

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARA NEY

HOW TO

lose at love



campus  legends

campus  legends

broody  gives zero f*cks 

HOW TO

lose at love

big truck. big...  stubborn 

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SARA NEY

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dedication

*For every girl with a broken heart,
there is a boy with a glue gun.*

He's out there.

Be patient.

Also dedicated to S + A + M

Three kick ass beauties who are going to break hearts.

one

dallas

“The best way to start a relationship is not to start one at all.”

– Dallas Colter

“I DON’T MEAN to sound like a cynic, but why are you datin’ her to begin with?”

With my foot up on the locker room bench—the one directly in front of my cubby—I glance over at my teammate Diego, who’s standing beside me, his hands poised to grab the padding around his shoulders. He’s keen to spill his guts about some girl he’s dating, something about breaking up with her and *blah blah fucking blah I don’t have time for his bellyaching*.

His face is scrunched up like he didn’t understand the question.

“Why am I dating her to begin with?” He shrugs. “I dunno. I thought we’d have a ton of sex and it would be more fun.”

“Fun? Banging the *same* chick all the time?”

Honestly, I’m not banging anyone at all, so it’s not as if I have any room to talk.

But still.

That’s beside the point.

I finish tying my sneakers, then rise to my full height. Smack Diego on his uniform chest plate with a smirk.

“I said I *thought* we’d have tons of sex—I didn’t say we *were* having tons of sex.”

“And how’s that workin’ out for you? Your dick fall off yet?”

“It’s not working out.” He pulls at the waistband of his shorts and takes a look down the front. “And no, it hasn’t.”

“Why ain’t it workin’ out?”

Diego follows me to the drinking fountain where I intend to fill up my water bottle. He’s like a stray puppy who’s lost his way—or a pestering fly that won’t quit dive-bombing me.

Too bad I can’t swat the bastard away.

“There’s no chemistry.”

That sounds like a *him* problem, not a Dallas problem.

Still, I humor the guy, raising a brow, feigning interest. “Shouldn’t you have realized there was no chemistry after your first date?”

I’m no expert, but that part seems obvious.

“How the hell should I know? I’ve never had a girlfriend before!” His voice has risen an octave, panic across his brow.

“You’ve never had a girlfriend before?”

“No.”

Now why on earth does this fact surprise me? It shouldn’t. Lots of my teammates haven’t had relationships. Being a serious athlete doesn’t leave much downtime, let alone time for dating.

Fucking, yes.

Dating, no.

“Yeah, me neither.” I scowl at him because he hasn’t left my side and insists on breathing down my neck. “How long have the two of y’all been together?”

“Two months.”

Two months? Is he being serious? That’s not a relationship. That’s...that’s...dating. Or ‘seeing each other’, as some people say.

I squint over at him. “And you’re *sure* she’s your girlfriend? That doesn’t seem like an awful long time. I got eggs in my fridge older than that.”

“You have eggs older than that? That’s actually disgusting.” Diego laughs, watching as I fill my water bottle.

I roll my eyes. “It was a metaphor.”

“Dude, are you going to help me or not?”

Without hesitating, I give him a firm “Not” before walking back to my cubby. I need to pack my shit up and get gone so I’m not late for my athletic trainer, Shelby, who hates it when I’m late. And I’m almost always late.

As I’m stuffing things in my bag, Diego gets even closer, encroaching on my personal space with his nonsense.

“You’re seriously not going to help me?”

“Help you with *what*?”

Here I am listening to his bullshit, the whining—what more does the dude want from me? I’m not a relationship counselor.

Glancing up, I catch sight of myself in the small mirror inside my cubby, the scruff covering my cheeks, jaw, and chin.

Damn, I need a shave.

On the other hand, it’s getting cold, and the fur on my face helps on those long walks to class.

On the other hand, I’m starting to look like a caveman.

Whatever.

Who gives a shit?

“I need help breaking things off with Ryann.”

This gives me pause. “Her name is Ryann?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s a guy’s name.”

Diego rolls his eyes. “Can you focus for one second?”

“I’d focus if I gave two shits.”

“Dude, I’m your *mejor amigo*. You have to help me out.”

Whoa, where did that come from? The closest people I have as best friends are my brothers because family doesn’t fuck you over, and family doesn’t ask you to do things like break up with their girlfriend.

I’m Diego’s best friend? Since when? “Helping you out is one thing. Breaking up with a chick for you is another.” I heft my duffle over my shoulder. “Why are you bein’ so dramatic? Send her a text and be done with it. Also, stop callin’ me dude.”

Bein’ so dramatic...

I cringe hearing my Southern accent creeping in; it’s something I’ve been trying to lose, but man, when I get salty with someone, it tends to slip out.

“I told you...I’ve never had a girlfriend before.” His hands are splayed as he pleads with me.

I snort. Big deal if he’s never had a girlfriend before—as if that’s an excuse for being a dipshit. “I’m telling you it’s been two months and she’s not really your girlfriend. Just stop messaging her back. She’ll get the hint.” I walk toward the exit.

“I am not doing that. It’s rude.”

“Have you officially had *the talk*?”

“What talk?”

I wave a hand in the air. “You know—the talk. The one where you say, ‘*Are we girlfriend boyfriend? Are we seeing other people or just banging each other?*’ That talk.”

His brows furrow in confusion. “People do that?”

How the hell should I know! “Seems like it would have been a good idea.”

“Well, no. We didn’t have that talk...”

“And you said you barely have sex?”

“I mean, there’s no time.”

No time to have sex?

I hold up my hand, stopping in my tracks. “Did you have sex with her?”

I realize it’s none of my fucking business what goes on in his bedroom, but it would shed some light on some of their issues as a couple—again, not that I’m an expert...

Diego hesitates longer than I’ve ever seen any man hesitate.

“No.”

“Are you jokin’ me right now?”

Diego stands there looking like a wet turd. “I’m just not feeling it, man—she’s giving me sister vibes.”

Oh shit. Sister vibes?

Yikes.

That’s a huge problem—but not *my* problem.

It’s his.

“Jesus Christ, kid, and you let it go two months before you’re going to say something to her?”

“She’s too nice. I don’t know how to tell her.”

Too nice?

What the fuck does that even mean?

I know most guys like to date bitches. They love a girl with an attitude problem, big tits, and a mouth that sucks, so I get it. I get how he wouldn’t want to continue dating someone who’s too nice, but I’m not sure what that actually means.

I clamp my giant paw on his shoulder. “I’ll tell you how. You rip off the Band-Aid in one pull. Do yourself a favor and send her a text. You’ll never have to look her in the face again.”

“My mom would kill me if she knew I broke up with a girl in a text message,” he mutters.

“So you plan on running to your mama to tell her you broke up with a girl?” I scratch my beard at that. “Does she even know you’re datin’?”

“No.”

“Then shut the fuck up about it and stop being a chickenshit.”

Diego opens his mouth.

Snaps it shut.

Opens it again. “*Please?*”

I can’t freaking believe this guy! I just called him a chickenshit and he wants to keep yammering away?

“You think sending a henchman is somehow better?”

“What’s a henchman?”

I stare at him blankly. “Me. I’m a henchman.”

“Oh.” He shrugs. “It seems like the sensitive thing to do.”

“Sensitive my ass.” I shake my head, disgusted. I walk away from him again, pushing through the door to the long hall leading to the parking lot.

“I meant not breaking up with her in a message. I didn’t mean it was sensitive breaking up with her by hiring you to do it.”

Not willing to drop the subject, Diego continues to tail me—as if I don’t have enough shit on my plate as it is.

“Let me give you a little advice. If you don’t have the balls to tell a girl you’re not interested, you don’t have any business being on a team with us.”

“One has nothing to do with the other.”

I stop again, spinning on my heels. “The hell it don’t. We have to *trust* that you’re being honest with us, that you have the guts to stand up for what’s right, what’s wrong, and contribute with new ideas. You don’t get to be the team captain by silently sitting by and watching shit happen to you—you go out and make it happen. You take the good and the

bad, and you make it work in your favor. You swallow the crap, take the heat, make hard choices.” I point at my own chest. “That’s what it takes to be a leader.”

“See! Exactly!” Diego has a giant grin on his dumb face. “That’s why I came to you with this. I don’t trust anyone else.”

I want to slap myself in the forehead. “Jesus Christ, you’re missing the point.”

This guy is exasperating.

“No, I’m not.” He hurries to catch up with me, the stark corridor beneath the stadium where we’ve been working out today a long and deserted one. Not too many people around since it was just special teams, thank God. I don’t need anyone overhearing this jackass asking me to break up with his girlfriend for him.

Diego puts his hand on my forearm as I’m about to open the door to the outside. “Bro. I’ll pay you.”

He’ll pay me?

Well, shit.

I’m not broke by any means, but I have a few expensive hobbies that my brother doesn’t exactly want to bankroll with my allowance, plus a *Star Wars* habit I can’t quit—among other things.

It’s not as if I can have a regular job while I’m playing college football.

1. They don’t allow it.
2. There is no time.

Now that I have an agent, I can do gigs and endorse products—and get paid for it—but it’s not like I can walk into the movie theater in town and tell them I want to pick up a night shift.

I let the door to the parking lot close.

Lean on the doorjamb and give Diego my full attention.

He says he'll pay me?

"I'm listening."

two

ryann

“Dating is fun, darling, but I don’t recommend it.”

– Dr. Laura Winters, relationship expert

I AM NOT the type of girl who inspires fantasies—especially in college-aged men. *Especially* popular ones. Yet here I am, dating one.

A popular guy, I mean.

But Diego confuses me more so by the lack of physical affection than the fact that he even asked me out to begin with.

We haven’t been dating long, but we’ve barely kissed, something I think about every day since our first date; I don’t know if it’s because he’s *shy* or polite, or if it’s because he’s truly not that interested in me sexually.

Trust me when I say: when it comes to that sort of thing, I’m all for it. He doesn’t need to hesitate to spare my sensibilities, or however you want to put it. My parents always taught me that physical affection is one of the most important forms of love you can show your partner, so I’m not sure why Diego isn’t showing it to me if he liked me.

Confession No. 1: It would be accurate to say I’m dating my boyfriend because he was the only guy who asked me out so far this year.

Worse? Half of *that* reason was because he plays football for the university and I knew I wouldn’t have to see him all that much. Because guys like that? They don’t have time to date.

Not really.

Not in the way that counts.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror before pulling my hair back into a ponytail, which is the same style I wear it in for work.

The green sweater on my bed is pale, brings out the color of my eyes, and will keep me warm on the walk since it's cold outside and almost winter.

Cute bra (as usual).

Conservative underwear.

Not that anyone is going to see them...

A shame, really. My date is tomorrow, but there's a chance he might stop by during my shift tonight, and I want to look cute—he's done it once, so maybe he'll do it again if he has time?

“Why am I doing this to myself?” I muse out loud while I swipe on some mascara. “He's not going to stop in.”

Doesn't stop me from putting in the effort.

And I still go on dates with him despite what little we seem to have in common, despite the fact that he's not really my usual type and I'm probably not his.

What's my type? Studious and funny. Clean-cut. Average build. The kind of normal dude who's content staying home to watch movies over the weekends instead of going out—not one who's on televised football games around the country, a guy who plays in front of thousands of people, then wants to go out and celebrate after a victory.

Diego is athletic, bulky, a partier, and kind of *not so studious and smart*.

Shit. Is that a rude thing to say?

Our conversations haven't been the best, which would be fine if we had other things to fill the silence with, like, say—kissing? But we rarely do that either.

Confession No. 2: Diego and I haven't slept together. Not yet, anyway, though not for my lack of trying.

He's a linebacker on the football team. Aren't those sports guys supposed to be all horny and want to bang, like, *all* the time? Diego doesn't seem to care either way.

We've been dating long enough I should expect some sort of major sex effort on his part. Groping at the very least. At a minimum, he should try to kiss me without always asking if I want him to kiss me—that's getting old.

One can only use toys for so long when there's actual, real live dick involved.

I mean honestly, come on. What's a girl got to do to get laid around here?

"I have no idea why he asked me out in the first place, but I can assure you, if he got a boner every time he saw me, we'd have slept together by now."

Great. Now I'm talking to myself.

Diego *is* a catch. He is. But sometimes I'd rather come home and bathe a cat than sit through a date with him. *Yawn.*

He's sweet, though on the shyer side. In great shape. Friendly.

Anyway, we're taking it slow.

Super slow.

Like—at a glacial pace.

My friends told me to give the guy a chance, so I'm giving the guy a chance even though I'm still very undecided about him and where this is headed. Are we just wasting time, or is there potential here?

Can a relationship grow if there's no zing or zap when you touch?

I grab my jacket off the chair when I breeze through the kitchen, slipping into a pair of comfortable boots. I have a long shift at the diner and will be on my feet the entire time, so the sweater and comfy shoes are a must.

“Please let us be busy tonight so I can keep my mind off things,” I mutter, grabbing my house keys off the hook and jamming them in my cross-body bag. Give the door a yank when I’m in the hall to make sure it’s good and locked.

Bzzt, bzzt.

My cell buzzes in my back pocket.

Diego:

Hey, whatcha up to?

Heading to work! You?

Just got done with practice. Jake is taking us for pizza.

Jake is his roommate and not a member of the team, but it seems like they spend a ton of time together.

Pizza? Yum, my favorite. What will you have on it?

Dunno. Meat lovers probs.

I rack my brain for something new to say. I’ve noticed Diego isn’t great about reciprocating questions, so the conversation usually dies unless I keep it going.

Another text comes through before I can send one off.

Gonna have to take a rain check for tomorrow.

He’s canceling?

Disappointment dips in my stomach. Tomorrow is Friday and the only night this week he had available to get together. I made reservations at a nice place, a moody steakhouse where we could talk and have a drink and possibly get romantic for like, the first time ever.

Guess not.

Oh. Okay, sure. I understand.

I understand? He hasn't even told me the reason he can't make it. Doesn't offer an excuse.

Cool

Cool.

I stare at my phone before pushing through the door of my apartment complex. Stare some more. Finally step outside, eyes still glued to my phone.

I'm so tempted to ask what he'd rather be doing than taking me on a date, but I resist the temptation, not wanting to sound thirsty or desperate or too eager.

Okay well, gotta bounce, guys are here.

Have fun! Eat a slice for me.

thumbs up

I stare at that emoji, recounting every argument I've ever had with my friends and parents regarding its use, the general consensus that it means *fuck you* or is used by someone too lazy to type out an actual sentence.

Stuffing my phone back in my pocket, I burrow deeper into my jacket, the wind whipping as soon as I step outside, the frigid cold a shock but not a surprise. Certainly has me hustling down the street toward the diner downtown, has me wondering what I'm going to do when there's snow on the ground and it's too cold to walk.

I don't have a car.

Don't have a bike.

Those little electric scooter things aren't really my style, not even when I'm drunk.

Especially when I'm drunk—which isn't that often, but still. Nobody wants me on one of those things, driving on the

sidewalk after I've had alcohol, except perhaps my girlfriends so they can have a laugh.

Speaking of friends, mine is already at work when I walk through the back door of ROSCOE + MIMI, a divey diner that hasn't changed since the late sixties, though it's changed owners at least a dozen times—once since I've been working here.

Open late, we serve your typical dinner crowd, a cute brunch, and drunk college students on their way home from the clubs and the bars after closing time. Fortunately, I don't have many of those shifts because I've been working here for three years, earning me the right to work primarily day shifts.

Lucky me.

And lucky me, I get to work with one of my best friends, Winnie.

She's already in her apron when I take mine off the hook, snacking on a plate of French fries, our pre-shift ritual.

I steal one before tying the white smock around my waist. Wrap the cord around once, tie it in a bow. Order tablet in one pocket, straws in the other, French fry on my tongue.

"Damn, that's hot."

"Pfft," Winnie scoffs. "That's because I'm in the room."

She tells that joke all the time, but I laugh anyway. Its predictability feels good most days.

"Diego canceled our date tomorrow."

Her brows go up as she dips a fry in mayo, then ketchup. "No shit? Why?"

I shrug. "He didn't say."

"He didn't say?" Her mouth is twisted into a displeased frown. "That's annoying."

"It doesn't mean anything. He just can't go out."

Winnie chews. "Yeah, but you were looking forward to it."

I was. “Seriously, though, Win...am I wasting my time with this guy, or am I wasting *his*?”

“Why are we having this conversation again?” Winnie pops another fry in her mouth, unbothered by my disappointment.

“Because...I keep waiting for something to happen and it doesn’t. And now he’s canceling on me.”

She stands, wiping her hands on the apron around her waist. “And I keep asking you—why are you *waiting* for something to happen when you could be *making* it happen yourself? This isn’t 1950. We are not our grandmothers. You want to bang the dude, bang the dude.”

Easy for her to say.

Winnie is outgoing and loud and gets attention everywhere we go without putting in any effort. And when she does put in the effort, that attention increases tenfold.

She’s also dating a guy everyone at the fraternity house calls Rookie, so what does that tell you?

She’s way more fun than I am.

My best friend is full of charm and has that *je ne sais quoi*, as they say in France.

Not that I speak French, but I do have a T-shirt with that saying on it—I should probably give it to Winnie because she has it and I do not.

Winnie has always been more outgoing than I am, loves parties and socializing, loves makeup and glam, loves expensive purses and shoes. She’d rather spend her financial aid on dinner at the mall than on textbooks and classes.

“You’re right, you’re right. If I want to get laid, I should be more assertive...” I fail to mention that Diego and I rarely kiss or make out.

I want more heat.

I want him to feel me up.

I want him to stick his damn tongue down my throat!

You don't know what you want, Ryann...

Yes, I do!

Then what are you waiting for?

“Hello?”

Winnie is waving her hand in the air to get my attention, holding the plate of fries in my direction as an offering.

I take another one. “Sorry.”

“Just have fun and stop overthinking everything. This isn't a big deal. You've only been dating, what, four months?”

“Two.” I blush. “Overthinking things is ingrained in my blood. Blame my parents.”

“You are *not* your parents.”

Winnie knows my parents are therapists who love to dole out advice—they doled it out to her the last time she made the trip home with me.

“I know, but they've ruined me for dating.”

My parents aren't just regular therapists—they are *marriage* and *relationship* therapists and have always emphasized open doors and honesty. They encourage me to give everyone a chance, and I've learned a crap ton by watching them work together over the span of my life.

They also encourage open communication, though when it comes to their own relationship? There isn't a ton. Or if there is, it isn't *honest* communication because otherwise my mother would have told me she and Dad are having issues of their own.

Guess I shouldn't assume their marriage is perfect just because they help other couples work on their relationships, though they have the tools for success, so I would think they'd use them on each other...

But I digress.

“So you don't think I'm wasting my time?”

Her shrug is noncommittal and not an answer.

I set the plate down on a nearby table. Time has flown and it's time to clock in for our shift.

“Two months?” She makes an *eh* sound. “Maybe, maybe not. Only one way to tell, and that's to go with what your gut is telling you.”

“My gut is telling me Diego only asked me on a date because he was bored.” I pause. “Maybe it was a dare?”

“A dare? Stop.” She squints at me like the sun is shining in her eyes, face contorted. “You don't think he asked you out, gee, I don't know—because you're *cute* and *pretty* and *tall*?”

Cute and pretty and *tall*?

She enunciates every word.

I laugh. “I'm a real dude magnet with these daddy long legs.” If you consider five-foot-six *tall*.

“Would you stop being so self-deprecating and appreciate the fact that you have a guy who likes you? Diego Lorenz, who, by the way, is an actual catch.”

“That's already been established.”

A customer comes in and sits in a corner booth, and the server, Monica—who was already on shift—goes over to greet her.

As veterans of the establishment, Win and I sit in the corner booth, filling salt shakers and wrapping silverware for the late shift.

In companionable silence, we each take a paper napkin, set a fork, spoon, and butter knife inside, and then roll it up. Wrap a paper ring around it to hold it together, then start all over again, stacking them in a basket for later.

Winnie cocks her head to the side as she focuses out the window. Sits up straighter, at attention, like a pointer dog that sees a bird in the distance.

“You know, that's the second time I've seen that boy going into that theater.”

“Boy? What are we doing, spying on people now?”

“Not just any people.” Winnie stops rolling to stare. “Dallas Colter.” She stares through the window, across the street, where the little local movie theater rests, old and archaic and playing only vintage shows.

“Oooo, Dallas Colter.” I repeat his name the same way she crooned it, breathy and excited-like. “Who?”

She directs her shocked expression my way. “Dallas Colter?” She waits for recognition to fill my face and, when it doesn’t, looks disgusted. “The Dallas Colter?”

“He has a the in front of his name now? Oo la la.”

Winnie is not amused. “Are you being serious right now?”

“What?” I roll my eyes as I place more napkins on the table. “Is it a crime not to know who someone is?”

“No, but come on. Even *I* know who he is, and I don’t watch sports.”

Yeah, Winnie is less of the scholastic type than I am. She always has her finger on the pulse of the campus.

“I don’t watch sports either.” Professional or otherwise, which is why I *don’t know who he is*. “So I guess he’s an athlete.”

Winnie snorts. Glances over her shoulder and shouts to Kyle, the line cook we can see flipping burgers in the kitchen. “Yo, Kyle, who is Dallas Colter?”

Kyle only glances up for a few seconds. “Best quarterback in the Big Ten, junior, was nominated for the Heisman, predicted to go early in the NFL draft.”

Winnie looks pleased with herself. “*See?*”

“I mean, is that even fair? Kyle is a nerd when it comes to that stuff.”

“Kyle is a nerd when it comes to everything,” Winnie teases.

“I heard that,” comes the voice from the kitchen.

My bestie leans across the table and lowers her voice. “Dallas Colter is so hot. Like—so hot.”

“Uh-huh.” I get to work unscrewing the salt and pepper shakers so we can top them off.

“Maybe he’ll come out while we’re sitting here,” she says. “I saw him go in last week around the same time, which is odd since they’re only showing black-and-white movies from the forties.” Winnie pulls a face. “Boring.”

“You think everything that doesn’t include hair and makeup and music is boring.”

“Facts.”

We make short work of our mundane task, finishing so we can do actual work as customers begin pouring in for the dinner hour. It’s not a rush but a slow, steady trickle, totally manageable for the three servers who are working this shift.

Winnie watches for the almighty Dallas Colter to reappear. She hasn’t said she’s watching for him, but her interest in the building across the street is a dead giveaway as she wipes down tables and brings customers their food. Fills their water glasses. Brings extra napkins.

All the while, her eyes are gazing outside.

I watch Winnie watching the window, obviously—people-watching is what I do, and my friends are no exception. Plus, she’s fun to observe.

All in all, work is the same as it is the rest of the nights of the week, uneventful because I only have to work the dinner shift and not the night shift, when students come in drunk and hungry after hitting the bars.

Sometimes they’re high.

We get the occasional rowdy crowd, too, and sadly I’m more than adept at kicking people out.

Le sigh.

“Up to anything tonight?” I ask Winnie when it’s time to clock out, punching my card in the machine hanging next to

the walk-in refrigerator against the back wall.

“Yeah, Rookie and I are going to a party.” She wraps a scarf around her face, pulling a pair of mittens out of her pockets like it’s winter outside already. “Thirsty Thursday and all that.”

Thirsty Thursday—big night of the week for drinking, if you don’t count Trashed Tuesday, Wasted Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday among them.

“That sounds like fun.”

Actually, it doesn’t, but that’s neither here nor there.

Winnie presses her hands against the exit bar across the back door, ready to push through it to the back alley.

“Want to study tomorrow night?”

“Uh, yeah.” I nod. “I have a quiz Monday in my biology class and I got a D on the last one, so...”

Lucky for me, I only have to take a science class to meet a general core requirement and there are no more needed for my mass comm major.

“It’s a date then.” Winnie hugs me before stepping out into the cold—I’m assuming Rookie is grabbing her at the end of the alley in his beat-up pickup truck, the one they had sex in at the beginning of the semester, in the bed of it.

She’s gone before I can open my mouth again and ask for a ride.

I zip my coat to my chin, ready to hunker down for the walk home, grateful it’s still somewhat light outside. And not snowing. And not negative temperatures.

“Why did I choose a school in the Midwest?” I grumble to myself as I walk through the restaurant to the front door, doing a double take when I see a guy leaning against the building, one leg bent, foot up on the brick, hands in his pockets, bright blue baseball cap on.

He rises to his full height when I pass by, walking in the same direction.

Shit.

Shifting my gaze so I don't make eye contact, I pull the jacket collar higher to shield my face from the wind.

“Hey.”

I don't stop. Why didn't I turn around when I first saw him? Why didn't I just—

“Ryann Winters?”

At the sound of my name, I do stop.

Do turn around.

I give him a good once-over, passing my gaze over his hat, face, and jacket. The hands he has stuffed in his pockets, the joggers and expensive black sneakers.

I neither confirm nor deny that Ryann is my name; after all, I don't know this guy from Adam. What's it to him what my name is?

“Are you Ryann?”

I shift on my heels. “I don't talk to strangers.”

Obviously.

“False. Otherwise you wouldn't have just told me you don't talk to strangers.”

“*Excuse me?*”

When the guy laughs, a puff of steam leaves his lips. “I'm Dallas—and I'm cold as fuck, so...”

“Yeah, well, so am I because we're standing here and you haven't gotten to your point.”

Sensing I'm in zero danger, I start walking again, brain shouting that this is the elusive Dallas Colter Winnie was dishing about. I'm confused about why he was waiting for me outside of my job.

I stop again on the sidewalk. “Wait—were you waiting for me?”

That is what he was doing, right?

“Yeah.”

“Why?” I’ve never met this guy in my life—it’s not as if we run in the same circles. This is a guy who, if Winnie and Kyle are correct, is headed for the major leagues or professionals or whatever they call it when a guy keeps playing ball after they graduate.

“It’s about Diego.”

Instantly, my hands fly up to cover my mouth. “Oh my God, did something bad happen?”

“Why would you think something happened?”

“Um, because you’re here at my job like a creep, leaning up against the building waiting for me! Plus, he canceled our date.” I gasp again. “Oh my God, is this why he canceled the date? Because something is wrong?”

“Dude, calm down.”

Dude, calm down? Never have I ever been called *dude* by a guy; not sure how I feel about it, either.

The wind whips my hair, sending my ponytail sailing past my mouth.

“So. I’m just going to rip off the Band-Aid.” Dallas Colter pulls his hands out of his jacket pockets and claps them together definitively. “Diego is breaking up with you.”

I’m sorry. What? “*Excuse me?*”

“I said, Diego is breaking up with—”

I hold my freezing-cold hand in the air. “No, I heard you. I just...” I start to laugh. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. No offense.”

I begin walking down the sidewalk, still giggling to myself at how absurd that is, why some strange guy I’ve never met has appeared at my job to dump me.

As if.

“Diego sent me to break up with you,” he calls to my back, and when I turn to glance at him, I see he’s still in the middle

of the sidewalk. Legs parted, arms crossed.

My steps falter.

“Sorry, dude,” he says. “He paid me to break up with you. Didn’t have the balls to do it himself.”

This time when I turn to face him, I storm forward, finger pointed in his direction. “Are you kidding me right now? Diego Lorenz would never pay someone to break up with me. We’re barely dating!” I laugh. “We barely kiss!” I point out. “We’ve never even—”

“Had sex? Yeah, I know.”

If my face wasn’t already red from the harsh wind hitting it, it would be red from embarrassment.

He told this guy we’ve never had sex? Like it’s my fault we weren’t doing it? What an asshole!

“He paid you? How much?”

Dallas shrugs his broad shoulders. “Fifty bucks.”

I can feel my eyes almost bugging out of my skull, frustration and shock widening them. “You’re going to stand there and tell me you’re so hard up for cash you took fifty bucks from some kid on your team to dump his girlfriend?”

He shrugs again. “I never said I was hard up. For anything.”

His cocky grin makes me want to pop him in the face with a towel.

“You think it’s okay to come up to some girl you’ve never met and drop a bomb like that? Neither of you considered how it was going to make me *feel*?”

What if I were heartbroken? Then what would he have done?

What if I’d started to cry or get hysterical?

What if I’d had a catatonic meltdown like I’ve seen some girls do?

What if—

“Uh, judging by how pissed off you look, I feel like you’re misdirecting your anger at me instead of Diego. He’s the one you should be pissed at.”

My arms go up, then down. The jerk needs to stop interrupting my thoughts.

“Do you *see* him anywhere? No. Can hardly get pissed at someone who didn’t think he had to show up for the party!” I begin stomping away. “Asshole.”

Behind me, Dallas laughs again, that dopey, loud laugh. “Are you calling me an asshole or your ex-boyfriend an asshole? Be more specific.”

The nerve of this guy! Who the hell does he think he is? What kind of guy does this, Diego notwithstanding? He took fifty dollars to dump me? We were barely going out in the first place!

Freaking guys.

This is why I was single for so long before going out with Diego, and now I know why!

The outrage!

The—

“Want a ride back to wherever it is you live?”

Wherever it is you live? Lord, this guy is terrible with words. He needs a lesson on subtlety.

“As if I’d get in a car with *you*.” As the words leave my mouth, a cold shock of wind hits my face, leaving me breathless. Chills run down my lower spine, and I shiver.

“It’s going to snow. How far do you have to walk?”

I know for a fact it is NOT supposed to snow, but still, my body shivers again at the words.

I don’t answer, only stand here debating my options. Yes, I’m pissed off and angry, and yes, I never want to see this guy’s face again as long as I live—Diego’s either.

On the other hand, I've never been a glutton for punishment or being so stubborn I can't see past the nose on my face.

"Fine. You can drive me home. I deserve it." My chin tips up indignantly.

I know my worth.

I did *not* deserve to have some guy break up with me by proxy in the freezing cold, to get completely caught off guard by some dickhead who thinks his shit doesn't stink.

I follow Dallas to a big black pickup truck that's parked at the end of the block, its taillights flashing as we get closer, doors unlocking with a telltale sound.

"Need help climbin' up?" he asks from behind me, hovering.

I want to swat him away—the last thing I want is him touching me.

"No." *Don't touch me.*

I don't care if I *am* accepting his hospitality. I don't want him helping me. He's done enough to ruin my afternoon already.

My fingers are itching to pull out my phone and call Winnie, but I don't want to take my eyes off this guy for one second. I'm also tempted to send Diego a message to find out if this is all legitimate, but...

The facts are the facts.

1. He canceled our date.
2. Barely touches me.
3. Hasn't made any effort.

Part of me stings from the rejection. The other part of me knew all along it wasn't going to work and we were wasting each other's time.

And I was right.

“Is he seeing someone else?”

Dallas’s hands are on the wheel and he’s pulling out of his spot. “Who?”

I roll my eyes. *Follow along.* “Diego.”

“If you’re askin’ if he was cheating on you, the answer is no.”

“How do you know?”

He shrugs. “I don’t.”

That tells me nothing. “You’re operating on a hunch. Got it.”

Staring out the window, I eventually remember that this guy has no idea where I live and I have to give him directions, I tell him to go straight when he gets to the railroad tracks.

“What were you doing in the theater?”

“You little creep.” He laughs instead of giving me a direct answer. “Were you watchin’ me?”

“No.” I roll my eyes. *As if.* “My coworker was. Get over yourself.”

“Trust me, I’m not under myself.”

I side-eye him, unamused by his attempts at joking, unamused by his deep, teasing voice.

Watching the road ahead of us, I find myself asking, “On what planet is it a good idea to break up with someone else’s girlfriend?”

“What’s the big deal?”

Is he joking right now? “You have no idea what kind of person I am or how into him I am. That could have gone horribly wrong.”

“Pfft.” He scoffs. “Like how?”

“I don’t know. What if I’d screamed at you or started crying? Then what?”

“But you didn’t.”

“But what if I had?”

“But you didn’t.”

Oh my God. Does he not know how this conversation is supposed to go? People are unpredictable. WOMEN are unpredictable. Does he not know anything about *anything*?!

Ugh!

“I think you’re focusing on the wrong problem here. The fact that you would date a guy who would pay someone to dump you...” His voice trails off.

“Excuse me?” Seems to be my big comeback tonight. The audacity of this guy!

“Now that I’ve met you, the two of you had no business dating.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Diego might be a giant man-child, but he’s a major pussy.”

My mouth falls open. “He’s a nice guy.”

Was. Is.

“His balls still haven’t dropped.”

“That is none of your business.”

“It’s none of my business that his balls haven’t dropped?” He laughs, and I look ahead at the road to make sure we haven’t passed my turn.

“I meant...” My head shakes. “I meant he’s a nice guy. That doesn’t make him a pussy.”

“Says the girl who just got dumped by a stranger.”

“Can you please stop saying that?”

“Why? It’s the truth.”

“That doesn’t mean I need you to keep repeating it. Jesus.” This guy has a lot to learn. “You can’t just say whatever pops into that brain of yours.”

“Thanks for the input, but I’ll be fine.”

I settle into the seat, relaxing my shoulders. “I’d bet any amount of money you’ve never had a serious girlfriend.”

Dallas Colter snorts. “No shit. Why would I want one? See what it leads to?”

“Wait—you’ve seriously never had a girlfriend?” How is that possible? He doesn’t exactly look like a troll that lives under a bridge, though I can’t really tell what he looks like under the knit cap, the thick coat, and the jogging pants. The outfit isn’t doing him any favors.

“No, I’ve seriously never had a girlfriend. Why does anyone care about that?”

He is so dramatic.

“Who is *everyone*?”

“None of your business.”

That makes me laugh. “Your family?”

He hesitates. “For starters.”

“Well, you sound like an only child.” Crabby and bratty and impulsive.

“For your information, I am one of four. All boys.”

Shocker.

“That explains *so* much.”

He scrunches up his nose. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re one of four boys, and let me guess, you all play sports.”

“How do you know I play sports?”

“My friend Winnie—she’s the one who was watching you through the window—told me who you were because I had no idea.” To punctuate my boredom, I feign a yawn, lest his head get any bigger because we were yapping about him earlier. “It wasn’t me, it was her, and she’s dating someone, so...yeah. Check the ego.”

“The ego?” He laughs. “That’s a good one.”

I can't argue, can't tell him I'm shocked his giant, inflated head fit into the cab of his truck, can't say I could tell he was a pompous windbag by the way he stood in the wind, daring it to try to bend him—because as I open my mouth to refute him, I'm forced to ruin any debate by telling him to make a right-hand turn at the stop sign.

Then again, I've only known him all of fifteen minutes.

Then *again*...any guy who takes fifty bucks from his buddy to break up with his girlfriend is probably an unfeeling asshole with serious daddy issues.

In my professional opinion.

My parents are relationship therapists, remember? A tad butthurt, I give myself permission to diagnose Dallas Colter as a commitment-phobe. In fact, I wouldn't doubt he played some part in convincing Diego he should be single, he's better off without a girlfriend, he would have more fun, blah blah blah.

We have a few more streets to pass before I have to give him another direction.

“You didn't tell me why Diego doesn't want to see me anymore.”

“Nope. I didn't.”

I only let us sit in silence for a few seconds. “Well, aren't you going to tell me why?”

“How should I know why? I'm not the guy's mother.”

That makes no sense. “Clearly he confided in you if he asked you to break up with me for him.” I shake my head, stunned. “I mean, who does that?”

“I already told you. The guy is a pussy.”

That tells me nothing about his reason. I'm tempted to message him, but honestly, the fact that he hired someone in the first place tells me everything I need to know. Diego could have sent any number of people to do what he sent Dallas Colter to do; the ugly truth is, he doesn't want to date me anymore.

Even worse?

I hadn't even decided I wanted to date him! That asshole beat me to the punch.

The nerve!

"So...he broke up with me because he's a pussy? Nice." I cross my arms, unable to stop myself from pouting. I'm pissed off, embarrassed, and indignant.

"He did you a favor."

Actually, he humiliated me.

Humiliated, Ryann? That's a bit dramatic, even for you—especially for you.

If there's one thing my mother taught me, it's that no one can make me feel shitty without my consent.

Not in those exact words, but you get the point.

"Do we both agree that I shouldn't contact him?"

Dallas glances over at me, a flash of light from an oncoming car creating a slash across his face.

"I wouldn't. I'd let it go."

I laugh. "You know how hard that is for me to do, right?" I pick at the sleeve of my puffy coat, needing something to occupy my hands. "Not that I want to beg him to keep dating me, because I don't. I just like closure. This was so random."

"Was it?"

I give him a hard side glance. "What's that supposed to mean?" In that tone?

"All I'm saying is, it doesn't sound like y'all were hot and heavy. It sounds like y'all were lukewarm at best."

Y'all...

He's not wrong.

Not in the least.

Still, it's aggravating.

I open and close my mouth like a guppy, not sure how to refute the claim that Diego and I were no better than tepid water.

Which sounds so...boring.

Because it was.

The fact that I'm arguing has me baffled when, in reality, I was thinking of breaking up with Diego myself.

So annoying!

"Turn here. I'm the apartment right there. Just pull up to the curb. Don't bother pulling into the driveway." I'm the unit on the bottom floor—which I hate—patio doors facing the road. Luckily, I've never had any scares being at ground level; no one has ever tried to break in, but that doesn't mean it's the safest spot to be in.

I've been on the waiting list for a second-story apartment since I signed my lease.

"Which one are you?" Dallas is eyeballing the yard, the street ahead, and the neighborhood in general.

"None of your business." As if I'd give some random guy a road map to where I live. He's taken me far enough; he needn't go any farther.

Unbuckling my seat belt, I give him a forced smile. "Thanks for the lift."

Dick.

"No problem." If he had a cowboy hat, I imagine he'd tip it toward me in some forced gesture of Southern humility.

I hop out of the truck, phone already in the palm of my hand.

Dallas Colter continues watching me from the curb, and I stop in the middle of the lawn, pivoting on my heels so I can stare him down.

"Go." I shoo him away, irritated.

A few more seconds, then finally he's pulling away. I watch as his taillights disappear down the street.

“Well. This was a fucked-up night.”

three

dallas

“If love is the answer, I’m going to need you to rephrase the question.”

– Dallas

THINGS I’VE NEVER BEEN ACCUSED of, in no particular order:

1. Giving a shit about other people’s opinions of me
2. Caring what my clothes look like
3. Wanting a relationship
4. Making friends

I have no time for any of that bullshit.

So when my new agent, Elias Cohen, calls and says, “Dallas, I think you need more of a personal life,” I’m taken aback.

“Come again?” I heard what he said, but I need him to repeat it.

“Teams like to know that you’re well-rounded. These days they’re looking for more family-oriented players than what we’ve been used to in the past. Guys who don’t get caught with their pants down around their ankles and don’t constantly post themselves partying on social media.”

“Whatcha mean then by personal life? I don’t have social media and I don’t sleep around.”

“Well now, that’s the thing. Maybe you should start an Instagram so they have something to look at when they’re trying to decide if they want you on their team.” He briefly moves out of frame in our video chat, reemerging with his cell phone. “See here? Even Eric Decker has an Instagram. Tons of followers, too.”

“Eric is retired.”

“But look how wholesome he is. That’s what team owners want.”

Wholesome? Since when is a *man* wholesome?

“Why do I have to create a social media account so I can be fake?”

“It’s about cultivating an image. Think of it as marketing.”

I’ll think of it all right.

Not.

“What am I supposed to do, go to the pumpkin patch and pose for pictures?”

“See now, that’s a great idea.”

“I was kiddin’.”

“I know.” He laughs. “Just think about it. And you’re going to hate hearing this since I know your views on relationships while you’re in the middle of a season, but it wouldn’t hurt you to be seen with a responsible young woman.”

I can’t help it—I let out a loud, gut-busting laugh before I can stop myself. Eli is being serious, and that’s funnier than any shit I’ve heard this week. “A responsible young woman? Why the hell would I want to do that?”

“I meant...stay away from party girls or young women who only want to be influencers.”

“That’ll be easy enough since I don’t intend on findin’ anyone to date, period.” End of story.

Eli shuffles some papers around on his desk. “Listen, I’m not going to go too hard on the subject, but I want you to give it some serious thought. I’ll probably circle back around on it next week.”

I tilt my head back and squint up at the ceiling. “What am I supposed to be giving a serious thought to?” I scratch my head so I appear more dense.

My agent rolls his eyes.

The agent my brother insisted I meet.

The agent my brother insisted I consider signing.

So I did.

I signed with the most cut-throat, successful sports agent in the United States, possibly even the world. A man who represents the world’s best up-and-coming athletes. Tennis players, wrestlers, skiers, snowboarders. Football and baseball players. Soccer. Sailing.

He represents them all, and he’s damn good at it.

And now he’s telling me I need to be seen in public with a respectable girl?

“I don’t know any.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know any respectable girls.”

Eli laughs. “What the hell does that mean? Don’t tell me you’ve slept with half the female population on campus.” He wipes a hand down his face.

“That’s not what I meant. I just meant...I don’t hang out anywhere.” I don’t party, either. I rarely drink. I live with my brothers, spend time with my brothers, watch movies in my free time—the classics they only show at the little theater in town, across from ROSCOE + MIMI.

“What do you mean you *don’t hang out anywhere*?” He repeats my words, confusion etched on his brow.

I shrug. “I don’t like going out.” Simple as that, and it’s not like it’s a crime.

“And you don’t know a single female?”

My mind strays to the girls who live in the house next door, three of them who behave like stray cats in heat, showing up without warning, without an invitation. Dressed up, tits out.

They deserve an A for effort but won’t be trapping none of the Colter boys—not if I can help it.

“Just the girls next door.”

Eli’s brows go up. “Girls next door? Like the Playboy Bunnies?”

I guess so. They don’t tend to wear many clothes when they invite themselves over. “Kind of.”

His head hits his desk as he groans. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I can’t help it if the house we live in is surrounded by single young women. We’re in a college town.”

“But you’re not dating any of them? Or sleeping with any of them?”

“No.” Not yet...but I can’t say I wouldn’t let one of them scratch the itch if I had it.

“Fine.” He nods. Leans back and folds his arms across his chest, twirling around in his desk chair. “If you happen to meet anyone cute and down to earth, think about what I said.”

I nod. “Sure.”

Not.

“I’m serious. It could help you.”

“Yup. Got it.”

Not.

Except...

After I disconnect the video chat and jump in the shower, my mind strays to Ryann Winters and the look on her face when I caught her off guard outside of her job. That was probably bad timing, but how the fuck else was I supposed to make time to do it?

Ryann Winters.

Hated my guts.

Which is fine. I'm not looking to expand my fan club.

I was doing my teammate a favor; who could fault me for that? Jesus, it was practically a public service ending that relationship. Who dates someone and doesn't fuck them?

I did Ryann a favor.

She'll thank me later.

"Yo, dipshit, what do you want for dinner? Pizza or chicken?"

My younger brother Drake leans against the doorjamb, his giant torso taking up the entire frame.

"Don't care. You decide."

He stands there a bit longer than necessary, sizing me up. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Too late. He senses my melancholy and comes bounding in, throwing his massive body onto my bed.

"You're messing up the covers!" I complain, yanking them back into place, liking things in order.

"You sound like you have your period. What's goin' on?"

"Nothin's goin' on."

"Why are we bothering with this little song and dance? Just spit it out so we can eat."

I sigh as loudly as I've ever sighed. "It's been a long day, that's all."

"How?"

Jesus, why is he giving me the third degree? Drives me nuts when he latches onto something and won't let it go. In this case, it's prying information out of me.

I decide to be honest. "You know Diego Lorenz, yeah?"

He nods. We're all on the same team, even though the twins—my brothers—are a few years younger.

"He paid me to break up with this girl he's been datin'."

Drake sits up quicker than a rattler gettin' snuck up on in the desert. "You're fucking with me right now."

"Dead serious."

"Shut up."

I shake my head. "Nope. Not kidding."

"Stop."

"Gave me fifty to tell this chick he doesn't want to see her anymore."

Now my brother is up off the bed, pacing. "Don't tell me you took the money and did it."

I nod. "Yeah. Did it this afternoon."

"Shut the fuck up. For fifty bucks?"

I nod again.

"Fifty bucks?" He pauses in the middle of the floor. "What the hell were you thinking? What did she say? How did you find her? Did she cry?" His rapid-fire questions have me scowling, glancing out the window at the yard below.

"The kid wouldn't let up. Figured if I agreed to do it, he'd shut up about it, and he's my teammate, so I wanted to help him out."

"Bullshit!" my brother shouts. "Bull. SHIT. You did it because you're bored and had nothing better to do."

"Oh, I have nothing better to do? I just signed with an agent and I'm going to the Combine, then I'm entering the draft, not to mention practice and games and working out and I have nothing to do? Fuck you."

Drake only laughs. “You love shock value.”

“So?”

“That’s the real reason you did it. You’re taking your frustration out on some clueless chick because you’re spiteful.”

Spiteful? I’ve been called a lot of things, but spiteful has never been one of them.

Dickhead, yes.

Mean, yes.

Arrogant, yes.

“Why would I take my frustration out on some chick I barely know?” I pause. “And for your information, Ryann Winters is far from clueless.” She didn’t even seem to give a shit that her boyfriend was dumping her.

In fact, she seemed more pissed at me for breathing in her precious airspace than the fact that I’d just dumped her.

“Her name is Ryann? That’s a dude’s name.”

“But also a girl’s name.”

He rolls his eyes. Such an idiot. “And she didn’t deck you?”

“No.” I lean into the conversation as my brother plops back down on my bed. “I gave her a ride home.”

“What? Dude. Why?”

“It’s cold as balls, bro. I’d just given her bad news. Couldn’t let her freeze to death.”

“Aren’t you a regular knight in shining armor,” he says sarcastically. “So what else has you acting all bitchy?”

“Eh. I didn’t love the call I just had with Eli.”

“What was it about?”

“He thinks I need to...” My shoulders move up and down in a shrug. “Not clean up my image, but make myself...”

“Less of an asshole?”

“No. More—”

“Macho?”

“Would you *please* stop interrupting me?”

“Oh, my bad. I thought we were playing a guessing game.”

Honestly...

“He wants me to make myself more approachable, I guess? Those aren’t the words he used, but he said teams are looking for players who are family-friendly.”

This is the funniest shit my brother’s ever heard, and he falls to his back in a laughing fit, chuckling up at the ceiling, hands clenching his chest.

“Has he even *met* you?”

Of course my agent has met me—not in person, but these days, isn’t a video chat the same thing?

“Don’t be a dick.”

“Or what? I’ll hurt your *one* feeling?”

“Ha-ha.”

Drake finally settles down and leans back onto my pillows. “So what exactly is it he wants you to do?”

“I told you. He wants me to be more family-friendly.”

“Uh, you’re twenty-one. How are you supposed to be more family-friendly?”

Good question. “He told me to meet a respectable girl and try to be seen with her in public.”

“So like, not the girls living next door?” He laughs.

“Hell no.” In the summertime, they show up in their swimsuits and pretend they’re not sure how to work the garden hose. Next thing I know, they’ll be popping over in bikinis and UGG boots pretending they don’t know how to adjust the thermostat.

“Well, who then?”

“This was my point. I don’t know anyone.” None of the girls I’m currently acquainted with are wifey material. The other girls? Could get attached if I’m not careful.

No. I need someone who doesn’t like me.

“You could start hanging out at the library. You know, that place with books in it.”

“Fuck. You.” I laugh, throwing a pen at him.

“What about that Ryann Winters chick? She’s single now,” Drake suggests helpfully with a maniacal laugh.

“Did I not just tell you she hates my guts?”

“Actually no, you didn’t tell me that. You said she was salty, but when you offered her a ride, she took it. Meaning she didn’t want to stab you.” He’s quiet. “What’s she like?”

“How should I know?”

“You *just* took her home. She was trapped in your truck for what, ten minutes? Didn’t you talk?”

“Not about anything interesting.” I pause. “And she wasn’t trapped. She climbed in of her own free will.”

“You didn’t ask her any questions about herself?”

“Why would I do a thing like that? I’m not interested in getting to know her, moron.”

Seriously. Get real, Drake.

“Does she seem respectable? What was she wearing?”

I snort. “That has nothing to do with it. Also, she was wearing a puffy coat because it’s fucking freezing outside.” And a hat. And a scarf. “I couldn’t tell you if her hair was blue or pink or if she shits rainbows.”

“Then how did you know it was Ryann Winters?”

“I didn’t know it was her, but Diego told me where she worked, so when I saw a girl come outside, I threw her name into the air like a fart in the wind and she responded.”

My brother considers this information. “You have such a way with words.”

“Thanks.”

Drake pushes himself off the bed. “Well. This all sounds great, but you made me bored, and when I’m bored, I get hungry.” My brother stands in the middle of my room. “I’m gonna make a pizza since you don’t give a shit what we’re having.”

“Cool.”

He lifts his leg and lets one rip before walking toward the door with a laugh, crop-dusting the entire space.

What an asshole.

four

ryann

“Welcome to DumpVille. Population: you.”

– Winnie

WINNIE:

Diego did WHAT?

Sent someone to break up with me.

What do you mean break up with you?

He broke up with me. But HE didn't do the breaking up—he had a friend do it.

Tell me you're joking.

Nope.

I can't believe you're being serious right now. Who does that? WHO????

We did that shit in MIDDLE SCHOOL. I remember Adam Blankenberg telling my friend Amy Wolf to break up with me for him. She told me at my locker after lunch and I took the Bart Simpson mug he gave me for Valentine's Day and tossed it in the trash.

I would have done the same thing

Okay but for real, how are you?

Fine. Considering you and I were just having a conversation about whether or not I was wasting his time by dating him when I wasn't sure...I shouldn't be surprised.

Um, the point is HE DIDN'T EVEN DO IT HIMSELF.

I know, I know...

Well. Who was it?

You're never going to believe me when I tell you.

Omg why are you keeping me in suspense TELL ME ALREADY

We were just talking about this person

K, can we not play this game where you give me vague clues and then I guess and get it wrong so you keep giving me vague clues? Just TELL ME OH MY GAWD

Dallas Colder

*Colter

Wait. For real?

Like Dallas Colter from the football team Dallas Colter?

The one and only, and he didn't even flinch. Just ripped the Band-Aid off.

STOP. ARE YOU JOKING

Would I joke about something like this?

YES. YOU WOULD.

No I wouldn't, but go on...

What's he like????

He's an asshole.

Obviously.

What kind of an asshole?

The usual kind?

You're going to have to be more specific...

I would be if I knew what the heck you were talking about. How many kinds of assholes are there? Explain

The COCKY asshole, the LYING asshole, the SHADY asshole, the NARCISSIST asshole... need I go on???

I get the picture LOL

So which one was he? I picture him as the cocky type, probably doesn't give a shit? Sort of smooth and suave so he can get into your pants.

I mean, it was freezing out so I couldn't say if he was smooth or suave and wanted to get into my pants since I could barely tell what he looked like.

And how did YOU know what he looks like??

No idea. I mean, I've only seen pictures of him. Oh wait. Once I saw him out at the bars, but that was like, last year—but when you know, you know.

roll eyes emoji

Don't roll your eyes at me.

Can't help it. You might be dating Rookie, but you have boys on the brain.

Yeah yeah—back to Dallas Colter. Was he tall?

I guess so? I didn't notice.

Okay if you can't give me more information you're fired.

First of all, how did this conversation about ME BEING DUMPED BY DIEGO turn into a conversation about how tall Dallas Colter is???

Because you didn't actually give a shit about Diego Lorenz, let's be honest. But I care about how tall Dallas is.

And I'm telling you it was hard to tell how tall he was. A, I wasn't standing next to him, and B, when he drove me home, he was sitting the entire time.

BACK. THE. TRUCK. UP. He drove you home???? Ryann Ariel Marie Shauna Winterbottom WHY ARE YOU JUST TELLING ME THIS NOW?

Winterbottom?

Don't change the subject. HE DROVE YOU HOME?

Omg Winnie, why are you fixated on this?!

Because I am. Because it's Dallas Colter. Rumor has it he doesn't date and he barely parties. So not only was it a RARE sighting, but he offered you a ride home. In his sex wagon.

Sex wagon? Could you not...

You just said he doesn't date.

Sex and dating are two different things. As you are very well aware.

Gee, thanks.

No offense.

None taken.

I set my phone on the bedside table and head to my small bathroom to wash my face and remove my makeup. I don't typically wear much to work, but I have mascara on and feel so...

Drained.

Defeated somehow, so much on my mind.

Once all that is accomplished and my pajamas are on, I settle into bed so I can stare aimlessly up at the ceiling. Replay some conversation with Diego in my mind, namely the one we had the last time we were physically together.

We were at a house party, not a big one, but a house party all the same, somewhere off campus with his buddies and their girlfriends/dates sitting around drinking bottled beer, watching a professional football game.

I kept waiting for Diego to put his hand on my knee, the same way everyone else in the room was doing with their date.

He didn't touch me.

And on the way home when he walked me to my door and I tried to invite him in, he stretched and yawned so big I blushed.

"Are you sure you don't want to come inside? We can keep talking." Keep talking? We'd barely said ten words to

one another the entire night. What I meant was, ‘So we can finally have one-on-one time.’

“Ugh, babe, I’m so tired, and we gotta be up early tomorrow for drills.”

That was a given. I wasn’t naïve about the fact that he worked out and practiced a lot, but there was no reason he couldn’t come in and possibly spend the night.

“Gracias por entender.” His fingers brushed my hair back behind my ears and he leaned forward to lightly press his lips to my forehead.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, thanks for understanding.”

But I didn’t understand.

I wanted the guy I was seeing to come inside my apartment and touch me. Talk to me. Maybe dry hump me. I don’t know. I was attracted to him—he’s a good-looking guy. Sweet. Kind. Patient.

What was so wrong with me that he didn’t want to get to know me more?

We had no chemistry. This I knew. That fact I understood.

Still, it didn’t stop me from trying.

I wasn’t a quitter, and my parents always told me you have to put work into a relationship to make it work.

I don’t believe in love at first sight, but I believe love grows over time. Does that make me a cynic? Or does it make me realistic?

Rolling over, my eyelids finally grow heavy, the urge to send a message to Diego creeping to the very back of my mind to settle there. If he wants to get ahold of me, fine, but I’m not going to pursue what I was grasping at for two months.

I gave the boyfriend thing a shot, and it didn’t work out.

five

dallas

“Oh. You’re dating my ex? Cool. I just ate a sandwich—want those leftovers, too?”

– Diego Lorenz

“...YOU’RE going to hate hearing this since I know your views on relationships while you’re in the middle of a season, but it wouldn’t hurt you to be seen with a responsible young woman.”

My view on relationships. Ha!

What does Elias Cohen know about my views? Let alone on relationships, period. From what my brother, Duke, has told me about my agent’s personal history, the dude was dumped by his long-term girlfriend for one of his clients, then she got preggo, tried to pretend it might be his, mind-fucked him for a few weeks when he first started dating his current girlfriend.

So messed up.

So what business is it of his to judge my single status?

Because it’s his job, Duke not-so-kindly pointed out. Duke, who just started seeing someone himself after being single most of his adult life. My brother barely sleeps around; I couldn’t believe my eyes when he brought a woman to campus when we moved in at the beginning of the year.

Posey is cute. Sassy. Perfect for my brother because she’s a kindergarten teacher and he acts like a six-year-old sometimes.

“...it wouldn’t hurt you to be seen with a responsible young woman.”

Seen?

What does that even mean?

Seen doing what? Holding hands? Frolicking in a field?
Painting pottery and sharing ice cream?

Get a grip, Dallas. They do that shit in Hallmark movies.

You don't watch Hallmark movies, idiot.

Yes, you do...

I tap my pen on the desk I'm seated at, not having heard a single word the professor up front has said. Have barely glanced up at the PowerPoint presentation she has up on the screen, ignoring it for the conversation playing on a loop in my head.

The page in the notebook in front of me is blank.

And yes, I have a notebook and not my laptop—the morning went to shit and I forgot to throw it in my backpack, so now I'm kicking it old-school by taking notes by hand.

Except I haven't written a single thing.

I glance to my left.

Glance to my right.

Tap the pen again, distracted.

Check my watch to see how many minutes of torture I have to sit through before this class ends.

Twenty.

My eyes continue to roam the room, which is uncharacteristic considering I typically keep my head down or my eyes to the front. My future might already be mapped out, but it's not my goal to flunk out of classes, especially easy ones.

Duke still checks in about my grades, even though our ma doesn't.

My perusal dips to the left.

In my same row, a young woman with long brown hair has her arms in the air, stretching. Leans to the left, to the right, looking over her opposite shoulder each time she bends.

Black turtleneck. Laptop open in front of her.

She wiggles her fingers over the keys but doesn't use them to type anything.

Rests her hands on the desk.

She looks vaguely familiar, though I can't place her face.

My regard homes in on the high neck of her shirt, the only one in the room.

She's pretty, if her profile is any basis for judgment.

"...it wouldn't hurt you to be seen with a responsible young woman."

I shake the feathers out of my brain, shifting my focus back to the front of the lecture hall.

Check my watch.

Five minutes...

Two.

I shrug into my winter coat and tug on my knit cap before the professor officially ends class, wanting to avoid the crush at the door and in the hallway but failing once she says there won't be any homework but that the final will be a three-page paper rather than an exam.

There's a collective buzz of appreciation amongst my classmates as everyone gets up and out of their seats, gunning for the exit. I wanted to be one of the first out the damn door and here I am, jammed in the middle of the herd like a sheep, staring over the top of everyone's heads.

The shuffle is slow, has me bumping into a few people and making me apologize. One girl I smash from behind turns and almost curses when she spills her coffee, but then she sees it's me and clamps her mouth shut.

Being a campus legend has some perks.

I bound down the stairs once I'm outside. Hightail it to the courtyard.

Train my eyes on a burgundy red coat, long brown hair blowing in the breeze.

The girl is tall.

Long stride. Sure of herself.

Marching in the same direction I'm headed, and I think it's the girl from class.

Suddenly, she whirls around.

"Are you following me?"

"I'm sorry?" What is she talking about?

"I said—are you *following* me?" Her glare is positively heated.

"We're going in the same direction. I didn't realize that was a *crime*." I squint at her through my sunglasses. "I think you were just in my last class."

She rolls her eyes as a reply, turning to walk away from me, a movement I find oddly familiar.

The same way Ryann stalked away from me last night.

I'd recognize that angry snit anywhere.

"Ryann?"

The girl pivots on her heels and faces me.

Studies my face, eyes raking up and down my body, down, then up again, finally landing on my hat.

I remove the sunglasses.

She groans. "Oh God. Not you again."

A peep of black sticks up from the collar of her jacket. It's not the same puffer she had on yesterday but one that's not as warm.

"You're turtleneck girl."

“Excuse me?” She says it in the way girls say it when they’re already pissed off and itching to argue.

Ha! “You’re the girl wearing the turtleneck.”

I can hear her groan from here. “You’re so annoying.”

That’s the first time anyone other than one of my brothers has called me annoying—at least to my face. Women usually find me the opposite of annoying, not that I’m going to say that shit out loud. She already cannot stand me.

“Spend that fifty dollars on anything good yet?” She adds an eye roll to the end of her sentence.

“Not yet. Have any suggestions?” My grin is smug.

“Sure. I could think of a list of ways to spend it, starting with a TED Talk about respecting boundaries.”

“Ouch.” I push out a laugh, clutching my heart in mock pain. “That stings. Kind of. Not really. Anything else?”

However, Ryann isn’t interested in small talk. “It’s too cold to be standing around arguing with you. I’m going home.” Her hand goes up. “See ya.”

I didn’t know we were arguing; I thought this was playful banter.

“Want a ride?” As soon as I say the words, I wish I could snatch them back.

Especially when she throws a hand in the air, dismissing me.

“Nope!”

The thing is, I’m not going home, so why would I offer? I’m headed to the gym next to get in a workout with my brothers, but I would have given her a ride regardless.

A pang of guilt settles in my stomach.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have taken fifty bucks from Diego to dump her—I should have made him do it himself, forced him to man up and be an adult. If you’re going to date someone,

you should have the decency to tell them yourself you're no longer interested...

Hindsight.

It does me no good now.

Ryann Winters is the only person on this campus holding a grudge against me, and she can't seem to stand the sight of my face.

Most girls come running. Most girls beg.

Try to sneak into my hotel room at away games.

Try to come home with me if I'm at a party.

It's frustrating and annoying, the level of desperation to date someone they perceive as famous so they can be famous, too. Not because they themselves have accomplished anything except snagging some poor bastard dumb enough not to smell a clout chaser when she's right in front of him.

Not that dudes can't be clout chasers; I see plenty of those too. Guys who want to be my friend so they can be seen hanging out with me, hoping it will raise their status with the ladies. Guys who want to fuck me and don't care if I'm gay or not.

Sigh.

By the time I'm checked in for my workout and get changed into mesh shorts and a bro tank, my brothers are already halfway through their routine, Drew spotting Drake on the deadlift.

When they see me, they stop and mosey my way, ready to annoy the crap out of me.

Like flies to shit, a few more guys meander over, wanting to be near greatness. The Colter brothers might not be dominating the world yet, but we're as popular as the Kardashians, at least by my standards.

Our pops would be proud, may he rest in peace.

My brother Drew slaps me in the chest with one of the lifting gloves he's removed, stretching while I strap on the

weight belt.

Diego and a dude named Kellen stand like two turds floating in a punch bowl, serving no purpose but to irritate me.

Drake is restless. Bro loves a good gossip session while we're hard at it, and today seems like no exception.

"Have you talked to that girl you gave a ride home to since?"

"What girl?" I say, knowing damn well what girl he's talking about. The little snitch can't keep his mouth shut when we're surrounded by other people.

My younger brother is a colossal pain in my ass most days.

"Yeah, what girl did you give a ride home?" Everyone is interested, especially Drew, my other brother, who wasn't home when I spilled the tea to Drake.

"The one with the guy name. Ryann," Drake supplies, flapping his big mouth for everyone to hear.

He knows Diego was dating her because I told him, so why is he bringing this shit up in front of everyone if not to stir up trouble?

Little dickhead!

Diego's head snaps up from the bench press. "What do you mean you gave Ryann a ride home?"

"It was cold, she'd just been dumped—by me, I might add—did you want me to leave her standing out in the street, too?"

There. That ought to shut him up.

"You gave her a ride home after I broke up with her?"

"You're giving yourself way too much credit for doing nothing."

Honestly, I've never met anyone so naïve.

"She was my girlfriend."

"Dude, you paid him to break up with her. What do you care?"

Drake, bless his heart. He might be a shithead, but at least he's got my back. And speaking of dudes who have my back, Diego is my teammate—one of the reasons I agreed to help him out. Shouldn't he climb down off my nuts about it and not ride my ass?

Diego needs to grow the fuck up and stop acting immature. Besides, what does he care? He broke up with her.

"You haven't even asked me how she took it," I remind him. "You haven't even asked how it went."

Diego sits up on the bench, wrapping a towel around his neck and wiping the sweat from his brow so he can give me his full attention—attention I do not want.

"How did she take it?"

"Fine." I pause. "In fact, I don't think she gave a shit, if I'm being honest."

"Shut the fuck up."

I laugh. "I'm being serious, dude. Why would I lie?"

"Because you're an asshole."

"Yeah, an asshole you asked for a favor."

The rest of the group stares on.

"But...I don't get it. Why wouldn't she give a shit?"

"Maybe she didn't actually like you." I shrug, about to take another dig. "Pretty sure she was about to dump you. You just beat her to it."

"Shut up." His laugh is hollow, smile forced.

"Dead serious."

"How the hell would you know?"

"Because in the car on the way home, we barely talked about you. All she did was call me an asshole, ask what would make a guy like me get involved. Not a tear shed, my friend."

I leave out the part where I told Ryann he'd done her a favor and she didn't look broken up about being dumped. She looked way too sensible for any kind of theatrics.

Sensible.

Responsible.

Probably someone he could have taken home to his mama, had he given her more of a chance. There's a small part of me that suspects no *woman* will ever hold Diego's attention...

He just hasn't admitted it to himself yet.

six

ryann

“You cross my mind on Thursdays. That’s usually when I take out the garbage.”

– Ryann Winters in a text she never sent Diego

“WHAT’S MY BABY GIRL DOING?”

The sound of my mom’s voice on the other end of the line puts a smile on my face, the way it does every single time, unless I’m in trouble—which almost never happens.

I can hear something in the background that sounds suspiciously like a pan being set on the stove top.

“Did you just have dinner?”

“We did.”

“What was it?”

“Eh, eggs. I know it’s boring, but Dad and I both had late sessions and I didn’t feel like making anything else. We settled on breakfast for dinner.”

Oh. If she’d said they were having pot roast or chicken cordon bleu, I might have been jealous and had FOMO. And let’s not forget about the fact that she and Dad are separated yet still living under the same roof as if I were still a child and they didn’t want to shatter the bubble they created for me.

“What’d you have for dinner, sweetie?”

“I ate at work. Kyle made me a burger and fries.”

“Remind me again—do you have to pay for food while you’re at work?”

“Not if I’m working. Only if I’m dining in with friends or whatever.”

“Huh.” She makes a humming sound. “That’s nice.”

My mother doesn’t entirely *love* the fact that I’m waitressing; she’d rather have me working on campus in the psychology or science department, or applying to be a teacher’s assistant or at least something academic. As supportive as my parents are of everything I do, there is always an undercurrent that I could do *better*, could challenge myself more.

Mom also doesn’t love the fact that I’m majoring in mass communication, but again: supportive. It’s in her DNA to be accepting as long as it’s not illegal.

“How is Diego?” She’s always asking for updates.

“So.” I pause. “I have news.”

“Oh?” I picture Mom’s brows rising at my pre-announcement. “What kind of news?”

“We’re not seeing each other anymore.”

“Really?”

She doesn’t press, simply waits for me to give her the details she knows are coming.

“He broke things off.”

“Why?”

“Okay, so technically, he paid someone to break things off.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line as she decides what to say next.

I spare her the trouble. “He paid a teammate fifty bucks to break up with me and the guy ambushed me outside of work.”

“Are you kidding me right now? Ryann Simone Winters, this isn’t a funny joke. That’s horrible.”

No shit, Sherlock, I want to reply, but she hates swearing of any kind, especially from me.

“I wish I were kidding because it was hella awkward.”

She kicks into therapist mode. “How did it make you feel?”

Pissed. It made me feel pissed. “First I was shocked because the guy who broke up with me was a complete stranger, but mostly I feel relieved. Because it was inevitable and, as Dallas said, Diego did me a favor.”

“Who is Dallas?”

“The guy who broke up with me.”

“Ah. And do you know how it made *him* feel?”

“I imagine it made him feel fifty dollars richer.”

“Ryann, who is this person?”

“He’s not anyone you would know.”

“But you said he’s Diego’s teammate. Does he also play football?”

I roll my eyes, grateful she can’t see me. “Yes, Mom.”

“I’m sorry this happened to you.”

She knows what the short-lived relationship was like; she asks about it every time she calls, so it was no secret that it lacked affection and communication.

“Everything happens for a reason, sweetie.”

“I know.”

Still, it sucks because I tried to give the dating thing a go, and if this is what guys my age are like—*they* suck, too.

“Relationships only work if two people are willing to put in the effort, and I don’t think either of you really wanted to make it work.”

True.

“And you’ve mentioned the lack of intimacy...”

I have mentioned it. I didn’t go into detail, because there wasn’t much detail to share, but I have given her a few nuggets of information, and she knew we barely kissed.

“Focus on your classes,” she goes on. “Some young gentlemen at this age don’t know what they want yet or who they are.”

“Mostly I just think we lacked chemistry.”

“There is that, too,” she says diplomatically.

“And sexual attraction.”

“Ryann...”

She may be a therapist, but she’s still my mom and hates when I bring up sex or the thought of me *having* it. But let’s be real, I’m not a virgin. I might not be having tons of sex, but I’ve had it a few times. Uncoordinated, fumbling sex.

Ugh.

“I knew it wasn’t going to last,” I continue. “The ironic part of the whole thing was I’d been talking to Winnie about it and telling her I thought we were wasting time—and that night he dumped me.”

“Via the boy on his team.”

“Right.” Though I wouldn’t actually call him a *boy*. Don’t know if I’d call him a man, either—he’s somewhere in between from what I could discern.

“And was he at least nice about it?”

“Eh. Define nice.” I laugh. “The fact that he even had the balls to do it should tell you everything you need to know about the guy.”

“The only people I know who would be willing to break up with a friend’s significant other are in middle school.”

“Exactly.”

“And you were at work when he did it?”

“Technically I was done with work, but yes, he basically ambushed me outside when I was trying to leave. The good news is I got a ride home from him.”

“Sounds to me like this young man probably has issues of his own if he’s willing to take on a task like that.”

Take on a task like that? Ha.

“He wasn’t the friendliest chap,” I allow. “Bumped into him again today—he’s in one of my classes.”

“Oh? Which class?”

“Business communication.”

“And how is that going?”

“Fine. We have to write a paper rather than take a final exam, which I guess is good? I definitely like it better than biology.”

“Why do you have to take biology if you’re a communication major?”

“Because I need one science class to fulfill the gen ed requirement.”

One science class and that’s it.

Thank God. I’m barely passing and can’t wait for the semester to be over.

We chat a bit longer; she tells me how she and Dad are going away for the weekend to a little boating town on the coast to reconnect, to eat some good seafood, and take a lighthouse tour. I tell her about Winnie, Rookie, and how I should start saving for a car so I don’t have to walk home in the dark.

She tells me to take an Uber.

I tell her it’s not cold enough for that yet.

She tells me it will be soon and says she’ll talk to my dad about paying for the charges in the app.

Later when I’m lying in bed, I get a text from Winnie.

Are you coming out this weekend now that you’re single?

You can’t just assume I’m ready to mingle...

Ha, good one.

But seriously, Rookie and the guys are having a party.

Is that supposed to be news? They have parties every weekend.

True, but this one is a Snow Pants or NO Pants party since it's getting cold out.

And you think that's something I'd be interested in? I happen to like ACTUAL pants.

Whose brilliant idea was THAT?

The social committee.

They have a SOCIAL committee???

This is news to me.

I know nothing about fraternities or sororities, but the fact that they have a special committee designated to come up with stupid party ideas blows my mind.

I thought it would be a fun way to get you out.

I get out.

Occasionally.

Sometimes.

When is the last time you were at a party?

You don't remember dragging me to that blacklight party a few months ago?

A few MONTHS ago does not count.

You see me at work—why do I have to go to a house party?

It's not a house party, it's a fraternity party. And you're a junior—you only have one more year before you graduate and we have to become actual adults.

Says who?

Says ME.

Will you at least think about it?

Obviously I'll at least think about it, but I took a shift for Beth this weekend and I'm not excited about it.

When?

Saturday

Saturday when?

I don't remember...

Lies. I do remember, but she's going to roast me if I tell her it's not a late shift.

Still.

I'm not going to want to go anywhere afterward, regardless.

Why are you acting like I can't just text Kyle and have him look at the schedule?

Fine. I work from 1-6, but I'm already dreading it.

Six is still early when the party is going to start at 10

That doesn't make me any less lazy...

Is now a good time to change the subject?

Depends on what it is

Bumped into Dallas Colter after class.

NOT AGAIN! What happened?

Turns out he's actually IN my class and we go in the same direction afterward. I thought he was stalking me, but he just walks the same way I do...

AND?????

And then I went my way and he went his?

That's it?

Why do I get the feeling you're not going to be happy with my answer?

Because I'm not happy with your answer. You went your way and he went his??

What was I supposed to do? The guy is an asshole—it's not like I want to be his buddy.

Still...you know more about him than most people do.

I'm sure that is NOT true.

He doesn't date. He's never been seen out with anyone. Guys want to be him, girls want to marry him.

That's the oldest cliché in the whole wide world...

In this case it's TRUE.

Maybe he's such an asshole so people stay away from him. He's focused on his schooling and stuff.

Um no, he's not focused on his schooling. I love you to death, Ryann, but I'm sure the guy doesn't give a shit about school. He's going to play in the NFL—what does he need a degree for?

Uh, he needs a degree for plan B? What if he breaks a kneecap?

Breaks a KNEECAP? LOL

What?? You don't think he could break a kneecap?? Google it.

She's silent for a few moments, then:

Okay you're right, I googled '3 most common football injuries,' and knee injuries was number 1

So putting all his eggs in one basket is a bad idea. He could get hurt and then his career is over.

You're being way too literal right now. My point was, you've been in a car with him, you've spoken to him, you have him in one of your classes. What are the odds?

Wow, she's really pumped about this new development.

Wish I could give you more info. Like I said, we're not buddies. He is a dick—I legit don't think he likes people.

The guy broke up with me for FIFTY dollars, which is an insult. Fifty. Dollars.

Um, yeah, that's not very much money.

Which makes me wonder: What's the real reason he did it? What was his actual motivation?

Maybe that's something you should ask him.

NOT LIKELY.

seven

dallas

“I sent my ex a card that said GET BETTER SOON. She was not sick or anything, she was just really bad in bed.”

– Drake Colter

“HAVE you thought about what I said?” Eli is staring me down from inside my computer screen.

“I don’t understand why it matters. Texas already knows me—my pops played for them and now my brother plays for them. Why do they need to know my personal shit when the Colters have played for them for decades?”

“I want you to understand something: you may not go to Texas. You shouldn’t get your hopes up about any one team. They will look at you the same way they look at everyone else—with a critical eye.”

I might not go to Texas?

“Have you asked yourself if you really want to play on the same team as your brother?”

Obviously, I want to play on the same team...don’t I? What if I end up in a place I hate? And can’t get traded? Worse, what if I go pro and biff it? Plenty of outstanding college athletes have made the move, then couldn’t meet the expectations.

I don’t want that to happen to me.

“Won’t I play better if I play with my brother?”

He twirls a yellow pencil between his thumb and middle finger. “Have you ever *been* on the same team?”

“No, but I’m on the same team as the twins.”

His brows go up. “But they’re younger.”

True. “So?”

“You’re the alpha in that relationship. Duke is the alpha in yours, yes?”

“Yeah?” I mean, he’s the oldest—obviously, he’s the dominant one.

“Consider the fact that you would be playing for his team, entering his team as a rookie. You won’t be on even playing ground. That’s all I’m asking you to consider.” He rolls his chair closer to the desk, arms behind his head. “Now, as I was saying—the girl thing.”

“I told you, I’m not dating. It’s a distraction.”

“I of all people already know that.” His pencil spins. “Having someone to support you can also be the most rewarding part of your success. Coming home after a weekend away and having someone waiting for you. Taking a hit and having someone in the stands who’s going to be there for you.” He pauses. “Not having an emergency contact gets pretty lonely.”

“I’m twenty-one—my mother is my emergency contact.”

“But she’s in Texas and you’re in Wisconsin.”

“Brothers. You.”

He nods. “All right, you made your point. You have no interest in being in a relationship, but that doesn’t mean you can’t fake it for the media.”

Fake it for the media?

“What are you talking about?”

“Just like I said before. It looks good if you find the right young woman.”

“To borrow?”

“No, you’re not borrowing her. You’re asking her for a favor.”

“Like an escort?”

“No, not like an escort. Someone reliable who, if it comes down to it, you can take out after a game when you’re celebrating so that when your picture is in the papers or on social media, you’re not drunk and making out with some random stranger.” Twirl, twirl. “Remember that debacle with Tyler Wykelan? Shitfaced after they won the hockey cup and making out with three different women in one night?”

I do remember that. It was a media circus. Kid just won the national college championship, goes out, gets hammered, makes a few bad choices for company that night, and ends up all over the news. He got a draft offer, but not until it had ended, and not from any teams that were any good.

Nothing good comes from going out after a win.

“Walk a girl home. Study with her in the library. Be seen with her during a Christmas tree lighting.”

“A Christmas tree lighting? Why the *fuck* would I go to one of those?”

Do I sound angry?

My agent only laughs. “A good woman will get you to do things you never wanted to do.”

“No, thanks.” My own mother can barely get me to celebrate Christmas, let alone go to a lighting ceremony in the town’s center. December isn’t a time to lie around eating and opening presents; it’s a time to work out harder to prepare for bowl season. Same as November. “I don’t want to do things I never wanted to do.”

“Are you always this stubborn?”

I purse my lips. “It runs in the family.”

I’m referring to my brother Duke, who’s a bigger asshole than I am.

“Duke? He does what he has to do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? That I don’t?”

“No one is making you do anything. All I’m doing is making a suggestion that could give you an edge over someone else. If it comes down to choosing between a guy who seems to be family-oriented, who plays for the love of the game, and a single guy everyone assumes is out partying and sleeping around, well...I probably don’t have to tell you who’s going to get drafted.”

“This feels a lot like gaslighting.”

Eli laughs. “Merely an observation. Even if you had a girlfriend and she was pregnant, the press would eat that up despite your being young and still in college, as long as the two of you were a united front.” He shrugs his shoulders.

“What if I paid someone?”

Immediately his head jerks from side to side at the same time his eyes damn near bug out of his skull. “Absolutely not. *No*. That’s not what I’m talking about. No. One hundred percent illegal, completely against the governing rules.”

“Okay, but if no one knew, would it still be against the rules?”

“Yes,” he hisses, holding his stomach. “Suddenly this conversation is making me ill. I’m going to barf.”

Can he say he’s going to barf? Is that, like, professional?

“Sorry I mentioned it.” Not. I’m enjoying his horror. Most fun I’ve had in a long time, actually.

“The part that’s making me sick is that you haven’t said you’re joking.”

I cock my head to the side and study my nails. “Do you honestly think I would pay a girl to hang out with me?”

Lifting my head, I find him staring at me long and hard through the monitor. “Do I think you’d have to? No, of course not. Do I think you would?” He’s quiet for a few moments. “Yeah, probably, just to piss me off because the whole subject pisses *you* off.”

Dang, he already knows me so well.

“Do you realize when you say I should find someone responsible and respectable or whatever, those adjectives are subjective? Your version of respectable and mine may not be the same thing. Someone you might not bring home to your mama may be exactly the kind of woman I’d bring home to mine.”

“Fine.” He sighs, defeated. “You’re right. Do what you want.”

I sit back.

Well.

This is no fun. He’s just going to give up lecturing me that easily?

Jeez.

“Do what I want.” I raise a brow. “By that you mean, keep playing and doing what I do and don’t worry about the other shit?”

“Sure.”

Why do I feel like he’s trying to trick me?

Is this that reverse psychology bullshit?

“Sure? That’s it?”

His shoulder rises and falls. “Sure.”

Eli Cohen smiles, and I see the reason my brother likes him so much; the guy cares a lot, but he also gives no fucks. But he also really gives a shit. But he doesn’t.

It’s a mind fuck, let me tell you.

Downstairs, I hear the doorbell ring.

“Expecting company on a Monday night?” My agent is watching me look toward my bedroom door, which is open.

I don’t hear the sound of either of my younger brothers.

The doorbell rings again.

“Persistent, eh?” Eli says.

“Drake!” I listen for the sound of footsteps. “Drew!”

Nothing.

“Can someone get the damn door?”

Eli yawns and stretches. “Our time is up anyway. I’ll leave you to it.”

I lean forward to hit the end button on the call, but not before adding, “Thanks for your time.”

“Same. We’ll chat soon.”

My agent ends the call, and I shove my chair away from the desk, rolling a few feet before standing.

I stick my head through Drew’s bedroom doorway.

Empty.

Stick my head into Drake’s bedroom.

Empty.

With a loud sigh, I head down the stairs, yanking the front door open without glancing through the window to see who it is.

Big mistake.

Huge.

I don’t bother pasting on a smile, don’t bother with pleasantries—I already know what these three chicks want.

Leaning against the doorjamb, I cross my arms. “Hey.”

“Oh!” The blonde who lives next door has a big smile on her face, eyes wide with surprise. Not sure if it’s because she wasn’t expecting it to be me opening the door or because she was hoping it would be. “Dallas, hi.”

“Hi.”

We’ve never been formally introduced—I have no clue what her name is or what any of their names are—but they definitely know me and my brothers.

Almost positive Drake fucked one of them the first week we moved in.

Anyway, it's cold as hell tonight and these three are dressed like they're going to a dance club. Maybe they are, but dang. You wouldn't catch me standing on someone's porch not wearing a jacket.

The brunette shivers and gives the blonde a jab.

"Are the twins around?"

"No."

If they're frustrated by my lack of enthusiasm, the other blonde certainly shows it, mouth opening and closing a few times to say something but thinking better of it. Or not actually having much of anything to say?

"Are you expecting them back anytime soon?" The blonde cranes her neck to see behind me, as if the twins are hiding and I'm lying about them being home. Or perhaps she's trying to see if I have a visitor?

"No idea." I squint down at them. "Aren't you cold?"

They all shiver. "So cold."

"Why aren't you wearing coats?" It's like, thirty degrees.

"They don't go with our dresses." Duh.

"That sucks." If I were a steer, I'd be chewing cud, that's how bored I am with this conversation. "Anything else?"

I got better things to do, and these three aren't my type. I like a woman who's smart enough to wear clothes when it's cold out, Jesus Christ.

"Can we come in?" One of them is brave enough to ask, the brunette who's wearing the least amount of clothes of the trio, shaking like a leaf in a metallic gray, spaghetti-strap dress.

"Nope." I push myself off the doorjamb, rubbing my hands together. Take hold of the door to close it. "Whelp, see y'all around. Maybe go put some sweaters on or somethin'."

"You're *such* a dick!" one of them retorts, her long dangling earrings catching the light from the porch lamp.

“Oh, good comeback.” I grin. “If I’m such a dick, why would you want to come inside?”

I take pleasure in slamming the door.

eight

ryann

“There are two sides to every story, but he’s a douche in both of them.”

– Winnie to Ryann

“I SWEAR I’m not following you.”

“Really,” I drawl. “Is that why you’re following me? Again?”

He plops all of his crap on the desk next to mine and sits without an invitation.

Not that he needs one, but it would still be polite of him to ask.

“We are in the same class,” he mutters. “Relax.”

My head whips toward him. “Don’t you know it’s a trigger to tell a woman to relax?”

“Is it?” He doesn’t care. “Weird.”

He cracks open his computer and powers it up, oblivious to my ire.

“Why did you sit here? There are a million other seats.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Really? A *million*?”

Oh my God, he is so annoying. “Seriously, why are you sitting here?”

I honestly want to know. And why didn’t I put my book bag on the seat when I got here?

“Because you’re so friendly and welcoming.”

“Yeah, I am—*thanks.*” Heavy on the sarcasm, light on the genuine gratitude.

We stare toward the front of the room and I try to ignore his existence, but he makes it difficult when he spreads his legs and boxes out his enormous body. One I hadn’t noticed before.

Today he’s wearing joggers—gray ones.

A dark gray hoodie.

No hat.

He’s worn one the other times I’ve bumped into him, and the sight of his shaggy, jet-black hair is startling.

Face the front and don’t look directly at him...

His thighs are thick—anyone with decent sight can see that. Those sweatpants are doing him a lot of favors.

Dammit!

Why are these desks pushed so close together? Aren’t we supposed to be six feet apart?

I try not to notice his jawline.

Try not to notice that he smells like cologne.

Try not to notice his large hands. The big palms.

The fingers that cover his entire laptop keyboard when he spreads them...

Whatever.

I stare straight ahead.

“Do you have a pencil?”

What kind of question is that? He’s using a laptop.

“No.”

“Got any candy?”

What? “No.”

“Protein bar?”

“Would you be quiet?” I hiss, glancing around to see if anyone is listening to the exchange. “Some of us want to hear what she has to say.”

Up in the front of the room, Professor Rebecca Robinson is discussing the customer service aspects of business communication and how they’ve been impacted by the creation of social media, how it’s evolved.

At least, that’s what the header of her PowerPoint presentation says.

Beside me, Dallas roots around in his laptop sleeve and fishes out a pair of black-framed glasses. Slides them up the bridge of his nose as ovaries in every corner of the world explode.

Fine.

Okay, so he’s good-looking, big deal.

The fact is, he’s a dickhead, and I have firsthand experience.

“Have you heard from Diego lately?” he whispers next to me, all the while tapping notes on his laptop as if he were paying attention to the lecture. Meanwhile, I’ve barely heard a word Professor Robinson has said.

“No.”

He snorts. “Doesn’t surprise me. No backbone.”

Tap, tap, tap.

He types awfully fast for a guy with such large hands.

“You ain’t messaged him, have you?”

“Also no,” I mutter out the side of my mouth. “But thanks for giving me the benefit of the doubt.”

“Hey, the guy didn’t give you any closure. It wouldn’t surprise me if you’d texted him.” He taps away. “I’d be pissed.”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

Mostly wasn’t. Mostly it was ego and pride.

“Which means you didn’t actually like him.”

“Don’t analyze my relationship like you know anything about it.”

He chuckles. It’s low and deep and quiet enough that only I can hear it because his arm is touching mine and I can feel his body vibrating with the motion.

“I know nothin’ about nothin’, don’t you worry.”

“Clearly.”

He shifts in his seat, causing my laptop—the one I’ve barely touched—to jerk to the right.

Dallas barely notices.

Throughout class, I have to smell him.

Hear him *breathe*.

Hear him *sigh*.

Dallas Colter coughs four times; twice I suspect were on purpose to agitate me. Bumps his knee into mine no less than a dozen times, hogging a majority of the leg room.

Pushes those glasses up his nose with the tip of his forefinger, which isn’t as much annoying as it is *distracting*.

He looks like a cross between Clark Kent and some Marvel superhero but in gray joggers and a hoodie.

When class ends, I avert my eyes from his sweatpants-clad ass, pretending to pack my backpack, hoping he’ll leave before I do.

No such luck.

Dallas dicks around longer than I do.

Doesn’t say a single word as I dodge my way out of our row, stepping around classmates, gunning for the exit.

I let out a relieved puff of air when the wind hits my face —

“Why are you walking so fast?” The voice is deep, but I don’t turn around. “Ryann.”

Oh my God, why is he still here? I refuse to turn around and acknowledge him.

“I swear I’m not following you.”

He’s most definitely following me.

My hands go up in mock defeat as I continue on my way, Dallas falling in line beside me, his long stride matching mine, step by step.

“Right. It’s a weird coincidence that you keep having to tell me that. You’re lucky I don’t have my taser or I’d zap you with it for shits and gigs.”

I can’t flip my hair because I’m wearing a damn winter hat.

I stomp off, determined to ignore him, which is impossible because...

“I have a proposal for you.”

He is like an irritating fly buzzing around my head.

I want to smack it and make it go away.

“A proposal? Sorry, I’m too young to get married.” I chuckle, laughing at my own joke, the cold air creating puffs out of my warm breath.

He rolls his eyes. “Har, har—you’re funny.”

“What?” I smirk. “I’m a catch.”

“Such a catch that Diego dumped you.”

I stop in the middle of the sidewalk, prepared to spar.

“Screw. *You.*”

“No, thanks.”

Letting out a frustrated grunt, I stomp down the sidewalk, fumbling for the app on my phone my parents said I could charge to their credit card so I won’t have to walk home after work when it gets cold.

I also need to get away from this megadouche.

“I’m kidding.” He’s still behind me, hustling to keep up.
“Ryann, stop.”

He hasn’t said please, so I don’t heed him, bossy asshole.

“I might need your help.”

Might need my help? For what?

I roll my eyes heavenward instead of stopping like he wants me to. Didn’t his mother teach him any manners?

We walk on.

At the busy street separating campus from Frat Row, I look both ways so I can safely cross, hoping he’ll abort his mission and go on his merry little way.

Students who recognize Dallas give us our space but also stare, visibly trying to decide if they should interrupt us to greet him and at the same time wondering what the hell we’re about, glaring at one another.

“Please.”

Ah, there it is.

“What do you want?”

He glances around, sneaky like. “Maybe not here.”

The crosswalk signal turns green, so I step down into the street, hoofing it across, Dallas right behind me.

I walk to the next block before whipping around. “What?” I toss my hands in the air, exasperated. “This is as far as you go.”

I look him up and down and immediately regret it.

“I have a proposal for you.”

“Uh-huh, you said as much before you insulted me.”

One would think this would be the perfect opening for him to apologize, but no—not him. *Not Dallas Colter*, almighty campus legend. God forbid.

Yeah.

The jerk is a campus legend according to the Googling I've done despite myself, every glowing word grating on my nerves like nails on a chalkboard.

The Most Anticipated New Player in NFL History...

Dallas Colter, following in and filling very large footsteps...

Dallas Colter, Most Eligible Bachelor on Campus...

And my favorite headline from *Sports Illustrated*?

One-Track Minded: Dallas Colter Hasn't Had a Girlfriend Since Middle School

As if. Give me a break.

"When did I insult you?"

"Um, when you said Diego dumped me."

"But he did."

"I know that!" I'm practically stomping my foot on the ground like a child. "You just don't say that to someone's face."

"Okay. So you'd rather I lie to your face?"

I slash my hand through the air. "How about we don't talk about it? Like, at all."

He huffs. "You brought it up."

Oh my God. "What do you want? Get to the point."

He stares down his nose at me, brows rising.

Dallas has a knit winter hat pulled down over his hair now; it covers his ears and the mop of glorious black hair I now know exists.

"Are you always this moody?"

Moody?

"Sorry I'm not falling at your feet like everyone else does."

“Everyone does not fall at my feet. That’s absurd.” He crosses his arms and leans against the traffic pole, legs crossed at the ankle, looking way too casual.

“You were saying?” Let’s move this along before my boobs freeze off.

“I know you just got out of a relationship.” He punctuates this statement with an eye roll. “And I’m not saying I’m looking for one, but I have this agent—”

“You have an agent?”

“Yes.”

“For what?” Seriously. He’s what, twenty-one? I work at ROSCOE + MIMI serving pancakes during the lunch shift and he has an actual agent?

“Um...to negotiate contracts and to get me through the NFL draft?”

“Oh.”

Dallas uncrosses his legs. “Anyway. He’s worried I’m not approachable enough.”

“Approachable enough for what?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Team owners or whatever.”

I smirk. “You are kind of a grouch.”

He frowns. “No, I’m not.”

“Uh, yeah you are, but okay.”

He stares me down. “As I was saying, Eli was telling me that a lot of teams want someone family-oriented. So they can relate to their fans.”

“Uh-huh.” Losing interest and still waiting for this crosswalk to turn green, I begin digging through my backpack for a piece of gum. Wish I had a pair of mittens or something to keep my hands warm—suddenly they’re freezing cold.

I pop gum in my mouth and rub my palms together, willing the lights to change color.

“...help me out for a few weeks.”

“Huh?”

“Are you listenin’ to a word I say?”

Listenin’.

So Southern.

“I heard half of what you said, most of it was ‘*blah blah blah are you listenin’ to a word I say.*’”

Finally, the light changes and we’re not alone any longer, students at the corner joining us on our walk across the street.

We’re like a small herd of sheep.

Dallas Colter is still trailing after me, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up over his hat. Shoulders slouched. He either doesn’t want to be recognized or he’s freezing cold. Can’t tell which one.

I halt at the end of my road, determined to ditch him.

“You’re like a bad rash I can’t get rid of.”

“Like herpes?”

“I take it you speak from experience?”

“Nope.” Dallas doesn’t have the decency to look insulted by my barb. “Can we stay on the subject, please?”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you’re on a mission.”

“If I weren’t on a mission, would I be following you?”

My chin tilts up in triumph. “So you admit it—you’ve been following me.”

“I can’t help it if we’re goin’ in the same direction.”

“Has anyone told you how annoying you are?”

“Nope, just you.” His toothy grin spreads across his entire face. “About a dozen times now already.”

The fact that this doesn’t bother him is seriously so obnoxious. Any other guy would have taken the hint. Any other guy would have walked off with his tail between his legs and left me alone. After all, I’m a girl who was just dumped, and I deserve a moment of reprieve from bullshit like this.

“It’s about to be a dozen and one...”

It’s then that I notice a small cluster of students—two girls and a guy—watching the exchange between Dallas and me, phones out and being held in a way that tells me we’re being filmed bantering. Or our photo is being taken.

“Do you see that?” I tilt my head, nodding in their direction.

“What?”

“Those three—I think they’re taking pictures of us.”

“Oh yeah. Happens all the time.”

I falter in my steps. “Well. Not to me.” I don’t like it. “Could you walk away from me, please, so they stop?”

Git.

Go!

“Not before we’re done with our talk.”

That’s right—he’s been trying to hit me up for a favor. Blah blah blah *are you listenin’ to a word I say.*

“All right.” He has my full attention. “Say what you want to say.” *But be quick*, I want to add. *Be quick so I can go home, get warm, take a shower, and study...*

“I need a favor.”

“Right. You mentioned something about your agent.”

“He thinks I need to find a respectable, responsible girl to hang out with. Well, be *seen* hanging out with,” he amends.

“And?”

“And...” He bobs his head around as if that explanation was enough and the head bobbing is its punctuation.

“*And...?*” Are we really doing this? Is he going to finish his sentence or are we going to stand here bobbing our heads?

“I figured...”

“Figured what?” I think my eyebrows are raised, but my face seems to be frozen solid. Numb.

Then.

The reality of his words sets in.

My palms go up. “No. No, no, no.”

“It will be easy! You’d be like an escort.”

“An escort? How lovely.” I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. In fact, my intelligence level just dropped a few points from hearing him speak.

“My agent said I’m not allowed to pay you.”

“Did he?” Wow. Dallas Colter sure knows how to lay on the charm when he’s asking someone out. “Dude, you don’t need my help pretending to be your girlfriend—you need actual help from an *actual* professional.”

He is nonplussed. “Who said anything about pretending to be my girlfriend? I just need a responsible, respectable girl to hang out with.”

“And you think that’s me?”

“Well.” He looks me up and down, gesturing vaguely. “Obviously.”

I have no idea whether or not to be insulted. Again.

“Define ‘responsible and respectable’.” I cross my arms, my feet rooted to the cement sidewalk.

Not sure how I feel about being described as respectable by the hottest guy on campus, for a number of reasons.

1. It’s not sexy.
2. That’s not how I would describe myself if I had to choose adjectives.
3. It’s not sexy.

“You know—you’re chill. Kind of like...” He’s clearly struggling to find the right words. “Okay, so if this were a movie, you’d be the wholesome girl next door. Except the girls who live next to our house barely wear any clothes and keep trying to sleep with my brothers. So the opposite of that.”

My face turns scarlet red; even in this cold weather, I can feel it burning, and only one thought enters my brain.

Dallas Colter is the worst.

nine

dallas

“I’m not saying the blond neighbor girl is a gold digger, but I am implying it.”

– Dallas to Drake

DUDE, what is her problem?

“Why are you making that face?”

She looks like she tasted a sour lemon before turning her back and walking away from me—again—backpack in tow, hell-bent on ignoring me. Whatever, nothing new. Ryann Winters doesn’t like me.

We’ve established this.

From the second I broke up with her on behalf of my dipshit teammate, she’s held a grudge. As if any of this were my fault.

“Why are you pissed? The fact that you don’t want to sleep with me is a *good* thing.”

Honestly, she should be flattered.

“I was giving you a compliment.”

Her laugh rings out into the cold. “You’re hilarious.”

“I’m being serious. I need your help.”

“The last thing you need from me is my *help*, Dallas Colter.”

Suddenly, that’s the only thing I seem to need.

Why am I so determined to get her to agree to this? Why am I taking this as a challenge when it isn't? What do I actually care if she pretends to be my girlfriend?

I'm going to get drafted—the odds are in my favor.

My father played for the Texas Steers. My brother plays for the Texas Steers. They are legends.

I am a legacy.

I will be a legend.

Not to brag.

“I didn't take you for a wuss, Winters.”

She snorts. “Oh, please—do you think reverse psychology will work? I'm not an eight-year-old boy.” Her keys are in her hand and she's punching at the keypad on the front door of her apartment complex. “Are you coming in or not?”

“You're inviting me in?” Shit. I take it as a good sign that she hasn't told me to fuck off and that she's willing to negotiate. “Sweet.”

“Only because I don't want to be seen with you outside. I don't want my neighbors to see us.”

That's a first. A woman *not* wanting to be seen with me? Who would have thought.

“Gee, thanks.”

Her apartment is on the ground level, and I'm surprised by how good it smells when I step inside. Ryann dumps her bag on the floor by the door, kicks off her black boots, and walks around the small island to stand in the kitchen.

She braces her elbows on the countertop, leaning forward and watching me.

“What does it entail?” She holds up her hand. “*Not* that I'm interested.”

“I don't know.” My answer is honest. This whole plan is very half-assed; I've thought none of this through. “Probably going out in public a few times, being seen on campus.” I

pause. “Maybe hanging out at my place to keep the neighbor girls from wantin’ to hang out.”

Ryann turns and opens a cabinet, pulling out a cup. “You want something to drink?”

“No, thanks.”

She nods, filling hers up with water. Takes sips from it, watches me over the brim.

“Not to give you a big head over this whole thing, but why can’t you just pretend to date someone who might actually want to date you?”

Duh. This answer is easy. “Because they might actually want to date me, and I don’t have time for that shit.” The same way Diego Lorenz didn’t actually have time for that shit. Because our time is dedicated to working out and football practice and doing things that *really* matter, like trying to get drafted into the fucking NFL.

We’re not regular students.

“And you think I won’t want to actually date you?”

Is she being serious? “Uh, no. You’re the last person who wants to date me.”

“How do *you* know?” Her lips are pursed, color still high.

“You just broke up with your boyfriend, one you didn’t give a shit about. The last thing you want is to date someone new.”

I can see her considering my observation, which is just a guess, but she doesn’t know that.

Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out Ryann Winters wasn’t bent out of shape when I dumped her for Diego. She was more pissed at me for doing it out in the cold.

“Why were you datin’ him in the first place?”

Her chin rises slightly. “That’s none of your business.”

It’s really not, but that doesn’t make me any less curious.

“Why do you take up so much space?” Ryann blurts out, the question coming out of left field.

“Why do I take up so much space?” I repeat.

“You’re...” She motions around with her hands. “Huge.”

I mean, yeah. That’s one of the reasons I do what I do and have the opportunities I have.

“Sorry?” Ain’t nothin’ else to say.

“That was a rude thing for me to say.” Ryann goes about taking off her hat and puffer coat, busying herself hanging them in the closet located right off the kitchen.

It’s a tiny apartment, suited for only one person, and I try to look around rather than look at Ryann as she putzes, try to notice the beige sofa in the living room, the television on the wall, the knickknacks she has placed on the hutch beneath it.

Try to look around at her stuff instead of at her.

The long hair.

The long legs.

The tight black leggings.

The opposite of what the neighbor girls were wearing the other day; then again, they were going out on the town to party and not coming home from class. But it’s not uncommon for any number of the student body to show up to class in midriff-exposing tops, tanks, shoulder-baring shirts—even in the winter.

Ryann is wearing an oversized plaid flannel that would easily fit *me*.

She could be wearing a plastic garbage bag for all I care.

“Why is it a bad thing that you haven’t been seen dating anyone?”

“Because teams want men who are loyal and faithful and shit like that—so fans buy tickets.” According to Eli, anyway. I don’t see why it matters, but I suppose I’m paying him to give a shit about things I don’t give a shit about even when it

becomes a huge pain in my ass. “A good girl would help with that.”

The words ‘good girl’ are out of my mouth before I consider how she’ll react to them.

“So your agent thinks being seen with a good girl will be good for you.”

“No. It would be good for my *reputation*. Big difference.”

Ryann stares me down, and I notice the color of her eyes.

Green.

She takes an apple from a bowl and bites into it, chewing. “I disagree.”

“Disagree with what?”

Her shoulders move up and down, but she doesn’t explain herself, only takes another bite of the apple.

Swallows.

Her lips are covered in juice.

I try not to notice.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Her eyes are narrowed as we regard one another across her small counter.

Spell broken, she’s pissed at me again for staring at her, though can I help it if I’m staring at the juice dripping down her chin?

Wipe that shit up.

“I was staring because I can hear you chewing.” Not exactly a lie, but I can’t tell her that her lips are too plump and juicy for me not to be staring.

Ryann covers her mouth with the palm of her hand, embarrassed. “Can you? I’m sorry, the apple is crunchy.”

Clearing my throat, I pull out one of the two bar stools at the counter and sit myself down, knees hitting the underside of the counter because I’m too tall for the height of them—a common problem.

“Stop worrying about it.” I frown. “Let’s get back to business.”

Ryann stops chewing, hip leaning against her kitchen counter. “All right. Shoot your shot.”

Shoot my shot? Who is this chick?

Doesn’t she know I’ve never had to *try* to shoot my shot at anything, that things just...come to me? Football not included, although that does come pretty naturally to me. I’m talking about girls, obviously.

Dudes, too, if I’m being honest.

“You’re not willing to help me out? What if it’s only for a few weeks?”

“Well, obviously it’s only for a few weeks,” she scoffs. “I’m not going to waste my time *pretending* with you and blow an entire semester fake dating when I could be dating someone else for real.”

She’s got a good point, but it still blows my mind that she’s so against it.

Ryann Winters clearly has no social-climbing ambitions.

Dating me—even as a farce—could catapult her to the top of the campus food chain, right alongside yours truly. In fact, it could make her a social media sensation if she played her cards right. I’ve seen the girlfriends of athletes get modeling contracts and endorsements, seen them blow up on Instagram simply by dating a player.

Ryann doesn’t give a shit.

She bites into her apple again with a loud chomp.

“No one is asking you to ‘blow an entire semester’ fake dating me.”

This whole conversation is making me regret asking her; she’s taken my ego down so many notches I’ll have to take a stroll through the student union later to hike it back up again. *Damn.*

“I just wanted to be clear. You seem like the type of guy who takes advantage of a situation.”

“Me? Why would you say that?”

“Um, the fact that you’re sitting in my apartment after I asked you to stop following me is a clear indication that you take advantage of situations so they’re in your favor. You could just keep showing up at my job like a normal person or sitting on top of me in a class full of empty desks.”

I clamp my mouth shut for a moment. Then, “Was that sarcasm?”

“Wasn’t sure you picked up on that.” She continues chomping on the apple.

“Thanks, I’m not a complete idiot.”

She’s giving me *I’m not so sure about that* vibes, but at least she doesn’t say the words out loud. I’d be insulted otherwise.

Butthurt, if you will.

“Can I ask you something?” Ryann asks.

“Yup.”

“Not to sound like a brat, but...what would I be getting out of this? Why should *I* help *you*?”

Er.

Good question—wish I had an answer.

“Nothing, I guess.”

For a second, Ryann says nothing, only looks at me from across the small kitchen. Then...

She busts out laughing.

Laughs until she’s hunched over, giggle fits, the whole thing. The kind of laugh where she kind of sounds like she’s wheezing.

I wonder what she could possibly find so damn funny.

“I’m sorry.” She inhales, waving a hand in my direction. “That just struck me as so...” *Laugh.* “Damn...” *Laugh.* “Funny.”

“Which part?”

“The part where you admit I get nothing out of it.” She’s still waving her hand around, the other clutching the apple like a baseball, wiping a tear from her eye. “I mean, at least you’re honest.”

“It’s one of my virtues.”

“Is it?” She can barely say it without wheezing.

“Sure.”

It takes Ryann a few minutes to come back down to earth, the giggle fits subsiding, the tears of laughter fading.

“I already said I can’t pay you—my agent said it violates like, so many rules.”

“Plus, I’m not an escort, so...”

“I don’t know how I’d make it worth your time,” I admit. “I mean, besides the fact that you’d be hanging out with me? And everyone wants to hang out with me.”

“Because you’re so much fun?”

Fun? Eh, no.

Popular, yes.

“I mean, I won’t lie and say I wouldn’t be curious, though I’d probably be bored out of my mind.” Ryann studies me. “How are your grades?”

I shrug. “Good. I got a 4.0 last semester.”

She squints. “But are those regular classes or like, the fake classes they put athletes in so they pass and barely have to use two brain cells?”

I smirk. “Regular classes. You know, like the ones you’re in.”

Smart-ass.

She scratches her chin. “What’s your major?”

“Business.”

Ryann nods.

“What’s yours?”

“Mass comm.”

“Sounds like a copout. What does that even mean?”

“I want to be in marketing or advertising.” She thinks for a second. “What will happen to you if the football thing doesn’t work out for you?”

I scoff. “The football thing is going to work out.”

“But what if it doesn’t?”

“It will.” I pause. “Why are you arguing with me?”

Ryann has the balls to shrug, nonplussed. “What if you twist a knee or break your leg and can’t play? Then what?”

Obviously, I’ve thought of that, but she doesn’t have to freaking throw it in my face.

It’s something most athletes think about on a regular basis, if not every single day they step out onto the field. *Will this be the day I strain a muscle? Will this be the day I tear a ligament? Will this be the day...?*

“Let’s pretend I don’t get hurt and I play football, and I’ll only need my business degree when I retire, mmkay?” Jesus.

“Fine.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “So you want to hang out and be photographed with me so everyone in America gets warm fuzzies when they think of you and wants to buy posters with your face on them for their kids’ bedroom walls.”

I nod. “Yes.”

I have no idea what’s going on behind those green eyes right now, but when she opens her mouth, I’m so sure she’s going to tell me what I want to hear.

She doesn’t.

“I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll think about it? *That’s it?*”

This chick needs to enter a poker championship.
Expression blank, she regards me. Blinks a few times.

Takes a bite of apple.

“Yup.”

ten

ryann

“I asked my client today what he’s looking for in his relationship. He looked at me and said, ‘A way out.’”

– Dr. Laura Winters

DALLAS NEEDS my help in more ways than one.

The guy is a mess, and I’m not just talking about this “need” to be seen with me in public to help his career.

Ridiculous.

A veritable commitment-phobe if I’ve ever seen one, as was made clear when I Googled him and learned a bit about his past. He had a father who was cheating on his mother—in the public eye, no less—which would surely sour a young guy on monogamous relationships.

“Not to sound like a brat, but...what would I be getting out of this? Why should I help you?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

Nothing.

Yet there he sat, wanting a favor from a girl he’s known all of one week, barely. He had no problem breaking up with me for my boyfriend, and he has no issue asking me to play house with him for who knows how long, all to benefit him.

He’s done me dirty twice now.

The ego on this guy.

He wasn’t helping Diego for the money; he did it because he was bored and because he was at the theater across the

street anyway and it was barely an inconvenience to walk over and wait for me.

The nerve.

I'm mad all over again, stewing over the nuances of our meeting. The discovery that we're in the same business class.

I'll give him some credit—the dude doesn't give up.

He needs my help all right, but not because he needs a pretend girlfriend.

Nope.

Dallas Colter needs to be taught how to treat a woman, and as the daughter of two relationship therapists, I'm the perfect person to do that.

eleven

dallas

“If you don’t remember her name in the morning, just take her to Starbucks.”

– Drake giving dating advice to his brothers

“YOU DID WHAT?”

My brother’s eyes are wide, cereal spoon halfway to his mouth.

“I invited Ryann Winters to the house.”

Drew sets his spoon down; it clanks in the glass bowl. “Wait...isn’t that the chick you dumped?”

“It is. How do you remember her name?”

“Because—she has a dude’s name. Those you don’t forget.” He resumes eating, holding his spoon like it’s a tiny shovel.

I set my own bowl in the sink. “Anyway, she’ll be here tonight to hang out, so don’t act like an asshole.”

“Me? Since when am *I* the asshole? You’re the one who holds that title.”

My brother isn’t wrong; he isn’t actually an asshole. In fact, Drew is one of the coolest, most decent dudes I know—and I’m not just saying that because he’s my brother.

“All I’m saying is, don’t say anything stupid.”

I invited Ryann over to discuss the terms and details and to get her to commit to helping me, once and for all.

“Me? Say something stupid? That’s Drake’s department, and he isn’t home yet.”

“Where’d he go?”

“To Tiffany and Shannon’s.”

“Who are Tiffany and Shannon?”

Drew gives me a blank stare. “Um, the neighbors? You’ve only met them a few dozen times.”

If that’s the case, it’s because they’re like three flies on shit, buzzing around, taking every opportunity they can to weasel their way inside this house. Some girls seem to think if they fuck one of us, their magical golden vagina will be the meal ticket to a life of shopping, expensive bags, and VIP suites.

“Are they blond?”

“Two of them are.”

“They all look the same to me.” And they all want the same thing, too. “Maybe they should try a new approach.”

Drew shrugs. “Seems to be working on Drake.”

“Thought he was smarter than that.” He shouldn’t be letting them lead him around by his dick.

“Well, he’s not.”

I thought I taught him better; I thought Duke taught him better. We took all our cues from him, the three younger Colters, watched him wade through the bullshit as a high school student, as a college football player, then as a rookie in the pros. Our older brother struggled to find a relationship—a genuine one with a genuine girl—so...he was never really in one.

And neither was I.

Drew and Drake? Yeah, they’ve had girlfriends, but nothing serious.

Oftentimes when they begin dating someone and the girl realizes how little free time we actually have to spend with

them, well—that’s when the fights and arguments begin.

“I was going to order pizza later. You want some?” Drew asks with a mouth full of cereal.

“No, dude, we just had pizza. Get something different.”

“Want me to order something from Gleeson’s before that girl gets here so you can pretend you made it from scratch? Steaks or something?”

Gleeson’s is the only nice steakhouse near campus and has cost an arm and a leg the few times we’ve been there, usually when Duke comes to town and we want to go somewhere nice.

“No, jackass. I’m not having her here so I can impress her.”

“Then why are you having her here?”

So I can convince her to do the impossible: pretend to be my girlfriend so I look like a better human being.

“I told you, we’re just hanging out.”

“Like—hanging out in the living room?”

“No. Probably in my room.” Obviously, we’ll want privacy so we can talk about shit. I don’t need my two brothers sniffing around while I’m trying to formulate a plan, certainly don’t need them repeating the plan to someone who’s going to sell the story to the press.

“So you have a girl coming to hang out, in your room, you’ll probably close the door even though nothing is going on, and you don’t want to serve pizza but you also don’t want steak.” Drew pauses. “Anything else we should know?”

My jaw clenches. Does he have to say it like I’m doing something shady? Or wrong? Or whatever he’s implying in that tone of voice?

He may be my younger brother, but he’s judgy as fuck sometimes.

“It’s not just any girl—it’s Ryann.” I roll my eyes.

“*It’s not just any girl, it’s Ryann,*” he mimics. “What the hell does that mean?”

No idea. “It means we’re just...hanging out. We’re not even friends, so get your mind right.”

“Not even friends? Then why are you hanging out?”

Dang.

Okay, little brother’s got me on a technicality, and I have no good way to respond.

“Leave me alone,” I finally growl, in no mood to keep circling around, barely in a mood to have company.

I hit the gym first. Shooting the shit with my teammates, Ryann’s name never crosses Diego’s lips. A good sign, yeah?

There’s no way I’d be able to explain using her to Diego.

Using her?

Huh.

Yeah, I guess that’s what I’m doing. I figure as long as she’s in on the plan, it’s no big deal, right? Open and honest, no matter what the honesty looks like—that’s my style.

Tearing off the Band-Aid. Cutting to the chase.

No one—including her—can accuse me of being misleading. Does everyone like the honesty? No. Those people can *suck it* because I’d rather be upfront than a passive pussy, Diego Lorenz being a shining example of one.

Imagine being such a pussy you can’t break up with your own damn girlfriend.

How fuckin’ embarrassing.

My watch buzzes, and I glance down at it, Ryann’s name lighting up the tiny digital screen.

Where am I going? I need your address.

To the point—I like it.

I give her my address and a brief description:

Roger that. See you in ten.

I wonder if she's walking, then wonder if I should offer to pick her up, which defeats the purpose of her coming over to negotiate, doesn't it?

Still, half of me thinks it's the polite thing to do. The other half of me doesn't give a shit. Ryann is a big girl; she'll put on a scarf if she's cold.

I hear the doorbell exactly ten minutes later.

Hear the sound of my brother opening the door, Drew's enthusiastic greeting. "Hey, come on in. We've heard a lot about you."

What the fuck? He hasn't heard shit about her, other than her name and that bit about Diego paying me to dump her. Freaking Drew, meddling in my business already.

Get your ass down there then.

Too late. There's a hesitant tapping at my door; it seems to glide open of its own volition. Then Ryann is standing there in her hat and mittens and, "Dude, why are you so bundled up? It's not like it's squallin' out there."

Ryann ignores me, plopping down into my desk chair and twirling in it toward the window.

"Cute room."

Cute room? There's nothing cute about my room and she knows it. Gray walls, gray bed, black furniture. It's masculine, and I found most of it on the curb last year after everyone on campus was throwing out the shit they didn't want.

Look at me, saving the environment by living sustainably!
Ha.

"So." Ryann crosses her arms and her legs, looking ridiculous in her bulky jacket. "Let's cut to the chase."

"Er. Want to take that coat off first? It's distracting me."

“How is *my* coat distracting *you*?”

“You don’t look comfortable.”

“What do you care?” she volleys back.

“I don’t.”

“Then why’d you bring it up?”

“Are you always this argumentative?”

Ryann removes one of her mittens and tosses it on my desk. Holds up one finger. “One, you invited me over.” She holds up a second finger. “Two, you’re the one who’s distracted by my jacket—not me. How does that make me the argumentative one?”

She raises a very valid point.

“Fine. Never mind.”

Laughing, she spins around in my desk chair for the second time, removing the other mitten as she does.

“Never-you-mind is right.” She sighs, plucking the hat off her head and setting it on top of her mittens. Ryann goes about smoothing her hair, the flyaways, hand running down the long layers. Her fingers rake through it like a comb, and I hadn’t realized how long it was until this moment, mostly ’cause I’m trapped in my bedroom with her.

And the color...

Not black but not brown. No idea how I’d describe it, and I have no idea why I’m bothering to try considering it hardly matters what she looks like or what color her hair is. Or her eyes. Or the fact that she has freckles across the bridge of her nose.

She’s not freezing cold for once.

That’s the only reason you’re noticing this shit, Dallas, I tell myself.

Obviously, Ryann Winters is attractive—it’s not as if I hadn’t noticed she’s cute. I have eyes, don’t I? But if we’re

comparing her to the chicks next door, it's an entirely different kind of attractive.

Is it?

Or is it the fact that you've only ever seen her bundled up?

Whereas I've seen the neighbor girls in bikinis, for fuck's sake. They're such thirst traps...

Stop.

Focus.

Black leggings peek out of the bottom of her coat, high gray socks yanked up mid-calf. She's removed whatever shoes or boots she had on to be polite, but she needn't have bothered because the last time my brothers or I cleaned the floors or swept was never.

This girl does not like to be cold...

"So," she begins, lifting a bronze trophy off my desk and studying it this way and that. Reads the small print at the base. "Third Place, Pee Wee League." Ryann glances up. "What is this?"

"Pee Wee League."

"I can see that, but what sport was it? Tee-ball?"

Baseball? Don't insult me. "No, football."

"How old were you?"

"I don't know." I know exactly how old I was. "Maybe seven?"

Six.

Why am I lying? Jeez.

"What's so special about this trophy that it's the only one you have in your room?" She sets it back down on the desk. "Can't be the only trophy you have."

No, it's not the only trophy I have.

In fact, I have dozens. And yes, that's the only one that seems special because when I was six years old... football was

fun. I enjoyed it.

It was my first year playing; it wasn't work or a chore or an expectation set by my father, and coming in third place was still the best day of my life.

After that? Shit got real.

We weren't playing for bronze; my father wanted gold. First.

He wanted me to be the best, my brothers too. Can't forget about them.

His four athletically gifted sons.

Duke was always the golden child, but then again, he's the oldest and was the first to do everything purely because of the hierarchy. While Dad was on the road, it was up to Ma to get us to practice, make sure we threw the ball around the yard, ran drills. Never missed a game, not even when we were sick.

Dad wouldn't allow it.

Sure was a hovering control freak considering he was only around in the off season and barely even then.

"Earth to Dallas..."

"Huh?" I look up at Ryann, lost in my own thoughts.

"I said, what's so special about this trophy that it's the only one you have in your room?"

Shrugging, I walk to the other side of the room and stand next to the bookshelf. "Guess it's because that's the first trophy I ever got. You always remember your first."

First win.

First trophy.

First kiss.

First fuck.

Some of them are special for other reasons, ha!

"How is it that we keep getting off subject?" Now she's fiddling with the pens and pencils in a ceramic coffee mug on

my desk—I don't drink coffee, but for whatever reason, a friend gave it to me one Christmas.

“Sorry if I offended you using facts and logic.” Ryann reads the quote on the side out loud. “Whoever gave you this knows you well.”

Why does it feel like we're suddenly in close quarters?

Is it hot in here?

What's the thermostat set at?

Strolling to the bed, I sit on the end of it while Ryann touches all my personal shit, with zero regard for my space or privacy.

“You look so serious.” Ryann spins the chair so we're eye to eye, then randomly decides to unzip the jacket and peel it from her body.

Hangs it on the back of my chair as if she'll be staying a while.

Lord help me if my eyes don't travel from her face to her neck to her chest.

Tight white long-sleeved shirt, so tight I can see the outline of her bra beneath it, the decent-sized tits.

What the fuck.

Ryann stands, readjusts herself, tucks one leg under her ass when she sits back down, looking mighty comfortable, tits bouncing the entire time she's getting situated.

Of course they are.

Great tits.

Small waist.

Long dark hair.

Freckles.

Fuck my life. Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

Not a good idea? Are you kidding me right now? You have a job to do, Son, and no woman is going to stand in the way of

that—especially one you don't give a shit about.

My father's voice echoes in my mind, words I heard him say to my older brother over and over until it was ingrained in not just Duke's mind but mine as well.

Ryann's hands hit the top of her knees. "Okay, down to business. I have studying to do tonight, and I'm sure you do, too."

"Yeah." Not really. "I already told you I need someone to be my cover."

"Your beard." She winks. "*Got it.*"

"No. *Not* my beard." What the hell is her problem? "I'm not in the closet."

"It was a metaphor." I can see her holding back; she's tempted to roll her eyes but, for once, refrains. "Chill."

I've been told to chill before, but never by a woman, and never one sitting in my own damn house, twirling and spinning in my desk chair as if *my* entire body wasn't vibrating with nerves and tension and whatever else this feeling is in the pit of my stomach.

Hunger, probably.

"Anyway." I glare at her. "I figure it can't be that difficult. We'll go out in public a few times, let people take pictures of us. I can get you tickets to a game if you want."

Ryann nods. "That works." Squints at me. "I needed to come over for you to tell me this? You could have texted me this information."

My mouth opens.

Closes.

"I figured you would be a hard sell and I'd have to do a song and dance to get you to agree."

Ryann yawns. "The fact that I'm even here should be telling. As if I don't have other things I could be doing, like picking up an extra shift at work."

“You said you have to study.”

“Right. Only because I’m here. Otherwise I could have picked up an extra shift at work and then gone home to study.”

I don’t believe her but *whatever*.

“One thing I did want to circle back around on was...” Ryann crosses her long legs. “You said I wasn’t getting anything out of this, and we both know that’s bullshit.”

“I’m not allowed to pay you.”

“Who said anything about being paid? Don’t insult me.”

I didn’t think she was the type to toss her hair, but here she is, throwing it over her shoulder, affronted by my mention of money changing hands.

“You have to do better than that.”

What is she talking about? “I’m not sleeping with you.”

I mean, I could.

She’s not horrible to look at and I haven’t fucked in a really long time (three months at least), so sleeping with her in exchange for—

“Are you trying to make me barf?” She laughs, uncrossing her legs. “Be serious for a second.”

I thought I was.

“The thought of sex with me makes you want to barf?”

What the actual fuck. Never in my damn life have I ever had—

“Kind of. You’re not exactly my type.”

Ryann Winters is so full of shit right now. I can’t believe she can sit there and say that with a straight face. Not her type my *ass*. I’m everyone’s fucking type!

Even guys want to have sex with me!

Who is she kidding?

“I’m not your type,” I deadpan, disbelieving. “What is your type then?” Diego Lorenz, the dude with the limp dick

and weak spine?

“Why do you care?”

Because I care, goddammit! Not because she’s my type, either, but still.

“I don’t.”

“So then we can move on.” Her arms wave in the air nonchalant-like.

We could move on, but *I don’t want to*. I want to know what her type is because clearly Diego was an experiment—one that failed.

“Give me something on your list.”

She seems to consider this. I can see her mulling it over in that brain of hers. Taps her fingers on my desktop, lets out a long, taxing sigh.

As if I’m inconveniencing her. “I guess he must be family-oriented.”

“Meaning what, he likes his family?”

“No. I mean, he has to want kids at some point. I want all the babies.”

Ryann cradles her stomach as if she were already pregnant, rocking back and forth in the chair.

Shit.

She’s thinking of that crap already, at this age? How the hell is anyone supposed to know if they want kids or not? We’re twenty-one, what if my balls get smashed while I’m playing and are rendered useless?

Suddenly, she busts out laughing. “Oh my God, you should see your face, it’s so pale.” More laughing. “Did you think I was serious?” An eye roll. “We’re twenty, for crying out loud. I’m not thinking about kids.”

“I knew that.” I scoff, face going from blanched to bright red.

“You’re an asshole, do you know that?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m the asshole here.” She laughs again. Clears her throat. “Since you’re obviously having a hard time coming up with some terms of endearment, let me think on it for a second.”

She spins some more, clearly needing to be busy in order to think.

“Knock-knock, is everyone decent?” My brother shoves through the doorway without waiting for a reply, barging in and standing in front of my guest like a warrior returned from battle. “Hi.”

She glances slowly up at him. “Hi?”

“I’m Drake.” He nods in my direction. “His brother.”

“I can see the resemblance.”

“I have a twin.”

Ryann’s brows shoot up the same way everyone’s do when they find out Drake and Drew are identical. “You’re a twin?”

“It’s my stupid human trick.” The giant lummoX won’t leave. “What are y’all up to?”

“Oh, you know, hammering out terms so we can fake date or whatever it is he wants me to help him with.”

Drake’s eyes get wide and he turns toward me. “Say what now?”

“It was Eli’s idea.”

“Should she be tellin’ everyone?”

“Rule number one,” I tell her, “this is a secret.”

She pulls her fingers across her mouth like she’s zipping them closed. “Got it. My lips are sealed.”

“You blabbed to the first person who asked what we were doing hanging out together!”

Fuck, am I going to be able to trust her?

“I mean...I’m gonna have to tell my best friend at the very least.”

“That’s not how we keep secrets.”

“Oh, come on, she isn’t going to believe we’re actually dating.”

My brother snorts. “Weren’t you just dating that twat Lorenz? Why wouldn’t people believe you have a type, and that type is football players?”

I hold my hand up. “Do not get her started on what her type is.”

“I want babies. Lots and lots of babies.”

There she goes again, rubbing that flat belly of hers, round and round.

What a brat.

Drake gets pale. “Is she bein’ serious?”

“No, she’s not being serious.” I swat gently at her. “Ryann, knock it off.”

She begins laughing all over again. “You two are so easy! Gosh, if this works, it’s going to be fun.”

Drake is glancing between the two of us, back and forth, then back again.

“I thought it would be fun comin’ in here and giving you a hard time, but I see she’s doin’ that enough for both of us.” He holds a hand in front of his crotch. “Actually, I think my dick just shriveled up and my balls went back inside my body from all this baby talk.”

He backs out of the room slowly, taking hold of the door handle and pulling it closed.

“No, don’t go!” Ryann whispers softly. “Come back! Jack, come back...”

I can do nothing but stare.

twelve

ryann

“This whole house smells like testosterone and bad decisions.”

– Winnie, the first time she visited the frat house

“SO NOW WHAT?”

We came down into the kitchen after Dallas declared he was so hungry he could ‘eat the ass out of a dead skunk’ and needed a snack.

Fine. Not a problem.

It’s not like I want to be holed up in his bedroom anyway. A bedroom that’s tidier and cleaner than I imagined it would be—not that I imagined it. It’s just...different than mine. Masculine.

Organized.

Bare, if I’m being specific. The bed was made, only had a few pillows. The bedding matched the bookshelf, the bookshelf matched the desk, the desk matched the bedding, all one shade of dark gray.

Light gray walls. White sheets.

Stark but oddly sophisticated for a dude’s room?

I lean against the counter while he roots through the fridge, and I try to glance around him so I can see what’s inside. Not because I’m hungry, too, but because I’m nosey. What do guys keep in their fridge?

I was never at Diego’s, so I wouldn’t know.

Milk.

Chocolate milk.

Orange juice. Gatorade. Water.

Pasta? A loaf of bread.

Cartons of takeout. Cannot tell what they contain.

No beer.

No alcohol.

Interesting...

Why did I think he was a rip-roaring drunk?

Probably because he's huge and can likely hold his liquor?

"I dunno," Dallas says from behind the refrigerator door, his ass sticking out as he bends at the waist, riffling through the fruit drawer. "We hang out."

He makes it sound so easy when I know it won't be. "What about girls on campus who are going to want to pull my hair out?"

Dallas goes still. Stands and turns to look at me. "Girls are gonna wanna pull your hair out? Why?" He's holding a green apple and a container of tortellini.

Shrugging, I tap my fingernails on the counter behind me. "Because they'll think I'm actually dating you and they'll see me as competition."

He laughs. "Girls aren't going to try to pull your hair. That's ridiculous."

I shake my head. "You think so, eh? Winnie is dating a guy named Rookie, and he's the president of his fraternity. Once when they were at a bar, some girl grabbed her by the ponytail and yanked—her extensions almost fell out."

Dallas pops the lid off the pasta. "I've never heard of a girl physically assaulting another girl because of who she's dating."

"Just because you've never heard of it doesn't mean it doesn't happen."

He seems to consider this as he opens the door to the microwave, puts the container inside, and sets it to heat for one minute. Dallas leans against the counter, mirroring my pose, watching me.

“How ’bout this: if someone makes you a target, we’ll handle it. Or you can quit.”

I appreciate that he says WE and not HE will handle it, as if I wouldn’t be able to deal with a situation like that on my own.

I stand straighter. “Also, I’d like to talk to you about something.”

“What?”

“The reason I’m going to agree to this stupid idea of yours. Which is dumb, by the way.”

“You think this is dumb—noted. I’ll let my agent know.”

“Please do.” I nod. “Anyway. The reason I’m agreeing to all this is because I think you need me.”

Dallas pulls a face, turning to retrieve his pasta from the microwave now that the timer has gone off. “I think it’s already been established that I need you.”

“Yes, but not in the way you think you need me.” My chin tilts up, and I feel a wave of self-righteousness coming on. “I’m going to teach you how to be a decent human.”

The myth, the man—the legend—stops forking his pasta so he can sharply glance up at me, frown lines marring his handsome face.

There, I said it. He’s handsome—*are you happy now?*

Ugh.

“You think I’m not a decent human?” He grunts, stuffing his face and talking around the tortellini. “Of course you don’t.”

“Maybe that was a bit harsh. All I meant was you’re the kind of guy who would go up to a complete stranger and break up with her.”

“I’m not the kind of guy who *would* do that. I’m the kind of guy who *did* that,” he clarifies, as if the matter needed clarifying.

I sigh. “That’s the point. You can’t be doing shit like that.”

“I can’t?” He chews. “Why?”

“Because it’s...” I flounder. “It’s...*wrong*.”

“How was it wrong? I was helpin’ a friend.”

Helpin’ a friend.

That twang, tho.

He might have been helping a friend, but when the target of that helping was me? Not cool.

Not okay.

“I don’t think anyone has ever told you to think before you speak.”

“Sure they have.” He nods. “Plenty of people.”

He’s such a liar. I have a feeling he got away with murder growing up.

“Name *one* person who has told you to think before you speak.”

Dallas twists his face up as he comes up with an answer. “My nanna.”

“I don’t believe you.”

This guy is unbelievable.

To busy myself, I hoist myself up so I’m sitting on the counter.

I glance around, checking the place out.

The kitchen is tidy too. Only one dish in the sink, a bowl and a spoon. Toaster on the counter but no crumbs. Coffee pot.

The appliances are outdated and yellow, a shade that was popular fifty years ago and never since, but they obviously work and don’t need replacing. Besides, college guys don’t

give a crap about the color of the stove and dishwasher the same way a girl might.

Suddenly, one of the brothers waltzes in—I think it's the same one I was introduced to before 'cause he's wearing the same shirt, but didn't he say he's a twin?

“What are you two doing?” He roots around in the basket on top of the fridge. Plucks a bag of chips out and tears it open, popping one into his mouth.

“Dallas was hungry.”

He nods. “Y'all mind if I have company?”

Dallas's fork stops halfway to his mouth. “What kind of company?”

“Girls next door.”

Dallas groans. “Yes, I mind.” Sets the container of pasta down. “I mind a lot. I want to get to sleep early. Wasn't plannin' on listenin' to them fake laughin' at your dipshit jokes all night.”

“Neighbor girls?”

He puts the top back on the tortellini. “Yes, neighbor girls. They're like flies on shit, always buzzin' around.”

“Well, it's not like the two of you are going to entertain me. And besides, they're right next door—I don't even have to give them a ride over.”

How convenient.

Drake studies me.

His brother.

Scrunches up his face as he does it. “It's weird that the two of you are hanging out,” he announces. “Considering you can't stand each other.”

“Why would you say we can't stand each other?” I ask. “Dallas is awesome.”

Both of them laugh.

“You’re so full of shit.” Drake stuffs a handful of chips in his mouth.

“Of course we like each other,” Dallas says. “Look at us, gettin’ along perfectly fine.”

“Is that what you keep tellin’ yourselves?”

Dallas nods. “Yup.”

“Well. I’m going back upstairs. Holler when the girls get here.”

He tips his head before he walks out of the room, a stereotypical Southern salutation I find charming and cute.

“Over my dead body am I gonna let him know when those cleat chasers get here...” Dallas mutters.

I cross my arms, legs dangling over the counter. “He brings up a good point. If we can’t convince your brother we like each other, how are we going to convince anyone else?”

“Because people believe what they want to believe because that’s what we tell them to believe.”

Huh? Come again? “Did that make sense?” I add the words up in my brain, even counting on my fingers like it was a math problem. “Eh?”

“It made sense, trust me.”

“Well, your brother isn’t wrong. We don’t have the chemistry to pull this off.”

Dallas looks insulted. “Don’t have the chemistry to pull it off?” he repeats. “Since when don’t I have chemistry?”

“I said *we* don’t have chemistry. I’m talking about the sexual kind—we get along okay, but it’s not like I want to *bone* you.”

His jaw drops. “You don’t want to bone me?”

“Oh, please—not every girl wants to roll around in your sheets. Give me a break.” I snort so loud his eyes get wide. “You already knew that.”

Or not.

“Maybe we should practice faking it.”

“Faking what?”

“I just told you—*chemistry*. Don’t you think we should at least look like we’re into each other? A little?”

Dallas regards me, shifting on his heels, and for a brief moment, I wonder if I’ve made him uncomfortable or said something confusing, like I’ve spoken in another language he doesn’t understand.

He can dish the truth out, but he can’t take it.

“Yeah,” he says in that lazy Southern drawl. “We should at least look like we’re into each other.”

“Good.” I hop down off the counter. Now is as good a time as any to start doling out the little lessons I want to teach him—like emotional awareness and subtlety, beginning with the fact that he doesn’t have to blurt out everything in his brain.

“Let’s get started.”

thirteen

dallas

“Honesty is the key to a solid relationship. If you can fake the honesty, you’ve got it made.”

– Eli Cohen

RYANN DOESN’T WANT to bone me.

Ryann doesn’t want to bone me?

Why does this grate on me every time it comes up?

I’ve never had a girl use that word before to describe sex, but nothing about Ryann Winters surprises me anymore.

“Don’t you think we should at least look like we’re into each other? A little?”

Jesus. Every time this girl is within ten feet of me, her words make my dick and my ego shrink twenty sizes. It’s the opposite of the Grinch—instead of my heart, it’s my cock that should be growing.

“How are we supposed to practice?”

Seriously, I’m curious. How are we gonna do that?

I at least don’t mind looking at her nice tits and perfect round ass and the cute way she gets irritated. Or the way she’s constantly rolling her eyes as if she cannot fucking stand me. Doesn’t she know if she keeps doing that, her eyes will get stuck in the back of her head? Least that’s what my mama always said.

“I don’t know.” She thinks about it. “Try hugging me. Let’s see how that goes.”

“Huggin’ you? What good’ll that do?”

She holds her arms out wide. “Just hug me and quit arguing.”

I walk into her embrace, have to lean down because she may be tall, but she’s not nearly as tall as I am—most people aren’t, except for my brother Duke, who I can look dead in the eye.

When our bodies press together and her arms wrap around my waist, something happens to the inside of me. A shock? Tingles?

I shiver despite myself.

Ryann pulls back, shaking her head. “Ugh, nothing.”

Nothing? She felt nothing?

Not a shock, not a tingle?

What the fuck...

“Yeah, nothin’,” I repeat for lack of anything more clever to say. “Now what?”

“Try flirting. Like, what’s your best move?”

“My best move?” I scratch my head. “It’s been a long time. Normally I...” Take a girl back to my room and fuck her? There isn’t much small talk; both she and I know what we want, and the only thing I want from anyone is sex. Even that’s been few and far between, and I haven’t hit on anyone in the bars since...well, shit, I can’t remember.

“Hello?” Ryann is waving her hand. “Seriously, Dallas, it’s not that hard.” She stands up straight, hip hitting the counter behind her. Picks up a glass and holds it, glancing at me and fluttering her long lashes. Bites down on her bottom lip.

“Hey,” she finally says. “My name is Ryann.”

“I know.” Why is she telling me this?

She smacks my arm. “I’m role-playing! Pretend we haven’t met yet.”

“But aren’t we supposed to be practicing flirting?”

“This is flirting. Role-playing is flirting.”

“It is?”

She groans, frustrated. “Use your imagination for once, would you?”

My imagination? Not sure I have one of those. Probably haven’t used it since I was six and playing dragon slayer in our huge yard with my wooden sword.

Fine. If she wants me to use my imagination, I will.

“Hey, sexy, come here often?”

Ryann hesitates. “Out of the gate you call me sexy? Dude. No.”

“Why can’t I call you sexy?”

She sighs, setting the glass on the counter. “First of all, that’s gross.” It is? “Secondly, you don’t know me—you can’t just call me sexy like it’s my name. And asking if I come here often...what are you, Joey from *Friends*? No.”

Jesus Christ.

No wonder I hate dating—there are all these rules.

“Do it over.”

I squint at her. “Are you always this bossy?”

“No, but you need my help, remember?”

“How could I forget when you keep reminding me?”

Behind us, the doorbell rings. A few moments later, the sound of my brother stomping down the stairs; I hear him open the front door. Hear the feminine voices, the high-pitched greetings that sound forced and fake. *Those chicks don’t give a flying fuck about my brother...*

“Oh good, an audience.” Ryann smiles. “Okay, now pretend we’ve been out a few times. Try to act like you’re comfortable around me because we’ve been alone.”

“We have been alone.”

“Like *alone* alone.”

I raise my brows. *Alone* alone? “Is there a difference?”

When we hear the sound of my brother and Tiffany and *whatsherface* getting closer, Ryann shifts so she’s standing beside me in the kitchen, hip touching mine.

She turns to face me, face tilting up. Rises up on her toes and presses her nose into the side of my neck. “Mmm, you smell good.”

My dick twitches at the contact.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Flirting,” she coos in a voice I’ve never heard before, fingers tracing the pocket of my T-shirt, making my nipples hard. “Is it working?” She laughs. “If it matters, you *do* smell really good.”

She doesn’t back away.

“Thanks. I showered.”

Ryann laughs. Runs her hand over my pec muscle. “Wow. Do you work out?”

“Are you being serious?”

She giggles. “I was kidding—obviously you work out, but wow. You’re *so* strong.”

She sounds like every single girl who has ever touched my body, rubbed my arm, grabbed my bicep, copped a feel with or *without* my permission.

I can’t decide if she’s fucking with me or not.

Probably, considering she’s told me a million times she’s not interested, isn’t sexually attracted to me, I’m not her type, and we lack chemistry.

Still.

There goes that dick...

At the same moment it twitches in my pants, further confusing the situation I’ve created, Drake is ushering the two twits from next door into the kitchen.

The three of them stop short.

Three sets of eyes gaze at me, move down my body, over to Ryann.

“Oh, hello.” Ryann greets them cordially as if she didn’t know they were descending on us. “How’s it going?”

“Hi.” The newcomers regard her warily from the doorway. I catch the blond one touching my brother at the waist to get his attention back on her and not on Ryann and me...

...as Ryann slides her hand across my back and around my waist, resting her palm on my ribcage.

I glance down at the top of her head.

Sniff it.

Apples and flowers...

Like a limp cock, my arms hang at my sides, unable to move.

Meanwhile, my brother’s eyes volley back and forth from my face—to that hand on my ribs—to my face.

I shrug at him. *Dude, don’t ask me what’s going on.*

“I’m sorry,” the neighbor girl says. “We haven’t met. What’s your name?”

She doesn’t introduce herself first as she watches Ryann from my brother’s side. I want to flick her away; she’s irritating me already, and they’ve only been in the kitchen two minutes.

“My name is Ryann.”

I notice Ryann doesn’t ask them what their names are, merely smiling politely at my side.

Ignores them to say, “Babe, should we go watch a movie upstairs?”

Babe?

Drake’s eyes widen again.

“Uh...sure.”

I grab a bag of chips from the top of the fridge to occupy myself once we disappear upstairs before nabbing two water bottles, too.

I follow behind Ryann like a puppy when she makes for the second story, hand trailing along the banister. I watch it glide along the smooth wood all the way up the damn stairs.

Her ass—which is eye level the entire way—sashays in my face.

This is her idea of practicing so this bullshit is believable?

Shoot me now.

fourteen

ryann

“I’m single because I’m overqualified.”

– Ryann Winters

“WHAT THE HELL was that all about?”

“What was *what* all about?” I play dumb, knowing exactly what he’s talking about, but I refuse to give in to him that easy.

“The touching. The rubbing.” Dallas levels me with a glare. “You sniffed my neck.”

I shrug, plopping down on his bed. “So? You sniffed my hair.”

His mouth opens and closes. “You’re just going to lie there like that?”

“Lie here like what?” I fan my arms out and spread my legs so I look like I’m making a snow angel in the center of his bed. “Like this?”

Dallas stands over me, gawking like a guppy.

I delight in this new discovery—that big, tough Dallas Colter has no idea what to do with me. Not outside, not in the kitchen, not while I’m in his bedroom. The man-child who pretends to be confident and in control is floundering, and Lord help me, I’m loving every second of it.

My arms and legs flap.

“Knock it off, you’re makin’ a mess of my bed.”

Dallas takes a seat at his desk while I take up the space on his bed, leaning toward the nightstand so I can grab the remote

control for the television mounted on the wall, pointing it at the screen and hitting POWER.

He tears open his bag of chips.

“What do you suppose they’re doing down there?” I muse out loud.

“Nothin’.” He pauses. “Eatin’ and drinkin’.”

“Flirting.” I crawl across the bed and stick my hand into the bag in his hands without an invitation, grabbing a handful and popping one into my mouth. “Also, those girls are definitely wondering what’s going on in here.”

They were shocked to see me standing in that kitchen, that’s for sure.

Probably online, hunting down all my social media. Stalking me, looking for clues.

“Well, the good news is,” I say after lots of crunching, “they definitely fell for our little act.”

We won’t talk about the thoughts going through my head when I pressed my body against his to smell him, put my nose against the throbbing vein in his neck to see how he’d react... we won’t.

No, sir, we will not.

And I won’t be mentioning it to Winnie, either. She would die.

Plus, Dallas asked me not to.

“You can’t be doing shit like that,” he announces, spinning his chair in my direction, legs spread wide as he leans forward and props his elbows on his knees.

I try not to look directly at his crotch.

“Doing shit like what? Smelling you?”

“Yes.”

I nod slowly, trying to wipe the satisfied smile off my face. “Got it. I won’t smell you and you won’t smell me.” I pause. “Smelling leads to no good.”

That gets his attention. “How does smellin’ lead to no good?”

“Smelling and massages almost always lead to sex, so it’s a good idea to steer clear.”

“If that ain’t the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

My arms are folded behind my head as I settle in to watch a reality dating show. “Don’t believe me?”

“I don’t.”

“Suit yourself.”

Dallas only sits there for a few moments before he pulls his phone out of his pocket and begins tapping away at the screen.

“You better not be Googling it,” I warn. “We’ve already established that you don’t believe me.”

“I don’t. But now I have to prove you’re wrong.”

“That won’t be difficult.” I laugh. “I made it up.”

Dumbass.

Dallas tosses his phone onto the bed, and it lands next to me with a thump.

“Why are you like this?” he wants to know, frustrated and digging into the chips.

“I’m trying to help you, remember? Someone has to bring you down to earth.” Then, because I simply cannot help myself, I add, “I feel like your little sister.”

“My little...” His words trail off. “*Sister.*”

“Yeah.” I yawn, oblivious. “Don’t you feel like my older brother?”

I know he doesn’t. I felt his entire body go still when I pressed my boobs into his chest down in the kitchen. I felt his body twitch as I sniffed him, felt him shiver when I ran my hand over his waist and rested it on his ribs.

I wasn’t born yesterday.

Which is why it's so much darn fun to tease him.

Nothing to lose, nothing to gain.

I don't know what I was expecting Dallas to say, but it wasn't the short, clipped "No, I don't feel like your goddamn brother," he mutters through clenched teeth.

Beside me on the bed, his phone buzzes.

I grab it and hand it to him.

He clears his throat, reading out loud. "Yo, since we have a bye week, Schneider is throwing a kegger Friday. Tell everyone." He looks up, tossing the phone back onto the bed. "You free this weekend?"

"I..." I am. I don't normally work nights, and even if I do, it's never very late, not even when they're in a bind, unless I'm covering someone's shift. "What about Diego?"

He and I haven't bumped into one another since our last date, which was at least two weeks ago, and we haven't been in contact since he canceled the next date we had, which resulted in Dallas showing up at my job.

"What about him?"

I gape. "Won't he... Won't it be weird if we show up at a party together after he and I just broke up? And you're the one who broke up with me?"

Those long legs of Dallas's pivot his desk chair. "Considerin' you weren't physical and you were only just *datin'*? No, it wouldn't be weird. And if he's got a problem, it will be my problem, not yours."

It will be my problem, not yours.

I will my body not to shiver at his words, shifting my focus back to the television.

"How long do you think I should stay up here before I leave?"

It's getting hot and stifling in here, more so now that we have future plans that include more fake flirting and pretense

and a possible run-in with my ex...not to mention girls like the ones downstairs. Judgy, grasping girls.

“Reckon it doesn’t matter since I gotta drive you home anyway.”

Mmhmm. Okay.

We both go quiet.

And then...

“So, speaking of Diego...why didn’t the two of you have sex? What’s the deal?”

I prop myself against the headboard and set a pillow on my lap.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but...I have no idea what the answer is to that. I don’t think he found me attractive.”

Dallas snorts. “Bullshit.”

My arms flap up. “I’m not joking. I don’t think he was into me.”

“Well, if you want my opinion, I don’t think Diego is into women in general, but that’s just a theory. So don’t take it personal.”

Did Dallas Colter just tell me my ex-boyfriend is gay? I mull this new information over and over in my brain, adding and deleting details like a puzzle making it all fit. Red flags and signs I missed but now see very clearly.

It would certainly make sense.

Dallas shifts on the chair. “Shit. Did I piss you off again?”

“No.” He didn’t piss me off. He’s given me something to think about. “I’m processing.”

This he understands, head bobbing up and down. “Kay.”

The room is filled with silence both comfortable and uncomfortable; I cannot decide which I’m feeling. Comfortable because neither of us feels the need to say anything more...and uncomfortable because I’m on his bed

and he's a giant and now that I've touched and smelled him, I'm more aware of him than ever before.

I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing or if there's anything to be done about it.

fifteen

dallas

“We won’t know it’s a bad idea until we try it.”

– Drew Colter

WHY DID I agree to any of this?

Dumb idea.

Stupid to ask Ryann to pretend to be dating me, stupid to invite her to this party. Why didn’t I listen to my gut and tell my agent I have enough on my plate and don’t need to add a fake relationship to it?

I texted my brother Duke about this mess, but he hasn’t gotten back to me yet. I know he’s on the road right now, but it would sure be nice to get his insight; of the four of us Colters, he’s the most stable.

His girlfriend is a kindergarten teacher, for fuck’s sake. How much more stable can a person possibly be?

Outside of Ryann’s apartment building, I debate: should I go inside and grab her or wait for her to come out? Perhaps I should get my ass down out of the truck and go to the do—

The front door opens.

There she is.

I sigh, leaning back in my seat, relaxing. Wait for her to come to me.

Crisis averted.

She’s wearing another jacket over a pair of jeans, and I think those are heels but can’t quite tell because it’s dark out

and the overhead lights are total crap.

Should I get out and open the passenger side door?

This isn't a real date...

But still.

Once again, I debate the dilemma for so long Ryann is already pulling the truck door open and hopping up, slamming it behind her. Reaches for the seat belt.

"Sorry, I was gonna come get you, but you beat me to it," I blurt out, explaining away my bad etiquette.

It's dark in the cab of my truck, so I can't get a look at her, but I catch her nod. Catch her tip her head back and lean it back against the seat.

"Ugh," she moans. "I'm so tired."

Yeah, same. My body is beaten down from all the practice and conditioning. I'm drained from waking up early and going to class. I'm drained because I've been eating my meals on the fly and haven't had decent home-cooked food since I was home with my mama this summer.

I don't tell her any of this.

Complaining isn't my style.

"Did you at least eat?" The last thing I want to do is take her to a party when she has an empty stomach; not sure Schneider will have any food, and he sure as shit won't want me digging through his cabinets.

In fact, some people keep actual locks on them so when they throw parties, their stashes don't get eaten—but that's not the point. The point is, I should feed Ryann if she's hungry.

Don't need a drunken mess on my hands later.

"I had a burger at work." She pauses. "And fries." Pause. "And a few chicken tenders."

I shoot her a side-eye. "Do you dip those tenders in anything?"

She nods. "Ranch, usually."

“What about the fries?”

“Ketchup and mayonnaise.”

I nod.

“Why?”

“Just seein’ if we’re compatible in other ways.”

“And what are your findings?”

“Yup.”

Ryann looks out the window as we make our way to Schneider’s off-campus dump—I mean, house. It’s a big home but run-down, and I’ll be honest, no way in hell would you catch me sleeping there. Place should be condemned, but Schneider loves to throw parties, and you can’t very well do that in a house that’s decent.

It would get destroyed.

None of these kids have any respect.

Kids.

Ha.

Young adults, technically, but still, the majority of them act like assholes.

Present company not included.

Schneider doesn’t live far, but I couldn’t very well walk there if I was picking up Ryann, could I?

Too cold.

I park in the driveway when we arrive, party already in full swing if the students spilling out onto the porch are any indication.

Beside me, Ryann groans.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just...I haven’t been to a party in a long time.”

I can sympathize. “It’ll be fine. We’ll stick together, make an appearance for appearances’ sake, and bail in an hour. Deal?”

Slowly, her head moves up and down in agreement. “Do you think we should come up with a few more rules? Just in case?”

“In case what?”

She grins in the dark. “In case you get drunk and get handsy.”

I bark out a laugh. “Handsy? With you?”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, you ass.” Ryann scoffs. “I meant in case...I don’t know—just in case.”

“What kind of rules?”

“One drink maximum? So we don’t get drunk.” She hesitates. “And maybe...no flirting with anyone else inside. It would look bad if you’re trying to convince people you’re dating me.”

“Are you worried I’m gonna flirt with other chicks? What about you flirting with other dudes? That wouldn’t be cool.”

She snorts. “Trust me, I’m not going to flirt with any other dudes.”

“Good. Then we agree, no flirting.”

“With other people,” she clarifies.

I roll my eyes. “Oh, yeah—’cause you love flirtin’ with me so damn much.”

She tosses her hair. “I don’t know. Get a drink in me and I might forget myself for a few minutes.”

My arm goes up, resting on the back of her seat. “Any other rules you wanna lay down before we’re miserable for the next hour?”

Ryann nibbles at her lower lip. “Mmmm...I’d say no touching, but you’ll probably have to at some point to keep up the ruse.”

“Right. Likewise.”

“Right.”

A long, tense, silent stretch fills the truck before Ryann blows out a puff of breath.

“Well. Guess I’ll take this off before we go inside so it doesn’t get lost.”

She twists her body in the passenger seat, zipper whirring down to the hem and coming undone. Wordlessly, she shimmies out of it.

I stare.

An expanse of collarbone and cleavage is on display, and I have no idea where to fucking look. Granted, it’s not as if she’s *naked*—she’s wearing a black, off-the-shoulder top—bodysuit?—tucked into high-waisted jeans.

I mean. I’ve seen bare shoulders and tits before, but...

Whatever.

I glance away.

Indifferent, obviously.

Her tits are of no interest to me.

“I should take my jacket off, too,” I rumble, shrugging mine off in the same way and tossing it to the back seat where it will probably be forgotten until the next time I’m looking for it.

When Ryann opens the door, I notice her shiver, the cold air hitting me at the same time.

Several steps ahead of me, she slows.

Falters.

“I don’t want to walk in first.” Her hand goes to her belly, flattening. “I’m kind of nervous. Don’t judge me.”

Nodding, I take the lead, conscious that she’s behind me so I don’t lose her. I’d most likely take her hand if we were dating in real life ’cause that seems like something a boyfriend would do, but we’re not dating, so I don’t.

Friends? Eh.

Debatable.

It's fair to say it takes us a considerable amount of time to actually get inside the house; the number of people saying hello or wanting to say hello and wanting to chat drags it out *for-fucking-ever*.

Another few minutes to make it past the doorway. High fives and cheers all around. No one has seen me out at a party since school officially began, meaning I haven't been accessible to those classmates who only have the chance to get close to me in class or when I'm not hiding in my room.

"Colter, can I get you a beer?"

I have no idea how to introduce Ryann—everyone is acting as if she isn't there, though she's standing next to me.

Which defeats the entire purpose of her joining me tonight, doesn't it?

Reaching my arm around, I have no choice but to put it around her waist.

"Thanks. Can you grab two? One for me, one for her?"

That's when they notice.

The arm.

The arm wrapped around the girl.

The girl.

Turns out she is wearing high heels and they add a few inches to her already tallish frame; when I glance down, it's down at her boobs, though that isn't where I intended to glance.

Shit.

She noticed.

There's a shit-eating grin on her damn face as she looks around the room. "Now what?"

"No idea." I hate this crap.

Hate the socializing and how everyone acts so fucking excited to see me when they know nothing about me. They want photos and selfies, and that's what we're going to give them tonight.

"Smile," I say into the crown of her hair. "Everyone is watching."

"Did you just kiss my head?"

Is she joking? "No, I didn't kiss your head. I was tryin' to be discreet. Get over yourself."

Ryann laughs, making small talk with the guys from my team, the majority of them she's never met even though she dated Diego—who hasn't made an appearance yet, thank God.

Don't know how I'd deal with that.

"Bro!" A hand slaps me on the back, and I turn.

"Dude," I say to my brother, Drake, who has the neighbor girls in tow.

Why does he insist on hanging out with those two? Jeez, they're nothing but a pair of grasping wannabes. Barely have anything to say, showing up half dressed. Speaking of which, what's with the pair of them at the same time? They're not twins.

What the fuck is that all about?

"Glad you're here." My brother burps. "You can take us home later."

I shake my head. "We're not staying long."

"Awesome." The dumbass grins. "We'll bounce when you bounce. These two hate walking."

"Well, if those two hate walking, then by all means, let me drive you all home..." I quip sarcastically, taking the beers out of a rookie teammate's hand when he brings the cups over, promptly handing one to Ryann.

She sips daintily, foam catching on her top lip.

As we stand there like turds floating in a punch bowl, cell phones are produced and we're caught in the crossfire of duck lips and filters. Not everyone is obvious about it; most of them are stealthy.

"This is so weird," Ryann mutters.

"What's weird?"

She takes yet another sip. "The way everyone is fawning all over you."

Is that what they're doing? I barely notice anymore.

"They're not fawning all over me."

She scoffs. "Yes, they are."

Don't know what to say to that except, "You get used to it."

"I won't have to. This is temporary," she reminds me out of the side of her mouth, cup in front of her lips.

"Well, this is my life." Do I sound bitter? "Welcome to it."

"This will only get worse if you play professionally," she says, as if I didn't already know. As if I haven't already thought about this.

"Gee, thanks for letting me know. I wasn't aware."

Ryann laughs. "How can you stand it?"

I can't.

"My brother does it and so can I. All ya gotta do is mentally prepare to go out in public."

At least that's what Duke tells me. Then again, the dude had to hide out in his girlfriend's house for two weeks before letting the world know he was switching football teams. She wasn't his girlfriend at the time, so the whole situation was like a bad comedy.

"And mentally prepare to come to a college party?" Ryann's brows are raised.

"Listen." My fingers tap along the side of my beer cup. "A lot of these dudes are my best friends and we don't have many

bye weeks, so I think I can tolerate this for one night. I do love these guys.”

Being an athlete, there is an unspoken, unwritten vow of loyalty. We’re a brotherhood that sticks together—yeah, it’s hard explaining it to outsiders, but that doesn’t change the fact that I would give my life for most of these idiots.

It’s for the love of the game.

The party is uneventful and basic: loud music, makeshift bar in the corner. Beer pong in the basement, which has been spraypainted with glow-in-the-dark paint, black lights everywhere. Couples dancing and making out, more so as the hour wears on.

Drake and his posse circle our atmosphere again, my brother constantly surrounded by women. Weird because Drew isn’t, and they’re identical twins...

“Are you flirting with me?” Ryann bats her eyes at my brother when he taps her drink and asks if it’s piss warm yet; she’s barely drunk any of it. Correct me if I’m wrong, but she ain’t supposed to be batting her eyes at anyone but me.

We had a deal.

If it looks like she’s flirting with other people, this thing between us won’t look legit.

“I ask if your drink is piss warm and you ask if I’m flirtin’?” He throws his head back and laughs. “You’re a real gem, Ryann Winters.”

“Thanks.” She tosses her hair. “I know.”

My brother’s groupies are less amused, fake smiles pasted on their spray-tanned faces.

Why does he put up with chicks like this?

Jeez, I don’t want to date anyone, but if I did, it wouldn’t be someone grumpy and jealous who wanted to tear another girl’s hair out because I was talking to another female.

Un-fucking-believable.

“I’m glad you dragged this lazy P-O-S out of the house,” Drake tells Ryann. “He hasn’t been out this year yet, been hidin’ in his room like a hermit.”

“That’s because I’m trying to stay focused,” I shout at him over the loud, blaring sound system. “The only reason we’re out is because Ryann painted her toes pretty like and wanted to show them off.”

The lot of them look down at her feet, and sure enough, hot pink toenails peek out from a pair of black platform heels.

“They do look pretty,” my brother tells her, grinning over his beer cup. “Cute.”

Ryann wiggles her toes. “Once again, I thank you for the compliment.”

“Drake.” One of the girls tugs at the sleeve of his T-shirt. “You want to go play beer pong?”

He shakes his head. “No, I wanna hang out with my brother.”

Her shoulders slump and her mouth pouts.

“What are we doing tomorrow?” he asks me. “Should we brunch before we watch Duke’s game?”

I shrug. “Yeah, we can brunch.”

It’ll be nice to lie low and watch our older brother’s game on a full night’s sleep and a day off, rather than watching it completely exhausted and half-asleep.

“Brunch?” The girls perk up.

“Yes. It’s a tradition—just the three of us.” Meaning: not you, or you, or the brunette who for some reason didn’t make an appearance tonight.

Probably being cock-blocked by these two brother stealers.

The girls pout.

Ryann? Doesn’t seem to care—not that I would expect her to. She’s only along for the ride because she’s doing me a favor.

My date yawns.

Head tips to the side. In an unusually affectionate move, she rests her cheek briefly against my bicep and yawns again.

“Ready to go?” I ask down at her.

“Sure.”

“You guys leavin’? I feel like we just got here.”

We did almost just get here. “Think I’ve seen enough. The music is too loud and the beer is warm.”

Tepid at best.

Drake stares into his cup. “Piss warm, eh?” He sets it on a nearby table. “We’ll come with you—I want to order pizza. You don’t mind giving your little brother a lift, do ya?”

Yes, I mind.

I mind a lot.

Drake drapes his arm over the blondes’ shoulders. “Your little brother and the twins.”

“The twins?” Ryann asks.

“We’re not actually related.” One of them giggles. “He just calls us that because we’re always together.”

“Right. Yeah, no, I got that. I was just confused for a second.”

Because it’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever fuckin’ heard, that’s why.

I grunt. “I’ll give y’all a ride home, but you’re sitting in the back seat.”

She giggles again, eyeing me up and down as if Ryann weren’t standing there beside me. “I love it when you say y’all. You sound like you’re from the country.”

“That’s ’cause we are from the country.” A sprawling ranch in Texas, a few hundred acres of land surrounded by fencing, filled with roaming cattle and the occasional hay bale.

I grapple for Ryann's hand and lead us to the door, our escape taking much longer than our arrival did, everyone wanting to say goodbye, give hugs, slaps on the back, take selfies to prove they partied with me.

I call it the Goodbye Tour 'cause no one can just leave; it's gotta be a gosh-dang production.

Still. The online tagging will be good—it's the very reason we came tonight, so I don't really mind it, making a mental note to shoot my agent a note about it so he can check out the socials and direct teams and scouts to them.

We look about as humble as apple pie, smiling pleasantly at those around us.

It feels fake because it is.

Ten minutes later, I'm behind the steering wheel of my truck, a place I consider an oasis to block out the noise. Except it's packed full of people, one of whom won't shut her yap.

"Are you spending the night at the house tonight?" the blonde—Tiffany—asks Ryann as she climbs into the back seat with my brother and the other chick, the three of them buckling their seat belts, three adults stuffed back there like sardines.

No one answers.

"Hello." Tiffany rudely waves her hand in the air between the front seat and back seat, palm hovering above the center console. "Are you spending the night at the house tonight?"

I tilt my head and narrow my eyes. Why does she give a crap where Ryann is spending the night? Why is she even asking? The neighbors have never spent the night at our place. Why does she care if Ryann is?

Ryann's head shakes as if she was lost in thought. "I'm sorry, were you talking to me?"

"Yes." Tiffany rolls her eyes.

"Oh. Um." She pushes some hair behind her ear. "Not sure yet." Shrugs. "I like my sleep, know what I mean?" Laughs.

“This one here snores like a freight train and gets nighttime sweats, so...”

Snores? Nighttime sweats? What the fuck! “I do not snore.”

I don’t.

“How do *you* know?” The imp is grinning, daring me to tell the entire group of them she couldn’t possibly know whether I snore or not because she’s never slept with me.

“Because I would know.”

“Didn’t you tell me once that you almost had to wear one of those masks because of your apnea or whatever it’s called?”

“Ew.” Tiffany wrinkles her nose. “You have to wear a mask to bed? That’s so weird.”

“Yeah,” Ryann goes on, “so like, sometimes I like to just sleep in my own bed so I can sleep. Otherwise it’s like sleeping next to Darth Vader, and I’m not really into *Star Wars*.”

My jaw drops.

For once, I’m left speechless.

“You should totally spend the night tonight,” they say at the same time.

“Why?” Ryann cocks her head to the side and laughs.

Tiffany’s mouth guppies—as if she weren’t expecting Ryann to challenge her on something so simple. As if she were expecting her to agree because she was being put on the spot.

“Because...we’re going to spend the night, and it’ll be fun.”

Come again? Since when do these two spend the night at our house? This is either a new development or a power struggle to show Ryann who has the upper hand and the most access to the three Colter brothers.

“Fun?” Ryann isn’t taking the bait. “Fun for *whom*?”

Tiffany, for all her confidence, pouts in the back seat. “Like, I thought you were dating. There are a thousand girls at this school who wouldn’t hesitate to spend the night and here you are, going home to sleep because he snores?”

I cannot believe she has the balls to say shit like that to Ryann’s face—and in front of mine, no less.

The nerve of these chicks.

I’m going to have a talk with my brother about getting them gone—like, gone, gone. That’s for damn sure.

Nothing I can do about it now, though.

sixteen

ryann

“A blow job is better than no job.”

– Winnie

I CAN'T BELIEVE I was peer-pressured by Drake Colter and his two minions to spend the night, all for the sake of pretense.

Peer pressure isn't even a thing in my book.

My parents raised me to believe it comes from within and I shouldn't let anyone make me feel pressured to do anything, yet here I am in the front seat of a truck, heading for a slumber party and a night of pretending.

Dallas owes me for this...

This goes above and beyond the call of duty.

Drake Colter knows damn well I'm not actually dating his brother for real—he knows I'm Diego Lorenz's ex-girlfriend, too. There's no doubt in my mind about it.

That shady brat cornered us on purpose.

The entire truck ride he kept commenting on how funny it's going to be bumping into me in the bathroom in the middle of the night, telling us he'd make us waffles and mimosas for breakfast.

“We don't have a waffle maker,” Dallas pointed out.

“Pancakes, then.”

“Oh, I love pancakes,” Tiffany said, putting her hand on his leg. She was the one who had her hand on one brother but her eye on another.

Dallas.

The grand prize for them all, and I could see she was only going to settle for so long before making her move.

And Lord help me, I have no reason to be jealous—no reason at all—but I found myself saying, “Yeah, I could do pancakes for breakfast,” much to my surprise and Dallas’s. He gave me a side glance complete with brows shot into his hairline and an open mouth.

When we were finally alone in his bedroom, he closed the door and said, “You don’t have to do this. Don’t matter to me if you stay or not. I don’t give a fuck what those three think.”

“But what about my pancakes?” No one ever makes me breakfast unless I go to the diner.

Dallas actually laughed. “Fine. Spend the night.” He gave me a once-over, not looking directly at my boobs. “I might have a shirt that would fit you.”

“I guess I could wear clothes to bed.” I peeled off my jacket, hanging it on the back of his chair.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I usually don’t wear anything to bed.”

“But...” He swallowed. “What if there’s a fire?”

What if there’s a fire? I laughed. “Guess we’ll see what happens if there’s ever a fire.”

Dallas disappeared into his closet, emerging a few minutes later with a child’s T-shirt.

He threw it at me. “This’ll do.”

I held it against my body; the small shirt would barely cover my thighs.

“Whose is this?”

“Mine.”

I inspected it more thoroughly. “Two Bro Lawn Care.” There is a number fourteen on the back.

“Played in a rec league back in middle school. The neighbor’s landscape company sponsored the team.”

“Ahh.” I smiled.

...and that’s the short version of how I ended up lying across his bed in this skimpy little T-shirt and my baby blue underwear, totally comfortable; after all, this shirt contains more fabric than a swimsuit does.

Dallas, thank God, changes into a bro tank and boxers, and I’m graced with my first look at his bare arms, tattoos and all.

Tattoos? Those are a pleasant surprise.

I try not to stare, but damn, his biceps are huge.

“So now what do we do? Do I sneak out the window later after everyone is asleep?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It wouldn’t kill you to actually spend the night.” He shoots me a look. “I don’t snore.”

“That was pretty funny. Admit it.” Those girls looked semi-horrified when I announced that not only does Dallas Colter snore, but he wears a breathing machine to sleep.

Dallas stares at me from across the bed. “You tired?”

“No.” Not even a little.

“Me neither.”

Air crackling, I let out a puff of air. Roll off the bed and walk to his bookshelf, bending at the waist to peruse the board games. Glance over my shoulder at him.

“Should we play a game?”

He removes his eyes from my bare ass. “Play a game or watch a movie, take your pick.”

I study the games, finger trailing along the boxes. Cards Against Humanity, truth or dare, Scrabble, Monopoly—the usual suspects. Chess. Candy Land.

I pull truth or dare from the stack and hope for the best.

Toss it on the bed and rejoin him, grateful he has a king because there’s plenty of room to spread out so we’re not in

each other's space.

Dallas barely fits on the mattress, but I fit just fine.

Removing the top of the box, I go through the deck of truth or dare cards to make sure they're all facing down, separate the truths from the dares, then set them in the center of the bed.

"Ladies first," my host tells me, indicating that I should take a card. "You want a truth or a dare?"

"Let's start easy." I lift a truth card off the top of the deck. Read it out loud. "What are three of your biggest turn-ons?"

Wait.

What?

I reach my hand across the bedding and grab the box top: ROMANTIC TRUTH OR DARE TO SPICE UP YOUR RELATIONSHIP.

"I obviously didn't see that part when I grabbed this game." I laugh.

"I was wonderin' why you picked it when we've barely hung out."

"It was an accident. I swear I'm not trying to get you to get naked or anything."

"Pretty sure there is no dare card for 'get naked.' Then again, I have never played it." He clears his throat. "My pervy younger brother gave this to me as a joke last Christmas because at the time, they were all kind of datin' people and I wasn't. Duke also gave me a sock to jerk off into and a bottle of lube."

My head tips back and I laugh.

"So?" Dallas grins. "What are three of your biggest turn-ons?"

Lord, I don't even know, it's been so long. "I don't want you to think I'm stupid."

My turn-ons have nothing to do with sex and everything to do with intimacy...

The look he gives me pins me to the mattress. "I will never judge you or think you're stupid." He glances down, picking at a loose yarn. "It's not my turn, but if we're bein' truthful...I haven't known you long, but there's no one I respect more than you, Ryann Winters."

Oh, shit.

My nipples get hard, damned if they don't, and I swear my flesh is covered in goose bumps.

I nod. "Okay. Um, my turn-ons...I would say big hands. A deep voice. And someone who listens even when it's not important."

"You talkin' about someone who knows what you like in your coffee even when you don't tell them what you take in your coffee?"

You tawkin about...

What is it about that accent?

"Yes." That's exactly what I'm saying.

Why does it surprise me that he gets it?

Dallas nods. "Cool."

"Your turn."

He worries his bottom lip. "Guess I'll start with a truth, too." Large hand reaches for the stack, plucking the top card off and knocking down the rest of them. "Have you ever cheated on a partner?" He adds it to the bottom of the stack and fixes it. "No."

"You got an easy one."

He grins. "Your turn."

I take a card. Laugh. "What would you buy me if I gave you fifty dollars?"

Oh, the irony!

Dallas laughs, too. “Touché. Okay, let me think a sec.” His head dips as he considers the question, giving me a view of the thick hair at the crown of his head. Head rises again.

“I’d buy you a steak dinner.” I smirk.

“I’d probably buy you underwear with more fabric.” He gets the words out slowly and methodically, dragging his eyes down my body, landing at the apex of my thighs, that little blue triangle of fabric covering my...

I squirm.

Force out a laugh. “Ha-ha. If I had known this was a staycation, I’d have packed a bag.”

“My turn.” His fingers are already on the pile. “Would you take a shower with the other person in the room?” He nods. “Yes.” Flicks the card back onto the bedspread without batting an eyelash.

Yes.

No hesitation.

My cheeks flush.

I take another truth card. “What were your first thoughts about your partner when you met them?” I lower the card. “I assume that means you.”

Dallas nods.

“My first thoughts about you were...that you were tall. And you were in a hurry. I also wondered why you were at the Twilight Theater considering it only plays vintage films.”

“That’s it?”

I shrug. “Yes. That’s what I was thinking when I met you. What did you expect? It was cold and I was *freezing*.”

Dallas grabs yet another truth card. “If your partner kissed you, would you kiss them back?” He tosses the card to the bedspread. “Yes.”

I shiver, averting my eyes, not wanting to look at his arms or collarbone or the muscles on his chest that are visible

because of his loose tank top.

Shit.

I try to shift the focus by taking a dare card, feeling bold and brave and reckless.

“Write something embarrassing that only your partner knows about in a spot on your body that can be hidden with clothing.”

“Ooo, nice one,” Dallas croons, sitting up straighter on the bed. “Markers are in the desk drawer.”

“Fine,” I huff, rising from the bed and pulling open his desk drawer, confident he’s getting an eyeful of ass right now. Bend a bit to make him squirm.

I tap that marker against my cheek, debating my options, an angel and a devil looming on my shoulders, each whispering in my ear.

Be good.

Write something sexy he won’t stop thinking about...

Be good.

Write something naughty...

Back to Dallas, I bend my neck, uncap the marker. Push down the elastic waistband of my skimpy underwear and write KISS ME right above my pussy. Then, I add a tiny arrow pointing downward.

Pull my underwear up to cover the words.

Recap the marker. Set it back on the desk before slowly turning toward him.

“Done.”

I dust off my hands, unable to keep the smirk off my face as I rejoin him on the bed.

“Aren’t you gonna show me?”

His massive body is lying on its side, head resting in his hand, arm and elbow propping his head up so he can watch me.

Should I show him or will it lead to no good?

seventeen

dallas

“Sixty-nine percent of all people find something dirty in every sentence.”

– Drake Colter

“AREN’T YOU GONNA SHOW ME?”

“Show you?” She’s feigning ignorance; Ryann knows damn well what I want to see.

“You playin’ dumb, Winters? So unlike you.”

“Why would I bother showing you what I wrote? It’ll only torture you.” She winks, hair spilling over her shoulders and covering the sight of her hard nipples, the outlines of which I’ve had the privilege of trying not to gawk at since she pulled that shirt on. “Though my goal is to torture you.”

“Torture me? I highly doubt that.”

Except I can’t take my eyes off that blue patch between her legs, knowing there’s something written there in black marker that she won’t let me see. Not because I want to make this sexual, but because, well—what’s the point of writing it if she’s not going to show me?

Rude.

“Read that card out loud again,” I tell her.

Ryann plucks it up between two fingers and reads out loud. “Write something embarrassing that only your partner knows about in a spot on your body that can be hidden with clothing.”

“It’s me. I’m the partner.”

“They mean my actual partner...”

“For the sake of this game, I’m your partner, and we both know it. That’s how we’ve been playin’ it this entire time. No changing the rules now to suit yourself.”

Ryann worries her bottom lip.

I roll my eyes, feigning a yawn. “Suit yourself.”

I reach for another card and pretend I don’t want to see the message she’s written down south. Her voice stops me just as I’m about to palm one.

“You’re so aggravating.”

Never said I wasn’t.

I’m also competitive as fuck. She should know this by now.

I watch with bated breath as Ryann’s finger trails along the waistband of her low-cut cotton panties, back and forth, back and forth...

Is she teasing or is this simply a stall tactic?

Whoa, buddy, slow your roll—of course she’s teasing. Ryann isn’t into you. She’s made that clear a dozen times.

Vehemently.

The fact that she’s lying there in nothing but my tight tee from middle school and those freaking blue panties does nothing but force my eyes to the ceiling so they’re not focused on her tits, which are squeezed inside that shirt.

The bare midriff.

The outline of her areolas.

The long, smooth legs.

If Diego Lorenz isn’t actually gay, he’s the dumbest motherfucker this side of the goddamn equator. Seriously the dumbest asshole I’ve ever met in my entire goddamn life.

Ryann Winters is a wet dream, the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, and she’s teasing me as if she weren’t waving a steak in front of a starving lion—one that hasn’t had a meal in weeks.

And weeks and weeks and weeks...

She crosses her ankles.

My mouth is practically salivating.

I can't for the life of me imagine what she's written, but the curiosity may very well kill me.

"That only your partner knows about." I find my voice to remind her again.

"Oh, very well." She's being demure about it, but I can see the sparkle in her eye. Tension crackles in the air as my eyes move down her torso, over the boobs that don't fit in my tee, over the belly, the belly button, the...

Ryann's index finger drifts lower, dragging down the elastic of her panties.

Lower still.

It's smooth where she's going, smooth, but how much? Shaven, but how much of it?

Above what I'm sure is the most perfect pussy on this planet, she has written, upside down with an arrow pointing downward, the words KISS ME.

No. She. Did. *Not*.

"Does that say kiss me?"

If I wasn't seeing it with my own fucking pair of eyes, I wouldn't believe it. Never in a million years would I believe it.

Ryann looks like a prude.

Sweaters. Jeans. Hats, mittens, and scarves.

Turtlenecks.

She nods, lips curling into a coy smile I wouldn't have imagined she possessed. "Yes."

Kiss me.

Kiss...*it*.

Our eyes meet across the bed, cards still piled between us, creating a weak barrier.

“Truth or dare,” I whisper, voice rumbling.

“Truth.”

“Do you want...” I drag the words out painfully slow. “Me to kiss it?”

Slowly...

Ever so slowly...

Ryann nods, never breaking eye contact.

Yes.

Uncrosses her ankles.

Raises an arm above her head, causing the hem of her T-shirt to ride higher. I’m not staring at the bottom of her tits, but it’s close, so close...

Fuck my life.

Actually, fuck Diego Lorenz and his fifty bucks.

Fuck my agent and his need for me to be more approachable.

Fuck my brother Drake and those two neighboring nitwits who felt the need to shame us into a sleepover.

Why is Ryann Winters suddenly so...

So...

Mouthwatering?

Drool pools in my mouth, and I swallow.

Hands shaking, cock hardening, I move toward her and, with a sweep of my arm, send the pile of game cards sailing before I grasp Ryann’s hips and position her in the center of the bed.

She watches with heavy-lidded green eyes, mouth in an O of surprise.

Those freckles.

They’re not just on her nose; they’re on her arms and legs, too.

Her inner thigh has a birthmark.

I part her knees, bending to kiss the tiny brown dot. Inhale the smell of her soap or shaving cream or whatever this vanilla stuff is she's got on.

My hands look huge skimming the sensitive skin of her pale inner thigh, splaying out when Ryann spreads her legs.

Goddamn if I'm not still shaking as I press my nose up the middle of her pussy, listening for the sound of her gasp.

She wants me to kiss it, and kiss it, I will.

I pull down the underwear so I can read the words myself. See the arrow pointing down, down...

Because, like a good boy, I always follow directions.

I can barely wait to get my mouth on her.

I'm practically—

My door flies open.

“Bro, did you know Drake brought—”

Drew stands there like a limp dick, staring at the scene on my bed, staring at Ryann and me as if he's never seen two people going at it. I know for a fact he watches porn, so I don't get what he's fucking gaping at.

I never even have the chance to yell *Shut the fucking door* before he's stuttering.

“Oh, shit.” Drew backs out of the room, hands in the air like he's surrendering. “Shit, dude, I'm...” He covers his eyes with a hand. “Fuck.”

The door slams behind him, and Ryann and I are frozen, my fingers still poised to pull back her panties and go to town like she wants me to.

Now?

The moment is ruined.

Flipping little brothers. *They're the worst.*

Mood gone, I begin to move away from her, worried she's changed her mind now that Drew came in with his cold bucket of boner killer and dumped it on top of us.

“Wait.”

Ryann is propped up on her elbows, watching me, those full tits moving up and down as she breathes hard.

I glance up, hair falling in my eyes.

eighteen

ryann

“A wet dream is better than no dream.”

– Drake Colter

“WAIT.”

The words leave my lips before I can stop them or think them all the way through.

Wait.

Don't go just yet.

His face is right there between my legs—no need to rush off even though Drew has busted in and ruined the moment. We can still salvage it, yeah? My thighs are still vibrating, my core still trembling with a million quakes—and he's done nothing but press the tip of his nose up my center.

His legs are hiked out, wide shoulders holding my thighs apart quite possibly the sexiest thing I've had the privilege to see.

God, he's sexy, this giant man-child.

Legs like tree trunks and arms just as strong, he's poised in the middle of my spread legs, brows raised, waiting with bated breath for me to say something.

“Truth or dare,” is the next thing out of my mouth because it feels as if we're still playing the game.

His eyes get darker still. “Truth.”

Ugh, I thought for sure he was going to say dare, and I planned to dare him to take my underwear off and finish what

he started.

“What are you thinking right now?” I hate myself for asking a question that’s so cliché, but I honestly want to know what’s going through his head. Maybe he wants to get off me and watch a movie. Maybe he wants to—

“I hope you make a ton of noise when I make you come.”

Oh.

Well then...

I raise my hips.

The massive paw that’s on my thigh slides upward, over my pelvis and over my belly, up over my stomach. Fingers trailing along my silky skin, palm cupping one of my breasts.

Dallas tugs down my panties.

Slides his other hand under my ass, pulling me toward his mouth.

The sheer size of him. The strength.

The warm, wet tongue that licks me up and down while his hand plays with my boobs.

“Oh God...”

He is in no rush.

Licks.

Pulls back to look at me, licking again. Thumb stroking that nub at the top of my folds. Ugh, honestly...so fucking good...

The sounds he’s making are louder than mine, the moaning and grunting—like he’s having the time of his life sucking the pleasure out of me.

Now both his hands are on my hips. Pushing my knees, lifting them so they’re around his neck, face buried. Lips and mouth sucking, licking.

It’s too much.

It’s so good.

So, so... “Oohh...” I moan. Pant. “Don’t stop, yes—right there, right there, yes...”

The best part of it is watching him, the top of his head his large hands holding me down. Spreading me. His nose, pressed into my body.

Shit...

I’m gonna come, I’m gonna come, I’m gonna—

“Oh fuck!” I moan like no one is listening. “Oh God, Dallas, fuck...”

He milks my orgasm for all it’s worth, sucking until I can no longer stand it, pushing his shoulders away from my body, hips and thighs and pussy trembling.

He licks me again.

Wipes his mouth on my inner thigh. “You taste so goddamn good.”

Do I?

I don’t think about my crotch that way; then again, I haven’t had anyone’s face down there, so I haven’t had to worry about what it tastes like.

He readjusts his big body on the bed, and where do you suppose my eyes go?

To the front of his boxer shorts, to the straining, hard dick pressing against the fabric, desperate to play peekaboo through the slit.

I don’t know what to say, how to act while we sit here, my body still coming down from the euphoric high of my orgasm.

Damn, that felt good.

Leaving my underwear pushed past my girl parts, Dallas trails the tip of his finger down to my knee, up to my hip, neither of us making any move to pull my panties back up, although...

“Ryann?”

“Ryann.” He says my name again until I look over at him at his spot on the bed; Dallas has repositioned himself, so he’s leaning against the headboard, pillow on his lap, eyes watching me intently as they’ve often been doing.

“Huh?”

“You said, ‘Wait,’ so I asked what you want me to do.”

I’m on the bed, still lying with my legs slightly parted, the entire daydream nothing but a figment of my own lustful imagination.

Cheeks hot, face flushed, I give my head a tiny shake.

“I kind of have to pee.”

Nice thing to blurt out. *Real smooth and sexy.*

Dallas gives me a berth to climb off the bed, scrambling for the pair of jeans I had on earlier in the evening, stepping into them so I’m not half-ass naked in the ha—

“Don’t bother,” he tells me. “Just stick your head out to see if the coast is clear. Everyone is probably in bed.”

Not likely. It’s still considerably early.

“Um, your brother *just* busted in on us.” Everyone is *not* asleep.

Still, I toss the jeans back to the floor. He has a point. If I’m not self-conscious enough to have pants on in front of him to begin with—I could have put on joggers or something—there’s no sense in throwing jeans on if I’m just going to come back here to take them off again, and the bathroom *is* directly across the hall...

I sneak out.

Pee, wash my face, and use whatever I can find in the cabinet as moisturizer, which is basic hand lotion. Whatever. When life hands you lemons—or in this case, when you’re stuck in a guy’s room with none of your own things—you make lemonade. You march back into the bedroom with your spine straight and chin up because you have nothing to be

ashamed of except suddenly wanting what you shouldn't be wanting.

“No walk of shame for this girl, no, *ma'am*.” I shut the medicine cabinet door with a decisive nod, square my shoulders, and go back into the hall.

Dallas has not moved from the bed. The truth or dare cards remain spread out on the floor, a few of them still on the comforter, strewn about this way and that.

I falter in the doorway, studying him. Wonder what's going on behind those dark brown eyes as they drink me in, top to bottom. Bottom to top.

He's staring, and I don't exactly hate it.

I shiver as I step over the threshold of his bedroom, his eyes on my every move, probably imagining his face between my legs—the same way I am.

“What?” Closing the door behind me, I lock it for good measure before turning to face him, pressing my back against the door.

“I...” He hesitates. “I dare you to take the rest of your clothes off.”

“Why, Dallas Colter, you little horndog. That's also a super aggressive dare considering you're fully clothed.”

He doesn't deny being a horndog. “You miss every shot you don't take.”

“Never hurts to shoot your shot. The only thing I can do is say no.” I'd say...

Oh my effing God! Why am I doing this? Why am I suddenly visualizing myself getting naked with this guy? Him going down on me, demanding to see my boobs?

You want Dallas Colter to go down on you, that's why. You want Dallas Colter to see your bare breasts because honest to God, they're fantastic and you know it. You want to see the look on his face if you take your shirt off.

Really? Or am I just starving for attention because Diego rejected me on so many levels?

A great question to ask my mother, and I make a mental note to do just that as I bend at the waist to retrieve the cards scattered across the hardwood floor, bringing them with me when I rejoin him on the bed.

“Are we still playing truth or dare, or was there something else you wanted to do instead now that the vibe has been thoroughly squashed by your brother?”

He shrugs. “I’m game if you are.”

I nod. “It’s not as if we have anything better to do.” Like, oh, I don’t know—go down on each other? Have sex? Get to know each other better... Perhaps if we were both drunk, we’d be naked by now, rolling around the bed instead of getting trigger shy at the first interruption.

Dallas has his hands behind his head. “Truth.”

“You have to pick a card.”

“Pick it for me.”

Rolling my eyes, I do as he says, adding, “You’re so bossy.”

“So are you.”

Eh. “Zero people have ever called me bossy, but okay, if you insist.”

Lazily, I take in the way his tattoo wraps around the back of his bicep; it must have hurt like the dickens when he had it done. I know how sensitive the area is because that’s where my cousin Amelia used to pinch me when she was mad.

She was such a brat back when we were kids.

The card in my hand reads, “Have you ever peed yourself?”

Dallas sits up, leaning forward. “It does not say that.”

It sure does.

I hold out the card for him to verify, smiling when I set it beneath one of the piles I neatly reshuffled the decks into.

“Well? Have you ever peed yourself?”

“Obviously when I was a little kid.”

I hold the card in the air. “That’s not what this means.”

Dallas considers the question. “No, I’ve never wet the bed or pissed myself being drunk or nothin’. But I have peed in the shower. Have you?”

Have I peed in the shower? “It’s not my turn, so I don’t have to answer.”

“Which means you’ve probably pissed in the shower.”

“That was not an admission of guilt!” I laugh. “God, all I said was it’s not my turn, so technically I don’t have to answer.”

“I thought we were tryin’ to get to know each other.” He nudges my knee with his big toe.

“Are we?” Is that what this is? We’re getting to know each other? “I thought we were up here hiding because your brother’s twins browbeat me into spending the night and I’m only here to save face.”

“That too.”

I pick up a truth card for myself since it’s my turn now and read it out loud to Dallas. “What’s one thing you miss about your partner when they’re not around?”

nineteen

dallas

“You know when your dick tingles the second someone is turning you on? That’s common sense leaving your body.”

– Duke Colter

“OH, THIS ONE IS EASY.” Ryann puts the card at the bottom of the stack. “Nothing.”

Ouch.

That hurts.

Kind of.

“We’re not partners, but would it kill you to say something nice?” The words slip out of my mouth, making me sound needy and overeager for compliments.

Ryann surprises me by not teasing me just then. Instead, she studies me from her new spot on the bed. She’s farther away now, having plopped down on the end after she went to pee, out of reach but still fantastic to look at.

Those tits, though...

“All right, let me think about what I’d miss about you if you weren’t around.” She uses a wayward playing card to tap against her chin, drawing my attention to her full bottom lip.

Major DSL.

Dick. Sucking. Lips.

She would flay me alive if I said that shit out loud, but that’s what popped into my brain; it is what it is. The longer I know her, the more I’m learning.

“I think I would miss your ability to defuse tense situations.”

“What do you mean? Tense situations?”

“For example, I know you didn’t want to drive the neighbor girls back from the party and they were driving you nuts in the truck, so you were direct when they were asking those annoying questions in a way that—she pauses—“leaves little room for argument. Hence, defusing a situation.”

Huh. Never thought of it that way.

Most people—my teammates, my brothers, even my mom—accuse me of being an insensitive prick, not someone who gets to the point, who cuts the shit.

I’ll take her comment as a compliment.

I snatch a card from the truth pile.

“Have you ever stayed in the bathroom longer than forty minutes? If so, what were you doing?” I toss the card down. “Showering and jerking off.”

Boom.

Suck on that.

Ryann raises her brows. “Jerking off in the shower or showering and then jerking off?”

“Wanking in the shower, usually. Less mess.”

She nods.

Is there no tripping this girl up? Nothing I’ve said has shocked her and it’s grating on my nerves; not sure why I give a shit, but part of me wants to see that calm exterior crack.

Ryann chooses a dare.

“Demonstrate your favorite kind of PDA.” She bites down on her bottom lip. “My favorite kind of PDA...”

“You have to demonstrate,” I remind her gruffly, as if she didn’t just read that to me two seconds ago.

“This is a tough one because I haven’t been in a relationship long enough to show PDA.”

She was with Diego Lorenz for two months, which would have been considered the honeymoon phase—my ass that wasn't long enough for him to be holding her hand, grabbing her ass, kissing her in public.

“The clock is ticking,” I tell her, impatient for her to involve me in whatever PDA she loves the most, manifesting some kind of shit—I don't know, a blow job or a French kiss or whatever.

How gnarly would that be?

“I guess my favorite display of affection would be, um... someone holding my hand while we do something basic, like chilling on the couch watching TV. Or maybe just putting my hand on his thigh while we're sitting there—or he's driving. And vice versa.”

That sounds pretty fucking awesome to me, too.

“You're not supposed to tell me, you're supposed to show me.” I'm pressing her, damned if I'm not, suddenly desperate for Ryann to touch me.

Ever since I had my face between her legs, I can't stop thinking about sex and blow jobs and sinking my cock into her pussy. She smelled so fucking good, felt so warm; I bet she was dripping wet.

I mentally force my eyes to stay trained on her face, their penchant for drifting down her body a battle I can't seem to win.

Tits.

Pussy.

Tits...

Ryann moves on the bed, crawls to lie next to me, mirroring my pose: one hand behind the head, the other on a hip. Then, real slowly, that hand on her hip reaches across the comforter and makes contact with my thigh.

A smile forms on her lips.

My eyes move to her hand so close to mine, then go back to her face. Hand. Face. Hand.

It doesn't move, does nothing, just sits there, branding heat through my boxer shorts and warming my skin.

“Your turn.”

Her smile doesn't waver, and her hand doesn't move from my thigh as I reach for a dare card, heart racing.

Clearing my throat, I read it loud and unflinching. “Kiss your partner somewhere other than their mouth.”

Yes.

Yes, yes, *fuck yeah*. Best card ever.

“Is that cool?” God forbid I make unwanted advances, even though we're playing a game.

“Sure. It's just a game.”

Liar.

What a damn liar she is.

This stopped being a game the second I went between her legs and pressed my nose against her pussy.

Ryann wanted me to go down on her as much as I wanted to go down on her; she's just not man enough to admit it. Fuck Drew for interrupting—I can't wait to chew his ass out for busting in unannounced. This isn't Mom's house, for fuck's sake. What did he think I was doing in here, sitting on the floor playing with my LEGOs?

Yes, I still have LEGOs—get off my nuts about it.

“Should I close my eyes for this?” Ryann laughs, teasing.

“If you want to close your eyes, go right ahead, but this won't hurt a bit.”

Ryann drags her hand off my thigh, and the spot is immediately replaced by cold; I can't decide if I should put my hands on her face or just lean in, kiss her on the cheek, and be done with it.

Or.

Maybe I take it slow?

Maybe I take my time and see how she reacts.

Maybe I...

“Dear God, how long is this going to take?” She sulks testily, voice betraying her nerves. “Are you going to stare at me all night or do the thing?”

Stare at her all night?

So dramatic.

Ryann fidgets on the bed, anxious.

“I’m going to do the thing. Be patient.”

Such a brat, but those lips...

Lips I can’t kiss. Them’s the rules, and I didn’t make them. If I kiss her on her mouth, she’ll freak.

Somewhere other than the mouth. Now, where would that be?

My eyes do a once-over, gliding over the side of her neck, her collarbone. Down the fitted T-shirt over her breasts. Maybe I kiss those?

Nah, too soon.

Her jawline? Her bare stomach?

Trying not to appear too eager, I lean forward to focus on her neck. Run my nose along her jawline from her chin to the space below her earlobe, inhaling the smell of her along the way. *Fucking great, that’s how she smells*, and I begin peppering kisses as I make my way back down the way I came.

Trail my nose down the side of her neck.

Ryann’s breath quickens.

Her skin is warm and sweet, and she gets goose bumps when I kiss the exposed skin along the T-shirt neckline.

Next, I press my lips to the indent at the corner of her mouth, one side, then the other.

So soft.

Unable to stop myself, I press my lips against hers, because honestly, it feels like the next logical step.



Ryann

ONE SECOND DALLAS IS DROPPING DELICATE KISSES ALONG MY jawline, the next our lips are pressed together and his tongue is in my mouth.

One large palm settles itself on my neck, thumb stroking my cheek.

Then his lips are on mine, though they're not supposed to be, warm and supple and pressing into mine softly.

Dallas hovers over me as I lie back on the pillow, letting him kiss me, parting my lips so his tongue can slip inside. Cautiously, it explores, mingling with mine.

Everything about it is tentative and slow, unlike the kisses that came before it.

No one has ever kissed me like this before.

Not that I can recall. None of them stand out as remarkable.

Damn shame that Dallas Colter isn't in the market for a girlfriend because now that I've spent a little bit of time with him, my mind is going to that place.

The daydreaming, woolgathering, touch-myself-when-he's-not-around place.

His T-shirt is not made out of boyfriend material.

I'd be smart to remember that.

That doesn't mean I can't love the way his lips feel or like the way his body heat warms me from the inside—does it?

No, ma'am, it does not...

And so, I relish Dallas's hand on my hip as he kisses me, his large body moving so he's between my legs, erection pressed into my pelvis. Silently, I will his palm to roam higher, to cup my breast or sneak beneath my shirt.

Alas, he does not.

He doesn't grind on me or try to remove any clothes, his or mine.

I tamp down my restlessness, pulling my mouth from his. End the kiss so it doesn't go too far or fill me with hope I have no right to feel. I don't want to wake up in the morning and have to convince myself the kiss was *nothing*, so I won't let it turn into *something*.

"Truth or dare," I whisper breathlessly.

Dallas does as predicted and pulls back, moving off me and rolling back to his side of the bed.

"Truth."

He has no card, but there is a question brewing in my brain that begs to be let out.

"Are you a commitment-phobe?"

He rolls so he's lying on his back now, looking at the ceiling. "No, of course not. Why would you ask that?"

I shrug, nibbling my bottom lip. "You just give me commitment-phobe vibes, that's all. Like you have a problem with relationships in general."

"What makes you say that?"

Yeah, what is making me say that? And why do I care?

Dallas Colter is not my problem, but I did say I wanted to help him using the lessons my parents taught me about relationships, communication being the big one.

"It just seems like...if you were in a relationship, you would have no give and no compromising."

He fluffs his pillow, leaning into it again once he's satisfied. "I say what I mean and mean what I say. Is that what

makes you think I have no give and no compromise?”

Kind of, yes. But also, no. “I don’t think your problem is that you’re too bold and say what you want. I think your problem is something else.”

“Who said I have a problem to begin with?”

“The only thing you seem to care about is football. You don’t think *that’s* a problem?”

He snorts. “What else should I care about? I love my family—my brother plays, my younger brothers play, our dad played. Should I be worried about anything else?” He begins a ticking tally on his fingers. “I don’t have a wife, I don’t have a girlfriend, I get good grades, I don’t have to worry about a job. What am I missing, Ryann, that you seem to consider a problem?”

Well, shit.

He sounds so super...insulted.

Perhaps I overstepped and should have kept my mouth shut. Now that he’s listing all these things, who the hell am I to judge how he should behave?

He’s right; he doesn’t have a girlfriend.

Doesn’t want one.

Football is his wife, girlfriend, and mistress.

twenty

dallas

“Admitting you have a small dick is a big dick thing to do.”

– football teammate

TIME TO GO to the gym.

As I lie here, staring at the ceiling, sheets and bedding pooled down near my ankles because I kicked them off my side of the bed, I weave my hands behind my head and lace my fingers together.

“The only thing you seem to care about is football. You don’t think that’s a problem?”

Nope.

Football is my career.

My future.

School is the path to get there. Who cares if I’m hyper-focused on the end game? That doesn’t make me anti-relationship.

Much.

Fine, dating is the absolute last thing on my mind and I don’t give a shit about it. So what if that doesn’t make me a well-rounded individual? My agent seems to be the only one who cares about that, but guess what? I’ve done just fine by myself so far, thankyouverymuch.

And have we forgotten my parents’ fucked-up relationship? My dad cheating on my mom every opportunity

he had—while he traveled, while he was in the city for a game—all while Mom sat at home taking care of four young boys.

How she stuck it out is beyond me.

Always begging for his attention, crying in her closet after every new story about his infidelity broke. She never knew we were listening.

As the oldest, Duke tried to shield us from it.

Our dad was a great man, a damned good football player. A fucking great sports broadcaster. A legend.

Who also happened to be a shit father, one who was only proud of us when we were overachieving or winning awards for athletics. He never missed those banquets but sure didn't give a fuck about the band concerts, homecoming parades, science fairs, or helping with academics.

Never did he ever sit down and help with math homework.

May he rest in peace...

Some men become martyrs when they die, but Pops certainly wasn't one while he was living.

But anyway, I digress.

Unfold my arms and turn my head to look at my bed partner, a sprawled-out Ryann, ass cheeks hanging out, bare midriff revealing her belly button.

I give her a nudge. "Hey. Time to wake up."

It's still early, sun barely rising over the earth, but there is no rest for the weary—not in this house, not if she wants pancakes and eggs for breakfast, the breakfast of champions. Or the breakfast of three guys who burn calories like a lumberjack burns wood and have to eat like horses.

Ryann groans and rolls over.

"Hey. Sleepyhead."

"*Leave me alone,*" she mumbles, hands fumbling around for the blankets. When she locates them, she yanks, pulling

them up, over her waist—a fruitless effort considering the morning is about to get started.

“Ryann. It’s time for breakfast.”

I can hear my brothers coming to life in the kitchen, the blender already churning out protein smoothies and pancake batter.

She grunts.

Okay, so she’s not a morning person...

“All right, suit yourself. Guess I’ll throw on some gray sweatpants and let Tiffany and whatsherface keep me company down in the kitchen.”

That works.

Ryann throws the covers off and sits up at the edge of the bed, bedhead game strong, long hair shooting this way and that in the most adorable way.

She wipes her mouth on her arm and turns to face me, twisting at the waist.

I laugh. “Now I know your hot buttons.”

Her back arches and she begins stretching. “I’m here to do a job and keep up appearances. No one will”—*yawn*—“stop me from”—*yawn*—“doing that.”

I laugh again. “Whatever you say, sleeping beauty. I’m gonna take a piss and we can go down in a few.”

She nods, rubbing her eyes with her knuckles. “I have to pee, too. Hurry up.”

Precious.

Knock it off, Dallas—she’s not precious or adorable.

She has bedhead, keeps grumbling to herself as she stumbles around my bedroom trying to wake up, and she’s bossy.

I have to pee, too. Hurry up.

“You go first. I’ll go downstairs and use my brother’s toilet. Meet you in the kitchen.”

She throws me a thumbs-up over her shoulder before walking through the door and disappearing into the bathroom across the hall.

Definitely not a morning person.

After tossing on a shirt and mesh athletic shorts, I find my brothers in the kitchen—to my surprise, they're alone, nary a neighbor girl to be seen.

“The other twins still sleeping?”

Drake shakes his head. “No. Tiffany said something about her contacts needing to be taken out, so they didn't spend the night.”

“Ah.” More like she didn't want to be seen without the fake black lashes and gobs of makeup, but that excuse works, too.

I pad to the coffee pot in bare feet and retrieve two mugs from the rack, pouring one for myself and one for the hellion upstairs. “Ryann will be down in a minute. She's peeing.”

Drew nods. “Can't believe she actually spent the night. I thought she despised you.”

“She does.” Mostly.

Eh. Maybe not so much anymore. I have a feeling I'm wearing her down. Plus, that kiss last night helped.

The kiss.

Gave me a raging boner and several sex dreams, but that's a discussion for a different day.

I pull at the crotch of my shorts, adjusting my dick.

Carry the two coffee mugs to the kitchen table and plop down, my brothers fussing around as per usual. Since they're constantly hungry and always wanting food, they're usually the ones who cook.

Drew sets a plate of steaming hot pancakes in the center of the table as Ryann enters the kitchen; a plate of scrambled eggs follows, cut-up turkey sausage mixed in. Bowl of shredded cheese for topping, maple syrup, butter, fruit.

Drake leans over from his spot across the table, long arm stretching, hand grabbing at a pan of day-old cinnamon rolls from the bakery up the block.

Carb load.

Calorie load.

Hydrate.

“Gee, is this all we’re having?” Ryann yawns as she takes a seat, eyeballing me suspiciously when I slide a mug toward her. “What’s this?”

“Coffee, black. I didn’t know how you like to take it.”

Drake snickers.

“I meant what she likes in it, asshole.”

Ryann rolls her eyes. “You guys are such idiots.”

“She’s not a morning person,” I tell them over the lip of my mug, sipping.

“You don’t say,” Drew deadpans wryly, scooping a giant wad of scrambled eggs onto his plate, then immediately topping it with cheese so it melts.

“And for the record, I like my coffee with soy milk and a few sweeteners.” She goes to work filling her plate. “Mostly I don’t love coffee, and I don’t usually need it to perk up in the morning.”

I cough into my hand. “Liar.”

“You’re calling me a liar?”

“Ryann, you’re still half asleep—bullshit you don’t need something to wake you up.”

“Something to wake me up,” she muses. “Would have been nice.”

Is that a smirk on her face? It’s hard to tell. She has the mug tilted up to her mouth, but the look in her eyes tells another story, one my brothers are hanging onto every word of.

Is she making an innuendo? So early in the morning?

“What’d y’all do last night?” Drake wants to know.

He’s balls deep in a cinnamon bun, a glutton for carbs in any form.

“We played truth or dare.”

“The fun kind of truth or dare or the regular kind?”

“Define *fun* kind.”

He’s chomping the roll like cud, holding it between his fingers, licking at the frosting like a slob. “You know, naked and dirty dare.”

Ryann answers the question before I can. “It was a mixed bag of fun and regular. Things only got risqué once.”

Try three times, or has she forgotten about the KISS ME written in marker above her pussy and the fact that we made out before falling asleep?

Drew begins a coughing fit, a guilty coughing fit if I’ve ever seen one, the fucker who walked in on Ryann and me when I was hell-bent on licking her dry, barging through the door like a puppy with no manners.

“Y’all wanna ride to the stadium together or what?” Drake changes the subject, down to the business of our workout this afternoon with the special teams coaches.

Just because we don’t have a game doesn’t mean we don’t practice or at least work out.

I cut the pancake on my plate, stack a few pieces on my fork, and take a bite. “Considerin’ I’m the only one with a vehicle, guess we’re all ridin’ to the stadium together, dipshit.”

“Valid point.” He turns his attention to my guest. “You comin’ to our next game, Ryann?”

Ryann hesitates, glancing over at me. “Er, no.”

“Why not?”

“Um...I don’t have tickets.”

They’re nearly impossible to get, but not for students, although getting tickets the day of can be challenging. Can’t

walk up to the box office and buy them; this shit has to be planned in advance, even when the team is having a losing year—which is never.

“Dallas can get you some,” my brother tells her. “How many d’you want?”

Ryann looks like a deer caught in headlights. “Uh. I don’t know.”

A normal answer would be *Four!* or *As many as you can get me!* Which is probably why my brother is setting down his cinnamon roll, talking with his mouth full.

“You’re gonna date my brother but not come to our games? You kiddin’ me right now?”

She shakes her head. “No, no—it’s just, I hadn’t thought of it?”

This is not to be believed by any of the Colter men.

“Hadn’t thought of it?”

Ryann sets down her fork. “What did I say that’s wrong?”

“You hadn’t thought about it.” Drake is being serious. “Really.”

“Yes, really. I normally spend my Saturdays at the diner or doing laundry.”

My brothers have no words for this phenomenon, but I wish they’d let it go.

“You’d rather spend your weekend doing laundry?” His head swivels back and forth between the pair of us. “Dallas, you can’t be serious.”

“I didn’t say I don’t want to go to your game! I said I normally spend my weekends working or doing laundry—that’s not a crime!”

“It is in this house,” I mutter, digging through the scrambled eggs on my plate in search of a piece of sausage.

She turns in her chair to face me directly. “Do you want me at your game?”

I shrug. “Wouldn’t hurt if, you know—you were seen there. I can let Eli know and he can, like...arrange for you to appear on camera.”

“Appear on camera?” The puzzle pieces aren’t clicking into place. “What does that mean?”

“Cameras. For TV. The games are televi—”

Her hand goes up to cut me off. “I know they’re televised, but why would I be on it?”

“Cause,” Drew cuts in to explain, “when a high-profile player is datin’ someone, the media loves to make her a darling, unless of course she’s a raging bitch, like Ben Davenport’s fiancée, Starla. She’s already blowing his money on designer bags and shoes and prancin’ around the sidelines to be photographed, and he ain’t even been drafted yet. Poor bastard.”

Ben Davenport plays for another Big Ten school, and he’ll no doubt be drafted early, same as I will. He also happens to be engaged to a former cheerleader who has made it her new goal to be a social media darling by riding on Ben’s coattails and future fame.

My brother is right—he is a poor bastard.

“How would the cameras even know where to find me?”

“His agent will be the one getting you seats, and he’ll make a call. That’s how they’ll know.”

“A call to who?”

“The powers that be,” Drew tells her.

“Okay, but who are the powers that be?”

He waves his hand around. “You know—the media. The control booth. They always know who’s who at the stadium.”

Ryann shakes her head. “I’m not a who’s who.”

Drake laughs. “No, but you will be.”

“I just want to sit in the student section,” she declares. “With everyone else.”

“Ah, so you do want to come to the game!” Drake grins, pleased to have railroaded her onto our schedule.

“No, but if I do, I want to be nameless and faceless.” Ryann’s foot bumps mine below the table.

“But that defeats the purpose,” I mumble again. “The point of this arrangement is for everyone to know I’m dating a good girl.”

Point to me.

“But you never mentioned what that entails.”

Point to Ryann.

“Can I think about it?” she asks.

I nod. “Yup.”

twenty-one

ryann

“Dating him was pointless. We could have just stayed strangers.”

– Ryann Winters

AND THAT’S how I ended up in the stands at a Wisconsin football game in a borrowed hoodie, borrowed red mittens, and a newly purchased white knit hat.

I’ve got spirit, yes, I do. I’ve got spirit, how ’bout you?

Not.

Winnie, Sav, and I found our seats with the help of a stadium concierge—a person whose job I never knew existed—after a trip to the concession stand and toilets, the line a mile long at the female bathrooms.

“This is ridiculous,” Winnie complained when we stood waiting. “I’m going to go to the men’s room—there’s never a line there.”

Sav gripped her arm. “They’re not letting anyone get away with that anymore.”

Winnie threw her arms up. “They should convert the men’s into another women’s room and add a tiny men’s toilet. There’s never a line over there.” She pouted.

She’s not wrong.

“Want a nacho?” She’s holding the plastic, fried-tortilla-filled treat in the freezing cold air.

“Uh, no, thanks. The cheese is already fermented.”

She's digging a chip into the center of the sludge. "That's the beauty of the nacho."

"I find beauty in a lot of things, but never stadium nachos."

"You're the one missing out."

Totally.

Sav, our friend from freshman year who picks up the occasional shift at the diner every so often, was more than happy to tag along, the tickets we scored a hot commodity on campus.

"How the hell did you get seats on the fifty-yard line so close to the action?"

Winnie answers for me, chewing. "She's best buddies with Dallas Colter."

"Are you serious?"

I shrug. "I guess so."

"Wait—how am I just hearing about this? Have you been holding out on me?"

Yes and no.

Mostly yes.

"We have a class together and he started sitting by me." Which is kind of annoying since he never shuts up. "He barely fits in the desk."

"What class is it?" Sav asks.

"Business communication."

She pulls a face. "Ugh, I have that next semester! If I'd known he was in it, I could have switched."

I want to roll my eyes but refrain. "You would have transferred so you could stare at the back of Dallas Colter's head?"

"Stare at his head, make small talk, try to get him to ask me out."

Ask her out?

Oh Lord, don't tell me she's one of those girls who chase guys based on their status. Sav? She seems so...so...down to earth. And...decent. And here she is talking about getting him to ask her out when I'm the one who brought her here to the game on his dime!

She thinks you're just friends...

Well, after tonight, when I'm plastered all over the friggin' sports channels and God only knows where else, she'll know we're not just friends. She'll know it's real.

Real fake.

I have to bite my tongue, staring down onto the field, armed with the binoculars my dad told me I should bring. He was so jealous when I told him; because I'm not a huge sports nut, we've never done any games the times he's come to visit. When he found out I'd be spending the day at a game (after having to swap shifts with another server at work, mind you), he told me to grab some cheap binoculars.

I hold them to my eyes, moving them around the sidelines, scanning for number fourteen.

I spot Dallas right away—he's catching balls with some guy not in a uniform. A short while later, someone comes to spray water in his mouth, then takes the football from his hands. Another dude walks over with a clipboard; that guy is wearing a headset and holding the mouthpiece and I have *no idea what's going on*.

It's loud and electric in the stadium, louder and more exciting than I could have imagined as someone who's never imagined they'd be here watching men run around in tight pants throwing a leather ball on a field and tackling each other, but here we are.

I don't know the rules.

I don't know how the game is played.

I have no idea what the positions are or what their jobs are, but by the third quarter, I'm jumping up and down and screaming with the rest of the crowd as our boys in red catch a ball at the end of the field near the goal post.

Everyone loses their minds.

I gasp. “Holy shit! That was Dallas.”

Winnie smacks me on the arm, appalled by my lack of attentiveness. “No *shit* that’s Dallas—haven’t you been paying attention to your man?”

My man.

I blush, tempted to tell her that’s not what he is but also remembering my promise not to tell a soul. Not yet anyway. Maybe not ever.

“I was paying attention, I swear! But it happened so fast. I only took my eyes off the field for a second.”

Seriously, who can focus with all the commotion? The marching band is playing, the fans are shouting, people are wearing costumes or have their bodies painted. Drunk, sober. It’s a veritable sea of red, and I’m drowning in the middle of it, determined to keep up with it all.

“Maybe if you weren’t gawking through those stupid glasses you wouldn’t have missed it.”

“I didn’t miss it. It just surprised me!”

“He’s had three touchdowns already—how is this one a surprise?”

Um. She doesn’t have to sound like such a bitch, her tone implying *You’re so dumb, Ryann*. I instantly regret inviting her when Rookie wanted to come—he’s a fan, and Sav is only here to make digs and muse about the best route for dating a football player.

Down on the field, they’re in the fourth quarter. I don’t know where the time went, but it flew by, our team winning by two touchdowns or points or however it’s scored, the crowd in no hurry to depart. Everyone seems keen to party despite the concession stands having cut off the alcohol flow after halftime, a rule I did not know existed.

There are locker room interviews with the athletes and coaches up on the massive screens, and I stare, phone in my hand, watching for Dallas.

My palm vibrates.

Dallas:

You still here?

I gave him my phone number after letting him know I was coming to the game, friends in tow, once I was able to convince my coworker to swap shifts.

Yes, we're slowly gravitating toward the exit.

Want to meet me in the parking lot?

Which parking lot, you weirdo

I park at the back, there's a section for us by the entrance closest to the locker rooms.

And you want me to meet you there so we can... do what?

I don't know. I thought I could drive you home.

What about your brothers? Don't you drive them around?

They can find their own rides.

Oh.

I guess I could meet you in the parking lot. How do I get there

You're gonna wanna walk from your section to section AA, which is the clubhouse entrance...I park in that lot.

I didn't even know that lot existed.

I'm typing as I walk and have yet to tell Winnie and Sav I'm going to say my goodbyes once we're in the corridor,

hallway thing. It's a miracle I'm not smashing into people as I walk and text at the same time, my eyes trained on Winnie's backside so I don't lose her.

Well I'll be down by my truck waiting. Jumping in the shower real quick.

They have showers in the locker room?

I mean, duh—of course they have showers in the locker room.

All right, don't be long. I don't want to be wandering around a parking lot that may not be the right parking lot.

I'll find you

Ok.

Sliding my phone into my back pocket, I tap Winnie on the back and get Sav's attention.

"Ladies, change of plans. Dallas just texted me and wants me to meet him in the clubhouse parking lot."

Clubhouse parking lot? Listen to me sounding like I know what I'm talking about.

"Oh my God," Sav enthuses, getting excited. "I can't wait to meet him in person."

Well, this is going to be awkward. "Just me, I think."

She cocks her head. "Did he say he just wanted it to be you?"

I laugh. "Uh, pretty sure he wasn't interested in a crowd. He's telling his brothers to find their own ride home. We're gonna hang out, I guess."

Sav stares at me, feet pinned to the ground, unconvinced Dallas Colter intended for me to meet him alone.

She's being so weird, and I don't like it.

“What if we come anyway? He won’t have a problem dropping us off at home,” she presses.

Winnie takes her by the forearm. “Let’s let her be alone with him, shall we? He always has people up his ass, and I’m sure he’s tired.”

My friend winks at me.

“But—” It seems Sav is ready with another argument before Winnie interrupts her.

“Come on, Sav, let’s hop on a shuttle. I’ll text Rookie and see where they’re partying tonight.”

They.

His fraternity brothers and co.

“Thank you,” I mouth to her, grateful she’s saving me from an uncomfortable situation.

Sav is deflated and annoyed at missing her chance, which wasn’t an actual chance to begin with, but I can see she resents me in this moment.

“Fine.”

I hug them both and walk in what I can only assume is the correct direction, only stopping to ask one person wearing a STAFF vest if I’m going the right way.

I am.

Nervous once I reach the door, I place a hand on my stomach to calm it before pushing through, stepping out into the cool autumn air, grateful I’m bundled up in all this gameday gear.

I glance around, eyes scanning the busy parking lot, cars slowly creeping through the aisles with one goal: working toward the exit.

My phone buzzes.

Winnie:

Did you find him?

Not yet...

Just checking to see if you've been murdered in the parking lot or not.

Nope, still alive. Plenty of people on the off chance I need to scream.

Still scanning the lot, still no sight of Dal—

Oop. Spoke too soon.

There he is.

Leaning against his truck like some kind of hero in a movie, watching me walk toward him, arms and legs crossed. Skin red, hair damp.

He's like Jake Ryan in *Sixteen Candles* come to life, and if you've never seen that movie, it's an oldie but a classic my mother used to make me watch when I was still at home.

Do yourself a favor and Google it.

Dallas is dressed in a rumpled sleeveless T-shirt, track pants, and a tired expression.

I raise a hand to greet him. "Hey."

He yawns. "Hey back."

I glance around. "So. Here we are." My hands rise. "In the parking lot."

"Appears that way."

He's still leaning against his truck, seeming in no hurry to be anywhere—except it's cold and I'd rather not stand here.

"How are you not freezing cold?"

I shiver.

"I just ran my ass off for three hours, in case you didn't notice."

Oh, I noticed all right.

I noticed, my *friends* noticed—heck, the whole world noticed considering the game was televised.

“You’re moist, though. You should still put a jacket on even if you’re not cold.”

“Did you just call me moist?”

“I *said* you’re moist. I didn’t *call* you moist. There’s a difference.” He needs to cover up so he doesn’t get sick.

I tousle his hair. “You’re wet.”

Damp.

Not dry enough to *not* get a cold or the flu if he’s going to insist on standing out here.

I hug myself and dramatically say, “Brrr,” hoping he gets the picture and hurries to the point.

Instead, Dallas laughs.

“Why are you laughing?” I huff. “And why are we just standing here? You asked me to come out here and—”

Suddenly, I’m pressed against his body, and the heat radiating is the first thing I notice besides his warm breath against my ear. “You’re so cute when you’re mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I argue. “I’m...I’m...” Not mad. I’m flustered and confused and want to be warm. I want to not be standing outside, want to be inside where it’s warmer even if that means climbing inside the cab of his truck—which he doesn’t even have running yet.

What is this, amateur hour?! Start the engine, man.

“Y-you’re what?” he whispers, and it’s not so busy that I can’t hear him, cars emptying the parking lot until their numbers dwindle.

“I’m cold.”

His large arms go around me, instantly warming my body but still not enough. “I’ll warm you up.”

I can’t help myself; I laugh.

Instead of melting or swooning like so many of my friends would, I laugh at Dallas Colter and his attempt to be suave and sexy.

It's comedic at best because it's out of character for him.

Sure, he has sex appeal because of the hard muscles and good-looking face, but Dallas is anything but. He's rigid and serious and has to force himself not to scowl; therefore, it's not my fault if I burst out giggling.

"You're an asshole," he grumbles, my nose pressed to his chest. "Do you know that?"

"Yes, I'm aware."

His arms are still around me, my face still pressed against his pecs, cheek brushing the cool skin of his shoulder. When I tilt my head up to look in his eyes, he dips, lips pressing against mine.

It takes me by surprise, this kiss, but I'm up on my tiptoes before I can think it through, reveling in how warm his mouth is. Soft. Heated.

Warming me from head to toe.

My lips part to let his tongue slip inside, and I wonder what the hell I'm doing, what we're doing. This isn't what I came out here for, but is this why he invited me? We're just friends—we're not supposed to be making out in the parking lot after a game. It feels so very...

So very nostalgic.

I feel like I'm in high school again, kissing my boyfriend Rory after his football game in the dark parking lot by the locker rooms, his buddies trickling out a few at a time after their win. Rory's inexperienced fumbling and overeager tongue had me squirming, not melting in a puddle at his feet.

But that's nothing like kissing Dallas.

He knows what he's doing, and I'm not sure if it's because he's kissed hundreds of girls or if it's because we...*fit?*

A drop of rain falls on my forehead, and I look up, searching for more.

One hits my eyelash.

My cheek.

Dallas's mouth kisses my jawline while I'm gazing at the sky, the forecast a surprise to me. *Who knew we were expecting rain?*

twenty-two

dallas

“Love at first sight is possible, but maybe you should take a second look.”

– Eli Cohen

KNOW WHAT I WANT?

I want to keep kissing her in the rain until we’re both soaking wet, but Ryann is having none of it, blinking up at the sky, clearly not interested in being soaked to the bone. She’s already complained about being cold a few times; standing here to make out would only get her sick.

She grabs my arm. Yanks it, actually, pointing across the parking lot.

“Do you see that?”

“See what?” I don’t need to crane my head around because I’m a head taller than she is and I can see just fine.

“That guy.” She’s staring off into the distance, squinting as rain begins to pelt us harder. “I thought I saw him taking pictures.”

Yeah, I saw him too, but I won’t admit it. “In this rain?”

She nods, beads of water dripping from her hair. “Before that...”

I grab her hand and pull her over to my truck. “Why are we still standing here? Let’s go.”

She’s not easy to convince despite the wet weather, determined to drag me toward the man in the parking lot—a

photographer, no doubt, if my suspicions serve me correctly.

Sopping wet, we're finally in the truck, my rain-drenched T-shirt clinging to my body like a second skin 'cause I skipped wearing a coat and didn't bother with long sleeves either.

Ryann's puffy coat must be thirty pounds heavier having taken on all that water.

She pulls the hat off her head.

Ruffles her hair with her fingers, though that doesn't do anything to smooth it down or straighten it out. Strands stick up every which way, hat head making it messy.

The ends of it are wet, obviously.

Shrugging out of her coat, she stuffs it at her feet, fussing with her sweatshirt and the rest of her outfit once she's buckled in.

"So," Ryann says at last.

Easing out of the parking lot, I tip my head to the dude in the yellow reflector vest, signaling me onto the street with his orange glowing stick, recognition lighting up his face when I give him a thank you wave.

"So," I echo, not sure what to say next. The stadium was deafening—it's one thing to be in the stands listening to it; it's something else entirely being out on the field.

Sure, I'm able to tune it out, but that too takes brainpower and focus, and right now, my brain wants to rest—not come up with words to entertain the passenger in my car.

"Where to?"

I think about this. "Normally I either go home and crash or go home and watch a movie to decompress, or I go out. Grab food or whatever."

She nods.

"Are you glad you came today?" I ask her, genuinely curious.

“Yeah, of course. It was fun.” Ryann is looking out the window at the world passing by. “I didn’t realize how good you are.”

She didn’t realize how good I am? Did she think I’m chopped liver? Did she think all the fuss is over nothing? Does she think agents and opportunities come out of the woodwork for mediocrity?

Damn girl. “I get by.”

Ryann lifts her arm, giving her hair another tousle before glancing over at me.

“Are you hungry?”

It’s not early, but it’s not late—that weird in between because we had an early game.

“Not yet.” Although that’s due in part to the protein shake I downed immediately after the game, I also have the bagged meal the training staff hands us as we’re leaving the locker room; tossed that in the back seat of my truck.

Two turkey sandwiches—which I’m not in the mood for—but I’ll still have to eat when I get home. They give us subs or sandwiches after every game to ensure we’re taking care of ourselves since we’re burning calories like crazy and haven’t eaten in hours.

Ryann taps on the center console and I look down at her hand, her long fingers. Her shiny pink nails.

Do not touch her hand, Dallas.

Leave it alone.

I avert my eyes, watching the road, not wanting to miss my turn. “Did you want me to drive you home?”

Speak now or forever hold your peace.

“Sure.”

Is that disappointment I feel? I thought maybe she’d want to come hang with me and my brothers a bit, watch a show, shoot the shit, order something to eat, and make a night of it. It’s been a long day, and another hot shower doesn’t sound like

a bad idea either; the showers in the locker room never get hot enough for my liking.

Hot shower.

Meat.

Pasta.

Water, water, and more water.

I pray to God the house is empty when I get home—I'll be so irritated if those neighbor chicks are there.

Again.

It's not long before I'm pulling up to Ryann's building, the rain still beating down on us hard, the overcast sky getting dark as the day drags on.

I yawn.

Pull over and cut the engine, letting the keys dangle from the ignition while Ryann gathers her jacket, hat, and fanny pack.

"Ugh," she moans. "I don't want to get out in this."

I shift in my seat. "I'm lucky I didn't have to play in this." We cut it close, though, missing the downpour by just a half hour. Sucks being on the field when the weather takes a turn, slipping and sliding on the AstroTurf they installed several years back.

Grabbing my keys, I yank them out and go to open my door. "I'll walk you to your door."

"Dallas, you really don't have t—"

"Race you!" I shove my door open and hop down into the rain, cutting across the front lawn of her complex before she's even gotten her door open.

"Wait!" she shouts with a laugh. "Knock it off, this isn't a compet—"

Her words are cut off again when she falls, legs flying out from under her, ass over tea kettle on the slippery, wet grass.

"Shit!" She laughs again. "Ow!"

I stop, turning.

Walk over and stand over her sprawled-out body, rain pelting her cute face, her coat, purse, and hat littering the area around her.

“Don’t just stand there, asshole. Help me up!” Her hand shoots up.

“I was going to!”

“Oh!” She hobbles once she’s standing. “Oh my God, my tailbone—it feels like I broke it.”

“You didn’t break it,” I inform her without evaluating her. “Maybe you bruised it.”

Bending, I snap up the shit from the ground, then I squat down, scooping her up as if she were as light as a feather, walking us toward her building.

“Aren’t you glad I walked you to your door so you don’t have to walk?”

She rolls her eyes, hair soaking wet. “I fell because you were racing, you shithead.”

Facts.

But still.

“But now that you’re injured, it’s helpful having me here.”

Ryann shakes her head. “5-9-4-2.”

“Eh?”

“The code for the door—it’s 5-9-4-2.”

Oh.

Duh.

I punch it in, able to support her at the same time. Pull the door open and whisk her through like a goddamn rock star action hero, then kick it closed behind me. BAM.

Another eye roll. “Cool it, Captain America. You’re being so loud. Some of us have a ton of neighbors.”

I dial it down a notch.

“Apartment 106.”

I remember. I walk us to her door, barely breathing hard despite having a grown woman in my arms.

“Jesus.” Ryann exhales. “You did that like it was no big deal.”

Please. I can bench-press hundreds of pounds.

I wait for a key to materialize. When it doesn’t, I stare down at her damp face. Raise my brows expectantly.

“Can you please put me down? My legs work fine.”

I put her down.

Not because I want to, but because she told me to.

Ryann digs in the fanny pack I’m still holding, holding up her key when she finds it, victorious.

“Ha!”

And just like that she’s inside, turning to face me, taking the things from my arms, both of us still soaking.

I shiver. Try to stuff my hands in my pockets but fail; my pants are waterlogged, the pockets impossible to penetrate.

Ryann sighs. “I suppose you could come in if you wanted to.”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice.

twenty-three

ryann

“Sometimes dating a mature guy is stressful. They apologize right away...and then what are you supposed to do with your anger?”

– Dr. Laura Winters

GREAT.

I’ve invited the beast into my apartment yet again, his entire form making my space feel twenty times smaller than it actually is.

“Do you have anything I can change into?”

Is he being serious right now? “Um, no.”

“Do you have a robe?”

“Yes, I have two.” I hesitate. “But they’re pink.”

“So?”

Shrugging, I point toward the little laundry room off the kitchen. “One is hanging on a hook behind that door. I’m going to go peel myself out of these wet clothes if I can and check to see if my ass is bruised.”

“I want to see it if it is,” he says, sounding solemn. “For medical purposes, of course.”

“Of course.” I glance at him over my shoulder, walking toward my bedroom. “Feel free to, you know—use the bathroom and change or whatever.”

I feel so awkward about this even though he’s been in my apartment before. But this time, it’s post make-out session and

post half-nude truth or dare and post 'he almost went down on me.' More intimate.

More tense.

On my end at least. I'm not sure how Dallas feels about it.

twenty-four

dallas

“I don’t have a girlfriend, but I do have a girl who’d be pissed at me for saying that.”

– Dallas

I FEEL GREAT.

This robe is the bomb diggity.

Never actually worn a robe before, and this one happens to be pink and furry as fuck, and it fits.

Mostly.

I mean, most of my legs are showing and it doesn’t cover up my lower half, but I’m dry and toasty and hunkered down on the couch when Ryann emerges from her bedroom looking very much the same as I do: snuggly and warm.

In addition to her robe, I’ve commandeered a few blankets, wrapping those around my legs, which I’ve stretched out in front of me and have propped up on the little coffee table she’s got arranged in front of the couch.

I give my toes a wiggle.

Lace my hands behind my head.

“Making yourself comfortable, I see.” Ryann saunters farther into the room, padding toward the kitchen with pink socks on her feet. Opens the fridge and peers inside. “What are you hungry for? Must have been a while since you’ve eaten.”

It has been hours since I’ve eaten solid food. “What have you got?”

I watch as she tilts her head. “Not much. Random stuff—salad? Leftover burger from work. Um, I have a frozen pizza.”

None of that sounds tempting.

I grab my phone off the couch and thumb through to the food delivery app. “Let’s order somethin’ then so neither of us has to worry about it.”

Ryann comes around the counter and sinks down onto the couch beside me, arm on the back cushion. I can see thermal pants sticking out of the bottom of her cozy-looking robe and a thermal button-down peeking out of the neckline.

Cute.

Conservative.

Casual.

Exactly the kind of girl Eli wanted me to align myself with, and I gone and done it.

Pleased with myself, I order a shit ton of food, needing pasta and carbs and protein and some other random shit, my stomach beginning to give that telltale sign that in no time it’s gonna start growling at me the same way I growl on the playing field.

Ryann fluffs her area, nesting, getting more comfortable and grabbing the remote. Props her feet on the coffee table next to mine.

I nudge her fuzzy socks with my big toe.

“Are you flirting with me?”

Am I?

Maybe.

Instead of replying, I do it again because I’m a guy, I’m immature, and despite the fact that I just played four quarters in a football game, I’m slightly bored.

The clock ticks.

Ryann is still flipping through the programs. Everything she’s stopping on to preview is a chick flick, a reality dating

show, a high-end real estate reality show, or a baking show.

Dammit.

It's finally dark outside, and from the looks of it, the rain is still coming down hard. I'm grateful for the quiet, companionable silence Ryann is offering me, because the last time I messaged my brothers, sounded like they did indeed have company.

The girls next door, obviously, but some others, too.

My brothers are still green.

Yeah, they're only two years younger, but the twins still haven't figured out the value of privacy and surrounding themselves with people who give a shit and aren't just using them for their own personal gain.

Well, Drake at least.

Drew has a better head on his shoulders. If Drake has company tonight, Drew will most likely hang for a bit, then make himself scarce, hide in his bedroom with the door locked and only come out to take a piss.

Ever since our dad died, Drake has been struggling. Even though he has us—his brothers—and our mom, he always looked to Pops for guidance, more so than the rest of us. Now that Pops is gone, he doesn't have that anymore. Seems he's filling that void with meaningless sex and company.

I check my food app.

Twenty more minutes until the food will arrive.

Ryann settles on a baking show—but it's with kids, not adults, and in the short time we've been watching, it looks like their challenge is to create a fall-themed cake, fully decorated, using the ingredients they can choose from the back wall.

Seems easy enough.

Cakes can't be all that difficult, can they?

The judges walk the perimeter of the room, the bald dude chatting with the kids, offering them tips and tricks. Asking them why they chose this, why they chose to do that.

“THIRTY MORE MINUTES, BAKERS!” the female judge shouts among moans and groans.

Huh.

I sit up straighter in my seat as some boy named Brennon removes his cake pans from the oven and returns them to his station, tries to remove the cakes from the pans.

Neither cake budges.

“Oh no,” he wails, head tipping back. “I overcooked it.”

Brennon bangs the metal on the counter to no avail, choking back a sob, tears streaming down his face.

Then, when the cake finally does come out, it falls in chunks onto the counter, much to his dismay.

Snot bubbles from his nose.

Okay, so maybe this show isn’t so terrible after all. This kid is seriously bringing the drama.

The judge rushes over to console him.

“Kid, chop-chop!” I shout at the TV. “It’s time to rally, Brennon, not stand there with your dick in your hand.”

Ryann sputters on her bottle of water. “Dallas, those are kids!”

“So? If you’re gonna be in a baking championship, fucking deal with the ups and downs.”

That’s exactly what Pops would have said.

You deal with the good and the bad when you’re competitive; it ain’t always a walk in the park. Some days you get slammed and feel like shit, some days you’re the victor and come out on top.

But it’s never easy no matter which way it goes.

“Calm down. He’s eleven years old.”

Pfft.

I clamp my mouth shut and watch the show. Brennon manages a patch job on his shitty-looking cake, using frosting

to plug the holes where sponge cake should be, wincing when the judge downs a giant gulp of buttercream.

“Lucky for Brennon, that Sophie girl made a cake that looks like a pile of dog shit.”

“Dallas!” Ryann laughs, trying to scold me.

I’m right, though—Sophie is eliminated, and Brennon lives to see another episode by the skin of his teeth.

My app buzzes at the same time Ryann’s phone dings, a notification that the delivery dude is here with our dinner. We both hop up at the same time, but I motion for her to sit.

“I’ve got this.”

I don’t need her going to the door after dark and answering it with some strange person on the other side of it. Granted, it’s probably another student our age, but still.

Since I’m here, better safe than sorry.

We live in a fucked-up world, and I’m glad I have three brothers and not a sister whose safety I’d have to worry about nonstop.

The handoff is quick; I make short work of going through the bags after I set them on Ryann’s small kitchen counter. Behind me, she moves around the space, gathering plates and forks and a few napkins as I dole out chicken wings, beef and broccoli, lo mein, buttered noodles, and steamed vegetables.

“This is enough food to feed an army.”

I nod. “It all sounded good. Couldn’t decide.”

“Apparently not.” She isn’t complaining, just stating facts, her own plate as loaded as mine. Food out of the way, we return to the living room to eat—and to see if Brennon can squeak out a sweet dessert that looks like a savory food.

“I love this challenge,” Ryann tells me, shoving a forkful of noodles into her mouth.

Nice.

Real nice.

If there's one thing she isn't doing, it's putting on airs and trying to impress me.

“He has to make that cake look like chicken and mashed potatoes.”

I'm well aware. “This is going to put that kid over the edge.”

We'd already seen him cry twice.

I lean in, fork suspended halfway to my mouth as we anxiously wait for something to go wrong.

Surprisingly, Brennon isn't the one who has a meltdown during this segment of the show; it's Adam, the twelve-year-old self-proclaimed pie king from Connecticut.

Adam's strong suit is not detail.

Everything he so painstakingly baked, trying his best to make his sweet look like tacos and salsa, crumbles. The coconut he added food coloring to is too green to look like lettuce, the strawberry “tomatoes” are too red, the cake he used as a taco shell is too thick.

Nothing worked out for him the way he planned, and he loses it, stomping his foot and laying his head on the counter before he's even begun plating his dessert to present to the judges.

“YOU LITTLE QUITTER!” I shout. “GET IT TOGETHER.”

“Dallas!” Ryann scolds for the umpteenth time, shocked but delighted. I can see in her eyes that she's amused but won't admit it because it's not politically correct to heckle small children doing their best.

“What?” I shrug. “No one can hear me.”

“I can hear you.”

I roll my eyes at her, finishing the beef and broccoli on my plate before going to the lo mein.

It hits the spot.

And who knew I'd be so entertained by tiny chefs?

Once we're both done eating, I stand. Take Ryann's plate and walk our trash to the kitchen, tidying up before I go back, bringing her another water because I'm a considerate asshole.

"Can I ask you a question?"

She glances over at me. "Sure."

"Why did you agree to help me?"

"Honestly?"

I snort. "No. I want you to lie."

It's sarcastic, but she laughs anyway. "I agreed to help you because I thought I could help you."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know if I told you this, but my parents are marriage counselors. So, it makes sense that I've picked up a thing or two along the way, listening to them work and whatever."

"Makes sense. But what does that have to do with me?"

"Er...well, I just figured you needed a little coaching on how to treat people."

Excuse me? What now? "Again, what do you mean?"

"I mean—and don't take this the wrong way—but I just figured, because you were callous enough to dump me for a friend, you were callous in other ways, too, and probably could use some tips on how to treat women."

I stare.

And stare.

Is she fucking joking? "How is it you think I treat women?"

I carefully select my words, genuinely wanting to know if her opinion of me is the same as the day we met—or even the same as the night we first fooled around because we were hiding away from the rest of the house.

I thought we were over this.

Didn't I explain to her that I don't need anyone in my life right now? That now isn't the time? I'm not not dating because I'm a dick to people; I'm not dating because...

...I didn't think I had the energy.

Because I like to sit at home after games and eat food and watch mindless TV and not have to entertain people. Because I like to watch old movies at the theater and avoid crowds. Because I want something real, with someone down to earth, who is honest. Because I don't have the time to filter out the bullshit.

And the gold diggers.

And the cleat chasers.

And—

“You treat them fine. I can see that now that we've spent more time together, so I'm sorry I ever thought you'd treat me like crap. You don't.”

No, I don't treat her like crap.

I stew on this information, gazing at the television but not seeing anything on the screen.

Shit.

My brain.

“So that's what you think of me, eh?”

“No.” She pauses, drawing out the silence. “Not at all.”

Not anymore.

The unspoken words hang over the room, lingering.

“Just because I don't flirt with women and give them false hope, don't stick my dick into every single one who's willin' doesn't mean I'm an asshole. If anything, I think that makes me a pretty decent dude. At least I'm not a douche. Everyone knows what to expect from me at all times. No guessin' games.”

My Texas twang is coming in hot and heavy the more frustrated I get.

Ryann nods. “That’s very true. I just...” She fiddles with the edge of her robe. “I’m not going to lie. I thought you needed fixing.”

“Fixin’?”

“Yeah. I thought you needed like, relationship help. Which is why I agreed to this sham of a relationship.”

She said as much.

twenty-five

ryann

*“The best part of the relationship was when we hadn’t met yet
and we were still single.”*

– Diego Lorenz

I CAN’T BELIEVE I’m admitting all of this to him.

It makes me feel like the worst kind of person saying it to his face, how I wanted to fix him, how I thought he needed my help.

What a jerk.

Me, not him.

“I’m sorry.”

He’s not perfect by any means, but neither am I. And he’s right—at least he’s honest and upfront about his intentions, unlike so many people. Unlike Diego, who sort of strung me along for two months and didn’t have the guts to dump me himself.

He and I still have not spoken, and now that I’ve managed to distract myself with Dallas, I have no desire to.

Distract myself?

Really, Ryann, is that what you’re doing?

Kind of.

Is that what you’d be calling it if he were interested in dating you? You dated a schlepp like Diego and had no problem with it—are you going to lie to yourself and say you

wouldn't jump at the chance to go on a real date with Dallas Colter?

Good-looking.

Sort of witty.

Honest.

Bright future ahead of him.

How many guys your age can claim they have any job prospects lined up after graduation?

Basically none of them.

I would be a fool not to have a teensy-weensy crush on him.

Just a bit...

Stop, Ryann. Stop it.

He's here now to relax and chill, not listen to you whine about what a shitty friend you are.

Friend?

Yeah, I suppose that's what we are.

"Ryann?" His low, deep voice cuts through the baking show on the television, gravelly and sexy.

"Hmm?"

"If you want to make it up to me, you might consider giving me a back rub."

"Make it up to you? Make what up to you?"

"You know, thinking I'm a douche and assuming you needed to reform me."

Um, yeah, I did do that. "And all I have to do to get back in your good graces is give you a back rub?"

"Shoulder massage would be killer. I'd love you forever."

I'd love you forever...

I shiver, averting my eyes so he doesn't see the effect his voice has on my girly parts, adjusting myself on the couch so

I'm in an optimal 'shoulder rub' position.

"Yeah?" His brows go up skeptically. "You're actually going to give me a massage?"

"Sure, why not?"

Dallas wastes no time shrugging out of my fluffy, girly robe to bare his upper torso. "No decent massage can be had over a layer of clothes."

He lets the furry fabric pool at his waist.

I stare at his back, eyes roaming over the firm muscles, tight trapezius and deltoids, all terms I learned the summer I took a biology class in high school to fulfill my science credits.

My eyes roam farther south.

"Are you wearing underwear?" I eyeball his lower back quizzically, specifically his nether region. The tapered waist, the iliac crest.

"No, they're still drying. Hope you don't mind that I hung them in the bathroom over the shower curtain rod."

I nod slowly, gaze glued to the smooth plane of his back muscles.

"Um...no, that's fine."

He wiggles his shoulders. "Now about that back rub..."

"Oh my God, you're the worst."

"I might be the worst, but I'm sore as hell, and I'll return the favor."

He'll return the favor? This perks me up. "You'll massage me? Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

Not sure where to put my hands, I hover them over his shoulder blades before slowly lowering them to rest on his skin.

His hot, smooth skin...

His thick, strong neck...

He's recently gotten his hair cut, dark hair a clean line.

My thumbs begin kneading the base, fingers digging in as deep as they can, over and over and over until they're tired and I need to change position, flattening my palms and pressing them into his spine.

Up.

Down.

Dallas moans.

"Don't you have trainers or something who do this for you?"

He dips his head in a nod. "Yup. None of them are as sweet as you, though."

Sweet?

Ha.

He's full of shit. "We both know I'm not sweet."

"Probably not, but that's 'cause you haven't had the chance to be. You haven't let your guard down yet."

My guard? I don't have a guard.

"I don't have my guard up."

"Sure you do. We all do, yours is just waitin' for someone to shit on you again—the way Diego shit on you."

My mouth falls open and my hands falter, sitting motionless on his skin.

Is he right? Did I put walls up because I'm waiting for a guy to come along and treat me like an afterthought because Diego did?

And here I thought it was the other way around. Here I thought Dallas was the one with his guard up, waiting for people to use him.

"Guess we have that in common."

He agrees with my sentiment.

Again, I knead his back, hands sliding down his biceps then up again, massaging but also feeling him up if I'm being honest, the heat from his body warming my palms.

So hard.

So toned.

Incredible.

I've never been in awe of a man's body before. Never seen one like this in person or touched one.

"What's goin' on back there?" he rumbles.

I didn't realize I'd been moving my hands in the same pattern, up and down his arms, until he said something, and I blush to the tips of my toes.

"Sorry."

Somewhere in the back of my brain, I hear Brennon on the television shouting to see if another baker is using the chill blaster. Another part of my brain wants to move my hands to the front of Dallas's body and run them over his pecs.

He didn't have his shirt off last time we were alone together.

Now he's practically naked, save for the robe around his waist, the only modest part about him.

"Switch?"

Robotically, I nod. "Kay."

twenty-six

dallas

“Never do the same mistake twice. Unless she’s hot.”

– Drake Colter

Now IT’S my turn to put my hands on her.

Except, under Ryann’s robe is a sweatshirt, which we all know won’t do if she wants a proper massage, will it?

Nah.

She’ll need to remove it, but I ain’t sure if she’s brave enough.

Brave enough, Dallas? Please. Ryann Winters is made up of piss and vinegar and has bigger balls than I’ve seen on some of my teammates.

She’ll lose the sweatshirt when she wants to.

At first, she only takes off the robe, folding it neatly and setting it across her lap like a security blanket. Makes it more difficult to get certain spots on her body but not impossible, and for a bit she tilts her head this way, tilts it that way; I can tell she’s uncomfortable.

“Everything okay?”

She shrugs. “The material is chafing my skin.”

Knew it would but didn’t want to point that out. She’d probably think I was a creep, and after our last serious conversation, that’s the last thing I want.

“Chafing is no joke,” I tease. “I know all about it.”

If she knows I'm referring to jock itch or ball sweat, she doesn't let on, instead just dipping her head forward so I can access her neck more easily.

I'm not working on her back for five minutes before she turns her head to the side, trying to look me in the face, wincing. "If I take off my sweatshirt, no funny business."

"Yeah, yeah," I grumble. "You hate funny business. I already know." We went through this the last time and fat lot of good that did us—I wound up between her legs; she wound up with KISS ME drawn above her vagina.

I wonder if it's still written there. Probably since it was in black permanent marker...

Piss. And. Vinegar.

I sit back while she pulls the gray sweatshirt up and over her head, startled to see she's not wearing a bra. Or a tank top. Or a T-shirt.

Nothing.

She's wearing nothing beneath it, and all I can focus on now is how badly I wanted to see her bare tits when she was in my bedroom and those nipples of hers were straining against that sheer T-shirt.

When she folds the sweatshirt across her lap, I get a glance of side boob 'cause, well—there's plenty of it.

Shit.

Okay.

No big deal. This ain't the first girl you've rubbed down, and it won't be your last, I coach myself as she settles between my spread legs, still on the couch with her back to me.

Ryann might be on the taller side for a girl, but she's also on the slighter side, and I ease up on the pressure once my hands are back on her flesh, thumbs pressing but not kneading—I don't want to hurt her.

I find a knot.

Rotate my thumb in circles as she winces, moans, then winces again, the tiny balls being worked out of her muscles.

I stay on that spot for a minute or two before moving on, crossing her back to do the same motions on the other side. Round and round with my thumb until I find the knots, working them out, pushing, massaging.

“You’re so good at this,” she whispers, neck craned to the side.

You’re so good at this...

Nothing sexual, but that doesn’t stop me from hearing it in a low, satisfied moan.

“I’m no professional, but I get by.”

“Can you just run your palms up and down my spine?”

Ryann is pale.

Has a set of three birthmarks on her back, on the right side, near her ribcage. Three tiny dots that look like they’d be a constellation if they were in the sky—I want to connect them with the tip of my finger.

I do as she asks and run my palms over her spine, working my fingers into the vertebrae as gently as I can, watching every space on her skin my hands occupy.

Silky.

Smooth.

Up, down.

Up...

Over her shoulder blades they glide.

My hands aren’t as soft as hers are; I handle a pigskin football hour upon hour during the week—my hands are mangled and calloused, despite the gloves I wear.

Ryann doesn’t seem to notice or care or mind.

She remains motionless.

Breath hitches when I span my hands over her waist, fanning out my fingers to cover more ground—or skin, ha!

My hands are large enough to put around her waist.

The tips of my fingers brush her ribcage; whether it's intentional or unintentional, I do not know. All I know is I'm being propelled forward by a force called lust—desire. Hunger.

Greed.

Plus, she smells good.

Plus, her skin is bare.

Plus, *there's that side boob.*

Feel it when I graze her ribs again, deliberately tracking my hands up as far as they'll take me before meeting the resistance of her arms.

She lets me.

And what's that quote I once heard? Something about *seventy percent of all massages between couples lead to sex* if my memory serves me correctly, or maybe I'm making that shit up.

Seems legit, though.

The only thing that would make this better is lotion or lube, and I'm not dumb enough to say that shit out loud. I mean—I am dumb enough, but *now is not the time.*

Ryann shifts restlessly in front of me between my legs, lowering her arms, resting her palms on my knees. Head dipping forward, hair falling around her face.

My hands go back up her ribcage.

Big. Hands.

Covering lots of ground.

Fingertips gently come down. I'm not tickling her, but I'm not massaging her either, my motions more of a ticking clock of uncertainty.

I lean forward.

My chest brushes her back.

Ryann inhales.

This time, I don't just brush my chest against her back—when I lean in, I lower my head and lightly graze my lips against her shoulder.

She smells great.

Better than I do, and I've showered.

I inhale the scent of her, nudging her hair with my nose to get it out of my way, brushing my mouth at the curve of her neck. Right below her ear. Hands at her sides, resting at her waist.

My dick stiffens, my lack of underwear or boxers or briefs making it glaringly obvious I'm getting turned on. Probably was long before she walked out of her bedroom in four layers of clothing, one of them currently in her lap.

Naked from the waist up, she and I.

I test her again.

Raise my hands, sliding them around her middle to the front, her lips parting when they settle below her breasts.

My thumbs brush the bottoms of them.

Ryann's head tilts to the left, inviting me to put my mouth there again, so I take advantage of the opportunity, cock hard as a rock, brain addled.

I have as much adrenaline as I do when I'm on the football field, waiting for the whistle to blow, utilizing every ounce of self-control not to slide my hands where I want them: onto her beautiful tits.

Innocent enough, yeah?

I scoot forward so we're skin to skin, arms around her midsection, mouth on her flesh, dick straining against the robe at my hips, my hands flirting with her tits.

I kiss the back of her neck.

Kiss the curve of her shoulder.

Kiss below her ear.

Ryann hums.

Turns her head, presenting me with her profile.

I kiss her jawline and the corner of her mouth.

Her lips reach for mine; our openmouthed kiss is hot, tongues instantly clashing, and damn if she doesn't lean back into me.

Over her shoulder, I glance down at her tits; hard nipples are rosy and puckered, boobs filling my palms up as if they were made for this exact moment.

Perfect.

Ryann moans.

Lets me play with her nipples a little longer before pulling away and shifting, moving her body, moving so she's straddling me on the couch, tits totally in my face.

Holy fuck, they're fantastic.

The kind of tits I'd masturbate to while I watched porn if I watched porn.

I take a nipple in my mouth, sucking gently while she tips her head back, slowly grinding on my dick, making it harder and harder not to tear her pants off and stick my face between her legs the same way my face is between her tits.

I yank at the robe around my waist, lifting my ass off the couch so I can discard it onto the floor—it's in my fucking way and I want the barrier between us gone, my thick, hard cock now the only thing I'm wearing.

Obviously, I'm not self-conscious in the least—don't have to be.

My body is tight and toned.

The one muscle that's been sorely neglected over the years is begging for attention, stiffly sticking up between our bodies, Ryann doing an admirable job not staring down at it.

He's an average cock—not too big, not too small, perfectly proportioned for a dude my size and height. A respectable cock, if you will, not one to be embarrassed about if caught unawares by a pantsing and the drawers get pulled down.

Ryann grinds on, pajama bottoms be damned.

Our mouths are fused together because that's what two people do when they're dry humping and horny, rubbing their bodies together because they want to fuck but haven't made up their minds about it yet.

"I can't take it anymore." I groan, unable to keep my hands off her boobs, lavishing them with all my attention. The most gorgeous nipples I've seen in person are in and out of my mouth, between my thumb and forefinger, on the tip of my tongue.

When I get one wet and blow on it, she moans.

Grinds harder.

"Are you wearing underwear?" I ask breathlessly.

"Yes."

That's all the affirmation I need to push at her pajama bottoms, easing them down her hips with a little bit of her help, sliding them down until they're off—a few awkward seconds where I think she may fall face down onto the couch.

Rather than climbing back on top of me and grinding like I thought she would, Ryann goes to the floor, kneeling in front, between my spread legs.

Reaches for the base of my dick, leaning forward and swallowing the length of my cock.

"Holy shit..."

Oh my God.

My hands want to touch her, stroke her hair, but there isn't enough blood flowing through my brain for the actions to coordinate. Instead, I grab the couch cushions and tug, same way I want to grab her long hair.

Ryann Winters blows me as if it were my birthday, deep and with enthusiasm. The tingling in my balls has me rolling my eyes at the same time I squeeze them shut.

“Oh fuck...oh shit...” I gasp again. “*Deeper.*”

Take it all, I want to add, but I hold the words in, not wanting to be a pig about this favor she’s bestowing upon me. My dick is a dam that’s about to burst, and she hasn’t even been sucking on it long—two minutes, tops.

Her hand goes under my balls, cupping them. Plays with them as if they were a pair of toys, middle finger pressing on my taint.

And because there’s no blood in my brain, it doesn’t tell my pelvis not to thrust up, doesn’t tell my body not to fuck her mouth.

Ryann gags.

Gags but doesn’t stop.

Watching the top of her head, watching her swallowing my hard cock, taking it in her mouth makes me want to—

Shoot my load in her mouth.

“I’m c-coming,” I groan, trying feebly to pull away on the off chance she wants to finish me off in her hand.

But she doesn’t.

Not Ryann Winters.

I should have known she’d swallow.

Should have known she isn’t a quitter.

twenty-seven

ryann

“I like him more than I’m annoyed by him, which counts for something, right?”

– Winnie

IF I DIDN’T KNOW any better, I would think Dallas Colter was petting my hair.

Although, I did just give him a blowie worthy of a porn star.

****hair flip****

Still on the floor in front of him, I’m not quite sure what to do with myself.

I rise.

Stand between his legs because I’m essentially stuck there, surprised when his hands go around my waist. Even more surprised when he stands, lifting me by the ass and hiking me up so my legs are around his hips.

Stalks to the other side of the room.

“Where are you taking me?”

The bedroom—he’s taking me to the bedroom, dropping me in the center of my bed before climbing up the center toward me, hands going straight to my panties.

He pulls them down.

Face goes straight to my pussy, one of his legs hiked up, the other hanging off the mattress. Dallas Colter with his mouth on my clit is a glorious sight.

I can't get enough of him.

I wanted to suck his dick—something I've rarely done in past relationships because I never considered myself good at it. But tonight? I wanted to have his dick in my mouth so bad it started watering as soon as I climbed on top of him.

And what a pretty dick it is, if there is such a thing.

It sits between his thighs now, spent from coming in my mouth, lying against the bedding still semi-hard.

Like I said: *pretty*.

Dallas sucks on my pussy, licking and sucking, thumbs moving in a slow circular motion, adding to my torment. His elbows press down on my knees to keep my legs spread.

So hot.

“Fuck, you're sexy.” He moans into me, eating me out. “So fucking sexy.”

One hand crawls up my body and massages my boob, fingers gently squeezing.

I want him inside of me so bad.

I want him inside of me so bad I lean up on my elbows to watch him, stare at his dick to see if it's hard again, knowing if it is, I'm going to beg him to fuck me—any self-respecting girl would.

I want him inside of me so bad.

I deserve a stiff fucking after the month I've had!

My mind wanders...

Condoms.

There are condoms in the bedside drawer, my brain shouts.

I bought them when I thought I needed to be prepared if I had Diego over to my apartment, something that never came to pass, the brand-new box in the top drawer gathering dust.

Yes...thank you, God.

Dallas's hips are rotating against the bedspread, basically dry humping the mattress, his thick thighs a thing of beauty. I observe him for a few seconds before pulling on his shoulder.

He lifts his head.

Eyes are unfocused. Lips glossy.

Hair a mess.

"I want you to fuck me," I tell him matter-of-factly, not wasting time being coy. "Please."

Why am I saying *please*? Jesus, Ryann—it's not as if he's going to turn you down. He's already ready to go, and you already know he's attracted to you.

Is this what it feels like to have a friend with benefits?

"I don't have any protection." His fingers haven't left their spot on my clit, thumb still pressed against the top of it.

Good boy.

Smart.

"I do," I say, chin up. "Top drawer."

Dallas hesitates for a split second before bolting toward the drawer, arm stretching, fingers yanking it open, grabbing the small box of three condoms I got at the gas station several weeks ago at the same time I filled up my tank and bought a lottery ticket.

He tears the box open.

Pulls one out, ripping the package.

I watch, transfixed, as he rolls it onto his dick, pulling it down to the base.

God, he's sexy.

A work of art, really.

He reaches for me, but I shove him back, push him so he's lying down, back pressed into the mattress.

Mine.

At least for the night anyway.

“I want to be on top.”

He nods, arms wide and waiting. “Yes, ma’am.”

So polite.

So Texan.

I straddle him the same way I was straddling him in the living room, but this time we’re both completely naked and our intentions are clear: we are going to have sex.

I initiated it. I want it.

His hands have me by the waist, and his eyes watch my face.

Am I ready for this?

Am I ready to have him inside me?

Will this change things? Will he treat me differently when I walk into class this week, or will it stay the same?

It’s not too late to change your mind, Ryann.

I don’t want to change my mind.

I want to have sex, and I want it with him.

Slowly, I move over him, teasing his penis with the slit in my pussy, rubbing up and down, turning myself on. His cock throbs and gets thicker beneath me.

I haven’t had a ton of sex before, but nature and instincts tell me what to do more than my own past experience, and I gasp in surprise when I inch down onto him.

It hurts a little—more than I thought it would, causing me to pause before easing farther.

Dallas doesn’t move, hands still holding my hips steady, brows rising.

He has what I refer to as sex face.

Red skin, parted lips, frantic eyes.

He’s controlling himself well, but the eyes don’t lie—he’s incredibly turned on right now, this body that’s used to stamina and adrenaline.

I can see the rush.

He's breathing in and out, and I can almost see him counting—like how a person counts sheep when they're trying to sleep, but in this case, it's to refocus so he doesn't start thrusting.

Weird how you can learn a person when you hang out with them casually, no pressure added, not trying to force it the way people do when they're entering a relationship—determined to find things in common, determined to be compatible.

Dallas and I just...

Are.

I hover above him, hands braced on his shoulders, leaning closer so I can put them on the pillows on either side of his head, his dick fully inside me.

I move slowly, getting used to it.

Lean back—

Nope, too deep.

Move my hips, shifting forward and back, watching his face because I can't seem to help myself.

His lips are still parted, so I kiss them, our tongues wet and wanting, almost desperate.

Dirty kisses during sex are my new favorite thing, and Dallas gives it to me good, sticking his dick and his tongue deep, one hand behind my ass, the other behind my head, pulling me closer.

Pulling me in so our foreheads touch, kissing and fucking—fucking and kissing, the frantic make-out session only getting me wetter, if that were possible.

How can kissing during sex make someone more turned on than they already are?

His eyes are so dark.

So serious.

Mouth pouty.

Dallas's palm moves from my ass to my breast, cupping it while he thrusts up, finally able to now that I'm used to the size of his cock. We fall into a rhythm.

In sync.

Back and forth, back and forth...

So good.

So wet.

He's sweaty, perspiration on his forehead.

"Are you trying not to come?" I muse out loud, the expression on his face undeniably straight-up panicked.

He nods. "I'm trying not to."

"Good." *Because you came already, and it would hardly be fair if only one of us got off the second time around...*

"You're so fucking tight," he mutters. "I swear I've died and gone to heaven."

You're not going to be able to let me go, are you? I think to myself, staring down at him, bending to kiss him again, his greedy hands still on my boobs and body.

Tight.

Wet.

Heaven.

I bite on my bottom lip, tempted to say something dirty, knowing he'd get off on it but having no practice.

He's being so patient; I want to surprise him with sexy words, surprise him by shifting myself back so I'm sitting, riding him slowly. His eyes go straight to my boobs.

Hands follow.

I toss my hair.

"You like that?" I moan, covering his hands with mine.

He gulps. "Yes."

"Am I the best fake girlfriend you've ever had?"

He nods. “Yes.”

“Your dick feels so good.”

Dallas parts his lips. Nods.

“You wanna come, don’t you?”

Nods again.

I grind my hips, imagining I’m a sexy porn star, fucking my man so he never thinks of another woman again when he closes his eyes. I want it to be my face he remembers when he wakes up in the morning; I want it to be me he looks for when he’s out at the bars.

If he went to the bars...

“You’re so big,” I tell him, getting him hot. “You like that I’m tight?”

“Yes.”

He can barely get the word out.

This is power, I think.

This is the power of the pussy.

The thing women whisper about—and I have it.

It feels amazing, being in control, like the strongest aphrodisiac.

Inside my core, I feel the first stirring of that tingle, the first hint of an orgasm, one I know is going to be a good one.

I lean in again to whisper in his ear. “I’m gonna come.”

“Come for me, baby.” He thrusts harder, though he doesn’t need to; I’m going to come hard no matter what, no thrusting necessary. His dick is doing the job.

My lips press against his neck, feeling the pulse there, his skin hot.

He fucks me and fucks me until I can no longer hold in my loud, drawn-out moan.

“Oh God...oh Dallas...fuck...”

“Let it go, baby.”

He calls me baby for the second time, and I revel in the false words I know won't be true in the morning but somehow sound so good to me in this moment.

Tomorrow when we wake up, we'll be back to reality, and won't that be a shame.

twenty-eight

dallas

“A boyfriend would be nice, but I’m already in a committed relationship with my right hand.”

– Kyle the cook

I’M NOT in my own bed.

It’s dark as fuck in here, and my arm moves to the side, making contact with a warm body I explore with the palm of my hand.

I raise my wrist so I can check the time, wincing at the bright light blinding me, and see that it’s three in the morning.

Too soon to get up and be productive or go for a run.

My dick tingles.

Gotta pee.

I ease out of bed, trying not to make any sound, feeling my way out the door and into the small living room, past the kitchen to the bathroom, which could seriously be closer to the bedroom—who the fuck laid out the floor plan for this apartment?

Oddly enough, when I slide back into her bed, I’m not compelled to roll to the edge of the mattress, as far away from her as I can so I can fall back asleep but keep my distance, as I’ve done in the past with girls I’ve had one-night stands with.

Not only do I not find my own space on the bed to avoid her, I find myself rolling toward her sleeping form so I can—and don’t think I’m a fucking creep for doing this...

I watch her sleep, only for a few moments.

Her hand is tucked under her chin, the moonlight shining through the window affording me a clear view.

I reach out so my palm can stroke her hair; my fingertips feel how smooth it is as it flows through my hands like sand. Ryann's skin is also super smooth, like glass as my finger slowly traces the bridge of her nose down to the tip.

She's so pretty it makes my resting heart race.

Ryann moves, ass wiggling, her hand reaching back and resting on my hip. She pats me a few times before shifting again, this time presenting her back as she faces the opposite wall.

Well, shit.

This is lame. Now what?

Sleep, Dallas. Sleep.

I can't.

You have to—you had a long fucking day.

But...

I see her eyes looking up at me as she sucks my dick, hear the sound she made when it was buried in her throat. The way she didn't back down when I said I was going to come, swallowing my cum like a champion rather than jerking me off to finish.

Her mouth around my dick.

Sucking.

Choking me down.

Is there a sexier sight? If there is, I haven't seen it.

I check my watch, groaning when I see only twenty minutes have passed.

Rolling to my back, I sling my arm across my closed eyes.

Unable to find a comfortable spot on my pillow, my head inches several centimeters toward her. I fit my body behind

hers so we're a proper set of spoons—ones that fit snugly and perfectly.

Her hair tickles my nose.

My nose finds her neck and sniffs, lips pressing a kiss on her pulse.

Ryann stirs.

Arms go above her head in a stretch. I use the opportunity to slide my hand over her waist, over her stomach, fanning out my fingers.

Nuzzle her neck; she's fast asleep.

Soft.

Warm.

Cuddly.

I can't help it if the position gets me hard any more than I can help being more awake than I'd prefer to be at this hour of the night, but on the other hand, it feels good to just...

Hold her, I guess.

Never done this with anyone before.

Ryann wiggles her ass, her round cheeks cradling my cock.

She's got on underwear and a tank top but never put her pajamas back on even though she complained about being cold when we finally decided it was time to sleep, her pants still in a heap in the living room where we left them.

Mine too.

I didn't bother with clothes.

Boxers included.

Not because I thought we'd have sex again but because I was too lazy and couldn't care less about what I wore to bed.

Ryann moans, wiggling again in a way that makes me think she may not be completely unawake. Her hand reaching back to grip my backside leaves me no doubt—she is definitely waking up.

I let my hand creep to cup her breast, toying with her nipple until it hardens, running my palm slowly over it again and again.

Kiss her neck while I caress her, listening for her to moan again.

“Mmm.”

And there it is...

My hand runs from her tits to her stomach, splaying over her lower belly, fingers dipping into the low band of her panties.

“Are you awake?” I whisper, nibbling on her ear.

“Mmhmm.” She spreads her legs when my middle finger pushes slowly inside her while my dick presses against her backside. “Yes.”

“Do you like that?”

“Yes.”

Ryann hikes her leg over my calf so her thighs are spread, giving me more access to the heat between her legs. She’s wet—so wet I want to bury myself inside her and live there.

She nudges my hand away, and I remove it, giving her space so she can roll to her back. Her hands go down to grab the hem of her tank top and she tugs, removing it and letting it drop to wherever it went in the dark.

I lean forward, mouth latching onto her nipple as she tugs off her panties, hands straying south, middle finger resuming its earlier position inside her pussy.

*Why does foreplay taste so much better in a sleepy fog?
And why does nothing feel better than a good old-fashioned
cuddle fuck?*

I feel Ryann’s hand inching across the mattress before it grips my cock and starts a slow, tired yank, jerking me off while I suck on her tits and play with her pussy.

“I want to come with your dick inside me,” she whispers, the words breathing new life into my dick as if it weren’t hard

enough.

It isn't far for me to get a condom from her bedside table, the little box she stored away there two condoms poorer.

My teeth rip open the package.

My hands feebly fumble to roll it on while Ryann lies there watching, hand stroking my back.

I shiver when her nails graze my skin.

I hover over her once the condom is on, leaning forward to kiss her, letting my cock hang between her spread legs. She moves, hips gyrating against it, kissing me back at the same time she plays with my shaft.

Moves it up and down over her pussy, lining it up so I can push inside, both of us moaning as I slide in.

My arms are on either side of her head, our mouths still fused when I begin the leisurely task of fucking her good and slow—and somehow the kiss is slow, too. Somehow the kiss feels...

Intimate.

As if we've kissed a hundred times.

As if we care about each other the way two people in a relationship do.

My heart constricts.

Tightens.

I pull my mouth away, burying my face in the crook of her neck, one of my hands in her hair. I keep myself from telling her she's beautiful and one of the best things that's ever happened to me—that would be a lie because it couldn't possibly be true.

You're sleepy, dude. Do not open your mouth and make an ass of yourself.

But God, she feels so fucking good, and it's not just because she's so fucking tight and wet and her hair smells like

goddamn heaven. Her skin feels like silk and her tits are the most beautiful thing I've ever felt in my palm.

You're high, man—keep your lips shut.

But...

But...

“You feel so fucking good, babe.” I kiss her on the side of the neck.

Ryann's hands move from the middle of my back, her palms now caressing the hip dips of my backside.

Sleepily, she leans up, mouth kissing my collarbone as I thrust in and out of her intoxicating, tight pussy.

I wish I could see her face.

I mean, I can, kind of—the moon is giving me enough light to watch her silhouette, but not so much that I can see the expression in her eyes or the way her lips part when I hit a sweet spot.

My face is still in her neck when she comes, her loud moaning putting a lazy smile on my face.

I hope the neighbors hear her.

I hope the neighbors hear when I thrust harder.

Now that she's had her orgasm, I can focus on mine, headboard smashing into the wall, a rhythmic beating.

Bump...

Bump...

Bump.

I slip my hand under her ass, pulling her into me, sliding in deeper.

Bump.

Bump...

I hope the neighbors hear it.

I hope the neighbors see me walking out her door tomorrow doing the walk of shame.

Mine.

When I come, I come harder than I did the first time we fucked—come harder than when she blew my brains into oblivion by sucking my cock.

Loudly.

Deliberately.

Then, after I've tossed the condom in the trash and come back to bed, I want to do it all over again.

twenty-nine

ryann

*“Starting to date sure looks tempting, but so did the Titanic,
and look how that turned out.”*

– Dallas Colter

DALLAS IS STILL HERE.

My phone is buzzing on the nightstand, and before I grab it, I glance over my shoulder at Dallas, who’s on his back, sprawled out on my mattress, hogging all the space, sheets around his hips.

We had sex three times last night—four if you count the blow job, which I do not.

I look at Dallas, then look at my phone.

Mom.

Shit.

I can’t take a call from my mother when I’m lying naked in bed next to a guy:

1. Whom I am not dating.
2. Who has major commitment issues.
3. Who broke up with me on behalf of my ex-boyfriend.

My mother would have a fit.

No matter how sex positive and body positive and feminist she is, she doesn’t want to know I’ve just had my brains fucked out most of the night by a guy who looks like one of

the Hemsworth brothers and only calls me back when he needs a favor.

Yeah, *no*.

I hit DECLINE and send her a text: *I'll call you back after my shower.*

Shower?

I'll absolutely be needing one of those.

Babe.

Baby.

By the third time we screwed, I'd lost count of the times Dallas had called me babe or baby, the endearments slipping off his tongue like my name does, sugary sweet.

A girl could get used to a guy like Dallas calling her baby, especially when he's buried inside her.

Oh my God, his dick.

His magical, glorious dick.

My eyes roam to his middle section, the part I can't see because my white sheets are wrapped around his waist, but I don't have to see it to know what's hiding there—the most mouthwatering cock on the planet.

This coming from a girl who's never purposely sought out to deep-throat one. His body has turned me into a wanton, lusty sex kitten.

Rawr.

Suddenly, the crisp white sheet concealing his penis begins to rise, tenting over his dick region, and I lift my eyes to his face.

He's watching me, a slow smile forming on his lips.

“Want to join the party?”

I shake my head with a quiet laugh. “No—I'm sore.” I can't take any more, as much as I want to have him inside me. As much as I like the sight of his dick.

“Then I should probably go take a piss and jump in the shower.” He yawns, untangling himself, then tossing the sheets back. “If that’s cool.”

I nod. “It’s cool.”

When he rises, I can’t keep my gaze off the backside of him.

Like a Greek statue, every muscle in his body flexes when he moves, powerful and firm. I rethink not wanting to have sex, tempted to call him back to the bed but not wanting to sound needy.

But will I get another chance at a night with him?

Proposing we renegotiate our original agreement into a friends with benefits situation would give me anxiety. If he turned me down, I would die of embarrassment...

So I watch him go.

Call Mom back when he’s in the shower, pulling on a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie, wrapping my hair into a messy bun at the top of my head.

“Hey, Mom.” I yawn. “You’re up early.”

“So are you.” She sniffs. “Busy night?”

Why is she asking it in that tone? “Yeah, it was busy. Yesterday Winnie and I went to the football game with a few friends.”

“I see that you went to the game. When were you going to tell your father and me you’re seeing someone? We had to hear about it from Grandma and Grandpa. Your grandmother is beside herself. Everyone in their retirement community has been stopping over.”

I leave the bedroom and go to the living room, plopping down in the overstuffed blue chair next to the sliding glass patio door.

“What are you talking about? I’m not dating anyone. I would have told you about it.”

“Really? You’re not dating Dallas Colter? Ryann, your dad is basically shitting himself.”

“I’m not dating Dallas Colter, Mom. I already told you. He’s the guy Diego paid to break up with me.”

“Why are you lying! It’s all over the goddamn news!”

My body goes still, brain processing all the words she’s shouting at me. *My grandparents’ retirement community, Dad shitting himself, all over the news...* “What do you mean it’s all over the news?”

“First thing your dad does in the morning is check the scores of the games on *SportsCenter*—and whose face do you think he saw plastered all over it, kissing the predicted number one draft pick for the NFL in a parking lot? His daughter. I thought he was going to have a heart attack when he came into the bedroom.”

My mind is spinning.

So that *was* a photographer I saw in the parking lot yesterday! I knew it. I told Dallas that—

Oh my God.

Obviously, he knew.

He knew the guy was there taking our photo, and apparently, he was recording us too.

“Do you see that?”

“See what?” *He craned his neck around as if he were having trouble seeing the same guy I saw.*

“That guy.” *I paused, rain pelting my eyes. “I thought I saw him taking pictures.”*

“In this rain?”

I nodded. Did it make a difference if it was raining or not for the press to take our photos? “Before that...”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward his truck. “Why are we still standing here? Let’s go.”

Distracting me.

“Ryann, are you there?” Mom’s voice interrupts my memory.

If this phone I’m on had a cord, I’d be nervously twirling it. “I’m assuming Dad almost having a heart attack wasn’t a good thing?”

“All I know is we’ve been getting call after call, and it’s still morning. This is ridiculous. Who is this boy?”

She keeps calling him a boy, but he’s anything but.

“I’m not dating him. We just...we’re friends.”

“How did you become friends with a guy who dumped you for one of his buddies?”

Ah. So she *does* remember me mentioning Dallas! How sly my mother is when she wants to be.

“It’s complicated,” I tell her. I can’t very well say I agreed to a farce for the sake of his football career. Which suddenly sounds so fucking stupid and was such a dumb thing to do, the whole idea gross to me. An idea that, at the time, I thought I could handle.

Mom huffs in frustration. “I don’t understand your generation.”

“You don’t have to understand it. This is really between Dallas and me.”

“And now it’s between you and Dallas and the entire nation of sports fans.”

“Mom, I just woke up. Can I have some coffee and call you back?”

“You told me you were in the shower.”

Dammit. I hate when she does this, as if she were a freaking private detective putting pieces of a mystery together. Except this isn’t a mystery—this is my personal life! And I still have no idea what she’s talking about.

I mean, I know what she’s talking about.

I haven't seen *with my own eyes* what she's talking about, but as soon as Dallas is out of the shower, I'm ready to pounce.

thirty

dallas

“Do you ever want to cuddle with your girlfriend and realize you don’t have one?”

– Drew Colter

WHY IS Ryann looking at me as if I just did her dirty?

Was fucking three times last night not enough? Do I need to fuck her once more before I bounce?

Seated on the couch, she’s been patiently waiting for me to put my clothes back on—the T-shirt and joggers I had on yesterday nice and dry from the dryer.

Not clean, but dry.

Anywho, I pause en route to her bedroom so I can riffle around for my socks, which have gone missing in action somehow.

“What?”

She crosses her arms.

“Did I do something?” Best to get the question out of the way since it’s obvious I have indeed done something to earn this ire, but I’m not dumb enough to ask something stupid like, *Why do you look like someone pissed in your Cheerios?*

“Have you seen the news?”

No, I haven’t seen the news, although my phone has been blowing up all morning, most of the messages from my teammates and my brothers, who are wondering where I am and why I never came home last night.

“No.”

Hey, it’s not a lie. I haven’t seen the coverage, but I know damn well what she’s referring to: our picture being blasted all over the national news.

“I thought they were going to put a cute picture of me on the big screen at the stadium and that would be the end of it. That’s what you told me was going to happen.”

I shrug. “What do you want me to do?”

Her eyes almost bug out of her head as she stares at me. “Something!” Her arms go up. “Do you know how furious my parents are right now?”

I snort. “Oh, please. Who gives a shit? You’re twenty-one years old. Do you ask them permission to take a shit, too?”

Ryann’s mouth falls open.

Shuts.

Steam practically rises from her nose. “Of course I don’t ask their permission to take a shit, but a heads-up from me would have been great.” She stands. “Actually, a heads-up from you would have been great, too. Someone had to have known about this.”

“My agent arranged it.” I say it as casually as I can, the words sounding foreign to me and odd. *My agent arranged it.*

“I had to shut my phone off,” Ryann announces indignantly, as if having to do so is a violation of her constitutional rights.

“Okay? Want me to shut mine off too?” Seriously, what does she want me to do right now?

The situation is beyond my control.

Her eyes narrow. “No, I don’t want you to shut yours off too! That’s not what I meant. I just meant...” Her arms flop up, then down at her sides. “I don’t know what I mean. I’m just...freaked out.”

She’ll be even more skeeved out when she reads the news online, but we can cross that bridge when we come to it.

By now all her friends—and mine—will have seen the news coverage, and why this is important to people is beyond me. For real, who gives a shit who I'm dating or not dating or sleeping with? What does it affect anyone to know whom I choose to kiss in a parking lot after a game or take home to meet my brothers?

Who.

Gives. A. Shit.

I cross the room and sit on the couch behind her, hoping she'll pop a squat and sit down, too, so we can discuss this rationally.

I don't want to be in this mess any more than she does; if anything, having this blasted puts more of a spotlight on me when all I'm trying to do here is play football.

"Look," I begin. "I was surprised to see that pap in the parkin' lot last night too. I honestly thought you'd be on the big screen with a caption that said 'friend of' like they've done with a few other players' girlfriends 'cause the crowd loves it. That's the truth."

"But you did see the guy in the parking lot."

"Yeah, I saw him. That's why I wanted to get you out of there, but by that point it was kinda too late."

"Too late," she repeats.

"Yeah. I guess the damage is done, as they say."

"So now what?"

"I suppose we have to let it blow over."

"Are we still going to do stuff together? Like—be seen in public?"

I rub my chin, unsure. "Let me ask Eli what he wants me to do."

"Who is Eli?"

"My agent."

Her mouth flattens into a line. "Oh. Him."

“He’s not a bad guy. He only wants what’s best for me.”

Ryann huffs. “What’s best for you isn’t what’s best for *me*.”

I...

Hadn’t thought of it that way.

She’s right. What’s best for me isn’t what’s best for her—not now that she’s going to have people breathing down her neck. She has classes to take, and she has to work.

“I just want to know what to tell my parents. If I tell them I’m pretending to date you, they’re going to think I’m an asshole. I already told my mom we weren’t dating, and she was appalled—evidently, she’s living in the 1950s where a girl can’t kiss a man she’s not betrothed to.”

Her mom sounds like a peach.

“My mom is used to this stuff.”

Ryann’s brows are raised. “How is that possible?”

“My older brother Duke played for New York, and anytime he was seen standing near anyone, the media would make it look like they were datin’. Could have been anybody—his publicist, his cousin, a friend, the stylist at a store—so my mom is used to shit like this. I don’t think she’s even texted me yet.”

Not yet anyway.

I’ve never been romantically connected to anyone before, so there *is* actually a chance she’ll touch base.

“You gonna be okay if I head home?”

I have to get to the gym for the afternoon workout with my brothers, and occasionally our assistant coaches like to go over game footage before practice.

Ryann shrugs. “I’ll be fine.”

Fine.

I hate that word, but I’ll take it, ’cause I do have to split.

A hollow pit forms in my stomach, that little niggling I've come to identify as guilt, but there's nothing I can do at the moment—not about the situation, not about having to leave.

I'm not going to be late because some dipshit reporter put my name on television.

thirty-one

ryann

“The day a man makes me happier than chips, guac, and a margarita is the day I get married. Unless he plays football.”

– Sav

“I’LL BE FINE.” Famous last words.

I let him walk out the door to go to practice without another peep, because what is there to say? Nothing can be done about this predicament, which is the predicament I signed up for without actually knowing the consequences.

How could I?

I’m just a normal person.

A normal student, going to classes and minding her own business. I don’t play in a stadium surrounded by thousands and thousands of screaming people—I don’t have fans. I don’t have a scholarship. I am not on television.

Dating Diego was different.

Diego isn’t going to be drafted; he isn’t going to the Combine, he isn’t entering the draft, and he won’t be playing professional football, so dating him was low-key.

Dating him was like dating a regular guy if you don’t include all the working out he did at the gym. Him hitting the gym felt the same as me having to work several days a week, so it never crossed my mind that being seen in public with a guy like Dallas would put me in the public eye.

I don’t watch or follow football. How the heck was I supposed to know he’s a big deal?

He's in college, for crying out loud; he's not an NFL superstar. At least not yet.

"I thought they were going to put a cute picture of me on the big screen at the stadium and that would be the end of it."

How embarrassing.

My naivety landed me in this mess, and I cannot blame him for the position I'm in.

To make matters worse, I feel like I'm being watched—*because I am.*

Everywhere I go on campus, all eyes are on me. Class, the student union, walking through the quad—people are staring.

It's a ton of pressure to know I'm being judged: on my appearance, on my credentials, Dallas's fans finding me worthy or unworthy based on my looks, my waitressing job, my major.

The simple fact that I've been fighting the temptation to do my hair and look cute to impress strangers weighs on me, so instead of doing that, I've been throwing on a hat and sunglasses before leaving my apartment.

But wait! *There's more!*

I went to sleep Saturday night with five hundred followers and woke up with thirty-two thousand. Deleted my account and created a new one with a fake name and made it private to prevent the same thing from happening again.

On top of all this, my father has been driving me up the wall about Dallas, wanting details I cannot provide: how long have he and I been together (*we're not*), will I be bringing him home to meet the family (*no*), have I met his older brother Duke (*also no*), has he shown me the playbook (*um, no—why would he do a thing like that?*).

And can we mention the fact that when I left the house this morning, there were photographers outside my apartment building taking photos of me walking—which was weird in itself. Why would anyone want a picture of me bundled up in a hat, coat, and mittens, walking to campus?

Who cares about shit like that?

Not me.

My phone buzzes and I'm relieved to see it's a message from Winnie, my only saving grace throughout this mess. My best friend may love to party and be in the spotlight, but she's been amazing at soothing my overactive imagination and keeping me from freaking the fuck out.

Winnie:

Good news! I took your shift for the evening so you won't have to brave the dinner crowd.

STOP IT. You goddess. Are you being serious right now??

I'm like your fairy godmother, aren't I?

Yes. Why are you doing this for me?

Um, you seem stressed LOL

I do? What would make you say that?

I mean. It's true, I have been stressed. What normal girl wouldn't be?

Um, the fact that you're running around hiding your face and wearing sunglasses inside as if people aren't going to know it's you?

Winnie has seen the articles.

She knows how my social media blew up, how the media has been putting out info about me for public consumption.

All I'm saying is, take the night off. Maybe try to talk with Dallas, get some of this figured out if you can.

I'd love to figure this out, but I feel like we need a plan. Honestly, though, there's nothing either of us can do to get these horses back in the stable.

I'm sorry, what now? Horses? What does that mean?

It's something Dallas has said, LOL. It's like letting the cat out of the bag—impossible to corral and get back in.

Yeah, no. That still makes no sense.

ANYWAY...thanks for taking my shift. I owe you.

Duh. Obviously you owe me.

My shoulders sag with relief; thank God I don't have to show up for my shift tonight—I need a night where I can just lie low and chill, figure my life out. There's also the other struggle I've had nagging at the back of my mind.

The fact that I have feelings for Dallas and he doesn't know.

Plus.

The fact that I have feelings for him and he doesn't want a girlfriend.

Plus.

I am his teammate's ex.

Plus.

We're caught up in a media storm and that's taken center stage in our lives.

Plus, plus, PLUS.

Ugh, when is it going to end? What can I possibly say to him to let him know how I feel?

Should I?

It feels like a bad idea.

Winnie thinks I need to spit it out and be done with it so it's not constantly on my mind, but truly, I personally think I need to bury the feelings so I don't get hurt.

I don't want to get hurt.

Again.

The reasons are simple:

1. I was dumped by a guy who never bothered to get to know me.
2. Who wants to be rejected by someone they like?
3. Who wants to be rejected by someone they've had sex with?

We slept together with no understanding, but the intention was clear: both of us wanted to get laid. We weren't looking for a commitment. We were DSO: *desperately seeking orgasm*.

And we can't forget I was the instigator in each of the times Dallas and I were intimate. It was my idea to play truth or dare. It was my idea to write KISS ME above my crotch, thinking it would be hilarious and also drive him to distraction.

It was my idea to get down on my knees and give him a blow job.

It was my idea to rub my ass against his dick in the middle of the night after I heard him going to pee, knowing he'd want to have sex again.

But flirty games and sex do not mean he reciprocates my feelings in any way.

Sure, I've caught him staring at me when I wasn't paying attention, and yes, I've felt him sniffing my hair...and neck... but in no way has Dallas Colter indicated he wants a relationship—a real one, not this fake bullshit we've somehow backed ourselves into.

What a mess.

What a flippin' mess.

How did we get here, and how...
...do we get out?

thirty-two

dallas

“When someone says you can’t do something, do it twice and take pictures.”

– Eli Cohen

THE PAPARAZZI ARE camped out in front of my house.

Lucky for me—and too bad for those assholes outside—I have a back door and I’m not afraid to use it.

Wearing all black and a baseball cap, I shove through the doorway and step down into the backyard, making my way across the grass to the detached garage where I’ve instructed the Uber to pick me up.

I toss my backpack into the back seat before climbing in, giving the dude a nod as I buckle in. “Sup.”

He adjusts the rearview mirror and looks back at me. “Dallas?”

“Yup.”

He hesitates before putting the car into drive, and I almost roll my eyes.

“Sorry for havin’ you pick me up back here. It’s a clusterfuck out front.”

The guy nods, taking a right onto the road at the end of the alley. “No problem. It’s kind of dark back here, but so is everything else.”

It’s true that the neighborhood doesn’t have a lot of streetlights since it’s primarily residential and who wants

lights blinding them at night when they're trying to sleep.

On the other hand, it's kind of inconvenient if you're trying to walk safely from one place to another in the dark, a problem I don't think about 'cause I'm not a female, but dudes have been known to get jumped.

Squished into the back of this guy's Nissan, my legs are bent up uncomfortably all the way to Ryann's apartment. I stretch on the curb when the dude dumps me off, bending this way and that, not noticing the small group of people clustered in the yard.

"Fuck."

More photographers.

What the hell are they even doing here?

Trying to get a glimpse of my girlfriend, that's what.

I pull the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head, over the brim of my ballcap, and sling my backpack over my shoulder before walking with my head bent to the front.

They barely notice me until I'm reaching for the door, their shouts muffled when I slam it behind me and stomp the weather off my sneakers on my way down the hall.

Ryann doesn't know I'm coming, and I hope she's home. Would sure suck if she wasn't 'cause I'd be forced to go back outside and hop a ride, fight off the bloodthirsty paps.

I knock twice on her door.

Nothing.

Knock again. "Ryann? It's me."

On the off chance she's home but just not answering because she doesn't want to open the door to a reporter...

"It's Dallas."

Several doors in the hallway crack open, and I sigh toward the ceiling.

"So fucked up," I mumble as Ryann's door opens, too.

“Hey.” It opens all the way as she invites me in, stepping to the side to give me room.

When I’m inside, we stand and look at each other as if we haven’t seen one another for days, because the truth is we haven’t.

“You didn’t come to class today,” I accuse, setting my bag down in the kitchen and putting my hands on my hips.

“I didn’t think you would go, either.”

“Well, I went.” I live with this shit all the time, and I’m used to it. Didn’t cross my mind that she would bail on a class, and I feel guilty knowing all this is my fault. “Everyone was lookin’ at me. I mean, they’re always lookin’ at me, but still.”

That does the trick and breaks the ice, Ryann giving me a gentle shove.

I grab the hand making contact with my body and pull, bringing her in for a hug.

“Let me hug you for a second.”

This warm-and-fuzzy shit is so unlike me, but I can’t stop myself from wanting that connection with her; it’s been a shitty few days thinking about her and wondering how she’s doing, not having the time to check in on her personally.

My coach and special teams coaches had a meeting with me. My agent called, giving me a metaphorical slap me on the back for following his directions and giving my reputation a much-needed makeover. He’s coming to town to see me within the next week or two and wants to meet Ryann. Told me he’d just seen my brother, Duke, who wants Eli to check in on me.

Ryann is in my arms.

“Since when are you a hugger?” her muffled voice asks, pressed into my chest.

“Since now.”

Since right this second.

Was kind of worried about the little shit.

Worried about her? Why?

She's a big girl, can take care of herself, but I care about her—we've spent a decent amount of time together lately, and I can trust her.

I trust her a lot.

Can't say that about everyone I hang out with, including the guys on my team. Some of them have my back, but a few of the others would stab me in it.

Ryann isn't a user.

She's my friend.

“Are you patting me on the back?”

“Am I?” I didn't realize I was doing that.

She pulls away. “Yes.”

Walks to the other side of the room and sits on one end of the couch.

I follow, sitting myself in the middle.

Ryann doesn't say anything, biting down on her bottom lip. She looks worried and distracted.

“So.”

I nod. “We have shit to discuss, and we might as well dive in, eh?”

“First tell me what's in the backpack.”

What's in my backpack? That's what she wants to talk about first?

“Stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“You know, clean clothes and whatever.”

Her brows go up. “Were you heading to the gym or something?”

“No. I was headin' here.”

“Where were you before you got here?”

“Home.”

She considers this. “Did you just swing by with a backpack and clean clothes because we have shit to discuss? No party games?”

Is that sarcasm? I can’t tell. “I thought we’d...you know, talk it out then hang?”

“Talk it out and then hang,” she deadpans with a blank expression that’s hard to read.

Does she not want me here? I thought we enjoyed each other’s company, and I certainly didn’t come here expecting anything other than to run away from the noise inside my head and the paps camped outside my house.

“Can we stop speakin’ in code and get to the point?”

“I’m not speaking in code.”

“No, but you sound pissed and I have no idea why. I know this situation ain’t ideal, but we can make the best of it until it blows over—and it will blow over.” Trust me.

I’ve seen the media stalk and hound my older brother. In fact, he had to hide out in the middle of nowhere when he was switching football teams—which is how he met his girlfriend, Posey.

Hiding out like a big ol’ chicken, scared the paparazzi were gonna get him.

Ha!

Slowly, Ryann nods, acquiescing to my request that we talk.

“First, I wanna apologize for all this. This isn’t what I had in mind when I asked if you’d, you know...”

“Be your fake girlfriend?”

“Sure. If that’s what we’re callin’ it now.” I tilt my head and study her. “Are you sure nothin’s wrong?”

Ryann moves her arms up and down in her lap. “Of course something’s wrong. I’m holed up in my apartment because

there are weirdos out there with cameras waiting to take my dumb picture. I couldn't go to class because I was freaked out, and I didn't want to work tonight—also because I was freaked out.” She takes a deep breath before continuing. “Look, I know I'm overreacting, and I know this is going to blow over. That's not the real issue here.”

“It's not?” 'Cause from where I sit, that's plenty of good reasons right there that she just listed.

“No.” She's wringing her hands in her lap. She tilts her head back, looking up at the ceiling. “Ugh, God, I hate this.”

“Hate what?”

“Hate how this is so hard.”

“What's hard?” And no, I'm not trying to make a dick joke.

“This...telling you how I feel.”

“You're telling me how you feel?” I am *so* confused right now.

She stares at me, frustration etched across her brow.

thirty-three

ryann

“I’m as cold as ice, but in the right hands, I melt.”

– Ryann Winters

I CAN’T GET the words out of my mouth.

“Tell him, Ryann. Worst-case scenario, he says he doesn’t feel the same, and you can know and move on, end of story.”

Winnie’s sage advice runs on a loop through my brain as I make eyes at Dallas, seated only a foot away from me on the couch.

“I...” I clear my throat. “Yes, I want to tell you how I feel.”

Oh God.

No, I don’t.

I don’t—I’m scared.

I can’t do it.

“Feel about...?”

Dallas looks genuinely confused. He also looks concerned, an expression that only elevates my anxiety.

Abort, abort!

“About...” I hedge.

You.

Us.

This.

“Ryann? Are you okay?” He’s reaching across the span of space, putting his hand on my thigh, his large palm warming my skin through the fabric of my leggings.

I nod, still unable to spit it out.

“Should I try to guess?”

Dear God, no, please do not try to guess!

This is a disaster.

I uncurl myself from the couch and stand. “Can you give me a second? I have to use the bathroom.”

Translation: I have to go text Winnie to help me out of this mess.

Dallas cocks his brow. “Should I find something to watch on TV?”

“Um, sure.”

He watches me all the way to the bathroom, and I glance at him one last time through the crack in the door before slamming it shut.

Me:

HELP. OMG. I thought I could do this but obviously I can’t and now he thinks I’m a weirdo.

It takes her an eternity to message me back.

Okay slow down, what is going on? Who thinks you’re a weirdo and what can’t you do?

Dallas. He showed up at my place a little while ago and I started to tell him how I feel—like, was going to dive right in, but when I opened my mouth, nothing came out, and now I’m in the bathroom straight-up panicking.

Deep breath. It’s going to be okay. He’s a decent guy, right?

Yes.

Then try not to worry—Dallas likes you, and now you just need to know if he LIKES you likes you.

What are we, five?

Well how else do you want me to put it??? Now you just wanna know if he wants to maybe marry you someday?

WINNIE that is not helping!

You wanna know if he wants to bang you and only you and go steady.

That's a little better...

Why not just tell him THAT? Use those words—dudes understand words like bang and screw and bone.

I'd rather not make this about sex...

Oh right, you want to make this about feelers.

Yes

Well the good news is he showed up without you telling him you wanted him over, right?

Also yes.

So. Hmm...

She has nothing to say for a solid two minutes, those three dots in the messenger app seemingly frozen on the screen, bubbling and bubbling with no message popping up.

It's torture.

Sorry, Kyle overcooked someone's burger and I had to take them the new one.

...

Okay so what I would say if I were in your position...

Yes, yes. Hanging on your every word...

Dallas, I thought when we agreed to hanging out for the sake of your career that I could do it without getting invested—but the truth is, that's not what happened.

Is there more?

I'm thinking! Plus Ben just got here for his shift and he's on my case. I swear that dude is useless.

WINNIE FOCUS. I can't sit in the bathroom forever!!!

She doesn't reply.

WINNIE

WINNIE

Nothing.

Shit.

She must be getting slammed at the diner.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, giving myself a pep talk. “You can do this. Winnie is right. The worst thing that can happen is he doesn't feel the same way.” I take a breath. “The good news is, he already considers you a friend and he didn't ghost you after you had sex with him.”

Most guys would have—not to stereotype him, but he is an athlete, and he doesn't want a girlfriend. It wouldn't have surprised me if he'd stopped talking to me once his needs were met.

Yet here he is, showing up at my place.

That's a good sign, yeah?

I straighten my spine. "Now get out there and tell the guy how you feel. No chickening out."

Easy-peasy.

Except...

Except I want to barf.

thirty-four

dallas

“Your nudes are safe with me.”

– Drake Colter

RYANN HAS BEEN in the bathroom an awful long time. I doubt she’s in there taking a shit, so what the hell could the holdup be?

She didn’t look well when she stood up and left the room, so maybe she’s sick.

Crap. What if she’s pregnant?

Don’t be an idiot, you only had sex a few times and you were wearing a condom.

So? Condoms aren’t foolproof.

But it didn’t break, moron.

I wipe my palms on my pants. Nervous energy has my leg bouncing up and down.

If she’s not out of that bathroom in one more minute, I’m going to—

The door opens and she steps out, hands running down the braid she now has in her hair.

I let out a relieved breath.

Okay.

Good.

She didn’t fall into the toilet.

Fall into the toilet? Now you're being ridiculous.

Ryann wrings her hands as she walks forward to take the spot she previously occupied, facing me when she settles in, pulling a blanket onto her lap.

“Why do you look like you want to shit your pants?” I blurt out, knowing it sounds rude but unable to stop myself.

“Do I?” Her laugh sounds nervous.

“Sorry—guess I shouldn't have said that.”

She gives her head a shake. “It's fine.”

My eyes dart from her face to the TV, where I've got a tattoo competition going, a show I watch when I need something mindless that I don't have to focus on or think about.

Ryann clears her throat. “When you got here, you said you wanted to talk?”

I toss the remote to the coffee table and prop my feet up, leaning back and putting my arm on the back of the sofa.

She fidgets, and I'm tempted to reach across the space and put my hand on hers so she'll stop. The twitching and squirming are making me want to squirm, too. *What is she doing?*

“Yeah, I thought it would be a good idea to...you know, check in on you and everything. How are you holdin' up? We haven't talked much in the last few days.”

I feel like a dick about that, and I feel lonely not having seen her.

“I'm fine. My dad is driving me up a wall, but other than that, I suppose I'm getting used to the whispers and staring.”

“Why is he drivin' you up a wall?”

Ryann hesitates, choosing her words. “He's envisioning having a professional football player as a son-in-law. I think he's already got his first grandson's name picked out.”

If I had water in my mouth, I'd be spitting it onto the floor right now. "Say what?"

"I'm mostly kidding." She coughs. "He got excited when he saw us on the news. He's a huge fan of the Chicago Steam and of football itself. Watches *SportsCenter* every morning as if that's all the news he needs."

"What other news is there?" I tease, clearing my throat. "I remember my brother dated this woman for a few weeks whose friends drove him bonkers. She, uh, was constantly asking for tickets to the games, which was fine, but like—she wanted box seats and suite tickets, and it got so annoying Duke dumped her."

Users.

So many users.

"I imagine it's hard for him to find a genuine connection."

"It was, but now he's dating a schoolteacher, and she only watches the football games so she can eat cheese and sausage and bake."

Posey is a riot. My younger brothers and I totally dig her, and the last thing on her mind is being in the spotlight; the only time she's ever made a public appearance was at the *SportsCenter* Awards, and she hated every second of it.

"A schoolteacher? What grade?"

"Kindergarten."

Ryann's eyes go wide at this information. "Talk about opposites attract."

"You sound surprised."

"I am. I wouldn't think a famous football player would be interested in someone as low-key as a schoolteacher."

"I'm not surprised. That's exactly the kind of home life we want—to spend it with someone normal who isn't trying to be famous, isn't fake, has a good head on their shoulders." Shit, that doesn't sound good. "Not to say there aren't plenty of football wives and girlfriends in the limelight who have a good

head on their shoulders, but when they cake on the makeup to sit in the freezing cold on a winter day, then spend time on the sideline posing for cameras, it makes you wonder.”

That didn’t come out right, either.

“It’s a good thing you’re not interested in a relationship. You don’t have to worry about any of those things.”

My head snaps up to her face.

Was that a dig? Or is she being serious? Because I don’t remember ever saying I don’t want a relationship—at least, someday—and kids, and a nice house, dogs and stuff.

Pretty sure this topic has come up on more than one occasion.

“We seem to be circlin’ back to this relationship business.” My voice sounds harder than I intend it to, but gosh darn, she’s pissing me off a little. “The only reason I ain’t datin’ anyone is ’cause I haven’t had the time. I’m up to my asshole in shit, Ryann. My agent, my brother—even my mother is on my case about the draft.”

“You barely talk about it.”

“Because it’s complicated. I’m twenty-one and being a professional scares the shit out of me, but if I don’t do it now, I lose the chance. I’m not Kurt Warner—I ain’t gonna spend the next ten years playing farm and semi-pro ball in the hopes that later, when I’m actually ready, someone will want me.”

“Um.” Her voice goes quiet. “I don’t know who Kurt Warner is.”

I sigh, picking lint off the blanket on her lap. “All I’m saying is...I’m not really ready, but I have no choice.”

Ryann tilts her head. “We always have a choice. If it’s not something you want, you shou—”

“I have no choice. The time is now.”

She nods slowly. “Okay.”

“This wasn’t my point.” I exhale. “My point was I haven’t given datin’ any space in my head ’cause I have other shit

occupying that space.” Simple as that. “It’s not because I don’t like women or sex or goin’ on dates, but seriously, who wants to date someone who’s tired and crabby all the time?”

What woman in their right mind wants to put up with my temperamental tantrums? Deal with my frustrations after a loss (which isn’t often) or deal with it when Eli Cohen pisses me off (which is often enough)?

“I deal with big-kid shit. The students on this campus fuck around on the weekends in a way I don’t get the chance to.”

Ryann is nodding again. “I get it.”

Doubtful, but she gets it more than most. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound like a bear, but it’s hard, you know? Who would want to take all this on?”

Ryann’s lips part. Her shoulders move up and down in a shrug. “Me. I would.”

She would.

Me. I would.

Me. I would.

The words play over and over again in my mind—*Me. I would*—as I stare at her, speechless.

Color me clueless, but what does that mean?

Football I know like the back of my hand.

Life on a ranch in the middle of Texas is my comfort zone.

I’m used to dudes and my teammates and my coaches.

I’m used to women hitting on me or coming on to me when it’s obvious and plain as day, but for some reason I cannot interpret the meaning behind the words of a chick I’ve been spending time with and have gotten to know.

Sure, we fucked.

But I thought she just wanted to be friends.

“I thought you just wanted to be friends.”

That’s it.

That's all I can think to say, because my mind is reeling, a virtual whirlwind of a million thoughts, all of them beginning and ending with Ryann naked.

thirty-five

ryann

“A dick a day keeps the vibrator away...”

– Sav

THIS WAS A MISTAKE.

A huge, huge mistake.

I never should have said it.

If I could snatch the words back, I would, because Dallas isn't moving—and he isn't speaking.

We regard each other, our knees now touching, mine covered by a plaid blanket for warmth and security.

Dallas says nothing, only watching me with those dark eyes. He hasn't shaved in a few days, the hair on his face as dark as the hair on his head, making him look dangerous and severe.

I know he's not.

His thick brows furrow. “I thought you just wanted to be friends.”

I did. I do. “We are.”

Friends, I mean.

It's just...

Why is it so hard to get the words out? I couldn't have cared less when Diego broke up with me. Couldn't have cared less about those times he canceled on me. Didn't hesitate to tell Simon Stevens I wasn't interested in anything serious

when he told me he was in love with me back in freshman year.

That pep talk in the bathroom with Winnie is doing me little good.

What's the worst thing Dallas could say, you wonder?

Well, for starters, he could tell me he doesn't have time to date me, which I would know is a lie because:

1. We have class together and see one another twice a week during the day.
2. We've spent numerous hours together before and after practices and games.
3. He wasn't too tired to come hoofing it to my apartment tonight—*without* an invitation, might I add.

He could tell me he isn't invested like I am and let me down easy.

He could tell me, as far as girlfriends go, I'm not his type.

I have no idea what his actual type is, only that I met a need, which was fooling the team owners interested in offering him a position on their team.

But what if he doesn't?

I take a deep breath. Shift on the couch so I'm cross-legged and facing him, moving the blanket so it's no longer on my lap.

“So what I'm hearin'—just to make sure I'm not misunderstandin' you—is that you...like me.”

Like him. “Sure. That's one way of putting it.”

That makes him laugh.

He grins at me. “Is it so hard to say you have the hots for me?”

“The hots for you?” I repeat, slight indignation lacing my tone. “I never said I have the hots for you.”

I mean, yeah—I totally have the hots for him.

What warm-blooded young woman wouldn't?

Dallas snorts. "You just said you would take all of this on."
His hands move over his body.

"I did say that."

"And aren't you gonna say anythin' else? You're just going to clam up and leave me guessin'?"

The Southern accent alone is enough to make me melt; the grin only punctuates the shiver sliding down my spine.

"Can I be honest?"

"Please."

"I have no idea why I'm telling you this," I admit, the blush creeping onto my cheeks.

"Darlin', you haven't told me nothin' so far."

Darlin'.

It's the first time he's called me *darlin'*, and I don't hate it as far as endearments go. Wouldn't push him out of bed if he happened to groan it while he was coming—but that's getting ahead of myself.

"Ryann, are you tryin' to tell me you want to end our PR stunt?"

No?

Yes.

No.

I panic. On one hand, if I say yes, he might think I don't want to see him at all. On the other hand, if I say no, he might think I want to keep pretending.

"Ryann...you're freakin' out."

"I'm not."

"You are. I can see it in your eyes." He reaches over and takes my hands. "Hey, if that's what you want then...let's do it."

"Do what?"

“Stop pretending.”

Did my shoulders just sag from disappointment? Defeat?

Dallas’s middle and forefinger touch my chin, lifting it.
“Hey. Look at me.”

I can’t.

Can’t look him in the eye, afraid of what I might see.

“Let’s try it.”

I raise my eyes. Raise my brows.

“Yeah.” He nods. “I’m game.”

“Are we talking about the same thing?”

“Who can be sure? You won’t say what you’re thinkin’!”
He cackles. “What’s goin’ on in that pretty brain of yours?”

“You want to try...this? *Us*?” Oh my God, I said it. I SAID
THE WORDS.

Us.

“Yes, us. Do you see anyone else here?”

My head shakes. “Let’s do it.”

I blush again at my words, the bravado I don’t feel.

But when Dallas closes the gap between our bodies and puts his mouth on mine, I sigh into it, happy and content, my nerves tingling when I part my lips so his tongue can slip inside.

His arms go around my waist, and he pulls me over until I’m in his lap, kissing him.

“You’re the fuckin’ cutest,” he mutters, lips sliding to my neck, kissing me below my ear, causing me to tingle.

Shiver.

“Am I?”

“Since when are you shy?” His lips are still creeping over my skin, softly pressing into my flesh.

It’s a beautiful distraction.

“I’m not.”

“Sure sounded like it, tryin’ to tell me you have the hots for me.”

“Oh God,” I groan. “Is that going to be a thing? Are you going to constantly be telling me that?”

“Probably.”

thirty-six

dallas

“Once we started dating, I became as horny as possible in every awkward situation.”

– Dallas

WELL, hell—if this don’t beat all.

Ryann Winters wants to be my girlfriend.

I hold on tight to her, burying my face in her neck, and close my eyes.

I want to remember this moment, as fucking cheesy as it sounds, because I’ve never had a moment like this before.

Never had a girlfriend if you don’t count the ones in middle school that last for a week. Never had the time.

Scratch that: never made the time.

My mom always says you make time for the things that are important, and I never figured that meant other people, just family—certainly never a woman. I figured she meant football, and Lord knows that was a given.

Making the time to hang with Ryann these past few weeks was easy.

Diego Lorenz did us both a gigantic fucking favor when he dumped her. I’m not sure how the hell I’m going to break the news to him that I’m bangin’ and datin’ his ex, but I’m confident he’ll get over it considering he never gave a shit about her to begin with.

As Ryann would say: easy-peasy.

It's all uphill from here.

But first, we have to take this show to another room.

I move, readjusting my position on the couch so my feet hit the carpet, then work my hands under her ass so I can lift her. I've really taken a shine to carrying her around, and I heft her up so I'm cradling her in my arms as I head to the bedroom.

No couch sex tonight.

Not the occasion for it.

I make short work of peeling my clothes off, Ryann's eyes scanning my body as I strip.

Dive onto the bed next to her, giving the hem of her sweatshirt a gentle tug.

"Your turn."

Rolling her eyes, she rolls to the end of the mattress and stands, untying the drawstring waistband of her sweatpants.

Smooth legs.

Pink thong underwear.

Hips, waist, thighs.

My mouth waters; having a girlfriend is going to be awesome.

Ryann takes her sweet time pulling the sweatshirt over her head, revealing a pink bra beneath it that matches her thong.

Sexy, plump cleavage.

"I swear to God I'm going to masturbate to the memory of these fuckin' things. They're perfect."

They're perfect...

The memory of these.

I cannot wait to see her naked.

thirty-seven

ryann

“When it comes to doggy style, he’s behind me one hundred percent.”

– Winnie

I’M TEASING HIM, but he deserves it.

Likes it.

My hands are at the back of my bra, about to unclasp it. “How bad do you want me to get naked?”

“Yes.” His nod is slow.

“That’s not an answer.”

He reaches for me across the comforter, his tan hand splayed. “You’re drivin’ me crazy.”

Good.

“What’s in it for me if I take off my bra and underwear?”

We both know I’m going to take off my bra and underwear, but that doesn’t mean I can’t make him work for it a bit.

“What’s in it for me says the girl who’s come in my mouth.”

He has a valid point.

I tilt my head. “What do you want to see first? My...” I point to my pussy. “Or my boobs?”

His eyes are homed in on the thong between my legs. “Yes.”

I shake my head playfully. “Pick one.”

“Tits.”

Tits.

The word rolls off his tongue.

Normally I hate the sound of that word, but not from his lips, not when it’s directed at me because he makes me feel sexy and desired, not like an object.

Tits it is.

I unhook my bra, letting it drop to the floor at my feet.

I’m not shy, but I am modest, covering them despite the fact that Dallas has seen me naked before.

I do a little twirl to let him look his fill.

“I love your ass.” He’s doing that thing where he reaches across the bed trying to catch me and grab me so I’ll join him, forgetting that I’m in the middle of a striptease.

Way too impatient.

My hands leave my boobs and go to my hips; thumbs hook inside the band of my thong and tug, tug, until they’re down around my ankles.

“I can’t believe that’s still on your skin.”

I glance down, fingers tracing the KISS ME printed on my flesh that I drew there over two weeks ago with permanent marker. It’s fading for sure but still legible.

“Just glad it’s not bikini season.”

“The fact that you’d write that on your pussy is sexy as hell.”

Er.

Okay.

If that’s what he considers sexy, who am I to judge? And technically it’s above my pussy—or near it—not on it.

“It was either this or boner garage, and since I hadn’t had sex in a while, it couldn’t be classified as such.”

Dallas stares. “Would you get over here already? Before I lose my boner?”

He’s not going to lose his boner, but I climb onto the bed anyway, on all fours, toward him as if he were my prey. In reality, Dallas Colter is a big, cuddly teddy bear who’s not the least bit aggressive in the bedroom, happy to let me have my way.

He kisses me as soon as I’m lying next to him, my braid falling over my shoulder. When I go to undo the elastic band, his palm skims over my stomach.

Upward.

Drags down my sternum, collarbone to belly button.

“Can I ask a rude question?”

I narrow my eyes. “How rude is it?”

“Are your tits real?”

Are my tits re...

What kind of question is that?

“Um, what would make you think they’re *fake*?” I cup them in my hands and look down at them as most people do when they’re cupping their own boobs.

“Because they’re so perfect.”

“Now, now—no one is perfect.” My hands fall back to my sides.

The fact is, I’m not so modest I can’t admit that I indeed do have a pretty fantastic rack. If I were boasting, I’d say it’s one of my best assets.

It’s Dallas’s turn to cup one of them. “Sorry, that was rude.”

“I mean, yeah, it was rude, but I’m not offended.”

“I think I’m gonna love being able to play with them whenever I want.” The tip of his finger goes round and round my areola.

“Not whenever you want. Whenever I want.” My body, my choice.

Ha!

My chin tips up. I have something he wants, and I’m going to make him work for it.

“Say please when you ask to fondle my boobs. *Use your manners, sir.*”

He laughs, nonplussed. “Ryann, may I *please* play with your tits?”

I nod my consent. “You may touch my tits.”

You may go down on me.

You may put your penis in my vagina.

You may, you may, you may.

Green light.

Pass go.

Make me come...

thirty-eight

dallas

“I’m not gay, but my boyfriend is.”

– Kyle

ONE THING I wasn’t counting on when we finished practice tonight was Diego ambushing me in the locker room, but it’s clearly his favorite place to back me into a corner for confrontation.

This is where our fucked-up relationship started, and this is where it will end.

“Are you still hanging out with Ryann?”

Hanging out with her? “Is that your polite way of asking why I was photographed kissing her in the parking lot of the stadium?”

He hangs back, half dressed in his practice pads, shoes dangling from his hand.

“Yes, I guess it is my polite way of asking why you were photographed kissing my ex-girlfriend in the parking lot after our game.”

I shrug, unlacing my shoulder pads. “The camera doesn’t lie.”

He shifts on his feet, standing there in his socks. “Stop acting like you don’t know what my point is. Haven’t you heard of bro code?”

That gives me pause.

I pull the pads off my shoulders and set them on the bench in front of my cubby.

“Dude, stop acting as if you cared about her. If she were dating someone else, would it matter?”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is your point?” I stand with my legs parted, arms folded across my chest. My hair is drenched with sweat and my face is bright red from the post-practice adrenaline rush.

“Bro code—that’s my point.”

“Your point sucks, and I’ll tell you all the reasons why.” I don’t budge from my position. “Ready? *One*, you’re the one who broke up with her.” I hold up two fingers. “*Two*, you didn’t have the guts to do it yourself. *Three*, the two of you were barely physical. Should I go on? ’Cause I can think of a fourth.”

“Say it.”

“Four, your relationship was an entire two months—your dates were never anything to write home about. Did you jerk off while picturing her naked even once?”

Cause I have.

Diego watches as the lightbulb goes on above my head, me making a mental note to text her after he’s done climbing up my asshole and ask her on a proper date.

It’s time.

My teammate looks resigned, shoulders sagging as I rattle off arguments.

“I feel like you went behind my back.”

“Man, I can’t help it if we became friends. We were thrown together because I helped you out, and she’s super cool. Of course I wanted to spend more time with her.”

It was inevitable.

Fate, as Posey would say.

“You should have asked me.”

That gets my full attention. “Excuse me? You wanted me to ask permission to date a girl who has free will? She could have said no when I offered her a ride home—but she didn’t.”

Should have asked him for permission—give me a goddamn break.

“That’s not what I meant. All I’m saying is a heads-up would have been decent.”

Fine. I’ll concede that it might have been the right thing to do considering he’s my teammate and everything and I’ve known him longer than I’ve known her.

Way longer.

Diego and I have gone to war together on the playing field, but in all honesty, it feels like Ryann and I are fighting one together too.

A battle with the media.

“You’re right.”

He hesitates. “You being serious?”

I roll my eyes. “Course I’m bein’ serious. You’re right. The least I could’ve done was give you a heads-up so you didn’t have to see it on the news like everyone else.”

It’s as close to an actual apology as the dude is going to get and he knows it, shuffling backward a few steps.

“Thanks, I guess.”

I nod, thinking the matter is settled, thinking Diego is going to float away and leave me to get undressed and shower so I can get the hell out of here and head home.

I’m starving.

I want food, not to listen to his whining.

“I’m just wondering why you wanted to keep hanging out with her in the first place. It doesn’t make sense. You gave me such a hard time about breaking up with her.”

“Dude, you paid me to dump her for you. And by the way, you haven’t actually paid me, so...”

I turn my back on him so I can peel off my T-shirt. It's soaked with perspiration.

“Since when do you date, though?”

Hands on the waistband of my compression pants, I slowly turn back to face him.

“Where are you going with this?”

Surely he's not smart enough to put the puzzle pieces together. Surely he hasn't heard whispers about Ryann doing me a favor—I haven't told anyone except my brothers; the only other two people who know are Ryann and me. Unless she told people?

We have no friends in common...

My wheels turn.

No. You're jumping to conclusions. Diego is dumb as a box of rocks. He knows nothing. You're just paranoid.

“I just want to know what motivated you to ask her out.”

“Technically, I didn't ask her out.” I resume undressing. “And we happen to have a class together, which is actually really convenient.”

“Oh. I didn't know that.”

“Look, man, if any of this hurt your feelin's, I'm sorry.” I have to force the words out, almost vomiting on them. It's not the sincerest of statements, not by a long shot. “I wasn't plannin' to have feelin's for the girl.”

“You have feelings for Ryann?”

“I guess so, yeah.” Grabbing the towel from the top shelf of my cubby, I wrap it around my neck. “Are we done here, 'cause I wanna rinse off. I'm disgusting.”

“Yeah, we can be done here.”

I watch his face. “We good?”

Diego nods. “Yeah, we're good.”

But we're not good.

Not by a long shot.

When I arrive home, Tiffany is on my front porch, swinging on the porch swing, feet dangling, rising when I climb the steps one by one, eyeing her skeptically.

I switch my backpack from one shoulder to the other. “Did you need something?”

Why the hell is she sitting out in the cold, wearing nothing but black leggings and a cropped hoodie? Her stomach is showing, for fuck’s sake, and she’s only wearing sneakers—the chunky white kind it seems chicks are all wearing these days.

Tiffany weirds me out for a few reasons.

1. She’s always popping up when I don’t want her around.
2. She hangs out with my brother Drake, but for whatever reason, she always finds the opportunity to make conversation with me—unwanted conversation—as if she’s only hanging out with him so she can get close to me.
3. She has motives I can’t figure out, and that makes me unable to trust her.

I wish Drake would stop letting her and her friends inside the house. Now that I have a girlfriend, the last thing I need is cleat chasers weaseling their way in and making shit weird for Ryann.

Ryann hasn’t said as much, but what woman wants a Tiffany trying to get on my dick all the time?

“No.” Tiffany is acting coy, despite the cold wind whipping around.

I have no idea how she’s tolerating it in that half-cut-off sweatshirt.

“Then why are you sitting out here?”

She shrugs, eyes glancing around the yard.

I glance down in the yard too—for once this week there are no paparazzi across the street, no media trying to catch me on my way out the door.

Then.

Tiffany does something she hasn't done yet, stepping closer, putting her hand in the middle of my chest. Goes up on her tiptoes and leans in.

“Sorry, it’s so cold out here.”

“Then why are you here?”

I know for a fact both my brothers are home; Drew told me in the locker room that he planned to get dinner started.

“I have a confession to make,” she coos, steam rising from her lips.

“What’s your confession?” *Spit it out. I’m starting to freeze my nut sac off.* I just took a shower, so my hair is wet.

“My confession is...” She gets closer still. “I daydream about sucking you off.”

Sucking me off, i.e. blowing me.

Is she fucking kidding me right now?

Now both of Tiffany’s hands are on my chest, her body pressing into mine as intimately as two people could possibly be while standing on a porch at the tail end of fall.

I step back, shrugging her off me. “You need to go,” I say firmly. “And you’re not welcome back.”

Her mouth opens. “Are you mad?”

“Who the fuck tells a guy she wants to blow him? Are you out of your mind? I have a girlfriend, or are you the only person who hasn’t seen it on the news?”

Tiffany smirks. “Do you really think it matters if you have a girlfriend or not?”

“I’m not a cheater.”

My father was a cheater, and I will not become my father. The insinuation that I would let some chick suck on my dick

when I'm in a relationship—a brand-new one, no less—blows my fucking mind.

“Oh, come on. Everyone is a cheater.”

My jaw clenches. “You need to get the fuck off my porch.”

Tiffany's eyes are wide, probably with disbelief—not sure if it's 'cause I cussed at her or because I'm kicking her off the property, but she's as shocked as they come.

I don't stand around to waste more brain cells arguing with her. I shove through the front door and slam it behind me, shouting for my brothers.

“Drew? Drake?” My backpack hits the ground at the bottom of the stairway.

Both of them appear in the doorway of the kitchen, Drew with a dishrag in his hand.

“Those girls from next door aren't allowed here again, do you understand me?”

Drake steps forward. “What happened?”

“Tiffany just offered to give me a blow job, knowing I have a girlfriend.”

Drew steps around him. “Wait—you have a girlfriend?”

“Wait—Tiffany wants to blow you?”

They are not helping.

“If someone is going to suck my dick, it's going to be Ryann, not the grasping bitch next door. Got it?” I walk past them into the kitchen, angry that they're making a mockery of the situation.

“Dude, where are you going? You can't drop a bomb like that and not explain yourself!” Drake steps in line behind me to keep up, riding my ass all the way to the kitchen, giving me no personal space.

“Do you know how fucked up my week has been?” I rake a hand through my hair, frustrated.

“No, actually, we don't. You haven't told us shit in weeks.”

Not true, but whatever. “I’ve been seeing Ryann—we’re going to date exclusively—which ought to make Eli happy since he wants me to be more warm and fuzzy. Then I get home just now, and who’s on the porch? Your little buddy, Tiffany, who damn well had to know I was seen kissing Ryann outside the stadium after our last game.”

I have no idea if the words spewing from my mouth make any sense, but the twins nod.

“Yeah, we saw that but didn’t want to ask you about it.”

“Speaks for itself, yeah?”

They nod again, two identical bobbing heads.

“Anyway. Fucking Tiffany was outside when I got home. Did you know that?”

They shake their heads.

“Pretty sure she was trying to kiss me when she propositioned me. I mean, who fucking does that?”

“Ummm...” Drake draws the word out. “So many chicks have offered to suck my dick.”

Drew and I both gawk at him. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Drake leans against the counter, crossing his arms. “I have a few buddies who are bouncers in town. Girls are always asking to suck their dicks to get into the clubs.”

That much I knew, but I’ve never had anyone approach me personally about it. Thought it was an urban legend.

“Guess I’m not approachable enough,” I grumble.

“Welp.” Drake slaps me on the back. “You are now that you have a girlfriend.”

Drew laughs.

I do not laugh.

I’m also not laughing three hours later when Drake sticks his head through my doorway, grim expression on his face.

“What’s that look for?”

“Have you seen the campus tattler?”

“What the fuck is the campus tattler?”

Seriously, the dumb names people come up with.

“It’s the gossip app where students post shit they’ve seen and heard around campus.”

Sounds idiotic. Where do they come up with this crap?

“I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never seen it.” I pause, setting down the TV remote. “Why?”

Drake steps over the threshold, holding his phone in my direction. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

I squint at it, eyes adjusting to the light shining in my eyes.

It takes my brain several seconds to process the image being thrust in my face, and I see it in fragments: the white cropped hoodie. The black leggings. The familiar long blond hair.

A girl’s ass.

My house.

My porch.

You can’t see my face because Tiffany’s head is blocking whatever expression is hidden there, the image incriminating despite its innocence.

“What. The. Fuck,” I mutter, sitting up, grabbing my brother’s cell. “What the fuck is this? What the fuck is this, Drake?”

“Dude,” is all he says.

“That bitch,” I whisper. “She set me up.”

My brother nods. “Looks like it.”

“That bitch,” I repeat. Look up at Drake. “Ryann is going to murder me.”

thirty-nine

ryann

*“Roses are red, violets are blue, I have to use my hand—but
I’m thinking of you...” –*

Dallas Colter

THE NEWS COMES FROM WINNIE, who gets her news from Rookie, the fraternity/sorority rumor mill strong.

“Ryann, you know I love you...” she begins, surprising me first by knocking on my apartment door and showing up unannounced—something she never does.

The look on her face says it all: something is wrong.

“What’s going on?” I hold the door open and usher her inside. “Is everything okay with your parents?”

“It’s nothing like that.” But she’s wringing her hands and looks crazy uncomfortable.

“Winnie, what’s wrong?” I take her hands and lead her to the kitchen, pulling two wine glasses out of the cabinet and setting them on the counter. We’re going to need alcohol for this. “I thought you had to work tonight.”

As her best friend, it’s my job to know when she works and when she doesn’t so we know when we can hang out together.

“I did have to work.”

I watch her for a few moments before I pull the wine out of the fridge and uncork it, pouring a glass for her and a glass for me, then I lean forward to give her my undivided attention.

“Winnie, you’re scaring me.”

She takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

Winnie taps on her cell phone, sliding her finger over the screen this way and that before pushing it across the counter at me. Takes a glass of wine and chugs it, downing the entire thing in one swallow.

My eyes go wide before grasping her phone and holding it up so I can read what’s on the screen.

I see a house and two people on a porch, a blonde and some guy. It looks like they’re making out, but it’s impossible to actually tell because of the angle.

I set Winnie’s phone down.

“I don’t get it.”

She points at the phone. “Look closer.” Pours herself another glass of wine.

And if I wasn’t so confused, I’d laugh at her, how nervous she is and how fidgety, still having no idea why.

House. People. Porch.

House.

People.

Porch.

Blond hair. That porch...

I zoom in on the photograph, moving two fingers apart on Winnie’s screen, trying to make out the figures.

“Winnie, who is this?”

“Click on the link and read the caption.”

I don’t want to.

A pit forms in my stomach, a massive lump settling there, rolling and churning because at that exact moment, the puzzle pieces all click into place in my brain.

“Is that Dallas?” And that neighbor girl? The one who’s always hanging around, making snide comments—the one who’s the third wheel to her friends. But she’s not the third wheel, is she? She’s been waiting, biding her time, wanting a chance with Dallas.

Why now?

“Why is this happening?” I whisper.

Winnie reaches for my hand now that I’ve set the phone down. I had to stop staring.

“Because she’s one of those girls who doesn’t care, and now that he’s being plastered all over the news, she wants her fifteen minutes of fame.”

But it doesn’t use her name in the article, does it? The headline reads: DALLAS COLTER CAUGHT IN A LOVE TRIANGLE WITH MYSTERY BLONDE.

Mystery blonde? Ha.

“Her name is Tiffany, and she lives next door.”

Winnie puts her hand over her mouth, covering her gasp. “No.”

“Yes.” I pause, on the verge of tears. “I wonder how long they’ve been sneaking around.”

“Ryann, maybe this isn’t what it looks like.”

I shake my head. “Please. That’s what everyone says when they get caught. Don’t get caught up in the cliché. Cameras have been following him around all week...he had to have known someone was there taking photos.” I have another thought. “Maybe this is how he’s trying to break up with me.” I look across the counter at Winnie, my wine glass long forgotten. “He was full of shit the other night when he said he wanted to try to make us work.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” she says emphatically, coming to his defense.

I laugh, but it’s not a cheerful laugh; it’s sardonic and angry. “You don’t even know him. You don’t know what he

would and would not do.” This time I do pick up the wine glass, slamming the liquid the same way Winnie did, drinking most of it in one gulp. “He’s a guy.”

“He’s a guy,” Winnie repeats. “Maybe we shouldn’t be stereotyping?”

“Why are you defending him?”

Winnie’s mouth opens and closes. “I’m not defending him! I’m just saying—you don’t know he’s a cheater. You don’t know this is his way of breaking up with you. I think this is your knee-jerk reaction. Maybe once you call him to talk, you’ll—”

I laugh again. “Oh no. No, no, no, I am not calling him. Are you out of your mind? *No.*” I say it again and again, wanting to hear none of this. My hands slash the air like an air traffic controller to illustrate my no-ness.

Winnie holds her hands up. “I get it. I know.” She pauses, choosing her words carefully. “I know you’re upset, and I can’t imagine how pissed off and hurt you are, but maybe you shouldn’t jump to conclusions?”

Is she being serious right now? “If this were Rookie, you would be dragging me out of here to light the fraternity house on fire, but not before lighting his grass on fire and calling him out on social media.”

She shrugs, a small smile bending her lips. “True, but this is you we’re talking about. That’s not your style. You’re the sensible one in our relationship.”

The sensible one.

The responsible one.

Both reasons why Dallas chose me.

I go to class, I rarely party, I never do anything stupid or that I’ll regret.

What a pity. All that impulse control has done me no good up to this point, has it? All it’s led to is a boy taking advantage of me and making me look like a damn fool to everyone on campus.

Humiliating.

Crushing.

Demeaning.

“I thought he was trying to help his reputation, not ruin it,” I mutter to myself.

Winnie catches it. “What do you mean he’s trying to help his reputation? What’s wrong with it?”

“His, um, agent wanted him to look more friendly, be seen out with someone...not like this blonde.” I point to her phone. “This is the exact opposite of what Eli wanted for Dallas.”

“Who’s Eli?”

Jesus, have I told her nothing? “Eli is his agent.”

Winnie shakes her head. “The fact that you’re dating someone with an agent blows my mind.”

Yeah, mine too. Except... “Looks like I’m not dating anyone—again. Two boyfriends in one month? Wow, I’m really winning at life here.”

“Stop it,” my friend chastises. “Knock it off right now. You couldn’t have predicted this, and like I said—maybe it’s not what it seems.”

“I’m sorry, Winnie, I wish I agreed with you, but pictures speak louder than a million words.”

She tilts her head. “Haven’t you learned anything from the tabloids? Celebrities are always getting fucked over because some asshole photographer sets them up. Maybe that’s what this is.”

I shake my head insistently. “That’s not what this is.”

“You can’t know for sure until you talk to him.”

I’m not talking to him. He had his chance, and he blew it.

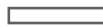
I am now going to be a laughingstock after he had the paparazzi breathing down my neck and every student on campus staring and whispering about me behind my back.

“Be smart about this, Ryann.”

I don't understand why she wants me to hear him out. Is it because deep down she's like every other fame-grabbing girl on campus?

"I think I need to be alone." I need to think.

I don't want to see that picture, don't want to hear about it. I'm terrified to check my phone, confident I'll have a million messages I don't want to see or read, dreading the night to come.



WINNIE:

How are you doing? I haven't heard from you in hours...

I'm hiding.

Did you make it back to work?

Yeah, but they were cool about me coming in late. Ben gets it...

Ben? BEN WAS COOL?

Yes. I mean, obviously he heard about the drama and saw the picture, so I feel like he was kind of expecting me to call in sick.

Obviously he's seen the picture.

Sorry, I shouldn't have said that.

Don't be sorry, it's facts.

Have your parents called?

Yes, a few times, but I don't want to talk to them because I'll just have to listen to my mother lecture me about dating a football player.

How would she know what it's like dating a football player?

Idk, she reads a lot of romance novels I guess...

The million-dollar question: Has Dallas texted you?

Texted. Called. Tried to video-chat me, texted, called...

At least he's trying

I mean, of course he's trying—he was caught red-handed kissing someone on his porch.

We don't know that's what he was doing.

Winnie, I love you, but sometimes you see everything with rose-colored glasses...

Ryann, I love you, but sometimes you have to have a little more faith in humanity.

When don't I have faith in humanity?!

You automatically assumed the worst!

The evidence is pretty damning, Winnie...

Like I said, hear him out. Let him talk.

I'm not ready to hear him out yet.

All right, well, you know I'm here for you.

Also, I gotta go. Ben's being cool, but he's not that cool.

Okay. Text me later.

I will. Send me any updates...

forty

dallas

*“Great boobs, good personality, shaves her legs regularly:
that’s the holy trinity.”*

– Duke Colter

THIS WHOLE SITUATION is a goddamn mess, and there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do about it.

I’ve called and texted and called Ryann so many times it’s borderline inappropriate, but short of showing up at her apartment, my hands are tied.

The media is having a field day with the story, running it on several news outlets, football’s golden boy now a philandering cheater after going public with a girlfriend just days ago.

Total.

Fucking.

Mess.

Even my mother has called, crying about the story. Telling me what an embarrassment it is and how she can barely go to the grocery store without being stopped by anyone with an asshole and an opinion.

Those weren’t her precise words, but they were close.

Mom has never called to reprimand me before. She knows the routine, knows how the media works. But the photograph was too damning to ignore, even for her.

Ryann will not talk to me.

Which means Ryann does not trust me.

Like I said, the whole situation is a goddamn mess.

I wonder if she's working at the diner today. It's been a while since she's had a shift. Seems like since she and I started hooking up, she's swapped shifts, called in, or taken off more often than not, one more thing for me to feel shitty about.

I stew at my desk, considering an ambush.

She would hate it, but I have to talk to her and tell her my side.

Standing, I grab a hoodie from the back of my chair and pull it on over my head.

Call to my brothers, "Going to see Ryann at work. Who wants to come with me?" as I bound down the stairs to the front door, stepping into a pair of sneakers.

Drake materializes. "I wanna come."

Of course he does.

"Wait for me!" Drew barrels down the steps too, almost biffing it at the bottom, pulling on a pair of clunky boots that don't go with the outfit he's wearing: sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

"Easy there, tiger." Drake smacks him in the arm. "Train hasn't left the station yet."

I roll my eyes. "Maybe this wasn't a good idea. Maybe I should go alone."

"Don't be an imbecile." Drake laughs. "You'll fuck it up if you go alone."

Of course I'm going to fuck it up; either way, I'm screwed. Still gotta go say my piece to Ryann, plead my case. The competitor in me has to share my side of the story *or bust*.

My brothers and I pile into my truck, all three of our giant bodies crammed into the front seat.

"Must you be so obnoxious?" I ask Drake when he puts his hand on my thigh like we're dating.

“Actually? Yes.”

I slap his hand away so I can focus on driving and not his idiot behavior, aware of the fact that I’ve never gone into the diner where Ryann works.

My hands clench the steering wheel, gripping it as if I were driving through a snowstorm and needing every ounce of concentration. Knuckles white, stomach in knots.

“Why are you so nervous, bro?” Drake asks, popping a stick of gum in his mouth.

“Why am I nervous? Because, you asshole, I don’t want her to tell me to piss off to my face without hearing me out, that’s why. Which she is totally going to do—and I did nothing wrong.”

“That’s where we come in. We’ll just explain what happened.”

“You don’t know what happened,” I announce. “You were in the house.”

“Duh. But when you came inside, you were super pissed. That has to count for something.”

“Please don’t try to help me while we’re at the diner, okay? Just let me do the talking.”

Something tells me Drake would only make things with Ryann worse.

Love the dude, but he’s a horrible negotiator.

For the rest of the short trip, we’re silent, the twins glancing at me ominously every few seconds to gauge my emotional state.

“I’m fine,” I reassure them as I slide into a parking spot. “Everything’s fine.”

But everything isn’t fine.

When Ryann sees the trio of us walk through the front door of ROSCOE + MIMI, it looks as if she wants to flee through the back, the stack of plates she’s carrying almost slipping from her hands when I stride forward.

She fumbles with them as I take a seat in one of the booths, watching as she sets the plates on a nearby table.

Drake and Drew sit in another booth, my wingmen to the end.

Ryann stomps over. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you.”

She gives me a hard stare. “There is no loitering.”

No loitering? “What does that mean?”

“You can’t just sit here and not order something.”

My brows go up. “Is that an actual rule or did you make it up to get rid of me?”

Ryann raises her brows. “It’s an actual rule.”

Fine.

I take a menu and give it a glance. “I’ll do fries.”

She narrows her eyes. “Fine. Anything else?”

Drake turns around, arm up on the back of the booth. “I’ll do a burger and fries to go, and he’ll do a chicken sammich, also to go.”

The look she gives my brother could kill a man, or at least stop him in his tracks.

“Fine.” A writing pad materializes from the pocket of the cute little apron tied around her waist and she scribbles, walking in the direction of the kitchen. Slaps the piece of paper on the shelf for the chef, who’s staring through the small window separating the dining room and kitchen.

The dude gives me a wave with the spatula in his hand, and I hear Ryann scold him.

“Stop it,” she hisses. “We do not like him anymore.”

“We don’t?” asks the cook. He’s definitely our age and probably also a student.

“No.”

“Oh.” His face falls, and he gives me a wan smile before taking the sheet of paper and beginning our order.

Luck is on my side, though, because there are only two other people in the restaurant, an older couple who look to be my grandparents’ age, and they’re completely oblivious to the drama that’s about to unfold.

Ryann is back at my table, arms crossed.

Damn, she looks adorable in that apron, hair pulled back into a low ponytail, all professional and waitress-like.

“As soon as your order is up, you need to leave.”

Curt.

Serious.

“All right.” I nod. “But that means I get at least ten minutes to give you my side of the story, okay?” I pause. “Please, Ryann.”

“Please, Ryann,” I hear behind me.

I turn around to face my brothers. “Drake, what did I say about talking?”

“You said not to talk.”

“Then why are you talking?”

“I’m trying to help.”

I give him a stare. “You can wait in the truck.”

Drew smacks him on the arm. “Dude, he’s being serious. Knock it off.”

I glare some more before turning back toward Ryann.

“Now you’re down to eight minutes,” she announces, and I could clobber my brother for wasting my precious groveling time.

Every second is valuable.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say *It wasn’t what it looked like*, but I know better than that, having rehearsed in my head what I want to tell her.

“Ryann,” I start. “People will do a lot of things for their fifteen minutes of fame, and that’s what was happening in that photo.”

She shifts on the balls of her feet, glancing over her shoulder at some dude I assume might be the manager, then looking at the guy cooking my fries.

“After I left practice, I went straight home. Both of the twins were home, too, but when I walked up to the house, Tiffany was sitting on the swing. Waiting for me, I guess.”

“Uh-huh.” Her arms are still crossed. “Could we maybe not use her name for the duration of this story?”

Fair enough. “So she’s there waiting for me, which I had no clue about. I thought her friends might be inside and she was out there, I don’t know, smoking or something. Honestly, she looked like a moron, not wearing a coat or anything warm.”

“Oh, I’m so sure you were thinking about how she needed a warm coat.” Ryann rolls her eyes, not that I blame her for thinking it sounds fucking stupid—because it does.

I forge on, the clock ticking away. “She gets up and walks over as I’m questioning what she wants, and I swear on the Bible, she...” I cannot tell Ryann the neighbor girl offered to suck my dick. It would put her over the edge, especially considering Ryann doesn’t even want me to say Tiffany’s name. I can’t use ‘blow job’ in a sentence, either.

The kiss of death.

“She...what?”

“She propositioned me. Then I told her she was out of her fucking mind, ’cause I have a girlfriend.”

“And what did she say to that?”

“She leaned in and did that thing you see in the picture. But what you don’t see is me pushing her away and storming into the house. I called for the twins. They were in the kitchen making dinner. They saw how pissed I was.”

“We could barely console him,” Drake adds enthusiastically, ever the fountain of information. “For real, he was pissed.”

“I’m sorry, but the media has been camped outside your house for at least a week. How did you not know someone was there taking photos? Give me a break. You did this on purpose.”

I knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but I was hoping she’d at least see my logic and hear me out. Turns out she’s latching onto her own theories, ones fueled by an overactive imagination and the span of days she refused to talk to me.

“I promise you I had no idea anyone was watching us. Ryann, that was her plan, don’t you see?” I one hundred percent sound like I’m groveling now, the way the tone of my voice pitches. “I have no idea who she called, but that whole thing was a setup.”

My girlfriend’s mouth is downturned. “Don’t you see, though? Everyone thinks you cheated on me. It’s all over the news now—again. My parents have been calling me constantly—again. The whispers went from ‘Oh my God, that’s who he’s dating?’ to ‘Oh my God, did you hear? He cheated on her, go figure.’ No one thinks I’m hot enough to be your girlfriend.”

“That’s the fucking problem. Everyone thinks they know me because they see me on television and watch my interviews. Everyone thinks because they have a pulse, they get an opinion on my life. I don’t get to date who I want, I don’t get to go to college where I want, I don’t know if I’ll get to play for the team I want to play for.” I stand up, frustrated. “Don’t you *see*? You’re the only thing I get to choose that’s choosing me back, and one little misunderstanding shouldn’t stand in the way.”

I’ve worked too damn hard and have been too damn unhappy for too damn long for her to dump me over this.

That fucking Tiffany.

“I’ll move out of that goddamn house if I have to.”

Ryann scoffs. “Don’t be ridiculous. Why would you move?”

“So I’m not near that lying, backstabbing bitch.”

Anything to distance myself from the female who created this unnecessary drama.

“That’s a harsh thing to say about her.”

I gawk at her. “Are you pissed at her or are you not?”

“Yes. Both. And I’m pissed at the situation because I have no idea how to handle it, Dallas. I haven’t been doing this for years the way you have, so forgive me for freaking the fuck out!” Her hands go up over her head and she stalks away, toward the kitchen.

Comes out moments later carrying containers, plops them down in the center of my table.

“Here.” Puts her hands on her hips. “You should go.”

“But…” We haven’t paid. She hasn’t given me a bill. She hasn’t forgiven me or the situation, hasn’t let me beg.

“You should go.”

Beyond her, the chef holds up his spatula. A sign? A warning?

Simmer down, pal. I’m going.

I shimmy out of the booth, stuffing my hands in my pockets so I don’t reach for her. She doesn’t want to hear the sound of my voice, let alone accept a hug from me.

Drake and Drew stand, too. For once, they’re speechless.

Ryann nods toward the table. “Don’t forget your food.”

“Yeah, don’t forget our food,” Drew whispers, breaking the silence.

Drake leans around me to snap up the containers, tucking them under his armpit. Claps his hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

“Let’s go, bro.”

“Ryann.” Her chin rises when I say her name. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Her face gives nothing away as she says, “For what it’s worth, I believe that *you* believe you’re telling the truth.”

Ouch.

My brother nudges me from behind. “Come on, bro.”

I only glance over my shoulder twice as we’re walking out the door, Ryann no longer giving me the time of day.

forty-one

ryann

“He may not be good for the soul, but he’s great for the vagina.”

– Winnie

“AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?” Winnie and I are folding silverware at work; she arrived after I messaged her that Dallas and the twins had just ambushed me.

She’s not on the clock, but she’s helping me anyway so I can give her all the tea in person.

“He said she was just sitting there waiting for him when he walked onto the porch, and he thought it was weird she wasn’t wearing a jacket.”

Winnie nods. “I mean, it’s like, forty degrees outside. Who doesn’t wear a jacket?”

“You. You don’t wear a jacket.”

“Well, duh, sometimes they don’t match my outfit.” She takes a napkin and spreads it out, folds it into a triangle, then sets a fork, knife, and spoon inside before rolling. “So then what?”

“Then I think I rolled my eyes? Or maybe I made a comment like, ‘*Oh, I’m so sure you were thinking about how she needed a warm coat*’ or something like that. I don’t remember exactly.”

“Did she kiss him?”

“I don’t think so.” I pause, doing my best to recollect his words. “He said something about her propositioning him.”

What do you think that meant?"

Winnie stops folding the silverware. "Like...she offered to have sex with him maybe? Girls do that all the time."

"He said he told her he has a girlfriend."

"Yeahhhh, they don't care." Winnie resumes folding. "I know a few girls who have blown the bouncers at the clubs downtown so they can get in because they're underage." She grimaces. "There is no club on this earth I want to be inside of bad enough to suck some sweaty dude's dick."

She gags.

"Agreed. Nor would I proposition someone who had a girlfriend. The fucking nerve."

The fucking nerve is right.

"You've seen her, though." My best friend defends me like no one else. "She and her friends are over there all the time, and it's not because those three guys have great personalities. The twins aren't even that cute."

She pulls another face.

I know she's exaggerating for my benefit, but it's true that the twins do not hold a candle to their older brothers. Dallas is the spitting image of the oldest Colter, Duke.

"What are you going to do?" my friend asks gently, setting everything aside, getting serious.

"What is there to do?"

"Do you trust him?"

Do I?

I thought so.

But do I trust other people? Next-Door Tiffany has clearly earned herself a spot on the shit list, deceptive and two-faced as they come.

"I don't know."

Winnie nods. "Don't you think he's worth giving a second chance? The two of you barely got started. It hasn't been a

week since you decided to take your relationship to the next level.” She bites her lower lip. “Hardly seems fair, does it?”

No, it’s not fair.

But fate is fate, and it done us dirty.



INCOMING CALL FROM: *UNKNOWN NUMBER*

Normally I would never answer an unknown number, but for whatever reason, I’m feeling bold and reckless, in the mood to spar with a telemarketer.

“Hello?”

“Is Ryann available, please?”

A woman’s voice fills my eardrum, one that’s pleasant and soft-spoken.

“Who is this calling?”

There’s a pause. “My name is Posey Kettner.”

Posey.

Where have I heard that name before? Where have I heard that name before? My brain checks my memory bank for information, but I come up blank, no recollection of a Posey Kettner popping up.

“What is this concerning?”

I sound so professional.

“Dallas Colter. I’m actually family.”

Oh, shit.

Posey!

Posey Kettner.

My brain clicks, filing her under: Duke Colter’s girlfriend. The kindergarten teacher I’ve heard so much about.

Then my brain automatically thinks, *Shit—what could Posey Summervale possibly be calling me for?*

“Oh.” I breathe out, suddenly tense. “This is Ryann.”

“Ryann. So good to hear your voice.”

It sounds like she’s smiling through the phone, and from what I know about her, she most likely is.

“It’s a shame we haven’t gotten to meet in person, but I know how busy everyone is, especially with school and studying.”

I have no idea what to say to that.

“But. That’s not the reason I called. I know your time is valuable, so I’ll get to the point.”

A woman after my own heart.

Get to the point because the suspense is killing me.

“I called because I know a little bit of what you might be going through and suspect you feel like you’re alone in all this. So, I wanted to share an experience I had with my boyfriend, Duke—Dallas’s brother—that might help you understand the Colter men in general, and perhaps shed some light on what they have to deal with on a daily basis.”

I nod. “Okay.”

She sounds exactly like a kindergarten teacher, tender and kind.

Patient.

“While I haven’t been dating Duke terribly long—it’s been about a year—we had a hiccup at the beginning of our relationship that had me questioning myself and him.”

I open my mouth to speak but close it so she can continue.

“As you’re aware, groupies and female fans come with the territory, some of them harmless—some of them brazen and destructive. Unfortunately, they come in all shapes and sizes, and there’s nothing to be done about it.”

Hanging on her every word, I give a quiet hum so she knows I'm still on the line.

“Anyway. During the summer after school ended, I moved to Texas to live with him so we could try dating during the preseason. Me in Illinois just wouldn't have worked, so I lived with him when we started dating, which isn't typically done, but it's what we needed to do. You're very fortunate you and Dallas live close to each other.”

Dallas.

Hearing his name makes my stomach flip and my heart race.

“I heard about what happened,” Posey admits, sounding bashful. “And I know it isn't my place to interfere—especially since we haven't met—but I love Duke and I love his brothers, and sometimes when we're on the sidelines watching the action unfold, it's hard to observe and say nothing.”

“I understand that.”

I would do the same for Winnie.

“The first time I went to one of Duke's games, I rode with the wife of one of his teammates because he wanted me to wait for him in the family room, then we'd walk out together.” Posey is choosing her words one by one, slowly and deliberately. “Everything was fine. Normal. Until we walked outside and there was a woman waiting for him. Once she saw him, she removed her shirt and only had a bikini top on.”

“But...” I sputter. “Weren't you with him?”

“That's my point. It didn't matter that I was with him. She had a one-track mind: she wanted his attention and barely noticed I was standing there with my mouth hanging open.”

But who wants to live like that?

“I like to think people have more respect for the players than that, but the truth is, they don't. This is par for the course. It comes with the territory, as terrible as that sounds. The fact is, these guys are just trying to play a sport. It's beyond their

control what happens off the field when those cleats come off.”

That doesn’t sound great either.

“When you love someone the way I love Duke, you find a way to push through it.”

I open my lips. “I don’t love Dallas.”

“Not yet,” Posey says.

“We’ve only known each other a few weeks. It’s way too soon.”

“Probably. But you’ll never find out how strong it can be until you let yourself try.”

“I did let myself try.”

“Dallas has no involvement with that girl they had on the news. He is devastated by this entire situation.”

“Devastated?” I scoff. “Pissed off, sure, but devastated?” I laugh, knowing damn well Dallas isn’t sitting at home crying about any of this.

More like he’s getting his ass chewed out by his agent for ruining the entire scheme he cooked up with one careless mistake.

“All I’m saying is give it thought. Keep an open mind. Know that there are people in this world—like that blond girl—who aren’t happy until someone else is miserable.” She pauses. “You are a strong female. That’s why he’s drawn to you and you to him. You can both protect each other. He needs someone to have his back, and he will have yours. That’s what the Colter men do.”

That’s what the Colter men do.

“I appreciate your calling me. It’s been a rough few days,” I admit to this person I’ve never met. I will also admit she sounds lovely and like she’d be easy to talk to. Such a shame that everything is a chaotic mess.

“I know. If anyone can sympathize, it’s me. I’m not trying to sway you one way or another. You do what’s best for you.

All I wanted to do was add a new perspective.”

“Thank you.”

forty-two

dallas

“I’m single because I don’t need anyone ruining my life. I’m perfectly capable of doing that on my own.”

–Drake Colter

I HAVE a problem that only my agent can help me fix.

Rather than call him or message him, I video-chat him, sitting on the edge of the couch in the living room, knee bouncing up and down as I anxiously wait for him to answer.

“What’s up, buddy?” He pops his earbuds in, then leans back in his desk chair. “How have you been holding up?”

Eli wasn’t exactly thrilled with the latest developments but understands this sort of thing happens, shitty as it is.

“I think I need your help.”

“Oh? How so?”

“You know I’ve been seen with Ryann Winters, but what you don’t know is that she’s someone I actually want to date. Like *date*—for real for real.”

“For real?” He smiles. “Okay. And?”

“Obviously she wants nothing to do with me because of that photograph, but I’m wondering if there’s a video of it floating around somewhere that we can get our hands on?”

Surely Eli has a connection with the tabloids. Or his agency’s publicists do?

I need to get ahold of it.

Eli steepled his fingers as he spins around in his desk chair, thinking. Taps the tips of his fingers on his chin.

“Hmm, would I know someone who could get their hands on that?” He hums. “Yes, most likely.” He inhales. “It won’t be cheap, but it’s likely.”

I perk up, sitting up straight, knee stops jiggling. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously.” He cocks his head, studying me through the phone. “You don’t honestly believe this is the first time I’ve had to deal with a woman trying to blackmail a player into whatever it is she wants from him, do you?”

“For real?”

“For real.” He spins again. “I once had a woman go to the press alleging one of my players got her pregnant and then dumped her. He claimed not only did he never sleep with her, they’d never even met. Turned out she wasn’t pregnant and the whole thing was a wild attempt at getting his attention.”

“That’s sick.”

He nods. “Yup, but that’s the business. Well, the dark side of it anyway. I could sit here and talk for hours about the shady shit that goes on, all the side deals. Extortion. Blackmail. And I’m not just talking about fans or women, either. Plenty of players have landed in hot water by doing illegal shit.”

Damn.

I’d love to know more about that, but not right now; now is not the time.

Eli stops moving in his desk chair and juts out his bottom lip. “Tell you what—if my sources come through as they usually do, there’s a good chance we can run a counter story during your next game.”

Which is this weekend.

“That would be great.”

“No promises, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“I appreciate it.”

“I’m sure you do,” Eli says solemnly. “Focus. Keep your head down, stay out of more trouble.”

I nod. “Of course.”

“I’ll be in touch.” His hand reaches up and he taps his earbud, his screen going blank, sound cutting out.



THIS ENTIRE GODDAMN GAME IS TURNING INTO A GODDAMN nightmare.

Worst I’ve ever played.

I can’t focus my mind despite Eli having told me the world would be watching. In the wake of my “scandal”, all eyes are on me, and this is not a time to bite the green weenie.

But I did, and I bit it hard.

“What’s your problem, brother?” Lamar Randall is staring at me through the white cage of his helmet, mouth guard dangling so he can speak to me.

“I’m sorry, guys. I’m just...off.”

“Dude, get it together.” Diego slaps me on the back. “We have your back, but you’ve got to stop playing like shit.”

No shit I have to stop playing like shit. It’s not like I’m trying to lose this game, not when the entire nation is likely watching.

The stakes are high.

I can’t keep my mind off the fact that there’s a possibility that *SportsCenter* will be running my story at halftime. Eli circled back around with an update that he was able to contact the paparazzi who had the video rights to my images, and they did indeed have video content in addition to the photographs.

My stomach is a ball of nerves.

The ball slips from my hands more times than it doesn’t.

My teammates and coaches think I've lost my damn mind, and I don't blame them because it feels like I'm going crazy.

Are they going to run the story?

Do the commentators for the network give a shit enough to play the tape during halftime?

Al Dannenberg—a retired NFL quarterback who played with my father—has the final say, and during our pregame rally in the tunnel leading to the playing field, I sent up a prayer to the almighty that Al will have my back.

The first two quarters feel like an eternity.

Whether they play the piece today or scrap it on the cutting room floor will be a mystery until I'm out of the shower and out of the stadium and buckling into my truck.

For the first time in my entire career as an athlete, I watch the clock on the big screen—not to see how much more time we have to score another goal, but so I know when I can go to the locker room and look at the internet.

How fucked up is that?

This is why my father discouraged us from having relationships—this mind-fuckery right here, this worrying about how another human feels and what the public thinks about me.

I barely recognize myself.

These are not the thoughts to be having when a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound lineman is staring you down, wanting to bust through the line like a runaway train.

The crowd is deafening.

Coaches on the sidelines shouting into our earpieces, my special teams coach using obscenities.

I throw my hands up. “What?”

Everything happens so fast for a guy who's not focused, bodies smashing into me that I barely see it coming, my ass getting knocked to the ground, one of the very few times I've ever been sacked.

Great.

Just fucking great.

The crowd boos me as Lance Morris helps me off my feet.
“What the fuck, dude.”

I have to snap out of this.

But I don't.

By the grace of God, we win the game, but that doesn't earn me a free pass; I know I'm going to get my ass chewed out now or later or both. Coach is going to be pissed, the fans are even pissed-er, and I can't imagine what my brother Duke is going to say when he gets around to calling.

He usually does.

As soon as the final whistle blows, I yank my helmet off, conscious of the fact that everyone is staring at me from the side, my coach's face positively beet red.

Is that rage? Hard to tell—the man always looks mad.

I blow past him, grabbing a water bottle and spraying it on my head, in my hair, and in my mouth—my teammates avoiding me, thank God.

I don't want to hear it.

Not from anyone.

Not my brothers, though Drake can't seem to help himself, sidling up to me. He didn't have any playing time today and has zero sweat on his brow, though he does look freezing cold.

“Hey. What the hell was that?”

“Subtle much?” He could at least pretend I didn't just play the worst fucking game of my life.

“I'm just sayin', I've never seen you like this.” He lingers at my side, stepping in line when I head toward the locker room, not caring to wait around for any of my buddies from the other team to walk over and chat, which is typically what we do.

My friend from high school plays for the university we just beat, but I'm in no mood for a chat. If Bobby Dean wants to hang, he'll shoot me a message and we can connect later.

Now is not the time.

Drake tails me through the tunnel and to my cubby, and if he weren't my brother, I'd tell him to piss off. But he's coming home with me, and I'm stuck with his shadow for the rest of my life.

If the equipment staff hadn't already come around and collected my helmet for cleaning, I would chuck it against my cubby. I yank my jersey over my head so they can come collect that, too, along with my pants.

Pads.

I tear through my backpack, digging for my cell that's normally in the front pocket.

There are dozens of new messages—a good sign.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I tap open the message from Eli.

Got it, buddy—breaking news during halftime, should bring you out of the weeds.

Link attached.

I click on it. The familiar faces of three of college football's leading commentators fill the screen, the halftime logo in the background, Howie Howard pressing a hand to his earpiece.

“Okay, folks, we're going to interrupt our halftime report to go live with Stephan Cople at CZR, who first broke the Colter cheating scandal story.”

“Thanks, Howie,” Stephan Cople says, also pressing an earpiece with the tip of his finger and broadcasting from an entirely different studio at the gossip rag where he works. “When we first ran the story on Dallas Colter, star quarterback for Wisconsin, he was seen on the porch with someone who was notably not his girlfriend Ryann Winters, a junior

classmate at Wisconsin. We didn't have all the details of the story at the time, and we're here with a retraction."

Didn't have all the details my ass. Fact is, they didn't want to run with the truth because the fiction sells more advertising space and has people glued to technology.

Behind Stephan Copple, a video begins playing, one he describes on the off chance his viewers are fucking idiots, showing me climbing the steps to my front porch—the address blurred out—and Tiffany emerging from the shadows.

It's obvious—at least to me—that we are not friendly. My hands are in my pockets and I look defensive, especially at the point where I start questioning why she's waiting, not knowing she's there waiting for me.

She's gesturing but still not invading my personal space.

I back up a foot, an agitated expression on my face you'd have to be blind not to see.

The video has no sound, but it gets to the moment when Tiffany propositions me. I appear to be shocked, moving back, telling her I have a girlfriend.

Again, the audience has no idea that's what transpired, but it's not a warm and fuzzy scene by any stretch of the imagination.

Tiffany closes in.

Rises on her tiptoes.

My face is blocked, but in a matter of seconds, I'm rebuffing her, my hands out, my feet stepping back.

I open the front door and slam it, leaving her standing on the porch alone, in the cold.

She folds her arms across her body, giving herself a hug, probably freezing her freaking ass off—as well as she should have. Who shows up half-clothed at the tail end of fall in the Midwest?

Tiffany stands there as if she's waiting for me to come back outside, but then...

She turns.

Looks directly into the camera and shrugs.

Bounds down the stairs and is seen walking back to her side of the lawn, disappearing out of view.

What the actual fuck.

Unbelievable.

I mean, I knew it was a setup, but this blatant backstabbing bullshit blows my fucking mind.

Wow.

Just...wow.

Suddenly, Drew is up my ass, watching over my back.

“Did you see this?” I ask him, holding my phone up.

“Yup, it’s gettin’ ’round.” He claps a hand on my shoulder and squeezes, a show of support.

Good.

Awesome.

I don’t pay Eli yet because I don’t have a contract, but he’s already worth his commission fee, and I already know he’s going to have my back for the rest of my football career.

Thank fuckin’ God.

Don’t mean to take the Lord’s name in vain, but hot damn, he saved my ass with a single simple phone call and whatever threats he had to make, whoever he had to pay off to air the actual footage.

I’m forever indebted to Eli Cohen.

forty-three

ryann

“A blow job without swallowing is like a birthday cake without candles. Make the right choice.”

– Sav

“I NEVER WANT to fold another napkin again, as long as I live.” Winnie stacks a rolled set of utensils on a pile, forever complaining.

I still have tables and my own work to do, so I haven’t plopped down to join her yet, but I am thoroughly enjoying her bitching and moaning every time I walk past her in the booth.

“You could be filling ketchup bottles. Or the salt,” I remind her with a smirk, a task that’s even worse than the silverware.

“I think I’ll stick with this, thank you very much.”

The football game is on. I’ve been trying to ignore it, but Kyle throws a massive fit if we want to have another program playing, his school spirit strong.

He’s leaning against the griddle, eyes glued to the TV mounted in the dining room, squinting as if that’s going to help him see the monitor better.

“Oh, damn!” he shouts, covering his mouth with a fist. “Oh, shit.”

I refuse to glance up.

The occasional mention of Dallas Colter’s name is plenty for me to bear—I don’t want to be a selfish brat and insist that

Kyle turn the game off because I can't stand looking at Dallas's lying face.

"He never gets sacked. This is unbelievable," Kyle mutters, not having any food to prepare because all the orders are up.

The diner is typically pretty dead on the days there are games, but it'll get horribly busy once the game is over—which is why Winnie is rolling napkins and three more servers are on their way in.

"Who never gets sacked?" Winnie asks.

"Colter." Pause. "Did you see that? Ripley took him out. Dude never had a chance to release the ball."

"Huh, weird. He must have a lot on his mind."

I narrow my eyes in her direction.

Winnie is as subtle as a hippo stomping through the forest, but she means well.

"He's lucky he's standing. That hit was insane."

"Are they supposed to hit a quarterback that hard?" Winnie asks the question I'm only thinking because I don't want either of them to know I care whether Dallas gets hurt or not.

Boyfriend or not, I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt.

"I mean, they're not trying to take him out, but some of these dudes are nothing but solid muscle."

Winnie nods, shooting me a sly look as she watches me watching the screen, my hand and dishrag pausing over the table I was wiping down.

Stop watching, Ryann.

YOU DO NOT LIKE THIS GUY ANYMORE.

"Halftime!" Kyle shouts, disappearing from the service window, getting back to the task of prepping the kitchen like he should have been doing instead of standing around watching football.

I resume wiping down tables.

Straighten menus, adjust the condiments in their metal racks.

“Holy shit,” Winnie whispers loud enough for me to hear it, and I turn to find her slowly rising from the booth. “Kyle, turn up the volume.”

I shake my head. “Winnie, we have customers.”

She shushes me, waving a hand to get me to shut up, all eyes on the television, Kyle pointing the remote toward the screen.

“...he was seen on the porch with someone who was notably not his girlfriend Ryann Winters, a junior classmate at Wisconsin. We didn’t have all the details of the story at the time, and we’re here with a retraction...”

My eyes get wide when a video begins playing.

I watch, transfixed, as Dallas stomps up his front steps.

I watch, transfixed, as Tiffany steps out from where the porch swing is, appearing on camera.

I watch, transfixed, as Dallas frowns and says whatever words he’s saying.

She steps forward. He backs up.

She leans forward, face tilted up.

Dallas moves around her, opening the front door and disappearing through it, slamming it behind him.

I watch, transfixed, as Tiffany stands on the porch, hugging herself before shrugging, staring directly into the camera.

“Oh my God,” Winnie whispers again. “Are you seeing this?”

Of course I’m seeing it, but I can hardly believe I’m seeing it.

Is this a joke?

How...

Why...

“I knew he was telling the truth!” my best friend declares triumphantly, which does nothing to calm the storm of relief racking my body.

I put a hand on the table to steady myself, my legs wobbling slightly.

“That *doesn't* help me, Winnie,” I blurt out, the butterflies in my stomach beating their wings like crazy.

“Well, it should! This is what I’ve been saying all along!” She looks relieved, hand gesturing wildly toward the TV. “Thank God, too. I was starting to wonder if I was blowing smoke up your ass for no reason.”

My hand is still hovering over the table, rag still in my hand. My mouth is hanging open too; I must look like a fool staring at the television.

Then the game comes back on.

Over the sounds of football being played, the commentators break down Dallas’s performance, giving speculation on why he’s biffing it so bad.

Of course, no one uses the words ‘biffing it’, but that’s exactly what they mean.

I stand like a deer in headlights.

“Ryann?” Winnie is waving her hand around in front of my face. “Maybe you should get to the stadium before the game is over so you don’t have to fight traffic.”

I snap out of my trance. “Huh?”

“Go,” Kyle yells from the kitchen. “She said, ‘Maybe you should get to the stadium before the game is over so you don’t have to fight traffic.’”

I look at them both. “You think I should go over there? To do what?”

“I don’t know,” Winnie says honestly. “Wait for him by his truck in the parking lot? Same way you did the last time?”

The photo that ended up on the news.

“Go, you fool!” Kyle shouts, spatula in the air. “Run like the wind, Bullseye!”

Winnie shushes him. “Calm down there, buddy. She’s freaking out.”

“I’m not freaking out.” I shake my head. “I’m just...”

Freaking out.

Scared.

Embarrassed.

Here we go again, I think. Letting other people make me feel a certain way when it’s within my own power to change the narrative—by making my own choices and decisions.

“I’m just... What if he doesn’t want to see me? I’ve been ignoring him for days, which— isn’t that like, ghosting?”

Shit.

I barely let Dallas say his piece, and then I flat-out ignore him, short of blocking him on my phone. Does that make me the asshole?

I keep telling myself I was justified in not trusting him because we haven’t known each other long enough; I also keep telling myself women “like Tiffany” come with the territory and is that the kind of life I want for myself? Besides worrying about him feasibly being injured in a game, but are quarterbacks typically injured all that often?

Lord, time to read up on football...

“Winnie, what should I do?”

She walks over and gently removes the dishrag from my hand, tucking it into her apron, then reaching for mine. Unties the bow in the back and takes it from me.

“I think you owe it to yourself to go over there and see what he has to say. You like him, don’t you?”

I nod.

“And haven’t you been kind of miserable since you stopped talking to him?”

I shake my head, in denial. “No.”

“Liar.” She smiles. “It’s all you can think about. And you didn’t go to class because you’re trying to avoid him, but you’re only avoiding him because you’re hurt.”

All right, fine.

She’s right; any warm-blooded female would be hurt by the original photograph of Dallas and Tiffany that was leaked, but not all women are willing to put themselves through this kind of drama to date a guy they’ve only known a few weeks.

Kyle comes out of the kitchen, beelining for me. “Girl, if you don’t go get that hunk of a man, I will.”

Only it’s not that simple.

I still have to wrap my brain around dating a minor celebrity. And then during the draft, he’ll become a major one, if you consider professional athletes celebrities.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Kyle is grabbing my hand and giving it a squeeze.

“No.” I laugh. “I don’t need you there hitting on my boyfriend —”

He gasps and covers his mouth. “Oh my God, see! You called him your boyfriend!”

Almost.

Caught myself just in time.

“Yeah, yeah.” I walk toward the back door where my coat, hat, and mittens are hanging, taking them all off their hooks.

“Yay!” Winnie claps. “You’re going!”

“We’ll let Ben know—he’s on his way in.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m so sure he’s going to love that I’m being flighty *again*.”

Kyle still has the spatula in his other hand. “Trust me, Ben Davis isn’t going to care that you fled to the stadium to rendezvous with the hottest guy on campus.”

Davis? “I didn’t know that’s his last name.”

“Can you please focus?” Kyle tosses the spatula into the kitchen, plucks my hat off the hook, and plops it on my head. “There’s no time to waste. They’re at the end of the third quarter. Tick-tock!”

“No time to waste.” Winnie stands behind me, holding my jacket open so I can step into it.

“I feel like Cinderella going to the ball.”

I hold out my arms so Kyle can shove the mittens on my paws.

“This is as close as I’m ever going to get to royalty.” Kyle ushers me closer to the door. “You better start bringing that guy around here more, not just when you’re pissed at him and he comes groveling. Which was super hot, by the way.”

The groveling was super hot, but I wouldn’t really consider him coming to the diner to give his version of the truth groveling.

“Let’s see how this goes, eh?”

“We have faith in you.” Winnie kisses me on the cheek and smacks me on the rear as they push me toward the exit.

I pause.

Turn.

“Hold that thought. How the heck am I getting there?”

They both stare. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t have a car!”

Kyle pulls the apron over his head faster than I’ve ever seen anyone pull an apron over their head, and I’m shocked he isn’t flipping it to the back like a Superman cape.

“Don’t worry—I got you.” He’s grabbing his keys off the hook and his jacket, too.

“Um, Kyle...small problem,” Winnie points out. “You’re our only chef.”

“I’m a line cook with no line, not a chef. And Ben will live, or he can fire me. I’m doing the community a service by

taking you to the stadium.”

“Can’t she just borrow your car?” Winnie looks confused about the entire situation that’s unfolding. “Or I can borrow your car to drive her.”

Kyle is already out the door. “No. Hell to the no.”

He is not missing his chance to run into other players; he’s that big a fan.

“I would rather watch this pit go down in flames than miss this chance,” he announces as he bleeps the locks on his car, pointing for me to get my ass inside.

“You’re like a knight in shining armor,” I tell him as I buckle in.

“More like a knight wrapped in tinfoil, but I’ll take it.” He glances over at me and cocks his brow. “Better buckle up. This is going to be one helluva ride.”

He’s not wrong.

All the way to the stadium—which isn’t all that far from ROSCOE + MIMI—Kyle has the pedal to the metal, almost running red lights along the way, both hands gripping the steering wheel as if he were in a race for his life.

I’d rather not lose mine, and besides, there isn’t a ton of traffic, at least not yet.

No cars are going into the stadium, only one or two coming out; the parking lot attendant at the chain link fence dividing the VIP parking lot from the regular parking lot is holding up his little orange traffic light when we approach.

Kyle rolls down his window and sticks his head out. “Hi. I’m the publicist for my friend here. We need to get in so we can be near the locker room exit.”

Wrong thing to say! Everyone and their mom wants to be near the locker room exit, but they pay for that privilege, and we’re crashing the parking lot with no permit or parking pass.

I smack Kyle on the arm. “Dude. What the hell.”

“Sorry, sir. You’re going to have to back up and go the other way. It’s fifteen dollars to park, but there’s only one quarter left, so if I were you, I wouldn’t waste your money.”

Kyle sniffs. “I’m well aware that there is only one quarter left.” He gives me a tap on the knee. “Show him your face and smile.”

I roll my eyes but lean over the center console, giving the parking lot attendant my best horrified grin, clenched teeth and all.

“Um, hi.” I feebly wave. “I don’t know if you recognize me, but my name is Ryann Winters and I’m dating Dallas Colter? I don’t have my car today, so my friend here had to give me a ride, and I was just watching the news and saw the story with—”

The guy cuts me off, his neon orange stick waving through the air. “Go! Don’t say another word! Go!”

He waves us through, Kyle unnecessarily stepping on the gas, though we’re in a slow speed zone. His revving a whopping one hundred feet has me slouching down in my seat, mortified.

“I had no idea you were this dramatic,” I groan. “Thank God everyone is inside the stadium.”

“Yeah—luckily I’m this dramatic or where would you be? Back at the diner twiddling your thumbs because none of y’all have a car and it would have taken you a half hour to walk here in the cold.”

He’s not wrong.

But still.

Weaving in and out of the rows, it takes a solid ten minutes to locate Dallas’s truck and park in front of it, Kyle announcing he’ll wait until the game is over before leaving me there, not wanting me standing out in the cold.

His phone buzzes.

My phone buzzes.

We each look at our messages, both of them from Winnie, in a group text.

Winnie:

WHAT IS GOING ON? I NEED AN UPDATE.

Kyle:

Just got here, they let us through the gate.

Winnie:

They let you THROUGH?? Shut up. How???

Kyle:

The guy recognized Ryann LUCKILY

Me:

More importantly, is Ben there yet? Does he know I'm gone? Is he pissed?

“Not more importantly—what the fuck?” Kyle is looking at me holding my phone while he holds his phone. “Ben is the last of our worries. I’ll quit if he threatens to fire me over this.”

That makes me laugh.

“You’ll quit if he threatens to fire you?” I shake my head. “How does that even work?”

“You’re my witness, hand to God.” He kisses two fingers and lifts them skyward.

More drama.

Winnie:

Yes Ben is here, NO he’s not happy. He has to use the GRILL himself and it’s hilarious. I don’t think he has a clue what he’s doing.

Kyle:

No shit he doesn't know what he's doing, the man hasn't lifted a finger in that place.

Kyle's fingers are tap-tapping away on his cell phone screen.

Kyle:

Maybe he'll appreciate me more instead of taking me for granted.

Winnie:

You're his employee. It's not taking you for granted.

I glance over at him. "She's not wrong."

Kyle glares. "Hush."

Kyle:

Were there any rumblings of firings? Ryann or me?

Winnie:

I mean, he's pretty pissed, but there are like, three other servers here now and he's trying to figure out how not to burn the burgers...

Kyle:

Tell him NOT to press down on the hamburger patty, it'll make them dry!

Winnie:

I'm NOT telling him anything! Why would I remind him that the chef is gone?

Kyle:

I'm a line cook, not a chef.

I look at Kyle again. “Do you have to say that every single time we bring it up?”

“Obviously.” He purses his lips.

When I set my phone in the center console cupholder and sink into the seat on the passenger side, it occurs to me I barely know Kyle at all. Is he still a student, or has he already graduated?

“What’s your major anyway?” This is the most we’ve ever sat and chatted. I have no idea what his deal is or what he’s got going on in his personal life.

“Performing arts.”

Shocking. “How did I not know that?”

He shrugs. “Same reason I have no idea what your major is.”

“Mass communication.”

He nods. “Yeah, I figured it was something like business.”

We sit side by side, the pair of us texting Winnie back and forth, her correspondence becoming more sporadic as we near the last few minutes of the game when customers typically come streaming into the diner, the customers who watch the game from home or the parents in town for the game who want to beat the crowd coming from the stadium.

Saturdays can get packed, but it’s not a big diner, and most of us have been working there a few years—we’re a well-oiled machine most days.

Today is not one of those days.

Kyle sets his phone on the dashboard in his car, playing the game on his app so he can keep track of the score and know when it’s about to end, four minutes and counting.

“Thank God they’re winning,” he grumbles. “Cause your boy there is playing like utter shit.”

“He hasn’t gotten any better after that halftime report?”

Kyle looks at me like I'm bananas. "You don't think he's in the locker room during halftime watching the news on his phone, do you?"

Er.

No?

"I don't know what they do in the locker room during halftime," I admit sheepishly.

"Girl, they're in there getting their asses chewed out. Everyone knows that."

Oh.

I chew on my lower lip nervously.

Then, when people begin streaming out of the stadium doors, I worry about that, too.

How long is it going to take Dallas to shower and come outside? Racking my brain, I do my best to recall the last time I met him in the parking lot—he beat me to it, but I'd been seated on the other side of the stadium and had to fight a sea of people to exit after walking around the entire building on the ground level.

How long did that walk take me?

Cars drive past slowly, the bottleneck making it impossible for traffic to move normally. But Kyle isn't in an actual parking spot—there were none—and has to move or face the wrath of fans. They cut alcohol off after halftime, but that doesn't mean many of them aren't drunk, and Kyle is blocking traffic.

Somewhere behind us, someone honks their horn.

I pull my mittens on. "Well. This is where I leave you."

I pull my hat on, too, aware that it's cold outside but not as bad as it could be.

I brace myself before stepping out of Kyle's car.

Lean in once I'm standing. "Thank you for bringing me, seriously."

“O-M-G, I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He points at me. “You better keep us posted.”

“I will.”

I slam his door and wave at the car behind him, a group of parents who watch patiently when I cross the narrow road so I can lean against Dallas’s truck.

I check the time.

3:47

Hug myself to ward off the cold as cars move past, one by one. The stadium parking lot steadily empties, taillights glowing in the gloomy afternoon weather.

3:52

Ugh. This feels like an eternity, and I contemplate if I could survive on *Naked and Afraid*, or any survival show for that matter, clothed or unclothed.

4:13

It’s a miracle I’m not shivering because this jacket isn’t exactly a parka, and this hat has a hole in the top, a tiny air pocket that tingles every now and again, reminding me that I need a new hat.

At 4:17, just as I check my watch for the fortieth time, a tall figure walks up, bag slung over his shoulders, wet hair rippling in the wind.

The sound of the truck unlocking has me shivering.

Dallas lays eyes on me.

His steps falter for a second before he continues moving toward me.

“You should have a hat on,” I blurt out as a greeting, unsure of anything else to say.

“You shouldn’t be standin’ in a parkin’ lot in the freezing cold.”

Shouldn’t be standin’ in a parkin’ lot in the freezing cold...

I shrug. “I’ve had worse.”

“Oh, you have, have you?”

I nod, stuffing my hands into my pockets, self-conscious and trepidatious.

Dallas stops when he reaches me, staring down, a confused look in his eye.

Or is that hope?

Suspicion?

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk.”

He nods. “Wanna ride?” Grins.

Of course I want a ride.

Walking to the passenger side, I feel Dallas behind me, reaching around to pull the door open for me, pressing my back against the back seat window.

“Are you here because you saw the halftime report?”

My eyes widen. How does he know about that? Weren't they busy getting screamed at in the locker room?

I nod.

Dallas leans in until our noses are close enough to touch, our breaths mingling. “I sure did miss you, Ryann Winters.”

My breath hitches.

“Mind if I kiss you?”

I shake my head.

Dallas leans closer, pressing his mouth against mine. His is warm and hot, and mine is...

“Dang, your lips are cold.” He moves back. “We better get you inside.”

forty-four

dallas

“She reminds me of my pinky toe: sooner or later I’m going to bang her on a table.”

– Drake Colter

ALL THE WAY back to my place, my mind goes reeling at a million miles per hour—same way it usually does—but this is different because, for once, things are working in my favor.

We’re mostly silent on the ride; I can’t tell if it’s due to tension or contentment or relief, but I expect I’ll soon be finding out.

My brothers are both home when we arrive, looking up at us from the couch, plates of food in front of them on the coffee table. From the front door, I can see giant sandwiches, chips, and potato salad piled high.

A carton of chocolate milk sits between them, two glasses of ice ready to go.

My stomach growls, but there’s no time for that.

Talk now, eat later.

Drake and Drew raise their brows, each giving Ryann a wave from the sofa. “Hey.”

“Hi, guys.”

“Good to see ya,” Drew tells her.

She pauses at the bottom of the stairs, hand on the railing, one foot on the bottom step. “Thanks.”

When we're in my bedroom with the door closed, I sit on the edge of the bed while she stands, unsure about what I'm going to say or how I'm going to say it. I mean, she's obviously seen the footage on TV or she wouldn't be here; that much is clear.

Ryann parts her lips, leaning against my desk. "I have no idea what to say right now, but...I saw the halftime report." She pauses. "It was on at work."

I wait for her to go on.

"I wasn't sure what to do, you know? We haven't spoken in days, and I was so hurt. The thing I realized while I was standing there in the cold today was that not once did I put myself in your shoes. I didn't think about how you felt with that defamatory picture splashed all over the news."

It's my turn to say, "The person who was most upset about it was my mother."

For once the media hit a nerve.

"She just assumed I'm a piece of shit." She didn't say those words, but the way she was carrying on must have triggered feelings about my father, who couldn't keep it in his pants.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. It wasn't your fault. It was Tiff—" I pause, thinking. "Correction: it wasn't even Tiffany's fault. Yeah, she played a part in it, but it's the media and its money machine that churns out rumors to cash in."

"Still...I was mad at you, and you hadn't done anything wrong."

Maybe I didn't cheat on her, but there are things I could have changed so the situation didn't happen to begin with, like banning the neighbor girls from the get-go, knowing their presence isn't good for my brothers or for my budding relationship with Ryann.

I knew they were vipers, and I was right.

On the other hand, snakes usually find their way into places they're not wanted; they're cunning and quiet, and that's the way Tiffany operates.

Lesson learned.

"You didn't know I hadn't done anything wrong." I clear my throat. "It's an adjustment getting used to...everyone watching and caring about what you do when they're complete strangers."

She nods. "That's an understatement."

"I, uh, heard from Duke that Posey called you. How did that go?" Not sure if I should apologize for that, too?

"Actually, she really shed some light on how all of this works." Ryann gestures around the room, eyes settling back on me. "Basically she let me know that in order to let things slide as far as the public is concerned, I'd need to really want to date you...and know the trouble is worth the reward."

The trouble is worth the reward.

I like that.

Have never heard it put like that. "So I'm the trouble then?"

She nods, biting her lower lip. "Guess so."

"And you've decided I'm worth it?" *Is that why you were standing out in the cold, in the parking lot?*

Her head nods again.

I spread my legs, arms extending, inviting her to step forward and into a hug.

I embrace her, sticking my nose between her breasts, into the puffy fabric of her jacket, needing her to take it off and stay a while.

I lean back to unzip it.

Work it down off of her and let it drop to the floor, pulling her in again, arms squeezing her hips.

“I missed you,” I mumble into her stomach, face level with her sternum.

“I missed you too.” Ryann’s face is on my head, nose nuzzling my crown. “I do think you’re worth it.” Her fingers rake through my thick hair. “I was really hurt when that picture was posted, but I was only thinking of myself.”

Human nature.

Her nails skim my nape, and if I were a cat, I’d begin purring. I’ve never had a girlfriend or someone to come home to after a game who wanted to comfort and take care of me, and I’m basking in this attention.

Who knew?

Most people want something from me, and most people think I’m worth it, but those people? They see dollar signs. My agent, my teammates, the dudes who want to hang out with me, and women too.

That’s just how it’s always been and I’ve gotten used to it, so this? This thing with Ryann feels entirely different in a good way.

Her hands in my hair feel like more than a simple massage—it’s a gentle, nurturing caress.

I lean back, bringing her along with me.

We fall onto the bed, Ryann atop me.

Face to face, our noses are centimeters apart, breaths mingling as if we were making out. It’s intimate and foreign.

She kisses the tip of my nose.

The side of my mouth.

The corner of my eyes, which is an odd yet satisfying spot to be kissed.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she whispers when she’s done.

My stomach growls. “Not for food.”

Liar.

But it can wait because I've waited all week to have her back, and I'm not going to piss away this moment to fetch myself a sandwich, not with those two knuckleheads downstairs to kill the buzz.

"You have to eat."

"Oh, I plan to." I haven't *eaten* in days, and I'm ravenous as a wolf, full of adrenaline and horny as fuck.

Ryann rolls her eyes at my attempt to sound sexy. "Knock it off, I'm being serious. When is the last time you ate?"

Nine this morning, but who's keeping track?

I kiss her on the mouth. "For real, though, are we good?"

She kisses me back. "We're good."

Ryann has a hoodie on—as usual—but not for long. I reach for the hem and tug at it; in turn, she reaches for it too, fumbling to remove it. Goes for her pants—leggings—and awkwardly discards those as well.

"Don't make me the only asshole lying here naked," she warns in that tone I've missed, the sassy one that's bossy and borderline sarcastic, though she never quite makes it there.

I've met my match.

Ryann is assertive without being aggressive.

Sassy without being sarcastic.

Blunt.

Cute.

Reasonable.

Reasonable—who wants to be described like that? Not me. I'd probably vomit in my mouth if anyone called me reasonable, but it's the truth; when push comes to shove, Ryann Winters trusted her gut and turned her nose up when the world was telling her I was a bag of flaming dog crap.

Maybe there is such a thing as God.

Maybe he is looking out for me.

“Are you going to take off your clothes or am I going to do it for you?” She shivers. “I’m getting under the covers while you decide. It’s cold in here.”

I roll off the bed so she can duck beneath the down comforter my mother picked out for me freshman year, standing so I can remove my shoes, pants, T-shirt. Socks too because I bothered to put them on after my shower.

Ryann’s wrist appears from behind the sheet, flicking her pair of red thong underwear to the ground, followed shortly thereafter by the matching red bra.

“I’ll just take a nap over here. Wake me up when you’re done.”

She punctuates her sentence with a loud, fake snore.

Brat.

I pull off my compression shorts before diving onto the bed, mattress sinking under my weight, headboard slamming into the wall from the force of my jump.

Ryann lets out a playful squeal, burrowing deeper still as if she’s trying to play hide and seek and I have to find her.

Fine.

Good.

Little tease...

“Oh my God, your feet are like ice!” I gasp when her toes rub my calf, flinching but not rearing away, wanting her bared tits pressed against my chest, arms reaching for her.

All she does is laugh.

Rubs herself against me, tits, pussy, and all, our mouths pressed together as we hide below the covers.

Private.

Intimate.

Quiet.

“I really did miss you,” I tell her between kisses and playing with her boobs, plucking at her hard nipples.

“Oh, yeah?” She hums. “What exactly did you miss about me?”

“Are you fishing for compliments?”

“Obviously.” She laughs again.

“What did I miss about you, what did I miss about you...”
Let me count the ways. “I miss your cute freckles. And your laugh. And how you’re always honest. I missed how I can trust you.”

“You can trust me,” Ryann whispers. “And I trust you.”

I trust you.

Intoxicating words.

My heart swells, goddamn if it don’t. No one has ever said that to me before; don’t know why they would, but it feels awesome to hear it from her lips.

We trust each other.

Great start to a relationship.

And here I used to think the best way to begin a relationship was to not start one at all.

That was the me of three weeks ago. I’m a new person now.

Ha.

For a while we do nothing but rub against each other; every so often, Ryann’s hand grips my dick and tugs, giving me a handy, then rubbing my chest. Giving me a handy, then rubbing my back.

I play with her boobs, then play with her pussy.

We’re not dry fucking, but it’s definitely not innocent, the road to penetration a short one.

“Did you remember condoms?”

Did I remember condoms? *Please.* “The night after we fucked at your place, I made sure to steal some from my brother.”

Brothers: it's like having a pharmacy in the next room.

She's pleased with this news, kissing me on the mouth as she pushes me to my back, straddling me, still trying to stave off the cold by keeping the blankets mostly covering her back.

Ryann looks ridiculous, not wanting the cold air to touch her skin, but I still want to fuck her senseless.

"I'll warm you up." I growl as she leans over, tits in my face, to dig through the bedside table. Produces a condom and takes the liberty of tearing it open, rolling it onto my dick.

She wastes no time sliding on so I'm buried deep, and we both groan, the few days we were apart now feeling like a goddamn eternity in sex years.

"Oh, shit," I groan, gripping her backside, already bucking. I can't stop myself, though she tells me, "Take it easy, cowboy. I don't want you to come in two minutes."

Pfft. Me? I would never...

I mean, I would, but I'll try not to.

"Oh my God, you feel so good," she moans, tipping her head, hair spilling down her back.

She rides me slowly at first, setting the pace and rhythm, eyes closed and lost in her own thoughts as if I weren't even here, but I don't mind; she can use my body however she wants, especially if she's banging me.

My hands are on her tits, cupping her boobs...

...when my brother walks in, not bothering to knock, his head sticking through the doorway.

"Dude," Drake says, looking his fill but then covering his eyes. "Shit." His hand feels the air as if he were trying to see with his fingers. "Sorry."

"What the fuck are you in here for?"

"I'm sorry, sorry, man, but—"

"Then get the fuck out." My erection is still salvageable, though I'm not quite sure Ryann's desire is considering she's

rolled off me already and is hiding under the covers again, chanting, "*Oh my God, oh my God.*"

"Bro." He pauses. "Duke is here."

Duke is here? "Here where?"

"Here." My brother nods. "Downstairs."

Oh, fuck.

Oh, shit.

"Is Posey with him?"

Drake shakes his head, sneaking a peek at us through his fingers. "Nope. Just him."

Great.

Just great.

forty-five

ryann

“I miss him even when I’m not horny.”

– Ryann Winters

PLEASE, dear Lord, tell me Drake Colter did not walk in while I was having sex with his brother—while I was on top.

Please tell me Duke Colter is not waiting downstairs, Duke Colter, who by now knows I was just boning his little brother, riding him on top because surely Drake won’t be able to leave out that little detail.

God help me.

I pull on my pants, face flaming hot. “I don’t have to go downstairs, do I?” I glance around the room. “Isn’t there a window I can climb out?”

“Babe, we’re on the second floor.”

“So? I feel like I’d be good at scaling a building, and besides, how high could it possibly be?”

“He’s not going to care that we were just fucking.”

But...

“Why do you think he’s here?”

He levels me with a stare, then pulls on his T-shirt. “Why do *you* think he’s here?”

I shrug. “Because he hasn’t seen you in a long time?”

Dallas makes a buzzer sound. “Wrong. Try again.”

I have no guesses and tell him so, my brain a mix of mush and horror—the last thing I want to do is go downstairs and meet the man.

“He’s here because of you.”

“He’s here because of me? *Why?*”

Dallas is stepping into a pair of gray sweatpants, his hard-on still semi...well, hard. If this were any other situation, I would be pulling them down and sinking to my knees because is there anything sexier than gray sweatpants with the bulge of a man’s dick?

Negative.

No.

“Everything that’s been blowing up lately is ’cause of what’s being reported in the media. I’m sure he wanted to come to the source instead of hearing it from our ma or watching it on the news.”

I mean, that’s smart, but still, who flies across the country at the drop of a hat to have a family meeting?

As we make our way to the lower level and my imminent doom, I count to ten several times over to calm my nerves. It’s one thing to be embarrassed on national television—it’s another to be embarrassed because your boyfriend’s brother caught you having sex...then come face to face with his other superstar brother who undoubtedly knows we were upstairs screwing when he arrived.

Awesome.

Great.

If I thought Dallas was larger than life, Duke Colter is more so, rising from the couch when we enter the living room, stepping forward to embrace his brother in a massive bear hug.

“Holy shit, I missed you,” the elder Colter says, actually burying his face in his younger brother’s shoulder, clapping him on the back as dudes do.

“I missed you, too.”

Duke isn't much taller than Dallas, but he's bulkier.

Darker.

More menacing and serious. I can see it in his eyes.

Bearded.

Over Dallas's shoulder, those dark eyes meet mine, and he pulls back, stepping around Dallas and advancing toward me, extending his hand.

"You must be Ryann."

I smooth my hair back before shaking his hand, nervous and terrified, face molten hot.

I want to press my hands against my cheeks to cool them, but instead, I muster the courage to tilt my chin up.

From the looks of it...it doesn't appear as if Duke is here to chew anyone's ass out or lecture us, but it's only been a few minutes and time will tell.

forty-six

dallas

“I’d introduce you to my older brother, but I’d like to keep dating you.”

– Dallas

“YOU MUST BE RYANN.”

My brother greets Ryann cordially, but I can tell by the look in his eyes he hasn’t made up his mind about liking her yet, which is the exact reason he’s here.

Duke Colter doesn’t make trips across the country for anything but his agent, work, his girlfriend—or family.

We have an audience, of course. The twins have never been ones to mind their own damn business and fade into the background like they should be doing. Instead, they’re perched on the couch, watching the scene as if it were a play.

I glare at Drew, who’s less obviously gawking.

As the youngest, they’ve always been more in awe of Duke than I have. His fame and skill have made him their mentor and hero, but hero worship has never been my vibe.

I rest my hand on the small of Ryann’s back, guiding her to the couch so we can sit, my stomach growling.

“Dude, go make me a sandwich,” I demand of Drake, who instantly shakes his head.

“Dude, do it yourself.”

“Duke is here to see us, not you. I haven’t eaten, so go make me a fucking sandwich.”

Ryann nudges me in the ribs.

I roll my eyes. “Please, can you make me a sandwich?”

If she weren’t here, I’d tackle the cocky little bastard to the ground.

Duke nods at our brother.

Drake stands. Glares.

Stomps out of the room to make me a snack.

“He’s probably going to hock a loogie on the bread. You do realize that, right?” Duke says, chuckling.

He better not hock a fucking loogie in my food!

I crane my head to get a look in the kitchen, but Drake is out of sight, rooting through the fridge for meat and shit. The loud clatter of drawers opening and closing and plates being taken out of the cabinets makes it sound as if he’s never made a goddamn sandwich in his entire life.

“Could he be any louder?” Drew asks.

“Maybe you should go check on him,” Duke says, taking a seat in a leather chair across from the couch.

Drew pauses.

Glances at me.

Rises and shuffles to the kitchen reluctantly, looking over his shoulder like a sad boy who’s being sent to bed during the party.

“So,” Duke begins. “What’s been going on?”

“Shit, where do I begin.” I rest a palm on Ryann’s knee, then watch as my brother’s eyes follow the motion. “Eli gave me a call a few weeks ago. We talk a few times a week now that the Combine is coming up and stuff.”

The Combine is the scouting showcase for the professional football league where college players get the opportunity to perform physical and mental challenges in front of coaches, scouts, and team managers, like a pageant of sorts, but for athletes.

Duke nods. “Okay. And?”

“And...teams had been calling to begin their digging, but there wasn't much about me and they wanted more, I guess. I had just met Ryann—”

“Diego Lorenz's ex-girlfriend,” my brother interjects.

“If I may?” Ryann clears her throat. “We were only seeing each other briefly, and the relationship wasn't...it wasn't...physical.”

Her hands are gesturing wildly because she's nervous, feels the need to justify herself to my asshole older brother.

Duke's brows go up. “Oh?”

“What she's trying to say is she was probably Diego's beard. The dude isn't interested in women, and there was nothing to them dating. They hung out a few times, period, end of story.”

There, I said it. Tore the Band-Aid off and blurted out what I should have told her weeks ago.

“His beard,” Duke repeats in a monotone voice, his brows up in his hairline at the revelation. “That's a new one.”

“Is it, though?” Plenty of guys on the team don't want to come out of the closet for various reasons, a big one being not wanting their sexual orientation to take away from their talent by becoming the top story, the main focus.

“Guess it's not.” Duke concedes, then circles back to the original topic, never one to let things die. “You were sayin'?”

“I met Ryann at a time when Eli wanted me to be seen out with someone who most people consider wholesome, for lack of a better term.”

“And are you?” His gaze shifts pointedly to Ryann, who blinks.

Points to her chest. “Me?”

“Yes, you. Are you wholesome?”

“Jesus, Duke, could you not?” I growl. “Can I keep talking or are you going to keep interrupting with stupid questions?”

“They’re not stupid questions—they’re relevant.”

They’re not, though.

“Whatever. Let me finish my story.”

His arms cross and he leans back into the cushioned chair. “Fine.”

As if I need his permission—although he does own this house. We just live here by his good grace, and so he can write it off on his taxes.

“So I met Ryann, and for whatever reason, we just... clicked.”

When Ryann snorts, we both look at her.

“Sorry, but we didn’t click. I couldn’t stand you, remember?”

I grin. “Oh, yeah, I forgot about that.” I look at my brother. “She couldn’t stand me, which basically meant she was perfect. So I asked her to help me out and do me a favor, and she agreed.”

Duke is quiet when I finish my spiel. “Why would you agree if you couldn’t stand him? What was in it for you?”

I squeeze her hand.

“Nothing was in it for me, but at the time, I thought he was such an asshole and needed to be taught a lesson. It didn’t take long for me to realize none of that was true. So...” She shrugs. “I helped him because he was my friend.”

“Your friend,” Duke deadpans.

“Right. Then just as things were getting serious between us, the first story blew up and almost ruined everything.”

“So there was nothing between you and the blonde from the pictures?”

“No, Duke, did you not see the halftime report today?”

“I watched it on my flight, but we both know even videos can be deceiving.”

He’s not wrong about that.

People—celebrities and athletes—pull PR stunts all the time to get their name in the news, the *even bad publicity is good publicity* bullshit I can’t stand.

“So I wanted to come see for myself.”

It’s then that Drake and Drew come busting back into the living room, unable to stand the suspense.

“Did Dallas tell you I busted in on him banging?” Drake is eating a chip off the plate he’s bringing me after he probably already ate most of them in the kitchen from the bag, plucking another one as he hands it to me.

“Oh God,” Ryann whispers beside me. “Shoot me now.”

I feel her shrink down as I smack my brother’s hand away when he reaches for another chip.

“What the fuck—who says that.” I snarl at my brother. “Ryann is sitting right here, asshole. Don’t be rude.”

“Yes, he told me you were upstairs when I arrived.”

If anyone can keep a straight face, it’s Duke; years of lying to our father to prevent us from getting our asses chewed came in handy when we were kids, and lying is coming in handy now.

forty-seven

ryann

“Picturing you naked is the most productive thing I’ve done all day.”

– Dallas

“DID Dallas tell you I busted in on him banging?”

Why are these guys like this?

I want to shrivel up and fade into the couch or sink into a black hole.

“What the fuck—who says that. Ryann is sitting right here, asshole. Don’t be rude.”

I give him props for sticking up for me, or at least letting his brother know his comment was rude. He doesn’t have to blurt out the first thing that pops into his brain.

Or—I don’t know—at least don’t do it in front of my face?

The guys continue talking about the drama with Tiffany; Duke shares a few close encounters with fan girls, stalkers, and mega-fans with no boundaries. He shares a story about Posey and the time he accosted one of her dates in a parking lot before they started dating.

I discover they have the same agent, Eli Cohen, and that the twins haven’t signed with one yet. They chat about Eli and his girlfriend, their circle of trust sounding incredibly small.

Duke asks me questions about myself: where am I from (Illinois), what do my parents think of all this (my dad is thrilled, my mom is horrified), what’s my major (mass comm).

He isn't warm and fuzzy, but he also isn't a complete asshole.

And...

The resemblances between the four brothers are uncanny; I would guess they were brothers even if I never saw them in the same room together and no one had told me they were related.

Big.

Broody (except for Drew, who is upbeat and cheerful).

Thick brows. Thick necks.

Thick muscles.

Tan skin.

Duke looks expensive, like a man who can walk into a high-end department store and buy whatever he wants because he can.

Expensive sneakers.

Joggers that probably cost more than my entire outfit.

Hoodie with fabric so fine I can see the sheen from here.

His face hasn't been shaved, but I can see that his hair has been freshly cut.

It's shorter than his brothers' hair, but it's the same color as theirs, and I wonder if they resemble their mother or father or both.

When they laugh, they smile the same. Sound the same.

Same accents.

When they grin, I can't help noticing they all have the same straight white teeth.

It's nauseating how good-looking these men are, and for a brief moment, I don't blame Tiffany for shooting her shot, despite the horrible timing.

I said a *brief* moment.

Very brief.

I'm finding it increasingly hard to concentrate on the words coming from their mouths as I fixate more on their commonalities and their devilish good looks. I find it impossible to believe Duke and Dallas had little previous dating experience before Posey and I came along, but it doesn't sound like they were fuck boys, either.

Before Duke leaves, he asks if any of us want to go to dinner; none of the boys are in the mood to go out in public, exhausted from their game, although I think Dallas was the only one who had playing time.

"You want to spend the night?" Drake asks their older brother when he rises. Stretches this way and that, arms above his head.

Duke shakes his head. "No, I'm gonna catch a flight back. I have Monday Night Football, so Posey and I are going to spend the day on the couch tomorrow. Lazy Sundays are kind of her thing."

He winks at me.

"You're going to go hop back on a flight?" Dallas scratches the back of his neck. "You just got here."

His brother shrugs into a black puffer coat. "Told Posey I'd be back tonight, so I'm gonna jet. Not a big deal, little brother." He ruffles Dallas on the head, mussing up his hair. "All I was really doin' here was checkin' up on y'all. I know you had a dramatic week and wanted to make sure y'all were stayin' sane."

My heart squeezes.

Makes me wish I had a sibling; I always wanted an older sister. Heck, I'd take a younger one, too, now that I'm watching the four of them hugging in a huddle, saying their goodbyes.

"Keep out of trouble," Duke warns before stepping out onto the front porch. He turns to me. "Keep your wits about you, Ryann. You're gonna need them. But mostly have fun—and don't let this dipshit do anything stupid."

I smile, giggling like a fool. "I'll see what I can do."

Just as quickly as he appeared, Duke Colter, the legend, is gone, climbing into a rented pickup truck and pulling away from the curb, taillights fading when he gets farther down the street.

We watch as he turns left and disappears.

Dallas puts his arm around my waist, pulling me close.

Kisses me on the top of the head. “Hungry?”

I nod.

Haven’t had anything for dinner and never snagged food from ROSCOE + MIMI before peeling out with Kyle, whom I absolutely have to message an update like I promised.

“We should eat and then go bang. Maybe this time we won’t be interrupted.”

A girl can hope.

forty-eight

dallas

“Gagging during a blow job is one of the most romantic sounds. It means someone is choosing your dick over having oxygen.”

– Drake Colter

“HOLY SHIT, RYANN...”

“Oh, fuck...”

No two brain cells fuse together sufficiently for me to form an articulate sentence, not that I’m trying. Two- and three-word phrases are all I can muster as I watch the top of Ryann’s head bob up and down on my dick.

She joined me in the shower—a first for both of us.

My brother talked about it once, showering with his girlfriend, how sexy it is when they’re both wet and playing with each other while lathering up and shit.

Granted, they went through a phase where Posey was constantly trying to scare the shit out of him when he was behind the shower curtain. Several times he pulled the entire bar down and ruined the drywall in her bathroom.

But I digress.

Ryann is on her knees in front of me, down on the tile floor, eyes closed, hand gripping my hard cock, mouth sucking and swallowing me whole.

Seriously, the sight is so fucking hot.

So fucking sexy.

I don't know what's wetter, the water or her mouth.

One of my hands grips the wall; I need it for support or I swear to God my legs are going to give in as the fingers of her free hand press on my taint, thumb moving in a circle, causing my eyes to practically roll out of my skull.

“Fuck...fuck...” I moan. “Shit...”

I manage to rest one palm on the back of her head, slowly guiding it as she bobs up and down.

Fuck yeah, baby...

Fuck my dick with your mouth...

Yeah, take it...

Endearments roll off my tongue like I invented them, things like baby girl, baby, babe.

I want to come so fucking bad.

I want to come on her face and her tits, thrusting slowly so she doesn't gag but wanting to fuck her hard.

I pull out, pull her up.

Turn her and set her on the small bench that's in my shower, getting down on my knees. Take her legs and put them over my shoulders, spreading her thighs.

Ryann tilts her head.

Warm water sprays my back.

I cannot wait to get my mouth on her sweet, hot pussy.

The first lick has her groaning; the second one has her spreading her legs a little wider on my shoulders.

My large hands glide up her smooth legs, down her thighs, press her pussy folds apart so I can suck the orgasm out of her or at least get her as turned on as I am.

“Such a hot, pretty pussy,” I mutter. Don't think she can hear me, not with her eyes closed and her lips parted. Ryann is out of it, lost in her own world, her own pelvis gyrating slowly, her teeth biting down on her lower lip.

Her lashes flutter.

When our eyes meet, her nostrils flare, Ryann's hand reaching toward me, settling on my hair.

Fingers rake my scalp.

I moan when her nails dig in.

Fuck yes...

I moan again when she rakes them against my shoulders like a cat, the small sting making my dick rock-hard. I've never been one for pain during sex, but for whatever reason, the nerves in my dick tingle, wanting more.

I suck Ryann's clit like it's my job, suck it long and with determination, wanting to send her over the edge.

Her tits jiggle with the motion, glistening from the shower water, nipples dark and rosy.

Goddamn, I want to suck on those, too.

I cannot get enough of Ryann Winters.

We have sex in the shower.

We have sex in the bedroom.

We have sex in the kitchen when the twins are both sleeping after I decided at midnight I was still hungry and wanted something to eat.

She yelped when I hoisted her onto the kitchen counter, said it was hard and freezing cold, but as soon as I took her legs and wrapped them around my waist, we were both goners.

"I love it when you fuck me," she moaned, gripping my ass cheeks.

I love it when you fuck me...love it when you fuck me...

Love.

The word gave me pause, but I shook it off.

Nah, too soon.

I shivered and continued thrusting, fusing my mouth with hers. She tasted like fresh, cut-up strawberries and toothpaste.

Love.

Yeah, definitely too soon.

“God, you’re so big.”

Flattering my ego? Maybe, but I’ll take it.

So hot.

So sexy.

forty-nine

ryann

“Bitch, don’t kill my vibe.”

– Winnie to Sav

“CAN I talk to you for a minute?”

The voice comes out of nowhere, scaring the bejesus out of me.

I whip my head around to search for the source, and my spine instantaneously goes ramrod straight.

Tiffany.

Ugh.

Of all the times for her to come beelining for me, this is not it. We have to get going, and she is the last person in the free world he wants to see, especially talking to *me*.

I walk past her, destination Dallas’s truck—not wanting the confrontation I feel may be impending; why else would Tiffany be lurking in the shadows and lumbering toward me from her front porch? She was obviously waiting for me to come outside.

She does not, however, cross into the boys’ yard.

In three seconds, Dallas is going to come bounding out of that front door, I want to tell her. And when he does, you won’t want to be anywhere around...

“Please?” she pleads.

I ignore her.

“Ryann. *Please.*”

Her familiar use of my name is what gives me pause and has me stopping in the center of the sidewalk.

“This will only take a minute, I swear.”

I’m not a complete asshole and I do have feelings and believe in second chances—not that stopping to talk to her means I’m giving her one, but now that she’s chasing me down, I’m curious to hear what she has to say.

Plus, either Tiffany lacks the self-awareness not to approach me, knowing I have no interest in being friendly, OR she may be genuinely sorry.

I want to know which it is, and I won’t know unless I stop to talk to her.

Right?

Right.

When I hesitate on the sidewalk, she knows I’m willing to talk, stepping forward and making haste across her yard, not stopping until she’s in front of me.

I cross, then uncross my arms, cross them again, finally deciding to stuff my hands into the pockets of my jacket while I wait for her to get to her point.

My eyes stray to the door.

Dallas has it open, freezing when he sees me on the lawn with Tiffany, but he doesn’t come forward after I hold a hand up with an unspoken, *I’m good, it’s fine.*

Still, he watches from the door like a sentinel, not budging from his perch, eyeing us like a hawk.

“What is it you want to say, Tiffany?”

She hugs her arms across her body defensively. “I want to tell you I’m sorry.”

I tilt my head to the side, not letting my facial expression change for a second.

“Sorry for what?”

My mother used to do this to me when I was younger; I'd apologize for something after I knew she was upset—then she'd ask me to clarify why. She never wanted me to say I was sorry unless I actually meant it and understood what I was apologizing for, which is why I do the same thing to Tiffany.

"I'm sorry I set you up." She's uncomfortable, tugging at the fabric of her gray hoodie.

"But you didn't set me up. You set Dallas up."

Over her shoulder, I see two girls come out on the porch, watching with robes on as if we were a sideshow. And perhaps we are; the situation has the potential to have a dramatic conclusion.

Like Dallas, they don't budge from their spot.

Great.

An audience, just what I need.

Tiffany tries again. "I meant I'm sorry I set him up. I know it had to upset you."

It did upset me, obviously—it would have upset anyone.

I let her talk, zero interest in filling the silence with wasted words.

"I wasn't thinking. I was..." She struggles to find words, and I struggle to decide if she's being sincere. Hard to tell. "Caught up in the moment. When the paparazzi contacted me, I thought, what the hell—why not?"

Why not?

See, that right there...

"How much did they pay you?"

"Not a lot."

"How much?" I pull my hands out of my pockets, and this time I do cross them over my chest.

"Five hundred."

This girl tried ruining my relationship for fifteen minutes of fame, for five hundred dollars?

Wow.

“I’m not impressed,” I blurt out. “Like, besides the money, what was your motivation exactly? All you needed to do was get the money shot. Did you actually have to offer to suck my boyfriend’s dick?”

Tiffany steps back from me, insulted. “Excuse me?”

“He told me you asked if you could suck. His. Dick.” I enunciate the word dick, draw the sentence out slowly, wanting to embarrass her in the only way I can.

I’m not the kind of brat who’s going to go crying to the press, so this will stay between the two of us, unless of course she decides to run to the press like she did the last time she didn’t get her way.

“What?!” Tiffany looks outraged. “Why would he do that?”

Why would he tell me?

“I’m sorry, does that bother you?” I snort. I mean, for real, is she serious? “He told me because I’m his *girl*friend. He told you he had one after you propositioned him.”

She scoffs. “In my defense, it was a joke. And by the way, plenty of guys would have taken me up on the offer.”

I don’t know what he sees in you...

Her unspoken words linger between us.

You’re plain.

Boring.

Brunette.

“It’s not a joke if no one laughed.” I pause. “Did you laugh when you said it?”

I’m so irritated.

She shrugs.

“What does that mean?” I want to know, then I shrug my shoulders, too. “What’s this?”

Up and down, up and down.

Shit, I'm really pissed. Sarcasm is not my second language, and for a hot second I wonder if my delivery is hitting home.

“Did you laugh when you offered to suck my boyfriend's cock?”

Tiffany's face is red, and I don't think it's from the wind or the cold, the tips of her ears crimson too.

“You know what, I came over to apologize, and you're being a bitch.”

I'm being a bitch? No shit! “Do you know I had to stop going to class after that picture of you came out? And my parents were disappointed in me. And I couldn't go to work. And I second-guessed every decision I'd made, all because you wanted to be on the news by selling your fake story.” I laugh. “Now you stand here apologizing that you got ‘caught up in the moment’.”

I use air quotes.

More sarcasm. Great, Ryann.

“Listen. I can't stand here all day arguing with you. I have to get home so I can change for work. But I'll accept your apology and we can agree to stay out of each other's way.”

“Dallas already told me I wasn't allowed over.”

I nod. “Good. I honestly don't want to see you inside the house.” Or in the yard. Or out by the street.

“How is that fair when my roommates are allowed inside?”

She has a good point. “How about I speak with the guys so they're not allowed inside, either?” *Huh, huh, how about that?*

I take a deep breath.

One. Two.

Three.

Four...

“Don’t do that,” she begs. “Shannon really likes Drake. She’d be really pissed if she got kicked out of the house because of me.”

Know who I really don’t like? These girls.

They seem fake and vapid and completely out of touch with my reality. Dallas’s reality.

The shitstorm she created.

“Look, you stay out of my way, I’ll stay out of yours. Sound good?”

Tiffany has no option but to nod her acquiescence. “Fine.”

“Great.” I pause. “Anything else or are we good?”

Tiffany narrows her eyes. “We’re good.”

We’re not.

I can see it in the tilt of her brows and the way she narrows those blue eyes.

Yikes.

Kitten has a dark side.

I watch her walk away, clad in that gray hoodie and athletic shorts, still not warm enough for the weather we’re having, but I’m sure her priority isn’t staying warm.

It’s to show off her smooth, tan legs.

Gross.

Nevertheless, I watch said legs until they’re back on her own porch where she belongs.

I nod to Dallas, who says something to his brothers behind him inside the house before stepping onto the porch. Shuts the door and slowly ambles down.

Sigh.

fifty

dallas

“I’ll never forget the time I was at a friend’s birthday party playing truth or dare and someone actually dared me to go home.”

– Drew, about a party he went to in middle school

“BABE? IS ANYTHING WRONG?”

Ryann has been lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling since she came home from class, lost in thought.

I arrived early to watch Duke’s football game at her place, bringing dinner and all, already killing it at this boyfriend game, the look of surprise on her face reward enough for the good deed of feeding her.

Burgers and fries, but hey—free food.

“Babe?”

I love calling her that, and I think she loves hearing it because every time I say it, she gives me a shy smile.

All day she’s been quiet.

I pause the TV, Duke Colter frozen on the screen as he stands on the sidelines wrapped in a thermal heated cape and having water sprayed in his mouth by a trainer.

That’s going to be me someday.

Possibly next season.

I shiver at the thought.

“Ugh, I can’t get that argument with Tiffany out of my head,” she says at long last, blurting out the issue without further prodding, one of the traits I love about her most—her honesty and forthrightness from the get-go.

“She just didn’t seem to get it.” Ryann breathes out slowly. “It’s irritating.”

“Why does that bother you so much?”

Ryann shrugs. “I have no idea.” Pauses. “And that look she gave me? I don’t know, I have a feeling she’s not going away.”

Yeah, probably not.

Stage five clingers like Tiffany are bottom feeders who never quite disappear the way you want them to. Instead, they linger, waiting for any scrap or crumb that gets left behind so they can latch onto it.

Any opening...

“Don’t let her bother you, okay? I’ll talk to the boys and let them know and that will be that. ’Kay?”

Ryann lifts her hand to my face, touching my cheek.

Gives me a slow smile. “Okay.”

I kiss her, leaning her back against the pillows of her bed, the Styrofoam hamburger container not too far out of reach. If it wouldn’t create a mess, I’d probably knock the damn thing to the ground so it’d be out of the way.

“Know what might make you feel better?” I whisper.

“Hmm?”

“If we play truth or dare.” The idea pops into my head, and though I’m not necessarily in the mood for games, she needs to get her mind off the freaking neighbor girl. The last damn thing I need is that chick ruining my evening—she’s done enough.

Ryann worries her lip. “Truth.”

I hum, using the tip of my finger to draw a heart around her exposed belly button.

“When did you know you didn’t hate my guts?”

Her eyes widen. “I never hated your guts.”

“Okay, but you didn’t like me at first...”

“No, I didn’t. It made no sense why you’d break up with me for Diego.” Who she still has had no contact with since the dumping.

“Maybe it was fate,” I tease.

She smacks my hand. “Ha-ha.”

But I’m serious. Maybe it was part of God’s plan, not to sound sappy and sentimental, but... “Everything happens for a reason, yeah?”

“Yes. Maybe.”

A few moments go by. “So? What’s your answer? When was the moment you started liking me?”

She shrugs, lying on the bed. “Not sure. Probably when you came and sat next to me in class that first day you realized I was in it. I didn’t exactly find it annoying...I thought you were cute.”

“Cute! You think I’m cute?”

She’s never called me cute before.

She rolls her eyes as if she’s embarrassed to have said it. “I mean, obviously you know you’re good-looking.”

Well, duh, but it’s one thing to have random people call you handsome or hot, to have your own mother tell you you’re good-looking. It’s another thing entirely to have the girl you have feelings for tell you she thinks you’re cute.

“I think you’re cute, too.” I kiss the tip of her cute nose.

Adorable and sexy.

“Truth or dare,” she says, getting back on the subject.

“Truth.” *Obviously.*

Ryann taps her chin as she comes up with a question. “Hmmm.” The lightbulb goes on. “Oh! When did you know

you were attracted to me?”

I laugh. “There was a day in class I looked over and thought you were cute. You had your hat off, and at the time I didn’t know you were you. I just thought you were a pretty girl wearing a turtleneck.”

Ryann laughs too. “I like turtlenecks.”

“I know you do.”

And she looks sexy in them because they’re tight and make her tits look huge.

I grab a handful of them now, caressing her over her T-shirt, until she puts her hand on the back of my neck and pulls me in for a kiss.

“Kiss me like you mean it,” she whispers.

“Where?” I whisper back.

“On my mouth, you goof.”

“Oh.” I pout. “I thought maybe you meant I should kiss your pussy like I mean it.”

Sweet.

Smooth.

Mine.

“Maybe you can show me how much you mean it later.”

Our mouths meet, and it’s slow and deliberate. Different.

Better.

We’ve had a few trials, Ryann and I. Already jumped a few hurdles that’ve been thrown our way, and we’ve done them together.

She’s my best friend.

Fuckin amazing, isn’t it, when you think about it?

“If you had told me a few weeks ago when Diego Lorenz paid me to break up with you that we would be lyin’ in bed together, eatin’ burgers out of a plastic container, and you

would end up one of my best friends, I would have told you to piss off.”

Ryann giggles, rubbing a hand across my cheek, along my stubble. “That is so sweet.”

We laugh.

“Yeah, cheesy is my new middle name.”

“I love how you’ve become so sensitive all of a sudden.”

“Have I?”

“Yes. You love holding hands and wait for me after class. And when I’m having an off day, you try to cheer me up. I appreciate that.”

Gag.

My shoulders move up and down. “Guess I do like holdin’ hands.”

And waiting for her after class. And touching her ass in public, and when no one is looking, I like grazing her boobs with my hand and making it look like an accident.

It’s not.

I do that shit on purpose.

Ha!

“So what happens next?” Ryann asks.

“What do you mean?”

“After this football season is over?”

I consider this question. “Once the season is over, the real hard work begins. I do the Combine, then the draft. You can come with me if you want, or take it one day at a time.”

I want her there with me.

Drake and Drew will of course come, along with Duke and Eli, but Ryann—she’s who I want there by my side if she’s willing to put up with my bullshit until then.

“All right.”

I lean in and kiss that simple ‘all right’ into her lips.

“Remind me to send that douche Diego a thank you card, would you? He did me the hugest favor anyone’s ever done.”

“Can I sign it too?”

I nod. “Fuck yes, we’ll sign it together. It’ll be hilarious.”

“What’s it going to say?”

I gaze at the ceiling for inspiration. “Dear Diego, just a quick note to thank you. I thought I was doing you the favor, but the truth is, you might have lost the girl, but I’m the one who found her.”

Ryann raises her brows, surprised at my prose. “Babe! You’re a wordsmith!” She rolls out from under me, hands going to the hem of her T-shirt. Pulls it up over her head. “That is so hot.”

Fuck yeah, it’s hot.

So are my girlfriend’s naked tits when she throws her shirt to the ground and goes for the hemline of mine.

Game.

On.

epilogue

Ryann

Six months later

“DAD, please take it easy. You need to *chill*.”

My dad is acting like a teenage girl at a boyband concert, laughing at whatever comes out of Dallas’s or the twins’ mouths, smacking them on the back like they’re his teammates and agreeing with every stupid thing they say.

It’s over-the-top.

“I can’t act normal. My daughter is moving in with her boyfriend, who happens to be going through the NFL draft, who happens to be Duke Colter’s brother. There is no chill, Ryann.”

He’s holding one of the last boxes of my bathroom essentials when Dallas walks through the door, also carrying a box of my stuff.

He overhears my dad and glances over, setting my box at the bottom of the stairs so we can take it to the bathroom when we go up.

“Why is there no chill, Ryann?”

My boyfriend wipes his hands down the front of his jeans.

I roll my eyes. “My dad keeps expecting Duke to materialize and waltz through the door, and if he does, Dad *will* shit his pants.”

“Ryann!” Dad’s eyes bug out of his head. He’s horrified by my declaration, gaze darting back and forth between us. “I would not shit my pants.”

I grin at him. “It’s a metaphor, Dad. We know you’re not going to shit yourself.”

My mom couldn’t make it this weekend; she had a last-minute emergency session with two clients going through a divorce who needed mediation. But she’s had her fill of Dallas, having met him a few times when I brought him home, then again when he came with us on a short spring break trip to my grandparents’ condo in Florida.

Plus, she wasn’t keen on the idea of manual labor.

Mom isn’t the warm-and-fuzzy maternal type—she learned what she needed to know about Dallas and is fine with Dad taking the reins on this moving weekend since it’s mostly heavy lifting and moving things from my apartment to the boys’ house.

Dallas actually doesn’t have much time left to live in this house. The football draft is looming, and if he makes a team (which he will), he’ll have to move to the city where the team is located while I finish my senior year.

I’m not sure where the time went, but never ever would I have thought I would be living with a guy during college.

Correction: a guy and his twin brothers.

Then it will be down to Drake, Drew, and me.

How I got here, I will never know.

Oh, that’s right—Dallas dumped me for Diego.

Diego...

Speaking of him, he and I finally had our reckoning—I was finally able to ask him face to face why he didn’t break up with me himself, not that it mattered at that point.

By that time, Dallas and I had been dating for two months, and I was bound to run into Diego at some point given that the guys play football together and run in the same circles.

I wasn’t exactly expecting Diego to come walking through the Colters’ front door for the party they were having; up until

then, he'd either not shown up or made an excuse not to come, but in this instance, he chose to come.

I was leaning against the doorway of the kitchen, watching the guys watch the Texas Steers game, the energy in the house electric because Duke was playing and the Steers were kicking ass and taking names.

Duke was busy earning his wage, worth a whopping hundred million dollars over the span of a few years.

Mind-blowing.

Anyway.

I digress.

There I was, leaning against the doorway when Diego and two other guys blew through the door, snow blowing in at their backs since we were in the middle of a good old-fashioned, Midwestern snowstorm.

I had hot tea clutched in my palms, warming my hands and my stomach. Brought it to my lips to disguise the surprise in my expression when our eyes made contact across the room—I had to force myself not to look away.

He looked the same, mostly.

Dopier, if that was possible.

Certainly not as good-looking as I once thought he was.

Okay, so maybe he didn't look the same. Ha!

The very fact that he didn't have the balls to dump me made him that much less attractive in my eyes. A wuss personality does nothing for me. Gross.

I lowered my mug and tilted my head in his direction as a greeting.

He tilted his back.

When he made his way across the room, all eyes were on him.

Us.

I pushed off the wall and ducked into the kitchen, not wanting an audience; caught sight of Drew leaning over the arm of the couch to peer over at us, nosey little bugger.

Usually it's Drake who's up in everyone's business.

"What's been going on?" he asked when he walked in, going straight to the fridge and grabbing a beer. Held one out to me, but I didn't want it and didn't take it.

I had tea, thanks.

"You know..." I shrugged. "The usual."

Only he didn't know what the usual is because he never got to know me on a personal level when we were dating. Didn't know what food I like or that I'd rather drink tea over beer on a cold winter day.

Diego shuffled over to the counter and rested his back against it, still wearing his coat, still looking cold.

Must have walked over.

"The usual." He took a chug of beer, then wiped his mouth. "So...Dallas Colter, eh?"

Dallas Colter, eh? That was his big way of asking what was going on and prying for information?

"Yup." I nodded. "Dallas Colter."

Time to rip the Band-Aid off and cut to the chase.

"So I've been wondering..." I let my voice trail off so I didn't sound like I was attacking him or backing him into a corner. "Was there a reason you didn't want to break things off with me in person?"

There.

That was diplomatic.

pats self on back

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Drew still gawking at me (Diego was out of his view), probably reporting my nonverbals to Dallas and Drake and anyone else who was interested in our personal affairs.

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

It was a simple response and answered the question, but it also didn’t make sense.

“You didn’t think paying someone fifty bucks to dump me would hurt my feelings? I thought it was a practical joke at first.”

He futzed with the beer can in his hands, plucking at the metal tab.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

Apparently, he hadn’t thought about anything but himself. Breaking up with someone is never easy, but you can’t stay dating a person you are not into.

It was inevitable. Shit, I’d been on the verge of ending things with him myself—and I would have done it in person, and it would have been awkward and it would have sucked because that’s how breakups are.

If it were easy, couples wouldn’t wait until they feel stuck.

“Well...guess it hardly matters now, but I still wanted to hear it from you.”

“Yeah.” Diego moved the beer from one hand, stuck his other hand in the pocket of his coat. “You’re with Dallas now. Don’t know why you’d give a shit.”

I chuckled at that. “We have you to thank for that.”

“You’re welcome.” Diego snorted. “Can I go now?”

Can I go now? “No one made you follow me in here.”

“I needed a beer.”

Rolling my eyes, I strolled back out of the room to the couch, cramming myself between my boyfriend and his brother, doing my best to ignore my ex-boyfriend for the rest of the afternoon.

“Where do you want this box marked ‘stuff’?”

I step forward, lifting the lid off to peek at the contents inside.

Bras, underwear, and socks.

“Bedroom.”

It doesn't take long to get things put away. My dad came to campus with a truck he borrowed from his buddy, taking my couch, coffee table, and mattress home with him, promising my parents would store them in their garage until I decide what to do with them.

Sell them or save them for a new apartment, perhaps?

It doesn't take long before I'm hugging my dad, kissing him on the cheek, and telling him to drive safe.

“I will, buttercup.”

Buttercup?

That's a new one.

“And, Dallas, take care of my little girl.”

When Dallas goes to embrace my dad, I can't help noticing how small my father looks compared to him, how he fits perfectly, wedged under my boyfriend's armpit.

Whoa.

“I will, sir.”

Sir?

I snicker at that, at the polite way Dallas has treated my dad the couple hours he's been here, surprised but also...

Not surprised?

He should be treating my father respectfully, but hearing him call my dad sir was unexpected—and damn adorable.

We walk my dad outside, furniture tied down and sticking out of the bed of the truck.

Hug once more.

Tell him to drive safe once more.

I wave when he drives off, standing at the curb until he's gone, not sure I'll see him again until the holiday.

“Alone at last,” Dallas moans playfully into my ear, making me shiver—not because it’s sexy, but because it tickles, whispers in my eardrum.

“Alone?”

Is he joking? Alone, with the twins underfoot?

Drew and Drake are both home—now so more than ever—loving nothing more than hanging out as a foursome to the point where Dallas had to install a lock on his bedroom door.

Our bedroom door.

Ours.

Sounds weird saying it...

Weird but good. The trials of the past have only brought us closer, like they should, and we haven’t had any issues pop up since.

I haven’t seen much of the girls next door, merely glimpses as they scurry to and from. They’ve even chosen to walk a new route rather than pass in front of the house, which is fine by me. Fine by Dallas too since the sight of Tiffany pisses him off more than a lineman talking shit about his mom on the field during a game.

He cannot stand Tiffany and barely tolerates Shannon, Drake’s flavor of the semester for the convenience of having her next door. He keeps her at an arm’s length by enforcing a few rules he insists she follows.

1. No sleeping over.
2. Must be gone by ten.
3. No hanging out in the living room.

There is no way in hell I’d put up with that shit, but I’m not Shannon, so...

“Are you coming upstairs? I want to show you something.” Dallas is already upstairs, head poking out of the bedroom so he can call down to me, scowling at Drew when he appears behind me.

“What?” his brother asks.

“Not you, numb nuts—I’m talking to my girlfriend.”

“What?” I call up with a smile on my face, already starting the climb up the steps.

“It’s a secret something.”

I roll my eyes. “Is that something inside your pants?”

Dallas frowns. “How did you guess?”

He pulls me into his arms when I reach the top, pressing me against the wall beside the bedroom door.

“How did I guess? Because you’re so predictable.”

And he can’t keep his hands off me.

“Get a room!” Drew shouts from the bottom, hands around his mouth so his shouting is louder.

“We have a room.”

“Well, maybe you should go in it.” Drew walks off, and Dallas laughs, taking me by the hands and pulling me into our bedroom.

Kicks the door shut behind him.

Locks it.

I flop down in the center of the bed, hair fanning out around me, waiting for him to follow.

Instead, he stands at the foot of it, looking down at me. “Look at how cute you are.”

“Cute?” I wrinkle my nose.

He moves closer, knees pressing against the mattress, hands making their climb toward me.

“Yes, cute.” He lifts the hem of my tank top so he can kiss my stomach. “Sexy.” Kiss. “Beautiful.”

I blush.

Still blushing after all these months.

“Roomie.”

I reach my arms up over my head in a stretch, which Dallas takes full advantage of.

“Now when I want to go down on you, all I have to do is roll over to your side of the bed and ask permission.”

I nod, preening when his hands slide beneath my tank, fumbling around for the clasp on my bra. It’s in front and he makes short work of the task, breathing out a sigh when he nails it on the first try.

“I mean, I may want to blow you instead.”

“Ahh. Who am I to deny you *that*?”

He hasn’t really denied me anything, unless you count the fact that he refuses to buy olives when I put them on the list for snacks.

Dallas hates olives.

No matter how many times I beg, he refuses to eat them, even on pizza.

Other than that?

It has been awesome.

I wouldn’t have moved in with him otherwise.

The tip of his index finger traces my nipple until it gets hard. “Have I told you today how much I love you?”

He has. “Twice.”

We’ve said it every day, repeatedly voicing our gag-inducing love for each other since we first confessed our feelings.

Love.

Dallas never thought he’d find it, and when Tiffany pulled that stunt? He thought he’d lost it.

Silly boy.

It would take a lot for him to lose me now.

“I love you so much, baby.”

bonus epilogue

Drake

My brother is a mess when it comes to dating.

No, not Dallas, and certainly not Duke.

I'm talking about Drew.

I shake my head as I watch him chatting up one of the university's rowers in the athlete cafeteria, watch as he leans against the table with his arms and ankles crossed, the bread between my teeth poised to be torn apart.

This IRL display is better than any on-screen drama, and I get a front seat.

For whatever reason, my twin brother has decided now is the perfect time to start dating. Now is the time he wants to look for love.

My brothers are dropping like flies. First Duke gets himself shackled to Posey, then Dallas has to go and copy him. Not that I blame him—Ryann Winters is the fucking coolest.

Obviously, some things have changed since Dallas went and got himself a girlfriend. Mostly he wasn't sleeping at the house as much, and I can't have sleepovers with the neighbor girls anymore since Tiffany went and fucked him over, ruining the fuck-buddy situation I had going with Shannon and the brunette.

Yes, both of them.

My eyes linger as Drew tries his hand at a joke the girl clearly doesn't find humor in.

He tries telling it again.

“Don’t do it,” I mutter, transfixed. “Don’t repeat the joke.”

He repeats the joke.

Cringe.

Listen, I love my brother. He’s my fucking twin and my mirror image, but that’s where the similarities end.

Where he is kind and smart, I’m...a ballbuster and make dumb decisions.

Where he feels pushed into playing football because we all play football, I love the game so much it flows through the blood in my veins.

Flows through... Wait. It flows like the blood in my veins?
Rushes like the blood?

Fuck it, I don’t know.

Not great at metaphors.

I chew my bread, torn between walking over to save Drew from what’s sure to be a tragic letdown and leaving it alone.

Practice makes perfect, after all, and he’s putting himself out there; that’s all that matters.

How is this chick not picking up what he’s throwing down? My twin is fucking *adorable*! A regular Mr. Nice Guy. A prince among men!

She looks irritated.

Drew, bless his heart, is not picking up on her non-verbals, which is no surprise to me but surely irritating as fuck to her.

“Give the guy a shot,” I mutter, rooting my brother on. He might have an awkwardness when it comes to women, but at least he’s giving it a go, yeah?

Wouldn’t it be nice if these girls saw the value in vulnerability?

Jesus Christ.

My lunch loses its flavor.

What's wrong with these chicks? They'd rather date an asshole than a nice dude who comes off as a bit too awkward at the onset?

Granted, none of those assholes are trying to chat them up in the cafeteria while they're trying to eat their biggest meal of the day, but whatever. Give the kid a break.

I can call him *kid* 'cause he's three minutes younger than I am, which also makes me older.

Yes, I keep track of that shit.

Sighing, I pick my tray up, appetite spoiled.



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about sara ney

Sara Ney is the USA Today Bestselling Author of the How to Date a Douchebag series, best known for her sexy, laugh-out-loud sports and contemporary romances. Among her favorite vices, she includes: traveling, historical architecture and nerding out on all things Victorian. She's a "cool mom" living in the Midwest who loves antique malls, resale clothing shops, and once carried a vintage copper sink through the airport as her carry-on because it didn't fit in her suitcase.

For more information about Sara Ney and her books, visit: <https://authorsaraney.com>



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