we need to figure out the root of the problem.”

Hearing that I'm failing everything except for art and gym is no surprise. I'd probably be failing art history too if it weren't for Charlotte taking meticulous notes and letting me copy her homework assignments. Until this moment, I didn't give a shit about my grades. But hearing the genuine concern in Ms. Kinsley's voice makes me feel ashamed. She's trying hard to put a positive spin on the situation. Any other counselor or teacher would scoff and call me a failure, pushing me away and writing me off as too much trouble to be worth the time or effort.

“Uh, well, I—” I stumble over my words, feeling a sharp pang in my chest. I don't like feeling like this. Like someone outside of my grandma and my tight circle of friends cares about me. But I'd be an irrational asshole to take it out on the counselor. “I don't really care about anything except for my art.”

I don't think I've turned in a single homework assignment outside of my art classes or made any sort of effort on any tests or quizzes I've had. We're only a month into the school year, and I've completely given up on doing anything except hanging out with my friends and obsessively painting and drawing Charlotte.

“Okay, great!” She grins, typing rapidly on her computer. “That's a good place to start. Are you thinking you might want to pursue a career in art after high school?”

“I haven't really thought about it,” I mumble honestly. I can't imagine not doing something with art for the rest of my life, but I hate thinking of how things will be after I graduate.

Seb, Gray, Liam, Elliot, and Charlotte are all destined to go off and do great things. I'll probably end up as a landscaper working for my grandma's boyfriend's company. Even if I had the grades, it's not like I can afford school.

“Well, art schools are competitive, if that's the path you choose to take. Sometimes it doesn't matter how talented you are or how strong your portfolio is. Your grade point average and test scores still matter to a degree. And if you decide to go to a liberal arts college instead, they'll matter even more. If you're concerned about the cost, we can always look into scholarships. I can think of several off the top of my head that you qualify for.”

She makes it seem so...possible. Like I'm fucking normal, and like I'm allowed to think about my future the same way any other privileged kid can. I get why Charlotte likes this lady so much.

Ms. Kinsley's eyes soften when I don't answer. I must look as overwhelmed and caught off guard as I feel.

“It's okay, Remy,” she says warmly. “We don't need to figure out everything all in one day. Let's focus on one step at a time.”



“DUDE, WHAT'S UP WITH YOU?” ELLIOT KNOCKS HIS shoulder against mine.

It's Friday, and we had to run the mile in gym class again. We finished ours, and now we're walking around the track, killing time until class is over. Charlotte's walking beside Emily about twenty feet ahead of us, and I've probably spent

the last five minutes shamelessly staring at Charlotte's ass. Her gym shorts are tiny and form-fitting, and her legs are toned. Pure, sweet torture.

"Just spacing out," I lie, peeling my eyes from Charlotte. I can't help wanting her, pining after her, loving her. But maybe I need to stop making it blatantly obvious around Elliot.

He snorts, shaking his head with a cheeky grin. He's fully aware of what I was doing. "Besides that. You've been weird since lunch. Did someone fuck with you or say something about Charlotte?"

"No." No more than usual, anyway. "I talked to that new counselor, Ms. Kinsley. She said some stuff that messed with my head, I think. In a good way, mostly."

I spent nearly an hour in her office, mostly listening to her. She talked about different options I have if I want to pursue a career in art, and she gave me all this shit to look up when I get home. She also gave me tips to start bringing my grades up, with advice on how to approach some of my teachers about make-up work or extra credit. She gave me a list of tutors to reach out to if I need more help.

There's a slim chance any of my teachers will give enough of a shit to help me out, and there's no way I'd ever reach out to anyone outside of my friend group for something like tutoring. But it was a nice thought, and I feel like I should make somewhat of an effort as a thank you to her.

"Oh, yeah?" Elliot asks. "I haven't met her yet, but Charlotte loves her. Plus, supposedly Adrian's trying to hook up with her. Charlotte says he's been acting like a lovesick puppy, looking for her around every corner when he and Charlotte train together."

“Seriously?” I grin. That’s fucking hilarious. After all the shit Adrian’s given me and the guys about Charlotte, he deserves to have us rag on him a bit. “What a simp.”

Elliot nods, and we laugh. All jokes aside, I’m happy for Adrian, and I hope it works out for him. He deserves to meet someone and settle down. I can’t help feeling a sharp pain in my chest, even though I try to hide it. Elliot’s made it clear once again that he and Charlotte have a solid connection and that they talk all the time without me or the other guys around. If this is the first time I’m hearing about Adrian and Ms. Kinsley. Elliot’s clearly the only person Charlotte’s mentioned it to. Seb, Grayson, and Liam would never be able to keep that information to themselves. Elliot has the excuse of being so exhausted and busy with football that it probably slipped his mind until now.

Charlotte and I never hang out alone. The only time I see her outside of school is when we’re hanging out as a group. Even then, and during the classes we do have together, it’s not like we have any deep conversations. If we’re not doing something as a group, I draw her and flirt with her. That’s it. I know she likes the attention I give her sometimes, even when I get way too intense, and I know she’s attracted to me. But at this point, I’m pretty sure that’s all she feels for me on her end.

“What are you doing tonight?” Elliot asks, changing the subject. “You and the guys hanging out at Seb and Charlotte’s playing video games?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “We haven’t decided if we’re gonna try to make it to your game or not.”

He scoffs and waves his hand at me. “Don’t bother. It’s gonna be fucking stupid. The rival team has a shit score this season. We can probably win with our eyes closed. I’d hate for

you guys to drive all that way to be bored. Plus, it's supposed to be really cold tonight."

I chuckle at his prediction and assessment of the other team. Knowing he won't be offended if we don't show up, I feel a lot less guilty about not wanting to go tonight. Normally, I really don't mind. Football's not my favorite sport, but I can get into watching a game in the right conditions.

"Then yeah. Video games, I guess." I glance longingly at Charlotte. She's still talking to Emily, which is cool. I love that it's been easy for her to make friends with more people here, despite all the rumors and bullshit from our long-time bullies.

Elliot's eyes dart between me and Charlotte, and a sly grin slowly spreads across his face. "Why don't you take Charlotte out? If she was planning on trying to come to my game with you guys, it's not like she'll have other plans."

I jerk my head to the side and stare at him like he's gone insane. He's practically dating Charlotte, so why would he joke about that? Even if we were still competing for her or whatever the fuck our stupid plan was, it doesn't make sense for him to suggest I go on a date with her.

"I'm serious." He holds his hands up defensively. "You've spent less time with her than any of us since school started. Didn't you mention asking her out almost a month ago? What the fuck happened with that?"

Adjusting my glasses anxiously, I shrug. "Yeah, I was gonna take her to an art museum. She seemed into the idea, but it's not like I have a car or any money. Plus, I felt weird pushing the whole thing after we caused those rumors about her having a threesome with us by the bleachers."

Elliot barks out a laugh, his eyes sparking mischievously. “Come on. We were teasing her, and it was still fucking hot. Plus, Sebastian was way more pissed about it than Charlotte ever was. So, that’s no excuse. Ask her out again, take her out tonight, and don’t worry about the guys.”

It still doesn’t make any fucking sense on his part, but there’s a hopeful flutter in my chest. It’s not a bad plan, and it’s not like I’d be doing anything wrong. She’s still single. And like Elliot said, I’ve spent hardly any time with her lately compared to everyone else.

“Did you forget the part where I mentioned not having a car or any money?” I roll my eyes. I’m being a dick for no reason, I know. But my thoughts are tangled. I’m confused, hopeful, and nervous to approach Charlotte. She said yes last time I asked, but that doesn’t mean she’ll say yes again.

“Whatever, dude. I know you’ve been hoarding money from your summer job. If you’re that worried about it, split dinner with her. She won’t care or think differently of you for that.” He grins and elbows my side. “And you can borrow my truck. I’m taking the bus with the team and won’t be back here until probably two in the morning, so I was gonna leave it here in the lot. My dad will never know. It’s perfect.”

My chest feels tight, and I have to swallow the lump in my throat. It’s pathetic, but he has me feeling completely choked up. What the fuck did I do to deserve such good friends? Whether he and Charlotte end up becoming a couple or not, this is a really nice gesture on his part. I may not understand it, but I know without a doubt his intentions are good.

“Are you sure?” I ask quietly. If he takes it back or decides it’s a bad idea, I won’t blame him or harbor any bad feelings.

“Absolutely,” Elliot says. He smirks in Charlotte’s direction and chuckles. “Show our girl a good time. She deserves it.”

CHARLOTTE



EMILY PEERS OVER HER SHOULDER, SO I DO THE SAME. REMY and Elliot are still walking about twenty feet behind us, talking and laughing together. My heart warms as I watch them. I love their friendship with each other, and it's really sweet of them to give me some space to talk to Emily during class.

They catch us looking at the same time, smiles lighting up their faces as they wave at me.

"I don't think they can hear us," Emily mumbles. "So, I wanted to give you a heads up."

We don't usually talk about the guys, or anything all that serious, really. But we have been talking a lot more ever since she, Alex, and Benji came over to Grayson's house the first time to hang out in the pool. They've started having their band practice at his house a few times a week, so I see a lot more of them outside of school. It's been really nice, and it makes me happy that I've managed to make genuine friendships outside of the guys.

When I was in juvie, and before all that when I lived with my mom, I struggled to socialize with people my age. I could barely form a coherent sentence around somebody, and I became distant and withdrawn. Arthur and the guys helped me a lot over the summer by helping me build my confidence.

Talking to new people and making new friends over the past month has been easy. Sometimes, I barely recognize myself—in the best way possible—and it makes me feel proud of my progress. So much that I opened up with my therapist a little and told her as much.

“What’s up?” I whisper to Emily, tilting my head curiously. She’s usually blunt and says whatever’s on her mind, so it must be a big deal if it’s something she doesn’t want Remy and Elliot to overhear.

She brushes a stray hair off her forehead, and her chipped, black nail polish catches my eye. She doesn’t seem like the type of girl who likes manicures or anything super girly, but maybe I should invite her to get her nails done with me sometime.

“It’s not a secret that my cousin likes you,” she says. My cheeks redden at the mention of Alex, and I nod briskly. Like I said, as much as we talk, we really don’t talk about the guys. She makes fun of Alex about his crush on me, but I’m not usually the target of her teasing. She snorts at me and shrugs. “He’s gonna ask you to Homecoming. I made sure he’s not gonna, like, make a huge, public spectacle, but I figured I should still let you know.”

“Oh.” My heart flutters wildly. I shouldn’t be that surprised, but I am. It’s been almost an entire week since the dance was announced and tickets went on sale. I was anxious and excited at first because I expected my guys to bombard me or fight over which of them would get to take me.

None of them has mentioned it once. Olivia thinks they’re waiting for me to ask one of them. It’s totally the perfect trap to make me ‘choose.’ Which is impossible. It just is. They’ve

been flirting with me a lot less lately, but I haven't forgotten about their dumb bet.

“Don't feel bad if you don't want to go with him. You can say no. I know you've got, you know...” She trails off and waves her hand behind us in Elliot and Remy's direction. Smirking and raising her eyebrows, she finishes, “Other options.”

“I—” I like Emily, but I don't know her like I know Olivia yet. It feels weird to talk about my feelings about the guys, especially since Alex is her cousin. I like him, but I try really hard not to flirt with him. I'd hate for him to think I'm leading him on when I'm already in such a messy situation with the rest of my guys. I clear my throat and lower my voice, giving Emily an apologetic grimace. “It's not that I don't want to go with him. Alex is a nice guy. It's just sort of...complicated for me right now.”

As much as part of me would like to go to the dance, or on any date, with Alex, I feel like that would hurt my guys' feelings way more than me going with one of them instead.

Emily smiles in relief. “Okay. I get that.” I must look guilty because she raises a hand and adds, “Don't apologize, girl. Your dating life is your business. I love my cousin, and it's hilarious to tease him about you. But I don't get a bad vibe from you, and I don't feel like you're leading him on or any bullshit like that. Just don't be a dick to him, and we won't have a problem.”

“Okay, thanks.” I smile.

She's always cool and non-judgmental. I'm about to ask if she's planning on going to the dance and whether or not she'd want to get our nails done together when Mr. Montalvo, one of the gym teachers, blows his whistle to signal that class is

almost over and we should head back to the locker rooms to change.

After changing back into my regular clothes and ignoring a few snide comments Madison and Summer throw my way, I head out into the main gym to meet up with Elliot and Remy. Only, Elliot's nowhere to be seen.

Remy gives me a tight smile. The one that hides his dimples and usually indicates he's feeling guarded or nervous. Before I can ask what's wrong or where Elliot is, he reads my mind and reassures me. "Don't worry. He ran ahead to meet up with the other guys at your locker. I wanted to talk to you really quick, so I told him we'd meet him and everyone else in the parking lot by Seb's car."

Butterflies erupt in my chest. What does he want to talk to me about? The dance? I'm probably assuming because of the conversation I just had with Emily, but I can't think of why else he'd be nervous or why he'd want to talk to me alone.

"Okay." I giggle anxiously. "I have the books I need for the weekend from my locker, so that's fine. As long as one of the guys grabs the lunch tote."

He nods and threads his fingers through mine as we head outside. The gym exits to the side of the school, but it's quieter and more secluded here than anywhere in the front or near the parking lot. As soon as we find an area where there aren't any students rushing or bustling around, he drops my hand and stares down at me with an intense expression as he adjusts his glasses.

"Do you remember when we talked about going to that art museum?"

I blink up at him, careful to keep my expression blank. Of course I remember. Alex sort of asked me out, suggesting he could take me there, and then I turned around and asked Remy about the art museum. Even though it's been nearly a month, and nothing ever came from it, there's no way I could ever forget.

When I nod, his mouth curves into a tiny smile. But his dimples still aren't showing, so I know he's still nervous.

"I know it's last minute, but would you wanna go out with me tonight? I looked it up, and the art museum is open until eight, and I thought maybe we could grab dinner after. Elliot doesn't want us dragging ourselves all the way out to his away game, and he offered to let me borrow his truck."

My eyes widen with shock. *Elliot* offered to let Remy use his truck so he could take me out tonight? That's so...sweet and thoughtful and amazing. Hope swells in my chest. This is one baby step closer to potentially getting everything I secretly want. If the guys start encouraging each other to take me out or hang out with me, that can only be a good thing. Right?

"On a date?" I squeak. Just in case I'm reading this situation all wrong. Like, maybe he's inviting the other guys too, and I'm just jumping to conclusions.

His smile widens until his dimples finally poke through, and a deep chuckle escapes his throat. "Yeah, a date. Just me and you, baby."

Just like every time he calls me that, my stomach flips over until I feel like I might physically faint from swooning. How am I going to deal with his attention and intensity all night? Especially if we're alone?

“That sounds amazing,” I blurt, almost breathlessly. For once, I’m glad my mouth worked faster than my brain. I’m insanely nervous, but I’m excited too. A date with Remy will be fun, and I have to remind myself that things will be alright and work out no matter what. Just because I’m going on a date with him doesn’t mean I’m choosing him over the rest of the guys. It doesn’t mean it’s the end of anything. It could even turn out to be the start of forming a real relationship with all of them. Plus, they’ve been getting along well lately, not fighting over me in any noticeable way, and clearly Elliot’s fine with me and Remy going out.

“Yeah?” he asks excitedly. He reaches out to squeeze my hand. “Awesome. I’ll, um, pick you up at four? That way we have enough time to drive up there and everything.”

That gives me just over an hour to change and get ready when I get home, which is perfect. We walk to Sebastian’s car to meet up with the rest of the guys, holding hands and stealing side glances and smiles at each other the whole way. I’ve technically been on a date with Elliot before, earlier in the summer, but this will be the first time I’m hanging out with one of my guys where we’re not making it clear we’re only hanging out as friends.

I wonder if Remy will kiss me tonight. He’s come close to kissing me a couple of times before, so there’s a super high chance he’ll go through with it tonight when there aren’t any other distractions around us. Oh my god. I need to text Olivia and update her before I completely freak out or embarrass myself.

The rest of the guys are waiting by Sebastian’s car, laughing and joking around. Elliot notices us approaching

first, and he gives Remy a questioning look. When Remy nods, Elliot grins and gives us two thumbs up.

Without thinking about it, I run over to him and throw my arms around his neck. He laughs and hugs me back tightly, rubbing one of his hands over my back.

“You miss me that much, gorgeous?” he teases.

Maybe he doesn't want everyone else to know that he helped Remy set everything in motion for our date tonight, but I need him to know how grateful I am. I could seriously cry at how sweet, understanding, and supportive he is. I know he likes me, and I'm pretty sure he knows I like him too. So, his gesture for me and Remy shows that maybe he gets how I'm feeling about all of them, and that maybe he's okay with that.

Standing up on my tiptoes, I lean as close to his ear as I can to whisper, “Thank you. You're so—god, I don't know what to say or how to make it up to you.”

He holds me tighter, kissing my cheek before whispering in my ear. “You can make it up to me by having fun. And by not worrying about what the guys and I, or anyone else, is going to think.”

I pull away enough to meet his eyes, and he gives me a shy smile. I'm overwhelmed by how hopeful, seen, and loved I feel, and I'm close to blurting out that I love him. When Grayson tried to say something like this to me a few weeks ago, I freaked out. I wasn't ready to listen to or to begin to imagine any of the guys would be okay with the way I feel about them. But maybe I should talk to them? Elliot and Grayson, at the very least.

“Good luck at your game tonight,” I say instead of any of the things swirling around in my brain. “Text me when it's

over, and call me when you get home.”

His eyes crinkle from amusement, so he probably knows I’m scrambling to change the subject. “It’ll be late when I get home.”

“I’ll wait up.”

He grins broadly and squeezes me so tight that it’s almost impossible to breathe. When he lets me go, I remember the other guys are watching us. Feeling my face warm up, I quickly go around and offer hugs to everyone else. Even Sebastian and Grayson, even though we drive home together. I don’t want anyone to feel left out.

Sebastian seems to appreciate it, even though I catch him giving Elliot a scathing look out of the corner of my eye. Grayson looks like he’s bursting to say something, and he’s fighting a grin every time I glance in his direction.

“So, I’ll see you in about an hour?” Remy asks sweetly when I move to get into the passenger seat of Sebastian’s car.

I nod and offer him a bright smile. “I can’t wait.”

CHARLOTTE



“REMY’S HERE TO PICK YOU UP,” SEBASTIAN SAYS.

I turn to find him leaning against my door frame, frowning. I swear, my bedroom door has become his favorite spot in the house. Every morning before school, and sometimes on the weekends, he’ll stand there and watch me do my hair and makeup. I’ve totally caught him taking a few candid photos too. Maybe I should find it creepy or annoying, but I don’t. Honestly, I love that he watches me like that. It makes me feel sexy and admired, and it’s something simple, subtle, and intimate that’s just between him and me.

“He didn’t come upstairs with you?” I ask, my heart pounding. Sebastian is always jealous whenever I spend any time with the guys. It always puts me on edge, and I never know what to say to him.

Sebastian shakes his head. “No. Arthur’s lecturing him about driving safely and getting you home at a decent time. He didn’t seem surprised that Remy’s taking you out...”

I know that’s Sebastian’s way of saying *he’s* surprised and caught off guard. We were originally planning on watching movies and playing video games if we ended up not going to Elliot’s game tonight. Arthur got home early from work today, a few minutes after we did, and I told him my plans and made

sure he was okay with me going. My uncle took it in stride, showing excitement for me and telling me to have a good time. Since our awkward conversation on the first day of school, he hasn't brought up my relationship with any of the guys or pried into my romantic life. Even last week when I went to the doctor to get on the pill, he avoided asking any invasive or personal questions.

"Well, he asked me right after gym class. It was last-minute," I say to Sebastian. I'm not sorry that I'm going on a date with Remy, but I am sorry Sebastian feels upset about it. "I'm sorry I won't be around tonight to hang out while you and the guys play video games."

"I just—" His gorgeous, mismatched eyes bore into mine across the room, and he swallows audibly. "I just wish it was me."

That's the last thing I expected him to say, and I have no idea how to respond. It's impossible to break eye contact with him, so all I can do is stare at him across the room while my heart beats rapidly in my chest.

Maybe I can try to explain that I'm not choosing Remy or anyone *instead* of him. That just because I'm going out with Remy, that doesn't mean I wouldn't be just as thrilled to go out with him too. Sure, the situation between me and Sebastian is more complicated than it is with the rest of the guys simply because we live together. Arthur forbade us dating or being together as soon as I moved in, and I get why it would seem inappropriate. I see Sebastian every morning when I wake up and every night before I go to sleep. We eat dinner and do our homework together every night. He sees me in my pajamas and glasses with morning breath, no makeup, and my hair a tangled rats' nest on a regular basis, and he still thinks I'm

beautiful. There are many nights we stay up late together, whispering about his mom and my dad or about our dreams of moving to New York City for school after we graduate.

My heart fully belongs to Sebastian, just as much as it belongs to Remy, Elliot, Liam, and Grayson.

“I’m sorry. Me and Remy—”

“It’s fine.” Sebastian cuts me off, tearing his gaze from mine. “I might hang out with Summer, anyway. She got a new camera, and I want to see how it compares to some of mine.”

If he wanted to hurt me, he certainly knew exactly what to say. All my words die in my throat, and I turn to fuss with something on my desk so he doesn’t have the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Because I feel like I actually might. I know rationally, it’s not fair for me to be upset. If I have feelings for more than one person, how can I be mad if Sebastian does too?

But Summer is awful. I tried not to hate her or let my jealousy cloud my opinion of her. But she’s best friends with Madison Taylor. The two of them constantly say rude things to me and call me a slut in gym class, and then she ignores me in history class or any other time Sebastian’s around. Whenever the guys tell Sebastian that she’s one of the people bullying me and spreading rumors at school, he insists she isn’t. It kills me that he always defends her and believes her over his friends.

After I manage to compose myself and hide my emotions, I grab my purse and coat and spin around to face him again. He’s still in the doorway, and I don’t meet his eyes or say a word as I slip past him. I can’t deal with him anymore. Not if he’s going to be purposely hurtful, and not while Remy’s downstairs waiting for me.

Arthur and Remy are talking in the living room when I get downstairs. They're smiling, so I assume that means it's going well and that Arthur didn't go into overprotective-guardian mode. My steps slow when I realize Remy's wearing the same thing he wore to school. Dark jeans, a dark blue cable knit sweater that brings out the color of his eyes, and his favorite beat-up black pair of converse sneakers. It looks like he's cleaned up by shaving the little bit of stubble he had, and he's wearing some sort of cologne that smells incredible.

Still, I can't help feeling self-conscious. I always go completely overboard with my outfits. Instead of wearing what I wore to school and simply fixing my hair and makeup, I showered and changed into an emerald green dress with long sleeves. The top part is form fitting, and the skirt flares out at my waist, making me appear curvier than I am. I paired the dress with black tights and a pair of black, heeled booties. I curled my hair and left it long instead of pinning it up, and I made my makeup bold and dramatic with a smoky eye and bright red lipstick. I love my look, but it's much fancier than what Remy's wearing. It's probably not suitable for our date at all.

"Wow," Remy says when he notices me. His eyes trail down my body slowly as he takes in every small detail, and a grin lights up his face. "You look beautiful, Charlotte."

"Thanks." I smile shyly, brushing my hands down over the dress. "You don't think it's too much?"

He shakes his head hastily. "No. Definitely not. Wow, I can't wait to draw you wearing this."

Arthur clears his throat, reminding us he's still here in the room with us. My cheeks heat up from embarrassment, and Remy shoots him a cheeky grin. Arthur chuckles and rolls his

eyes, reminding me to have a good time, be safe, and check in with him if it looks like we'll be home later than anticipated.

Sebastian doesn't come downstairs to say goodbye, and I'm in no mood to search him out. So, I grab Remy's hand and let him lead me out to Elliot's truck in the driveway. It's a little funny seeing his truck without him here, but the reminder of his gesture makes me smile.

The second we're both in the truck, my phone vibrates in my purse. I pull it out, expecting another encouraging text from Olivia. I frown when I see Sebastian's name instead. His message is short and simple. *"I'm sorry."*

"What's up?" Remy asks, pausing to watch me with concern before backing out of the driveway.

"It's Sebastian." I shrug. I don't really want to get into it or fuel a fight between them. This is my problem, not Remy's. And it's also not fair for me to think or worry about another guy while I'm on a date with him.

Remy snorts, pulling his gaze away to focus on driving. "He's pissed I'm taking you out, right? He was a dick to me when he answered the door too. Please don't worry about it, baby. He's just jealous."

"I know," I whine pathetically. And then the words spill from my mouth before I can take them back. "I always feel bad, but I don't know how to make him feel better. And then he lashes out at you guys or throws Summer in my face, and it makes everything worse."

Reaching over to grab my hand, Remy brushes his thumb over my knuckles and lowers his voice to a deep growl. "He can be a real asshole sometimes. I get that it's probably weird for me to defend him when I'm obviously crazy about you and

finally taking you out the way I've wanted to for months, but I promise Sebastian doesn't like her. The guys and I have called him out many times, and he's admitted he's using her to make you jealous. He doesn't have her number or talk to her outside of their yearbook club. Even then, I'm pretty sure he's only being nice when she talks to him, or he geeks out over their photography. It has nothing to do with her, and he wants you to think they're closer than they are. It's fucking stupid, and I'm sorry it's bothering you."

There's a lot to unpack there, and I'm silent while I sort through my thoughts. Remy sounds genuine, and I believe him when he says Sebastian's only trying to make me think there's something between him and Summer when there isn't. As irritating as it is to realize Sebastian's playing mind games with me like that, I can't help but feel relieved. I'm selfish, and I don't want him or any of the guys showing interest in any other girls.

It also makes me giddy to hear Remy admit out loud that he's crazy about me. Pushing aside my conflicting emotions about Sebastian, I smile and thread my fingers through Remy's. "You've been wanting to take me out for months, huh?"

He grins, and I internally swoon at his adorable dimples. "Are you kidding me? I've been dying to ask you out since that first day we hung out at the arcade. When you said I have artist eyes, I was done for. I always second-guess myself or worry about how the guys are gonna react."

I'm not sure I was prepared for this level of openness and honesty. He's not looking at me, and I feel like I'm drowning in his intensity. I've been interested in Remy since my very first night moving in with Arthur and Sebastian. He gave me

more space than the other guys did, but he also did everything he could to make sure I felt comfortable and included. His presence is dominating, and I remember feeling safe that night, letting him help me and take charge.

“I’d say that I wish you would have asked me out sooner,” I say. “But maybe it’s better we waited until now. We know each other much better, and I’m not such a reclusive freak who can barely speak in complete sentences anymore.”

He shrugs. “Sure, you’re happier, stronger, and more confident now, but you’re still the same person. You’re still just as sweet, kind, funny, smart, and accepting as you were the first night we met you.”

“It feels like so long ago. Like I’ve lived here forever and known you all my whole life. It’s crazy to think it’s only been a few months.”

Remy brings my hand to his mouth and kisses the back of my knuckles. “You moving in with Seb and Arthur is the best thing that’s ever happened to any of us.”



THE HOUR-LONG DRIVE PASSES QUICKLY. WE TALK THE WHOLE way about anything and everything that comes to mind. It’s nice to talk freely with Remy, even if we mostly talk about art, books, and the guys. Those are the things that are important to us. The things we’re passionate about. And I love sharing that with him.

The city is larger than where we live, but not as busy or as crowded as where I grew up. We drive through a downtown area filled with gorgeous shops and restaurants. Even though

it's only the first week of October, several of the storefronts are already decorated for fall and Halloween. It makes me smile, and Remy promises we can walk around before we grab dinner.

We end up parking in a parking garage, and I insist on paying the twenty-dollar fee. It's pretty outrageous that parking costs that much, but I'd rather suck it up than walk who-knows-how-many blocks in my heels to the art museum. At least here, we're only a short walk away.

When we round the corner, my mouth drops in awe at the sight of the museum. It's much bigger than I imagined—three stories, it looks like—and the entire front of the building is made of stained glass. Every color of the rainbow reflects back at us, the slowly setting sun making the view that much more stunning.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” Remy asks. When I nod mutely, still staring at the gorgeous building before us, he chuckles. “You wanna get a picture in front of it?”

I squeal and nod, practically dragging him down the street so we can get closer for photos. He snaps a few of me on his phone, then a couple of us together. We enter the building, and I'm not surprised to see the inside is as gorgeous as the outside. We check our coats before approaching the counter to buy our tickets.

“I can pay for mine,” I whisper to Remy when he waves me away and pulls out his wallet. The tickets are kind of expensive. They're twenty dollars apiece. I know Remy's been saving up all his money from his summer job and taking odd jobs whenever he can with his grandma's boyfriend, but I still feel bad. Like Remy, I didn't grow up with much money and I know what it's like to stress over spending even a penny. I'm

lucky now because Arthur gives me an insanely generous allowance.

“Don’t worry about it, baby.” He grins. “Maybe we can split dinner, but I’ve got this.”

After he pays and grabs a map and pamphlet, we leave the desk to begin perusing the museum. There are four big exhibits on the first floor, but the ones we’re most interested in seeing are upstairs. We decide to start on the third floor and make our way down so we don’t miss anything good before the museum closes. It’s been years since I’ve been to a museum of any kind, and I know Remy will probably nerd out while we’re here. I won’t be surprised if we end up losing track of time completely.

On the elevator ride up to the third floor, Remy wraps his arm around me and pulls me close to his side. “My grandma brought me here when I was thirteen, right after I got out of juvie and moved in with her. But I haven’t been back since. I remember loving it. I’ve been wanting to come back, but it doesn’t seem like the sort of thing any of the guys would be into, you know?”

I giggle and lean against him, looking up at him with a teasing smile. “Stop that. You know any of them would have been happy to come here with you.”

“Maybe.” He leans down and surprises me by kissing my cheek, pulling back with a giant smile adorning his face. “But I’d still much rather come here with you.”

We spend over two hours exploring and admiring all of the art installations and exhibits. We take tons of photos of our favorite pieces, and even more selfies of the two of us together. Olivia talked me into making an Instagram account a few weeks ago, so I’m excited to have something new to post

there. By the time an employee approaches us to let us know the museum will be closing in fifteen minutes, we're in our final exhibit on the first floor. This exhibit is made up of work created by a local artist. According to the pamphlet we grabbed, they change out this exhibit every six to eight weeks to feature new up-and-coming artists from the area.

"This could totally be you one day," I say to Remy. While I like this artist's work, I think Remy's better. Art is subjective, of course, and I'm definitely biased, but still. "You should see if you can apply to be featured here!"

"I don't know about that." He laughs, giving me a sheepish smile. "I don't think I'm good enough yet."

Scoffing, I reach out to grab his hand, swinging our hands between us. "That's not true. I think you're incredibly talented. Every drawing and painting I've ever seen from you takes my breath away."

He pulls me closer so I have to tilt my head back to meet his artist eyes. Reaching his hand up to gently stroke my cheek, he smiles. "Thanks, Charlotte. Maybe you're right. I'll check to see what it takes to get featured."

"Good," I whisper, unable to pull my gaze from his. "You should."

His eyes dart to the left, and he stares at the painting in front of us wistfully. "What do you want to do after high school?"

"Oh." I blink at him, surprised by the sudden change in subject. "Well, it might be silly, but I want to go to New York to work for a big publishing house. Or maybe become a librarian."

It's still hard to wrap my head around the idea that I can have a future like that. I spent so many years focusing on surviving and dreaming of getting away from my mom, I never let myself hope for anything big or grand for my future. Plus, imagining being able to pay for a fancy college—let alone a life in New York, is still outrageous. But I'm getting better about letting myself let go of my past and dreaming about the future. Now that I have so many people in my corner who love and support me, it doesn't seem impossible.

“That's not silly at all.” He shakes his head, frowning. “That sounds perfect for you.”

The frustrated tone of his voice concerns me, and I squeeze his hand lightly. “Why? What do you want to do when we graduate?”

Giving me a bashful look, he shrugs. “I never really thought about it before today. Honestly, I try not to think about it because I've always thought in the back of my mind the guys would leave me behind for fancy, expensive schools and high-profile careers while I get stuck with a job in landscaping or construction. Just like my dad did.”

“Remy, that's not true.” I furrow my eyebrows. It breaks my heart that he thinks that. He never talks about his parents either, especially his dad, and I have no idea how to respond to that tidbit of information about the man who raised him. “The guys would never leave you behind or forget about you. And neither would I.”

“I know. You're right. Seb or Elliot would probably punch me for saying that.” He laughs quietly. “It's hard for me not to think that way.”

I wrap my arms around him in a hug, rubbing my cheek against his chest. I know all too well how hard it is to think

yourself worthy of love or anything good at all. But he's more than worthy. Trying to figure out why he brought this all up in the first place, I ask, "You said you never thought about it much before today?"

"Yeah." He exhales harshly, reaching a hand up to adjust his glasses before absentmindedly rubbing my back. "Ms. Kinsley called me into her office. She's...something else. I know you like her, but I still wasn't expecting her to be genuine or positive. I never really considered that I could make money with my art, but she kept bringing up art school."

A grin fights to break out across my face. Ms. Kinsley is amazing, and I'm so glad she managed to get through to Remy. I know she'll be good for him, and for all my boys. "You know, there are lots of art schools in New York."

His eyes meet mine, and he gives me an intense, heated look as he lowers his head until our lips are only centimeters apart. His voice is deep and rich, and it makes my toes curl. "You want me to come to New York with you, baby?"

I nod slowly, incapable of speaking when he's staring at me like that. Imagining going to school in New York, with Remy and Sebastian there for art school, sounds like a dream come true. Now I need to convince the rest of the boys to come to New York for university too. Then we can all stay together after we graduate, and hopefully forever after that.

Someone clears their throat, and we turn to find the same museum employee who reminded us about closing time smiling ruefully at us. "I'm sorry, but we're closing now."

We apologize for lingering and hurriedly make our way to the front of the museum so we can grab our coats. There are a few other stragglers besides us, which makes me feel more at ease. Remy very sweetly helps me slide my coat on, going as

far as to button up the buttons for me. It's cute and heartwarming, and I can't help grinning like an idiot when he's finished.

It's much chillier outside now than it was when we first got to the museum, so I tuck my hands into my pockets and snuggle as close to Remy as I can when he wraps his arm around me. We walk leisurely to the main downtown area where I saw all those shops and restaurants. A lot of the shops are closed, or closing soon, since it's after eight. So, we decide to window shop until we come across a restaurant that looks appealing and not too busy.

Remy is sweet, attentive, and affectionate while we walk and talk, like he was in the art museum. I'm having so much fun that I almost wish this night will ever end.

"This is my first real date, you know," I blurt out. And then cringe at myself.

"Really?" Remy stares down at me with wide eyes and an even wider grin. "What about when you went out with Elliot? When you first moved here?"

"I don't think that counts." I laugh awkwardly, wishing I could erase the past minute and shove all my stupid words back into my mouth. I choose my next words carefully, desperately hoping I don't make Remy jealous or make him think I like Elliot more than I like him. "At the time, he was adamant it wasn't a date and that we were better off being friends."

"At the time, huh?"

I can't decipher his tone, but I don't think he's upset. Especially because he's still rubbing his hand up and down my arm, and there's a tiny smirk pulling at the corner of his

mouth. Feeling a split second of bravery, I tilt my head back to raise my eyebrows at him.

“Well, things have changed since school started, haven’t they? None of you ever used to flirt with me *this* much.”

It’s the closest I’ve come to admitting to any of them that I know about their bet to make me choose between them. Instead of showing any guilt or shame, he laughs and hugs me to his side tighter.

“You can’t exactly blame us, can you?” he teases, his voice deeper and sexier than ever. I feel my face heat up, and he chuckles and gives me a peck on the cheek. “What do you think of this place?”

I’ve been too distracted by our conversation that I haven’t been paying attention to our surroundings. I turn to the left to look at the restaurant Remy’s indicated. It’s a quaint Italian place with fairy lights decorating the front awning where a few outdoor tables sit vacant. They have their menu taped to the front window, and I’m pleased to see that most of their options look delicious and relatively inexpensive.

Luckily, there’s a table available right away, and we’re seated in a small, circular corner booth. There’s plenty of room, but Remy pulls me to his side so we’re snuggled close together. The lighting in the restaurant is dim, and there’s a candle in the center of our table. It makes for a very romantic atmosphere. After our server brings us some water, our drink choices, and some bread, Remy turns all of his intense attention on me.

I can feel his eyes on me, and I’m hyper-aware of our legs pressed together. My cheeks are hot while I pretend to read the menu, but I’m having trouble focusing enough to read a single word of it.

“Stop.” I giggle nervously, darting a side glance at him.

He threads his fingers through my hair, and I watch him grin from the corner of my eye. “You’re fucking beautiful. I’m committing every detail to memory so I can paint this moment later.”

Butterflies flutter wildly in my chest, and I smile shyly while I continue to pretend to read the menu. “You’ll have to let me see it when you finish.”

He hums in agreement, still stroking his fingers softly through my hair. Eventually, I give up on trying to read the menu and turn to offer him a soft smile. His eyes dip to my lips for a long moment, and then he settles his icy blue artist eyes back on mine.

“So,” he starts in his growly, sexy voice. “Your first real date. How’s it going?”

“Perfect,” I say breathlessly. “Tonight has been totally, completely perfect.”

His eyes light up, making him look happy and proud. “Good. I’m glad I haven’t fucked up yet.” He chuckles and lets his gaze wander over my face, his smile becoming reverent. “I can’t believe you’ve never had a boyfriend or had any guy take you out before.”

“Um, did you meet me when I first moved here?” I joke, laughing. “I was such a freak. I struggled to say a single word most of the time, let alone articulate an entire conversation. I was just the weird, poor girl who most people probably thought was mute. Nobody ever approached me at my old school when I lived with my mom. In juvie, I was even worse, except I was always getting into fights.”

Remy shakes his head, still smiling. “You might have been quiet, but you’re still hot. The guys at your old school and juvie were fucking stupid if they never approached you.”

“Well, there was one guy I worked with at the grocery store,” I admit hesitantly. When Remy’s eyes gleam with a mixture of jealousy and mischievousness, I grimace. “I mean, we didn’t really talk. He ignored me at school, but sometimes we would make out in the stockroom.”

“Sounds like a douchebag,” Remy grunts.

I shrug. I haven’t thought about Ryan in a long time. It never bothered me that we didn’t talk, or that we didn’t acknowledge each other outside of those stolen moments in the stockroom. He wasn’t really that cute, but he was a nice distraction from all the stuff going on at home with my mom and Deanna at the time.

“Have you ever kissed anyone else?” he asks quietly, not trying to hide the fact that he’s staring longingly at my mouth.

“One other guy,” I whisper. I feel weird talking about this with him, but I know I was curious about his past relationships before Grayson told me about the guys’ histories. Still, it’s awkward to bring this all up when I’ve never told *anyone*, and the moment is more intense because of the way Remy’s staring at me. “His name was Julian. We were in the same group home for a few weeks the first time I got out of juvie. I used to hide out in this little alcove in the backyard, and he would sneak out there to smoke. We didn’t really talk either. We just, um, you know...kissed and stuff.”

His eyes crinkle with amusement, and he snickers. “Kissed *and stuff?*”

I smack his arm and look away, giggling nervously at his teasing. “Shut up. Those guys don’t matter. I haven’t thought of them in so long. I’m sure they don’t think of me or even remember me.”

“I seriously doubt that.” Remy snorts.

“Well, what about you?” I ask, desperate to get some of the attention off of me and wishing I could keep myself from blushing. Grayson told me about Remy’s ex-girlfriend Katie, but I’m curious to hear about her from his point of view. Plus, it might make me feel like we’re on equal ground if we both talk about our past experiences.

He makes a face, shrugging like he’s uncomfortable. “I’ve only had one girlfriend, and it wasn’t that serious. We were seeing each other for a while last year. We went to different schools and neither of us could drive, so we barely saw each other. Even when we did hang out, it was pretty casual. Nothing like what I feel for you. When she found out that I was in juvie and why, she freaked out and broke it off. Haven’t seen her or talked to her since.”

That’s pretty much exactly what Grayson told me, and I’m glad to hear Remy’s not lying or sugarcoating anything. He’s being totally honest with me, just like I was with him. While I’m angry at this girl I’ve never met for judging Remy harshly and wrongly, I’m relieved he doesn’t seem heartbroken over her. Hearing him confess his feelings for me again is enough to set off a whole new swarm of butterflies in my stomach.

Our server comes back to our table, interrupting the intense moment between us and apologizing for taking so long. Since neither of us read the menu, we end up pointing to random entrees. While we wait for our food, we eat the bread

our server brought us before, and we talk about the guys and what they're probably up to right now.

The meal is lovely and romantic, and the conversation flows effortlessly through all of dinner. This is the longest amount of time I've ever spent alone with Remy, and I'm having the most wonderful time. I can't believe I was ever nervous, or that we put this off this long. While I haven't been one hundred percent up front about the fact that I have feelings for all of the guys, I've definitely hinted at it. And Remy's been open and honest with me. It feels like a good step forward, and I'm growing more and more hopeful that things might work out between all of us someday.

After we finish eating and split the bill, we walk outside and back to Elliot's truck at a slow, leisurely pace. All the shops along the street are closed, and it's beautiful, quiet, and peaceful. It feels like we're the only ones here. Like this night belongs solely to us.

When we reach the parking garage, we stand beside Elliot's truck and stare at each other. Eventually, Remy pulls me into a hug and buries his face against my neck. My heart flutters, and my breath catches when I feel his lips brush lightly against my skin.

"Baby," he whispers, deep and growly. His lips press more firmly against my neck, causing me to shiver. He pulls back, his gaze more heated than it's been at any other point tonight.

"Are you going to kiss me?" The words escape too quickly for me to take back, but it's all I can think about. All the times in the past when we were close to kissing, all the intense and heated looks he's ever given me, and how I'd love nothing more than to end this night with a searing, passionate kiss from one of the boys I'm in love with.

“I—I can’t.” He looks as surprised by his response as I do, and he pulls a little further away from me. His expression rapidly changes from confused, to longing, to distraught.

“What?” I ask, blinking up at him dazedly. I don’t understand. Why can’t he? His reaction and response are baffling. I can’t figure out how I’m supposed to feel or what I’m supposed to think.

“I want to kiss you,” he says. “So fucking badly. Believe me. It’s all I’ve thought about all night. All I think about constantly, every time I see you or think about you. But the guys and I agreed none of us would kiss you until you picked which one of us you like the most.”

My heart drops into my stomach, and I force myself to keep my face blank. I don’t want him to know how upset I am. But all of the hope that’s been building up in me—the hope I could ever be lucky enough to be with all of my guys and openly love them all—crumbles within seconds. Here, I thought Remy, Grayson, and Elliot might be coming around to the idea that I care about them equally. But all along, they’ve been hoping and waiting for me to make an impossible choice.

“I see,” I say, careful not to let any of my emotions show through in my voice.

His face twists like he’s in pain. “I’m sorry. Fuck, I ruined the whole night.”

It’s not his fault. It’s mine. My fault for letting Olivia get into my head and for letting myself believe the guys would ever be okay with sharing me. What world do I think I live in?

“Let’s, um...” I clear my throat. “Let’s just go home.”

CHARLOTTE



“GUYS ARE SO STUPID,” OLIVIA SAYS, FLIPPING HER HAIR OVER her shoulder.

I practically begged her to pick me up for school this morning so I didn't have to deal with an awkward encounter with Sebastian or face Grayson and the realization I was wrong about him being okay with me having feelings for more than one person. I managed to avoid both of them all weekend. I only left the house on Saturday to train at the gym with Adrian, and then for a short while on Sunday to go on my grocery store run with Liam. Even then, I was quieter than usual. Liam didn't comment on it, but I know the guys have talked about what happened between me and Remy. They're all a bunch of blabbermouths who tell each other everything.

“It's my fault.” I groan, throwing my head back against the headrest. Olivia gives me a quick eye roll before focusing back on the road. I whine, “I'm serious! I was stupid to get my hopes up or to think they were coming around. I should have known they're still going through with their stupid bet. Or competition. Whatever.”

“Hmm, I don't know,” she says thoughtfully. “From what it sounds like, before Remy totally choked up and word vomited nonsense, your date was pretty spectacular. Plus,

Elliot *helped* him by making it so he could take you out in the first place. Mr. Whiny Pants Sebastian seems like the only one of them who had a problem with the whole thing.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Nope, let me finish.” She cuts me off, wagging a finger in my face. Despite my stress and frustration, I can’t help grinning at her dramatic gesture. “To me, it sounds like most of your guys are already trying to share you. Like, it’s happening naturally. But because boys are stupid, they don’t realize what they’re doing. It’s probably never occurred to them that they *can* share you. I mean, come on. They’re helping each other, supporting each other, sharing information about their one-on-one time with you, and Stepbro is the *only* one of them who’s jealous? Please.”

“I hate when you call Sebastian that,” I grumble.

Olivia moans exaggeratedly and croons, “What are you *doing*, stepbro?”

When I smack her arm, she grins at me, and we dissolve into a fit of giggles. After we manage to settle down, I think about what she’s said. Could that be true? The guys are so in sync with each other because of their deep friendship that they’re naturally falling into a shared relationship with me without realizing it? It makes sense, to be honest. I’ve always said they’re my kindred spirits because of the way we connected quickly and easily. And why would the idea of them all being in a relationship with me cross their minds? It’s not exactly a normal or common thing.

“You really think so?” I ask, feeling a new thread of relief and hope begin to build in my heart. She nods, and I ask, “Then, what should I do? I can’t fathom telling them what I want, or asking what they think about sharing me.”

“Trust me, I get it. I’m not usually shy like you are, and I’m pretty sure I’d die if I said something to Ethan and Zack about wanting both of them. Honestly, until one of your guys pulls their head out of their ass long enough to consider the idea on their own, *or* until you break and tell them what’s up, I think you should pretend like nothing happened. Like everything’s totally fine and normal, and you’re not bothered by Remy choking when it came to kissing you. Let them keep flirting with you and acting like dumbasses, and maybe it’ll all fall into place.”

It’s as good a plan as any. Acting oblivious to the guys’ actions and their bet is what I’ve been doing. I hate being mad at them and not talking to them, so I decide she’s right. Once we get to school and I meet up with them, I’ll treat them like I always do.

“Thanks, Olivia,” I say sincerely. She’s become such a good friend, and it means a lot to me that I can come to her to talk about this.

“Of course, babe!” She grins. “That’s what besties are for, right?”

When we arrive at school, Ethan’s waiting in the parking lot for Olivia by her assigned space. She gets a goofy grin on her face, sighing dreamily when he waves at her. They’re so cute. Olivia and Zack would be cute together too, and I can easily picture them being a throuple. I wish it was easier for us to be more open about our feelings for our boys.

I quickly say goodbye to Olivia and Ethan so they can have some alone time before class, making my way into the main building by myself. It’s the first time I’ve walked into the school on my own without at least one or two of the guys by my side since school started over a month ago. The realization

makes me anxious, and it feels like there are a million eyes on me as I make my way through the halls to my and Liam's lockers.

I'm not surprised to find all five of my boys huddled together around my locker, talking in hushed voices. Even though the weekend was weird after my date with Remy, I'm genuinely happy to see them. They're my kindred spirits. My soul mates. It's agonizing to go even a couple of days feeling distant from them.

Approaching slowly and silently, I creep up behind them and lightly trail my fingers down Liam's back. He shrieks and jumps forward, and I giggle hysterically. He's always easy to scare, and his reactions never get old.

The guys turn to look at me, appearing shocked. Grayson's the first one to collect himself, and he turns to smirk at Liam with a snort. "Nice, dude. That was classic."

Liam flips him off before turning to me with a soft, hesitant smile. "Hey, Charlotte. When did you get here?"

"Just a couple minutes ago with Olivia," I say with a casual, carefree smile, pointing my thumb over my shoulder in the general direction of the front entrance. I'm totally playing it cool, like nothing happened and everything is one hundred percent fine.

Sebastian stares at me with this guilty, heartbroken expression, and his voice breaks when he says. "You didn't want me to drive you?"

I shrug like it's no big deal. "I needed some girl time."

While Sebastian continues staring at me like he wants to say a million things but has no idea where to start, the rest of the guys exchange glances. Liam clears his throat and gives

me a look like he's trying to calm an angry cat. "We're glad you're okay. Remy was just telling us about your date on Friday, and—"

"Yeah!" I cut him off, forcing a smile. I probably look crazed, but I'm doing everything I can to fight my emotions. Liam just admitted what I already knew. The guys tell each other *everything*. If they're gonna try to justify their dumb bet or apologize for it, I don't wanna hear it. Not now. Like Olivia said, I need to pretend like I'm not bothered and like nothing was ever wrong in the first place. "We had tons of fun. That art museum was amazing. Remind me to show you guys pictures at lunch."

Elliot chuckles, shoving Sebastian and Liam out of his way to come over and wrap his arm around my shoulders. He kisses my cheek and gives me a radiant smile. "Can't wait to see them, gorgeous. I'm glad you guys had a good time."

His tone is warm, reassuring, and genuine, and it doesn't seem like he's teasing me or trying to appease me. My nerves settle, and some of the hope that Olivia helped me rekindle flames up in my chest. Once again, he's showing he's supportive of me and Remy going out together. That's a point toward Olivia's theory.

The warning bell rings, and the guys quickly help me put our lunches in my locker while I grab my books from the one I share with Liam. There's no time to really talk to Grayson and Sebastian on the way to class, but Grayson seems a lot more at ease than Sebastian does.

During our history class, I make a point not to look in Summer's direction. It's easier than usual since we spend most of the period taking a test. Best of all, Sebastian completely

ignores her too. Even when she tries to approach him at the end of class.

By the time I make it to my second period English honors class that I share with Alex, Emily, and Benji, I'm feeling pretty good. Much calmer than I was first thing this morning, and much more ready to move on and go back to normal with my guys. At least, whatever normal is for us.

"Hey." Alex gives me a friendly smile when he takes his seat across from me. "How was your weekend? I feel like I didn't hear from you much."

"Sorry." I smile shyly. "I got busy with homework, plus I spent most of the day at the gym on Saturday."

Because I was trying to avoid talking to the guys, I didn't check my phone very often all weekend. I feel bad because Alex and I usually text a lot. We've been swapping book recommendations over the past few weeks, and I've been pleasantly surprised at how much I've loved some of his favorites.

"That's right." He chuckles as he pulls his books out, his bright, white smile making my heart flip. "Grayson said you do some MMA stuff, right?"

"You're very tiny and sweet. It's hard to imagine you fighting someone." Benji snickers beside me.

While Alex and Benji laugh at the idea of me fighting, I awkwardly join in. If only they knew. Emily shakes her head at them, giving me a knowing smirk. She doesn't know my whole story, but she knows enough about my past to fill in some of the blanks. I doubt she'd be surprised to hear how many fights I've been in, or that fighting is the reason I went to juvie my second time.

When the bell rings to signal that class has begun, someone kicks me under the table. I look around to find Emily staring at me like she's trying to tell me something. I furrow my eyebrows at her while trying to half-pay attention to whatever Mrs. Townsend is saying.

"So, Charlotte," Alex whispers. I turn to look at him, finding him smiling at me nervously. He taps his pencil lightly against the desk and quietly clears his throat. "I'm sure you've heard about Homecoming with the announcements and posters everywhere. If you don't already have a date, I was wondering if you might want to go with me?"

"I—" Oh no. That's what the look from Emily was for. A final warning. I am such a fucking idiot. I completely forgot that Alex was planning to ask me. After Remy asked me out on Friday, and the whole thing with our date and my attempt at avoiding the guys for the rest of the weekend, Alex and the dance slipped my mind completely. I never came up with a plan or asked Olivia's advice. What am I supposed to say or do?

He's staring at me hopefully, the most adorable, nervous smile curling at his lips. God, he's so cute. And so nice. I love talking to him. But when I think about the rest of the guys, I just...

"I'm already going with someone else," I blurt out quickly before I make the decision in my head. My eyes widen at my own lie, and his face falls. My heart thumps painfully in my chest. I don't know whether I made the right decision by rejecting him or not, but I feel terrible. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be." He shakes his head and swallows before meeting my eyes with a sad smile. "I'm not surprised someone else asked you. I'm the idiot for waiting this long."

His sweetness and understanding make me feel a million times worse. I drop my eyes to the top of the table shamefully. I've lied to him, rejected him, and he's been nothing but kind to me. I don't deserve him.

"Hey, hey." Alex reaches across the table and grabs my hand gently. When I look up at him through my eyelashes, he gives me a dazzling grin. "Pretty girl, it's alright. Please don't feel bad. Maybe we can go out another time? And I promise I'll be quicker to ask you the next time there's a dance."

I am *swooning*. He's never called me 'pretty girl' before, and I like it way too much. And how freaking sweet is he to still want to ask me out, even though I told him I'm going to Homecoming with someone else? My cheeks feel warm and butterflies swarm in my belly as I slowly smile back at him. "Okay. That sounds lovely."

Lovely!/? God, I'm a moron. Perfect, wonderful Alex chuckles at me and squeezes my hand. I spend the rest of class pretending to pay attention to our teacher, sharing stolen glances and smiles with Alex. Internally, I'm freaking out and feeling an overwhelming mixture of excitement, adoration, guilt, and dread. After lying to Alex because I'm worried about what the rest of the guys will think of me going to the dance with him, I've agreed to go on a date with him, anyway! It's the same exact problem I was worried about in the first place. Only now, I'll have to admit what happened to the guys and beg one of them to take me to Homecoming so Alex doesn't find out I lied. It's such a mess.

The next couple of classes pass slowly, and I continue to drive my anxiety up with every passing hour. I barely get to talk to Olivia or Liam in pre-calc because of yet another test—why do Mondays suck so much? —and I'm too worried and

distracted to talk to Sebastian or Elliot much in our psychology class.

“What’s up with you?” Elliot me asks on our way to the library for lunch after we grab the lunch bag from my locker. “You’re acting weird.”

Sebastian tugs a hand through his hair, giving me a pained expression. “You’re still mad at us, aren’t you?”

“No.” I try to laugh, but it ends up sounding more like I’m wheezing. I slap a grin to my face and insist, “I’m not. Promise.”

I’ve decided I’ll bring up Homecoming, Alex asking me, and me needing a date during lunch. It’ll be easier without an audience around us, and nobody except us ever comes to the library during the half hour break. Remy, Grayson, and Liam are probably waiting there for us, and I don’t want to say anything until I have all of their attention. I figure it’s better to address them together so I only have to ask once. Besides, I’d hate for any of them to hear it second-hand when they talk about it whenever I’m not around.

Elliot narrows his eyes at me like he’s still trying to figure out what’s wrong. I keep my mouth shut until we make it to the library, and I make a show of fussing with their lunches before passing them around the table to everyone. I end up seated between Elliot and Liam, with Sebastian directly across from me between Remy and Grayson.

“So?” Elliot asks, tugging on a stray lock of my hair. His smile is a mix between mischievous and indulgent. “You gonna tell us what’s going on yet?”

Even though I’m still usually careful to keep my emotions hidden, he can read me too easily. I look around, making eye

contact with each of them while I try to settle my nerves and build up my confidence. Sebastian and Remy look nervous, like they still think I'm mad at them, while the rest of the boys look curious.

"Okay." I take a deep breath. My eyes find Sebastian's mismatched gaze first, but I decide to focus on Grayson beside him instead. He's less likely than Sebastian to get upset. At least, I think. "So, Alex asked me to the Homecoming dance."

Grayson grins, and quickly tries to cover it up by coughing. The rest of the guys are silent. I swear, I can practically hear crickets.

"Who the fuck is Alex?" Remy asks, sounding more confused than anything. He glances around at the guys, like he's trying to see if they're as lost as he is. He's met Alex multiple times since the band formed, and aside from that, they've been classmates for years. How does he not know who I'm talking about?

"That skinny, emo dude with the flippy hair in Grayson's band," Elliot grumbles. When Grayson gives him an unamused look, Elliot gives me a tight smile. He's practically gritting his teeth when he says, "He seems like a really nice guy."

"His hair isn't *flippy*," I huff, feeling weirdly defensive. Heat rises to my cheeks, and I wave my hands around like the gesture will help me think of a better word. "It's more like... kind of just...you know?"

Elliot grins. "Yeah, you're right. Your description fits much better."

If he's teasing me, that's a good sign. That's what I try to tell myself, anyway, even though I feel dumb and completely

humiliated.

“Did you say yes?” Grayson asks. And maybe I’m delusional, but I swear there’s a hint of excitement in his voice.

“No.” I grimace.

“No?” Grayson repeats, appearing surprised.

I shake my head, my voice rising to a higher pitch so it’s nearly a squeak. “I panicked! Emily warned me that he was gonna ask, and I still somehow forgot. I ended up blurting out that I’m already going with someone else.”

“How—” Sebastian cuts himself off, shaking his head with his eyebrows furrowed. “Why would he ask you? I don’t get it. You guys barely know each other.”

“We’re friends,” I say. I know I haven’t talked to the guys about Alex, but are they surprised to hear I was asked out by someone outside of our group? It feels like my face is literally on fire, so I know I must be blushing as red as a tomato when I add, “We talk all the time. Like, every day.”

Sebastian’s expression shutters, his eyes filling with a mixture of jealousy, hurt, and rage. Elliot grabs my shoulder, forcing me to turn and face him instead.

“Alright. So, Alex asked you to the dance, you freaked out, and now you need a date for Homecoming.” Elliot says, phrasing it as a statement rather than a question. I nod hastily, and he smiles. “Well, who do you want to go with?”

There it is. The trap to make me choose. My heart flutters madly, and I raise my eyes to the ceiling. It’s way too difficult to look at any of the guys. This was a terrible idea to confront them all at the same time with this. Why am I such an idiot?

God, Olivia is gonna make fun of me later when I tell her about this.

“Um...” I trail off and giggle nervously. “If any of you guys want to go with me, that—”

I don’t get to finish my sentence before Sebastian, Liam, and Elliot respond completely in sync. “I’ll take you.”

“What?” Sebastian asks, frowning back and forth between the other two. “Come on, guys. You hang out with Charlotte all the time.”

“You live with her,” Elliot counters. “You see her more than any of us.”

“Yeah, but...” Sebastian gives me a pleading look. “I have to go to Homecoming to take photos for Yearbook, anyway. We should go together.”

“How convenient.” Elliot gives him a wolfish smile. My heart is freaking racing. They’re getting worked up too fast. I’m afraid they’re going to start fighting. Elliot throws his arm around my shoulders, pulling my chair closer to his. “The football team is required to attend the dance too. Looks like we’ll both be there, Seb.”

“We can’t both take her,” Sebastian growls, his face turning red with anger.

His words hurt, but I try my best to keep my face blank. Elliot glances sideways at me, frowning for half a second before his eyes light up and he turns back to face Sebastian with a goofy smile.

“Since our girl’s too nice to hurt our feelings by picking one of us, why don’t we arm wrestle for it? Winner gets to take her to Homecoming.”

“Really?” I laugh in disbelief. I can’t help it. It’s dumb and ridiculous, and it reminds me of the night we had our sleepover when I overheard them discussing arm wrestling each other for a chance to sleep next to me. Maybe that’s why he suggested it. To help make light of the conversation when tensions are high.

“Why not?” Elliot shrugs, smiling excitedly. “Unless Gray or Remy wanna jump in, Liam, Seb, and I will arm wrestle for the chance to be your date. Are you cool with that?”

“Okay, sure.” I giggle. It may be stupid, but it’s better than them fighting for real. And definitely better than being forced to choose between them for something as simple as Homecoming. At this point, I doubt it will count as a real date.

The guys call Elliot an idiot, but nobody argues or suggests another idea. Elliot and Sebastian decide to arm wrestle first, moving to the end of the table while the rest of us scoot down to give them some extra room.

As much as Elliot made the whole thing sound like a joke, he and Sebastian give it their all. Their arm muscles bulge, and their faces turn red. It seems like they’re evenly matched, neither of them making any progress. Just when I think they’re gonna have to give up and figure out a new plan, Elliot grunts and slams Sebastian’s fist down, winning the match.

“You fucking asshole.” Sebastian seethes. He doesn’t argue after that, simply shooting Elliot a glare as he scoots down the table to make room for Liam.

The match between Liam and Elliot goes much faster with Liam winning almost instantly. When Elliot winks at me, I’m convinced he threw the match to let Liam win. That’s another point toward Olivia’s theory. Here Elliot is, once again, being

supportive of my growing relationship with the rest of the guys. Although, it seems he draws the line with Alex.

“Do you really want to go with me?” I ask Liam softly, giving him a shy smile when he retakes his seat beside me.

“Absolutely.” He grins, laughing happily. “I thought my chances of taking you would be less than zero. Can I take you out to dinner before the dance?”

I nod, feeling relieved that at least one problem has been resolved. Alex isn't mad at me, and it seems like the rest of the guys aren't either. Now I officially have a date for Homecoming, and I didn't have to choose between them.

“I'm so excited!” I squeal, the words escaping me in a rush. “I've never been to a school dance before. I'll have to ask Olivia to help me pick out a dress. Can I have one of those corsage things? Or is that just for prom?”

Liam's eyes light up, and he reaches his hand up to brush his fingertips along my jaw. The action is sweet and sexy, and it makes my heart stutter. “I can get you a corsage, and I'll make sure my tie matches your dress. Whatever you wanna do to make your first dance special, I'll make it happen.”

“Thanks, Liam,” I whisper, and give him a quick hug. When I look around the table, most of the guys seem to have calmed down. They seem content with the results of the arm-wrestling competition, and nobody's making me or Liam feel badly about it.

Even Remy smiles at me and says, “We'll have to come over when Liam picks you up so we can see you all dolled up.”

Sebastian slumps back into his seat. There's no other way to describe his facial expression other than pouting. Part of me

feels bad for him. It kills me that he's always jealous. If he keeps lashing out at the guys or getting mad at me, I might have to consider honestly talking to him about everything.

"If Charlotte's going with Liam, who are you taking?" Sebastian asks Elliot.

Elliot snorts like it's a stupid question. "Um, nobody? I'll probably hang out with Zack most of the time since he's not going with anyone, and obviously, I'll try to steal Charlotte away for a dance or two."

The thought makes me giddy. If I get to dance with Liam, Elliot, and maybe Sebastian at the dance, I might almost be able to trick myself into thinking all three of them are my dates. Even if nobody else knows it.

Sebastian meets my eyes across the table, his expression unreadable. "Well, I'll probably ask—"

"I swear to fucking god," Grayson cuts him off, shaking his head angrily. "If you say you're going to ask Summer, I'm punching you in the goddamn face."

Jealousy washes over me. I *hate* that fucking girl. I hate that she likes Sebastian. I hate even more that Sebastian used to like her too and that he talks to her on a regular basis. Is he seriously going to ask her to the dance just to try to make me jealous? After he did practically the same thing on Friday when he found out I was going on a date with Remy?

Shrugging, Sebastian shows the barest amount of shame. "She's going for Yearbook too. It makes sense for me to ask her."

Without warning, Grayson stands up, kicks his chair back behind him, and punches Sebastian in the face. Just like he said he would.

“Ow!” Sebastian reels back, bringing his hand up to his left eye as he curses up a storm. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The librarian, Mrs. Lyons, walks into the reading room with a concerned expression on her face. She never checks on us during lunch, so we must be making way too much noise. Wordlessly glancing around the room, taking in Grayson’s stance and the way Sebastian’s holding his eye, her lips purse. I panic, assuming she’s going to revoke our lunch passes and permission to eat in here. Instead, she calmly reminds us to keep the noise down. The six of us mumble our apologies, and she gives each of us a stern look before leaving without another word.

It’s then that I realize we only have a few minutes left of lunch, and none of us have touched our food.

ALEX



“DUDE, YOU NEED TO CHILL.” BENJI ROLLS HIS EYES.

I know he’s tired of hearing me whine about Charlotte. So is Emily, but she took off halfway through lunch so she didn’t have to ‘deal with my shit anymore.’ I can’t help repeating myself.

“I’m such an idiot,” I groan. “I never should have asked her.”

Why did I think it was a good idea to ask her to Homecoming? What made me think she’d ever say yes? She’s out of my league, it’s ridiculous. Something I’ve been all too aware of ever since the first time I went to Grayson’s house to hang out in his pool, and I saw how ripped he and the rest of his friends are. Why would Charlotte ever be interested in me when she’s surrounded by them all the time?

“She seemed like she felt bad,” Benji reminds me. “And she still agreed to go on a date with you. I don’t get why you’re beating yourself up this much.”

A hypothetical date. I’m not sure it counts if there aren’t any definite plans. She’ll probably change her mind. He’s right about her feeling bad. She looked like she was going to cry when she told me she’s going to the dance with someone else.

It took everything in me not to jump across the table so I could hold and comfort her. I'm sure *that* would have gone over well.

“Who do you think she’s going with, anyway?” Benji asks. Since he had to stop at his locker first, we have to take the long way past the library to get to our chemistry class.

I shrug, still feeling dejected and embarrassed. “Elliot, probably? She’s always wearing his letterman jacket on game days.” If Grayson didn’t reassure me often that Charlotte’s single, I’d assume she’s dating Elliot Spencer. I can’t figure out if he likes her more than a friend or not, and I feel pathetic asking.

While Grayson and I have gotten close since school started, I don’t talk to the rest of his friends. The few times I’ve been around them, they act guarded and standoffish. I’m sure that’s not how they are with each other, but it makes it hard to be around them. I used to think Grayson was weird because he was like that before we bumped into him playing guitar at the end of summer.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” Benji agrees. “We should ask Gray.”

As we approach the entrance to the school library, Sebastian Reynolds storms out. He looks fucking pissed, and his eye’s all red and blotchy. Shit, did he get into a fight? Or is he crying? He’s scary enough that I’d probably avoid him under most circumstances, but he’s Grayson’s friend. Checking on him is the decent thing to do, right?

“Hey!” I call out to him, and he looks up with a scowl. The fact that his eyes are different colors, so vastly different, makes it more jarring to face him when he’s giving off this

unapproachable vibe. I try to offer him an easy, friendly smile and keep my voice level. “Is everything okay?”

His expression turns angrier, and he strides up to me until we’re only a few inches apart. He’s not much taller than me, but he’s a lot more muscular. Benji shuffles back a few inches, practically hiding behind me. I don’t blame him, but I keep my ground and raise my eyebrows at Sebastian.

Before I can ask what his problem is, he points his finger in my face and growls, “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“Umm...” What the hell is happening? Gray’s friends are usually weird and closed off around me, but they’re generally polite. I’ve never legitimately worried one of them might punch me, even though our classmates talk about most of them like they’re volatile and only seconds away from lashing out violently. But now, I’m rethinking everything Grayson and Charlotte have said about their friends being nice, rational people. Am I about to get punched? Holy shit, I’ve never been punched before. How badly is it going to hurt?

Charlotte will definitely never go out with me if I cry at school because her step-cousin punched me in the face. Fuck.

“Dude!” someone shouts. Sebastian turns around, and I peer over his shoulder to see Elliot and Remy walking out of the library. Elliot looks irritated as he walks over to us, grabbing Sebastian’s arm and roughly yanking him to the side. “Are you kidding me right now? What, you’re gonna fight Alex because he asked Charlotte out? Use your fucking head. If you think she’s pissed at you now, how do you think she’s gonna feel when she finds out you punched the guy she’s crushing on?”

There’s a lot to take in from his statement. The fact that Charlotte’s step-cousin was going to punch me because I asked

her to the Homecoming dance is pretty fucking alarming. But of course, my brain only focuses on one thing. “Charlotte has a crush on me?”

Benji nudges my side, silently telling me to shut the fuck up. Too late, unfortunately. Sebastian, Elliot, and Remy turn to me simultaneously with varying levels of anger. Well, Remy mostly looks devoid of all emotion like a fucking serial killer, but that’s pretty typical.

“You should probably stop talking,” Remy says coldly.

I clamp my mouth shut and glance sideways at Benji. We should leave, right? This is fucking awkward, and I really, *really* don’t want to get my ass kicked. If I knew asking Charlotte to the dance would cause this much drama...

Nope. I probably still would have asked her. Because I’m an idiot, and because I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her since the moment we met. Maybe she’s out of my league, and maybe her guy friends are really fucking huge and scary, but she’s more than worth the effort.

“What’s going on?” the beautiful girl in question asks, walking out of the library between Grayson and Liam. She frowns at everyone, her eyes meeting mine last. It’s hard to tell what she’s thinking, but it doesn’t take a genius to pick up on the tension surrounding me, Benji, and her friends.

“I ran into your *friend* in the hallway.” Sebastian grits his teeth.

For the first time, I see anger flicker in Charlotte’s eyes. She stomps her adorable ass over to my side, grabs my hand, and begins pulling me down the hallway. Over her shoulder, she shouts, “Why don’t you go cry to Summer about it?”

She's usually quiet and sweet. If she's raising her voice loud enough to shout, she must be furious. Her friends seem to agree because they're staring at her in shock as we walk away. Benji walks on my other side, and he looks nervous. I'm afraid he's gonna faint.

Me though? I'm giddy as fuck. Charlotte's willingly *holding my hand*, and it sounds like her guy friends are pissed at me because she has a crush on me. How could I not feel like a winner right now? Shit, I'll take getting hit in the face by one of those meatheads if it means I have an actual chance with her.

"You okay?" I ask her softly, threading our fingers together. This way is much more comfortable than the death grip she was using to hold my hand.

"I..." She shakes her head. It seems like she's struggling to find the right words, but I can be patient. After several long seconds, she squeaks, "I'm so sorry! I never meant—I didn't think they'd approach you."

"I'm assuming you told them I asked you to Homecoming?" I ask.

She nods, staring up at me guiltily. And god, I really try not to smile, but it's difficult. If she told her friends about it, that means it was a big deal to her, right? I'm not just some random, pathetic guy in her English class she barely thinks twice about.

"Did you punch Sebastian?" Benji blurts out. When Charlotte and I turn to look at him, he cringes and adds, "His eye was all red and puffy, so I thought..."

"Nah, that was me." Grayson runs up behind us, slapping his hand on Benji's shoulder with a chaotic grin. "That fucker

totally deserved it, so you better not feel bad for him.”

I laugh at how casual he sounds. “Seriously? You punched your best friend?”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. Benji and I have been best friends since we were kids. We rarely fight, but if we do, it’s never physical and we always resolve things quickly. I can’t fathom reaching a point where I feel like it’s necessary to punch him, and I definitely can’t imagine him punching me.

“You alright, Princess?” Grayson asks Charlotte.

She breathes slowly out of her nose, bringing her thumb and pointer finger up to hold them a few centimeters apart. “We were *this close* to getting kicked out of the library.”

Grayson blanches, throwing his hands up defensively. “Okay, okay. You’re right. Next time, I’ll wait until we’re home to punch him. I promise.”

When she nods, like this is an acceptable compromise, Benji and I share a look over her head. We’ve been hanging out with Grayson and Charlotte for over a month, and I’ve never seen this side of their weird friendship. It’s bizarre.

“Is your hand okay?” Benji asks, blushing. He denies it, but I’m pretty sure he’s harboring a tiny crush on Grayson. “Do we need to cancel band practice tomorrow?”

Flexing his fingers, Grayson smirks. “Nah, I’m fine. I know how to throw a punch.”

Once we get to class, Charlotte seems to realize for the first time that she’s still holding my hand. Her cheeks turn red as she drops it, giggling quietly as she meets my eyes. I smile back, hoping I don’t look as smug as I feel.

Class passes uneventfully, and nobody brings up what happened outside the library. It's like we've collectively decided to act like everything's fine. I can't help letting my mind wander, and my gaze continuously darts between Charlotte and Grayson. I've suspected for a while now that all of those guys like Charlotte as more than a friend, but I usually try to shove the thoughts aside and ignore the rumors about them so I can kid myself into believing they're more like her protective big brothers. But why wouldn't they like her? She's gorgeous, funny, sweet, and definitely the most interesting person I've ever met. Slowly getting to know her has been rewarding, and I hope I get the chance to know her even better. Talking to her at school and texting her at night are usually the highlights of my days. So, it's not like I can blame Elliot, Remy, or Liam for liking her. The situation is a little weird with Sebastian, but I have to remind myself they're not *actually* cousins like Em and I are. Grayson's the only one I can't figure out. Why would he encourage me to pursue her and insist she's single if he likes her?

After class ends, Grayson and I walk Charlotte halfway to her next class until Remy meets up with her. It's become a ritual over the past few weeks, and I promise to text her later when I wave goodbye. Remy gives me one of his serial killer looks, but he doesn't say anything before leading her away.

"Look, man." Grayson sighs, giving me a guilty look once we're alone in the hallway. "I'm really sorry about Sebastian. You shouldn't have to deal with our bullshit."

"It's cool. Not like it's your fault. I don't blame Charlotte either." I laugh awkwardly. Swallowing my nerves, I decide I need to suck it up and risk making an ass of myself by asking the questions rattling around in my head. I stop near an alcove

in the hallway so we can talk somewhat privately. “Uh, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” he says, shrugging. He’s fucking with his lip ring in a really obvious way, so I know he’s nervous.

“Okay, um...” I peer around us, keeping my voice low. “So, I know there are these rumors about Charlotte being with Elliot and Remy. Is there any truth to that? Are they into her?”

“Yeah. They are,” he says apologetically. Grimacing, he adds, “So are Liam and Sebastian.”

To my surprise, I don’t feel upset at hearing my suspicions confirmed. I thought I’d feel like I was punched in the gut. Because how the fuck can I compete with those guys? Not only are they cooler and way better looking than me, they’re also Charlotte’s best friends. They know her much better than I do.

“What about you? Are you into her too?” I gotta know.

Grayson swallows and nods. “I’m in love with her.”

Now, that one kinda hurts. He could have said something to me. It’s not like he hasn’t had the opportunity! I’m flooded with guilt as I reflect on all the times I’ve asked him about her, made it obvious I’m into her, and flirted with her in front of him.

“What the fuck, Gray?” I shake my head. “Why didn’t you tell me? I would have backed off, like, that first day. Jesus, I thought you were gay when we first met.”

“I—” He raises his hands to his head, his mouth twisting like he’s gonna cry. Shit. Even though I’m a little pissed off, I don’t wanna fight with him or make him cry. He’s still my friend. He clears his throat and says, “I didn’t want to discourage you from pursuing her. It freaked me out at first to

think of you being with her because our group is tight, but...I think Charlotte really likes you. I want her to be happy. If that means dating all of us..."

All I can do is gape at him. There's no way I just heard him right. "Wait. Are you saying you and your friends are *all* trying to date Charlotte? Like, at the same time? And you're just...cool? With me dating her too?" Do people actually do that?

He shrugs. "I get that it probably sounds fucked, but polyamory is a legit thing. Charlotte isn't exactly up front about her feelings with any of us, but I'm pretty sure she feels the same way for us as we do for her. Elliot and I have been trying to make the poly thing happen, but Remy and Sebastian keep messing things up."

The bell rings, and we simultaneously jerk back to take in our surroundings. The hallway is empty, and we're both late for class.

"Fuck," Grayson curses before turning to face me again. "I know you're probably pissed at me, and I deserve that. I'm sorry. I really, really hope you don't wanna stop hanging out or kick me out of the band. I've been having fun with you, Benji, and Em the past few weeks."

"What? No!" I widen my eyes. "Of course I'm not kicking you out of the band. I'm not sure if I'm mad, honestly. I think I'm too confused to really process everything. But the band has been fucking perfect, and I like hanging out with you too."

"Okay, cool." He smiles hesitantly.

Turning to hurry to my next class, I look back at him over my shoulder. "We can talk about it more later, alright? I'll probably have a lot of questions."

He chuckles and nods before heading to his next class. As soon as there's some distance between us and I'm alone in the hallway, I slow my steps. I'm already late, so what's another couple of minutes? Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I quickly google 'what is polyamory?'

CHARLOTTE



THE CAR RIDE HOME IS SILENT, AND THE TENSION IS SO THICK, you could cut it with a knife. I fidget with my phone in my lap the whole time, shooting anxious glances at Sebastian and Grayson while we drive. Neither of them has said a word to each other since Grayson punched Sebastian during lunch, and now they won't look at each other. It's like I can physically see their anger grow and grow, and I don't know what to do to stop it. It's pretty much my fault they're fighting in the first place.

I wish someone would at least turn the radio on as a distraction.

When my phone buzzes several times in a row in my lap, Sebastian glances sideways at me. In an angry, growly voice, he asks, "Is that Alex texting you?"

It's the first thing he's said to me since my outburst after lunch when I yelled at him to go cry to Summer. I didn't mean it. I was so angry that he'd threaten Alex. Alex hasn't done anything wrong, and he doesn't deserve to get any crap from the guys because of me.

Skimming the list of notifications on my screen, I see that I have about ten new text messages. More continue to roll in. "No. It's Olivia."

I leave it at that because who I text or talk to is none of his business in the first place. But also, Olivia's blowing up my phone because she heard that Liam is taking me to Homecoming. She's freaking out and making plans for us to go dress shopping this week. I seriously doubt it'll help smooth things over with Sebastian if I mention anything to do with the Homecoming dance right now.

"Oh," he says remorsefully.

And that's the end of the conversation. We go back to riding in silence the rest of the way home. Only now, after Sebastian's question, there's a sourer note in the air between us. So much anger, sadness, jealousy, regret, misunderstanding, and heartbreak. It makes me wanna cry, throw up, or maybe punch something.

The second Sebastian parks in front of our house, Grayson jumps out of the car and storms next door. He doesn't look back or say goodbye to either of us. I bite my tongue, fighting back tears. I thought things between us were okay, at least. He seemed like he was in a good mood, all things considered, after lunch and in our chemistry class together. I mean, I guess we didn't talk about Alex or Sebastian, but Grayson's given me the impression that he's fully aware—and perfectly fine with—the fact that I have a crush on several people.

Maybe he's mad at Sebastian, or maybe he needs some time alone. I know I shouldn't be making it about me, but I can't help feeling awful. I make a mental note to check on him once he's had some time to himself. Away from us, and especially away from me.

"So, uh..." Sebastian clears his throat, capturing my attention. I turn my head, my hand still hovering over my seat

belt buckle. When our eyes meet, he immediately averts his gaze. “I’m gonna head to the gym.”

“Okay,” I mumble. When he doesn’t say anything else and continues to stare straight ahead with his hands tightly gripping the steering wheel, I realize that’s his way of telling me to get out of the car. “You’re not gonna come inside first? Not even to change?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve got some extra clothes in my gym locker.”

Anger swells in my chest. Maybe he needs some space too, but he doesn’t need to be such a jerk to me. I owe him nothing. He’s not my boyfriend, and the way I feel about someone else is none of his fucking business.

Practically ripping my seat belt off, I grab my bags from the backseat and get out. Sebastian winces when I slam the door shut, but he doesn’t have the balls to look at me. Before I make it to the front door, I hear his car back out of the driveway.

Tears prick at my eyes as I fumble to unlock the door, but I sniff and blink them away. No way am I going to cry over a bunch of stupid boys. Not when I’ve been through a million worse things. My fingers itch to text Olivia, but I don’t want our friendship to constantly revolve around my stupid drama with the boys. She deserves better than that from me, so I decide I’ll catch her up on everything later.

Kicking my shoes off and dropping my bags on the living room floor, I look around the house. The open layout means I can see everything—the kitchen, the huge living room and entryway, the door to the garage, the sliding glass doors leading to the backyard, Arthur’s office, and the staircase that leads up to our bedrooms. It’s quiet without Arthur and

Sebastian here, and the openness of the space makes the quiet feel much more oppressive.

It makes me realize that I'm rarely left alone. I can think of maybe two times I've been left home by myself since my first week living here, and the dreadful feeling of loneliness quickly creeps in. Before I moved here, I was always alone. In juvie, in the group home, with my mom, and at my old school, I never had anybody to talk to or keep me company. I got used to that after many years, but Arthur and all of my friends here in Somerset have completely flipped my world upside down. I haven't had a real chance to feel lonely because I'm always surrounded by people I love.

To distract myself from the lonesomeness clawing at my chest, as well as the anger I feel toward Sebastian, the hurt I feel at the way Grayson snubbed me, and my frustration at my own greedy heart for putting me in this situation with the guys, I go on a cleaning spree. The house is already pretty clean since Arthur, Sebastian, and I are good about keeping up with chores, but I pretend like the place is filthy. I scrub the kitchen, the bathrooms, vacuum and dust every room until the floors and furniture are sparkling, and I go nuts and clean all the windows too.

By the time I finish, an hour and a half has passed. Sebastian and Arthur still aren't home, and the only messages waiting for me on my phone are from Olivia. To keep her from worrying, I text her back and agree to go dress shopping together this week.

I consider texting Grayson to check in on him, but maybe it would be better to go next door to talk to him in person. If he seems mad or says he still needs some space, I'll give him

that. But I'm worried about him, and I hate not knowing where we stand.

Besides, I think it's past time I talk to him about everything. It's been weeks since he mentioned he'd guessed how I felt about him, Alex, and all the guys. I have to remember how sweet and gentle he was when he broached the subject. I'm nervous and anxious, but ignoring this situation and waiting for things to happen without putting in any effort isn't getting me anywhere. It's made everything harder and messier.

After quickly checking that I don't look like a complete hot mess after my cleaning rampage, I walk next door and ring the doorbell before I lose my nerve. It'll be fine. No matter what, Grayson's still my kindred spirit and my best friend. Everything will be totally, completely—

“Hi, Charlotte.” Evelyn answers the door, smiling sweetly. She gestures for me to come in and asks, “How are you, sweet girl?”

“Good.” I feel awkward because I love Evelyn, and any other time I'd be more than happy to sit and chat with her for hours. Just not right now! “I was, um, hoping I could talk to Grayson?”

If she picks up on any weirdness, she doesn't comment on it. She crinkles her eyes and grins in amusement as she points to the staircase. “Of course. He's in his room.”

I mumble a quick thank you before practically sprinting upstairs. I'm barely halfway up when I hear the strumming of Grayson's acoustic guitar, and a small smile forms on my face. He's always been amazing at playing, but I could swear he's gotten even better these past few weeks since joining Alex, Emily, and Benji's band.

When I reach his room, I stand silently in the doorway to watch him for a few moments. He's sitting on his bed, his eyes closed like he's in another world as he strums. The song he's playing isn't a cover or anything I recognize, so it must be new. It's sad and hopeful at the same time, and full of passion, it takes my breath away and makes me want to cry.

He cuts the song short the moment he opens his eyes and sees me. He blinks and clears his throat. "Oh, hey. I didn't realize you were there."

"I..." Rocking back and forth on my heels, I stare at him longingly. I'm not sure what to say or where to start, and I don't want to invade his space if he's not ready for company. "That song was beautiful."

Grayson gives me a small smile, his tongue pressing against his lip ring so it juts out slightly. To my relief, he pats the bed beside him and says, "Come here, Princess."

It's all I can do to control myself enough not to run and leap onto the bed with him. Instead, I force myself to take slow, even steps and gracefully climb onto his bed where I fuss with my skirt to make sure it's covering me where it should. I'm careful to leave several inches between us, which makes Grayson snort.

Giving me a wider, more playful grin, he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me over until I'm sitting flush against his side. I giggle in surprise, and he kisses the top of my head as he sighs. "Much better."

I lean my head on his shoulder and whisper, "I thought you might be mad at me."

He tenses and quickly moves his guitar so he can wrap both his arms around me. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking earlier."

I just...Sebastian's been such a dick lately, and I can't stand being around him sometimes. It was bad enough at school earlier, but when he started up with that jealous, possessive bullshit with you in the car, I almost snapped. I needed to get away from him before I said or did something I'd regret."

"It's all my fault," I whisper, feeling choked up. One of my biggest worries has always been coming between the boys and ruining their friendship with one another. "I'm sorry, Grayson."

"No." He shakes his head, pulling me closer so I'm nearly in his lap. "It's not. You're not responsible for his actions, or for anyone else's. You have nothing to be sorry about."

He holds me and kisses the top of my head, and it feels nice to let him comfort me this way. Logically, I know he's right. I don't have any control over Sebastian's actions, and he definitely has taken some things too far. But if I could give him my heart the way he wants, and *only* him, he wouldn't lash out the way he has been.

"You—" I cut myself off before I finish my sentence. *You were right*. I want to say the words to Grayson, that he was right about me liking him, liking Alex, and liking the rest of the guys. But when he pulls back just far enough to focus his springtime eyes on mine, I panic and chicken out. "That song you were playing when I walked in. Is it new?"

"Yeah." He chuckles, giving me a nervous half-smile. "You liked it? It's something I've been working on with Alex."

"It's great," I say genuinely. "You guys are really great together, the way you feed off of each other's creativity." What I don't say out loud is that it's insanely freaking cute that

they've clicked , and I always feel warm and fuzzy when I see them playing music together.

Grayson smiles, turning to look at his guitar as he lightly strums his fingers over the strings. "It's been fucking awesome. Alex is turning out to be a really good friend too, I think."

Before we get too caught up talking about Alex—because I'm definitely stalling bringing up the subject I specifically came over to talk about—I ask, "Have you guys decided on a band name yet?"

They've been arguing about it for a month now. Emily always vetoes the names the boys come up with. To be fair, some of the band names that Grayson, Alex, and Benji have suggested are pretty terrible.

"Pretty sure, yeah." Grayson laughs. "Emily says it's 'okay,' and that's probably the best we'll get from her. We're calling ourselves The Letdowns for now."

"Hmm, I like it. Very pop-punk."

He snorts at me and sets his guitar across his lap so he'll be able to play it. I'm sitting close enough to him that I worry I'll get in the way, but he doesn't ask me to scoot over or show that he's having any difficulty. Giving me a shy smile, he lowers his voice to nearly a whisper. "I wrote a song for you too."

My heart flutters as a giant smile spreads across my face. "You did?"

"Well..." He clears his throat, his cheeks turning slightly red. "I'm still working on it. I suck at lyrics, but the music is pretty solid, I think. It sounds like you."

Can you die from swooning? Because I feel like that's a genuine concern right now. "Can I hear it?"

Instead of answering with words, he begins playing. The song starts off slow, sweet, and delicate before it slowly crescendos into something bolder, more confident. I feel like I'm drowning in his music, his springtime eyes lighting my soul on fire every time he glances in my direction as he plays. I'm not sure I've ever felt like this before. So seen and understood. The song *does* sound like me—the way I was before moving here, the person I've grown into, and the woman I hope to be in the future.

The final notes echo around his room when he finishes the song. As we stare at each other, I see the same love, admiration, and devotion I feel for him mirroring back at me.

"That was so..." I sniffle, only just now realizing I'm crying. I grin as I wipe my tears away, shaking my head in awe. "That was incredible, Grayson. You're amazing. I can't believe you wrote that. For *me*, of all people. I've never felt more special in my entire life."

He turns away without a word, leaning over to set his guitar down beside the bed. I assume he needs a moment to collect his thoughts and words, and I reach out to rub my hand over his arm soothingly. He just bared his soul to me, and I know that had to have been scary.

When he turns around, I open my mouth to tell him again how remarkable and talented he is. Before a single word escapes me, he wraps one arm around my waist as he brings his other hand up to cup my cheek, and he presses his lips to mine.

It takes my brain a second to get over the shock enough to realize that Grayson is kissing me. *Grayson is kissing me!*

Holy crap. I can't believe this is finally happening.

He moves to pull away, and that's when I find enough sense to respond. I kiss him more firmly and wrap my arms around his neck, practically climbing into his lap when he pulls me closer. The kiss breaks after a long moment, and I run my tongue over his lip ring. The contrast between the feeling of the piercing and the softness of his lips is strange at first, and I immediately decide that I love it. Kissing Grayson is just as fantastic as I always imagined it would be.

When he opens his mouth a little, I brush my tongue against his. My heart is beating hard in my chest, and I'm desperate to get closer to him. He groans as I continue to deepen our kiss, and I thread my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. Without warning, he jerks his chin up, causing our teeth to clash together.

It's so jarring, I pull away. He stares at me with a grimace.

"I'm sorry. I—" He chuckles nervously, his cheeks reddening. "I don't really know what I'm doing."

"What?" I ask, feeling dazed and frenzied from our kiss. My eyes widen once I realize what he's saying. "Wait, that was your first kiss?"

He nods, looking more embarrassed by the second. But he has nothing to be embarrassed about! Our first kiss together was magical. All the things I've been feeling anxious about feel like they're a million miles away, and Grayson's the only thing I'm focused on right now. Knowing I'm his first kiss makes me feel special. I can't help grinning like a maniac.

"You're so cute!" I lean in and give him a quick peck, smiling even wider when I feel his lip ring. Meeting his eyes, I

giggle. “I’ve been wondering what that would feel like since the first day we met.”

“Really?” he asks, his entire face lighting up. “Well, I can assure you I’ve felt the same way about you. God, you’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Unable to help myself, I kiss him again. He’s not as hesitant this time, fully wrapping his arms around me as he deepens the kiss. When he lies back, pulling me down on top of him, I let go of my inhibitions completely and allow myself to enjoy this moment with him. I love Grayson so much, and it’s a dream come true to finally be kissing him. After all the flirting and buildup between us, I can’t imagine this being any better.

My hands wander everywhere. From his hair down to his chest where all his delicious muscles are hiding. He continually groans into my mouth, which is hands down the hottest sound I’ve ever heard in my life, and his hands rub down my back and over my waist in a way that almost feels like he’s teasing. I want him to touch my skin, and I’m about two seconds away from pulling my shirt up for him.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway outside his bedroom manage to break through the fog of our make out session, and I quickly jerk away from him in a panic.

“Oh, shit,” he mumbles, leaning up on his elbows as he stares at me with wide eyes. His hair is a fucking mess, his shirt is wrinkled, and his lips are red. It’s super obvious that we were making out, and I frantically smooth my hair and outfit down as I scoot a few feet away from him.

Evelyn pokes her head through the door with a smile. “Hey, I was just coming to check if…” She trails off, taking in our appearances. Oh, god. She totally knows what we were

doing. Her smile turns into a smirk as she pushes his door open all the way and asks, “Are you staying for dinner, Charlotte?”

“Oh, um...” Reality comes crashing back. I still have all the same problems to deal with, and the same drama with the guys. Did I completely screw up and make everything worse by kissing Grayson? Yeah, he kissed me first, but I sure as hell didn’t discourage him. More like the opposite! How fast are the rest of the guys going to find out what happened? They tell each other everything. Taking a deep breath and forcing myself to calm down before I completely freak out, I shake my head. “I’m not sure. I already prepped dinner for tonight at home.”

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.” She shrugs, like she’s perfectly fine either way. She turns like she’s going to leave, and glances back at us over her shoulder with a devious grin. “Make sure to keep your door open, Gray. I’ll be back to check on you guys every ten minutes.”

“Mom,” Grayson groans from embarrassment, sliding his hand over his face.

Evelyn titters as she walks away, looking way too smug. She’s going to hate me when she finds out how selfish I am, and how I’m inevitably going to end up ruining everything with Grayson and the guys. The thought of losing her and Ava as my friends and allies breaks my heart, and tears well up in my eyes.

“What’s wrong, Princess?” Grayson scoots closer to me and pulls me into a hug, bringing his hand up to gently wipe my tears away when a few fall before I manage to blink them away. He deserves much better than me, and he absolutely deserves the truth.

“Your moms are going to hate me,” I whimper. He looks like he’s going to argue, so I shake my head and continue before I lose my nerve. “I like you so much, Grayson. God, *so much*. But you were right. I—I like Alex too. And Sebastian, Elliot, Liam, and Remy.”

There’s a few seconds of silence between us, and then he leans down to place a soft kiss on my lips. “I know.”

A sob mixed with a laugh escapes my throat, and I look up to meet his eyes with a wry smile. “I’m messed up. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I can’t help it.”

“Nothing is wrong with you,” he says, and he sounds like he really means it. “You have such a big heart, and you’re so fucking sweet, you can’t help it. In case it wasn’t obvious, I like you too. I more than like you.”

I blink up at him, feeling that hope rekindle in my chest that maybe he’s right. Maybe there isn’t anything wrong with me for loving more than one person. But at the same time, my insecurity fights against everything he says until I want to cry and apologize over and over.

“How can you not hate me?” I ask quietly. “Sebastian’s always angry and jealous, even when I try not to make my feelings obvious. It’s like, you guys keep acting like you want me to choose—I *know* about the bet—but I can’t. I just can’t. Choosing between you guys would be impossible, like ripping my soul into shreds.”

“The bet.” He furrows his eyes like he’s annoyed. “It wasn’t really a bet so much as a competition to figure out who you liked the most. For the record, I never wanted to do that, and the rest of the guys are fully aware that they’re a bunch of idiots for agreeing to it.”

I guess that's somewhat comforting. At least they're self-aware. Biting my lip, I shrug sadly. "It's probably beside the point. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. If you guys keep fighting, then it's probably better to stay friends. That way nobody's feelings will get hurt."

He surprises me by smiling. I thought for sure he'd feel upset and dejected that I'm suggesting we stay just friends after our amazing first kiss together. Reaching out to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear, he chuckles. "Princess, I told you months ago that I'm all in. If you only wanna be my friend, I'll be the best fucking friend you'll ever have. If you want me to be your boyfriend, I'll be the luckiest guy in the universe and do whatever it takes to be the best boyfriend I can be. If you want a few more boyfriends too, I can be supportive as long as they treat you the way you deserve. Whatever makes you happy, no matter what that means, *that's* what I want for you."

My lips part as I stare at him. I don't know whether to laugh or cry or kiss the absolute crap out of him. He's too perfect. Never in a million years, even after all my talks with Olivia, could I ever have imagined one of my guys saying something like that. I'm completely overwhelmed with gratitude and love for this wonderful boy.

All the words I want to say stick in my throat, and my mind is a mess. Since I'm struggling to speak, I do the next best thing and kiss him. I try to put all of my passion and feelings into the kiss, hoping he'll understand.

"Wow," he says dazedly when we pull away, a lopsided smile on his face. "I'm pretty sure I'm never going to get tired of that."

“So, what now?” I giggle, giddiness mixing with my nerves. Just because Grayson is okay with everything—which is a miracle—I know that’s not the case for the rest of the guys. “Are we, like, boyfriend and girlfriend?”

His eyes light up with excitement, and he threads our fingers together. “As much as I want to say yes, and as fucking incredible as that would be, I think we should probably wait until we’ve talked to the guys to put any official labels on anything. Elliot’s on board with having a polyamorous relationship—well, mostly—but we haven’t talked to the rest of the guys yet.”

“Mostly?” I ask curiously. So many things are starting to make sense. Like, why I’ve gotten the same vibes from both Grayson and Elliot that they’d be okay with sharing, and why Elliot’s always encouraging the other guys to flirt with me and take me on dates. Hearing confirmation that Elliot and Grayson have discussed this with each other seriously makes me swoon.

“He doesn’t like the idea of you dating Alex,” Grayson says apologetically. “But I keep telling Elliot to give him a chance, and I honestly think he’ll come around. He’s trying, at least. And, uh, Alex...well, he didn’t seem completely opposed when I mentioned the idea to him.”

The thought of *Alex* being included in their conversations makes me feel weird. Like, we’re still getting to know each other, so knowing that Grayson’s talked to him about sharing me is somewhat mortifying. But at the same time, how the hell could I be so lucky? Three of the guys I’m crazy about are potentially open to—what did Grayson say? A polyamorous relationship? It feels too good to be true.

When we hear footsteps in the hallway along with Evelyn's off-key humming, Grayson rolls his eyes. "Jesus Christ. She's seriously checking on us again already?"

CHARLOTTE



IT'S ALMOST A RELIEF TO FIND THE HOUSE EMPTY WHEN I GET home after leaving Grayson's place. With Arthur still at work and Sebastian presumably still at the gym, I have a little while to compose myself after my talk with Grayson. And all the kisses we shared.

My heart is pounding as I hurry upstairs to my room to freshen up. While the house is as silent as it was earlier, it doesn't feel as repressive. My conversation with Grayson has settled something deep in my soul, and I feel happier and more optimistic than I have since before school started over a month ago.

Olivia, Adrian, and most importantly, Grayson have all accepted me for who I am and how I feel, and none of them believe there's anything wrong with me for loving more than one person. I think I'm finally starting to believe they might be right.

And! Grayson is practically my boyfriend! We may have agreed not to use any labels until we've talked to all of the guys, but that hardly matters. He has my heart, and I have his. I want to squeal and jump around and announce to the world that we're together. Obviously, it's not that simple, and it probably never will be. I need to relax and focus on one thing

at a time. The first thing being getting myself cleaned up so I don't look like I've been kissed senseless whenever Sebastian and my uncle get home.

Then, I need to talk to Sebastian. I'm not sure he's ready to hear everything—how I feel about *all* of the guys, and how Grayson thinks we could successfully navigate a polyamorous relationship. But something needs to change. We need to have a heart to heart because I can't handle his attitude and behavior when he starts lashing out from his jealousy anymore.

After tying my hair up into a messy bun and changing into sweats and a tee shirt, I head downstairs to wait for whoever gets home first. It's only five-thirty, so it's too early to start dinner. Instead, I work on making mine and the guys' lunches for tomorrow. Keeping my hands busy with a task that makes me happy definitely helps calm my nerves. I feel like my brain is fighting between feeling elated about things with Grayson and anxious about everything that might happen from here on out.

I'm finishing up when I hear a car pull up outside. Without running to the window and peeking outside, there's no way for me to know if it's Arthur or Sebastian. I'm not sure who I want it to be. I need to talk to Sebastian, and it will be a lot easier without my uncle around, but I'm freaking nervous. If he says something hurtful or uses Summer to make me jealous, I don't know if I'll be able to control a word that comes out of my mouth. The last thing I want is to make things worse between us or drive a bigger wedge between him and the guys.

The front door opens, and my shoulders tense. I force myself to take a deep breath before I turn around, and my heart still skips a beat when I lock eyes with Sebastian. He's wearing the same clothes he wore to school, but they're

slightly ruffled, and his hair is wet like he recently took a shower. The bruising around his left eye is more noticeable now that it's been a few hours since Grayson hit him. By tomorrow, he'll probably have a full-blown black eye.

"Hi," he says quietly in a gruff voice.

I give him a small smile and turn back to finish my task. All I want to do is run over to him and give him a hug, but I feel like it's better to wait and see if he's cooled down yet.

While I pretend to be completely focused on packing our lunches into all their individual compartments, I hear Sebastian drop his bag by the door and take slow, hesitant steps into the kitchen. He stops behind me, clears his throat, and whispers, "Charlotte?"

Spinning around without hesitation, I raise my eyebrows and ask, "Yeah?"

His eyes drop to the ground like he's ashamed, and he brings a hand up to run his fingers through his damp hair. "I—I just want to apologize for being a dick. Not just today, but for the past few weeks. I'm sorry."

He sounds genuine and devastated, and my heart can't stand it. My fingers itch to reach out to him, but instead I curl them against my chest and whisper, "It's okay."

"No, it's not." He looks up, his blue and brown eyes practically piercing into my soul. "You mean the world to me. The last thing I want to do is upset you or push you away, and that's what I've been doing. I swear, Charlotte, I'm gonna try to be better. I like you so much, and it hurts to know that the guys can flirt with you or be with you when I can't. But that's not your fault or theirs, and it's not fair for me to take it out on you guys."

“Sebastian...” I stare up at him, at a loss for words. He sounds sad and heartbroken, that it breaks my heart. At the same time, he sounds genuinely sorry, and it means so much to me that he’s making himself vulnerable and trying to fix things between us. Giving in, I throw my arms around him and hug him tightly.

He hugs me back, resting his head on top of mine. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

“I’m sorry too,” I whisper. “I don’t mean to make you jealous or hurt your feelings. It just—”

Cutting me off, he squeezes me tighter and says, “Stop. You don’t have anything to apologize for. I talked to Adrian for a while after he completely kicked my ass in the training ring, and I think he knocked some sense into me. You don’t owe me anything because I like you. If you want to be with Alex—or Remy, or Elliot, or whoever—that’s fine. It’ll be hard for me sometimes, but I can accept that. I don’t want to lose you, and I hope you can still consider me your best friend.”

A smile slides onto my face. Thank god for Adrian. I’m curious to know what exactly he said to Sebastian, but this is a huge step for him. If he’s going to try to work on his jealousy and accept that I might like the other guys, there’s definitely hope that we’ll be okay and that everything might work out for all of us.

“Of course I still consider you my best friend.” I rub my cheek against his chest before smiling softly up at him. “No matter what happens, we’ll always be best friends and kindred spirits.”

He gives me a lopsided smile, chuckling quietly. “I love it when you call us that. Your kindred spirits.”

The guys always tease me for it, but not in a bad way. I'm pretty sure they think it's cute, even if they probably wouldn't choose those words to describe it. Slowly pulling away from Sebastian, I grab his hand and stare at our interlocked fingers worriedly. After his apology and promise to try to be better, I feel like I should be honest too. At least a little...

"You know I like you too, right?" I ask softly. When I hear his breath hitch, I add, "I like you so much, it's crazy. But..."

"But Arthur says we can't be together," he says, attempting to finish my sentence.

While the issue with Arthur is definitely a concern, it's not what I was going to say. I nod and shrug. "Well, that. But also...I *do* like Alex. *And* Elliot, Remy, Liam, and Grayson. When I told you before that I like all of you, I really meant that."

My confession is met with silence, and it feels like my heart is going to beat out of my chest. Either that, or I'm going to throw up from how anxious I feel while I wait for him to react. Glancing up at Sebastian through my eyelashes, I find him staring at me like he's confused. Like maybe he's not sure how to feel or what to say. At least he doesn't look angry or disgusted. Anything is better than that, right?

"All of us?" he finally asks, like he's having a hard time wrapping his mind around the concept. "You mean, you like us all the same?"

Laughing nervously, I nod. And then I shake my head. It's not really fair to group Alex in with the rest of the guys, in regards to how deep my feelings are. I'm crushing on him hard, for sure, but I still barely know him. With the rest of the guys, I feel like I know them as well as I know myself, like they're a part of my soul. I'm in love with my five kindred

spirits. Maybe I'll feel that someday with Alex, but it's a bit of a stretch to say that when we've never been on a date or had a chance to hang out alone.

"I mean, I'm still only getting to know Alex," I say, leaving it at that. It feels awkward to talk about this. Even though Grayson and some of my other friends have been really supportive, and now I know that polyamory is an actual thing, it feels weird to talk openly about my feelings for someone else to one of the guys I love. Especially with Sebastian, when he's still struggling to work on his jealousy issues.

A car door slams outside, and we simultaneously glance up. When we hear footsteps approaching the front door, Sebastian drops my hand and takes a step further away from me. I turn back to work on our lunches before Arthur walks in.

"Hey, guys," he calls out happily, oblivious to the tense and vulnerable moment Sebastian and I just shared. Arthur hangs up his coat and keys, smiling as he heads into the kitchen to join us. "How was your day? What are you up to?"

"Just making our lunches," I say innocently. "I was waiting until you got home to start dinner."

"That's—" he stops talking, and I turn to see him narrowing his eyes at Sebastian. "What the hell is that? Please tell me you didn't get into a fight."

"It was an accident." Sebastian chuckles, reaching up to touch the corner of his eye. He winces, quickly trying to cover it up. "Grayson and I were messing around, and we took it too far."

Well, it's not a complete lie, I guess. Grayson was the one who punched him, and it was a bit of an extreme reaction. The guys are always getting into stupid, physical fights for fun, so

it's a believable story. Arthur seems to relax, knowing how rough the guys can be, so he clearly buys it.

While I pack up the lunches and pull out everything I need to make dinner tonight, Arthur sits at one of the barstools at the island. He always loves to hear how our days were, so we talk while I work. He compliments how clean the house looks, which makes me feel equally embarrassed and flattered that he noticed in the first place.

Instead of sitting down, Sebastian hovers a few feet behind me. He's mostly quiet, only giving one-word answers to Arthur's questions. He doesn't sound upset, but he's being weird, and it makes me nervous. Thankfully, Arthur doesn't seem to notice anything off about the way he's acting.

"You gonna tell him about Homecoming?" Sebastian asks me.

I feel my cheeks warm as I turn to look at him over my shoulder. He gives me a soft smile, nodding encouragingly. Realizing this is his way of trying to prove that he can be better at handling his jealousy, I bite my lip to hide my smile.

"Uh, yeah." I clear my throat, turning around again to smile at Arthur. "I'm going to the Homecoming dance. It's going to be my first school dance ever. Olivia and I are gonna go dress shopping together this week."

"That's great!" Arthur exclaims genuinely. He's always excited to hear about things happening in our lives or with our friends, but I know it makes him extra proud whenever I do anything to show I'm putting down real roots here and trying to get involved in school. "Are you going with Remy?"

Considering I went on a date with Remy a few nights ago, it's completely reasonable for my uncle to assume he'd be

taking me to the dance. Feeling incredibly awkward, I shake my head. “Um, no. Actually, I’m going with Liam.”

“Oh,” Arthur says. He sounds mildly surprised, but he doesn’t comment further. “What about you, Seb? Thinking of asking anyone to the dance?”

My shoulders tense, but I force myself to keep my hands busy with dinner while I wait to hear Sebastian’s response. After everything, is he still going to ask Summer? The thought makes me want to scream.

“Nah,” Sebastian says, his tone even. He catches my eye, smiling apologetically before turning to face Arthur. “I have to go to the dance to take photos for the Yearbook, but I’m gonna hang out with Elliot since he has to go with the rest of the football team, anyway.”

Relief floods my body, and I very nearly turn around and throw myself into Sebastian’s arms to show him how much I love and appreciate him. Somehow, I manage to keep my cool and keep my expression blank like I’m not affected.

Conversation continues to flow naturally and pleasantly between the three of us while I finish making dinner. Nights like this are nice. Our family is small and unconventional, but there’s a lot of love in this house. Having a normal night where I can talk with them and know they’ll listen to me, where I can go to bed with a full belly with nothing to worry about other than my relationship drama with the guys, it’s unbelievably wonderful. It’s moments like this, when I reflect on my past and compare it to my present, that all the problems I’ve been stressing about lately don’t seem so big.

When Sebastian brushes past me to grab plates to set the table, he lightly caresses the back of my hand and gives me a small, secretive smile. Butterflies flutter in my stomach at his

simple gesture. Like I told him, he'll always be my best friend and kindred spirit. Seeing him already making an effort to change, to accept the way I feel about him and the rest of the guys, that's huge. Maybe we can really make it work, somehow, with all of us together.

I need to give Sebastian some more time to come around to the idea, and I need to talk to the rest of the guys. One step at a time.

SEBASTIAN



“DO YOU NEED HELP WITH ANYTHING ELSE?” I ASK.

Charlotte shakes her head, her attention focused entirely on the salad she’s putting together. The rest of the dinner she made is already on the table, and it smells delicious. Before she moved in with us, I never realized what I was missing with real, home cooked meals. Even when my mom was still around, she wasn’t much better than Arthur when it came to cooking.

It might be one of the things I love most about Charlotte. Watching her cook is like watching magic happen. She gets very absorbed in her task, blocking out everything around her—just like she does when she’s reading—and she’s incredibly organized. It’s astounding to me how she can keep track of so many different ingredients and dishes, never seeming lost or flustered with where things are or with the timers she sets on her phone. It’s even crazier to watch her cook when she makes large quantities of things, like whenever she makes stuff for me and the guys. And then, when she’s finished, everything she makes tastes like the best thing I’ve ever eaten. Every damn time.

“No, thanks,” she says to me over her shoulder, keeping her eyes on the salad. “As soon as I finish this, everything’s

done. You guys can sit down and start if you want.”

Yeah, right. I’m good right here. Arthur’s in the other room taking a work call, so I feel mostly safe taking a few extra moments to watch Charlotte. My eyes take in every detail of her form. Her hair’s up in a messy bun, and my fingers itch to reach out and untie it until her loose curls cascade down her back. She’s wearing a loose white shirt that hangs off one of her dainty shoulders, and I can just make out the few faint freckles visible on her skin there. She’s wearing sweatpants, and they’re long enough on her that she’s rolled them up at the ankles. Fucking adorable.

It’s almost better seeing her like this than when she’s all dressed up with her hair and makeup done. It feels more intimate, like I get to see a side of her most people don’t. It hardly matters. She’s fucking beautiful no matter what she wears. I thought she was just as stunning the first night she ever showed up here, covered in bruises with a cut lip, matted hair, and baggy clothing.

When she spins around with the salad bowl in her hands, she gives me a sweet smile. I follow her silently to the table, quick to pull her chair out for her before she can do it herself. Any time Arthur’s in the room, I’m usually pretty careful not to do shit like that. I’m even more careful about staring at Charlotte too much and keeping the lovesick expression off my face. But tonight, it’s much harder to hide it than usual.

For the first time, Charlotte admitted she likes me. *She likes me*. I knew it. I always knew it deep in my heart. She says it herself all the time—we’re kindred spirits. Soul mates. It’s everything I’ve been hoping for. All I’ve wanted for months is for her to acknowledge that she feels the same way for me that I feel for her.

Only, things are way more fucking complicated than I realized. Grayson was right all along. Charlotte likes all of us, and I don't know how to feel about that. At least she doesn't like any of them *more* than me, if what she says is true. But why would she lie? I could tell it was difficult enough for her to admit that much to me.

So, what happens now? Do we just wait to see who she ends up choosing? I thought that's basically what the guys and I were doing already, and it's only fucked things up between us. Which, yeah, is mostly my fault. After today, I finally realized that. Grayson was right to punch me in the face. I fucking deserved that shit. Adrian threatened to punch me in the other eye to make them match when I confessed all the shit going on in our group and what happened today at lunch.

All I've done is push Charlotte away repeatedly with my jealousy and anger, and I've pissed off the guys too many times. If I keep acting the way I have been, they'll end up hating me. I can't lose them. Even if the cost is watching Charlotte fall in love with someone who's not me, lashing out at them for that is only going to make me feel more miserable and heartbroken in the long run.

"Thanks," Charlotte says when she takes her seat.

I smile down at her, feeling nervous, flustered, confused, and most of all, overjoyed. Overjoyed because the most perfect girl in the universe likes *me*. Nervous and flustered because there's a very good chance I'm going to continue to fuck things up between us and make her unhappy. And confused because I still don't understand how she can have feelings for more than one person or what we're supposed to do about that. Do the rest of the guys know? Is that why

Elliot's been so fucking weird? Like today when he basically let Liam win the contest to take Charlotte to Homecoming?

"Is dinner ready?" Arthur walks into the room, glancing at the food on the table. His eyes light up, showing how impressed he is. He has the same reaction every night when Charlotte cooks dinner, and I know it makes her happy to see how much we appreciate her efforts. "Wow, everything looks great."

Charlotte proudly lifts her chin and points out each dish before my stepdad and I sit down and fill our plates. She always makes more than enough, and I know Arthur loves taking the leftovers to work for his lunches.

Dinner is pretty typical, even if I'm quieter than I usually am. I'm caught up in my own head, and I feel like I need to prove so much to Charlotte. I don't want to fuck up more than I have already. Arthur tells us about some new clients he's working with at the advertising agency he works for, and he asks us about our classes and the upcoming Homecoming dance.

I'm careful to keep my mouth shut about the dance. I don't want Charlotte to know I still feel jealous that she's going with Liam—even if it's nowhere near as bad as earlier today at school. I'm also really fucking desperate for her to forget what I said about asking Summer. I used to like Summer a lot, but this year? She's honestly become so fucking annoying that it's hard for me to understand what I ever saw in her. She never showed any interest in me before. In fact, she was pretty open about wanting nothing to do with me or my friends. Now, for some reason, she's always trying to talk to me at school or Yearbook club, and she keeps DM'ing me on Instagram. The only time I entertain a conversation with her is when she's

talking about photography. The one thing I'll give her credit for is that she's a talented photographer, and it's always interesting to hear about new techniques from people who share that passion with me.

When I first learned that Charlotte was jealous of Summer, I felt fucking terrible. I was terrified of making Charlotte think I was still interested in my old crush. But then, I realized the only time Charlotte ever hinted that she might possibly be interested in me was whenever Summer's name was brought up, or when she tried to talk to me at school in front of Charlotte. Out of pure stupidity and desperation, I decided it would be a good idea to purposely make Charlotte jealous until she finally gave in and admitted she likes me. Grayson giving me a black eye today was a huge wake-up call.

"So." Arthur clears his throat when we're nearly finished eating, and he gets that wide, fake grin on his face that indicates he feels uncomfortable. Oh, shit. I love him to death, but it's fucking awkward when he attempts to have a serious-dad talk with us. What could it be this time? Please, please don't let it be something to do with me and Charlotte because I was too obvious about staring at her all through dinner. He brings his hand up to rub the back of his neck, which means he's embarrassed on top of being uncomfortable. "There's something I want to talk to you guys about."

Charlotte and I share a look, and her lips twitch with a smile. She always seems to handle Arthur's talks much better than me. How is she not worried right now? A million scenarios run through my head of what he might possibly have to say. Grimacing, I turn to Arthur. "What is it?"

There's a long pause before he takes a deep breath and says, "I'm not sure how to say this, so I'll just be blunt. I've

met someone.”

It’s probably the last thing I expect him to say. Suddenly, there’s a ringing in my ears, and I feel like I’m going to throw up. My reaction makes no sense. When I see Charlotte light up with a smile, I feel even more sick to my stomach.

Logically, I know it’s a good thing. Arthur is a good guy. He’s probably the best person I know. He adopted me without hesitation when I was eleven years old, and he’s been more of a father to me since day one than my bio dad ever was. Ever since my mom died, it was just me and Arthur before Charlotte moved in. I know I haven’t made it easy for him. He deserves to move on, to meet someone new. I know my mom would want that for him.

But all I can think is that it hasn’t been long enough since my mom died. Next month will officially mark two years. While sometimes that feels like a long time, right now it feels like hardly any time has passed. Things have already changed a lot over the past few months with Charlotte. How much more are they going to change if Arthur gets a girlfriend? What if he chooses her over me and Charlotte? What if he has kids with her? I’m not his biological son, so will I end up getting pushed aside? It’s stupid for me to worry about, I know. Arthur’s not like that. But apparently, it’s a worry I have that I never realized until this moment.

“That’s great! I’m so happy for you!” Charlotte exclaims. I’m glad she’s able to say the right thing, because all I really want to do right now is go up to my room where I can mope and miss my mom in solitude. I’m sure I’ll be happy for Arthur once the shock wears off and I’ve processed my feelings, but I can’t muster up the energy to fake it right now.

Arthur gives her a nervous smile, darting worried glances in my direction. “Thank you. It’s not very serious yet. We’ve only been on two lunch dates, but I wanted to talk to you guys. You’re the most important part of my life, and your opinions mean the world to me.”

My throat feels thick, and my eyes burn like I’m gonna cry. Shit. I stand up quickly, my chair screeching loudly against the floor, and I back away toward the stairs. I open my mouth to make an excuse, or maybe apologize, but I’m too close to breaking down. So, instead, I leave and rush upstairs to my room. I feel like such a dick. I probably made Arthur feel guilty, and I didn’t bother taking my empty plate to the sink.

As soon as I reach my room, I quietly close the door. Pressing my fists to my eyes, I wince at the sharp pain I feel around my left eye. God, I’m a fucking idiot. I forgot I have a black eye and practically ran away from the dinner table to have a meltdown because I can’t stop being a selfish prick for two seconds. No wonder Charlotte and the guys have been pissed at me lately.

I spend a few minutes pacing back and forth across my room, trying to remember some of the anger management techniques Dr. Collins taught me after my mom died. It’s been a while since I’ve been to therapy, but it might be a good idea to go back with how volatile I’ve felt lately.

As soon as I feel calm enough that I don’t think I’m going to cry or punch a hole in the wall, I take a deep breath and pull a photo album from my shelf. It’s filled with a mix of photos with my mom both before and after we met Arthur.

Only a few seconds after I sit on my bed and flip to the first page of the album, there’s a knock on my door. Expecting

it to be Arthur, I tell him he can come in. I owe him an apology and an explanation, anyway. It's Charlotte who opens the door and pokes her head in, and I'm flooded with shame. I hate that she's seeing me like this.

"Hey," she says softly. "I wanted to come check on you."

"Sorry," I mumble, staring down at the album in my lap with blurry eyes.

"Don't be!" She sounds quiet and hesitant. God, what does she think of me? She must think I'm the biggest fucking baby on the planet. I can't handle seeing another guy flirt with her without flipping out, and now I can't deal with hearing Arthur's dating again without having a meltdown. How can she stand me? "Can I come in?"

I nod and scoot over so she can sit beside me on the bed. Even though I'm embarrassed by my behavior and reaction to Arthur's news, I'll take any opportunity I can to spend time with Charlotte. Talking to her might help make me feel better.

She climbs up onto my bed and crawls over to sit beside me, snuggling close and resting her head on my shoulder. I glance down at her, my heart racing at her closeness while my soul simultaneously settles. Two seconds in her presence, and I already feel more at ease.

"So, what's wrong?" she asks. "I thought you'd be happy for Arthur. We've been saying for months that he needs a girlfriend."

"I know." I close my eyes, tapping my fingers against the photo album in my lap. "I *am* happy for him. It's just...I freaked out for a second. You know next month is the two-year anniversary of my mom's death? Sometimes it hits me hard."

Charlotte wraps her arms around me in a side hug, burying her face against my neck. I wrap one of my arms around her shoulders, rubbing her back gently. This is another reason I love this girl. She understands me and my pain, and she never hesitates to step in and offer comfort in any way she can. She's one of the most caring and accepting people I've ever met. Fuck, my mom would have loved her. I wish so badly they could have met.

"I'm so sorry, Sebastian," Charlotte whispers. "I wish I could have met her."

A hoarse chuckle escapes my throat. "I was just thinking the same thing."

It's quiet, but the silence is comfortable. I continue rubbing my hand over her back softly, enjoying every second of this closeness between us.

"You know Arthur still loves her, right?" Charlotte eventually breaks the silence. "He always will, just like he'll always love us. We're his family. That doesn't change just because he's met someone else."

While I know that's true deep down, it still makes me feel a million times better to hear someone else say it. "Thanks, Charlotte."

We continue to sit together, flipping through the photo album. She's never seen any of these pictures, and it's heartwarming and therapeutic to tell her the stories behind every photo. It makes me feel closer to my mom and to Charlotte, like I'm somehow closing the gap between what I've lost and everything I've gained over the past couple of years.

“Your mom was beautiful,” Charlotte says, running her finger across a photo from my mom and Arthur’s wedding. They look so happy. It’s nice to remember how they were together before she got sick. Charlotte turns her head to grin at me and says, “You look a lot like her.”

Staring into Charlotte’s emerald green eyes, my heart clenches in my chest. Right now, I don’t give a shit that she likes the rest of the guys, or that she’s crushing on some random asshole from school. I’m stupidly fucking in love with her. All that matters right now in this moment is that she’s here with me.

“You’re beautiful too,” I say, my voice deeper and raspier than usual. I bring my hand up to brush a few loose hairs behind her ear. My eyes trail over every inch of her face, falling on her mouth last. “So fucking beautiful.”

Her tongue darts out to lick her lips, and I swear, I almost groan out loud. When I glance up to meet her eyes, I see she’s staring at my mouth. It would be easy to kiss her right now. She’s giving me every sign that she’d welcome it.

“Can I take your picture?” I want to kick myself before the words are fully out of my mouth. Fucking Christ. Only I could be stupid enough to ruin a moment like this.

Charlotte laughs, sounding like she’s both surprised and embarrassed. “Sure. You know you don’t need to ask.”

Still wishing I could punch myself in the face, I lean over to grab the camera sitting on my bedside table. It’s not my favorite camera, but the battery is charged so I don’t have to go in search of a different one and make the entire situation weirder. I turn it on, quickly snapping a few close-up shots of Charlotte. I have no doubt the photos will turn out to be

fucking stunning, even without good lighting or an interesting background.

“Can I take your picture too?” she asks, surprising me. I automatically cringe and shake my head. She pouts and furrows her eyebrows. “Why not?”

“I hate having pictures taken of me,” I say. It probably sounds weird and hypocritical considering I usually have a camera glued to my hand, and I constantly take photos of my friends without giving them much choice in the matter. When Charlotte raises her eyebrows, silently asking for more of an explanation, I shrug. “My eyes are weird. I don’t know.”

“Weird?” she blinks, staring up at me like I’m speaking another language.

I roll my eyes and chuckle awkwardly. “Uh, yeah? They’re two different colors, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Pretty sure I’ve noticed.” She giggles, reaching out to take the camera from my hands. Giving me a mischievous grin, she lifts the camera to take my photo and asks, “How can you find such an interesting and unique feature weird? You’re an artist!”

I glare into the camera, and jokingly make a stupid face for another photo in the hopes it might make her laugh. It works. I can’t help smiling at her giggles despite myself, and I lean closer to her to look at the photos she took. Just like I expected, they’re terrible. The contrast is off, made more noticeable by the vastly different colors of my eyes, and I look like I’m about two seconds from murdering somebody.

“Not weird at all. I love your eyes,” Charlotte says reverently, smiling at the photos on the camera roll before turning to face me. “Seriously, I always feel like I could stare

into your eyes forever. And so what if you look a little grumpy in your pictures? Broody guys are hot. Have you *seen* Matthew Macfadyen in *Pride and Prejudice*?”

I haven't seen it, but I'm not about to admit that to her. She'll end up wanting me to watch it with her, and there's no way I can handle sitting through a two-hour long period drama chick flick tonight.

“You think I'm hot?” I ask teasingly. In reality, I'm ecstatic at the idea she finds me attractive. I've always assumed our connection was more mental and emotional on her part. Physically, she's out of my league that it's pretty much impossible to imagine she could ever think I'm good-looking.

“Duh.” She rolls her eyes like it's obvious. I'm struck silent, staring at her in awe. When I don't say anything in response, her smile softens as she meets my eyes and places her hand over mine. “Sebastian, of course I do. My first night here, I thought you were one of the cutest guys I'd ever seen. I still think that. Only now that I know you as well as I do, I'm probably a million times more attracted to you than I was then.”

She likes me, *and* she thinks I'm hot? How did such a shitty day turn out to be one of the best days of my life? I have to be the luckiest guy in the universe.

“It's just, well...I had this girlfriend a couple years ago.” Holy fucking shit. Why am I talking about Lauren right now? Why am I such a fucking idiot? I should be kissing Charlotte. Not running my dumbass mouth and ruining things more than I already have. I stumble over my words, but the whiny bullshit spills out regardless of how badly I want to punch myself. “She always said my eyes were creepy. That it felt like two different people were staring at her. So, I always had to be

careful not to make eye contact with her and keep my eyes closed whenever we kissed.”

Charlotte gets a disgusted look on her face. “That girl was an idiot, Sebastian.”

I shrug. Maybe she was. Honestly, until right now, I didn’t realize anything she’d ever said about my eyes affected me that much. No wonder I’ve always been such shit with girls, and why I have almost zero experience talking to them. How the hell does Charlotte like me?

“I wish you believed me,” Charlotte whispers. She turns slightly and sits up on her knees, resting her arms loosely around my neck. My hands fall to her waist, and I feel myself falling into her green eyes as she slowly leans closer to me, never once blinking or breaking eye contact. Her voice drops lower, our faces barely inches apart. “Nope. Not weird or creepy at all.”

Is she going to kiss me? Even after I fucked up before by not kissing her first? I’m practically holding my breath as she continues to lean closer, and I force myself to keep my eyes open. My heart is pounding in my chest as I wait for our lips to brush. So fucking close.

Without warning, she darts to the side and licks my cheek before pulling away with an impish grin.

“Ugh!” I make a face and wipe my cheek, glaring at her once I process that the heated moment between us is over. “What the fuck, Charlotte?”

She shrugs, smirking. “What?”

I snort, shaking my head in amusement. I’m not mad at her for teasing me, even if I am disappointed that she didn’t kiss me. It probably would have complicated things even more,

which isn't what we need right now. I still need to figure out what it means for her to like the other guys, and I still have a lot to make up for. With her, and with the guys.

“You're such a brat.” I laugh, reaching out to tickle her side lightly. When she squirms and giggles, I grin and tickle her even more. She's not really fighting back all that hard, and I somehow end up pinning her down on my bed with her wrists above her head while she continues to laugh and half-heartedly wriggle beneath me. It's not until I lean down to lick the side of her face—in retaliation for what she did to me—that I realize how compromising our position is. My dick starts to get hard, and I decide I can still easily turn this whole situation around. She squeals when I slide my tongue down her cheek, and I'm just about to turn my head the few centimeters it would take for me to brush my lips against hers.

“What the hell are you guys doing?”

Charlotte and I startle, looking up to find Arthur standing in the doorway with a horrified expression on his face. I jump back away from Charlotte, holding my hands up defensively.

“She started it!” I exclaim, pointing at Charlotte.

Arthur's eyes darken angrily, and Charlotte's eyebrows shoot up as she whispers, “Seriously?”

Wow. I have really, really fucked this all up.

“I think you should go to your room, Charlotte.” Arthur sounds sterner than I've ever heard him before, and my heart drops into my stomach. How much trouble am I in? I can't guess what he's going to say or do after catching us like that. Technically we weren't even doing anything, but I definitely would have if he hadn't walked in.

Charlotte doesn't hesitate to jump off the bed, shooting me a guilty expression before she rushes past Arthur into the hallway. As soon as we're alone, Arthur steps into my room and closes the door behind him. I feel about two inches tall as he stares at me. There's a lot I need to say and apologize for, but I have no idea where to start.

Eventually, he sighs deeply and raises his arms in an exaggerated shrug. "What's going on with you, kid?"

Tears well up in my eyes, which is seriously fucking pathetic and embarrassing. I wipe them away quickly and shrug. "I'm sorry. I keep fucking up, and I'm so sorry."

He walks over to sit on the end of my bed, clapping his hand on my shoulder. "It's alright. You can talk to me. Whatever's wrong, or whatever you think you've done wrong, you know we can handle it after everything we've been through together."

Deciding it's safer to talk about my mom first, and secretly hoping he'll forget about the incident with Charlotte, I nod. "I know. I didn't mean to freak out when you mentioned meeting someone. I'm happy for you, I swear. I know mom would be happy too. It's just...I miss her so fucking much, and I wish she were still here."

His expression crumbles, and he pulls me into a hug. I feel like I'm fourteen again, dealing with the loss of my mom for the first time all over.

"I know, kid. I know. I miss her every day," Arthur whispers. "I hope you don't think I'm trying to replace her, or —"

"No," I cut him off, pulling away and shaking my head. "I don't think that. It hit me hard for a second. Charlotte and the

guys have talked to me about it loads of times before, and we all think it would be good for you to meet someone. Seriously, I'm sorry I reacted the way I did. I really do want to hear about her, and I want you to be happy."

"Okay." He nods, swallowing audibly. "Well, like I mentioned before, it's pretty early, but I like her, and I think I'd like the chance to see if it could turn into something more serious. You and Charlotte are so important to me, so I wanted to be open with you guys about it from the start."

Even if it's early, he probably likes this woman a lot more than he's letting on. The guys called it earlier this summer when Grayson's moms were trying to set Arthur up on blind dates. He's an all-or-nothing kind of guy. If he's decided he likes this new woman, he's probably already mostly all in. I owe it to him to offer my support and give her a fair chance.

"What's her name?" I ask. "And how'd you meet?"

"Christina," he says, getting a goofy smile on his face. "We work together, actually. She started with the company about a month ago, in the art department. Truthfully, she's the reason I wanted to start going to the gym. I'm not exactly as young or as in shape as I was when I met your mom, so..."

I snort in amusement. I should have guessed. I've been going to the gym religiously for almost two years, and I can count on one hand the number of times Arthur's gone with me to work out. It also doesn't surprise me to hear that Christina works in the art department. My mom was an artist too, in her own right, so Arthur clearly has a type.

"Well, I can't wait to meet her," I say. And I really mean it.

"Thank you." Arthur smiles gratefully, patting me on the shoulder. After a few moments, his smile drops. "Now, about

you and Charlotte.”

My eyes fall to my lap, and my face heats from shame and embarrassment. I love her so much, and I hate lying to Arthur or hiding anything from him. I thought I’d be able to sneak around behind his back if Charlotte ever admitted she wanted to be with me, but it’s quickly becoming evident I’d never be able to pull that off.

“We weren’t doing anything. We were just playing around,” I say quietly.

“It didn’t look that way. We’ve talked about this, Seb. The two of you can’t be together, not when you’re living under the same roof like this. I know you’re close, but—”

“I’m in love with her.” My voice cracks, and a few more tears leak from my eyes as I look up at him.

His eyes close, and he groans as he shakes his head. “Sebastian.”

“I know. I *know* it’s inappropriate, and I’m sorry. It’s all gotten completely fucked up and messy. The guys all say they’re in love with her too, and I keep fighting with them and with Charlotte. That’s why Grayson punched me today. Not because we were playing around. It was because I was being an asshole to Charlotte when she agreed to go to Homecoming with Liam instead of me.”

Arthur’s quiet before he reaches out to squeeze my shoulder. “I’m really at a loss, kid. I don’t know what to say, or how I can help you fix this. I’m not gonna sit here and argue that your feelings are invalid because you guys are young, and I’m sorry you’re going through this with your friends. It’s been obvious for a long time that you guys all care about Charlotte very much, and I’m sure the feeling is mutual.

But you and Charlotte *cannot* be together, not while I'm the legal guardian of you both and you're living under the same roof. We're still waiting on the paperwork to go through for me to legally adopt her. It's not as simple as when I adopted you because your mother and biological father both signed off to approve it. Even if everything with Charlotte was already finalized, I could end up losing you both if someone so much as suspected I was allowing you to have an inappropriate relationship under my care."

That possibility never crossed my mind, and I can almost physically feel the blood drain from my face. Would someone really take me and Charlotte away from Arthur for something like that?

"I know it's not fair," Arthur says, sounding choked up. "I wish I could make you believe me when I say I'm sorry. Maybe when you graduate, if you still feel the same way for each other, it won't be such an issue."

Graduation is still two years away. It feels like forever. A lot can happen in that time, and the chances of Charlotte waiting around that long just to be with me are less than zero. Not when she has better, easier options. Arthur's right. It's not fair. But I know it's not his fault, and I can't be mad at him for the situation I'm in.

"I understand," I say, but it still feels like my world is falling apart, even though nothing has changed. Arthur's rules haven't changed, and Charlotte hasn't given me any indication she'd want to date me instead of the other guys. I still owe the guys apologies, and I still need to work on my anger and jealousy issues. Why is everything so fucking hard, and why does every tiny thing feel like such a big deal? "I think...I think I want to start going to therapy again."

Arthur nods, never once judging me or making me feel badly for the way I feel. “Okay. We can do that. I’ll set up an appointment for you as soon as possible.”

CHARLOTTE



“UGH, I HATE LYING TO ARTHUR.”

Sebastian rolls his eyes, turning around to walk backwards in front of me as he lifts his camera to take a photo. “We’re not lying. We *are* going over to Liam’s house to hang out, and you’re having a sleepover with Olivia.”

Technically, yes. But Arthur has no idea that Olivia’s throwing a massive party, or that her parents are out of town. Aside from the fact that there will definitely be alcohol and drugs with zero adult supervision, I’m also going to be crashing with the guys in Liam’s room since Olivia will be *preoccupied* with Ethan in her bedroom. If Arthur had any inkling of what we were really up to tonight, there’s no chance he would have let me or Sebastian leave the house.

“Chill, Princess.” Grayson throws his arm around me, grinning as he flips Sebastian off. Sebastian snorts, undeterred from taking photos while we walk. Grayson turns to smile down at me, his eyes full of mirth. “Try to have some fun, will you?”

I’m not trying to be a downer. I’m really not. But I’m nervous. The only reason I agreed to go to the party is because Olivia begged me all week about it. She’s using the party to campaign for votes for Homecoming Queen since the dance is

next weekend. It's a smart idea, so I have to give her credit. Plus, our team won the home game tonight, so people from school are already hyped up. When I first mentioned the party to the guys a few days ago, I was surprised by how excited they were. I thought for sure they'd have no interest, and I was totally planning on using them as an excuse not to go.

So, here I am, dressed in a too-short skirt while I hike up a stupid hill in the dark with the guys to Liam and Olivia's house for a stereotypical high school party. At least this street is well-lit with street lamps.

Things have been really good the past couple of weeks between me and the guys, so I don't want to complain or put a damper on everyone's mood if I can help it. Ever since Sebastian apologized to me and promised he'd work on his anger and jealousy issues, the guys haven't fought at all. Not in front of me or in any obvious way, at least. Sebastian apologized to the guys too—including Alex—which seriously means a lot to me.

At the same time, there hasn't been any progress between me or any of them romantically. Grayson has stolen a few kisses from me in secret over the past couple weeks, but we haven't talked any more about being together or bringing it up with the guys. Even though he mentioned that Elliot was on board, and that Alex didn't seem entirely put off by the idea of polyamory, I've been way too scared to bring it up with anyone else. It feels like enough of a step forward to see Sebastian working on himself, and I don't want to push him or the guys by rushing into something big and complicated.

Olivia thinks I'm being ridiculous. She knows all about my talk and make-out with Grayson, and she cracked up so hard when I told her about Arthur walking in on me and Sebastian

in a not-so-innocent-looking position. But she still hasn't talked to Ethan or Zack about her feelings either, so she has no room to judge me for keeping my mouth shut. And for now, it feels easier and smarter to continue letting things happen or develop naturally. Like my date with Remy to the art museum, or my plans for the Homecoming dance with Liam.

"This is fucking ridiculous!" Liam grumbles angrily. He's walking ahead of everyone, with Remy and Elliot bringing up the rear behind me and Grayson. Liam shakes his head, throwing his hands up in frustration. "It's my fucking house! How is there nowhere to park closer than this?"

He has a point. I think we were all shocked when we arrived at Liam's house, only to find the driveway, front yard, and the street in front of their house jam-packed with cars. We had to park all the way down the street. Every time we pass another car, my heart stutters nervously. I can only imagine how crowded and crazy the party is. People probably started showing up right after the game ended, which was over an hour ago. The guys and I decided to stop by the diner to eat first, and then they went back home with me so I could grab my overnight bag and change into something more suited for a party.

"Have you guys ever been to one of Olivia's parties?" I ask. Olivia's super popular, even if she insists she's not as much as she used to be. From what she told me, she used to throw parties all the time before this year, back when she hung out with her old friends and ex-boyfriend. This is the first one she's thrown since school started.

Grayson shrugs, squeezing my shoulder lightly in the process. "A couple of times. Seb, Remy, and I aren't usually

invited, but Liam and Elliot have been forced to attend a bunch of them.”

“Yeah, we normally end up getting drunk and crashing in the theater room, or leaving to play video games in Liam’s room,” Elliot says, turning around to grin at me.

“What about you?” Sebastian asks, lowering his camera enough to give me a shy smile. “Have you ever been to a party like this?”

I shake my head slowly. “No. I mean, unless you count the parties my mom threw.” Which I definitely don’t.

The guys stop walking at the same time. Grayson’s arm tenses around me as Sebastian winces. Remy, Elliot, and Liam turn to look at me with a mixture of sympathy and guilt.

“Shit.” Remy hisses, raising his hand to adjust his glasses. “We’re fucking morons. We weren’t thinking.”

“We don’t have to go to the party if you don’t want to,” Liam says in a rush. “We can go back to your house and watch movies or something.”

“I know Arthur won’t mind if everyone crashes there,” Sebastian adds, nodding. “You can even invite Alex if you really want to.”

He looks pained as he says it, but I know the offer is genuine. While part of me is embarrassed—because my crush on Alex is no longer a secret from anybody, *including Alex*—I’m mostly touched by the guys’ reactions. Truthfully, I have been worried the party might bring up bad memories from when I lived with my mom. It’s a big part of the reason I’ve been nervous about going in the first place. How embarrassing is it going to be if I have a breakdown in front of practically the entire school? I’m not usually easily triggered by things

that remind me of my past, but there's always a possibility I might react badly. I won't know until we're there.

"I think I'll be okay." I smile at each of the guys. "Really. It means a lot that you'd all ditch the party at the last minute for me. You're all really sweet."

"You sure?" Grayson asks quietly, rubbing his hand up and down my arm. I have a jacket on because it's chilly out tonight. When I nod, he gives me a small smile. "Well, let one of us know if you don't wanna be there anymore or can't handle it. We'll either hole up in Liam's room, or we'll leave. Whatever you want, Princess."

The rest of the guys agree earnestly, and my heart melts into a puddle. Gosh, I love them so much. I reassure them that I'll let one of them know the second I want to leave or feel the least bit uncomfortable. A few minutes later, we finally find ourselves walking up the driveway of Liam and Olivia's house. I can hear the music blaring, and I desperately try to shove back my nerves as we approach the front door.

Inside the house, it's louder and more chaotic than I anticipated. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear the entire school was here. Elliot swaps places with Grayson to wrap his arm around my shoulders securely, and Remy takes my hand on my other side.

"Make sure you're with at least one of us at all times, okay?" Elliot has to shout for me to hear him, even when he leans close to my ear. I nod to let him know I understand, and he leads me and Remy through the house to the kitchen.

We lose the rest of the guys pretty much right away, but I know Sebastian mentioned dropping our bags and everything off in Liam's room. The kitchen is a little quieter, although there are still tons of people here. I feel like I don't recognize

anybody. Granted, the circle of people I talk to and bother paying attention to is fairly small, but I thought I'd at least see people from some of my classes. The one good thing is that nobody seems to pay any attention to us. We're just more random people who are part of the crowd.

"How are you feeling?" Remy asks.

I look up at him and give him a real smile. I definitely don't see the appeal of a party like this, but I don't feel like I'm going to freeze up or freak out. "I'm good. I should probably text Olivia to see where she is. There's no way I'll ever find her if I wander around trying to look."

He chuckles, and Elliot grins at me. "Want me to mix you a drink? I'll make sure it's sweet so you don't taste much of the alcohol."

The only time I've ever had alcohol was during my sleepover with Olivia when we drank those bottles of wine. That was fun, and I didn't end up feeling sick. I'm curious enough to know what it's like to drink something stronger, so I nod at Elliot thankfully. If I wasn't with all of my guys, here at Olivia and Liam's house where I know I'll be safe, I doubt I'd consider drinking.

I text Olivia while Elliot mixes us drinks, and Remy stands at my side protectively. He doesn't seem to talk to anyone at school besides me or the guys. Even in our classes, the rest of the guys will at least make small talk with other people. But not Remy. It's strange to me that he'd enjoy coming to a party like this.

"We should do some shots first," Remy says.

Elliot chuckles and grabs three empty red solo cups, pouring shots of whatever liquor he was mixing into his and

Remy's drinks. When he hands me my shot first, I make the mistake of sniffing it. It smells so strong and gross that it makes my stomach sick without even tasting it. It also brings a vivid image of my mom breaking a bottle of Jack Daniel's in our kitchen and laughing hysterically about it with Deanna while they were drunk and high.

I keep my expression blank so I don't worry the guys. When Remy and Elliot tap their cups against mine, I throw back the shot in one gulp. It burns my throat and my nose, and I cough as I thrust the empty cup back at Elliot.

"You okay, baby?" Remy asks worriedly, rubbing my back.

I give him a look like he's insane. "That was terrible. Why would anyone willingly drink that?"

The guys snicker, and Elliot hands me another cup. This one's full of ice and a light pink liquid, and it smells a million times better. "Here, gorgeous. Hopefully you like this better. It shouldn't taste too strong, but let me know."

Taking a tentative sip, my eyes widen in delighted surprise. It tastes sweet and fruity. Nothing like the harsh, burning crap from before. "Ooh, yes. This is good. Thanks, Elliot!"

There's a loud squeal from the kitchen doorway, and I turn in time to see a flash of Olivia's bright red hair before she throws herself at me. If it wasn't for Remy keeping me upright, I'd probably fall over and spill my drink from Olivia's clumsy hug.

"Hi, Livvy." I laugh, hugging her back.

"Oh my god! You're finally here!" she shouts, jumping up and down as her arms are locked around me. When she pulls away, she tugs on the sleeve of my jacket. "Geez, take this off already! Aren't you hot?"

She has a point. It was cold outside, but it's stifling in here with so much activity and tons of people around. Without having to ask, Elliot offers to take my jacket upstairs to Liam's room for me. As I slide it off and hand it to him, I can't help feeling self-conscious as I take a closer look at Olivia's outfit. She's wearing a short, gold sequin backless dress with long sleeves. And when I say short, I mean *short*. I doubt she'll be able to bend even slightly without giving someone a show. Her dress is form fitting, showing off her curves. She looks effortlessly sexy. I don't compare to her at all in my black mini skirt and long-sleeve white shirt. Sure, it's form-fitting, but I'm nowhere near as curvy as Livvy is. Other than my legs and a tiny sliver of my midsection, I'm not showing any skin like the rest of the girls here.

"You look hot," Elliot says, a grin lighting up his face as his eyes scan slowly down my body. I bite my lip, trying to hide a cheesy smile. Within two seconds, he's managed to erase all of my doubts and insecurities. My guys always make it very apparent that they find me attractive, even when they're attempting to be subtle.

Elliot kisses my cheek quickly before darting off. As I watch him depart, I realize Ethan and Zack are in the kitchen with us. They must have followed Olivia in. Now that I know about Olivia's complicated relationship with them, and the feelings she's hiding for Zack, it's obvious to me when I look at Zack to see he feels the same way about her. His eyes are glued to her form, a lovesick smile pulling at his mouth. Ethan's staring at her the exact same way.

"So cute!" Olivia squeals, jumping up and down beside me. I was caught up in deciphering the looks on Ethan and Zack's faces, and it takes me a second to realize she's talking about Elliot kissing me on the cheek. I roll my eyes teasingly

at her, and she wiggles her eyebrows obnoxiously. “Don’t give me that look. Just relax, have a few drinks, and have fun with your guys. Tonight is the *perfect* night for an orgy!”

Remy coughs loudly behind me. My cheeks heat up as I widen my eyes at Olivia. She’s obviously drunk, but *oh my god!* Ethan jumps forward and wraps his arm around Olivia’s waist, pulling her back as he offers me a sympathetic smile.

“Come on, sweetheart. Leave Charlotte alone,” he says.

She waves her hand at him dismissively and gives me a wicked grin. “Sorry, bestie. I’m only teasing. You know I think it’s sweet that you’re still a virgin.”

“*Olivia!*” I whisper in a shrill voice, darting a glance over my shoulder at Remy.

Remy’s cheeks are red, and his dimples are showing from his wide, amused grin when our eyes meet. “Hmm. I guess you never told her about Julian, then.”

“Ooh, who’s Julian?” Olivia asks with way too much excitement.

Are Olivia and Remy trying to kill me? I’m embarrassed, and my face feels like it’s on fire as I stutter over my words. “He’s nobody!” I glare at Remy, rubbing my hands over my cheeks like it will help make it less obvious that I’m blushing. “He’s just...a guy. And we never did it! God.”

He snorts while Olivia laughs wildly on my other side at my phrasing. She’s constantly teasing me for being a prude. Normally, I don’t mind, but right now? Ugh. At least Remy’s the only one of the guys here to witness my humiliation, and he hasn’t shown any sign of jealousy during the conversation.

“Sorry,” Remy teases, wrapping his arm around my waist as he pulls me back against his chest. His fingers stroke

tantalizingly against the bare skin of my midriff, and I bite my tongue to stop myself from gasping. He chuckles, like he can sense my reaction without me having to say anything. “I wasn’t sure what *‘kissing and stuff’* entailed, exactly.”

Instead of answering, I tip my drink back and finish it off. Maybe it’ll help me loosen up. Apart from feeling embarrassed at the conversation, I’m getting way too hot and bothered at the feel of his fingertips and the deep rasp of his voice. I know Remy’s not a virgin, thanks to Grayson giving me the lowdown on all the guys’ pasts. But even if Grayson never told me that, I’d probably make the assumption that Remy has a lot more experience than I do based on certain things he’s said or done when flirting with me.

“Alright, we’ll stop teasing now.” Olivia grabs my hand, giving me a devilish smile as she begins tugging me behind her. “Come play beer pong with me! I promised Brooke and her girlfriend that we’d play against them.”



“ARE YOU HAVING FUN?” LIAM SHOUTS.

I nod and grin enthusiastically, lifting my hair off my neck while we take a short break to catch our breath. We’ve been dancing together for the past four or five songs, and I feel like I’m burning up. With so many bodies pressed together in one room, it’s like a sauna in here. Liam wipes the back of his hand over his brow, and I notice that his hair is damp with sweat. He looks flushed and happy, and seriously hot. Like sexy-hot, not just hot-hot.

“So much fun!” I shout back. And it’s the truth. I may have been anxious when we first showed up at the party, but I’m

having a blast. I've danced with all of my guys and Olivia so much that I had to give in and take my heels off when my feet started to hurt. I've also learned that while Olivia and I are probably the worst beer pong players in existence, my guys, Zack, and Ethan are basically world champions. Watching the seven of them compete against each other was hilariously entertaining.

Another song begins playing. Liam raises his eyebrows, silently asking me if I want to dance again. I grin and grab his hand to drag him back to the middle of the makeshift dance floor in the living room. I think one of the best surprises tonight has been seeing how willing the guys are to take turns dancing with me. They all have vastly different dancing skills and styles, which has been very fun to learn. Liam is surprisingly the best dancer, which makes me even more excited about Homecoming. I should have known. It's always the quiet ones, right?

While we dance, I let myself get completely lost in the music and Liam. When his hands slide down my sides and around to my ass, I giggle and encourage him by pressing my body flush against his. I love that dancing together makes him brave enough to get a little handsy. Or maybe it's the alcohol. Normally, he's reserved with the way he flirts with me, and his touches are usually sweet and innocent. By the end of the song, I'm not sure we're really dancing anymore. I'm basically clinging to him and rubbing myself against him while his hands wander greedily over my hips and ass.

"You wanna take a break?" Liam asks, his voice a husky whisper when he leans down close to my ear. His breath tickles my neck, making me laugh as I nod.

A break sounds good. Liam kisses the side of my neck, which is super sexy and unexpected, and leads me over to a few couches on the other side of the room. There's a couple sitting at one end of the couch making out, but there's enough room for us to sit. Especially when Liam pulls me down to sit on his lap.

"Is this okay?" he asks, wrapping his arms around my waist.

I turn so I'm sitting sideways and loosely place my arms around his neck. "Very okay. I'm not too heavy or anything?"

He chuckles and shakes his head, squeezing me tightly for a moment. "Not at all. God, you're so fucking pretty. Sometimes I can't believe you talk to me."

Hearing him say that is sweet, but also sad. Does he seriously not know how good-looking he is? "Me? What about you?" I lean forward and kiss his cheek, pulling away with a giggle. "You're super hot. Like, so hot that I wanna kiss every single one of your freckles all over your body. And your muscles. Oh my *god*, Liam. So, so hot."

A breathless laugh escapes him, and I practically attack his cheek with kisses. Just because he needs to know how much I really love his face and all of his freckles. His hand rubs over my hip as he groans, "Shit. You're really drunk."

"No." I shake my head, kissing another freckle. I should totally kiss him for real too, right? "I'm not drunk."

Someone sits down beside us, and I turn to see Elliot watching us with a mischievous grin. "Whatcha guys doing?"

Liam pushes my head away slightly and laughs. "She's fucking drunk, dude. Sitting here telling me she wants to kiss every one of my freckles."

“I’m not drunk!” I whine, pouting at both Liam and Elliot. I feel fine. Just really happy and relaxed and appreciative of how hot my guys are. What’s wrong with that? It’s not like I’m stumbling over my words or feet, so I know I’m totally not drunk.

“Oh, gorgeous.” Elliot laughs, pulling my feet into his lap. He runs his hand up and down my calves, which feels nice and makes it kind of hard to concentrate on anything else. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Um...” I try to think about it, letting my gaze wander around the room while Elliot massages my legs and Liam brushes his fingers against my hip. This is nice. Other than the shot I took with Elliot and Remy, a few drinks that Elliot and Liam have made for me, and the beer I drank when playing beer pong, I haven’t had anything else. It doesn’t feel like that much.

While I’m trying to form the words to rationalize this to the guys, my eyes land on Sebastian standing against the wall across the room. I go still and narrow my eyes when I realize he’s talking to Summer Delaney. She’s hanging all over him!

“What the fuck?” I ask. “He promised he didn’t like Summer. Why is he talking to her right now?”

Elliot and Liam follow my gaze, and Liam winces. I knew Summer was here. So are Madison, Jude, and Mike, along with a bunch of their other asshole friends we try to avoid at school. But it’s not like I can expect Olivia to ban people from her party. Not when she’s trying to gain votes for Homecoming Queen, and most of those guys are on the football team with Ethan, Zack, and Elliot. It’s been pretty easy to keep our distance from the people we don’t like all

night, and nobody has tried to start any fights or drama with us.

“Hold on.” Elliot puts his hand out to stop me when I move to get up. He shakes his head and points at Sebastian. “Watch him. He’s not talking to her. She’s trying to get his attention, and he’s ignoring her.”

I watch closely and realize he’s right. Summer keeps grabbing Sebastian’s arm, and he continuously tries to shake her off as he turns to talk to Grayson and Remy at his side instead. Aww. God, he is so sweet. He’s trying hard to work on himself for me, to be understanding of my feelings. And he’s purposely ignoring Summer for me!

Clearly, he needs my help. He’s doing a good job by ignoring Summer, but she’s obviously not getting the hint. I give Liam one last kiss on the cheek and give Elliot a little cheek kiss too before standing up and making my way across the room.

“Come on, Sebastian. Just one dance! It’ll be fun.”

Summer’s voice grates on every one of my nerves, and I curl my fingers into a fist as I approach them. Sebastian shakes his head at her, appearing irritated. That’s when he finally notices me. His eyebrows shoot up, and he casts a worried glance at Summer. He opens his mouth, probably to defend himself or assure me he wasn’t flirting with her. He doesn’t need to worry, and I give him a big smile so he knows it.

“Hey,” I say, shoving Summer and cuddling up to Sebastian’s side. He throws an arm over my shoulders, making me feel secure and smug. “What are you doing over here?”

He shrugs, his eyes full of amusement. “Nothing. It looked like you were having fun dancing with Liam.”

Before I can tell him that I was, or suggest he dance with me, Summer shrieks at me as she grabs my arm roughly. “Excuse me! What the hell do you think you’re doing? Sebastian and I were talking.”

I shake her off and turn my head to give her a dangerous grin. “Oh, you’re done talking to him. Forever.”

Her eyes turn murderous. “Are you serious? He’s like your fucking brother, which is gross. *And* you’re fucking how many other guys already? Which is grosser.”

“He’s not my brother.” I roll my eyes.

“Really? *That’s* all you have to say?” she asks incredulously.

Madison freaking Taylor walks up, asking what’s going on. Summer gives me a disgusted look and tells her, “I was having a conversation with Sebastian when this dumb bitch shoved me out of the way to throw herself all over him.”

Wow. Over-exaggeration much? They weren’t having a conversation. *She* was bothering *him*, and I’d hardly say I threw myself at him. She’s jealous because he’s making it clear once and for all that he’s *mine* and wants nothing to do with her. While Summer and Madison continue to call me a slut, I watch them calmly and seriously debate punching them. It would be easy, and they probably wouldn’t see it coming.

“Just fuck off, alright?” Grayson says to the girls, sneering at them as he tries to lead me and Sebastian away. Sebastian’s also told them several times to shut up, but they’re still talking.

“Come on, Summer.” Madison scoffs, pulling her friend away. “Sebastian isn’t worth your time. He’s just as much of a psycho as Remy is, and he’s probably got herpes from passing Charlotte around with his friends.”

At the same time that Grayson and Sebastian shout something in my defense, I reach out and smack the drink out of Madison's hands. It ends up spilling all down the front of her dress, and she shrieks indignantly. I don't care what they have to say about me. It doesn't matter. But I refuse to stand by while they talk badly about my friends.

"Okay!" Elliot says loudly, lifting me up and throwing me over his shoulder. I didn't see him walk over, and I squeak in surprise. He slaps his hand down over my butt, holding down my skirt as he whisks me away from Summer and Madison. "I think it's time for bed, gorgeous."

Blowing my hair out of my face, I look up while Elliot carries me toward the stairs. Grayson, Remy, and Sebastian are with us, and it looks like they're all fighting smiles. Summer and Madison are standing in the same spot by the wall. While Madison is crying at the state of her dress, Summer's glaring darkly at me. I give her a wicked grin and flip her off.

"Stop, Princess." Grayson chuckles quietly, grabbing my hand to hide the fact that I'm holding up my middle finger. "I think we caused enough of a scene."

"Yeah, note to self: Charlotte likes to start shit when she's drunk." Remy laughs.

"I'm not drunk!" Why do they keep saying that?

When Elliot begins running up the stairs while holding me over his shoulder, the jostling is so uncomfortable that I shut my eyes and clench my teeth. At the top of the steps, he finally sets me down. I sway on my feet a bit, feeling sick.

"I think I need to throw up," I say miserably.

Liam scoops me up with zero hesitation and carries me through his room to his ensuite bathroom. Kicking the door

closed with his foot, he gently sets me down by the toilet. It's perfect timing because the second I'm kneeling in front of it, my stomach turns and I begin vomiting violently.

The entire time I'm throwing up, Liam sits behind me and holds my hair back while whispering sweet, comforting words. By the time I'm sure there's nothing left in my stomach to throw up, I turn to look at him with tears in my eyes.

"I'm so sorry. God, I probably look gross right now."

He laughs softly and helps me stand up. "Well, you've looked better."

Snorting, I roll my eyes teasingly. The guys were totally right about me being drunk. Now that I've thrown up and lost all my energy, I feel drained and embarrassed. I'll probably feel worse in the morning.

"Why don't you take a shower?" Liam suggests. "Or I can run you a bubble bath. I'm sure I can find some bath bombs in Olivia's room."

God, he's sweet. Even after seeing me act like a nutcase downstairs in front of a bunch of people, and having a front row seat to watching me get sick in the most disgusting way, he's still showing me love and attention. Blinking back tears and the sudden impulse to tell him that I'm in love with him, I shake my head and clear my sore throat.

"Thank you. A shower sounds nice. And I'd really like to brush my teeth."

He nods and goes over to the huge, walk-in shower to turn the water on, waiting until he determines it's the perfect temperature before leaving to grab my overnight bag and a towel. For the brief moment he opens the bathroom door, I hear the rest of the guys speaking in hushed voices in his

bedroom. I don't think any of them are mad at me, but I still feel worried and embarrassed. It's always my first instinct, to assume I've upset the people around me whenever I've done something wrong.

When Liam returns with my things, I sniffle and ask him in a scratchy voice, "Is everyone angry at me?"

"No!" He shakes his head quickly, stepping over to cup my cheek in his hand. "Not at all, sweetheart. Elliot only grabbed you the way he did because we didn't want you to get into trouble by getting into a fight. Even if you had hit Madison, none of us would have been pissed or blamed you. She deserved it."

"So, you don't think I ruined the night?"

"Hell no." He laughs, his eyes lighting up. "Believe me, this was the best party I've ever been to. All of us had so much fun with you, Charlotte. And the night's not over. Once you get cleaned up, you can come snuggle in bed and watch a movie with us. Okay?"

I want to hug him, but I still feel pretty icky from throwing up. Still, I can't help staring up at him with heart-eyes as I let out a lovesick sigh. Liam is so wonderful. I mean, all the guys are, but I feel like Liam always tries to take care of me. Whether by teaching me something new, helping me with my homework or with grocery shopping, or checking on me and reassuring me when I'm feeling anxious. And now tonight, he's gone above and beyond.

"Okay," I whisper simply. Everything else I want to say is too big right now, and I doubt I'd be able to find the right words.

He leaves me alone. I spend a few minutes brushing my teeth before peeling my clothes off and hopping in the shower. It's so luxe, with one of those fancy rainfall showerheads. I spend a long time relaxing, and I'm secretly thrilled to use Liam's shampoo and body wash so I can smell like him. I have half a mind to ask him if I can sleep in one of his tee shirts, but I've probably embarrassed myself enough tonight.

Once I'm clean and dressed in my pajamas, I shyly step out of Liam's bathroom into his bedroom. All five of my guys are lying on his California king bed watching TV, and their heads turn to stare at me in sync.

"Hi," I say. Like a freaking idiot.

"Feeling better, Princess?" Grayson asks, his tone only slightly teasing.

I nod and give the guys a guilty smile. "So, you guys might have been right about me being drunk."

They snicker at my expense, but that's okay. When Sebastian scoots over to make room for me, I crawl into the bed and snuggle in between him and Liam. The guys are watching *Schitt's Creek*, which I also love. I can't pay attention though. As I cuddle with my guys and drift off to sleep, all I can think about is how lucky I am to have them.

CHARLOTTE



“YOU SURE YOU DON’T WANNA STOP AND GET STARBUCKS?” Sebastian asks me for the third time.

I shake my head vehemently. To his credit, we usually stop at Starbucks every morning on the way to school. But today, we’re running a little behind, and I really want to cast my vote for Homecoming Queen before first period. The line is bound to be way shorter in the morning than at lunch, and I want to snap a picture of my ballot for Olivia. There are a couple of other girls running, but Olivia is way cooler and prettier than they are. There’s no way she won’t win.

“You know you have all week to vote, right?” Grayson teases me, reaching over my seat to tug on my hair.

Spinning around to swat his hand away with a grin on my face, I giggle. “Yeah, but I want to vote today so I can say I was one of the first people to vote for her! Plus, you guys need to vote for her too.”

He rolls his eyes, but his smile lets me know he’s only teasing me. Grayson’s never said as much, and neither has Olivia, but I don’t think they get along. I don’t think she really liked any of the guys except for Elliot, and obviously her twin brother, before she and I started hanging out. But that’s alright. It doesn’t bother me. I think that makes it even sweeter that the

guys are supportive of my friendship with her, and that Olivia is more than supportive of my relationship with the guys.

“We will. Don’t worry,” Sebastian reassures me.

I turn around in my seat again to smile at him. He seems happy and relaxed. More than he has since...well, honestly, since I’ve known him. After I got drunk and basically started a fight with Summer over Sebastian at the party on Friday, I thought for sure things would be awkward or that Sebastian would want to talk about me liking him or choosing him over the other guys. That didn’t happen, luckily. The guys teased me a bunch for my drunken shenanigans, but it was all light-hearted.

The six of us spent the entire weekend together for the first time since school started. Nobody fought, there were no weird or jealous vibes, and I was able to get through an entire weekend without feeling anxious, worried, or guilty about my feelings. It was perfect. Exactly what we all needed after dealing with so much drama, angst, and chaos over the past month.

“Do you have anything planned for after school today?” Grayson asks me.

I take a second to think about it just in case there’s something I’m forgetting. My weeks have been pretty full lately. Tuesdays are when I watch Elliot’s football practice, Wednesdays are for therapy, Thursdays are gym days with Adrian, and this Friday is the Homecoming game before the dance on Saturday.

“Nope. Totally free.” I grin, a little flirtier than usual.

Grayson’s smile widens, and his gaze drops to my lips for half a second before darting a glance at Sebastian. My heart

beats a little faster, more from anticipation than anything. Grayson and I haven't talked or kissed since Friday because we've been with the guys twenty-four-seven all weekend. I'm not sure if he's hoping we can hang out alone to talk, or if he's going to suggest we stage an intervention with the rest of the guys. Or maybe he's asking me if I have plans for a completely innocent or unrelated reason and I'm jumping to conclusions.

"Cool," he says vaguely.

Sebastian looks at us in the rearview mirror, opening his mouth like he's going to say something. He ends up clearing his throat and shaking his head, keeping his thoughts to himself. I watch him curiously for a few moments to see if he'll change his mind and speak, but he never does.

We're quiet for the rest of the drive. The silence between us is comfortable, and I find myself feeling excited for the day. Whatever it brings. When we arrive at school, Benji and Alex are waiting in the parking lot for us. Grayson chuckles when he sees them, explaining to me and Sebastian that a band they like dropped a new album last night. He assumes they want to talk about it.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach when we park. Alex and I texted all weekend like we normally do, but I'm not sure where we stand or how he's feeling. Grayson said he talked to him briefly about polyamory, and Alex definitely knows I have a crush on him. I invited him to Olivia's party, and he politely declined. Olivia thinks he was probably too intimidated to hang out with me and the rest of the guys at the same time, which is a good assumption. Still, I really hope things aren't suddenly weird between us in person.

“Hey, guys.” Benji greets us first when we get out of the car, bouncing up and down on his toes.

Grayson says something about the band he’d mentioned, and he and Benji fall into a passionate conversation—or maybe argument? It’s hard to tell because they’re yelling and smiling at the same time—about the new album. Sebastian quietly takes my bags and throws them over his shoulder alongside his, giving me a tight smile.

My eyes skip over to Alex. I startle when I realize he’s only a couple feet away, staring at me. He smiles shyly when I catch him staring, and I hesitantly smile back.

“Morning,” he says. He glances over my shoulder, presumably at Sebastian, before focusing his attention on me again. “How was your weekend?”

I give him a teasing smile. “Good. Not much different than what I told you already through texts.”

He chuckles, his cheeks reddening as he lifts a hand to muss his hair. Which is *not* flippy. “Sorry. I don’t mean to make shit weird. I missed you and wanted to say hi, but I don’t wanna push any boundaries.”

How sweet is that? I’m probably grinning like a lunatic, but I don’t care. I throw my arms around Alex and hug him tightly, and he laughs as he hugs me back. Safe to say, things are good. Maybe better than good. After he pulls away and gives me a more confident, flirty smile, Alex walks over to Benji and Grayson to join in their conversation.

Sebastian steps up beside me, and I nervously look up to meet his mismatched eyes. He gives me a pained smile, but he doesn’t say anything about Alex. I really hate that he’s uncomfortable and jealous, but I can’t begin to describe how

happy it makes me to see that he's trying hard to keep his emotions in check. If this entire interaction had happened a couple weeks ago, I wouldn't have been surprised if Sebastian punched Alex or started a fight with me. The words stick in my throat when I try to tell him how grateful I am and that I see how much effort he's making. So, I smile and reach out to squeeze his hand, hoping he'll understand how I feel.

While the five of us walk up to the school, Sebastian and I trail several feet behind Grayson, Alex, and Benji. It sounds like they're still talking about music, so I don't feel too bad for not paying attention. Sebastian clears his throat at my side, capturing my full attention.

"Do you still like me?" he whispers in a gruff voice. He doesn't sound angry. Only confused, worried, and maybe a little sad.

Like him? God, if only he knew how much I loved him. Feeling a tiny bit heartbroken that he still feels insecure, I try to put all of my affection into my voice when I whisper back, "Of course I do, Sebastian."

His shoulders visibly relax, and he lets out a deep breath. I watch his eyes wander ahead of us to Grayson and Alex, and he grimaces. "But nothing's changed, right?"

I know I can't give him the answer he wants, and it's still a messy situation. While I know what my heart wants, and the idea of dating all of the guys at the same time *sounds* like a simple solution, there's nothing simple about it. "No, I'm sorry. Nothing's changed."

He nods like he's not surprised. But he still seems more at ease than he did when he was watching me talk to Alex, so I'll take it as a win. If we weren't at school or in public, I'd hug

him or even give him a kiss on the cheek to reassure him that he's just as important to me as the other guys are.

As soon as we walk inside the school, it's like we're surrounded by chaos. People are laughing and shouting, going completely nuts. It's a million times louder than it usually is, especially first thing on a Monday morning.

Sebastian and I share a look of confusion, and Grayson voices our thoughts. "What the fuck is going on? Did something happen?"

The rest of us shrug. Benji and Alex surprisingly stick with us as we walk to my locker where we meet up with the rest of the guys. As we walk through the halls, it feels like every single person turns to look at us. Even with the usual rumors going around, and the way the guys are bullied sometimes, we never get this level of attention. Not on such a large scale. A feeling of dread settles in the pit of my stomach while I wonder what I'm missing. I can tell the guys are feeling as frustrated and anxious as I am.

It's not until we're almost to my locker that I realize everyone seems to be reading a paper, or maybe a flyer. When I see a few taped on the walls and lockers we pass, I slow my steps to see what all the fuss is about.

My throat closes up, and my heart stops when I see one of the flyers up close. My hand shakes as I reach out to grab it. This has to be a nightmare. There's no fucking way this is happening. Feeling like my entire world has been flipped upside down, I stare at my very first mugshot. The one that was taken when I was fourteen and arrested for stabbing the guy who climbed into my bed after paying my mom for the chance to have sex with me. My eyes burn as I scan the rest of the page. The words 'psycho slut' are hand-written across the

top while my charges are printed under my mugshot along with a story that was run in the local newspaper about the incident and arrest. In the article, no names are mentioned since I was a minor, and the story is written to portray me as a psychotic teen girl who violently stabbed an innocent man. I remember reading it when I first went to juvie. Back then, I really believed I did something wrong. It never felt like self-defense when I took things as far as I did.

“What—” Sebastian rips the paper out of my hands, his expression transforming from shocked to furious in the blink of an eye. His hands shake as he crumples the page, and he reaches out to punch the closest locker.

“How did this happen?” Alex asks, quickly moving down the row of lockers to rip down the flyers taped along them. He shakes his head in disbelief. “Who the fuck would do this, and how did they find this shit out?”

“Madison fucking Taylor. She did the same thing to Remy in eighth grade, but we could never prove it was her,” Grayson says angrily. He reaches out to grab Sebastian, who’s ripping the flyers down with Alex and Benji. “Stop, guys. Let me get some pictures for evidence. I need to call my mom. Charlotte —”

I tune out whatever else he has to say and continue walking to my locker. It’s like my body’s working on autopilot. The sounds around me become muffled until all I hear is a ringing in my ears, and my vision becomes blurry.

When I see my locker, I stop in my tracks. I shouldn’t even be surprised. Splashed across my locker in bright red paint are the same words from the flyer: Psycho Slut.

“Baby!” Remy rushes up to me, pulling me into a crushing hug. I don’t move or react. It’s like my brain doesn’t know

how to process the situation, so I've completely shut down. I'm frozen. Should I be angry? Sad? Ashamed? Does it even matter that everyone in the school knows about my past?

"Take her to the front office, and make sure you tell Ms. Kinsley what's going on so she can be there with the principal. One of you call Arthur and tell him what's happening. I need to call my mom, and we need to take pictures of her locker before you guys clean it up."

Grayson barks out orders to Remy, Sebastian, Liam, Elliot, Alex, and Benji. I hear them respond without hearing their actual words, and I go limp when Remy lifts me into his arms. He holds me tightly as he walks briskly through the hallways, and I bury my face in his neck so I don't have to face anyone else. I keep hoping I'm dreaming, that I don't actually have to deal with this. The longer I can pretend that's true, the better.

"It's gonna be alright, baby," Remy whispers to me. "I've got you. We've all got you. We're gonna take care of this for you, okay?"



HOURS LATER, A SOFT KNOCK ON MY BEDROOM DOOR STIRS ME from sleep. I shove myself up on my elbows, blindly reaching over to grab my glasses from my bedside table. As soon as I can see clearly, I squint at my phone. I'm surprised to see it's only two-thirty in the afternoon. I feel like I've been sleeping for days. Not two hours.

"Come in," I say in a creaky voice, remembering what woke me up in the first place.

Arthur slowly opens my door and pops his head in, giving me a sympathetic smile. “Hey, kid. How are you feeling?”

I shrug. Honestly, I’m still not sure how to feel. Today feels like it’s dragged on forever and ever, and I’m exhausted. Arthur and Grayson’s mom Ava showed up at the school shortly after Remy carried me to the office. It was a complete shit show. While Arthur and Ava spoke to Ms. Kinsley and the principal about the incident—and it was more of an argument between them and the principal than a productive conversation—Remy stayed by my side, offering silent support.

The cops ended up being called because Ava insisted we press charges for the degree of bullying and slander against me. I had to give a statement, which meant admitting that I got into an argument with Summer and Madison at the party on Friday. The guys are positive it was them who made the flyers and spread them around the school. Madison bragged about doing the same thing to Remy a few years ago when he first moved here. Her dad is some sort of police officer, which is probably how she was able to discover the confidential information about my arrest records and my mugshot. There isn’t any concrete evidence against either of the girls yet, and it’ll probably be harder to prove something since her dad’s an officer. But Ava, Arthur, and even Ms. Kinsley are determined to see the culprit—or culprits—punished.

Part of me wants to move on and forget it happened, but how can I say that when everyone I care about is only trying to help me? I know Sebastian, Alex, and the rest of the guys spent most of the school day tracking down as many of the flyers as they could, and they cleaned the paint from my locker. While everyone was fighting for me, all I could do was sit frozen in the office, watching and listening to everything happen around me. I feel like such a useless idiot for freezing

up. The only time I spoke was when someone asked me a question directly, and I still barely managed.

“Um, I’m okay.” I bring my knees up to my chin and try to smile at Arthur. I’m sure it comes out as more of a grimace. “Just tired. Sort of numb.”

He nods like that makes sense. I’m glad I don’t have to explain myself further. He’s been amazing today. Never hesitating at all to show up at the school and take my side. He didn’t seem mad about the party either, even though we kept that from him. Maybe he’ll lecture me and Sebastian about it later, but he didn’t bat an eye or show any anger or disappointment when I mentioned it to him and the cops.

Once we finished talking to the police and the principal, Arthur took me and Sebastian home. I’m technically excused for the rest of the week, but I can’t think of what’s going to happen past today. As soon as we got home, I came straight upstairs to my room to take a nap.

“Olivia’s downstairs,” Arthur says. “She’s filling our freezer with ice cream and bossing the boys around. If you’re up for some company, I’m sure she’d love to talk to you.”

A real smile spreads across my face, even if it’s small. That sounds like Olivia, and it seriously warms my heart to hear that she’s here. She must have come straight from school.

“Yes, please,” I say.

Arthur grins and leaves to go grab Olivia. As soon as I’m alone, I grab my phone to check my messages and notifications. I end up chickening out, my fingers hovering over the screen. If people from school are saying mean things about me on my social media, I don’t know what I’ll do. I still feel numb and detached from the situation, but I can’t help

worrying that it's going to hit me any moment. Right now, it feels easier to shove everything aside and to tell myself I'll deal with it later.

“Hey!” Olivia says. I look up to see her standing in the doorway, a hesitant smile on her face. She's usually so exuberant and outspoken that it's weird to see her this way. It makes my stomach twist.

I force myself to smile and hope she's not going to keep giving me that look—the one that screams that she feels bad for me and that I'm freaking pathetic. “Hey. I heard you brought ice cream?”

She laughs, sounding relieved as she steps into my room and closes the door behind her. “Hell yeah, girl. You know I'll use any excuse to pig out on ice cream. I made stepbro completely rearrange your freezer to make all six gallons fit.”

A snort escapes me, and we dissolve into fits of laughter. When Olivia comes to sit on my bed with me, I give her a real smile.

“Who's downstairs?” I ask. I knew Sebastian and Grayson were here when I came upstairs for my nap, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn Liam and Remy came over right after school. Elliot's supposed to have football practice today, and who knows what Alex is thinking. If I were him, I'd probably want nothing to do with me after dealing with all this drama this morning.

“Everyone,” she says, grinning. “Stepbro, Grayson, Remy, Elliot, my brother, and even that hot emo dude, Alex. All down there, bonding together and pining over you. It's pretty impressive.”

“Really?” I giggle. My heart feels lighter, butterflies practically exploding in my chest. Knowing they’re all here for me and getting along makes me feel special and cared for.

She nods, her laughter trailing off. Her voice gets quieter and more serious, her expression sober. “Okay, real talk. Are you okay? What the hell happened? Liam said those cunts Madison and Summer were the ones who put those flyers up everywhere?”

“We’re only assuming it was them. It’s not like we have any real proof.” I shrug. “They’ve been spreading rumors about me since school started, and then I sort of got into that fight with them at your party. Arthur and Grayson’s mom ended up calling the cops and pressing charges for the flyers and the vandalism on my locker. It was so...god, it was fucked, Livvy. I wanted to disappear the whole time. I kept wanting everyone to stop talking about it and to pretend it wasn’t happening, and then I felt ungrateful because I knew everyone was only trying to help.”

“They were trying to help,” Olivia says, reaching out to grab my hand. I squeeze her hand back, grateful for the friendly affection. She scowls angrily, her eyes narrowing to slits. “And I’m sorry, but they’re right to press charges. I know it made you uncomfortable, but those girls are fucking awful. They committed a crime. Also, who the fuck passes out an article about someone’s sexual assault and then calls them a slut?”

“I—” My mouth dries up, my words sticking in my throat.

Olivia winces, clearly reading the shock on my face from her words. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say it so blatantly, but I can’t begin to tell you how pissed I am.”

“How did you know?” I ask, my voice a hoarse whisper. I don’t want to jump to conclusions or assume that Liam told Olivia about everything that happened with my mom or the reason I stabbed that guy, but—

“What?” She seems genuinely confused for a second before her gaze softens. “That article, Charlotte. I assumed you’d read it before the guys tracked down all the flyers to shred. It was easy enough to read between the lines and guess what really happened. How the hell did your lawyer let you go to juvie for self-defense? It’s a fucking travesty.”

Tears prick at the corner of my eyes, and before I know it, I’m bawling. Olivia pulls me into a hug, shushing me softly as I finally let go of all the emotions I’ve let build up. I knew it was only a matter of time before I broke.

When I calm down enough to speak, I tell Olivia everything. Unlike with the guys, I don’t sugarcoat anything or leave any details out. I tell her all about my mom and what it was like to live with her after my dad died, everything about my mom’s friendship with Deanna and the parties they liked to throw, and about the guy I stabbed. She doesn’t interrupt me once or show any judgement.

Telling her everything is different than it was with the guys. When I told them what happened at the end of summer, I still felt shame and guilt for my past. They were the first people I ever told anything to, and while it was good to finally get everything off my chest, I don’t think I really, truly ever processed what I went through. When Arthur suggested talking to my social worker and the police about pressing charges against my mom and that man for what they did to me, it was a wake-up call. That was probably the first time I ever really considered that I didn’t do anything wrong, and that I

never deserved to go to juvie in the first place. Those emotions were so foreign that I shoved them away and haven't thought about them since.

But now, telling Olivia, and hearing that she could guess what happened based on a vaguely worded news article about the incident, I realize that I'm finally looking at my past from a completely new perspective.

"I'm so sorry," Olivia says when I finish telling her everything. She's crying too, and she wipes her eyes on her sleeve, smudging her mascara across her cheeks. "God, I'm such a mess. Seriously, Charlotte. I wish there was something I could do. Your mom, that guy, those fucking cunts from school—Jesus, I want to kill all of them!"

I laugh, but it's more out of relief and a way to release my emotions. "Why do you think I used to get into fights all the time? So much pent-up anger."

She giggles and shakes her head. "You're ridiculous. But you're also a fucking badass."

Snorting, I wipe the tears from my face. I probably look like just as much of a mess as she does with my makeup smeared everywhere. I feel a lot better though. I don't feel numb, sad, angry, or guilty, and I'm ready to move on and deal with everything.

"Are you coming back to school tomorrow?" Olivia asks.

"I don't know." I shrug. "Arthur said I can stay home all week if I want, and Ms. Kinsley even agreed to excuse my absences. But does it really matter? You and the guys have my back, and I don't care what anyone else says. I mean, being called 'Psycho Slut' isn't that different from what people have been saying about me already."

“You should own it.” She cackles, a grin lighting up her face. “Psycho Slut sounds like the name of a sexy, badass villain.”

We fall into another fit of uncontrollable giggles, leaning against each other. A knock at my door interrupts us, and we both look up when Arthur pops his head in again with a hopeful smile.

“Laughter is a good sign, right?” he asks.

Olivia and I nod, and I smile happily at my uncle. It’s the best feeling in the world to know without an ounce of doubt that so many people are on my side. Knowing they’d all do anything to help me or take care of me makes me love them so much more. I can’t wait to see my guys and thank them for everything, and to show them how much I care about them.

Arthur looks so relieved that I’m surprised he doesn’t fall over. He leaves us alone, and we quickly clean up our makeup before heading downstairs to devour copious amounts of ice cream. Before we make it down the stairs, I can hear the guys talking in the kitchen.

“How can two tiny girls eat so much ice cream?” Alex asks, bewildered.

Sebastian grunts in response. “I don’t know. You don’t think they’ll share with us?”

“Hell no!” Elliot laughs. “This is Queen Livvy we’re talking about, *and* she’s in full out BFF-Protection mode. She looked ready to kill anyone who so much as sneezed in Charlotte’s direction when she walked in here.”

Olivia steps in front of me, propping her hands on her hips as she teasingly glares at the boys. “You’re damn right. And nobody gets any ice cream until Charlotte says so.”

The guys look up, surprise mixed with excitement and concern when they see me. All six of them start talking at once, asking if I'm okay or if I need anything. There's a goofy smile plastered to my face as I meet each of their eyes. It's a little strange to see Alex hanging out casually with the rest of the guys, but it makes me extremely happy. Like he belongs with us. Every one of them are sweet and thoughtful, it's no wonder they've stolen my heart.

"I'm fine," I say, which should answer most of their questions and worries. I smile wider, my cheeks aching. "And *everyone* can have some ice cream."

It looks like they have all the ice cream set up on the counter, along with bowls, spoons, and all sorts of different toppings. Arthur must have warned them we were coming downstairs for them to have taken everything out of the freezer. While Elliot, Remy, and Sebastian work together to make a sundae for me, Grayson walks over to pull me into a hug.

"You sure you're okay?" he whispers.

I nod, hugging him back. "I am. Promise. I think I was overwhelmed earlier, and my brain sort of shut off." I look up, raising my voice so they can all hear me. "Thank you guys so much for everything you did today. I hope you know how much I appreciate you."

"Of course, Charlotte. We'd do anything for you." Liam rubs the back of his neck, blushing when he meets my eyes. "I know it's probably the last thing on your mind, but I wanted to make sure you know that I understand if you don't want to go to the dance anymore."

My eyebrows shoot up. It never occurred to me for one second to skip the dance. After talking to Olivia, I'm really not

that worried about going back to school. Before I can assure him that I definitely still want to go, Olivia snorts and rolls her eyes.

“Oh, please. Charlotte, you’re going. You look way too hot in your dress to not show it off. Besides, Liam’s already made restaurant reservations, and he special ordered a fucking tie and corsage to match your dress. It’s so cute, it makes me wanna throw up.”

The guys laugh, and I reach out to squeeze Liam’s hand as I smile up at him reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I still want to go with you.”

While everyone sits around the kitchen eating ice cream and talking about less serious topics than everything that happened today, I feel myself relaxing more and more. The guys continue to amaze me and make it clear that as a group, we can get through anything together. It doesn’t matter what sort of drama we’re dealing with, even with each other. None of that makes a difference when one of us needs help or support.

Alex is still a bit of a mystery, but the fact that he’s here means something, right? When I catch him staring at me multiple times, I start to feel a little self-conscious. Maybe he feels obligated to be here after helping track down all the flyers with the rest of the guys at school. I try to smile at him when our eyes meet, but that only makes him blush. His cheeks are so red that it’s slightly alarming. He didn’t blush like that when he asked me out, or even when Sebastian confronted him about asking me out.

Subtly brushing a hand over my cheek, I silently wonder what’s going through his head. Is he looking at me like that because my eyes are still red and puffy from crying? I know I

washed all my makeup off, so I don't think there's anything on my face. Is he trying to figure out how to leave while being polite? Or maybe reconsidering why he'd ever like someone like me after seeing my mugshot and reading that article?

Elliot catches the looks shared between me and Alex, and he barks out a laugh. Slapping a hand roughly on Alex's back, he gives me a toothy grin. "Chill, gorgeous. Alex here has never seen you in your glasses before, and I think his brain's short-circuiting."

Shrugging, Alex bites his lip to try and hide the smile spreading across his face. "You look fucking adorable. I honestly had no idea I had a thing for girls in glasses until now."

To my surprise, the other guys laugh and tease him while agreeing they all like the way I look in my glasses. Even Sebastian joins in. If he's feeling jealous, he's doing a fantastic job of hiding it. While Arthur coughs awkwardly and pretends to be oblivious to the direction of the conversation, Olivia winks and gives me a sly, secretive smile.

CHARLOTTE



MY HEART FEELS LIKE IT'S STUCK IN MY THROAT WHILE I stare at my reflection in my full-length mirror. There are so many butterflies fluttering in my stomach that I feel like I'm going to throw up. In a good way, mostly. Liam's waiting for me downstairs to take me out to dinner before we go to the Homecoming dance. I'm sure the rest of the guys are here too, just to see me in my dress.

God, I wish Olivia was here for a little extra reassurance. She's been to tons of dances and formal events. I mean, she helped me pick out my dress, so I know I'm not completely off with my styling. Still, I know my look is probably a little different than the typical short, revealing dresses the other girls from school will be wearing. Including Olivia.

I force myself to take a deep breath and remind myself that it doesn't matter what everyone else thinks. I made it through the entire week at school with random strangers calling me Psycho Slut, and I was fine. If someone at the dance doesn't like my dress, that's fine. *I* like it, and I'm sure the guys will think I look beautiful in it.

My look makes me feel like a literal princess. My dress is light blue with spaghetti straps, flaring out at my hips and falling to mid-thigh. While that part is simple, the dress has a

sheer periwinkle, sparkly overlay with stars woven into the fabric. The overlay has short, fluttery sleeves, a low v-neckline, and it falls to my knees. With light blue peep-toe heels and my hair woven into an intricate updo that took me over an hour to replicate, I feel like a modern-day Cinderella.

The butterflies in my stomach ramp up their violent fluttering, and I smile as I wonder where Liam's taking me for dinner. He's treating this like a real date, and I honestly love him for that. We hang out alone when we go grocery shopping once a week, but this will be our first legitimate date. It's also my first date with any of the guys since I talked to Grayson about wanting to be with all of them. I'm much more nervous than I was even when I went out with Remy because it feels like there's more potential than before for something to happen. I don't think there's any reason for me not to kiss Liam anymore, if the opportunity presents itself.

Plus, when I got drunk at the party, I was super affectionate with Liam and told him I want to kiss every freckle all over his entire body. While that's mildly mortifying, it's not untrue. This will be the first time we're able to be alone together since the party. The rest of the guys even tagged along with me and Liam when we went grocery shopping on Sunday.

Checking one last time that my makeup is perfect, I grab my vintage silver clutch and leave my room to make my way downstairs. I can hear Arthur and the guys talking, but they go quiet when I make it halfway down the steps. When I finally see them, I find that they're all watching me descend with awed expressions on their faces. Even Alex is here, which doesn't seem all that surprising anymore.

I meet Arthur's gaze first. He has the biggest, brightest smile I've ever seen on his face, and his eyes look a bit teary. I have to look away from him quickly before I start crying.

The sound of Sebastian's camera breaks the silence, and I giggle softly as he takes about a million photos of me until I reach the bottom of the stairs. Staring boldly into his camera lens, I smile and twirl so he can capture the full effect of my dress.

"Wow," Liam says breathily. My eyes snap over to him, and I nearly lose my breath from how handsome he looks. His hair is styled to perfection, his black suit tailored to fit him impeccably, and his tie is the exact same shade of periwinkle as my dress. While his eyes scan me from head to toe, his smile grows wider and wider. "You look beautiful, Charlotte."

"Thank you!" I want to tell him that he looks amazing, but it's slightly overwhelming having this many eyes on me at once. I look around at the rest of the guys, smiling shyly while I try to think of something else to say.

Grayson chuckles when our eyes meet. "You look like a real princess, Princess."

"Fucking gorgeous," Elliot adds. While Remy, Sebastian, and Alex remain silent, it's obvious they agree judging by the looks on their faces. Elliot turns to Liam with a bright smile. "Well? Give her the corsage so Seb can get some photos."

"Right." Liam clears his throat, reaching around to grab a wrapped box from the accent table by the stairs. He hands it to me, a shy smile tugging at his mouth. "This is for you."

The box is wrapped in glittery silver paper and tied with a light blue bow. My heart feels like it's going to explode from cuteness overload as I carefully tear the paper and open the

box. Inside, there's a beautiful corsage made up of light blue, lilac, and white flowers all tied together with a periwinkle ribbon. There's also a matching boutonniere for Liam.

“Oh my gosh, thank you! I love it so much!” I squeal with delight. Liam laughs from relief and carefully ties the intricate corsage around my wrist. As soon as he finishes, I reciprocate by pinning his boutonniere to the lapel of his jacket. It's such a sweet moment, made even more surreal by our audience and the fact that Sebastian hasn't stopped taking photos since I came downstairs.

Before Liam and I leave, I make small talk with everyone and check what their plans are for the night in case anything has changed. Arthur's taking Christina out on a date—their first real one, and I'm excited for him. Elliot and Sebastian are going to leave for the dance later since they're not going out to dinner first, and Remy and Alex are going to hang out at Grayson's house for the night. I love that Alex has been making an effort to hang out with the rest of the guys lately instead of just me and Grayson.

Arthur reminds me that I have a midnight curfew—making me feel even more like Cinderella—and Liam places his hand on the small of my back to lead me outside. I expect to find his SUV in the driveway, and I stop dead in my tracks when I realize there's a limo parked in front of our house.

“Too much?” Liam whispers anxiously to me.

I shake my head, staring up at him in awe. “You really hired a limo for me?”

He shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck like he's nervous. “You said it's your first dance. I know it's cheesy and cliché, but I wanted to make tonight as perfect and as memorable as possible for you.”

Cheesy and cliché? Maybe. Perfect, wonderful, lovely, romantic, and memorable? Absolutely. It takes everything in me not to let out a high-pitched, girlish squeal. “I feel like I’m in a fairytale.”

Liam laughs, pulling me close to his side as we walk to the limo. “Good. You deserve a fairytale, Charlotte. I’m just lucky to be a part of it.”



“I ALMOST WISH WE DIDN’T HAVE TO GO TO THE DANCE, JUST so I can have you all to myself a little longer.”

Liam isn’t usually bold with his words. But like at Olivia’s party where he was a little braver when it came to touching me and flirting with me, he seems more relaxed tonight. Maybe it’s because we’re alone, or maybe it’s because we drank some champagne in the limo. Just enough to feel light and happy. Smiling, I scoot closer to Liam until our thighs are pressed together. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, careful not to mess up my hair or wrinkle my dress.

“We don’t have to stay at the dance very long. I just want to say I went, you know? Plus, I want to see Olivia win Homecoming Queen,” I say. When Liam raises his eyebrows at me like I’m holding back, I giggle. “And it would be nice to dance with you, Sebastian, and Elliot. At least a little.”

“Don’t worry.” He chuckles, leaning down to kiss my temple. “I’m not complaining. We can stay all night, and I’ll dance with you as much as you want. Whatever you want.”

He’s been sweet all night. The perfect gentleman, and so romantic. Riding in the limo has been amazing and like

something out of a romance novel, and dinner was fantastic. Liam took me to this incredibly fancy French restaurant. I couldn't pronounce a single thing on the menu, and they didn't have the prices listed next to anything. I'd probably have fainted if I knew how much everything cost, but I kept my worries to myself. Money isn't a big deal to Liam, and I know he was looking forward to spoiling me.

"You're amazing." I sigh dreamily, leaning up to kiss his cheek. Liam turns his head just as I do, and my lips catch the corner of his mouth. It's enough to make me blush and give me butterflies.

He meets my eyes before his gaze drops to my mouth. God, I hope he kisses me. This moment couldn't be more perfect. We're both dressed up fancy, alone in a limo, and we've had an amazing date so far.

Liam jerks back and clears his throat, his cheeks reddening as he avoids making eye contact with me. "Oh, uh, I think we're here."

As he says it, I feel the limo slow. I turn to look out the window, trying to hide my frustration. I know he panicked, and I'm sure I'll get another chance to kiss Liam tonight. Forcing my disappointment aside, I grin and try to make out any details I can through the tinted windows. The Homecoming dance is being thrown in the ballroom of a luxurious hotel downtown. I've walked by this place with the guys a few times, but I've never been inside. I can't wait to see it.

Our driver parks and opens the door for us. Liam gets out first so he can offer me his hand to help me out. After promising the driver that we'll give him a heads up when we're ready to leave, Liam wraps his arm securely around my

waist and leads me into the hotel. As soon as we enter the lobby, we're hit with the sound of loud pop music. In case it wasn't easy enough to figure out which direction the dance was in, there are several signs directing us there.

"Wow," I whisper when we walk into the ballroom. The exterior of the hotel is gorgeous, as is the lobby. But the ballroom? Absolutely stunning. The ceiling is tall and completely made of glass, and whoever decorated did an incredible job. There are fairy lights strung up everywhere, giving the entire room a soft, romantic glow.

We turn our tickets in and walk around the room to look for Elliot, Sebastian, or Olivia and her guys. It doesn't take us long. Luckily, we find them all standing together in a corner. Sebastian's taking a photo of Olivia and Ethan together, and it looks like Elliot keeps photo bombing them. Olivia looks like she's about two seconds away from murdering him.

"Hey, guys!" Zack says, spotting us first.

Olivia gasps and runs over to pull me into a crushing hug. "Oh my god, Charlotte! You look stunning!"

"So do you!" I grin. Her off-the-shoulder black dress has a sweetheart neckline and fits her figure perfectly. So much sexier and more daring than my look, but it fits her personality so well.

"Thanks!" She pulls away from our hug, turning to glare at Elliot. "Tell your boy to back off so Stepbro can get a picture of us together."

There's an awkward moment of silence, and I don't miss the way Sebastian grimaces and tenses his hands around his camera. Giving Olivia a look, I laugh nervously and tell

Sebastian, “She calls you that as a joke. You know, because of the memes?”

Elliot chokes on a laugh, grinning wildly back and forth between me, Olivia, and Sebastian. I feel my cheeks heat up from embarrassment since he clearly understands what I’m referencing. It seems to take Sebastian a few seconds longer to process. But when he does, a lopsided smile forms on his face.

“Fuck off, Elliot,” Sebastian says happily, raising his camera to photograph me and Olivia.

After taking a ton of photos of all of us, Sebastian wanders off to take pictures of other people for the yearbook. Even though he may not like a lot of our classmates, he’s completely in his element with his camera in hand. Olivia drags Ethan onto the dance floor, so Liam asks me to dance.

We spend what feels like hours dancing together, only taking a few breaks. Liam never once leaves my side. He’s attentive, always making sure I’m having fun and checking to see if I need water or if my feet hurt. He’s not as handsy as he was at Olivia’s party, but it’s understandable that he’s trying to be more of a gentleman during a school function. Besides, he’s still an excellent dancer. All night, he continues to make my fairytale a reality.

“Are you thirsty?” Liam asks, smiling sweetly when another song ends.

I nod, agreeing that we should take a break. I’m thirsty and out of breath, and I think it might finally be time for me to take my heels off. At least for a little while. When I look around the ballroom, I grin when I see several girls’ shoes lying lined up against the walls from when they gave up dancing in heels. I consider lining my shoes up with the others, but I decide I can

make it through one or two dances with them. My shoes are just too pretty, and I don't want them to go to waste.

Threading my fingers through Liam's, I let him pull me over to the drink table at the back of the room. I'm not surprised to find Zack there, but I am surprised to see that Elliot's not with him.

"His stepmom just called him, so he stepped outside," Zack says, answering my unasked question in regards to Elliot's whereabouts.

I nod gratefully. Victoria is always calling Elliot at the most inopportune times to yell at him for things that are completely random and out of his control. I hope she doesn't upset him or put him in a bad mood. Tonight has been going too perfectly.

Liam pours me a cup of sweet tea, and I thank him before taking a sip. Glancing sideways at Zack guiltily, Liam rubs the back of his neck and gives me a grimacing smile. "I feel like a dick for leaving you, but I need to run to the bathroom. Are you okay hanging out with Zack for a few minutes?"

"Of course!" I smile. I don't mind at all. Zack and I have become pretty good friends. Granted, we don't talk much outside of school, but he always defends me in front of Jude in our history class. Plus, ever since I found out about Olivia's feelings and romantic history with him, I trust him implicitly. He's a good guy.

Apologizing again, Liam leans down to give me a quick kiss on the cheek before heading to the bathroom. As soon as he walks away, I look around the ballroom to see if I can spot any of my other friends. Olivia stands out easily with her bright red hair. She's laughing unabashedly while dancing with Ethan. They look sweet and happy together.

“You having fun?” Zack asks, nudging my elbow with his.

I turn to face him with a smile. “Yeah, lots of fun. I’ve never been to a school dance before. So far, it’s exceeded expectations.”

He chuckles. “No one’s been fucking with you? I know Elliot was worried.”

It’s cute to realize that Elliot talks about me with his other friends outside of our tight group. Even cuter to hear that it’s because he was worried about me. I know the guys had reservations about me coming to the dance after the incident with the flyers. People at school have been pretty terrible, but it’s been way easier to deal with than I anticipated. It hasn’t changed anything for me. In fact, it seems to have brought my guys closer together, including Alex. They’ve been protective and vigilant in keeping an ear out for anyone saying anything even remotely negative about me.

“Not really.” I shrug. “I mean, not that I’ve noticed. I’ve been ignoring pretty much everyone except for you guys, Elliot, Sebastian, and Liam. It’s not so bad at school either when I have so many people looking out for me.”

Zack smiles a little easier, relaxing his shoulders. “I’m glad to hear it. I’ve been worried about you too, but I didn’t wanna pry or make shit weird.”

Every time I talk to him, it’s easy to see why Olivia’s still crazy about him. Not that I’m interested—I have my hands full enough as it is! But he’s sweet, funny, cute, and thoughtful. He’s always made me feel comfortable being myself around him.

“I appreciate it,” I tell him sincerely. “So, what about you? Are you having fun? I know you were kind of forced to come

because of the football team.”

Instead of answering, he turns to look out at the dance floor. I follow his line of sight to Olivia and Ethan. In a sad, wistful voice, Zack asks, “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.” I don’t hesitate. Is he going to ask me about Olivia? If he does, what should I say? I know she loves him, but it’s not really my place to tell him that. Or does he have the same mindset that Sebastian seems to have when it comes to me? That Olivia *has* to choose between him and Ethan?

Spinning around to meet my eyes, Zack stares at me with a mixture of guilt, panic, and curiosity. “Okay. But seriously, if I cross a line, feel free to slap me or tell me off. I’ll pretend I never asked or brought it up, and we can go back to being friends just like before.”

My eyebrows shoot up. So far, the conversation isn’t going the way I expected. I nod slowly, patiently waiting for him to voice his question. Luckily, there’s no one around us, so we have plenty of space and privacy.

Zack’s eyes bore into mine before he nods, mostly to himself. “Alright. Well, I’m just gonna ask. You love them all, don’t you? Elliot, Liam, and the rest of your friends?”

Feeling caught off guard and slightly embarrassed—because I thought he was going to ask about Olivia, not me—I shrug awkwardly and scramble to think of the right thing to say. But he doesn’t sound judgmental, and the way he phrased his question made it sound more rhetorical than anything.

“Yeah, I do.” I decide he deserves the truth.

He turns to stare at Olivia and Ethan again, running his fingers through his hair like he’s agitated. “How do you guys make it work?”

A grin slides across my face. So, this *is* about Olivia, after all. Shrugging again, I laugh. “We don’t, really. I mean, I’m not officially with any of them. Honestly, Grayson’s the only one of them I’ve talked to about it.”

“Really?” Zack asks, finally showing some surprise. “Wow. I honestly thought your whole group was solid, and keeping shit private because people suck and can’t mind their own business. I’ve been watching you guys since school started, wondering how the hell you make it look effortless.”

“It’s not easy,” I whisper. And then I decide to correct myself. “I mean, it’s easy to love them. It’s not easy to ask what I want from them, or expect them to understand. If that makes sense?” He nods slowly, his gaze full of empathy. Giving him a tiny smile, I admit, “Olivia told me about you guys.”

He winces, rubbing his hand over his eyes. “Shit. I really fucked things up with her, didn’t I?”

Personally, I don’t think so. If he hadn’t pushed her away when he did, she probably never would have gone out with Ethan or fallen in love with him. And then he would have ended up being the one stuck on the sidelines, pining after her and feeling left out.

“Maybe,” I say with a secretive smile. “I get that it’s difficult and complicated, but you should talk to her. You should talk to Ethan too.”

He opens his mouth, then quickly clamps it shut when he sees Elliot and Liam walking over to us. I’m glad we had a chance to talk, even if it was only for a few minutes. I hope that, at the very least, I’ve reassured him that it’s possible for someone to have feelings for more than one person. Even Olivia. And maybe he’ll take my advice and talk to her and

Ethan about it. I'll have to give Olivia a heads-up, of course. She's gonna flip out when she hears what Zack said to me.

"Is everything okay?" I ask Elliot once he and Liam reach us. "Your stepmom's not making you go home already, is she?"

Elliot grins and shakes his head. "Nope. In fact, she strongly suggested I find somewhere else to sleep tonight. I figure I'll crash at your or Grayson's place. Wherever the rest of the guys end up."

Oh, yay! That means I'll be able to hang out with everyone all night, well after the dance is over. How much more magical could this night possibly be? A slow song starts playing, and Liam and Elliot share a look.

"Wanna dance?" Elliot asks me, an uncharacteristically shy smile on his face as he holds his hand out for me.

Before I accept, I glance at Liam to make sure he's okay with it. He's my date after all, and I don't want him to think I'm ditching him. Liam grins reassuringly and says, "Go ahead, beautiful. I've been hogging your attention all night, and you *did* say you wanted to dance with Elliot and Sebastian."

My cheeks flush, but I can't keep the sappy smile off my face. It's things like this that probably made Zack assume we were already solid in a polyamorous relationship. It's like Olivia said—we keep falling into this naturally and effortlessly. I place my hand in Elliot's, and he grins triumphantly before pulling me out onto the dance floor.

I wrap my arms around Elliot's neck and rest my cheek against his shoulder. His hands fall to my hips as he pulls me flush against him and rests his head on top of mine. We sway

slowly back and forth together while the song plays. Everyone around us seemingly disappears until it's just us, completely wrapped up in each other. We don't speak. We enjoy the moment, and it's sweet and magical.

When the song ends, Elliot pulls back and looks down at me with a soft smile. There's so much tenderness in his gaze that I swear I'd melt into a puddle on the floor if he wasn't holding me up.

"Have you seen the garden?" Elliot asks. I blink stupidly at the unexpected question, shaking my head in confusion. He chuckles, the shyness from before returning. "There's a garden outside. I don't think we're technically allowed out there because they didn't decorate it. The lighting is kind of bad, otherwise Sebastian would have taken your picture out there."

He's rambling, which is making me anxious. Elliot is usually playful and silly. It's weird to see him acting nervous like this. Trying to follow the direction of his thoughts, I ask, "Where is it?"

Elliot threads our fingers together and leads me through the crowded dance floor to the far side of the ballroom. There's a hidden alcove I hadn't noticed before, which leads to a set of French doors. It's dark enough that I can barely see anything back here, and my heart races as Elliot casually opens the door and pulls me through.

Cold air hits me, and I realize we're outside. It takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust, and I look around curiously. We're in some sort of small, circular courtyard with one street lamp, and it looks like there's a fountain and a couple of benches several feet from us. The fountain emits some light, and I walk closer to it slowly with a growing smile.

“It’s a lot prettier during the day,” Elliot says. He points to a few bushes surrounding the fountain. “There are a bunch of flowers and stuff. Maybe we can come back another time so you can see it.”

He’s being weird, and I’m not sure how to act. I walk over to stand in front of him, threading our fingers together in the hopes that I’ll bring him some sort of comfort or reassurance. “It’s pretty now. Besides, it’s nice to take a break out here where it’s cool and quiet.”

Elliot doesn’t say anything. He slowly brings his hand up, caressing my cheek and tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. Goosebumps break out across my skin, and it feels like his fingertips are lighting me on fire with his touch. I try to think of something, *anything*, to say, but the way he’s looking at me makes me feel dizzy with want.

Almost without warning, Elliot leans forward and presses his lips to mine. The kiss is soft and hesitant at first. The second I react, standing up on my tiptoes and placing my arms around his neck to get as close as I possibly can, Elliot loses all sense of gentleness. He pulls me against him with one arm around my waist and the other on the back of my neck, deepening our kiss. I gasp quietly, and he takes the opportunity to caress my tongue with his.

His kiss is passionate and demanding, so different from anything I’ve ever experienced. And very different from how I imagined it would be to kiss Elliot. Not that I’m complaining. I kiss him back fervently, my hands wandering over his broad, muscular shoulders of their own accord. As our tongues and lips slide together, our bodies pressed flush against each other, I feel like I could get lost in this kiss forever.

A shuffling sound startles me, and I break away from the kiss in a daze. Looking around the small, dimly-lit courtyard, I don't see or hear anything. Assuming it must have been a bird or a squirrel, I look up at Elliot with an awestruck expression.

“Wow.” I giggle. There are a million things I want to say, but that's all I seem able to manage.

“Sorry,” Elliot says, grinning. He doesn't look or sound sorry at all, which almost makes me giggle again. “I know you're Liam's date, and there's probably a better time for this. But then I danced with you, and you just...fuck, Charlotte, you look beautiful tonight. You take my breath away every time I see you, and I couldn't go another second without kissing you.”

“I—” What do I say to that? Seriously, *what do I say?* When Grayson kissed me, the moment we shared was sweet, clumsy, and emotional. Equally perfect, but so different from what's happening right now with Elliot. I wanted him to kiss me. God, I already want him to kiss me again! Should I say that? Should I tell him I've kissed Grayson too, and that I want to be in a relationship with both of them? Do I thank him? “I love you.”

Oh. My. God. I did not just fucking blurt out that I love him. No. There's no way my brain is that much of a mess. When Elliot's jaw drops and he blinks at me in shock, I screw my eyes shut and pray for the ground to open up and swallow me so I can disappear.

“Charlotte,” Elliot says warmly. I keep my eyes shut. I'm mortified. He chuckles and cups my cheeks in his hands, kissing me softly. I sigh into his mouth, feeling some relief mix with my nerves. He kisses me again, pulling away to rest his forehead against mine. “I love you too. I'm so fucking in

love with you, it's ridiculous. Haven't I been saying for months that I'm gonna marry you, gorgeous?"

That gets a laugh out of me, and I finally open my eyes to meet his gaze. A grin spreads across his face, his thumbs softly caressing my cheeks. I lean against him, breathing out another sigh of relief. "You have said that. I just feel dumb for blurting it out like that."

"Don't feel dumb." He laughs, pulling me into a hug. "Fuck, it was perfect. Definitely a story to tell the kids someday."

My eyes widen, and I choke on my spit as I hiss, "Elliot! Oh my god!"

"I'm kidding!" He barks out a laugh, pulling back far enough to look down at me with a mischievous smirk. "Maybe."

Shoving him playfully, I roll my eyes. But there's no erasing the sappy smile from my face, and no getting rid of the swarm of butterflies taking up permanent residence in my stomach. Until I think about the other guys. It brings me some peace of mind knowing that Grayson and Elliot have already talked about it. I don't want to diminish this moment between me and Elliot, but I feel like it's important to be honest right from the start about my feelings.

"So, um, the rest of the guys..." I trail off, feeling awkward while I try to decide the best way to start.

"It's okay." Elliot grins. He leads me over to one of the benches in the courtyard. The iron is cold against the back of my thighs, but it's almost a welcome distraction. Threading our fingers together, Elliot says, "I know you love them too, and that you've got a crush on Flippy-Hair-Alex."

Relief floods my chest. It's one thing to hear from Grayson that Elliot's okay with me having feelings for all of them, and another thing completely to hear the genuine acceptance and warmth in his tone. I'm not even bothered by his nickname for Alex. Not when everything else seems utterly perfect, like it's all falling into place.

"Yeah." I laugh breathlessly. "Grayson said you knew, and that you guys have talked about maybe trying to make a polyamorous relationship work."

He blinks like he's surprised. "You've talked to Grayson?"

"We kissed," I admit, grimacing when the words spill from my mouth. "And then we, um, talked. He says Alex knows too."

Elliot barks out a laugh. "That fucker. I can't believe he didn't tell me!"

The music from the ballroom cuts off, and we look up. I hadn't even realized we could still faintly hear the music from the dance until we're thrust into complete silence. We share a look, and Elliot shrugs. "They must be about to announce Homecoming King and Queen."

I stand up so fast, I almost trip over my heels. Elliot teases me, standing up and wrapping an arm around my waist.

"Sorry," I apologize. Maybe it's silly, but I want to be there when Olivia wins. Or in case she doesn't win so I can offer her my love and support.

"Don't worry. I get it." Elliot kisses the top of my head, leading me back to the dance. "We can talk later. We've got all the time in the world, gorgeous."

Inside the ballroom, we find everyone crowded around a small stage where the principal and the senior class president

are standing with a microphone. It seems that Elliot's assumption was right about the Homecoming King and Queen being announced. People talk quietly amongst each other, creating a buzz of nervous anticipation in the room. Elliot cranes his neck, searching for our friends in the crowd. When he spots Liam and Olivia, he squeezes my hand and leads me over to them.

"Thank god!" Olivia says when she sees me. Ethan's rubbing her shoulders soothingly while Zack stares at her worriedly on her other side. She squeals and grabs my hand, quietly admitting, "I'm so nervous! I'm going to feel incredibly stupid if I lose."

"You're gonna win, baby," Ethan says to her.

"It's true!" I smile excitedly. "The other girls don't stand a chance against you."

She gives me a grateful smile, spinning around to give Ethan a kiss. When the nominees are called up to the stage, Ethan escorts Olivia there. Our group wishes her luck again, and I take a moment to look around at my friends. Zack's staring longingly at Olivia, which is no surprise, but I'm startled to find Liam standing tense with his arms crossed, staring straight ahead at the stage with a somber expression. I know that as much as he loves his sister, he's not that invested in her winning the crown.

"Where's Seb?" Elliot asks. I look around again, realizing he's nowhere to be seen. I figure he's probably standing closer to the stage so he can get some shots of the Homecoming King and Queen once the titles are announced.

"He left," Liam says gruffly.

“What?” I ask, shocked. Why would he leave? Did something happen during the short amount of time Elliot and I were outside? I just don’t get it why else he’d take off without even saying goodbye.

Liam shrugs, not making eye contact with anyone. I reach out to touch his arm, wondering why he’s acting strange. As soon as I touch him, some of the tension leaves his shoulders, and he looks down at me with a sad expression. He grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly before bringing it to his mouth so he can kiss the back of my knuckles.

Before I can ask what’s wrong or what happened with Sebastian, the principal begins speaking. I’m not a fan of the guy at all—he was a jerk when I first signed up for classes, and he’s done the absolute bare minimum about the incident with the flyers and vandalism on my locker—but I clap politely along with everyone else during his speech for Olivia’s sake. I figure it won’t take long to hear Olivia crowned Queen, and then I can deal with whatever drama is going on with the guys.

When it’s finally time for the senior class president to announce Homecoming Queen, I grab Liam and Elliot’s hands, squeezing tightly. It might be silly or superficial to some people, and I know Olivia’s not as concerned with popularity as she used to be. But this still means a lot to her, and she deserves it.

Olivia’s name is announced as the winner, and voracious cheers erupt around the room. I squeal, jumping up and down, making Elliot and Liam laugh. I’m ecstatic for her! She looks gorgeous on stage as she graciously accepts her crown and the sash that goes with it.

“Typical.” Jude Foster’s voice is like nails on a chalkboard, somehow breaking through the excited voices murmuring all around me. I whip my head around to see Jude standing only a few feet behind me, along with Mike and Tim from the football team, and Madison freaking Taylor. Jude’s arm is still in a cast from his idiotic, self-imposed injury.

“Charlotte,” Liam whispers, giving me a warning look. “It’s not worth it.”

“Of course Olivia Edwards won,” Madison scoffs. “She’s slept with half the school by now, and she probably paid the other half to vote for her.”

The guys she’s standing with snicker, and Jude says, “I wouldn’t expect anything less from someone who’s friends with Psycho Slut.” Their group erupts into laughter.

That’s it. I’ve had it with these people. They can say whatever the fuck they want about me. It doesn’t matter. But Olivia? Hell no. My vision turns red. I shove past Liam and Elliot, launching myself at the group of assholes as fury courses through my veins.

I punch Madison first, feeling a satisfying crunch against my knuckles. She screams and crumples to the ground, holding her hands to her face. It’s almost disappointing to see her go down this quickly. Without waiting to see if she’ll attempt to get back up, I spin around and throw my entire body at Jude. He’s way bigger and taller than me, so I know there’s not much chance of him going down from one hit like Madison did. Thankfully, he’s not expecting my attack. His broken arm makes it harder for him to fight back. We end up falling to the ground with me on top of him, making it easier for me to pull my arm back to punch him in the face.

“What the fuck!” Jude screeches, clumsily trying to push me off of him as blood spurts from his nose.

I pull my arm back to punch him again, but someone roughly yanks me off of him. I nearly turn around to punch whoever grabbed me until I realize it’s Elliot. Without a word, he tosses me over his shoulder and makes a beeline for the exit.

By the time we make it outside, I’m panting from my adrenaline rush. When I wiggle to escape Elliot’s hold, he slaps his hand over my butt. “Not a chance, gorgeous. Can’t have you running back in there to stir up more trouble.”

Liam laughs, and I look up to find him walking behind us with a bloodthirsty grin. “As fucking awesome as that was, Elliot’s right. I’m gonna ask the limo driver to pick us up around the corner. It’s best if we disappear as quickly as we can.”

“Yeah,” Elliot agrees, chuckling. “The good thing is that you were so fast, I don’t think most people realized what was happening. Hopefully we got you out of there quickly enough that we can deny being nearby or involved at all.”

My body goes limp as I process what he’s saying, and what he’s not saying. I punched two people in public at a school event in front of a ton of witnesses. Something I could easily be expelled for. “But they deserved it.”

Liam grins at me, reaching out to gently stroke my cheek while Elliot carries me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Liam’s eyes and voice soften, and he nods. “They did. It looked like Zack was going to punch them too, but you beat him to it by a few seconds. It’ll be alright. We’re gonna do whatever it takes to make sure you don’t get in trouble for this. Olivia, Zack, and Ethan will help make sure of it too.”

“Okay,” I say quietly, letting his reassurances calm me. My guys have never given me a reason to doubt them, and they acted quickly by getting me out of there the way they did. If they’re confident I won’t get in trouble, then I’ll try not to worry about it. And honestly? Punching those dickwads was worth it.

Ending the night with bloodshed seems somehow fitting and cathartic. My perfect, fairytale night couldn’t have turned out any better.

SEBASTIAN



I SWITCH THE MEMORY CARD OUT OF MY CAMERA FOR THE third time tonight, grinning to myself. I'm going to have tons of material to go through, and I can't fucking wait. Even though it's only a stupid school dance, there's no better feeling than walking through a crowded event and capturing moments that will last forever thanks to me. Some people pose and smile when they see me taking photos, but I've gotten pretty good at blending into a crowd and becoming invisible with my camera. Candid shots are my favorite because they show real emotion. I never know what I'm going to get from a shot until I edit my film later, and there's something satisfying and magical about that.

The best part about tonight is that about two-thirds of the photos I've taken have been of Charlotte. I still can't get over how beautiful she looks tonight. Grayson called it by nicknaming her Princess. While it usually pisses me off whenever he calls her that, I can't disagree with him after seeing her all dressed up.

It sucked a lot watching Liam pick her up from our house. He went all out with the corsage and a limo. I can't say I would have acted any differently. If I'd won the chance to take Charlotte to the dance instead, I'd have done everything I

could think of to keep a smile on her face all night. Ever since I talked to Charlotte and she admitted that she's crushing on me—and all of the guys—I've been trying really fucking hard to control my anger and hide my jealousy.

So, every time I see one of the guys flirting with Charlotte, I count backwards from one hundred and remind myself that Charlotte says she likes me too. I still have a chance with her. Even if that chance is miniscule and getting smaller every passing day. Knowing that she feels the same way for me, that she feels this intense connection between us, it puts me somewhat at ease. It probably helps that she hasn't officially picked any of the guys over me yet. I keep telling myself that everything is fine if she likes them too, as long as nothing changes.

Realistically, it's only a matter of time before she picks one of them. I know that. But actively working on my anger has made things a lot easier for me lately. I haven't been fighting with the guys, and Charlotte and I are getting along better than ever and spending more time together than usual. Arthur promised to get me back into therapy, which I think will help. I want to be here for Charlotte *and* for my friends without feeling angry at them for having something I don't. I want to reach a point where I feel at peace with Charlotte loving someone other than me.

“Get any good shots yet?”

My spine stiffens, and I grit my teeth angrily at the sound of Summer's voice behind me. Turning slowly to face her, I bite my tongue as I stare down at her furiously. She hasn't tried talking to me all week, and I can't believe she has the balls to approach me now. Does she think I'm fucking stupid? It's obvious that she and Madison were the ones who made

those flyers about Charlotte's past trauma. The official investigation might still be pending, but there's no doubt in my mind that they're responsible for making the flyers and painting Charlotte's locker. So, what the fuck does Summer think she's playing at by trying to talk to me now?

She gives me a timid smile and brushes her hair over her shoulder. Her dress is short and low cut, same as pretty much every other girl here tonight. The fact that I used to pine after this girl—that I ever found her attractive in any way, shape, or form—makes me want to punch myself in the dick. She's fucking plain next to Charlotte, and she's obviously a garbage human being for what she did to Charlotte. Besides, I'm pretty sure Summer's only interested in me *now* because I stopped showing any interest in her.

“What do you want?” I ask venomously.

Summer pouts. The action seems fake. Like something she's trying to do to make me feel bad for her or some shit. “Can we talk? I thought it might be easier now that your friends aren't around. You're *always* with them at school and football games.”

“Yeah. Because they're my friends.” I snort sarcastically before glaring darkly at her. “And I have nothing to say to you. I'm not interested, so fuck off already and leave me alone.”

Her mouth drops. I've never spoken to her like that. Before this year, I was always nice and accommodating. I was a fucking simp for this girl. That ended the second I met Charlotte. Still, even the past couple months since school started, I've tried to be polite to Summer, even while trying to keep our conversations short and to the point. Now, I'm fucking pissed and completely over dealing with her.

“Are you serious right now?” she hisses, glancing around us nervously to see if anyone’s listening. I don’t give a fuck if they are or not.

“Dead serious. Do you actually think I’ve forgotten what you and Madison did to Charlotte not even a week ago? If you were a dude, I’d punch you in the fucking face right now.”

Summer takes a step further away from me, her face twisting with a mixture of anger, fear, and shock. “I had nothing to do with that!” Her eyes soften, and her voice lowers to a soothing, consoling tone. “I swear, I’d never do something like that, Sebastian.”

Some of my anger dissipates, and I furrow my eyebrows at her. Is she telling the truth? The guys and I have been convinced it was Summer and Madison after what happened at Olivia’s party. Madison got away with doing almost the exact same thing to Remy in eighth grade, and we’ve been doing everything we can think of to make sure she doesn’t get away with it this time. But maybe Summer wasn’t involved? Just because she’s friends with Madison, that doesn’t mean—

No. Stop being a fucking idiot, Seb. This girl is toxic and completely full of shit. I didn’t listen to my friends when they insisted Summer was one of the people spreading rumors about Charlotte. I’m not gonna believe her over them this time. And if she’s innocent? I still don’t want anything to do with her.

I turn away from Summer, intent on finding Charlotte, Liam, or Elliot. It’s been a while since I checked in with them, and taking photos of my friends will undoubtedly help calm the simmering rage I feel right now.

And then Summer opens her fucking mouth again, raising her voice just enough to recapture my attention. “It has to be

hard, living with someone like her. After reading that article and seeing how obsessed she is with you and your friends, it's obvious Charlotte has some mental issues.”

My grip on my camera tightens until I hear a crack. I've probably broken one of my favorite cameras, and I don't give a shit. My vision turns red, and I'm worried I'm about to do something really fucking stupid. Like punch Summer. I'd never hit a girl, but she is seriously testing my temper and my patience. How dare she say some shit like that about Charlotte? She doesn't know anything about her. Giving her one final scathing look, I storm away to find my friends.

I look around the massive ballroom frantically, desperate to catch a glimpse of Charlotte, Liam, or Elliot. Liam's usually the easiest to spot because of his hair and his height, and I sigh in relief when I see him standing by the drink table with Ethan, Zack, and Olivia. I make a beeline for them, not bothering to slow down or apologize whenever I bump into someone.

“Where's Charlotte?” I demand when I reach Liam and the others. I don't see her anywhere, and I don't think this fury in my chest will settle until I do. Until I can stare into her bright green eyes and reassure myself that she's okay. That *we're* good.

Liam gives me a look of concern, pulling me off to the side so we have some privacy. Meeting my eyes, he whispers, “Dude, what's wrong?”

I must look like a fucking nutcase. Realizing my hands are shaking, I rub them roughly over my slacks and take a deep breath. “Yeah. Just...fucking Summer cornered me and was saying some shit about Charlotte. I wanna see her and...”

And what? Tell her I love her? Fuck, maybe I should. Maybe I need to tell her that I don't care if she's in love with

the other guys too. It doesn't matter that Arthur says we can't be together. She's the only girl for me, and I'll always choose her over everyone else.

"Calm down," Liam says, placing his hand on my shoulder. I nod and take another deep breath, and he relaxes slightly. "Whatever Summer said, it's not worth getting upset over. Please don't freak out and ruin Charlotte's night."

"Okay." I nod, running my hands through my hair. Liam's right. If I walk up to Charlotte like this, she'll freak out and worry. If she finds out that I was talking to Summer, she'll probably be pissed. Maybe at me, and definitely at Summer. Charlotte deserves to have fun tonight without worrying about anything, and I don't want to mess that up. "Okay. I'm calm."

Liam watches me while I continue to take deep, calming breaths. Fuck, I love him for putting up with my bullshit. I seriously have the best friends in the world. When he smiles, I figure I probably don't look like I'm ready to go on a murder spree anymore.

"Charlotte was dancing with Elliot, but I'm pretty sure they just went out to that garden you guys found earlier. You should go talk to them. She said she wanted to dance with you and Elliot before the night was over."

Hope rises in my chest. It's validating to hear that even while she's on a date with Liam, part of her still wants to be with me. Maybe I don't have her whole heart, but at least I've got a piece of it.

Feeling much less volatile, I calmly walk around the perimeter of the ballroom to the hidden alcove that leads outside to the courtyard and garden. It's too dark out there to get any decent shots, and my camera's probably broken. But maybe I can suggest coming back here during the day another

time to take some photos. Maybe it can be just me and Charlotte together. Is that a weird thing to do for a date? Would she be into it?

The alcove and French doors are still unguarded. I'm really surprised the staff in this place didn't have it blocked off, considering how many horny high school kids are here tonight. Even more surprising is that more students haven't discovered it.

When I open the door and slip outside, I open my mouth to call out to Elliot and Charlotte. But then my eyes land on them standing together in the center of the courtyard, and my heart drops into my stomach. The light from the lamppost and fountain illuminates them just enough to see them kissing passionately. Their lips are locked together, and their hands are all over each other.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I hold my breath to hold in a sob as I turn to leave. In my disoriented state, my foot slips and I nearly fall to the ground. Panicking, I quickly and quietly close the door behind me and rush back into the ballroom. Fuck, I hope they didn't see me or hear me. I can't face them.

"Whoa!" Liam grabs me and pulls me to the side, back against the wall. I was so focused on getting away from Charlotte and Elliot that I didn't even see him. I haven't been paying attention to my surroundings at all. Liam grabs both my shoulders and widens his eyes at me. "What the fuck's happened now?"

My vision turns blurry, and I realize I'm crying. Fuck. As if I wasn't pathetic enough already. How did this night turn out to be incredibly shitty? I never should have come to this stupid dance in the first place.

“I saw Elliot and Charlotte,” I gasp, fighting to get the words out. “Making out. Fuck. She chose him. I knew it was going to happen. I *knew it*.”

“What?” Liam looks like I just slapped him. It’s a reminder that I’m not the only one who will be upset by this news. I know we all agreed we’d be happy for whoever Charlotte chose, if she chose any of us. But right now, I want to die.

Roughly wiping the tears from my face, I shrug. “What do you want me to say? I saw Charlotte kissing Elliot. It’s probably not the first time.”

He looks gutted and completely heartbroken. It makes me feel a million times shittier. I’ve been so selfish and worried about my own relationship with Charlotte that I never considered how the rest of my friends would feel if she picked one of us. Maybe eventually, we’ll be able to offer each other some comfort and get through this together. But right now, I need to leave before I explode. If I have to confront Elliot or Charlotte tonight, I worry that I’ll end up flipping out on them.

“I’m gonna go,” I say. Liam shakes his head, but I don’t give him the chance to talk me out of it. “As shitty as I feel, I still don’t want to ruin her night. I don’t want her to see me like this.”

The next time I see Charlotte, I want to be able to smile at her and tell her sincerely that I’m happy for her. That I’m not angry with her for her decision, and that I still hope she knows I’ll be around as her best friend. Right now, I can’t fathom being able to feel that way.

“Can you drive like this?” Liam asks. Elliot and I drove together, and I have my car here, luckily. I know I’m a sobbing mess, but I’m sure I’ll be fine. When I nod, Liam raises his eyebrows. “Are you sure? I can call you an uber.”

“No. I’m good.” I shake my head, giving him a quick hug. He’s keeping it together a lot better than I am, but I know he’s still upset. I hope he’ll be okay facing Charlotte and Elliot whenever they come back into the dance. Liam gives me a sympathetic smile, and I quickly take my leave.

Somehow, I manage to drive home without sobbing or losing my shit again. I haven’t figured out what my plan for the night is. All I’m focused on is getting home, and getting some distance from Charlotte. Maybe I should sleep over at Grayson’s tonight. But if everyone else ends up there, I’ll be stuck seeing Elliot and Charlotte, and probably hearing all the fucking details about how much they love each other and how they’re a couple now. Shit. What am I supposed to do?

I park crookedly in my driveway. Arthur will probably bitch at me for it later, but I can’t find myself to care. Feeling lost, heartbroken, and defeated, I slowly walk up to my front door. When I hear laughter coming from Grayson’s backyard, I pause to listen. It sounds like he and the other guys are playing in the pool. Fucking nutcases. It’s like sixty degrees out. Even with a heated pool, that sounds miserable.

Still, I know it’s a bad idea for me to be alone right now. Maybe my friends can help me calm down now that I’m away from Charlotte and the dance. Wiping fresh tears from my eyes, I stumble over to Grayson’s backyard, letting myself in through the tall, wooden gate.

Just like I suspected, Grayson, Remy, and Alex are fucking around in the pool. It looks like they’re taking turns diving and flipping off the diving board. I stand there silently like an idiot before anyone notices me.

“Seb?” Remy calls out, sounding confused. He laughs. “Dude, what the fuck are you doing creeping around in the

dark like that?”

I walk closer to the pool, fighting more dumbass fucking tears as I swallow the lump in my throat. Grayson’s standing the closest to me, and he seems to realize before the others that’s something’s wrong.

“What’s going on?” Grayson asks. He takes a few steps closer, raising his eyebrows in alarm. “Are you crying?”

“Yes. Fuck,” I sob. I try to pull him into a hug. I need my best friend more than ever right now. He grunts when my camera jabs him in the stomach, but he still hugs me back. I forgot I had the thing around my neck, and I pull away far enough to yank it over my head and smash it on the ground.

Grayson and Remy yell at the same time, and Remy crouches like he’s going to try to grab the camera. I shake my head at them and cry, “It was already broken. I broke it at the fucking dance when Summer started saying shit about Charlotte. It doesn’t matter.”

“Is that why you’re upset?” Grayson asks.

I start to shake my head, noticing Alex approach from the corner of my eye. I wish he wasn’t here. He’s been hanging around a lot more lately, and I get that he and Grayson have gotten pretty close because of their band. I also have to give the guy credit—he was extremely helpful on Monday in tracking down all those fucking flyers to destroy them, and he never once hesitated or showed any judgement toward her for what he learned about her past. I can admit that he seems like a decent guy. Any other time, I might even try to make more of an effort to get along with him. Right now? I don’t think I have enough fucking energy to manage it.

Alex clears his throat awkwardly. “Is Charlotte okay?”

Nodding, I focus on Grayson and Remy instead. My real friends. It'll be easier if I can pretend that I'm only talking to them. They understand me better than anyone.

“She’s fine. Still at the dance with Liam and Elliot.” When I begin sobbing uncontrollably—fuck, I’m such a pussy—Grayson pulls me into another hug. “I’m sorry. It’s just—she chose Elliot. I knew it was only a matter of time, but I couldn’t deal.”

Grayson tenses up, and Remy practically growls, “What the fuck are you talking about? What do you mean, she chose Elliot?”

He knows what I mean. He just doesn’t want to believe it. Before the school year started, I honestly believed Remy would be my biggest competition when it came to winning Charlotte’s heart. Turns out, I should have been more worried about Elliot all along.

“I caught Charlotte and Elliot making out at the dance. They’re a couple now.” I shrug dejectedly.

“Seb.” Grayson lets out a long sigh, pulling away to roughly place his hands on my shoulders. “Did they tell you they’re a couple, or are you jumping to conclusions?”

“Well, I didn’t talk to them,” I admit, feeling like an idiot. “I left right after I saw them. I was already angry after talking to Summer, and then seeing Charlotte and Elliot—I didn’t want her to see how upset I am. I don’t want her to know how fucking hurt I am, and I also don’t want to make her feel bad about anything. So, I just...I needed to get away from her. And from Elliot. I won’t be able to stand it if he rubs it in my face that she picked him over me.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Remy grumbles. I think he’s trying to sound comforting, but instead, he sounds pissed.

Feeling desperate, I turn to him and ask, “Can I crash at your place tonight? Maybe even for the whole weekend?” That way I can get my shit together before eventually coming home to Charlotte.

“Yeah.” Remy doesn’t hesitate. “My grandma won’t mind. Did you wanna leave now?”

The sound of a vehicle out front catches my attention, and the four of us turn to face in that direction. Alex pads over to the fence and peeks through the gate. Over his shoulder, he quietly calls out to us, “Uh, Charlotte, Liam, and Elliot are here.”

Oh, no. No, no, no. I thought I’d have more time to figure something out or get out of here. What are they doing home already? Did they come home early to confront me after I freaked out with Liam? My throat closes up, my vision goes white, and it’s difficult to breathe. I think I might be hyperventilating. Charlotte’s going to tell me to my face that I’m a dramatic fucking baby and that she’d pick Elliot over me no matter what.

“Why don’t you go inside?” Grayson suggests calmly, patting my arm. “We’ll figure out what’s going on, and then you can leave with Remy without having to face them. Okay?” I nod, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm down. Grayson lowers his voice, staring at me sympathetically. “It’ll be alright, Sebastian.”

CHARLOTTE



“ALMOST HOME, GORGEOUS.” ELLIOT PLACES HIS HAND ON MY knee, sliding his thumb back and forth across my skin. It tickles, and the motion distracts me from staring at the dried blood on my knuckles.

Looking up at him, I find him staring at me tenderly. I give him a tiny smile in return before looking over at Liam. He’s sitting across from me in the limo rather than beside me, his eyebrows furrowed as he types rapidly on his phone. The drive home has been pretty quiet, giving me too much time to think. Now that I’ve had time to process everything and for my adrenaline rush to settle, I’m sick to my stomach at what I did. It will be a miracle if I don’t get in any trouble for attacking Madison and Jude. It doesn’t help that I’m still worrying about Sebastian. He left a few minutes ahead of us, and I hope he made it home okay.

“I think you’re good,” Liam says, looking up to meet my eyes with a comforting smile. “Livvy says that Madison made a fuss about you attacking her, but a bunch of the girls on the cheer squad were standing near her, and they adamantly insisted that they saw you leave the hotel before the announcements for King and Queen started. Surprisingly, Jude hasn’t said a word.”

A sigh of relief escapes me, and I shake my head in disbelief. “There’s no way I’m that lucky.”

Elliot snorts, raising his eyebrows at me. “Pretty sure you’ve earned some luck after all the shit you’ve had to deal with in your life. Stop worrying and lighten up. We have the rest of the night ahead of us to have some fun.”

I giggle and look up at Liam again. He looks sad, but he quickly shakes the expression off and shoots me a grin when our eyes meet. “I can’t wait to tell the rest of the guys what happened. I think that might have been better than the time you broke Mike’s nose at the arcade.”

“Fuck yeah, it was.” Elliot laughs. He wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to his side. “Our girl is such a badass.”

My cheeks flush at his declaration. I’ve heard him say ‘our girl’ dozens of times, but I never truly let myself believe he meant it the way I wish he did. But now, it’s crystal clear that he means it literally. Oh my god. Do I have two boyfriends now? I mean, Grayson and I agreed we were *basically* together after we kissed the first time, and I’d like to assume Elliot and I are together after we said I love you to each other. How does this work now? Do I tell Grayson first? Talk to both of them at the same time? Talk to the rest of the guys?

The limo comes to a stop, and I squint out the tinted window at my house. Sebastian’s car is parked haphazardly in the driveway, and Arthur still isn’t home. The guys get out first, and Elliot helps me out while Liam thanks and tips the driver.

Before I can take a step toward my house, I startle when I see Grayson and Alex walking up to us from Grayson’s

backyard. They wave, so I wave back. I blush when I realize they're shirtless.

“Are you guys seriously swimming?” Elliot asks, laughing.

Grayson chuckles. “Alex wanted to see what it was like to swim in a heated pool. It's not bad when we're in the water. I'm freezing my fucking balls off right now though.”

“Fucking rich people,” Alex says with a teasing grin.

“Did you guys have fun at the dance?” Grayson asks. “We're surprised you're home so early.”

Elliot and Liam exchange a look, laughing quietly. It's Liam who breaks the news. “We would have stayed longer, but we had to make a quick escape when Charlotte started throwing hands.”

Grayson grins, showing absolutely no surprise. Alex's eyes practically bug out of his head as he stares at me though, a wild laugh escaping him. “Seriously? What the fuck happened?”

Liam, Elliot, and Grayson are used to seeing my violent side, whether it's at the gym with Adrian or in regards to defending my closest friends. Alex has never seen that side of me, and it's weirdly embarrassing to show him. I don't know why, but I like the idea that he sees me as this sweet, innocent, bookish girl from school. This past week, he's getting a totally new perspective and a deeper glimpse into my life.

“Jude and Madison were talking shit about Olivia when she was crowned Homecoming Queen,” Elliot answers for me. Giving me another tender look, he adds, “Charlotte went fucking feral and punched them both. It was incredible. And also extremely sexy.”

“Oh my god. Shut up!” I giggle from embarrassment and slap his arm.

“Just speaking the truth, gorgeous.”

There’s an uncomfortable silence, and I look around anxiously. Alex and Grayson are sharing a look while Liam stares sullenly at the ground. I don’t like the weird vibe I’m getting, and I decide to change the subject. “Where are Remy and Sebastian?”

“Ahh…” Grayson rocks back and forth on his heels, giving me a crooked smile. There’s enough light to see him clearly from the streetlamps, and my heart flutters nervously when I realize he’s playing with his lip ring. “They’re inside my house. Did you wanna come over and swim? Or maybe chill in the hot tub? I bet your feet are hurting from wearing heels all night.”

“Good idea,” Elliot says, rubbing his hand over my back. He smirks at Grayson while he speaks to me. “Why don’t you go inside and change? Meet us over at Grayson’s house in a few minutes.”

Are they trying to get me to leave so they can talk without me around? The longer I watch them, the more likely that seems. As awkward as that realization is, I’m not going to argue. I probably need a few minutes alone to process my night, anyway.

“Um, sure. Okay.” I hesitantly take a few steps toward my house, glancing back at the guys over my shoulder. Liam looks slightly lost, and the others have these weird, placating smiles on their faces as they watch me retreat.

The house is dark and empty, and I turn a few lights on in the living room before heading upstairs to my bedroom. I slip

out of my heels the second I step into my room, hissing in pain. I should have taken them off hours ago, but I was too stubborn. Even though I'm sure Grayson only mentioned the hot tub to distract me, it's not a bad idea. Soaking my feet sounds like heaven right about now.

Taking tender steps further into my room, I turn my lights on and pause in front of my full-length mirror. My dress still looks mostly perfect, but my hair and makeup are slightly disheveled. Not too bad for dancing all night, making out with Elliot, and getting into a fight, I have to say. Snorting at myself, I begin the tedious and slightly painful process of unpinning my hair. Once it's loose, I shake it out and sigh in relief.

Shimmying out of my dress takes much less time than dealing with my hair and choosing a bathing suit. If Alex wasn't there, I'd just grab a suit at random without giving it much thought. I also feel like there's a little extra pressure to look pretty now that Elliot *and* Grayson are basically my boyfriends. Eventually, I choose a pair of navy blue boyshort bottoms and a matching bikini top. It's simple and not too revealing, and it'll be easy to throw something over it.

The front door opens and closes downstairs, and my heart pounds at the sudden interruption. Is that Arthur? Or Sebastian? Stepping out into the hallway, I call out, "Hello?"

"Hey," Remy calls back. My shoulders slump in relief, and I smile when I hear him on the stairs. The guys never knock when they come over, so it's not that strange for him to walk in like this.

"What's up?" I ask when he reaches the top of the stairs. Did he come over to check on me? Or did the other guys send him over here? I still don't know what's going on with

Sebastian, and I'm trying really hard not to freak out about the conversation Elliot and Grayson may or may not be having without me.

He gives me a heated look, his eyes slowly scanning down my body. My toes curl, and I suck in a sharp breath. The guys check me out all the time, and it's no secret that they find me attractive. I should be more than used to Remy staring at me intently after all the times he's drawn and painted me. But this is much more charged than usual, and I find myself frozen in place as he approaches me with the same lustful expression.

"Hi, baby," he says in a deep, husky voice.

I stare up at him, getting lost in his icy blue artist eyes. I lose all of my words, struggling to even say hi in return. He brings his hand up to caress my cheek, and I automatically lean into his touch.

"Look at you," he growls, sliding his thumb over my bottom lip. I part my lips, feeling dizzy from want as he continues to focus all of his intensity on me. "So fucking pretty."

"Thank you," I say breathlessly. God, I feel out of my element. Why can't I be as confident or as smooth as him?

Remy smirks, pushing me backwards until my back is pressed against my bedroom door. He leans over me, resting his forearm against the door above me while he continues stroking my cheek. "I wanted to come over and say goodnight. I figured this might be my last real chance before you made a decision."

What? I don't get a chance to voice the question aloud before he leans down and crashes his lips against mine. There's no hesitance or softness. No, Remy's kiss is as searing

and intense as his stare. I open my mouth with a gasp, and he slides his tongue against mine. He uses his hands to cup my cheeks and tilt my head, and I submit to him completely and without complaint.

After kissing me thoroughly and ravishing my mouth, he breaks away. Instead of pulling back and cooling off like I expect him to, he kisses down my jaw until he reaches my neck. A moan escapes me, which is mildly embarrassing. When Remy grabs my hips and lifts me up, I let go of all my worries and insecurities as I wrap my legs around his waist. I lose myself in him entirely. Right now, it doesn't matter that Remy has more experience than I do. It doesn't matter that I've already kissed Grayson and Elliot. All that matters is that Remy Oliver is giving me the hottest kiss of my life.

His lips meet mine again in another bruising kiss, and he grinds his hips against mine. When I feel his hard length press against me, I have a moment of clarity and internally begin to panic. Holy crap. This is happening way too fast. We *just* shared our first kiss. If he keeps this up with the way he's touching me, I don't trust myself to not let him take things further.

I break the kiss, panting as I stare at him with wide eyes. He blinks dazedly at me, a cocky smirk forming on his lips. "Sorry, baby. I didn't mean to get this carried away."

Thankfully, he sets me down and steps back so I have a tiny bit of space. I bring my fingers to my lips, staring up at him like a deer in headlights. What do I say after that? My mind is reeling. So much has happened tonight with the dance, Elliot, and now this unexpected moment of passion with Remy.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, breaking the silence between us. With an irritated sigh, he pulls it out to glance at the screen. Giving me an apologetic grimace, he says, “Shit. I’ve gotta go. I didn’t wanna leave things like this, but...”

I feel like I’m missing something huge, but I find myself nodding at him like an idiot, anyway. “It’s okay. That was—wow.”

Remy chuckles, his eyes lighting up with a smile. Getting a peek at his dimples settles something in me. I always know his smiles are genuine when I see them. He leans down to give me a soft kiss on my lips, pulling back with an even wider grin. “It was wow for me too. I’ll text you tomorrow, alright?”

“Okay.” I nod, completely stunned.

He gives me one final kiss, bids me goodnight, and leaves me alone in my room. I’m frozen in place until I hear the front door open and close, indicating Remy’s left the house. Did that seriously just happen? Did Remy really come in here, kiss me senseless, and casually leave like nothing’s changed between us? And what was that crap about me making a decision?

Feeling totally overwhelmed, I head to the bathroom to wash my hands and face. I almost consider changing into my pajamas and going to bed. But I don’t want to ditch the rest of the guys without giving them a heads up. They’re waiting next door for me. Liam and Elliot especially don’t deserve that after giving me the night of my life.

After tossing an oversized sweater over my swimsuit, I quickly make my way outside and walk next door. I find Grayson, Elliot, Alex, and Liam huddled close together beside the pool. They’re speaking in hushed voices, but it’s hard to tell whether they’re arguing or not. I knew I wouldn’t see Remy, but my heart clenches painfully in my chest when I see

no sign of Sebastian. Something dawns on me, and I spin around to look back at my house. Sure enough, Sebastian's car is gone. Did he and Remy leave together? First the dance, and now this? Why wouldn't Sebastian say goodbye to me? A sense of dread settles in the pit of my stomach.

"Charlotte!" I whip around when I hear Elliot call out to me. He waves me over, giving me a soft smile. "Come here, gorgeous."

I approach the guys cautiously, wrapping my arms around myself. Summoning a shred of bravery, I meet each of the guys' eyes and bluntly ask, "What's going on? Why did Remy and Sebastian just take off?"

There's a moment of silence. I nearly repeat my question, growing anxious and irritated that they're keeping something from me. Then Elliot raises his hands, placing them on top of his head as he lets out a deep breath. "Well, apparently Sebastian saw us kiss at the dance, and he flipped out. That's why he left."

Before I can react, Grayson adds, "He was freaking the fuck out when he showed up here, before you guys did. He's gonna crash with Remy for a day or two while he gets his shit together."

My eyes widen in alarm, and I bring my hands up to cover my mouth. Oh, god. Poor Sebastian. I would never kiss one of the guys in front of him knowingly. I understand that he gets jealous. He's trying to work on it, and I appreciate that he's been making an effort for my sake. My heart clenches painfully in my chest as my gaze snaps over to Liam. Is that why he was acting weird earlier, and why he looked so sad? Sebastian must have told him what he saw.

This is such a mess. How did I mess up so badly? I don't blame Sebastian for not wanting to be around me. I'm surprised Liam can even look at me.

"It's okay, pretty girl." Alex surprises me, giving me an affectionate smile as he reaches over to rub my back. "Nobody's upset with you."

I highly doubt that, but it's sweet for him to reassure me. This must be so weird for him. We've only known each other a short time, and we've never been on anything remotely close to a date. To get such an intimate look at my life and the unconventional connection I share with the guys should surely scare him off.

"Come here, Princess. Let's get in the hot tub, and we'll talk." Grayson grabs my hand, leading me over to the large hot tub under the awning.

This conversation is probably going to be awkward and uncomfortable no matter what, so I might as well enjoy the hot tub while I can. The scorching water feels divine as I step in, and I sigh at the relief on my poor, sore feet. I end up sitting between Elliot and Liam, with Alex and Grayson across from me.

I giggle when someone's foot knocks against mine, and Grayson gives me a flirty grin. Looking down at the water bashfully, I clear my throat. "So, I guess everyone knows Elliot and I kissed."

Elliot grunts affirmatively, searching for my hand in the water. When I thread our fingers together, he squeezes my hand comfortingly. "Sebastian assumes we're together because he saw us kiss. He's not mad at you. He's just jealous, and he's not in the right state of mind to hear anything we have to say."

“Well, we are together, aren’t we?”

Too late, I realize that probably makes it sound like I’m choosing him and *only* him. Exactly what Sebastian and Remy—and any sane person—would most likely assume. It’s pretty obvious now that Remy’s inanely passionate kiss was his last-ditch effort to make sure I chose him instead of Elliot. I’m sure that’s what he meant by me making my decision.

A bright, euphoric smile spreads across Elliot’s face. “You wanna be my girlfriend?”

I’m glad it’s dark because there’s no way I’m not blushing. I glance shyly over at Grayson, wondering if I should mention now that I already kind of thought he and I were a thing too. Am I stupid and naïve to think it’s that simple with both of them? That kissing them means we’re official?

Grayson grins mischievously, splashing water in Elliot’s direction. “She’s already agreed to be my girlfriend too, you know. We were waiting to talk to you dumbasses before making shit official.”

“Wait, what?” Liam asks, his voice hoarse. He stares back and forth between us, his eyebrows furrowed. “You can’t both be Charlotte’s boyfriends.”

“Sure we can,” Elliot says with a smirk. “I bet Charlotte would say yes to you too if you ask her to be your girlfriend.”

This entire conversation is surreal. I’ve imagined talking to the guys about my feelings so many times, and I’ve imagined about a million scenarios of how they might possibly respond. I never thought it would be like this, and my heart keeps flip-flopping between feeling anxious and feeling elated.

Liam turns to me, silently asking me to explain myself. I dunk down lower in the water, wetting my hair while I hum

awkwardly. He deserves my honesty just as much as the other guys do. I also feel like I owe him an apology for kissing Elliot while I was supposed to be on a date with him instead.

“I like all of you,” I blurt out. “I mean, you’re my kindred spirits. How can I not be totally, completely crazy for every one of you? I know you guys had some weird bet or competition to make me pick one of you to date, but...that’s impossible. I’ll never be able to choose only one of you. I’d rather choose all of you.”

Hope flashes in Liam’s eyes. “Really? You actually like *me*? As more than a friend?”

He sounds so sweet and surprised, like he never let himself believe I could really care for him like that. Biting my lip to hide my cheesy smile, I nod shyly. “Of course I do. I know it’s nuts, and this is probably, like, insanely awkward to talk about as a group. But it’s true, and I’m tired of trying to hide my feelings from you guys.”

A radiant smile lights up Liam’s face. He doesn’t seem perturbed at all that I’ve admitted to liking the other guys. Laughing happily, he glances between me, Elliot, and Grayson. “Well, shit. How do we do this?”

Grayson quickly explains to Liam what a polyamorous relationship is. When Elliot and Alex comment with their own input, referencing different blogs and sites they’ve come across, I’m pretty sure my heart turns to mush. I had no idea they’d all been working so hard to educate themselves. How on earth did I get so lucky?

When Alex meets my eyes across the hot tub, I giggle nervously. “I can’t believe you’re really sitting here with us. How do you not find this entire situation weird?”

“Oh, it’s very weird.” Alex grins flirtatiously. “But in the spirit of being one hundred percent open and honest, I’ve been crazy about you since the moment I met you. You’re hands down the most interesting girl I’ve ever met, and not a single thing I’ve seen or learned about you has scared me off for a second. So, you’ve got three boyfriends now, right? I’d still love to take you out and see if we can make it work. If that means I need to try and bro-date the rest of these guys too, I’m up for the challenge.”

I am *swooning*. That might be the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me. The guys seem to approve too, and Elliot laughs in surprise. “Aw, man. I really thought it was gonna be impossible for me to like you and your flippy hair, dude. But you got me with the bro-date. Guess you’re officially one of us now.”

“I’d love to go out with you,” I say to Alex, smiling so big that my cheeks hurt. This is turning out to be much easier than I ever imagined. That thought sobers me for a moment, and I bite my lip anxiously. “I don’t think Sebastian will be as understanding as you guys are. I’m not sure about Remy either. The last thing I ever wanted was to hurt anyone’s feelings.”

Elliot wraps his arm around me and kisses the top of my head. It’s such a sweet gesture, and after being so open about my feelings with the guys, I don’t feel weird or guilty about leaning against him and taking comfort in his affection.

“They’ll come around, gorgeous. Remy’s quieter than Sebastian, but he’s just as jealous and possessive. It might take longer to convince them that we can make this work, but they’re as crazy about you as we are. It’ll be alright, and everything will work out.”

The other guys murmur their agreement along with more comforting words. Not worrying about Remy and Sebastian is much easier said than done, but it means a lot to me and honestly makes me feel loads better to hear how confident the rest of my guys are that things will work out the way they're supposed to.

After going through months of emotional turmoil, constantly worrying about keeping my feelings hidden or that I might screw up my friendships with my guys, I can't believe I'm finally here. One step closer to getting everything I could ever want.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Well, it took forever, but here we are! This book is finally finished. For those of you who read *Smile Like You Mean It* when it was first published (or even before that) and had to wait this long to read more about Charlotte and her boys, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your support and patience.

This was a hard book for me. I've suffered from severe depression and anxiety for most of my life, and it hit me hard a few months ago. I struggled to write much of anything for so long, and there were many times I felt like I'd never manage to finish this book. But after finding a therapist who gets me (finally!) and continuing to push myself, I freaking did it. I hope you enjoyed reading nearly 150K words of sugary-sweet fluff. There are some heavy moments in this book too, but my goal with all of my books is to leave my readers feeling happier and lighter. So, if you're feeling like that right now, I'm so glad I succeeded!

Now, for my thank you's. To my moon sluts: Taryn, Kiersten, Winter, Seneca, Georgia, Danielle, and Rachael. You're some of the most amazing women I've ever met in my life, and I honestly don't know what I'd do without every single one of you. Talking to you guys gets me through my days so often, and your love, encouragement, and support while I wrote this book will never be forgotten. I love and appreciate you guys so, so much.

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Now, fingers crossed it doesn't take me another year to give you guys the next book in Charlotte's series!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Willow Hadley is a self-published author who primarily writes sugary sweet reverse harem romance. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, their dog, ferret, and two demon-familiars (aka cats). She started writing in early 2018, and decided to pursue publishing in 2020. She loves character driven stories and fluffy books that give you a warm, fluffy feeling. She's also obsessed with Disney movies, and her favorite candy is licorice.

Everything Will Be Alright is her sixth published book.

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