

LOCKRIDGE LOVES BOOK 2

LOVING AVA



MEI DANSEN

LOVING AVA

MEI DANSEN

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2021 by Mei Dansen

Digital Edition 2.0

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the author, except where permitted by law or for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

@ Mei Dansen: <https://linktr.ee/meidansen>

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

LOVING AVA
LOCKRIDGE LOVES Book 2

**Ava's men have taught her that she deserves happiness.
But what happens when a public scandal about their
relationship erupts on campus?**

Ava's second semester at Lockridge College is better than anything she could have dreamed. She's in a committed relationship with three gorgeous men: Colin, the ambitious and wealthy doctor-to-be; Darius, the popular party guy admired by all; and Seth, the sweet Southerner full of adventure.

Meanwhile Ava's friendship with Arun, her resident assistant with a golden reputation, is heating up—even though their passion for each other is against the rules.

But trouble is brewing. When Ava's relationships get exposed on the campus gossip site, it puts all of them to the test. Can her newfound loves withstand the heat?

**This is a Reverse Harem Contemporary Romance
with multicultural and interracial relationships and
fiery hot explicit scenes. For adult readers only!**

***Have you read the prequel? *WANTING AVA (LOCKRIDGE
LOVES BOOK 1)* is [available exclusively at Amazon!](#)***

OceanofPDF.com

1

AVA

Sometimes I still couldn't believe my life. Just over six months ago, I wondered if my heart had been broken forever. I'd lost my father to stomach cancer. I was in the process of losing my mother to cold silence and resentment. I'd just found out that my boyfriend had cheated on me with my best friend, and that she was pregnant with his baby. I felt like the cascade of sadness and betrayal would bury me. My only lifeline was that I was set to start my first year at Lockridge College. I left my small town of Juniper, North Carolina behind, sure that I'd never look back, believing that I'd never be happy again.

But my life today has done a complete one-eighty. At Lockridge I found four wonderful guys who helped me see that the problems of my past don't have to drag me down forever. That I deserve love, and that maybe they can be the ones to give it to me.

Yes, all four of them.

Lockridge's winter break was four weeks long. I decided to split the time visiting each of my guys at home, starting with Arun Deshmukh in New York, followed by Colin Kim in Pennsylvania, Darius Johnson in Chicago, and finally Seth Gallant in Georgia. I'd be staying in their houses, spending time with their families, seeing where they grew up. And, incidentally, doing way more traveling than I ever have in my nineteen years.

I'd planned my first week in order to experience Christmas in New York City, but there were several other important reasons for that to be the first visit. For one thing, Arun and I were still taking things slowly. Since he was the resident assistant on my hall at Lockridge, a relationship between us could get complicated, both professionally and personally. It isn't a fireable offense for an RA to get intimate with one of their hallmates, but it *is* frowned upon. An RA is supposed to

be fair and impartial during resident disputes—which I’ve had my own history with—and Arun had already found it a struggle not to take my side even before we acknowledged our mutual attraction. On the flipside, an RA is supposed to be *seen* as fair and impartial by the students they’re in charge of, and that could change if it became known that Arun and I were dating.

I found it a struggle to wait, but I also respected his perspective and his dedication to his job. For my own part, I didn’t want anyone on the hall to look at or treat *me* differently because of our relationship. So we just...didn’t really start one. At least not physically.

Although we hadn’t really talked about how this New York visit would go, I was taking it as a time where I could have Arun all to myself—not just snatching free moments between our studies and work and the other people in our lives. That was another reason I wanted to spend the first week of winter break with him, because I sorely craved that kind of quality time.

But I hadn’t quite realized until now, sitting next to him on the train from DC to New York, what being alone with Arun really meant.

Torture. Pure heated torture.

It was the *nearness* of him. On our hall, the 2nd floor of Milner dorm, we rarely let ourselves be physically close. Arun’s the heart of the hall, and anyone could come looking for him at any time, wanting his advice or needing a question answered. The only times he’s ever behind closed doors are when he’s sleeping, unclothed, or counseling someone about a private matter. So we had to maintain plausible deniability at all times: we were friends and nothing more.

Well, except for a few quick stolen kisses here and there, when our feelings overwhelmed us.

But now that we’d left campus, we found ourselves away from prying eyes. Outside of the guys, only my roommate Kaya knew I’d be with Arun in New York. The trip was our

own secret, a quick escape from real life which would allow us to bend the rules a bit—at least, more than we already had.

The question was, how far would we let ourselves go?



When the train first pulled out of DC's Union Station, Arun turned to me, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, then tracing gentle fingers down my cheek. His touch lit a trail of fire wherever it went. He leaned in, his warm brown eyes studying me. "How are you feeling?"

It was still a new sensation to have him touch me in a non-platonic way, to have his handsome face so close. I was shy about drawing attention to that, though. So I said, "I'm glad we made the train on time."

He grinned. "Me too."

"And I feel nervous," I confessed. "About meeting your parents."

"They'll like you. And they're super easy-going so don't worry about standing on ceremony for anything."

"Will they be analyzing me the whole time?" Arun's parents are psychology professors at Columbia University, and he's told me some interesting stories about child development stuff they used to try on him when he was a kid.

"Okay, that *is* a possibility," he admitted. "But they do it to everyone. They've been training their brains for decades to see people as bundles of neuroses and trauma and whatever, so it's hard to shake. Ultimately they're harmless."

"Are they on winter break as well?"

"Technically, yes, but they're both deep into manuscripts so I don't think they'll be underfoot too much. They usually like to be on-campus where they've got their offices and books and everything else."

As he spoke, his breath washed over my lips, smelling of toothpaste. We'd been gradually moving closer, drawn together like magnets. I saw his gaze flicker down to my mouth, and unconsciously licked my lips. Which made him look again, lingering this time. A flame of arousal unfurled low in my belly.

"Arun?" I murmured.

"Hmm?"

"How are *you* feeling?"

He drifted a tiny, aching distance closer. "About?" he said distractedly.

I coasted forward, under the thin pretext of whispering in his ear. "About me coming to visit?"

"Happy." He pitched his voice at a soft, intimate volume. "I'm happy you accepted my invitation. Happy all the travel plans worked out. Feels like we've been waiting forever, huh?" His hand found mine on the seat, intertwining our fingers.

"It's been way too long," I agreed. "Especially during finals. I feel like I've barely been able to see you. And now I get to see you and only you for a whole week. Amazing."

He pulled back a bit to look at me again, a small contented smile on his face. "What do you want to do with the time? You've got a born and raised New Yorker at your disposal, and I'm putting my usual bored cynicism on hold to play your willing and enthusiastic tour guide."

Willing and enthusiastic. What I wouldn't give... I tried to focus, because jumping him on a public train, before we'd even left the District, would truly lack any restraint. "Well, Central Park, obviously."

"That works. My parents live just a few blocks away."

"And I want to try *all* the food."

"Naturally."

"Would it be too cheesy to try and see some kind of show?"

“Musical? Play? Broadway or off-Broadway? Or maybe a studio audience for a talk show?”

“All of the above? Ugh, you’re totally going to be the jaded New Yorker again by the time I’m done. But I promise I don’t care about the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building.”

“Thank God. I do enjoy live performances. Concerts, too. It’s one of the best things about the city, that we’re such a cultural epicenter.”

I grinned at him. “The fact that you use phrases like ‘cultural epicenter’ makes you more New York than anything.”

“All right, all right. We can’t all be honey-sweet Southerners.” Our hands were still joined, and he lifted them to place light, feathery kisses on my knuckles.

“Are you calling me simple?” I asked in mock-offense.

“Not at all. I’d only ever call you perfect.” He pressed a kiss to my wrist, and I lost *all* of my words, simple and not.

Slowly, his mouth trailed higher, up my forearm to the inner bend of my elbow. The feel of his lips on my skin thinned the air in my lungs. I crooked my wrist around his head, trailing my fingers through the dark waves of his hair. A cocoon of silence descended on us, not just because we’d stopped talking, but because I just didn’t have the bandwidth to take in any other sensations besides those created by Arun: the heat of his mouth, the grip of his fingers, the silky locks of his hair. And his eyes, heavy-lidded as they glanced up to meet mine.

The other times we’d let our guards down and gotten physical, we’d only kissed on the lips. Those time had already been hot enough to make me want to climb the walls in sexual frustration. But *this* kind of kissing felt all kinds of different. This made me think of his mouth in other places, of *my* mouth in other places. The flame of arousal he’d lit earlier, with nothing more than a look, now roared into a full-on fire.

He touched his tongue to the thin, sensitive skin of my upper arm, and my body answered that moist heat with its own

at the apex of my thighs. I sucked in a breath, shifting in my seat.

A door slid open at the end of the train compartment, followed by a gaggle of noisy schoolkids. Arun abruptly withdrew his mouth and sat up straight. He kept hold of my hand, though, tucked between our legs. The schoolkids ploughed through the compartment, chatty and oblivious, and left by a door at the other end.

I looked up at Arun, framed by the window. His hair was delightfully ruffled, and he was looking down at me with a sheepish grin. “Sorry,” he said. “Think I got a little carried away for public transportation. We should probably dial it down some.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” I breathed. I wondered what would happen once we were in private, where only our willpower could hold us back.



We took the subway from Penn Station to the Upper West Side. I thought I’d been to DC enough times that I’d feel confident in New York, but New York made DC feel as small and sleepy as Juniper. Even though DC can get crowded and noisy, it’s manageable. The buildings never go higher than twelve stories. There’s still a feeling of space and reasonably paced movement within that space.

By contrast, New York moves *fast*, and it moves *big*. I didn’t get much of a sense of the city aboveground while we were changing at Penn Station, but people seemed to be rushing in every possible direction—usually directly across our path. Once we got on the subway, the stations whipped by. There was only room to stand, so Arun held onto one of the handrails and I held onto him. The train screeched and lurched, throwing me against him awkwardly, but he slung an arm around my waist and held me close.

“Okay?” he asked.

“Yep. Just trying not to knock you over.”

“You’ll get your subway legs soon, don’t worry. We’re aiming for 96th Street, by the way.”

“Ninety-six streets,” I marveled. “There’s like nine streets in the whole of Juniper.”

Arun grinned. “Technically there are way more than ninety-six. And that’s just in Manhattan.”

He explained about the five boroughs, and I studied the map of the subway pasted on the wall of our compartment. *You’ll have to get to know New York*, I told myself. *And Philadelphia, Chicago, and Atlanta. You could be spending a lot more time in these cities, and not just during the next few weeks.*

That gave me some pause. These relationships weren’t just cool excuses to travel. These trips I was taking might be the first of many. They marked the beginning of true commitment, of making our relationships real and tangible outside the bubble of school. I felt a shivery thrill tinged with apprehension, like when the rollercoaster edges toward the top, revealing the world waiting below.

At the other end of our subway ride we emerged into a massive intersection. Arun rolled both of our suitcases, which helped slow down his normally long-legged strides and gave me time to take in the surroundings. Arun pointed things out to me as we navigated the city blocks. I tried not to gawk like a silly tourist, but there was just so much *life* to take in—cars and people and restaurants and storefronts and apartment buildings and little parks and alleys. It blew my mind that there were hundreds more streets like the ones we were walking, that so much was going on at the same time in the same city and I’d never be able to know even the tiniest fraction of it.

Finally, Arun steered us into a large brick apartment building with beautiful stonework on the ground floor and around the windows. I was glad to get out of the cold and into the warm lobby, where there was an elegant Christmas tree set up to the right of the double glass doors. A gray-haired woman

behind a counter waved at Arun and said, “Welcome back, hon! You home on break? How’s school?”

“Yeah, Mrs. Engle, I’m back for a month. School’s good. This is Ava. She’s visiting for the week.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“Enjoy your stay. I’ll put your name down in the book so if you ever lose this guy, the other doormen know to let you in.”

“I don’t plan to lose him.” I grinned at her.

She winked back. “Smart girl.”

“Aren’t I the smart one for inviting her here?” Arun interjected, making me snort at the OTT cheese. “Happy Holidays!”

He swept me into an elevator and pressed the button for the seventh floor.

“My mom texted,” he said, as the doors closed. “She and Dad are grading finals on a deadline and it’ll be a few hours before they come back home. So we can chill for a bit or go out for lunch, whatever you want.”

The elevator arrived before I could answer, and within a few moments Arun was holding open the door of his family’s apartment. I found myself in a long, oddly crooked hallway with exposed brick walls on one side.

“Keep walking?” I asked.

“Yep.”

The walls were decorated with artsy black and white photos of people who looked like relatives. I looked at those with interest. The hallway’s odd shape bent around his parents’ suite, apparently—Arun showed me the door for it—before ending at a large sunlit space.

“Wow.” I stopped and took it in. It was all open plan. To the right of us was the living area, with an L-shaped sofa, floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and a bay window seat adorned with throw pillows. Ahead was a dining table and a kitchen with an island. Beyond the kitchen was another shorter hallway, ending in a

second bedroom. A bathroom was accessible from this hallway, tucked behind the kitchen.

“I’m just going to put your suitcase in there and grab some stuff for myself,” Arun explained, gesturing at the bedroom. “I’ll be camping out in the living room.”

I’d thought about the sleeping arrangements approximately every minute since Arun first invited me to New York. But I hadn’t said anything until now. “Arun, no. I can sleep out here.”

“It’s fine. This way you can have privacy.” He led me into the room, which was painted a lovely shade of grayish-blue. Another built-in bookcase stood between two tall windows, the shelves populated with random personal items as much as books. But it was the bed, opposite the bookcase, that drew my eyes. It seemed to take up more space than a bed should. Or maybe the room was just small—I’d heard about how tiny New York apartments are.

No, it was definitely the bed and its whole...bed-ness.

I hesitated. *The beginning of commitment, right?* “Well... would your parents have a problem if we both slept in here? Um, at the same time, I mean?”

Arun paused in the act of opening his closet door and turned to look at me, his gaze intent. “They’d be okay with it,” he said slowly. “Would you? I didn’t want to assume.”

“Yeah.” The word came out raspy, and I cleared my throat. My face burned, but I pushed through. “I’d be okay with it. *More than okay.*”

“Unless,” she said, “it would be breaking the rules. But it’s just sleeping, right?”

And that was the problem, wasn’t it? We’d agreed to wait on taking any big steps toward a relationship, but every day that wait got more and more difficult. Still, the idea that we could go to bed together, and wake up together, after months of keeping a carefully professional and platonic distance—could we be satisfied with that new intimacy? Or would it be more temptation than we could resist?

“We can control ourselves,” I said, resolutely forgetting about our few slip-ups. “I’ve shared beds with friends before and nothing happened. I trust you. Do you trust me?”

Ava nodded. “Of course. And I won’t kick you out of bed if you cuddle me in your sleep or something.”

“I won’t kick you out of bed either. But I also won’t maul you like I did on the train.”

A smile played over her lips. “And *I* won’t maul you. But we don’t have to do the social distancing thing all the time we’re awake, do we?”

In answer, I opened my arms, and she came over. Even an embrace like this still had an edge of risk, because God, the feel and scent of her drove me crazy. It would be so easy to just lean down and kiss her—and add to the ongoing list of slip-ups. But I supposed I’d have to get used to this kind of closeness if we were going to be together for a week. More closeness was the point of her visiting, after all.

Y’all are fooling yourselves with this promise shit, I remembered Darius telling me weeks ago. Just be together. If anyone wants to start some smoke about it, I got your back.

Ava turned her face up to me, and just like that, the energy changed, charged. Her mouth parted, and my hands slid to her

hips of their own accord.

I reached deep for reserves of restraint. “How about lunch?” I said, forcing myself to step back a bit. “My favorite café is just around the corner.”

“Probably a good idea.” She sounded slightly breathless, and the way her eyes trailed down my body made me want to give up the struggle and use that bed for every last thing *but* sleep.

This was going to be the longest week of my life.



After lunch, we cut over to Central Park, climbing up to sit on one of the big glacier rocks which had been soaking up the winter sun. Ava wiggled her butt around on it. “I need the warmth,” she laughed. “I love that this place exists. The park, I mean. They probably could have used it to build tons of apartments or skyscrapers, but instead they were like, nope, we need a fuck-ass big park.”

“I think you quoted the reasoning with one hundred percent accuracy,” I teased.

“So.” She squinted up at me. “How come your parents wouldn’t mind me sleeping in your bed? Have you done it a lot with other girls?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, it might not fly if *I* were a girl. They still have a few old-school Indian values that pop out once in a while. But overall they like to pretend that being psychologists in New York City means they’ve left behind a lot of the traditions and conservatism they grew up with.”

“You think they haven’t really?”

“Well, it’s all on a spectrum. In some ways they were cool about me being a relatively independent kid, following my own path academically and socially. But there were a couple of bad behavior type things I did that seemed scary to them, and then they automatically went to super strict disciplinarian

mode for a bit. After a while though they'd relax and revert back to whatever new child development technique they were into."

"What kind of scary bad behavior are we talking about here? Like not doing your homework? Or scamming old ladies?"

"I mean, there was some petty theft, yeah. When I was eleven I had a friend who was really more of a bully than a friend, and he made me shoplift from a bodega near school. I got caught and my parents freaked out—as they should. Put me on complete lockdown for a month. But then after two weeks they rescinded the punishment and used it as an opportunity to teach me about how to counteract bullies and the cycle of abuse. With a bonus helping of how to manage guilt and shame constructively, in case their initial punishment had mentally scarred me."

Ava chuckled. "That sounds like some pretty soft parenting in the end, no offense. How did you manage to turn out so perfect?"

I smiled back at her. "I'm sure I have a flaw or two."

She shook her head. "Nope, no flaws detected. You didn't answer my question about other girls, by the way."

"There have been a couple," I admitted. "But it's not like I had a revolving door—my parents aren't *that* tolerant. And never anyone from Lockridge. I think it's kind of a bigger deal to bring home someone from another state."

Ava propped her feet up on the rock and rested her elbows on her knees. "*Have* you ever dated someone seriously?"

"I guess you could say my high school girlfriend. We dated for over a year. But we split up right before we graduated. Nothing dramatic. We just knew we weren't meant to be."

"I get that."

Ava had told me a while ago about her own high school ex, and how she'd been able to move on from all the damage he and her friend had created with their betrayal. *I don't know if I would be talking to Jodie again if it weren't for you*, she'd said

to me. *You taught me that an apology can be accepted even if I'm not all the way ready to forgive. That it doesn't have to be all or nothing.*

“Anyway,” I continued, “I haven’t felt as strongly about another person since. At least, not until now.”

“Hmm, are you talking about anyone I know?” she said lightly.

“You might have met. Darius Johnson? Lives on our hall.”

Ava snickered. “Sometimes I could swear Darius *would* actually prefer to date you. Seth, too. They’re always going on about you’re such a golden boy and how they can’t understand why I’d agree to wait.”

I’m understanding it less and less myself, I thought but didn’t say. Instead I found myself voicing something else. “Is it weird, being with all of us?”

She straightened. “Yes, to begin with. But I can’t imagine it any other way, now. Is it weird for you?”

“I’m probably still getting used to it. Not in a bad way. It’s just different, obviously.”

“Another good reason for us to take it slow, maybe.”

“Right.” And yet with every slow minute that passed, it felt like more and more of a struggle.



Ava’s meeting with my parents went great, as I predicted. I’d wondered if they might be concerned about me dating one of my residents, but neither of them brought it up. In fact, my dad poured her a glass of wine and toasted her presence in my life.

“He’s too aloof, isn’t he?” Dad said. “I keep telling him that in this day and age, you have to put yourself out there. Don’t be afraid to show your most authentic self.”

“You can’t act on every single attraction,” Mom put in. She snuck another chocolate out of the box Ava had brought as a thank you gift for letting her stay. It had instantly won Mom’s favor. “Arun knows how to assess the future potential of a relationship. He’s a good judge of people.”

“He’s definitely very insightful and thoughtful,” Ava said loyally, as she scraped sliced tomatoes into a salad bowl.

Somehow the two of us had ended up taking over dinner preparation while my parents plowed through wine and chocolate. They deserved the break, though. Even if it was the end of their semester, they had to dive right back into book writing tomorrow.

Dad’s the chef of the family, so he gave us instructions on the recipes, sitting comfortably on the other side of the kitchen island from us. “Indira, don’t ruin your appetite,” he scolded Mom, after she went for her fifth chocolate. “The kids are working hard to feed us.”

Ava met my eyes, looking amused. A warm wave of contentment swelled in my chest. In spite of her earlier nervousness, she looked completely comfortable and at home. We moved easily around each other in the small kitchen, occasionally brushing bodies, but beyond my usual heightened awareness of her, there was no self-consciousness or embarrassment about it. She just fit.

Over dinner, my parents asked about the Intro to Psychology class she’d just finished, and the conversation naturally turned to the research they were writing up. “We’re both into trauma,” Mom said. “Well, not *into* trauma, of course, but that’s our area of expertise. My focus is on the trauma inflicted by childhood peers and how that often comes to be reflected in one’s own internal dynamics, leading to potentially conflicting and destructive impulses later in life.”

“And I focus on the more typically known traumas,” Dad said. “The kind of post-traumatic stress disorder you see in veterans or people who’ve been through horrible events. My book is about some of the more experimental treatments.”

Ava’s eyebrows rose. “You mean recreational drugs?”

“Yes, namely marijuana and MDMA, looking at the results of clinical trials.”

They started talking about how rigorously clinical trials must be conducted in order to be deemed reputable. I’d heard it all before, but I liked hearing the kinds of questions Ava asked. I knew my parents found it invigorating to talk to students, which was why they actually enjoyed the teaching component of their professorships much more than the requirement to publish research on the regular.

“I wish now I hadn’t taken my Psych class pass/fail,” Ava said. “Your work sounds so interesting.”

“Not to worry,” Mom said. “You have plenty of time to take more classes if you want.”

“I always advise my students that psychology is a big field with lots of career opportunities,” Dad said. “Just stay out of academia.”

“That can be said for almost any so-called professional field,” I pointed out. “Besides, if all the good ones took your advice, what kind of teachers would we have?”

“All the good ones *do* follow that advice,” Dad joked. “That’s why your mother and I have job security.”

Ava laughed, and Dad winked at her.



Mom made sure I’d shown Ava where all the spare towels were. “I’m sorry that Vasu and I will be working so much this week,” she said. “Since we’re Hindu we really only celebrate Christmas as a commercial holiday, because it means we get to take the day off.”

“I’m not much for Christmas either,” Ava reassured her. “Arun promised to be my tour guide so that should keep us busy.”

“We’ll make sure to at least have a nice meal on the day,” Mom said. “And I promise you won’t have to cook that one.”

She and Dad said good night and went to their room, generously leaving me and Ava the rest of the apartment. We settled on the sofa to watch a movie. My parents' queue was full of their choices and suggestions, which meant mostly crime documentaries. Ava suggested something happy and fictional, so I let her take the remote. She settled on *When Harry Met Sally*.

"Because it's about New York," she said.

"From forty years ago."

"And because it's about friends who fall in love."

My breath caught, but Ava just started the movie and settled against me. We stretched out on the chaise section of the sofa, her snuggled against my side with my arm around her, and a thick fleece blanket over our legs. "Let me know if you want anything, snacks, a drink, whatever," I said.

"Just this," she sighed happily.

I did my best to pay attention to the movie, but I'd seen it a few times before and I'd stayed up super late last night finishing a paper. Plus, Ava and I kept sinking further and further into the sofa cushions, enveloped in the soft weight of the blanket. The feel of her curled against my side was arousing, but in a lowkey kind of way, like warm syrup relaxing through my veins.

I let my eyes drift shut for just a second, only to open them and find the credits already rolling. "Wha—?" I shook my groggy head. "Did I miss the movie?"

"It's okay." Ava's voice was hushed and tender as she leaned over me. "You seemed like you needed the sleep."

"Mmm," I groaned. "I'm sorry. Did it bother you? My mom can't stand it if my dad falls asleep when they're supposed to be watching something together."

"Not at all," she said. "I was plenty entertained just staring at you."

I yawned. "Hope it was a good kind of entertainment."

“It was,” she said softly. “You look younger when you sleep. I always think of you as so, I don’t know, grown up. It’s nice to see you through a different kind of filter.”

“I think I understand,” I said, just as softly. “It’s vulnerable. Intimate.”

“Yeah.”

The hushed air between us seemed to thicken with tension. In the lowered lights of the living room, Ava’s beautiful face was a beacon itself. She was still tucked against me, one of her hands resting on my chest. I was very aware that beneath the blanket, my cock was half-erect, that all she had to do was slide her hand downward and—

“Anyway,” she said, “if you’re sleepy, we can go ahead and call it a night. And no need to get up early just so I can drag you places. We *are* on vacation.”

“But I only get this week with you,” I protested. “I don’t want to waste a minute of it.”

She smiled. “Even if you spent the whole week sleeping and all I could do was sit next to you, it wouldn’t be a waste.” She winced. “Ugh, I sound like a sappy rom-com now.”

“I don’t mind. Tell me more about how great it is to be around me.”

“I think your admirer Darius can do better,” she bantered back. “Should I call him up?”

“Only if you promise not to be jealous. You’re still first in our hearts.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Somehow I don’t think our rom-com would be a box office hit.”

3

AVA

Arun let me wash up first; I went ahead and got in bed while he took his turn. I sent messages to Colin, Seth, and Darius to check in and see how their travel days had gone. They answered quickly, like they usually do. Everyone had arrived home safely. They missed me and couldn't wait to see me.

Tell Arun no one's watching and y'all can end this long national nightmare! Darius added.

Tell him some of us wouldnt mind watchin, was Seth's reply.

Colin added the fist bump emoji, which was interesting. It had come through right on the heels of Seth's, so I didn't know if they'd just crossed paths or if he was actually responding favorably to the idea of watching. He'd relaxed a lot of his initial unease about group sex lately, but I'd be surprised if he was totally cool about seeing Arun that way. They didn't really know each other well yet.

Arun came in, shutting the bedroom door gently behind him. He was wearing a T-shirt and plaid pajama bottoms, and he'd brought a glass of water which he set down on the nightstand next to me. "Do you need anything else?" he asked. "Do you think you'll be warm enough?" His eyes dropped to my bare legs.

I was wearing a T-shirt with a pair of boxer shorts I'd lifted from Seth. Probably impractical, especially since I'd be traveling to three northern cities in the middle of winter. But I hate sleeping in long pants. Fortunately the bed was covered in the fluffiest down comforter I've ever seen. "I think I'll be okay. I do tend to get cold hands, though, so I'll try to keep them to myself."

"Well, let's not get carried away with *too* much courtesy." Arun grinned and slid under the comforter, and I dove in as well.

As if by mutual agreement, we both turned onto our sides facing each other. The one lamp in the room, on Arun's side of the bed, cast his skin in a golden glow and highlighted the elegant lines of his face. Earlier on the sofa, he'd smelled like red wine and spices. Now he smelled like soap and toothpaste and fresh laundry. All evening I'd been resisting the urge to bury my face in his neck and just inhale. That urge was now dialed up to maximum.

"I really like your parents," I said, figuring that topic would cool me down.

"Yeah, they're pretty all right in their own way."

"I've never had a dinner conversation like that with anyone's family. There aren't a ton of higher degrees in Juniper."

"I'd like to visit one day," Arun said. "I want to see where you grew up. Do you think you'll ever go back? Actually, sorry—you don't have to talk about it."

"No, it's okay. I guess I've been thinking about it, too. This is the first time I've ever spent the holidays without my family. Or my friends."

To be honest, if it weren't for the guys, I'd be spending the holidays homeless and alone. But letting myself think about that would put me on a slippery slope to nowhere good.

"Was Christmas a big deal for all of you?" Arun asked.

"Not spiritually. My mom grew up Buddhist and my dad was a cynical lapsed Catholic. We only got into it because we had to decorate the café like all the other main street storefronts. And I guess because of our friends, too. Seemed like every other family had an annual Christmas party, and the town would have a competition for the best decorated house. They did it for Halloween, too."

Arun huffed out a laugh. "Now I want to visit even more." He paused, seemed to hesitate, then said, "Do you know what your mom's doing this year?"

I shrugged. "No." And I thought, *I don't even know if she's alone.*

“Do you...want to talk to her?”

I adjusted the pillow under my head. “I’m not sure we’re ready. Well, I know I’m not. And I think she isn’t ready to admit she did anything wrong, which adds up to the same thing.”

In the shadows, his dark eyes had a mournful cast. “I’m sorry, Ava. I can only imagine how hard it is to cut off the last parent you have.” He saw that I was about to speak, and went on, “I know it was the right decision for you. I’m just trying to say that it’s okay to feel down about it. And that I’m here for you if you are.”

“I know,” I said softly. “I was actually going to say that maybe I could talk to your parents about it sometime.”

“Sure. They’re not licensed therapists, but they could maybe give you some insights from their research.”

“Or use me for research,” I said wryly. “Anyway, I might wait until my next visit to have them psychoanalyze me. I’m still trying to make a good first impression.”

A yawn bubbled up from my throat, and Arun pulled the top of the comforter higher over my shoulders. “Is it my turn to watch you sleep now?”

I scrunched my nose. “I’ve been told that I snore and/or drool. Not that I was ever awake to prove otherwise.”

“Oh, no.” Arun chuckled. “I really think this information should have been disclosed to me before I invited you into my bed.”

“Too late. I’m not movin’.”

“Seriously, these are my favorite sheets.”

I hauled my sleepy body up to nudge him onto his back, then scooted against him so my head was pillowed on his shoulder. “How about this? Only your shirt gets drenched.”

His arms wrapped around me. “Much better.”



Maybe it was all the talk about Juniper and my folks right before I nodded off, but I dreamed about them. I was in the café, wiping down the glossy wooden counter. Dad sat across from me dressed in a hospital gown, frail and haggard, his eyes downcast. Mom kept sliding full cups of coffee down toward us, and they'd hit my hand and spill all over the counter, some of it dripping onto Dad. I'd wipe up each spill, and then she'd do it over again.

Finally I said, *You're not paying me enough for this.* And she said, *Why should I pay? It's not my coffee.*

I stood frozen, then I threw down the soaked rag and walked out of the café. Or tried to. My limbs moved like they were stuck in molasses. Dad reached his hand out to me, thin and bony like he'd looked toward the end. His mouth moved, but nothing came out.

Mom shook her head as she watched me struggle. *Fine, go away. Why did no one disclose to me what a disrespectful daughter you would be?* And she waved her arms to shoo me off.

I woke up still trying to leave the café. Beyond the foot of the bed, pale early sunlight was filtering in through the blinds. At some point in the night I'd started spooning Arun, which probably accounted for my paralysis in the dream. I laid there quietly for a few moments as the images melted away, replaced by all the sensations of waking up in this new place, with this new companion.

My arm was draped around his waist and my legs were tucked up under his. Arun in the morning smelled just as yummy as other times of the day. The fragrance of his skin permeated his T-shirt, warm and clean and comforting. I pressed my nose to his spine and breathed in the way I'd wanted to last night, filling my lungs with the essence of him. My hand splayed against his flat stomach for leverage so I could pull my body closer.

He shifted beneath my touch and a short huff of air escaped his lungs. I felt his fingers cover mine. "Are you awake?" he

whispered.

“Mmm. Good morning.” My lips moved against his back.

“Did you sleep okay?”

“I definitely slept.” I let the rest of the wispy dream fragments drift off rather than talk about them. “Usually I have trouble the first night in a strange bed, but I guess I was tired. You?”

“Same when it’s a strange bedfellow, but my subconscious must have deemed you acceptably non-threatening. I slept like a baby.”

I snorted. “Any idea what time it is?”

“Too early to ask that question.”

He pulled my hand to his mouth, kissing my fingers like he’d done on the train, and it was as if he were simply picking up the end of a sentence he’d left unfinished, no time in between. When he pulled my pointer finger between his lips, suckling lightly, my nipples peaked in response. I wondered if he could feel it through the two layers of our shirts.

Then he turned until he was facing me. There was a question in his eyes, and I very much wanted to answer it. I dipped my head toward his, capturing his mouth with mine.

Arun drew in a breath, his lips opening immediately. The soft heat of his tongue touched my lower lip and I sighed at the feel of it, the rightness of it. An answering heat rushed between my legs, like a fire that had been banked but was now roaring back to life.

This kiss was more intensely sexual than any of our previous ones, maybe fueled by our growing awareness of each other—or by the fact that we were in a bed, far away from school. Arun’s hand grasped the nape of my neck, thumb sweeping forward to find the corner of my jaw. His mouth slanted over mine and his tongue plunged inside. I returned the explorations with my own, savoring every bit of him I could taste.

His hand came away from my neck to grasp my leg and draw it up over his hip. The heat of his palm seared my bare thigh like a hot iron. Then he thrust forward and the hardness of his cock touched my core. Even through our clothes the sensation was shockingly arousing.

I rocked in, bringing us into contact more purposefully, and Arun made a strangled noise in his throat. His hand slid up my leg, beneath my shorts to cup my bottom through my panties. With firm pressure, he began driving the rhythm of my movements.

We'd gone from zero to sixty in just a few short moments. I wanted to pull him on top of me. I wanted him to grind his cock down on my cunt until we were both frantic enough to forget why we shouldn't be doing this.

A sound came from somewhere in the apartment—the kitchen faucet running water. We broke apart, panting, staring at each other wild-eyed.

A cabinet door fell shut, followed by the clink of a coffee mug on a counter. One of his parents was awake.

Arun groaned softly. "I don't know if I'm glad or mad."

I giggled. "Same."

"If they were asleep on the whole other side of the apartment..."

"No, I know." My leg was still hitched over his hip, but he'd withdrawn his hand to place it safely on my waist—not that anything was really safe between us. "Arun, maybe we need to decide once and for all. What the hell are we doing?"

"I was afraid one of us was going to ask that." He pulled away to flop on his back. Meanwhile, beyond the door, I heard cereal hitting a bowl, a drawer opening, silverware rattling.

"Are we being stupid? I mean, I feel like we should be able to control ourselves. But then we just...don't."

"It's my fault," he said. "We haven't been away from school for twenty-four hours and I'm all over you."

"What? No. It's both of us."

“No, I’m the one who put the brakes on because of my job. I set the rules. It’s not fair to you that I can’t follow them.”

“Arun, I’m saying *we* can’t follow the rules. It takes two.”

“In principle, but I think it’s more my responsibility. If we keep on like this, you’re going to start getting truly frustrated and resentful, and I’m going to start feeling guilty. And those feelings are not how I wanted us to start out, you know?”

I sat up, suddenly feeling cold all over. “So what do you want to do? Stop everything? Do you think we can?”

“I honestly don’t know.” He sat up as well, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “What I do know is, whenever I look at you, I want you. I want to be with you.”

“Me too,” I whispered. Saying it out loud, and hearing him say it, helped take some of the edge off. At the same time, it crystallized the issue in such sharp relief that it took my breath away. The *wanting* between us was almost tangible.

“I feel like that’s always going to be in the background,” Arun said, “no matter what our relationship is. So the questions then are, can we acknowledge it without indulging in it? Or is it really just too difficult to stay in control? And if it’s too difficult, do we throw all the rules out the window and go for it, or do we go the opposite direction and put distance between us?”

We stared at each other for a moment that turned into an even longer moment, expanding like a balloon. It was like we were each waiting for the other one to pop, too afraid to be the one to move first.

The decision was removed from us when we heard the sound of the refrigerator shutting, followed by voices. Both of Arun’s parents were now awake.

I broke. “I think another question is, would it be possible for us to go for it now, and for you to feel one hundred percent that we did the right thing? Because I don’t want us to start out with bad feelings either. No guilt, no conflict, no worrying.”

Arun gave me a wry smile. “Did you and the other guys have this many questions when you got together?”

“We had plenty,” I assured him. “But I just want to point out that you were the one to pile on the questions. I just asked what’s happening between us.” I arched an eyebrow.

Arun chuckled. “I guess that’s true, technically. But I think it’s all the same question, in the end.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly.

“I think it’s good we’re talking it through, at least. Because I don’t think we ever did, really. I just kind of unilaterally decided, and you agreed.”

“Because I knew it was important to you. Being good at your job, I mean. I think it still is, right?”

“Yes.”

“And honestly, it’s important to me, too. It’s important to me that you’re able to keep doing it, and that you can feel proud of your work, because what you do matters to everyone on the hall. You know, you really help people. I learned that firsthand. And I don’t want to get in the way of that for anyone else.”

“So...what are you saying?”

I thought about the right words. “The fact that you’re in my life at all is completely amazing to me, whether it’s as a friend or something more. So I don’t want to put distance between us. I hope you feel the same?”

He nodded. “I don’t want us to stop talking or spending time together. I *wanted* us to become closer this week, just...in a more controlled way.”

“Okay.” I sighed. “So then I think I’m saying we need to take another stab at setting rules. Together, this time.”



We decided that Arun would sleep on the living room sofa after all, and that we’d stop any physical contact that was beyond the boundary of friendship. Hugging was fine, as long

as it was the kind of hug we'd feel comfortable giving to anyone. Everything else was off limits.

And we agreed that since I had Colin and Darius and Seth, it was only fair for Arun to date other people if he wanted to—people not living on Milner 2nd, of course. Deep down, I wasn't sure I'd be totally okay seeing that, at least not the way the guys seemed to be totally okay sharing me. But I'd offered it, feeling like I needed to show I was truly cool with waiting. It helped a little that Arun seemed surprised by the suggestion, and then dismissive of even the possibility of dating anyone else.

I joked that after the big blow-up with my original roommate, Mimi, I should have been the one to move out instead of her, and then we wouldn't have to worry about these rules at all. But Arun said, very seriously, that moving out would have been a punishment I didn't deserve at the time.

“And I like having you nearby,” he finished. “Even back then, I would have been sad if you left.”

In the end, figuring out the rules was quick and easy. Because honestly, we'd known all along what we had to do; it was just a matter of voicing it out loud.

“Kind of feels like we should shake on it or something,” I said.

Arun extended his hand with a crooked grin. “We did essentially negotiate a deal.”

His palm was warm against mine, and I thought of how he'd been cupping my bottom just minutes ago, his fingers flexing as he pushed my hips against his stiff cock—

Not helpful!

We got up and started getting ready for the day. Arun left for the bathroom and I heard him talking to his parents, but it was just a low indiscernible murmur. The bedroom felt achingly empty without his presence, and I knew that was because we wouldn't be sharing it again.

To distract myself from the melancholy, I concentrated on picking an outfit for the day. It was going to be another frigid

one, and Arun had mentioned lining up for same-day discount theater tickets. I decided layering was key, so I went with long underwear, jeans tucked into knee boots, a flannel button-up shirt, and a plush wool sweater. I also had a scarf, hat, gloves, and a bulky long coat, which had already served this Southern girl well during cold snaps at Lockridge.

Arun's parents were just washing up their breakfast dishes when I came out for my turn at the bathroom. They said good morning warmly, asked about our plans, and then apologized again for having to dash off to work. They really were charming people. Charming people who'd raised a son with principles and integrity and way too much willpower.

OceanofPDF.com

4

AVA

After breakfast, Arun took me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I've been to a couple of the big national museums in DC, but the Met has a kind of grandeur and spectacle that took my breath away. It seemed to contain *everything*, the peak of human expression in art and sculpture and even fashion, all housed inside an architectural palace. "We have to come back," I repeated again and again, as I led Arun from one gallery to the next. "We need more time."

He just laughed at me. "We'll come back as often as you want. In fact, you don't even have to leave. You can hide in a sarcophagus and I'll come collect you next month when you've finally seen everything."

"I'd rather go with a decorative Chinese wardrobe, thanks!" I said airily, and zoomed off to the Asian art section.

We had lunch in the European-style café, sitting at a round Parisian table with views of Central Park through massive floor-to-ceiling windows. Dinner with Arun's parents last night had been vegan, but he'd ordered salmon, so I asked him about their different dietary preferences.

"They don't mind me eating meat when I'm outside their home," he explained. "They're not vegan for religious reasons or anything. It's purely about animal rights and the environment. I don't eat much meat anyway, mostly fish."

"I've been meaning to ask, how come you didn't decide to go to Columbia? Or did you not want to because that's where they teach?"

"Yeah, basically that. I actually didn't even apply to Columbia—or any city schools. I just wanted to get out of this place for a bit. I've lived here all my life, and I could see that if I went to any New York school it would be too easy to stay in that apartment rent-free and hang out with my friends from

high school all the time. I wanted to be on my own for once. How about you? Why Lockridge?”

“Kind of the same, except for me it was wanting to get away from a small town. But what cemented it was my scholarship.”

Arun already knew about me having a full ride. “Yep, makes sense.”

In the afternoon we took the subway down to Times Square and lined up at the big ticket booth to see what evening shows were available. Now that we were just standing around instead of walking, it was indeed freezing as fuck. I regretted that I couldn't cuddle up to Arun for warmth. Since it probably wouldn't be the first time I'd wish we hadn't agreed to these rules, I told myself to just get used to it.



We ended up getting tickets to a Broadway play. I'd never heard of the play or the playwright, but Arun had read it for a class and thought it was pretty good. Seeing a live show of that caliber was another first for me. Jodie was in a couple of productions in high school, and I went out of loyalty to her. But I always found myself more impressed at how people who fucked around in class everyday could memorize so many lines, rather than their actual performances. The Broadway actors, on the other hand, completely inhabited their characters. There was some artificiality to the sets and the stage design, but even if those actors had performed in an empty room, I would have believed them.

On the subway ride back to Arun's apartment, he shared some insights about the play he'd learned in class. I raved about the acting and declared how lucky he was to be from a place like New York.

He tilted his head at me. We were standing, holding onto a pole for balance, maintaining a friendly distance from each other. “I think the city's probably a fun place to visit because you get to pack in all the positives in a short amount of time.

But living here means you experience more of the ups and downs.”

“Of course,” I declared. “But isn’t that why people come here? For the whole up-and-down *New York* of it all?”

“You could try it,” Arun said. “Find a job here after you graduate. Or you could get an internship for the summer. Try it on a temporary basis.”

I stared at him. “You know, I started thinking about internships a while ago but I always assumed I’d get one in DC. New York wasn’t even on my radar.”

“It’s one of the major markets for Lockridge students. You’ve got all the big industries—” He ticked them off on his fingers. “Legal and finance and tech startups and journalism and obviously arts and entertainment. Even local government. Whatever you’re interested in.”

“Which ones pay well?”

He grinned. “Sadly, the paying internships are going to be the most competitive, because they’re few and far between. But remember I was talking about living rent-free with my parents? I’m sure if you landed an internship, you could stay in the apartment.”

“Wow. That would be really generous.”

My mind was already swirling with possibilities. I didn’t know what industry I’d be interested in, but any chance to live in New York would be the opportunity of a lifetime. Seth would be teaching summer school in DC, which I’d now learned was a pretty easy train ride away. I didn’t know what Colin or Darius planned for the summer, but hopefully they would also be easy to get to.

“I guess I should start looking into what’s available as soon as possible,” I said.

“Remember, now you know people in the city. Half of job searching is networking.”

“Oh, I’ll remember. How have you spent your summers?”

“After freshman year, I interned at a publishing house. It wasn’t for me. Last summer I stayed on campus as a research assistant for one of the English professors. Then I had resident assistant training which was a couple weeks.”

“Hmm, publishing sounds cool. But I’m not picky.”

“You shouldn’t be.” His smile turned fond. “You’ve got plenty of time to explore and find out what interests you.”

I leaned away from the pole a little, testing my weight on it. “Do you think you’ll come back to New York this summer? What about after you graduate?”

“There’s a good chance,” Arun said. “I’ve liked writing for the *Rundown* and I’ve already applied for internships at a few papers on the East Coast. If I like the work, who knows? Journalism school, maybe. And Columbia’s one of the best.”

“I really liked your series. Are you going to continue it next semester?”

Arun had published a handful of articles in the Lockridge paper profiling recent graduates and what they were up to. He had, in fact, done a fairly in-depth profile of Jenn Silviana, the woman Colin and Seth and Darius shared last year. The *only* woman besides me they’ve ever shared. I’ve been dying to ask Arun about her, but the guys asked me to leave it alone. Their relationship with her had always been secret—she preferred it that way—and they were still actively respecting that. So they were sensitive about raising anyone’s suspicion, even Arun’s.

“I think that series has played itself out for now,” Arun said. “I’m brainstorming ideas for something else.”

“Ooh, care to spill?”

As Arun described his possible pitches, I let my curiosity about Jenn fade. It never fully disappeared, though. Arun’s article had portrayed her as this ambitious, glamorous, incredibly hard-working high performer with a super cool prestige position at the White House. I told myself it was a self-esteem trap to even try to compare myself to her, and I’d certainly never tell anyone about it if I did. But some differences were just obvious.

Well, Ava, you're only getting started, I thought. One day someone might want to write an article about you.

I liked that thought.



As usual, Arun let me commandeer the bathroom first to get ready for bed. My skin felt dry from all the walking around in cold weather, so I made sure to slather on moisturizer. When I stepped out, he was perched on the arm of the sofa looking at his phone. He glanced up at me, blinked, and then a smile spread over his face.

“What?” I backed up a step self-consciously.

“That...” He gestured. “On your hair.”

My hand flew to the oversize bow on my fluffy hairband which I’d—of course!—forgotten to remove. I pulled it off quickly. “It’s not mine,” I said. “I lost the one I usually use and Kaya let me have her extra one.”

“It’s adorable,” he said, coming toward me. “You looked like a Christmas present.”

Maybe you could unwrap me?

He stopped just short of touching distance, looking down at me with that same appreciative smile. God, his eyes. Maybe I should be the one to unwrap *him*.

But no. We’d resolved otherwise.

“Well.” I cleared my throat. “Bathroom’s all yours.”

Arun blinked, breaking the spell. “You’re heading to bed? Of course. You must be tired. We did a lot today.”

“Yeah,” I said uncertainly. “We walked all over.”

“I’ll go easier on you tomorrow.” He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on my forehead. “Sleep well.”

“You too. And...it was a good day,” I reassured him. “It’s a good kind of tired.”

Squared away in bed, with the door firmly shut between us, I sighed. Tired? I was buzzed enough to run around the building ten times. I flopped onto my belly and pulled out my phone to check my messages.

And there it was waiting for me, like a spider you knew was in the room somewhere, only to find it lurking beneath the bedcovers.

According to Lockridge academic calendar you're on winter break already. When are you arriving? Her face, in its circular icon, floated at the top of the screen above the word *Mom*.

I physically recoiled. Dropped my phone and sat up, drawing my knees to my chest. A strange numbness settled over me, the room's walls receding into dimness and leaving me in the middle of the bed, isolated in the pale field of the sheets.

With fingers that felt like someone else's, I picked up the phone again. She'd sent the message hours ago; I hadn't checked all evening. I typed out a reply: **I'm not coming**.

As I hit send, I noticed the time: eleven p.m. She'd most likely be asleep, since the café opened at seven a.m. But within seconds, the three dots appeared, indicating that she was typing back.

Why not? read the first message. It was immediately followed by another three dots, then **Where are you?**

Was she fucking serious? She was really asking this? I'd heard nothing from her since our last terrible phone call in October. Nothing about Thanksgiving. When I was still living in Juniper, for months we'd pass each other without acknowledgment or eye contact, like strangers suffocating in silence. I'd left for Lockridge with no goodbye or even a semblance of warmth from her. And now she was interrogating me about not coming home?

Because I don't want to, I wrote back. I didn't answer her second question.

I held my breath, waiting for the three dots to reappear. Or worse, for the phone to flash with an incoming call from her. The seconds ticked by slowly before I finally exhaled. Nothing. Again. I'd turned off read receipts a while ago, so I didn't even know if she'd seen my reply. Only that she'd left me to wonder and worry and agonize, as usual.

Hours of tossing and turning dragged past, until I finally fell asleep around three a.m. I dreamed about trying to find a subway station in Juniper because I was late for school. I kept hearing the screech of departing trains, but no matter where I searched I couldn't tell how to get to them.

I jerked awake, felt the telltale shift in weight of my phone slipping off the comforter, then heard it thudding to the floor. I leaned over the side of the bed to fish it back up, blinking blearily at the screen in the gray early light. I finally had a response.

Very disappointing.

This time, I didn't bother writing back.



The rest of my week in New York flew by. We rambled all over the city, opting to walk as much as possible in spite of the cold, so that I could get a feel for all the different neighborhoods. Arun was an enthusiastic tour guide, happy to squire me around to the big landmarks as well as introduce me to his favorite locals-only spots.

We met up with a few of his friends who lived just off the High Line, a gorgeously landscaped raised walkway built on top of a former train track. We all went for a stroll on it and while it was beautiful, the cold winter wind gusted along and threatened to blow me off the side—or it felt like that, anyway. Arun offered me his arm like a Regency gentleman and I clutched it with both of my hands, sticking close for warmth and affection as much as security. It was a simple friendly gesture, of course, but I could still enjoy it on more than one level.

Our relationship had settled a bit. Every night Arun bedded down on the living room sofa while I shut myself inside his bedroom, alone. The next day he was usually up first, sitting at the kitchen island with coffee and the *New York Times*. We said good night and good morning with the same simple friendliness we used when we were in public at school, which I supposed was the aim.

But beneath the bland words an undeniable heat simmered between us. It was in the way we held ourselves carefully distant to say good night, me hovering in the short hallway outside the bedroom while Arun stayed by the sofa, halfway across the apartment. It was the slight pause before he said good morning, when he first laid eyes on me for the day, his gaze flickering over my face and lingering for the slightest quiver of a second on my lips.

Then, suddenly, it was Christmas. I was leaving the next morning. Arun's parents finally decided to put the pens down for a day, and we all hung out inside the apartment cooking and eating and playing BS of all things. Indira bluffed like it was her job, making Vasu complain that he still couldn't read her even after thirty years together, not to mention his career in psychology. We used Christmas cookies for prizes and she acquired a row of stacks so tall they threatened to topple over onto the floor. Of course, Arun's father helped that situation by stealing a few.

It was perfect—exactly the kind of chilled out day I'd hoped for.

"Thank you so much," I told them, before they went to bed. "I had such a nice time here."

"Come visit us again soon," Indira said. "It was so lovely to meet you."

"Yes, most definitely," Vasu agreed. "You don't even have to bring Arun."

For our last time saying good night, Arun and I met in the middle—leaning on the kitchen counter finishing off the bottle of wine his parents had opened over dinner. "I don't know

anything about wine,” I confessed. “But I’m assuming if your parents chose it, it’s a good one?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “They don’t know anything either. Everything they have was gifted from someone else.”

We shared a laugh. Then Arun placed a slim gift-wrapped present on the counter. “Merry Christmas.”

“We didn’t say we were doing presents,” I protested.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing big.”

It was a collection of plays by the playwright of the one we’d seen on Broadway. The cover was a black shadow skyline of New York against solid yellow. Inside, he’d written, **For Ava. So you’ll remember you know someone in the city. xx, Arun**

“Thank you,” I said softly. “I can’t wait to read them. Hold on a second.”

I went into the bedroom, came back out, and put my own gift on the counter. Arun laughed. “So we weren’t doing presents, huh?”

“Well, I need to compensate the best tour guide in the city. Plus...it’s our first Christmas.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It is.”

I’d given him a framed clipping of his first article in *The Lockridge Rundown*. It wasn’t anything fancy—just a black frame from the campus bookstore, but I’d been relieved to see it matched the ones in the apartment. “I didn’t see that you’d done anything to celebrate getting published,” I explained. “I mean, anything concrete. I thought this might be nice.”

He stood there looking at me with that dangerous warmth in his eyes. “It is,” he said at last. “More than nice.” He reached over and gave me a gentle hug. I returned it gingerly. Simple, friendly. “Thank you, Ava. Thank you for coming to New York. Can’t believe it’s three more weeks until I see you again.”

“I know,” I said into his shoulder. “It’ll go by quickly, right?”

“Right,” he affirmed. “We can make it.”

OceanofPDF.com

5

COLIN

It was a blessing wrapped in a curse that my parents got the twins a new SUV for Christmas. It was a curse because their driver's license restrictions had only just lifted, and two scatterbrained teenagers did *not* need to be tearing up the streets in an oversized car which they'd never practiced in. Not that anyone asked my opinion about it. But it was a blessing because now Cherie and Shannon just wanted to drive their new toy every place they could think to show it off, which hopefully meant they wouldn't be in the house much during Ava's visit.

Her flight arrived around noon. I pulled up to the curb—thankfully I spotted her just stepping out of the terminal—and hopped out to greet her properly. Her lips tasted like maple syrup, plush and sweet. She wound her arms around my neck, tipping her head back, letting me turn our bodies so that I leaned against the passenger door with her draped along my front.

“Pancakes for breakfast?” I asked.

Ava nodded. “Arun made them.” She looked as pretty as a painting, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed, hair tangling in the winter breeze.

“How's he doing? Did you have a good visit? Flight okay?”

“He's good. New York was amazing! And the flight was super short.” She shivered a little in my arms. “I did not expect Pennsylvania to be colder than New York.”

“We just got a cold front coming through. But lucky for us, the truck's seats are heated. The drive's going to be an hour or so, that okay?”

Ava's jaw dropped. “You drove that long just to pick me up?”

“Absolutely. Worth every second.”

On the way, she told me some of the stuff she and Arun did in New York. It seemed like he'd showed her a good time, but she didn't mention anything intimate, nor did I ask. When she first told us about Arun, Darius and Seth had seemed like they knew all along that something was up. I wasn't surprised the dude was attracted to her, but I *was* surprised that it went deep enough he was okay with sharing her. Except for how they weren't quite together. Or they were, just not physically. Yet. That whole part was a little confusing.

The security at our neighborhood gate waved us through, and Ava turned to me. "So this is where it begins, hmm?"

I guided the truck up the gently sloped main parkway, which runs through rolling wooded hills before getting to the residences. "Where what begins?"

"Your fancy chaebol lifestyle."

I snorted. "Not me—my grandfather's client, remember?"

"Practically the same thing. This is so *Sky Castle!*" She gestured out the passenger window. We'd cleared the wooded area and were now passing houses—or at least, glimpses of them through their gates.

"I mean, they're nice houses. But I don't own any of them personally."

She gave me a look as if to say, *Duh*. "I guess that's true, but you still grew up in one."

"Does it make you see me differently?" I teased.

"No, but I *am* wondering how awkward this visit's about to be. I don't have any experience with this kind of thing."

"With what, meeting your boyfriend's family?"

"*Colin*. I'm serious."

I grasped her hand and pressed it to my lips. "Look, I'm not gonna lie and say my parents are the chilliest people in the world. They're absolutely in the top one percent and yeah, they know it. But they aren't evil snobs. As cliché as it sounds, just be yourself and let them get to know you."

“I guess that’s all I *can* do,” Ava said doubtfully.

“Besides,” I continued, “if they really don’t like you, you’ve got exclusive use of the whole guest quarter wing of the mansion. So you’d never have to cross paths. Your maid wouldn’t even interact with their maid.”

She snatched her hand back. “You’re joking, right?”

I just laughed and kept driving.



The truth was, I was only half-joking. My room and the guest room where Ava would be staying *are* located in a somewhat isolated section of the house, but that’s just a coincidence of the design rather than some intention to keep people apart. There’s also a small guest cottage at the back of the property, but it’s reserved for my grandparents whenever they visit.

“We timed this visit pretty well,” I explained to Ava, as I rolled her suitcase toward her room. “You’ll get a chance to meet my grandparents. They’ve been here for Christmas but they’re leaving tomorrow to stay with my aunt and uncle for New Year’s. They’re looking forward to meeting you.”

“Are you close with them?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’d say our whole family is pretty close.” I turned the corner at the end of the hall—that turn is the building feature that makes our rooms feel more separate—and opened the door to Ava’s room. “Here you go. I like this one because you have access to the back deck. All the rooms on this side of the house do.”

Ava followed me in and stopped, her jaw dropping. “Holy shit. This is beautiful!”

“Yeah, my parents remodeled all the guest rooms recently.”

It wasn’t the biggest bedroom, but it was right next to mine, and it benefited from the two huge glass doors which opened onto the deck. Sunlight streamed through tall sheer curtains,

filling the high-ceilinged space and brightening the light wood-paneled accent wall at the head of the bed. The furniture was sleek and modern, but most importantly comfortable.

“Closet’s here,” I said, pushing the suitcase through an open doorway on the opposite wall. “You can access your bathroom either through here or by that other door.” I gestured down the wall. “Want to see the rest of the house?”

“Shouldn’t I meet your family first?”

“They’re in the rest of the house.” I grinned at her. “Actually, let’s do *this* first.”

I picked her up, cupping her bottom to hold her in place. Her legs wrapped around my hips and her hands rested on my shoulders. For a moment I just stared into her eyes, inches from mine, feeling how good it was to have her in my arms again.

“Hi,” she said breathily.

“Welcome to my house,” I murmured.

“Thanks for inviting me.”

Our mouths met. I tried to keep the kiss slow and relaxed, but Ava almost immediately clutched me closer. Her tongue dove in to taste me. My cock stiffened in reaction, lust clouding my mind. My hands squeezed the flesh of her ass and one of us—maybe both of us—got her pelvis grinding against my abs, soft urgent motions that were reflected in tiny whimpers from her throat.

Somehow I found the strength to break the kiss. “Ava, Ava,” I gasped. “We’ve gotta slow down.”

“I know, I know—” But she was still kind of frantic, her mouth chasing mine.

“We’ve got time,” I soothed her. “Plenty of time later.”

Fuck, I was hard up, too. A week without her wasn’t that long, of course, but every time we got together it was explosive. And we hadn’t been on our own, just the two of us, in a while. Next semester was going to be hard as hell.

It took another minute or so to cool off. “Sorry,” she said, when I eased her down to stand on her own feet. “I just... missed you, I guess.”

“Same. And no need to apologize. *I’m* sorry we had to pause.”

She brushed her fingers over my bottom lip. “No need for you to apologize either. As long as it’s only a pause.”

Next semester was going to be damn near *impossible*.



My folks were in the family room watching a movie. Ava had wondered if they would look down on the chocolates she’d brought as a gift, but everyone exclaimed graciously over them. Gracious is kind of their default setting. My mother and grandmother invited her to sit between them on the sofa so they could—graciously—administer the Kim family welcoming questionnaire.

They were all impressed by her scholarship, of course, and my grandfather nodded approvingly to hear that Ava’s family owned a business. But I noticed a slight arch to my mother’s elegant brow when she realized Ava hadn’t visited home for Christmas.

Of course they co-opted the house tour I’d planned, under the guise of needing to stretch their legs. My parents love nothing more than telling guests about the various decorating choices they’ve made, how some random vase dates back to the late Joseon dynasty or what kind of custom wood craftsmanship went into the library’s doors.

“This is the whole reason we bought the house,” Dad said, leading us into the indoor pool room. “Since it’s on the basement level, it runs half the length of the building, and it’s all temperature controlled. Salt water, too, for the health benefits. But don’t worry—it’s nothing like the ocean.”

The house is built on a slope, and the pool opens onto a patio area below the back deck. The exterior wall is all floor-

to-ceiling glass panels, and at the center are a pair of massive glass doors. Unlike the bedrooms above, these doors slide back a fair distance, so in the warmer months we just leave them open and it's like having a covered pool rather than fully indoor.

"It's amazing," Ava said emphatically. "Please tell me you use it every single day?"

"Well, we try. Did you know Colin was a champion swimmer in high school?"

"I believe it," Ava said. "He always works so hard at everything."

The grown-ups beamed at her. "Yes, we have very high hopes for him," my mother said.

"He's our firstborn grandson, you know," my grandmother added.

The twins showed up for dinner. Since they're fraternal, it's easy enough to tell them apart, but Cherie had apparently decided it was a great idea to chop her hair into some kind of pixie style. Mom was *appalled*.

"Is this what you're going to do with your freedom now that you have a car? Which salon did you go to? I want to have a talk with them about doing cosmetic alterations to minor children."

Shannon rolled her eyes. "Eomma, it's just a haircut."

"It's your first time meeting Ava!" Grandmother exclaimed. "What must she think?"

"I think it's cute," Ava offered. "It brings out her cheekbones. But it can always grow back."

As an attempt to appease both sides, it didn't quite land as the arguing just continued. I gave her an amused thumbs up across the table. Out loud I asked, "Do you want to go for a swim after dinner? You brought a suit, right?"

"I did."

“Try the new sound system,” Dad advised. “We upgraded it before Thanksgiving but I don’t think you’ve had a chance to check it out.”

“Thanks, Appa.”

“We’ll be sure to give you your *privacy*.” Cherie smirked.

I ignored her, but I did have to concentrate extra hard not to let my thoughts distract me for the rest of the meal.



I swam a couple laps waiting for Ava to come down, so my body felt buzzed by the time she arrived. She was wearing one of the white bathrobes my mother likes to leave out for guests. When she took it off to reveal a black two-piece, I swallowed. It was modestly cut, but her skin looked perfectly smooth and golden brown against the dark fabric, and my hands itched to run over her.

I caught her checking me out too, and stood up in the shallow end to give her a better look. “Come on in,” I invited.

I’d tuned the sound system to play some classic rock, but I didn’t even hear it for the blood pumping in my ears as Ava descended the underwater steps toward me. I drew her close, and we both shivered at the feel of so much naked flesh finally in contact.

Her legs wrapped around me just like earlier, and I carried her easily as I backed further into the pool. “This must have been *the* place for high school parties,” Ava remarked.

“It still is. We’re lucky the twins had other plans tonight.”

She pursed her lips. “Everyone’s assuming I’m your girlfriend, right? So it’s not weird that we’re in here alone?”

“Yeah, we’re good. I mean, if they saw anything *really* weird on the security cameras they’d just use the intercom to tell us to quit.”

She scrambled to jump away, but quickly stopped when she realized I was joking. “Colin, I swear—”

“Nothing to worry about. I turned off all that stuff. Promise.”

Ava licked her lips, and my groin tightened. “You go ahead and keep trolling me. But remember, I know where you live now.”

“You certainly do,” I said seriously. “I’m glad you finally got a chance to visit.” It had almost been a possibility in October, but we’d decided to go to Juniper instead, after Ava ran into her weasel ex and decided to finish her unfinished business back home.

In answer, she kissed me. Like our earlier kiss, it quickly escalated. The buoyancy of being in the pool helped me hold her up. I lashed her lips with my tongue and she opened for me, sucking me in. We became a tangle of limbs and grasping hands, and I waded us over to the side of the pool before we could sink under. We stayed in the water, though, maybe feeling it was a little more hidden.

“Colin,” she gasped, as I kissed my way down her throat to her breasts. “I’m so... Don’t make me wait.”

I mouthed her cleavage. “You and Arun didn’t—?”

She cupped my face, lifting it so our eyes could meet. “No, not yet. But this is about you and me. I *missed* you.”

“Hey, I don’t mind. If he left you frustrated, I’m more than happy to reap the benefits.”

She rolled her eyes affectionately. “Men. Fine, then. Why are we wasting time talking?”

I completely agreed. I kissed her again, running my fingers up and down the naked skin of her waist. She pulled the straps of her bikini top down, exposing her breasts. The luscious weight of them filled my hands. Her back arched as I thumbed the puckered tips.

I knew she needed to take the edge off quickly. Frankly, so did I. I lifted her higher, fastening my mouth on her nipple and

giving me space to free the heavy weight of my cock from my swimming trunks. Ava moaned, the sound of it echoing above our heads. Somewhere on Dad's expensive sound system, I registered Hendrix flying up and down a guitar solo.

When I got my fingers inside her bikini bottoms, I found her slick and hot compared to the pool water. I strummed her clit and she sucked in a breath, her thighs squeezing my hips. "Oh, God."

"How long have you been this wet?" I licked at her ribcage, where her skin was thin and sensitive.

"All through dinner." She thrashed a bit, her hands tugging on my hair. "Staring at you. It's all for you. Colin, *please*."

We'd all stopped using condoms a few weeks ago, after we got tested and Ava got an IUD. So there was nothing else to wait for. I pushed the crotch of her bikini to the side, lined myself up, and thrust into her.

"Oh, fuck yes," I groaned into her neck. "So tight, honey."

Ava clenched down around me even *more*, and it was all I could do not to finish that second. I put one hand on her clit, keeping her bikini bottom out of the way, and braced my other hand on the pool wall. She held onto my shoulders as she worked herself up and down my cock.

Our bodies together created an aching kind of friction. Her nipples rubbed my chest and her legs gripped my sides. Her fingers traced lines on my cheeks as we kissed, our tongues sliding against each other. I circled her clit over and over relentlessly, knowing that as soon as she reached her pleasure, I could take mine.

It didn't require much. After a few more minutes, I felt her body peak. She shook in my arms and I kissed her through it, murmuring encouragement into her mouth.

"Your turn," Ava whispered.

I didn't want to hurt her, so I turned us around like I had at the airport, putting my back against the pool wall and shoving my pelvis forward. With my hands on her hips, I rocked her on

my cock. The sight of her topless in the water was so incredibly sexy. “Play with your nipples,” I grunted.

“Like this?” She plucked them with her fingers, then circled them the way I’d done to her clit.

The sight of that was all I needed. My climax lifted me up like a wave, and I let it carry me into ecstasy.

OceanofPDF.com

6

AVA

Colin helped me back into the bathrobe and led me out onto the patio area. “This way we don’t have to go through the house,” he explained. It was freezing, of course, but we hurried up a staircase onto the deck, and from there he led me through another set of glass doors. “This is my room. Your doors are just there.”

It was already lit up with two lamps on either side of a king-size bed. I could see that it was a lot bigger than the guest room, with space for its own living area occupied by a sofa, two chairs, and a TV. “How do you survive in a tiny dorm room?” I marveled.

“I try to spend as much time as possible outside of it.” He hit a button on the wall and blinds began to descend from the ceiling to cover the windows and glass doors. When they were down, he stripped off his trunks. “How about a shower?”

“Together?”

He smiled. “Thought you’d never ask.”

His bathroom was twice the size of the guest bathroom I was using. The shower was a walk-in with large panel tiles, a long built-in bench, and a rain faucet which—unlike the Lockridge bathrooms—instantly provided hot water. Colin let me stand under it while he worked shampoo into my hair.

“Mmm, this is luxury,” I said, closing my eyes and tilting my head backward.

“Relax and enjoy. You just finished your first semester of college. You deserve some time to chill.”

He kept going, lathering me up in his no-doubt expensive body wash. I was still sensitive from our sex in the pool, and my skin loved the feel of his big hands running over me. He let me rinse off while he soaped himself, and then we traded places so he could rinse.

Feeling relaxed and happy, I settled on the shower bench to admire the view. The muscles of his arms bulged as he ran his fingers through his hair, reminding me of how easily he'd lifted me both in and out of the pool. Water ran down his chest and abs in rivulets, making its way further into the grooves where his hips met his thighs. I noticed his cock had gone half-erect, and I looked up to see his eyes on me, heavy-lidded as he watched me watching him.

“See something you like?” Colin asked.

“Yes, indeed. In fact, I'd like a closer look.”

He shut the water off and came toward me. I grabbed him by the hips to steer him directly in front of my face. It seemed he could tell what I intended, because his cock jutted up proud and ready. Without preamble I licked him from root to tip, then plunged my mouth down around him.

“Ava,” he sighed.

He tasted clean from the shower, with that hint of salt leaking from his slit. He leaned over me, one hand on the wall above my head to hold himself up. I grabbed the firm muscles of his ass, encouraging him to fuck my mouth with gentle thrusts. I let my fingers explore the tight line between his buttocks, stopping short of what Darius liked to do to me. I just wanted to add a layer of sensation. From the way Colin growled, he seemed to like it.

He set the pace the way he usually does for blowjobs, fast and focused. I stared up at him, admiring the chiseled lines of his face, the ripples of muscle in his torso. His jaw had gone slack, his mouth panting. His cock twitched, slipping back and forth between my lips.

“Gonna come,” he rasped. “Oh, fuck.”

I sucked hard enough for my cheeks to hollow out. Colin moaned, thrusting faster but still careful with me, his perfect body in perfect control even as he began to fall apart. I felt the first spurt of come on my tongue, followed by more, and swallowed him greedily.

As his breath evened out, I pulled off of his cock with a smacking sound and he shuddered a bit. “Sensitive,” he said.

“Hopefully not *too* sensitive. I’ve got my eye on that king-size bed.”

“Well, we’ll just have to find something else to do in it until I’m ready.”

He picked me up and stepped out of the shower. “I’m loving all this manhandling you’re doing today,” I said as he carried me into the bedroom. “But wait—we’re going to get your bed all wet.”

“We’ll stay on top of the covers for now.”

Colin set me down on bedding that felt as slippery as satin. He placed soft kisses all over my chest, sucking up droplets of water from my breasts, then ran his tongue along the undercurves. I giggled and squirmed as he trailed his mouth down my ribcage and stomach, with a quick dip into my bellybutton.

I stopped giggling when he spread my legs and licked straight up my cunt. He eased me further toward the middle of the bed and laid flat on his belly, his hands wrapped around my thighs. It was clear that after our quick session in the pool, he was now settling in for a good long while.

His tongue dove into my intimate folds, bringing me to the edge again and again but never quite letting me finish. My fingers flexed in the wet strands of his hair as I writhed beneath the merciless attentions of his mouth. I lifted my hips, trying to rub my clit against his tongue, desperate to get myself to the end. But he just gave me a knowing smile and pushed my legs wider against the bed, anchoring me in place.

It felt like we were in a time out of time—just pure mindless, measureless pleasure. Colin read my signs so well. He would get me close, then back right off. Each time it happened, he’d pull me up to an even greater height than the last time. At some points I heard myself begging to come, but the ending of this was completely in his control. I could only let myself be swept along.

Finally, *finally*, his lips fastened on my clit and he slid a finger inside me, stroking deeply. This time when I approached those impossible heights, he kept going. My orgasm was like a freefall. My hands scrabbled for one of his pillows, covering my face to muffle my moans.

Dimly, I was aware of Colin flipping me over, drawing my ass up to meet the hot length of his cock. He found my cunt from that angle and pushed into me. His hands on my hips pulled me back to meet his thrusts. The wet sounds of our fucking and his harsh breaths mingled in my ears. Then he groaned deep in his throat and I felt his cock pulsing inside me.

He folded himself over onto my back, nosing my shoulder. “*Goddamn.*”

“Right?” I panted. “Jesus, Colin. I almost blacked out, I came so hard.”

He pressed a hot sloppy kiss to my spine. “I felt like that in the shower. I didn’t know if I could come again but you were so fucking hot while I was licking you I just...*ungh*. Damn near lost it just humping myself on the bed.”

I laughed. “I’m glad you held on.”

We drifted down into a properly horizontal position, and Colin somehow worked the comforter out from under us and then back over us. Tucked under the covers, in the circle of his arms, a wave of contentment came over me. This man had helped me through one of the scariest things I’d ever experienced, an attack of anxiety that had literally felt like dying. I would always associate his embrace with safety and comfort and calm.

“Don’t tell me I have to go back to the guest room,” I murmured. “As nice as it is, I couldn’t leave this bed for anything.”

“Nah, you’re good,” he whispered. “Just sleep.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.



In the morning, before breakfast, I gave Colin his Christmas present: a collection of sheet music arrangements for popular songs on guitar. It felt like such a cheap and mediocre gift, especially after seeing the way he and his family live. And I was sure my stupid box of chocolates had been given to the maids or something—because a house this size definitely needed more than one, for all Colin’s jokes.

But he flipped through the book with wide eyes, looking excited. Then he gave me the sweetest kiss and said he couldn’t wait to try every single song.

“Really?” I said. “I’m sure you already know a lot of them.”

“I know a lot of songs by sound, puzzling them out on my own. But I need to work on my music reading. This will help so much.”

Maybe he was just being polite, but I decided to believe him. “Can I watch you practice? I always love hearing you play.”

“I love playing for you.” He smiled. “So...I didn’t get you a gift exactly, because I know you’re traveling and lugging your stuff around. What I got you was more of an experience. Have you ever been snowboarding or skiing?”

My heart thumped excitedly. “No, never.”

“How would you like to go with me for a few days? Get some lessons from a pro?”

“Are you serious?” I gaped at him. “Just us two? What about your family?”

“They won’t care if I duck out for a little while. I’ve already been here through Christmas and I’ll be here for two weeks after you leave. I just wanted to make the most of our time together.”

“I mean, I would love it. But I don’t have any gear or...or... whatever you call it.”

“The resort will have skis and snowboards to rent, and they should be pretty good. We can buy all the clothes and safety gear.”

My brow furrowed. “That sounds expensive. And it’s a lot of stuff for just a one-time experience.”

“First of all, don’t even worry about expense. You know I don’t care about that.”

“I know you *say* that, but—”

“All I want is for you to have a fun time. I can’t promise that you’ll love snowboarding or skiing, but if you don’t, then we can just chill in the resort. It’s a beautiful place with tons to do.”

“That’s even more reason not to splash out on a bunch of things. It would be such a waste if I hated it.”

Colin looked me over with an assessing eye. “Hmm, if it’ll really bother you, how would you feel about asking Cherie or Shannon to borrow their gear? I think you’re around their size.”

“Okay, but no arm-twisting!”



Colin’s grandparents left after breakfast. In the big high-ceilinged foyer they hugged Colin and his sisters goodbye, and gave me a hug as well. “It was very lovely to meet you, Ava,” his grandmother said, patting my hand. “Best of luck with your education this semester.”

Colin waggled his eyebrows at me from behind her perfectly coiffed head.

They had their own driver for their sleek black sedan, which I tried not to gawk at. We all stood in the driveway waving as it pulled smoothly away.

“I think her ass and boobs are bigger than ours,” I heard Cherie saying behind me.

I turned and caught Colin's blanched expression. "So what, your stuff won't fit?"

"My snowboarding stuff is pretty loose on me," Shannon said. She was looking me over. "It should work if she doesn't layer too much."

"Come upstairs so we can discuss terms," Cherie said.

"Why not just do it out of kindness and generosity?" Colin griped as we walked back into the house. "You get new gear practically every year."

"Unlike you, we don't have access to our trust funds yet. We can't afford to do *everything* for free."

"You actually can with the allowances you get, but whatever. I know you don't actually want money. So what's the real price?"

We'd reached one of the upstairs bedrooms. I gathered that the upstairs was primarily the twins' domain, since Colin's and their parents' suites were downstairs. I also gathered that I shouldn't have assumed Colin would be the one doing the arm-twisting. It was a bit awkward standing by as the siblings bickered, but I refused to let Colin spend more money than he needed to.

"We're not after anything big," Shannon said soothingly. "But Mom and Dad are going to spend New Year's in Philly and—"

"And you want to have a party here," Colin finished. "How many people?"

"Not that many. Maybe thirty, forty people."

"Which means sixty, seventy people. *If* you can stop more from coming in the door." He looked grim. "I wasn't even planning to come back until New Year's Day. Now we have to cut the trip short."

Cherie looked like she was trying to suppress her alarm. "Not at all. That's exactly what we wanted in exchange for the gear. We want the house to ourselves."

"No way."

“*Co-lin*, come on!”

“You played your hand. Now that I know you’re having a party, I’m *definitely* going to be in the house. That’s non-negotiable. So what you’re bargaining for is that while I’m in the house, I’ll stay out of your business. Unless people start breaking shit, obviously.”

“Why would you want to be around anyway?” Cherie said. “It would be weird for you to be in the middle of a high school party.”

“Because I remember your birthday. You had college-age dudes creeping all over the place. Take it or leave it.” He crossed his arms. “I can always ask Eomma and Appa what they think.”

“Fine, fine!” Shannon said quickly. “Ava, my closet’s over here.”

It was a massive walk-in, bigger than Colin’s. There was an open door to a gleaming bathroom, and on the other side of the bathroom another door led to another walk-in closet. “That’s your sister’s room over there?” I asked.

“Yeah, we share the bathroom between us. Try these on. You’re supposed to wear long underwear but skinny jeans should be okay for now.”

I pulled on the pants, which actually had a tighter cut than I’d expected, but Shannon assured me that was the style. The hooded jacket was just a big shell that would zip over multiple layers of clothing with room to spare. Shannon also let me try on her boots, goggles, helmet, and wrist guards, and they all seemed to fit fine.

“I had no idea there was so much stuff involved,” I marveled. “Thanks for letting me borrow all this.”

“Happy to. The gear’s important for safety *and* for looking cute.”

I helped her pack everything into a bag. We’d left the door to the bedroom open, so I pitched my voice low. “I’ll do my best to keep Colin distracted during your party.”

Shannon gave me a relieved grin. “Thanks, Ava. You’re all right.”

OceanofPDF.com

7

AVA

The resort was less than two hours away, but the sudden appearance of snowy slopes made it feel like we'd entered a whole other country. The property was a sprawling complex situated mid-way up a mountain, with lots of buildings of different shapes and sizes, and many balconies overlooking the view. A valet came out to meet Colin's truck on the long semi-circle driveway in front of the main building. Together they unloaded all of our luggage from the truck bed—including Colin's personal snowboard—and then the valet drove the truck off to park.

We were personally escorted to our suite by a porter in a uniform, which was helpful because it wasn't located in the main building but somewhere on the edge of the complex. "It's actually a condominium my uncle owns," Colin said. "The main building works like a normal hotel, but these smaller buildings are all apartment-style for long-term stays. Residents can take advantage of everything on the resort that the hotel offers, like the restaurants and spas. Probably some exclusive benefits too."

The porter murmured something about a residents' handbook and Colin thanked him. I noticed he also slipped the guy a tip.

The condo had two floors, with an open living room, dining room, and kitchen on the main floor, and a loft space for the bed accessible by a short flight of stairs. The windows were double-height, giving expansive views of the surrounding mountains. Colin led me out to the balcony, and I admired the breathtaking sight of the sun shining down on miles of pristine snow.

"I'm glad my uncle bought this place," Colin said. "We used to come here all the time, but we'd just stay in the hotel. It's nice to have something private now."

“Looks like it snowed recently.” I gestured to a huge mound of snow at one end of the balcony. “Should we try and shovel it off?”

“Nope, it’s actually a hot tub.” Colin went over to it and brushed the snow off with his hands, revealing a square cover on top of the built-in tub. It was perfectly situated to capture the balcony’s view. “We’ll want to use this after every day on the slopes. Good for sore muscles.”

It was already well past noon, so we walked over to the main building for lunch. As we finished eating, a woman with blonde hair came over and introduced herself as Danielle, my snowboarding instructor.

“Have you ever skateboarded?” she asked. “Surfed? The balancing is similar.”

I shook my head. “I’m pretty unathletic overall.”

“You hold your own,” Colin said. “You run with me and Seth.”

“Running’s good,” Danielle assured me. “It sounds like you’re in good health.”

“Maybe you can help us get Ava fitted up for a rental board now,” Colin proposed. “That way we can get straight into the lessons tomorrow morning.”

“Good idea.”

Danielle helped me select a snowboard based on my height and weight. “For you, longer is better since it’ll give you more stability, but you don’t want to go so long that you’re unbalanced and can’t maneuver.” She explained that she’d pick up the board for me in the morning and bring it back at the end of the day for servicing and storage.

It was all so easy, this lifestyle where everything and everyone catered to you. Colin seemed to take such luxuries for granted—not in a bad way, like he assumed he deserved them, but in a natural and accepting way, like there was nothing to feel self-conscious about. *I* felt self-conscious all the time, though. In the real world I’d be someone like Danielle or the driver or the porter, providing services to

customers and hustling for tips. This vacation was a temporary visit to a fantasy land where I lived on the other side of the divide, and I told myself it was no bad thing to keep remembering that.

But I didn't want to make Colin feel ashamed of his life, or come off as ungrateful. So I resolved to just settle in and enjoy myself.



The next few days were more physically strenuous than anything I'd ever experienced. I spent hours on the snowboard—or rather, I spent hours falling *off* the snowboard. Colin patiently stuck by me, helping to demonstrate everything Danielle taught even though he probably would have preferred to go off and snowboard on his own. He even spent a good long time that night massaging my legs to stave off sore muscles. I demonstrated my gratitude enthusiastically.

On the second afternoon it just clicked, and I was able to keep upright and balanced most of the time. The problem after that was maintaining the endurance to get all the way down the long slopes, a real concern given how slowly and carefully I descended. Colin and Danielle cheered me on as they rode their boards nearby, tracing figure eights with their carving turns so one of them was always close to me.

The third day was our last full one, since we had to get back to Colin's house for New Year's Eve the following day. I finally managed to pick up the pace, even doing some carving myself. I absolutely *loved* it. I wasn't trying anything difficult by Colin and Danielle's standards, but the rush of wind in my face and the slope whipping by made me feel all the excitement of potential danger. And the sense of accomplishment, knowing that I'd made my body learn something new, couldn't be beat.

At the end of the day, when we got to the bottom of the slope, Colin picked me up and swung me around, snowboard

still attached to my feet. “You smashed it,” he said, and kissed me deeply.

We celebrated with Danielle in the hotel bar that night, doing shot-skis on the patio until the stars and snow twinkled dazzlingly to my eyes. Danielle told us stories about the cross-country snowboarding she liked to do in the Rockies, carrying her snowboard up twelve miles just to ride it all back down. Colin shook his head admiringly. “I’ve gotta train up and do that next winter,” he said.

“Why not this winter?” I asked. “You’re in shape enough to do twice that distance.”

“No time,” he said. “Have to get back and keep the twins from burning the house down.” That wasn’t exactly an answer, but I let it slide.

Back at the apartment, he and I settled into the hot tub for our nightly soak. I sat in front of him, leaning back against his chest with his arms around me. The cold mountain air kept our heads and shoulders cool while the roiling water warmed the rest of us, the jets providing gentle massaging motions. To my tipsy eyes, the stars seemed to dance overhead.

“You have so many talents,” I mused. “Everything you do, you’re good at.”

He kissed my temple. “Says the girl who picked up snowboarding in three days.”

“Hardly. I bet if I weren’t here you’d be doing half-pipe tricks and obstacle courses.”

“Nah, give me an easy slope ride any day. I try to avoid situations where I could break my neck.”

“Very doctor-y of you.”

Colin shifted behind me. “I’m glad we got to have this vacation. This next semester is going to be brutal.”

“Because of med school applications?”

“Yeah. A lot of the schools accept on a rolling basis and applications open in early June, so that’s what I’ll be working toward all spring.”

“When do you take the MCAT?”

“I decided on April since it takes around a month to score. And if I do badly it gives me some leeway to take it again, although med schools might still look at both scores.”

I nodded. “Like the SAT.”

“The problem with the MCAT is the preparation’s no joke. I’ve basically got to fit in a professional study course on top of all my normal classes. I’m already planning to hit the books the day after you leave.” He sounded glum and grim. I craned my head back to look at him. His eyes were closed, his jaw tight.

I guessed that explained why he wouldn’t do any cross-country snowboarding this winter. “Are you worried?” I asked.

“Sure. Rolling the dice on this one test? I’m low-key stressing all the time. *All* the time. You’re the only thing that makes it better. But this semester it’s kicking up to high-key stressing, and I have to stay focused.”

I put it together. “Colin, I already knew you’d be short on time. Darius and Seth explained it to me.”

“Even they have no idea how scarce I’ll need to be. This semester is like the make-or-break moment for every pre-med in a relationship. I’ve seen so many crash and burn.”

“That won’t happen to us.”

I said it with conviction. Still, I couldn’t help feeling, deep down, an echo of his concern. I knew *I* was in this for the long haul, but if *he* felt any small doubt, what did that mean?

“Anyway,” I went on, “it’s only a few months. And we shouldn’t let it spoil our time together now. We’re on vacation, like you said.” I heard parallels to my conversation with Arun, and it gave me a renewed sense of purpose. We might not be able to indulge ourselves the way we wanted to this semester, but it would only be temporary.

“Right,” Colin sighed. He rubbed his thumbs over my shoulders, which were still exposed to the open air. The contrast of his hot palms against my cool skin was delicious.

I smoothed my hands up and down his thighs. They bracketed mine, hard and muscular. Every morning, even before we hit the slopes, he'd climb down from the sleeping loft and do bodyweight exercises in front of the tall windows. He always worked so hard on himself, from his studies to his health to his family. Our relationship was the one part of his life where I could help him relax.

I arched my back so that the tips of my breasts rose above the water. The frigid air made my nipples pucker immediately. I brought Colin's hot hands to cover them, and he huffed softly in my ear. "I was going to give you a massage."

"No," I breathed. "Just touch me."

"You touch me, too."

The only part of him I could reach in my position was his legs, but he seemed to like that. We stroked each other lazily at first, just enjoying the feel of each other. Although his thick cock prodded my bottom—and my cunt slickened in response—by unspoken mutual agreement we kept exploring without escalating. I loved the feel of him cradling me with his body, the water swirling around us.

Then he began kissing my neck, his fingers plucking my nipples. Suddenly I was ready. I shifted up to get his cock at my entrance. He groaned as I sank down on him. Water splashed over the sides of the hot tub as I bounced on his lap, as he thrust up to meet me. His hand came down to work my clit.

"Fuck, I love fucking you," he muttered. His tongue swiped my earlobe.

"I love you fucking me," I gasped back. "I love it so fucking much."

The words were close to something else I'd been wanting to say for a while. Not just to Colin, but to all of them—Seth and Darius and Arun. Something held me back for now, some sense of how momentous it would be if I were to say it out loud. But I didn't think it would be much longer.

We peaked at the same time, my head thrown back and Colin's strong arms circling my waist as he pressed kisses to my shoulders. He called me beautiful, and perfect, and when we regained control of our breathing he picked me up and carried me to the sleeping loft. But we weren't ready to let each other sleep for a good long while.



The twins' New Year's Eve party was, unfortunately for Colin, kind of a rager. His sisters had at least relocated a lot of the more delicate and expensive items and had done their best to lock doors to private areas like bedrooms and their parents' offices. They'd also promised to pay the housekeeping staff extra. But there were definitely way more than seventy kids in the house, and Colin was right—some looked clearly older than high school.

Music blasted from every speaker, only it seemed to be different music from each one, which just created an overall cacophony of noise. The pool was packed. The kitchen was a disaster area. I thanked God and Colin's parents for being able to have my own bathroom, not to mention Colin's.

He'd tried to do regular patrols through the house, but it was clearly messing with his head. I persuaded him to stop looking for trouble and just chill in his room for a while, with the concession that we'd leave the door open. He grabbed his guitar and started working through the music book I'd gotten him for Christmas. I laid on my stomach on his bed, watching and listening.

Colin really did have a gift. Mom had made me take piano lessons for a few years as a kid, and I stuck it out long enough to know that music would always feel like too much work to enjoy playing it. But Colin could sightread a piece and have it memorized immediately—despite his claim that he needed to practice reading. He could rock all kinds of genres, all levels of difficulty, and he'd put his own spin on the songs as well.

More than that, he clearly loved it. Unlike when he spoke about med school, his face was totally content, a small smile playing about his lips as his fingers worked magic on the strings.

I thought of Seth's occasional comments about Colin choosing music versus medicine, in a way that sounded like joking on the surface yet betrayed an underlying worry. It was clear Seth would be thrilled if Colin quit medicine to concentrate on music.

But Colin's entire family expected him to become a doctor, and I knew the weight of that expectation wasn't something he could just shake off. I always thought the best way to support him was to recognize my lane and stay in it, so I kept quiet whenever Seth said something.

Still, if it weren't for medical school, next semester could be very different for us. We could be together whenever we wanted, and our relationship wouldn't be a "distraction."

No, I told myself. That's selfish. Whatever happens, you're not going to create or become an obstacle for him.

Through the open doorway we heard the noise level in the house increase suddenly. I glanced at the clock on Colin's nightstand. "Almost midnight," I said, sitting up.

He put the guitar down and came over to me. We listened to the crowd count down the seconds—"Ten! Nine! Eight!"

Colin cupped my cheeks and stared into my eyes. "Thank you for being here."

"Thank you for bringing me here," I told him.

The shouts from the depths of the house grew louder. "Three! Two! One! Happy New Year!"

As the cheers rang out, Colin and I kissed sweetly. I let myself be as fully present in the moment as I could, knowing that the memory of it would have to sustain me for some time.

8

DARIUS

Chicago was so fuckass cold that I was over it the second day I was home. As the weeks went on, new snow seemed to dump down every other day, and whose job was it to shovel our front walk? The only child of the family, of course. After all these years I've got it down to a science, but that doesn't make it fun. Plus, the city infrastructure was having trouble keeping up their end of the sidewalk shoveling regime. I'd go out to see friends and my ass would be slipping and sliding all over.

So fuck weather. After graduation it's going to be Silicon Valley or nothing.

At least I had Ava's visit to look forward to. Finally the day arrived. I took the L to O'Hare and waited in the Arrivals area. Her flight was slightly delayed, so I just paced the floor. Soon enough my phone rang. I picked up and heard her voice: "Turn around."

A smile already splitting my face, I spun on my heels. She stood just a few feet away, luminous under the harsh lights of the terminal. I took a moment to absorb the sight of her. Then we strode forward together, all cinematic, and met each other with a kiss. All my grumpiness from the past two weeks evaporated, to be forgotten forever. This was happiness right here: Ava in my arms, and seven days of her all to myself.

"Mmm." She nuzzled my shoulder. "I'm so glad to see you."

I squeezed her tighter. "Me, too."

When it came to dating, I'd expected junior year to be all about playtime. I hadn't expected this girl to burst into our lives and capture our hearts. We were so burned by our last experience that no one could fault us for being gun-shy. Or Ava, who had her own wounds. But maybe that's why we

work so well together, because we know how to recognize something precious, and how important it is to nurture it.

On the L into the city, Ava told me about her weeks with Arun and Colin. We always chatted like buddies outside the bedroom; we'd started as friends first, after all. She didn't hold back on telling me both the good and the bad of the visits—the bad being that next semester, she was going to have to cool it with both guys.

“I guess I'm both surprised and not,” I said. “Not surprised, because the two of them are so serious. They've got discipline and principles and all that shit.”

Ava nodded in resignation. “And you *are* surprised because?”

“Surprised because I just can't relate. I wouldn't ever let work get in the way of you.”

She leaned in to kiss my jaw. “At least I don't have to worry about us next semester. Hopefully not Seth either.”

“Are you really worried about Colin and Arun? You gotta know they're not going anywhere.”

She slumped a bit in her seat, looking out the window at the approaching city. “I haven't had the best track record. When life gets tough, people show their true colors.”

“First of all, those two dudes are the not the ones to trouble your mind. When Colin's in, he's a hundred and twenty percent in. And Arun...I mean, it's *Arun*.”

A small smile played on her lips at that, but concern still furrowed her brow.

“Second of all, one dumbass high school ex is not enough to make a track record. Especially when you've got four relationships still in play. See how it goes with all of us first.”

“I wasn't talking only about boyfriends, though.” Her tone was morose.

“Your mom?”

Ava shrugged one shoulder. “She messaged me while I was in New York. Tried to guilt-trip me about not coming home for winter break.”

“She thinks you’re in the wrong and you think she’s in the wrong. What’s gonna snap y’all out of that stalemate?”

“I have no idea.” She sounded truly mystified. “It almost seems like we could go the rest of our lives like this. How crazy would that be?”

“Whatever happens, she’s more in the wrong,” I pointed out. “And I’m not just saying that cuz I’m on your side.”

“Thank you.” She took my hand, lacing our fingers together. “I needed to hear that.”



Since it was the weekend, plus fuckass cold, my parents were puttering around the house. They’d already met Ava over Thanksgiving at Grandma Evelyn’s, and they’d been looking forward to seeing her again.

“Hi, Mrs. Johnson,” Ava said to my mom, hugging her tight. She gave my dad a hug as well. “Chief. Happy Holidays.”

Everyone calls my dad Chief. He was a petty officer in the Navy for thirty years, and might still be if Mom hadn’t wanted me to do all of high school in the same place. That’s how we ended up in Chicago, where she’s originally from. Dad’s one request was that we live in the city itself, rather than suburbia. He likes to be where the action is.

Ava brought out a box of chocolates, and Mom exclaimed her thanks. “Baby, you didn’t have to do this. Come sit down and chat a while. Darius said you didn’t go back to Juniper for Christmas?”

“No, ma’am, I went to visit a friend in New York.”

As far as my folks know, Ava’s my girlfriend. We’d played it like we were just friends over Thanksgiving, because Colin and Seth were there too, and it seemed simpler. But this week I

wanted to be able to hug and kiss her without my parents asking questions. So I'd "explained" to them that Ava and I started dating right after Thanksgiving.

Probably I should have explained a couple other things before she arrived, because Dad was now looking between us with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. Dread struck my gut.

"Okay, lovebirds." He clapped his hands together, interrupting the conversation about Ava's week in New York. "Let's get the embarrassing stuff out of the way."

"Dad—" I said warningly, but he just waved his hand at me.

"I remember those early days when everything's all new and fun between two young people and you just can't keep your hands off each other. And there is nothing wrong with showing affection to your lady. But in this house—"

"*Dad.*"

"—when it comes to the privilege of indulging yourself in that kind of thing, and by *indulging* I'm sure you have a good idea what I mean, even if Darius here is still just a lil pup—"

It was like watching a train barrel toward a car on the tracks, and I was the car on the tracks.

"—in this house, that privilege has always been and always will be reserved for the grown folks. The adults. Now, Ava, you strike me as a mature and responsible young lady, and I'm sure you can be entrusted with a certain amount of freedom. But unfortunately I cannot say the same for that boy of mine over there." Again, he waved his hand in my direction.

"Dad, please stop. I'm begging you, man."

"I know he's very presentable, a good-lookin' kid, probably pretty hard to resist. Takes after his sire that way."

I groaned.

"But mature and responsible?" Dad sucked his teeth. "He's been my son for all twenty-one years of his life and I just haven't seen the evidence. Feel me?"

Ava giggled.

“So all this is to say that we have three levels in this house, clearly demarcated by staircases, ceilings, and floors. We have a basement, which is completely finished and comfortable, thanks to my son and me working on renovations every summer. It’s got a bedroom, a living area, and a private entrance. That’s where Darius has installed himself now. Big college man who likes to go out and come back at all hours.”

I mouthed to Mom, *Make him STOP*. She returned an innocent look.

“Then we have the main floor where we’re currently sitting. No bedrooms on this floor. Then we have a floor above us. Three bedrooms, one for my wife and myself, one that used to be Darius’s but was deemed no longer acceptable for a big college man, and one where we invite you to stay, Ava.”

“Thank you,” she said, still giggling. “I accept.”

“Now, both Tina and myself work during the day, and we can’t exactly control what a big college man likes to do during those hours we’re outside the house. Usually it’s video games, either alone or with some of his rascalion friends. But now that you’re here, Ava, if there are other ways you wish to pass the time, well, I admit I got no choice but to leave those hours between you and God.”

I heaved a gusty sigh.

“But when Tina and I *are* present, for instance during the night when we’re peacefully sleeping in our own room, and you’re on our level of the house and Darius is supposed to be on *his* level of the house...”

“No indulging ourselves,” Ava said. “Understood.”

“Thank you.” Dad beamed. “I expected a lady of your evident intelligence *would* understand. Now, if you start suffering from this Chicago winter, I’ll let you borrow my first officer, Commander Johnson.”

Ava glanced around at me.

“Our cat,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“He loves to cuddle guests and he’s as good as a hot water bottle.”

The Commander, always dramatic, chose that moment to pad into the room in all his fluffy Maine Coon glory, jumping onto the arm of Dad’s chair. “What a handsome boy!” Ava exclaimed. “Darius, I can see the resemblance between you two.”

“Chief,” I said, “I know you love to hear yourself talk, but at your big age you really can’t afford to waste all that breath.”

Dad’s eyes twinkled. “It’s your first time bringing a girlfriend under my roof. Got to lay down the rules of engagement.”

Ava’s merry eyes swung to me. “Really? I’m the first?”

“First *and* the last,” I told her. “I’m not planning on others.”

“I hope you aren’t either,” she teased.

“Well, that’s partly because I’m not trying to subject anyone else to this windbag right here.” Dad guffawed. I went on, “But mostly it’s because I don’t need or want any others. Not after you.”

“Oh, that’s sweet,” Mom said. “He gets that from me.”

Dad started sputtering about how I clearly learned all my game following in his footsteps. I tuned them both out, and just focused on the radiantly happy smile on Ava’s face.



Ironically, I was able to get us more privacy at a party than in my own house. After dinner—which gave Dad even more opportunities to pontificate—I took Ava to my buddy Monroe’s place.

“Sorry about the Chief,” I said as we walked the few blocks. “He doesn’t normally get to embarrass me in front of women and now he’s way too excited about it.”

“It’s not embarrassing,” Ava assured me. “It’s adorable.”

I snorted. “Do you mind the sleeping arrangements? I mean, I sure as fuck do, especially after two weeks without you. Don’t know why they have to be so old-fashioned.”

“Of course I wish we didn’t have to be separated.” She took my hand. “But I like that your parents are so...so *normal*. I have this old idea of you in my head from when we first met, basically that you were this kind of unattainable, larger than life person who’d never have time for someone like me. And I don’t know, the more I’m around your family, the more that old idea of you fades away.”

“You mean they take away my mystique,” I grumped.

“Well, I for one would rather have you next to me than far away in fantasy land.”

I adjusted our handholding so that our fingers were interlinked. “And I for one would rather have you next to me in bed, but I guess that’ll have to wait a bit.”

She pressed her cheek to my arm. “It’ll be worth it. But meanwhile, I hope you don’t get too jealous of the Commander. I plan on getting *all* the cuddles.”

Monroe had already thrown a massive shindig for New Year’s. Tonight was a smaller gathering meant to finish off all the leftovers. It was a good mix of people. Monroe graduated from Lockridge last year and he’s the unofficial ringleader of the Lockridge Chicago network. There were some local alums and current students, along with a few of his co-workers. Monroe’s getting a year of experience as a legal assistant at a big firm before going on to law school. I’d already joined a couple of their happy hours, which was why I very carefully steered Ava away from them, only introducing her to the Lockridge crowd.

We went to grab drinks, and while I was occupied with making what I could from Monroe’s spotty selection, I heard my name. Ava had started talking with a couple of girls.

“Did you and Darius come here together?” one of them asked.

“Um, yeah,” Ava said.

“You were Mimi’s roommate, right?” the other one said.
“Amy something?”

“Ava.” I heard the wariness in Ava’s voice. “She moved out a while back.”

“I know. She’s my good friend, actually.”

“Oh,” Ava said.

“If I didn’t already have a roommate I would have requested her to move in with me. It’s such bullshit how she got in trouble behind all of that.”

“Well, as far as her actions and her punishment,” Ava replied steadily, “none of that was really up to me.”

Nice work.

“Except for how you turned the whole hall against her.” The girl snorted. “Mimi always thought you were thirsty for Darius. Guess you locked that down after she left.”

“Wait,” said the first girl. “You and Darius are *together* together? Are you that girl?”

“What girl?” the other one said.

“You haven’t heard? She’s not just with Darius. She’s dating Colin Kim and Seth Gallant at the same time!”

They both turned to Ava, stunned expressions on their faces. Then they noticed me coming up behind Ava and immediately tried to play it cool.

“Hey,” I said, handing Ava a cup and slinging an arm around her. “Thought you might like a vodka and soda?”

“Thanks,” she said. Her shoulders were stiff beneath my arm. “This is, um. Sorry, I didn’t get your names.”

“Haley,” said the first girl. “This is Lena.”

“Nice to meet y’all,” I replied.

“I was actually in Operating Systems with you last semester,” Lena said.

“We’re both sophomores,” Haley offered. “You’re a first-year, right, Ava?”

We did the standard asking about majors thing, talking about classes, but after a few minutes I could feel that Ava still hadn't relaxed. I leaned down to her. "Hey, want to get some fresh air? There's roof access at the end of the hall."

"It's freezing out."

"I'll keep you warm."

Lena and Haley were watching us. Ava nodded. "Okay, lead the way."

It was indeed cold up on the roof, but the night was at least clear and quiet, for Chicago. I pulled Ava close and wrapped the sides of my coat around her. She circled her arms around my waist. And at last it was just the two of us.

"Mmm, we should've come straight here instead of bothering with the party," I said. "Feels like I've been waiting forever to be alone with you."

"I know." She raised her face for a kiss and I obliged. Her lips were warm and lush, with that telltale bite of vodka from her drink. I chased the flavor, stroking my tongue into her mouth until Ava was the only taste left.

Even though there's never been a doubt in my mind about her dating other people, it still felt damn good whenever we could snatch a moment to be exclusive. Lately those moments have gotten rarer, as end-of-semester exams and finals started kicking in and we all needed to make time for studying versus time with Ava. We'd grab whatever free moments we could, and if we had to share her, we did—none of us had qualms about that anymore, anyway.

But relationships need quality one-on-one time to thrive. Even though Colin and Seth are my boys, I don't want them there for every single intimate encounter with Ava. We need to work on our own thing, too.

The kiss slowed down, but we were still panting for breath when we broke apart, steam billowing between us. "Am I keeping you warm enough?" I asked. "We can go back in if you're cold."

“Plenty warm,” Ava said, burrowing deeper into my coat. “Let me enjoy having you to myself a little longer.”

“I was just thinking that about you. I’m not the one who’s been visiting my other boyfriends.” I gave her another kiss, so she’d know I was joking.

She drew back. “No, but...those girls were aiming for you.”

“Huh?”

“Haley and Lena who we were just talking to? You’re not *that* oblivious to people flirting.”

“They were just being friendly.”

“They were being especially friendly to you. As soon as they realized you’re with me, or maybe I should say as soon as they realized *I’m* the one you’re with, they figured there was no competition. So why not shoot their shots?”

I had to take a moment to think, because I was honestly confused. “I mean, clearly there’s no competition. Look at you.”

“What?” She dropped her arms. “Darius, I’m saying they dismissed me. They were giving me the onceover before you got there. They clearly decided it would be easy to turn your head, so that’s what they were trying to do. Right in front of me.”

I shrugged. “I don’t see it, but even if they were, so what? My head’s all about you, period.”

“Thank you for saying that,” Ava said, though she grimaced. “I guess I’m just annoyed that other people don’t believe it. I’m aware that people talk about all of us. It’s our own fault since we haven’t really kept it discreet. But now I’m also aware that people don’t think our relationship is serious. Or at least not serious enough to respect.”

“No, it’s more like they don’t understand that us sharing you is not the same as you sharing us. Anyway, people disrespect conventional relationships all the time. I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“I can’t help taking it personally when two girls try to hop on your dick while I’m standing right there.” Now *she* was grumping, and it was adorable.

I kissed her nose, cool against my lips. “Those are some cute kitten claws you got. Let’s come on inside and get warm. I’ll show everyone my lady’s not to be disrespected.”

OceanofPDF.com

9

AVA

I'd expected that my week with Darius would be non-stop action, constantly out and about with his many friends. On the flight over I'd actually read a couple of articles about introverts dating extroverts, thinking I could mine some strategies for how to stay sane. But my first few days in Chicago turned out way more chilled than the time I'd spent with Arun and Colin.

Part of it was the weather. A historic cold front descended on the city the day after the party, so we opted not to go out. Since it was a Sunday, Darius's parents were home. We all hung out watching Christmas movies, huddled under blankets with popcorn and potato chips, the Commander prowling over our laps in search of someone willing to share.

I never would have thought Darius would be happy to spend a day stuck inside with just me and his folks, but it probably helped that they're such lovely people. Thanksgiving at Grandma Evelyn's had been so busy that I hadn't been able to get to know them that well, but now I could see them as the core family unit: how Darius's charisma came from his mother, and his teasing nature from his father. They told me stories about living in Japan and Italy and the UK when the Chief was still in the Navy. I adored the pictures of Darius as a chubby-cheeked baby and toddler, and then as a skinny kid shooting up to the tall young man he'd now become.

I could understand why Darius was so good at making friends, so easygoing with different types of people. Since he'd spent most of his early childhood moving from base to base, he had to be flexible and open to new personalities and cultures. I loved getting to demystify him that way, even if he protested that his parents kept "exposing" him. His mother and I were the laughing audience for the Darius-and-Chief show, full of loving banter and gentle trolling.

Monday morning was still frigid, but the Chief and Mrs. Johnson left the house early to head to work. I braced myself to receive some pointed comments about maturity and responsibility, but Mrs. Johnson pushed her husband out the door and reminded us that there were plenty of leftovers in the refrigerator for lunch.

Darius and I were both in our sleeping clothes, sitting across from each other at the kitchen table with the remains of toast and grapefruit. All through breakfast I'd been aware of him, not quite meeting his eyes but instead watching his big hands, his plush lips, the bob of his throat when he swallowed. Now, as the front door shut and his parents' voices faded, I looked up and caught him staring at me. In the silence that fell over us, we gazed into each other's eyes, letting the stillness thicken into an unbearable tension.

Then Darius moved, his chair scraping the floor. I stood on trembling legs as he came around the table toward me. He grabbed my hand, pulling me through the house and down into the basement.

I'd seen it already during a quick tour of the house the day I arrived. There was a living room, carpeted and furnished with a long gray sofa, matching armchairs, and a TV. There was a full bathroom, which the Chief had proudly told me Darius tiled himself the summer between high school and Lockridge. And then there was Darius's bedroom.

My heart thumped as we entered. The high windows faced the back of the house, where the morning sun hadn't quite reached, so the room was still dim. The bed was centered on the far wall, the sheets rumped, pillows piled against the headboard like he'd been sitting up before he got out of bed.

Darius pushed me gently toward it. "Stand next to the bed. Bend over and put your hands on the mattress." His voice sounded strained. "Spread your legs some, too."

I stepped forward slowly, feeling his eyes on me like an almost tangible weight. As I went, I pulled my shirt off, baring my back to him. I heard him huff out a breath. Then I pushed

down my shorts and stepped out of them, leaving me in just a pair of panties. I heard him curse.

At the bed, I followed his instructions. My hair fell forward as I bent over, and I tucked it to one side of my neck. My breasts felt heavy, my nipples already puckered from the cool air of the basement. My heart still hammered in my chest, and as Darius moved up behind me a parallel pulse started between my legs.

There was a rustle of cloth, and Darius's shirt hit the bed. I turned to look at him, admiring the cut muscles of his chest and abs. But he shook his head. "Turn back around," he said.

I did. There was a window above me, with a thin rim of snow on the bottom part of the external frame.

Those big hands of his grasped the curve of my waist. They were warm, but my skin pebbled, maybe from the contrast with the air. Then he smoothed his hands up my back. "Think you can stay still?" he said, low and intense. "No matter what I do?"

I gulped. "I'll try."

He brought his hands around to my front, skimming over my stomach. My breasts ached for his touch, but he stayed focused on the safer parts of me, just running his palms in lines and circles over the planes of my body.

"Beautiful Ava," he murmured. "I just want to soak this in. Seeing you again. Touching you again."

"You're taking your time." I couldn't keep the pouting note out of my tone.

"Don't worry, we've got *all* day."

I shivered.

He kept the gentle, chaste caresses going for a few more moments, and then I felt his lips brush my spine, right at the bottom of my lower back's curve. His mouth opened wetly, followed by the hot slide of his tongue, seeming to penetrate my skin to the spinal nerves themselves.

His hands slipped to my front again, tracing up my ribcage until his fingers met the curves of my breasts. Still, he stopped tantalizingly short of where I really wanted them. I couldn't help arching my back a little, trying to push myself into just the right spot.

Darius's laugh puffed against my back. "I told you to stay still."

"I know, but you're making me crazy."

"Didn't you say the wait would be worth it?"

"The wait until we could be alone. Now we *are*."

"Mmm, but now I'm promising to make it worth your while. *If* you do what I say."

I sighed. "Fine."

"Good girl." And *that* sent a throb straight to my core.

His mouth moved delicately upward, tracing the shallow bend of my spine. More of his body came close to mine, but still not quite making contact. All I felt was the heat radiating from his naked skin. Then his tongue licked around the shape of my left shoulder blade, followed by my right. His hands, so light on my ribs, judged the rhythm of my breathing. Except for the expansions and contractions of my chest, I did my best not to move even a millimeter.

A soft nibble of teeth at the meat of my shoulder made me gasp. He soothed the love bite with his tongue. "Hurt?"

"No," I whispered. "Just surprised."

He moved higher, nuzzling the side of my neck, and now I felt his body—the hardness of his torso, and the hotter hardness of his cock nudging my ass before he shifted it away.

"*Darius*," I groaned.

"Shhh."

He licked my jawline, then my earlobe. His hot breath washed over my sensitive skin. I wished now that he hadn't made me bend over with my legs spread. My clit needed some

kind of friction, some kind of relief. But God knew when Darius would have mercy on me.

As if he'd heard my thoughts, he kissed my neck again. And then—his hands moved up that last crucial distance to cup my breasts fully. My nipples tightened, caught in his fingers.

“This what you want?” he groaned into my hair.

“Yesss.”

“Can't wait to taste these.” His palms scrubbed lightly over the puckered flesh.

“You don't have to wait,” I breathed.

Darius laughed again. “It'll happen. Just want to taste a few other things first.”

Although he was bent over me, touching me with both of his hands, he'd been holding himself up through sheer muscle. I wondered how long he could maintain that posture as he went on mouthing my neck and playing with the tips of my breasts. Part of me hoped it would be forever, because everything he was doing felt so damn good.

But he straightened, pulling away. I moaned at the loss of him.

“It's okay,” he said in quieting tones. “I'm not going far.”

His hands started that gentle smoothing up and down my spine again, before going separate ways to either side of my waist, back where he'd first begun. I held my breath as they crept slowly, teasingly, down to the band of my panties. Would he...?

His fingers swept right on past, skating along the bare skin of my hips and down the sides of my thighs.

“Dammit,” I said.

Darius snorted in amusement. “You want this to be over that soon?”

“There's some benefit to taking the edge off first,” I pointed out, remembering my first night reunited with Colin in the pool.

“You’ve got all of us wrapped around your finger,” he said. “In this one area, you can let go of some control for a little while.”

He spoke with conviction. I was surprised, though. I never thought of my relationships with the guys in terms of control. But hadn’t they all pushed me out of my comfort zone in their own ways, made me venture into new kinds of thinking and being? Didn’t that mean they had *me* wrapped around their fingers?

I supposed it could be both.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll let you steer. For a little while.” As dominant as Darius liked to get in bed, that was really all he ever asked of me.

“Very good girl. Just for that, we can accelerate.”

His fingers hooked into my panties, peeling them gently off and down my legs. The cool air that had pebbled my nipples now touched my cunt, making me extremely aware of how wet I’d gotten.

Darius knelt on the floor to help me step out of the panties, and just like that I was naked and fully exposed to his gaze. He stayed kneeling, trailing his fingers over my feet, then my ankles, then up the inside of my spread legs. As he drew above my knees, I trembled.

“You soaked those panties,” Darius whispered. His breath tickled the wet flesh of my pussy. “And I can see your cunt all slicked up and ready for me.”

Again, though, he limited his touches to a lazy up-and-down pattern of caresses on my inner thighs. I resolved not to push him. At least, not openly.

“I’ve been ready for you since I saw you in the airport,” I told him. “I thought you’d be inside me as soon as we got to your house. But when I couldn’t have you these past two nights, I felt so desperate I had to help myself.”

“Fuck. You’re saying you—”

“I laid in bed. Upstairs, all alone. I thought about you. I thought about what if you snuck into my room after all. I thought about you fucking me with your hand over my mouth, trying to keep me quiet with your parents down the hall.”

Darius’s hands stopped their caresses, clutching my legs instead. “And what did you do while you were thinking?”

“I touched myself.” A breathy moan escaped me as I remembered. “Dipped my fingers inside my cunt. Got my clit wet. I pretended it was you.”

“Did you come?” he demanded.

“Of course. Multiple times. Once wasn’t enough.”

“Can’t believe I’ve never asked to watch you get yourself off.”

“I’d rather you just fuck me. That’s what got me over the edge every time. Hoping you’d come to me in the middle of the night. Hoping you’d miss all those times you stuffed that massive dick inside my tight—”

I cut off with a gasp. He’d pushed his face into my crotch, open-mouthed, his tongue swiping my pussy. No finesse, nothing slow, just pure hunger. Even this was a torture. He lapped up my juices from every intimate fold, sending bolts of pleasure with every stroke, but I needed him on my clit. I wanted his lips wrapped around the yearning bud, suckling me to climax. But all I got were accidental brushes as he enthusiastically licked me clean.

He broke off, panting hard, his breath gusting over my flesh. “*Fuck.*”

“Darius, please, I—”

“Ava.” His hand clenched around my knee. “Who’s steering, babe?”

With a groan, I subsided. “You are.”

“That’s right. That was a little detour. Real scenic, but I got a different route planned.”

“What do you—” I cut off again as I felt his fingers graze the cleft of my ass.

“I’m just going to taste you a little here,” he said. “If you don’t like it, tell me and I’ll stop.”

Darius had promised to go slowly with ass play and he’d stayed true to his word. So far he’d only ever fingered me back there. This was going to be an incredibly intimate step up.

“Ava?” he whispered. His fingers probed a few millimeters deeper.

Let’s venture into another new thing, a little voice inside me said. “Okay,” I whispered back to Darius. “But...let’s keep it to that. For now.”

“Absolutely.”

First I felt his lips, kissing the globes of my ass with soft reverence to start, gradually increasing in ardor. He kept switching between them, leaving open-mouthed kisses closer and closer to my cleft. His breath washed over me, hot and heavy.

He’d licked up all the wetness that had leaked outside of my vagina, so the next thing I felt was his fingers dipping inside, gathering more. With gentle care, he spread my ass cheeks and circled his wet fingers around my hole.

I was a different kind of sensitive back there, just as much mental as physical. Every time he touched me like this it got me trembling—not from fear, but from a kind of shivery excitement about the unknown. Would I like whatever he was going to do? Would he? Would it live up to the anticipation? Everything he’d tried so far had...until now.

“Ready?” Darius asked.

My stomach quivered. “Yes.”

His tongue slipped into my cleft, swiping up in a long line. The sheer shock of it made me cry out. He swept his tongue downward again, brushing my hole, and my elbows buckled.

His hands spread my cheeks wider, and he pressed more of his face in. I felt his lips against my hole, the scorching new

intensity of that contact, and then his tongue, exploring the puckered flesh. My arousal spiked, feeding off his evident enjoyment, off the filthy forbidden nature of what he was doing to me.

Moaning softly, Darius pushed his face in more, bringing his hands to the front of my thighs for leverage. His mouth was voracious. His tongue kept moving, circling, pressing. My legs shook.

I felt him pierce the tight opening. As his tongue pushed into me, his thumb slipped along my cunt, collecting more of my wetness. He massaged it over the bud of my clit, then flicked me lightly. I saw actual fucking stars.

Darius kept up the combination of techniques, working my clit with his fingers while his mouth worked my asshole. My hips began to move on their own, minute thrusts against his face which intensified the stimulation. Between us, the sensations built and built. I heard myself *whimpering*. Then Darius circled my clit, pressed down on it—and I shattered.

I came so hard my legs gave out. I collapsed on the bed with Darius following, still holding onto me. He pushed my knees outward in a spreading kneel and hiked my hips up. The thick length of his cock drove into my cunt, pushing past slick inner muscles still experiencing the aftershocks of my climax. The only thing I could do was take it. The only thing I *wanted* to do was take it.

He fucked me with all the urgency I'd been asking for. His hands clutched my hips, pulling me back to meet each stroke. In moments, he was coming as well, his voice breaking as he hurtled over the edge.

Dimly, I registered the warm weight of his body settling over me, the heaving of his chest and his hot gasps for breath. "Don't fall asleep," Darius sighed against my neck, his voice dark with promise. "Remember we've got all... goddamn... day."

10

AVA

The cold front let up that evening, and the Chicago winter actually turned somewhat nice. When we finally clambered out of bed, Darius took me out to see the city. I felt the street vibe was closer to DC than New York, in that it wasn't as crowded. But compared to DC, the Chicago buildings were bigger and the public transportation was better. I loved that the river went right through the middle, even when the freezing wind hit us on the bridge crossings. I loved that Lake Michigan was so big it felt like the ocean, with an actual beach and an endless horizon.

I liked the funkiness of the food, all the extra fixings on the hot dogs, and even the sloppy mess of deep dish pizzas. But, as I told Darius regretfully over one of the latter, I didn't think I could live in Chicago. If I had to choose a city, New York already had my heart.

He levered another chunk of the pizza onto his plate, licking sauce off his fingers. "I don't blame you," he said. "I don't even know if I think of this place as home. I only moved here for high school, and I've already been at Lockridge almost as long."

"Your parents are here. And your mom's family."

"Yeah, I'm more than aware. They're all gonna wanna weigh in on my post-graduation prospects."

I knew Darius wanted to design video games, but we hadn't talked as much about what that career would look like—or where it would be. "Let me guess. California?"

"That's what I've been thinking. There are companies all over, but the biggest concentration is in the Bay Area."

"That's San Francisco, right?"

"You got it. San Francisco and like a fifty-mile radius around it." He forked a bite of pizza into his mouth, chewed,

and swallowed. “I’m thinking of internships there this summer.”

“Oh.” I pushed my plate away, suddenly not hungry. The restaurant we were sitting in had felt cozy and toasty up to this moment, but now it felt like someone had opened the door wide to the elements. “I’ve been thinking about New York.”

“Because of your trip?”

I nodded. “Maybe not this summer, but I’d like to try it one year. If I like it, then I could see myself going there after Lockridge.”

Darius took another moment to chew and swallow. “That’s fair. But you’ll still have a few summers to try other places. Maybe you could try California.”

He and Arun and Seth and Colin would have graduated by next summer, and they might all go their separate ways. Apparently they were already going separate ways this coming summer, but at least that would be temporary.

Darius was watching me. “It’s just a suggestion.”

“I didn’t say no to California. I’d really like to go there.”

“You’ve got this look on your face.”

I sighed. As usual, he knew when I was in my feelings and needed to let them out. The words came tumbling. “I guess I just realized that after a whole semester of not getting to see Colin as much, I won’t get to see you at all this summer. And I haven’t even asked Colin what he plans to do. And maybe Seth will be too busy teaching. So maybe I won’t get to see any of you. Then we’ll only get two more semesters before y’all graduate, and after that it could be forever before we’re all in the same place again.”

“Hey.” Darius took my hand. “It’s a little early to be worrying about this stuff.”

“I remember you telling me I was thinking about internships too early, but now you’re doing it.”

“No, don’t get me wrong. Just based on the past two weeks I can already tell how bad it’s gonna suck being apart for three

months. Not to speak of more. And I'm not feeling great about it either. But as far as what happens after we graduate, no one's made any concrete moves."

"Yet." I turned my hand over beneath his, so we were palm to palm. "I guess I just want to have a direction. Because I can't go home, you know? And if I have nowhere to go back to, then I need to know where I *will* be going."

He nodded. "I get it. I hear you on needing some insight into the future. But trust and believe it is *too* early to start feeling down about hypotheticals. Anything could happen."

"I hear you, too," I echoed. I tried a self-deprecating smile. "It's probably too early to even be having a conversation like this. I mean, we haven't even been together for three months."

"It rounds up to three months." He smiled back at me, but then went serious. "And it's been long enough to know that I do want a future with you, no matter where we are or what we're doing or who else is in it."

"Me too," I said quietly. Again, certain unspoken words seemed to swell in my heart. But again, I wasn't quite ready to let these particular words out.

"We *will* talk about the someday of it all," Darius said. "I agree that we'll need to eventually. But we should all do it together." He paused. "Arun also."

"Okay," I said. "And meanwhile, I guess I'll just try and enjoy the present instead of stressing about the future."

He leaned over and kissed me. "And I'll try and give you more to enjoy."



At night when Darius's parents were home, we'd catch up with them for a few minutes. But usually Darius liked to go out for "young company," as the Chief put it. Every gathering we ended up at seemed to be a big group, whether it was for dinner or drinks or just gaming at someone's house. It felt like

I met more people in those days with him than I'd met during the entire semester.

On the whole, the gatherings were fun. I'd spent the middle half of the past year isolating myself, starved of human contact. The guys brought me out of that shell, just by virtue of our relationships. But so far I've been slower about finding my own friends. My new roommate, Kaya, is pretty much the only one I have.

So whenever Darius inevitably got distracted talking to other people on our nights out, I resolved to take it as an opportunity for independent friendship hunting. Darius's friends were a lot like him: easygoing and happy to get into conversation with a stranger. A lot of them were current Lockridge students, which meant I could see them again after break.

Plus, they were curious about me. I got the impression that even though Darius had a history of casual hookups, he wasn't known for hanging out with one person for long. That seemed to give me a lot of goodwill in their eyes. Maybe they thought I had something especially interesting going on to have snagged his attention. I didn't mind going along with the illusion to begin with, if they ended up liking me on my own merits.

I wasn't pleased, however, when one of the girls who showed up for video gaming on Friday night turned out to be the same one from Monroe's party. I didn't exactly remember *which* girl from the party, but I did remember her angling for Darius right in front of me.

She remembered me, too. "Ava, right? Haley."

We were in Darius's basement, as he was hosting. For Christmas I'd given him a Zelda-themed skin for his console and controllers, in honor of the first game we ever played together, as well as a new game which the salesperson had assured me was great for groups. He'd decided to test out the latter with some of the Chicago crew, and he was now busy wrangling the tech to set up the controllers everyone had brought. They were all standing over him, giving conflicting

advice about how to do it—everyone except for this girl. Opportunities to snag the attention of a different conversational partner seemed limited.

“Right, hi,” I ventured finally. “How’s your break going?”

“Not bad. My parents are driving me kind of nuts. I never thought I’d say this but I’m actually ready to go back to school.”

“Oh. That sucks.”

“I mean, it’s nothing big. They’re just kind of overwhelming. So how long are you in Chicago for?”

“I leave tomorrow, actually.”

“Oh, no! I was going to ask if you and Darius wanted to come over and see a movie.”

At her house? Has he been there before? “Sorry,” I said stiffly. “Um, I don’t know if he has plans already.”

“All I can do is ask, I guess. He wouldn’t think it’s weird to come without you, would he? I don’t know him that well.”

My eyes widened. Did she honestly want me to tell her it was fine to ask my boyfriend out?

Haley snorted. “I mean, I don’t know you that well either, but I feel like it’s less weird to ask you as a couple rather than just one of you.”

Wait, what? “What do you mean?”

She blinked. “Oh! Sorry. I didn’t even explain. This movie night I do is kind of like a couples thing. It started after me and a bunch of my friends got into relationships around the same time and we were like, we never hang out anymore. It was like me versus my friend’s boyfriend competing for her attention, or her being jealous of my girlfriend because I have someone else to do girly shit with. So the idea behind couples night was that if we spent time together *with* our significant others, that would kind of take the edge off. But it’s evolved since then into like an all-purpose date night where people just snuggle up in the dark with their cuties.” She laughed. “Kind of defeats the original purpose.”

The sheer amount of words she'd thrown at me reminded me of Kaya, and I found myself relaxing. Because of that, and because of the word *girlfriend*.

"Darius wouldn't feel weird anywhere," I said. "He'd thrive in any setting as long as he can talk to someone."

"Can't relate," Haley said. "I'm not sure how I ended up at a video gaming thing but I'm already cringing at how hard I'm about to embarrass myself."

"Darius didn't invite you?" He'd certainly greeted her in his typical happy enthusiastic way.

"Uh, no, I'm crashing. My girlfriend's the one who knows Darius."

She gestured at the group hovering around Darius, still struggling with the setup. There was a lot of good-naturedly emphatic backseat driving going on. Darius seemed to be giving back as good as he got, clearly in his element.

"So..." Haley leaned closer, pitching her voice low. "You're really dating three guys at once? Like, for real for real?"

I didn't detect anything salacious in the question. Just honest wonder. "Yeah," I said. "It's not something I planned or anything. It just kind of...happened."

"Everybody's wondering how. Martina—that's my girlfriend—lived on their hall last year and she said *nobody* could get a second look from any of them. She's dying to ask how you snatched Colin especially, because it's like lamented all over campus how he wastes all that beauty on books. And she says she always thought Seth was gay."

"He's bi, actually."

Haley nodded like the lights had just come on. "Oh-kay, that makes sense. I feel like I should have been able to identify a fellow bisexual."

"You're into guys too? So you *were* flirting with Darius!" That last sentence blurted out of me before I could stop my foolish mouth.

Haley's eyes danced merrily. "He's kind of impossible not to be a little flirty with. But I wasn't trying to take your man. Can't say the same for Lena—that's who we were talking to at Monroe's party."

Right, I remembered now. Lena had said she was friends with my old roommate Mimi, which was all the warning I needed to stay clear of her.

"Not that you have anything to worry about," Haley continued. "*Are* the guys allowed to date anyone else?"

"Of course," I said automatically. "It's only fair. They just... don't really want to."

"Babe. *What* is your secret?"

Before I could sputter some kind of answer, a cheer went up from the technical crew, and Darius came striding over.

"We're good to go," he said. "Want in?"

I took the controller from him like a lifeline.



Since Darius had gotten roped into hosting the night before I had to leave, we'd run out of opportunities to be private in the house. I was already missing that physical intimacy, but it would only be a week before we were both back on campus and could be together again.

We did spend some time cuddling on the couch after everyone left. We were mostly horizontal, propped against the cushions with a blanket over our legs. The Commander had gone all cat-loaf on the back of the sofa, keeping sentry. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were in bed already, so we had the illusion of being private, but I was committed to respecting their rules. I kept swatting Darius's playful hands away from my breasts and ass, drawing his arms safely around my waist, but then he'd go wandering again. I'd giggle and he'd nuzzle my jaw, making me laugh harder.

We settled into a peaceful truce and I just luxuriated in how close and cozy and warm I felt. The necklace Darius had given me for Christmas, an amber pendant suspended from the same kind of braided copper as the bracelet the guys gave me at the music festival, slid backward on my breastbone. As the pendant settled lightly in the hollow of my throat, I covered it with my hand.

“Thank you for this week,” I said. “I feel like you’re always showing me how to let go and have fun.”

“Glad you had a good time.” He played with my other hand, sandwiching it between his and curling his long fingers over mine. “I feel like you’re always showing me how it’s possible to let go and have fun, no matter what life throws at you.”

“I never thought about it that way. I guess it’s a good thing, yeah.”

“You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. I feel like I’ve generally been a happy person. I never took shit too seriously. Even when my dad had to transfer to a new base, I’d try to think of it like an adventure instead of making a fuss about it. But maybe ignoring the negative stuff turned me into someone with rose-colored glasses, someone who never sees reality. So I never learned to be strong like you.”

“I think we’re talking about different kinds of strength. I wish I could be someone who sees life as an adventure and doesn’t break when things get difficult.”

“It’s in the eye of the beholder. I’m just saying, getting to know you? Seeing how you’re on this journey to heal all the pain you went through? It kind of opened my mind. Inspired me. I don’t know if I’m saying this clearly. Maybe what I mean is, it grew me up a little.”

I kissed the tips of his fingers. “I think I understand.”

“You were talking before about seeing the real me instead of some fantasy. I’m not sure if I even know who the *real* me is. But someday hopefully I will. And I know I want the real me to be someone worth seeing.”

“You are.” I cupped the straight line of his jaw, stretching up to brush his lips in a sweet kiss. “And I’ll always choose the real you.”

OceanofPDF.com

11

SETH

I really got the unlucky draw when it came to the timing of Ava's visit. Three weeks without her was a damn long time. But I did have a bonus to look forward to: we'd be driving back to Lockridge together.

I'd planned for a long time to buy a car and bring it to campus, and I finally persuaded my brother Dave to sell me his Subaru. Winter break was my window to officially transfer ownership. I asked Ava if she wanted to help me break in the car. She said yes.

The shortest route back to school is normally a ten-hour drive, but we planned a four-day route via the mountains. All the guys thought we were crazy, but Ava was big into it. "I'm already spending my winter break traveling," she'd declared. "A road trip is an epic way to finish."

Also unluckily, however, the only appointment I could get for servicing the car ahead of the trip was when Ava's flight was landing. I felt like a chump asking her to take a Lyft to my folks' house, but she promised she didn't mind.

I got out of the auto place around four p.m.—two hours late, and feeling fleeced for way more "service" than I'd expected the car to need. Mom had texted me to say Ava arrived fine, so I went straight home. I found her in the kitchen, helping with dinner.

I picked her up and whirled her around. She laughed, and it sounded just like all that fancy romantic shit: bells ringing in my heart and everything right in the world. Our chocolate lab, Nancy, circled us happily, her tail thwapping my calves.

"Seth!" Ava protested. "I need to wash my hands!"

I set her down and gave her a lingering kiss. She glanced at my mother, but Mom was just smiling indulgently. "How was

your flight?" I asked. "I'm sorry again about not being able to pick you up. Was the Lyft super expensive? I'll get you back."

"Don't even worry about it," Ava said, giving Nancy a scratch between her ears. "You're letting me stay here and all."

"Now, sweetheart, you know that's more for my benefit. I *will* make it up to you. But first, wanna come see the car?"

"Go on," Mom said, when Ava sent her a questioning look. "Best to find out now if you really want to spend four days in that thing."

"It's a perfectly good car!" I protested.

"It *was* ten years ago. After everything Dave put it through, I'd be amazed if y'all didn't break down before you make it out of Georgia."

I stole a piece of chocolate from the box on the counter, dodged Mom's playful swat, and led Ava outside.

I invited her to sit in the driver's seat so we could see how comfortable she felt. Nancy hung out in the back seat, tongue lolling. "I don't think I've ever driven for longer than an hour at a time," Ava confessed. "And I've never driven anywhere outside North Carolina."

"Plenty of room to practice here." I gestured out the windshield. "We've got about twenty acres and a couple miles worth of road. All gravel though."

She stared at the stretch of property visible from where we sat in the driveway. Our house is situated near the top of a slope of pine forest. The land immediately surrounding the house is clear, which gives us an uninterrupted view of the trees, the small valley at the bottom, and the slope rising opposite. We have a mix of evergreen and deciduous, so the green of the trees wasn't as solid as it would be in warmer months, but the mix of brown needles gave the landscape texture. All that we could see was washed in golden evening light from the sun, which was at that moment descending toward the western end of the valley.

"This is really beautiful," Ava said. "You must have had so much fun growing up here."

“Yeah. Unfortunately these hills haven’t caught much snow this winter. The view would be a lot more dramatic. But it means the trails will be fine for walking. I can take you out exploring tomorrow if you want.”

“Definitely.” She turned toward me from the driver’s seat, leaning her temple against the headrest. “Your mom’s so nice. When I was a kid I used to think the superintendent had to be really scary because they were the principal’s boss, and you *never* wanted to go to the principal’s office because that meant you were in trouble.”

“Funny. When I was a kid, I thought my mom seemed way nicer in her job compared to how she was at home with us kids.” I chuckled. “Did you get to meet Zach?”

“Yeah. Your mom sent him to the grocery store for something. So Zach’s your youngest brother and he’s in high school.” She counted off with her fingers. “And there’s Dave who you bought the car from—”

“Yep, he’s the oldest of us.”

“And then your other brother is...Justin, right?”

“Yep. He lives in Charleston. He was here for Christmas but he went back before New Year’s. You’ll meet him one day.”

“Did you ever wish you had a sister?”

“Shh! Don’t let her hear you.” I reached back and gave Nancy a comforting pat. Ava laughed. “You know, it never really seemed like we were missing out in that way. But there were certainly times I wished I had fewer brothers. We had to share so much stuff, and everything I had growing up was some kind of hand-me-down.”

“I always wished I had siblings. Brothers *and* sisters. I thought it would be like having built-in friends.”

“Sometimes it was like that,” I acknowledged. “But there are big age differences between all of us. Dave’s thirty, Justin’s twenty-six, I’m twenty-one, Zach’s seventeen. It’s been less of a big deal as we’ve gotten older but when we were kids, we seemed really far apart.”

“Who do you feel closest to?”

“Zach’s the only one I still share a roof with on a regular basis, but I can talk about more grown-up stuff with Dave and Justin. I’m probably closer in personality to Justin, but he lives away from all of us.”

“Technically so do you, when you’re at school.”

“True.” The sun slanting through the windshield hit Ava’s face, illuminating her dark brown eyes. “It’s amazing that you’re actually here,” I said softly. “I was honestly starting to wonder if I’d ever see the day.”

“Same.” She reached her hand out to trace over my cheek in a light caress. “I’m excited about this week.”

Her smile was magnetic, drawing me in. I closed the distance between us and captured her mouth in a kiss. The one we’d shared in the kitchen had been an excited reunion. This one escalated quickly into something well beyond that. Fire ignited in my blood. I cupped her jaw with both hands, tilting her head so that our mouths could meet at a better angle, so that I could meet her tongue with mine. A tiny whimper escaped her throat and went straight to my cock.

The car’s emergency brake poked my hip and I broke the kiss. “Mmm, it’s so damn good to see you.”

“Same,” Ava said again, still smiling. “By the way, I have good news and bad news.”

“Hit me.”

“The bad news is, I promised your mom I’d help with dinner and we’ve been out here twenty minutes already.”

I groaned. “Nah, she’s probably all done with it by now.”

She giggled. “A promise is a promise.”

“Well, what’s the good news?”

She leaned in, her breath tickling my ear. “Our sleeping arrangements. When I arrived, she told me I could go ahead and put my stuff in your room.”

“Now *that* is great news.”



That first night with Ava at my house was everything I could have wanted. I could tell Mom and Dad found her totally charming, and Zach of course was starry-eyed by her gorgeousness. She was easy around all of them as well, and the bonus: Nancy adored her.

My parents have always been good about anyone I date, probably because they had plenty of experience before me with Dave and Justin. Nobody even blinked an eye when it was clear that Kyle and I were having sex. Dad calmly took me aside one day and said, “Let me know if you need help getting protection.” Mom just asked if we could have our dates at home, where it was safer.

I told Ava this as we were getting ready for bed upstairs, and her brow furrowed. “Safer? Because you were two guys?”

“Yeah. Georgia, you know? She basically said as long as I was still in high school and living under her roof, she couldn’t help worrying about me. So that was why she wanted us to think of our house as the safest place to be really out and proud. But it wasn’t like a hard rule—we went to prom together and all that.”

Ava sat on the edge of my bed, her legs bare and smooth and tempting beneath her tank top and panties. “*Did* you ever feel unsafe?”

“No. But we also didn’t do anything too hot and heavy in public. The kids at school were pretty chill about it. Teachers, too. But I don’t know what any parents might have said around the dinner table.”

“That sounds like my high school. We had a couple of kids who were out, although nobody was in a relationship. I’m sure there were more who just didn’t feel safe or ready.” She drew her knees up under her chin. “Seth, I hope you know you can tell me if you ever feel like you’re missing out on being with guys. Not that you *have* to tell me anything. I know it’s not really my business.”

I'd just taken off my shirt, about to toss it into the hamper, and I spun around with it bunched in my hands. "Why wouldn't it be your business?"

"Because..." Ava flapped her hands a bit. "Well, we haven't really discussed the details on this point, but I've never assumed that you and Colin and Darius wanted to be exclusive. Within our group, I mean. Like, I told Arun he could date other people—"

"And he agreed to that?" I said, mystified.

"He said it wasn't likely, but my point is, it's the fair thing to do for all of y'all. And maybe it's even more important for *you* since, um..." She trailed off.

"Since you don't have a dick?" I said in amusement.

"Um." She blushed. "Kind of, yeah."

I put the shirt in the hamper and crossed the room, crouching on the floor in front of her. "I don't have a quota of body parts I need for satisfaction." I tried to keep my face serious, but she was so adorable. "I'm turned on by both sexes, yeah. But ultimately it's about the person for me. The emotional connection is way more powerful than the physical connection. And when I'm with someone that way, I believe in devotion. I think it'd be the same if I had a different orientation or you were a different gender. I wouldn't want or need anyone but you."

That was pretty close to some serious words I'd been wanting to say to her—that I think we'd all been wanting to say to her. And yet we also knew we had good reason to take our time on that, so we had to be patient.

Ava's eyes looked misty, but she unfolded her knees and sat up straight. "Thank you."

I couldn't help asking, "How *would* you feel if one of us wanted to date someone else?"

Her expression turned thoughtful. "Honestly, I've been considering that. I know I'd try to be cool about it on the outside. But on the inside?" She put a hand on my chest, right

over my heart. “I wouldn’t love it. Some days I still question why none of y’all get jealous.”

“I think we do covet your time. I hope this winter break is helping with that. But Colin and Darius are my boys. It only makes sense that we’d all fall for the same woman. And since you happen to be an *incredible* woman, it only makes sense that we’d be happy with whatever makes you happy.”

A soft smile spread over her lips, making them look even more lush and kissable than ever. “Y’all have a special definition of *sense*.” Then her smile turned mischievous. “What if Colin or Darius were bisexual as well?”

“You mean what if we all had a quota of dick we needed and we all helped each other fill that quota?”

Ava laughed outright.

“Heaven,” I said. “I mean, once we got past the icky friendship barrier.”

“I guess that also makes sense.” She leaned in. “And it would be heaven for me, too.”

I moved from a crouch to a kneel, lodging myself between her knees so that I could stretch right up into the kiss. We made out for long, slow minutes, her hands running over my chest, my shoulders, my neck. Meanwhile, I cupped her ass, teasing my fingers over the thin material of her panties.

Her nipples were visibly defined beneath her top. Since my hands were occupied, I mouthed them through the fabric, testing the weight of her breasts with my lips and teeth. Ava’s head tilted back and her long hair brushed my knuckles. I glanced up and saw the smooth arc of her throat over the neckline of her shirt, and all I wanted to do was taste her skin.

I dipped down, using my face to push the bottom of her shirt up her stomach, her ribcage. The cloth snagged on the tips of her breasts but I pressed my nose to the undersides, breathing in her fragrance, glorying in her naked curves. Ava eagerly helped me out, tugging her shirt higher to expose what I wanted.

She hitched a shuddering breath as I covered her nipple with my mouth. I flicked the sweet, puckered peak with my tongue and her knees clamped around my waist, skin to skin. I caressed her other nipple with my thumb and her hips undulated, her pussy brushing my belly.

Even her reactions got me so fucking hot. The way my cock stiffened, I wished I'd had the intuition to take off my pants in addition to my shirt. But I was just going to have to deal with it, because I was nowhere near finished tasting her. I came off her nipple with a soft sucking sound and licked my way back down her stomach. I pressed her breastbone gently until she was lying flat on the bed, then sat back a bit to get a good look between her legs.

Her mound invited me to kiss her through her panties, already semi-transparent with her wetness. That tiny taste made me see red. I pulled the panties off and dove back in to lick her straight from the source.

And *fuck*, her cunt was something I could never get enough of. I pushed her thighs up to bare her intimate flesh even more. True heaven was getting to feast on her like this, burying my mouth in the subtle tang and musk of her. Feeling her frantic fingers in my hair. Her body writhing urgently. I was so far gone I felt lightheaded.

I slipped my tongue all over her, dipping inside, then licking up to her clit. There were times in the past I'd gone down on her for so long my jaw felt sore all the next day. I knew exactly how to draw out her arousal and then how to make her pleasure explode.

But after three weeks without her, my instincts craved more. I had to feel her climax on my cock. Not just *had to*—I was fucking desperate for it.

Ava seemed more than good with that. I swirled my tongue around her clit in the exact way she needed to get right up on the edge, then reared over her. “Want to feel you come,” I said hoarsely.

Her eyes were wild as she attacked the fastenings of my jeans. “I’m so close. Hurry.”

I didn't even have time to get my jeans off all the way. She pushed them over my hips, wrapped her hand around my cock—and goddamn, I nearly lost it all right there—and guided me to her opening.

When I pushed inside that tight slipperiness, we both groaned. She hooked her ankles behind my back and I rocked in and out of her, straining and thrusting into that clenching heat, just mindless with the feel of our fucking.

I only had one last shred of control. I licked my fingers, got them on her bud, and rubbed her until she keened. Her back arched and I felt her cunt fluttering on my cock as her orgasm hit. That was it for me. My own orgasm came rushing up and I spilled into her, gasping out all the words of devotion I thought she was ready to hear.

OceanofPDF.com

12

AVA

The Gallants were the kind of Southerners I grew up with in Juniper, even if they were a couple hundred miles distant. Seth's great-grandfather had worked and scrounged his whole life to buy the land, and then his grandfather bought a few more acres just because he liked having a "buffer" between them and their neighbors. A lot of people back home were like that, including Darius's Grandma Evelyn.

Seth's dad is actually a house contractor by trade, and had built a fair chunk of their house with his own two hands as the family grew and needed more room. He showed me around with obvious pride, and with good reason. It looked just as nice as my ex Matt's super expensive lake house—maybe even better, because Matt's place is a total Instagram photoshoot kind of house whereas the Gallants' home has lots more personality.

Seth's mom provided a lot of that personality. Rather than seeing her as a scary superintendent in charge of all the scary adults at school, I got along well with her dry sense of humor and generous spirit. She really loves working directly with kids, and according to Seth would often get home pretty late because she'd visit after-school programs and then end up chatting with the parents who came to pick up their kids. The house was full of holiday gifts and cards from families all over the district. I could understand why Seth found her so inspiring that he wanted to be an educator as well.

His passion for teaching had inspired my Christmas present: a personalized nameplate for his future classroom desk, with *Mr. Gallant* engraved on the brushed metal face. "This is beyond awesome," he said with a huge smile. "Thank you, sweetheart."

He'd gotten me a pair of hiking boots. They were the real deal, sturdy but lightweight with a mix of fancy-sounding wicking and waterproof materials. They kind of *smelled*

inspiring—like I could just imagine myself flying over mountains while wearing them. And they fit perfectly. “How did you know my size?” I asked.

“Might’ve peeked at some of the shoes in your closet,” Seth answered sheepishly. “Actually, all of us together figured out your sizes for different things. We thought it’d be helpful with future gift-giving.”

I stared at him, impressed. “Now that’s a benefit of having multiple boyfriends I hadn’t thought of before. Collective brain power for special occasions.”

“We aim to please.”

Seth and I spent our daytime hours breaking in my new boots by taking Nancy out on the trails which the Gallants had cut through the woods over the years. I could see why Seth loved running the trails at school so much. He’d grown up outdoors, breathing the fresh air of elevation, soaking in the sun, sweating with hard work. I always thought he carried an inner light of life and vitality, but it flared even brighter whenever we found ourselves in the middle of nature.

Seth tried to do at least a half-hour run every morning around seven. I told myself that under normal circumstances, I’d challenge myself to go along with him. But I’d started my period—a welcome thing these days with how busy my sex life is—so instead I took the opportunity to snooze. Whenever Seth got back to the room, he’d wake me up with sweet kisses, smelling like cold winter wind, and I’d coax him back into bed for a warming cuddle. His brother and parents always left early for school and work, so when we heard the crunch of gravel from the last car driving off, the cuddle would turn into more. After, we’d shower together before starting the day for real.

I tried to soak in these last relaxed days of vacation like a sponge, knowing that back at Lockridge we wouldn’t have the time or the privacy. Even our road trip would be busy, since we’d be on the move so much.

Then, on one of our walks outside, Seth asked if I wanted to stop through Juniper. “You could see your mom. If you wanted

to, I mean. If not, maybe Jodie.”

We were just cresting a hill after a long climb, and I was huffing a little, the winter air sending a cold burn through my lungs. I heard the words *Juniper* and *mom* and my chest clenched. And that was it—I couldn’t breathe anymore. Panic attack.

Dimly, I was aware of my foot stumbling over the small change in elevation. The trees spun overhead, then blurred, then darkened. I reached out blindly, animal instinct preparing me for a fall. The ground swung toward me like a wave crashing over my head.

Seth’s strong arms wrapped around my shoulders and hauled me back up against his chest. I heard his voice coming at me from a long distance. “Ava. Ava! Breathe.”

If only it were that easy. I squeezed my eyes shut and just leaned into him, letting his body absorb my shivers. My heartbeat galloped wildly. I couldn’t feel my legs. I barely even understood that I was still standing.

Seth surrounded me, strong and solid and soothing. His hands traced firm circles over my back, up and down and around in a steady rhythm. His familiar scent filtered into my nose and I realized I could inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. I concentrated on doing that until I didn’t have to think about it anymore. And gradually my muscles relaxed, my chest expanding again and the thunder of my heartbeat receding. I felt Nancy licking my fingers and I brushed them reassuringly over the crown of her head.

“I’m okay,” I whispered. “Sorry, I...sorry.”

“Ava, what *was* that?”

I shook my head without lifting it from his chest. My hair rustled against his coat. “Um...I just...couldn’t catch my breath for a second.”

“That took way longer than a second. You scared the fuck out of me.”

“Sorry,” I said again. My legs felt like noodles; I was glad Seth was holding onto me, that I could lean against his

strength to stay upright.

“What are you sorry for?”

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“What do you think it was, asthma or something? Do you think you can make it back to the house? I can take you to the doctor.”

I desperately wished I could just rewind the past however-long-it-was and get a hold of myself before my body completely melted down and exposed all the mess inside of me. But here we were. “I don’t need a doctor. It was just...” *No getting out of this one.* “I had a panic attack. At least that’s what Colin said about it.”

“Colin?” Seth held my shoulders and pulled me up straight. His cheeks were flushed pink, his eyes watery. “Has he seen this happen to you before?”

I nodded. “During fall break. When we all went to Juniper the first time. I was with him, luckily I guess, and he talked me through it.”

“Juniper,” Seth said. “I was asking you about Juniper just before.”

Now *my* stupid eyes were tearing up. “Yeah. And my mom.”

“Fuck.” Pain crossed his face. “So that basically triggered this.”

“I mean, I guess so. That seems to be the pattern.”

His brows snapped together. “Pattern implies more than just this time and the time with Colin. Have there been others?”

I nodded slowly. “Thanksgiving weekend. I was in the bathroom at Darius’s grandma’s house, getting ready to take a shower. But that time I was able to calm myself down.”

“Did you tell Colin? Or Darius? Arun?”

“No, I didn’t want to worry anyone. Darius and Arun don’t even know about the first time.”

Seth sighed. “Ava, this is not good. You know that, right? Maybe we should see a doctor anyway.”

I shrugged noncommittally. “Colin thought I should.”

“But you haven’t?”

“Um. I guess I’ve just been hoping it wouldn’t happen again. Because sometimes it just doesn’t. Like, I had a whole fucking text message exchange with my mom when I was in New York and it was...it wasn’t great. But I was okay.”

“What did she say?”

“She assumed I was coming home for winter break. I said nah. We basically left it at that.”

Seth’s eyes searched my face. “That’s all?”

“I mean, it sucked. What else can I say about it?”

He stroked the sides of my neck lightly. “Even if you never had a panic attack again in your life...this whole situation with your mom is messed up. So it might still be worthwhile to talk to someone.”

“I know,” I said softly. “I’ll think about it.”

“Are you going to tell the other guys now?”

“Maybe.” I knelt down to give Nancy a hug. She whined a little and nosed my neck. “I *would* tell Colin, but I don’t want to distract him from med school stuff.”

“I think he’d want to know.”

“Maybe,” I said again. “If I get a chance.”

“Darius and Arun would want to know also,” Seth said. “But that’s just my opinion. I won’t say anything to them unless you do.”

“Thank you.” I stared up at his worried face, trying to communicate how much I appreciated his understanding, his willingness to let me handle this in my own way.

“In the meantime,” he went on, “I’m sorry for flapping my jaw about Juniper. Don’t worry. We’ll give it a wide berth.”

“Yeah.” Even to my own ears, my voice sounded small and sad. “I think that’s for the best.”



Like with the previous panic attacks, I was absolutely depleted the rest of the day. And it felt like I needed the next couple of days just to recuperate and feel like a normal human being again. At least Seth’s parents were chill and didn’t seem to mind me being quiet or wanting alone time.

We left Thursday morning, planning to arrive on campus Sunday. We had the small tent which we’d used at the music festival, two sleeping bags and two bedrolls which could be combined into one comfy double pocket, cooking gear, canned food as well as snacks, and our luggage. Between us, we had enough funds to spend all three nights in motels if the weather was bad, but only as a last resort.

Seth took the first driving shift. We weren’t going far, just a couple of hours to camp in the Nantahala National Forest in the mountains of western North Carolina. Neither of us had ever been, so we’d be exploring a new place together.

We spent the day hiking a long trail along the Nantahala River gorge, which is so deep that parts of it only get sunlight during a limited time in the middle of the day. Fortunately, the sky was a clear, sweet winter blue, giving no obstruction to the sun.

On parts of the tree-covered trail I walked single file behind Seth, admiring the canvas which his broad shoulders and long back made for the leaf-dappled light. Wherever the trail was smooth he moved with long, confident strides. When it got rocky, he’d navigate a way across with calm competence, offering me his strong grip for balance when it was my turn to follow. Then he’d grin down at me with pride and my metal tank of a heart would tremble excitedly.

It took another hike to get from the car to our campsite. I left my suitcase in the trunk, bringing only a backpack with a change of clothes so I could help Seth haul our heavy gear.

The camp trail brought us to a babbling creek. Two tents were already parked right next to the trail's end, with a mom and dad starting up a campfire and three kids chasing each other around it. Seth preferred to pitch our tent somewhere totally isolated from anyone else, but having other people nearby gave me a feeling of safety in numbers. We compromised by walking along the water until we couldn't hear the playful shouts of the kids anymore, but could still see the tents. Soon enough, we were all set up ourselves, with the cold creek on one side of the tent and our firepit on the other.

Dinner was canned vegetable stew heated in a pot over the fire, and dessert was soft homemade chocolate chip cookies from Seth's mom. We sat cross-legged on a thick canvas rug close to the fire; the evening had come in cold. In the fading light, I noticed a smear of chocolate at the corner of Seth's mouth and wiped it with my thumb. He caught my hand and put his lips around the fleshy pad, licking the chocolate off with a gentle swirl that sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

"Cold?" he asked, his eyes dancing wickedly.

"Mmm. I think I need someone to keep me warm."

"I think I might be that someone."

I scooted closer to lean against him. He put his arms around me and I nuzzled my cheek against his chest. The soft fleece material of his pullover felt perfectly toasty from the fire outside and his own body heat within.

"How long is our drive tomorrow?" I asked. We were aiming for a campground in the northeast corner of Tennessee, right near the borders to both Virginia and North Carolina.

"Probably three and a half hours if we take it straight. But we could stop in Asheville to nose around. It's a funky little town."

"How many road trips like this have you done?"

"One with Dave when I was sixteen, and one with Justin the summer before I started at Lockridge."

"So this is your first one with someone you're dating?"

Seth's arms tightened around me. "I went camping with Kyle a couple times, but traveling somewhere different every day? Yeah, you're the first." I snuggled into him more and he chuckled. "You like that?"

"I like that we're sharing an experience that's new to both of us. I know you're this Bear Grylls explorer type, always looking for something new and cool to do. It feels kind of special to be part of one of your journeys into the wild or whatever."

He kissed my hair. "I think *you're* a pretty special journey all on your own."

"Journey, huh? You make me sound like I'm a mountain you want to climb."

"*Climb*, huh?" His hand slid under my sweater to tickle my belly, fortunately not too cold. I giggled and tried to squirm away. "Nah, not a mountain. You're more like an epic quest into unknown country, with lots of twists and turns and challenges for whoever's brave enough to venture forth. But there are priceless rewards and life lessons to be discovered all along the way. And beautiful scenery, of course."

I snorted. "You're such a flirt."

He'd left his hand on the naked skin above my jeans, and now he began to trace light circles over my stomach. "I'm a hundred percent serious."

"So what's at the end of the journey?"

"Who says it has to end? Anyone on a journey with you would want it to last forever."

Good answer. I tilted my face up in invitation and he accepted with a slow, searching kiss. His hand explored me lazily beneath my shirt, leaving heated trails that curled into flame in my belly.

We kept kissing, and Seth kept stoking the fire inside me with his hands and lips and his body subtly grinding against mine. He slipped my breasts free of my bra, hefting them in his palms, playing with the tips. I felt nothing of the January mountain air, submerged instead in liquid heat.

Seth began kissing my neck. “I want to fuck you right here. Right out in the open with nothing but the stars on top of us.”

I sucked in a breath. It had been a while since we’d last heard anything from the other campers down the creek, but I could see their campfire twinkling in the darkness. What if someone decided to stroll our way?

“You worried about people catching us?” Seth breathed against my jaw. “They’d just pass out from the glory of seeing you naked.” His fingers circled and flicked my nipples. “Anyway, the risk of getting caught is half the fun.”

“Let me keep my sweater on,” I reasoned. “It’s cold.” And it was long enough to cover my hips if we had to suddenly scramble for the tent.

Seth groaned. “Okay, but if we ever find ourselves in warmer weather...”

“We’ll see.” I licked his teeth playfully.

We got to our knees, quickly shedding our jeans and underwear. Seth’s cock stood out boldly, like it didn’t have a care in the world who might be looking. Now that I was outside his embrace, the cold nibbled at my exposed skin, and the canvas rug was rough on my goosebumps. I glanced down at it. “My period,” I said. I was in the spotty end of it, but still. “I don’t want to get any stains on this. My towel’s in the tent...”

“Come here,” Seth said, sitting back. He pulled me to where he was kneeling on the rug, guiding me into straddling his lap. “This should be fine, right? I’m still committed to getting you hot, by the way.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his hips, hugging him close. “You’re supposed to be keeping me *warm*.”

“All the same to me.”

His hands cupped my ass, adjusting my position so that his cock picked up some of my slickness. We both gasped at the contact.

“Do you have anything you need to prep?” he asked.

I shook my head. I’d packed my menstrual cup and switched to pantyliners when we set up camp. “I’m ready to go.”

Normally Seth loves to take his time with sex, but he respected my nervousness about being out in the open and kept things moving. His finger dipped into my cunt to test how ready I was, then spread the wetness up to my clit while he worked his cock past my entrance. I sank the rest of the way down on him with a grateful groan.

He was right about the nerves contributing to the thrill. That spark of urgency flipped our heat level up to an outright conflagration. He jerked my hips back and forth, fucking up into me like this *was* the end of our journey, like he’d never be able to fuck me again. His ferocity fed mine, creating a feedback loop that brought us swiftly over a mutual finish line. I fell apart in Seth’s arms and he fell apart in mine. The stars overhead filled my vision.

“Damn fucking hot all right,” he panted, after we took a moment to catch our breath.

I kissed him. “There’s a joke somewhere in all this about me climbing *you* like a mountain.”

“Possible. My brain’s too sex-scrambled for jokes.” I slipped off him to stand, and he pressed his mouth to the curve of my ass where it peeked below my sweater. “Beautiful scenery indeed.”

“It’s about to be interior only,” I said, tilting my head at the tent. “And maybe too dark to see anything.”

“That’s okay. I do some of my best work in the dark.”

I remembered suddenly that when I’d first met Seth properly in the Lockridge library, I’d imagined him climbing out of a tent with a sexed-up woman tumbled in the sleeping bag behind him. At the time I never would have believed that woman could be me.

But now it was. I took his hand and I led him into the tent.

OceanofPDF.com

13

AVA

In the morning, Seth got it into his head that he wanted to bathe in the creek. It was barely past dawn and a low fog hung over everything. I felt the wet chill in my bones and all I wanted was to be in the car with the heat blasting. But here I stood on the bank of the creek watching Seth—naked as the day he was born—test the water with his toes.

“It doesn’t feel that bad,” he said.

“No way am I going in there.” I was still wearing my sweater from last night, a pair of thick leggings, and flip flops with socks. I would have loved a bath in *something*, truth be told, if only the air was about thirty degrees Fahrenheit hotter. Our next campsite was supposed to have showers, at least.

“It’ll feel cold at first,” Seth coaxed, “but your body’ll get used to it.” He held out a hand to me. “We’ll go in together.”

I snatched my hand out of his reach. “Absolutely not.”

“What happened to all the adventurous spirit we were talking about last night?”

“There’s adventurous and then there’s insane.”

“All right, all right. Just be my lookout, then. Don’t want to traumatize any strangers or bears.”

“Wait, there are *bears*?”

Grinning, Seth splashed into the creek. As soon as the water hit his waist, he whooped and flung his arms up. “Fuck me, that is *freezing*!”

“I told you!” I called.

Instead of running back onto dry, marginally warmer land like a sane person, he took a deep one and dove fully into the water. The water was crystal clear, so I was able to admire the long expanse of his body as he swam submerged. Then he surfaced with another whoop.

He'd brought a bottle of lavender-scented Dr. Bronner's, so I tossed it to him, then settled on a large rock on the bank. Quickly, he scrubbed himself down, shivering and cursing. I just shook my head. He was an adventurer, all right.

We were able to hit the road after a breakfast of toast skewered on sticks over the revived campfire. I drove the first shift, getting us to Asheville in less than two hours. Before Lockridge, it might have been the second biggest town I'd ever seen—after Charlotte—but now I'd been to DC, New York, and Chicago. Even so, I liked the funky kind of character to the downtown area, and of course the Blue Ridge Parkway just minutes away.

With so many of the trees bare for winter, the mountains had a stark, carved beauty. Since we had all day to drive just a few hours, we kept stopping at scenic overlooks to take pictures or breathe in the air. It amazed me how all of this was relatively close to Juniper, yet I'd never realized it until now. It was a strange and almost circular path that had brought me to this place. I felt grateful I hadn't missed it after all.



At lunch time we had a decent phone signal, so I checked my email. I'd sort of fallen out of the habit over the break as the guys and Kaya preferred texting or chat apps. Now I saw that I'd missed the posting of last semester's grades.

We were sitting in the back of the Subaru with the trunk door up, eating sandwiches with the mountains in front of us. The wind whipped up every now and again, but it would always die down and then the sunlight would do its best to warm us up.

Seth and I put the sandwiches aside and logged into our Lockridge accounts. Before I could get into the grades section on mine, he offered, "How about we announce for each other?"

"Hmm, but what if I failed everything? What if *you* did? Could we bear the shame?"

His eyes twinkled. “No shame between the two of us. But we could just decide to keep driving and fuck school forever.”

“Solid backup plan. Okay, but yours get announced first.”

He handed me his phone. “All right, lay it on me.”

I tapped through. “Wow. Urban Education, A–. Gender and Education, A+. *Nice, Gallant.*”

Seth let out a relieved breath. “I wrote the hell out of that final paper.”

“Literacy, B+. Special Needs Education, A. Looks like I’m dating a very intelligent young man. Gotta pat myself on the back for that.”

He leaned in for a kiss. “You do have good taste. Ready for yours?”

My fingers felt cold as I passed him my phone. A bolt of nervous energy shot me to my feet, and I stood facing the mountains with my back to Seth. “Okay.”

“Intro to Psych, pass. Mandarin Chinese, B+.”

I sucked in a breath. I’d really been hoping for an A.

Seth went on, “Biology, A–. Intro to the Novel, A–.”

So close, yet so far away.

“Econ, A. Damn, girl. Where’d you even find the time for all that excellence?”

I turned around, smiling sheepishly. “Is it wrong that I was hoping for an A+ sweep? I shouldn’t feel disappointed, right?”

He gave me my phone back so I could look over the grades. “You wouldn’t be the only hotshot from high school thinking to keep up the streak in college. But first semester is no joke, *and* you had a rocky takeoff and landing. Plus a bunch of sex-crazed boys constantly demanding your attention. I’m honestly amazed how much academic ass you kicked in spite of all that.”

I snorted. “I guess you’re right. I’m too used to being a big fish in a small pond. Compared to Lockridge, my high school

in Juniper can barely be considered a school. But I don't know...I still expected better."

"As far as I'm concerned, you smashed it. As far as *most* people would be concerned. An A+ sweep is for perfectionists who run themselves ragged instead of enjoying life. Even Colin doesn't aim for that."

I squared my shoulders. "Well, this semester I'm only taking four classes instead of five. If I can't get a sweep, I can at least do better."

Seth shook his head. "Just make sure you don't burn yourself out. What's the minimum GPA you need to keep your scholarship?"

"I have to maintain a 3.3 or higher." I scrolled through the grades section on my Lockridge account. "Right now I'm at a 3.67."

"Plenty of buffer."

I sat down again, and Seth put an arm around my waist. "It's not just about my scholarship. My dad was always the type to throw himself into work at like two hundred percent, you know? My mom, too. They never slacked off—ever."

"What did they do for vacations?" he asked, then tilted his head. "Is it...okay to be talking about this? Do you feel anxious or anything?"

I thought about it, trying to discern any tightness in my chest. "I'm all right. I'm the one who brought it up, anyway. Maybe it's fine if I'm just reminiscing."

"Just let me know at the first sign of trouble."

It sucked that he even had to ask. And maybe, despite feeling okay now, I'd dream about them again, like I had after Arun asked me about them. It woke a small flame of resentment in me, the idea that I couldn't even talk about my parents without falling apart.

I threaded my fingers through Seth's where they rested on my hip. "We were talking about family vacations, right? They kind of never really took any. At least not long ones. They

never had a manager for the café and they always claimed they'd lose business if they shut it down."

"That explains a lot."

"No kidding."

"What about trips to see family?"

"We went to Florida a few times to see my grandmother—my dad's mother. But after she died, it was only his sisters there and I guess there wasn't as much of a reason for him to see them. Most relatives came to visit us, actually."

"Did you want to travel more?"

"Definitely. That was a big factor in the colleges I applied for. I had this idea that I only wanted to apply to places I'd have to get on a plane for. I didn't even want to go somewhere in the South, because I felt like if I could drive to it, it wasn't far enough away."

Seth smiled. "But here we are driving."

"I wasn't exactly basing any of that on experience." I laughed softly. "Anyway, I think my parents had mixed feelings when I got into Lockridge. They would have rather I stayed close, but they *really* liked that they wouldn't have to pay for it."

"They were proud of you too, right? Not just relieved for their bank accounts."

"Yeah," I said quietly, thinking of my dad. "They were proud."

"And they'd be proud of you now. For what it's worth, *I'm* proud of you."

"Coming from you, Mr. A+ in Gender and Education? It's worth a lot."



Our campsite for that night was on a narrow lake. On our side of the water was a flat grassy bank where all the tents and facilities were. On the other side, a forested mountain sloped so close to the water that it barely left any room for a bank, giving the impression that only the lake separated us from the mountain. There was a thin cap of snow at the peak, and when evening fog began to obscure the bottom of the slope, it made for a super dramatic vista.

Compared to last night, the campground was smaller but more populated, so there would be no sexy shenanigans out under the stars. We introduced ourselves to the neighbors in the tent next to ours, a cute pair of elderly ladies who found Seth extremely charming, and got invited on a hike to watch the sunset. Seth put his arm around me as the sun sank behind the mountain, and the ladies—who were damn energetic hikers—cooed at us. They thought *we* were the cute ones.

Once we'd had dinner and showers and zipped ourselves into the tent, we were able to be private. But I was self-conscious about making noise. Seth and I tried to shush each other *and* make each other moan with whispered dirty talk and extra-energetic sex. The resulting giggles probably gave the game away for anyone within hearing distance, but after a certain point I stopped caring anyway.

In the morning, Seth suggested a kayak ride on the lake. “You promise not to pull any funny shit to get me in the water?” I demanded.

“On my honor as an Eagle Scout!” He held up his hand like he was swearing an oath.

The campsite's kayaks were made of some kind of old beat-up plastic material. We had to dislodge one from a scrim of ice and frost on the ground in order to drag it into the lake. Seth directed me to sit in the front while he finished pushing the kayak into the water, then hopped into the back. I squawked as the kayak tipped dangerously, but Seth just chuckled.

It was pretty easy to gain distance on the still surface of the lake, albeit with Seth doing most of the work. When we

paused for a break halfway across, I tested a hand in the frigid water.

“Watch out,” Seth warned. “Tennessee piranhas just love chewing on pretty girls’ fingers.”

I splashed him. “You’re such a troll.”

We paddled around long enough that I felt like I’d gotten a decent workout. I loved how crisp and clean the air felt, and how peaceful the lake was in contrast to the mountain on the other side. The bank there was all jagged dark rocks, with no place to dock.

“If it weren’t so cold,” Seth said, “we might could hop out close to land and just carry the kayak on our shoulders.”

“We might could,” I said agreeably, although as far as I was concerned my ass was stuck to the kayak until we paddled back to our campsite. We didn’t have time for exploring anyway, as we needed to hit the road.

Our next destination was four and a half hours away, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. We had to camp in the valley because all of the mountain sites were closed for the winter, but we were at least able to take the mountain route in. Seth drove, and we passed the time with a modified game of Never Have I Ever.

“Is this going to be fair?” I protested. “You’re older than me, you’re interested in twice as many people as me, *and* you’ve been a huge chunk of my sexual experience.”

“There’s gotta be something I can uncover.” He winked.

Alcohol was out since we were driving, so we used pistachios instead. I fed them to Seth, snatching my fingers back when he tried to nibble on them.

The first few questions were pretty sedate. We established that both of us had committed petty theft as small children, although Seth proclaimed that to this day he had no idea how he ended up walking out of church with five dollars from the collection plate mysteriously in his pocket.

“I guess the truth is between you and God,” I said, waving airily at the beautiful mountain scenery visible through the windshield.

“I tried telling my dad something like that,” Seth replied. “Still had to return the money *and* wipe down all the pews for a month of Sundays.”

We upped the ante on the next several questions. We both had to eat a pistachio on “Never have I ever kissed someone of the same sex,” me confessing to the time I kissed Jodie for a drunken dare. To that, Seth immediately said, “Pics or it didn’t happen.” (There were no pics.) He had to eat a pistachio on “Never have I ever jerked off to thoughts of my friends,” admitting that sometimes his thoughts strayed.

“But I try and yank ‘em back,” he said quickly. “I seriously don’t *want* to use my friends for my spank bank. That could get messy.”

“With Colin and Darius, y’all are a lot more than just friends. I mean, you share a lot more.”

“Just because we share *you* doesn’t mean we agreed to share anything else. I may flirt and say some nonsense occasionally, but I try to keep the serious and potentially complicated shit locked down. Especially if it doesn’t seem like anyone else is lookin’ to hear it.”

“I get you,” I said. “But for the record, if you ever feel the need to open up about something—especially something like that—I *would* want to hear it.”

We finished off half the bag of pistachios, mostly thanks to Seth. As predicted, he’d experienced a hell of a lot more than me, not just sexual stuff but life in general.

“Let’s play this again next year,” I said. “Maybe even every year. At the rate I’m going, I’ll catch up with you eventually.”

Seth beamed. “I have no doubt about that.”



Our Shenandoah campsite turned out to be on a corner of farmland, which gave me fond memories of the music festival we all went to in the fall, and of course my first time meeting Darius's Grandma Evelyn. We were the only campers on a huge stretch of field under a bright moon. It made for a relaxing last night on the road. Seth had brought beer, but instead of continuing "Never Have I Ever," we just sat drinking in front of the campfire, enjoying the quiet falling of night.

Seth finished his first bottle and asked if I wanted another. I raised mine to show it was still half full, the liquid slinging in the bottle. That sound, and the fire crackling, and a distant cow lowing—the simple symphony made school feel so far away.

But really it was only a couple more hours in the car. My epic vacation was ending, with the real world and all of its concerns approaching fast. I couldn't wait to see Darius and Colin and Arun again. And yet a part of me felt apprehension. The past four weeks had been a parade of ideal scenarios with the guys, giving each other exclusive attention and devotion, engaging in mutual discovery without any distractions. Now we'd have to test what we'd built in fantasy land against our actual lives. Colin and Arun would be focused on school and work. All of us would be thinking about the summer and beyond. It was time to stop playing and plan for the future.

I'd already told Seth how I was feeling about the coming semester. I'd kind of expected him to give me even more of a pep talk than Darius had, to tell me in no uncertain terms that there was nothing to worry about.

Instead, he nodded and said soberly, "I can't make promises for any of the other dudes. But if you're worried about it, you gotta try and carve out some time, make an effort. Even if they're busy, even if they don't want to go past a certain heat level. Relationships take work, and you gotta put in that work if you want 'em to survive."

It made sense that Seth would have insight like that, I supposed. When he and I first got together, it was largely because of his efforts, because he confidently asked me out in order to explore the attraction between us. And he had more

experience than the others in struggling through a relationship that ultimately failed. He'd gotten serious with his ex Kyle, despite never feeling completely sure of how accepting others would be, and tried to keep it going after they went to separate colleges. Even though it didn't work in the end, Seth had clearly learned something from it.

I'd promised Darius I wouldn't stress about what might happen in the future. But talking to Seth made me realize that I didn't have to just sit back and *let* things happen, either. All of my guys were incredibly important to me, and this vacation had only deepened and strengthened our connections. Planning for the future meant planning for a future with them. So I'd do my best to fight for it.

OceanofPDF.com

14
ARUN

I got back to campus late Sunday afternoon, just in time for a scheduled dinner with all the RAs in our section of campus. It was mostly a business dinner, with the purpose of doling out assignments for welcoming back all of our residents. We'd already planned, before winter break, to decorate our dorms with signs and decorations. But then Cassidy, from Milner 3rd, mentioned she'd brought ten boxes of sidewalk chalk.

Everyone immediately and boisterously volunteered. Cassidy passed the boxes around until she ran out, but as everyone got up to leave, she tucked one into my hand with a wink. "Saved an extra for you."

I grinned. "You're a real one, Cass. Did you have a good break?"

"Yeah, it was awesome. How was yours?"

"Half lazy, half productive, so all good, I guess."

"Only good?" she asked casually. "Because I heard a rumor that sounded kinda spicy."

My eyebrows shot up. "Spicy? Me?"

"I'd say so. I heard you went home with someone?"

My face flashed hot and cold. "I invited a friend to stay with me for a week. She'd never been to New York before."

"Hmm, a *friend*, right. I guess that makes sense."

The hot and cold flash sank through my whole body. "How do you mean?"

"Just that the rumor was it was one of your residents."

"I mean, it was. But we're just friends."

Cassidy splayed her hands. "Sorry. I wasn't trying to gossip about you. That's why I asked directly."

“No, I appreciate it. Hopefully the rumor doesn’t have legs.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Everyone knows you’re not that type of guy.”

I was convinced I was broadcasting my guilt loud and clear, but Cassidy started talking about what she wanted to chalk, like she considered the matter closed. I wanted to ask what she’d heard exactly, and who she’d heard it from, and what people would do if they believed the worst. But I held quiet. Getting overly inquisitive or overly defensive would just add fuel.

Night was already falling, clear and cold. Apparently it hadn’t snowed in a while, so the campus pathways were bone-dry, lit up well by the lampposts. Perfect for chalking. The Milner RAs got started on the paved area in front of the dorm. Cassidy outlined a huge *WELCOME BACK* and the rest of us colored it in.

I worked my way down the main path, writing inspirational quotes like *WORK UNTIL YOUR IDOLS BECOME YOUR RIVALS* and *THE MIND IS NOT A VESSEL TO BE FILLED BUT A FIRE TO BE IGNITED*.

Then, as I rounded the turn toward the library, I heard the voice I’d been looking forward to for weeks.

“Are you defacing school property?”

I pivoted, still crouched. There stood Ava, perfectly illuminated in the pool of light from a lamppost. She was smiling at me. I wanted nothing more than to get up, stride toward her, wrap her in my arms, and kiss her breathless. Then I wanted to lead her to my room, shut the door behind us, and spend the rest of the night reuniting—and uniting—in every way possible.

But I couldn’t. I didn’t even stand. People were already talking about us, and we were on a public path right near Milner. And also, the sheer fact that I wanted her so much meant this was exactly the time to exercise restraint.

I did return her smile, though. Impossible not to. “When’d you get in?”

“About an hour ago. Seth dropped me at the dorm.”

“That’s not long. I would’ve thought you’d still be catching up with Kaya or Darius.”

“They’re both out still. I thought I’d take the chance to look for you on the hall, but then someone mentioned you were out here.” She squatted down next to me, and again I had to resist the urge to reach out to her. “What’s all this?”

“Sort of a Lockridge tradition. You’ve seen chalking on-campus before, right?”

“Yeah, but usually it’s like, *Come join the Poetry Society or Hanover Party, all welcome.* You know, advertisements.”

I nodded. “This is just welcoming people back from break. I figured I should give them some positive messaging in case anyone’s dragging their feet.”

“Sweet. I like it.”

I handed her the chalk I was using. “Want to try?”

“Hmm, how do I find a good quote?”

“Instagram,” I said. “That’s where I’ve been getting mine.”

Her eyes danced in amusement. She scrolled through her phone, and I sat back on my heels, admiring her face in the glow from her screen, the curl of her breath in the cold air. Then she bent to the asphalt and wrote, in big flowing script: *THE BEST WAY TO PREDICT YOUR FUTURE IS TO CREATE IT.*

“Nice,” I said. “Let’s keep going.”

We talked about how the rest of winter break had gone after she left New York. I didn’t have nearly as much to report as she did, of course. But I’d gotten some professional-level feedback on my portfolio of clips from *The Lockridge Rundown*, thanks to a journalism professor my parents put me in touch with. She’d given me some ideas about diversifying versus focusing, and that inspired me to refine the next pitches I was planning for the *Rundown*.

“This is the portfolio you’ll be using if you apply to journalism school, right?” Ava asked.

“Yeah. And also for applying to fellowships. Like *The New York Times*, for instance. They’ve got a year-long fellowship that would be great to try for after I graduate. I’m not at all likely to get it, but even just applying is a good goal to shoot for. I’d have to apply during the fall of my senior year, meaning I’ve got this semester to get my portfolio in order. I’d like to get at least four, maybe five more stories published.”

“What about this summer? When do you hear back about the internships you’ve applied for?”

“Well, I actually got a rejection from one over winter break.”

“Oh no!” She looked aghast. “I’m sorry. Is there any way to appeal it?”

“It wasn’t at the top of my list anyway. It was a podcasting internship and they could probably tell I barely had any relevant experience.”

Ava’s brow furrowed. “Then why apply?”

“I mean, like *The New York Times* one, applying is itself good experience. I have to try and figure out how to sell myself. It’s a helpful exercise to go through the process of putting together a resume and a cover letter, not to mention all my clips. My one regret is that I didn’t get to the interview stage, because I could definitely use that practice. But I should start hearing from other places pretty soon.”

“You know, that’s a good tip,” she said consideringly. “I’ve been thinking about how I have no idea what I want to do this summer. But it sounds like even if something isn’t the right fit, I can still get some value out of trying.”

“Definitely. And by the way, you know four juniors who’ve got a lot of collective experience applying for jobs. I’m sure any of us would be happy to help you, give you advice, or just cheer you on. I know I would.”

“Thank you. I’d love your help.”

Speaking of the other guys, it sounded like Ava’s three weeks with them had gone really well. The way she described

her visits, their relationships were all stronger than ever, and she'd also ticked off some bucket list life experiences.

I searched my heart for my reactions to hearing about all of that. I tried to do that kind of exercise regularly, because I'd asked Ava to wait for me, and so I felt I owed it to her to be honest about my feelings—not just with her, but with myself as well. She and the other guys were sort of a package deal, and if at any point I found myself not cool with that, then I needed to let her move on.

I had to admit I felt some jealousy. It wasn't exactly the "normal" kind of jealousy—I'd always want Ava's happiness and if the other guys made her happy, then that was a positive thing, period. It was more of a jealousy about how free they all were to be *with* her. I wished I could have the same freedom.

"Can I ask you something?" Ava said suddenly. She'd been decorating her quote, drawing curlicues and flowers around it. Her hair fell half over her face, and she glanced sideways at me, like peeking around a curtain.

"Sure, what's up?"

"Um...I think I already know what you're going to say, given your parents and all. Maybe that's *why* I want to ask you this, because I want you to give me the answer I think I need." Nervously, she scrubbed the chalk off her gloves.

"Ask and we'll see."

"I think that I..." She took a breath. "I think I want to see a psychiatrist."

"Do you mean for analysis or therapy?"

Ava blinked. "You know, I took a whole psychology class *and* spent a week with your parents and I didn't even think about the difference."

I gave her a gentle smile. "It's understandable. You've been kind of steeped in the academic side of it."

"The problem is that anything I might have learned taking Intro to Psych pass/fail hasn't actually helped my mental

health. So I think I need a professional.” She gestured vaguely at her temple. “It’s kind of fucked up in here.”

“Hey,” I said gently. “I think everyone’s a little fucked up by someone’s definition. And sure, I may be biased because of my parents, but I think we could all benefit from talking to a professional at some point. Was that your question?”

“I guess so. I guess I already assumed your answer would be that I *should* see someone. Maybe a better question is, what should I do? How do I find that someone?”

“Lockridge has a student health center with a whole department of licensed therapists and counselors. I’m supposed to recommend them as an RA, but I’d recommend them no matter what. They rate really highly on student surveys every year, and I’ve also heard from students personally who’ve used them.”

“So do I just make an appointment?”

“Yes. Call them, or you can fill out a form on their website or in person. They’ll ask you some basic questions like why you’re seeking therapy, and what you’re looking for in a therapist. And they’ll try to schedule you with the first available one who matches.”

Ava nodded slowly. “That simple.”

“Well, making the decision to get outside help is never simple. And it won’t be an overnight fix and it won’t be an easy fix.”

She grimaced. “But at least it’ll *be* a fix, right?”

“Not necessarily. I mean, it depends on how you see yourself. I said that part badly, because I for one don’t think you need fixing. You’re not broken. But you’ve been through a lot, and a therapist can help you process it in a healthy way. Or at least give you tools to cope better.”

“Okay,” she said, drawing in breath like she was about to dive into deep water. “I’ll try it. What do I have to lose, anyway?”

“In my opinion, not much. But you could definitely have a lot to gain.” It was so hard not to try and touch her somehow, not to take her hand or caress her cheek. “Thank you for trusting me with this. I think it’s awesome that you’re thinking about it.”

“I’d like to believe that,” Ava said softly. “That I’m awesome.”

“If you need convincing, I’m happy to keep reminding you.”



I ran into Darius in the dining hall the next morning, and he invited me to share a table for breakfast. We were interrupted no less than eight times by people stopping to chat with him. Popular topics included how everyone’s winter break went, and the various parties, gatherings, and events being scheduled for next weekend. Everyone offered to send Darius details about the latter topics.

In between the interruptions, he and I talked a little about Ava, but only superficially—how we each spent our weeks taking her around our old stomping grounds, how our parents liked her, that kind of thing. I sort of expected him to ask whether she and I had hooked up physically, but maybe she’d already told him enough.

We were just finishing up when yet another person came by to clasp hands and give Darius a bro hug.

“How do you make so many friends?” I marveled, as we took our trays to the disposal area. “Do you actually consider them all friends? Like in a meaningful way?”

Darius laughed. “I don’t get into everyone’s personal business or whatnot, but yeah, if I like to hang with you or tend to holler at you, you’re my friend.” He tilted his head back a bit, studying me down his nose. “You’re not exactly hurting socially either. You knew most of the people I was talking to.”

“Not the way you do. I guess I’m a little stingier than you when it comes to the friend label.”

“Well, you should come hang with us. In fact, I’m gonna organize a boys’ night one weekend. We all had our one-on-one time with Ava over the break but it’s been a minute since me and Colin and Seth got to just chill together. And you should get to know them better.”

That actually made some sense. “Yeah, I’m up for anything.”

Darius smirked. “Don’t say *anything*. Don’t want Seth getting too excited. And I don’t know how long I’ll be able to drag Colin out of his study cave for. So no promises about whatever itinerary I can negotiate.”

We stepped out of the dining hall, bright winter sunlight making us squint. “And who gets to explain to Ava that she’ll be spending a good chunk of a weekend alone?” I asked.

Darius let out a low whistle. “You raise a very good point. Okay, it won’t be a long itinerary. And we’ll make it up to her. Big time.”

“I was just kidding. She’s never struck me as all that clingy.”

“Nah, you’re right. But either way, we’ll have fun making up.” With a wink, he strode off.

“Maybe *you* will,” I grumbled after him. Friends, after all, could only do so much.

15

AVA

The first couple of weeks flew by. Last semester I'd taken four regular classes and a fifth pass/fail. This semester, I'd learned from my excessive tendencies and limited myself to the four. I did still want to knock out some of Lockridge's distribution requirements, though, so I decided to take Intro to Physics to fulfill the science area, Comparative Poetry for arts, History of Asia for social studies, and continue with Mandarin for foreign language. Most importantly, there were two major improvements over last semester: no classes earlier than ten a.m., and no long Bio labs on Friday afternoons. I might actually be able to feel human again.

Kaya, on the other hand, seemed to be taking the opposite approach. Now that she'd successfully finished her first semester, she was ready to attack a new level for her second, which meant joining a whole bunch of extracurriculars and upping her social game.

Unfortunately, *my* social schedule was relatively relaxed—much more than I wanted it to be. All the guys were getting settled into new routines as well, so we'd sort of unofficially defaulted to flying solo on school nights. I did spend Friday night with Darius and Saturday night with Seth, but I also felt like I should be mindful and moderate about it. When I came out of Darius's room in the morning, I ran into Arun. He gave me a perfectly warm and friendly greeting, but there was a wistful look in his eyes that reminded me all over again how unbalanced the situation was. Even though we'd both agreed to that, I didn't want to throw it in his face.

So with my extra free time, I decided it was at last the moment to get a campus job. I had experience working in a café, of course, but I wanted something that didn't remind me of home. Unfortunately, most of the campus hiring had already been conducted last semester, so there wasn't an abundance of choice. I landed just one interview, for a position as an office

assistant in the Literature department. My interviewer turned out to be my old Intro to the Novel professor. She seemed excited that I'd even applied, and that night I got an email from her asking when I could start.

We scheduled an initial three afternoon shifts per week. I'd be helping professors with filing, photocopying, word processing, and delivering books to and from the library. The latter part of the job description had been especially interesting to me, but unfortunately the timing of my shifts didn't line up with Seth's, who worked weekday evenings and weekends. The main benefit was that I'd be getting \$90 a week—not exactly rolling in it, but at least I could worry a little less about stretching my scholarship for fun stuff, and pay for things with the guys once in a while.

I turned up early on my first day, wanting to make a good impression. The Literature department takes up three hallways, with a cluster of desks and built-in cabinets at the junction. There were four people sitting at the desks when I turned up. Three of them looked like students while the fourth was clearly a receptionist.

“Hi,” I said. “I'm Ava, the new office assistant.”

The receptionist arched an eyebrow at me over thick-framed cat-eye glasses. “Sorry, who?”

I repeated myself. “Professor Chudasama hired me?”

“She has a class right now.”

The three students, whose desks were a few feet away, looked up. I shifted on my feet. “Right, but...we agreed this would be my first day.”

With a frown, the receptionist started clicking on her mouse. She looked young, barely out of college herself. “We did have a new office assistant start today, but she worked this morning. What did you say your name is again?”

“Um, Ava. Ava Le.”

“I didn't receive anything about you.” More mouse clicking. Another withering stare. I pictured myself backtracking down

one of the hallways with everyone craning their heads to track my pathetic retreat.

Then, just as the receptionist began shaking her head, Professor Chudasama herself came around the corner. “Stefka,” she said, “I’m running late for my class. Do you have those handouts ready? Oh, Ava, hello! Are you getting oriented?”

The receptionist—Stefka apparently—handed a large folder to Professor Chudasama. “Did you hire this student, Professor?”

“Yes, didn’t you get my email? I sent it to the whole department.”

“No, I didn’t get anything.” Stefka’s voice had the thinnest overlay of frost. “What is her position supposed to be? What are her hours?”

“Department assistant,” Professor Chudasama said. “Like Lacey.”

“Two to five on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays,” I said helpfully, but the way Stefka cut her eyes at me made me wish I’d stayed quiet.

Professor Chudasama nodded and waved the folder in our direction. “I have to run. Just think of Lacey and Ava as the morning and afternoon versions of each other. Thank you, Stefka!”

Stefka made a show of clicking her mouse a couple more times. “I really didn’t get any email about this. And it’s not like there’s that much work—” She cut herself off and stood. “Well, I guess we should get you onboarded. This will be your workstation.” She gestured at the desk next to hers. “We’re front and center so it’s easier for people to access us. Go ahead and put your things down and I’ll walk you around.”

I chucked my bookbag under the desk and turned attentively back to her.

“Those are the research assistants.” Stefka gestured at the three students. “They work exclusively for individual

professors. Your position is at-large, so you'll be serving the whole department."

"I'm Nadia," one of the girls said. "This is Monique and Joe." She gestured to the girl and guy on either side of her.

Stefka showed me the coffee and tea station just outside the department conference room. "I just brewed a new pot, so I can't show you how it works, but feel free to pour a cup for yourself."

"I know how it works," I said. It was the exact same one my dad used at home. I sipped from the piping hot cup. "Mmm, it's good."

We'd started off awkward, but for obvious reasons I wanted to hit the reset button. However, Stefka only sniffed before leading me to the alcove with the photocopier and binder. She then took all of three minutes showing me how to operate the various office equipment before swiftly concluding with, "I'm sure you'll pick up whatever you need as time goes on. Just be sure to ask me any questions right away so you don't make avoidable mistakes."

Well, then.

As the afternoon passed, other professors stopped by to introduce themselves, and one of them gave me an assignment to source and upload documents to their class bulletin board. Luckily, Stefka took a bathroom break right before I hit a roadblock, so I asked Nadia for help.

"Thank you," I told her. "I didn't want to bother Stefka."

"Oh, don't even worry about her. She's been working here a whole year so naturally she thinks she runs the place."

"Yeah, Lacey got it way worse this morning," Monique added.

Lacey, I quickly learned, apparently coped with Stefka by dumping her leftover workload onto me. She liked to leave sticky notes on the desk about things she hadn't been able to finish from her shifts, signed with smiley faces. There always seemed to be a lot of notes.

By my third day, Thursday, I'd gained some confidence around the department routines, and I had a better idea of what different professors expected. Unfortunately, Stefka hadn't warmed up. The other student assistants were friendly, but their desks were just far enough away that we had to raise our voices to properly chat, and Stefka would make throat clearing noises until we hushed. I was basically stuck with her, and unlike with my old roommate Mimi, nothing she did was quite aggressive or mean enough to make a fuss about it.

For Thursday's shift I'd taken over the conference room because Lacey—who I'd still never met—had left me the task of stuffing envelopes for a newsletter mailing. Apparently, hundreds of people still preferred to receive paper copies summarizing all the riveting developments in the Lockridge Literature department. Lacey had spread the materials out on the conference table during her shift but hadn't made much headway. Now the room needed to be cleared up for a meeting, so I had to rush through and finish the job—or more accurately, *do* the job.

TY so much and have a good day!!! Lacey's note had read. I really wanted to leave her a note of my own—and no smiley faces anywhere.

An hour and two papercuts later, I carried a cardboard box full of envelopes out of the conference room. As I came in view of my desk, I drew up short. Darius was leaning against my desk, talking to Stefka.

I'd texted the guys about getting the job, but I hadn't mentioned my specific hours. I couldn't think why Darius, a computer science major, would come to the Lit department unless he was looking for me. Still, I approached hesitantly. "Hi. What are you doing here?"

He smiled. "Hey there. We were hoping you were still on-shift."

Stefka's eyebrows, ever eloquent, shot up.

Darius stepped forward and took the cardboard box from me. "Where's this going?"

“Um, to the mailroom. But I was going to take it on my way out.”

“Arun and I can do that if it’s ready. We’re both done with classes for the day.”

“Arun’s here?” I looked around.

“Yeah, some kind of WA business. I just tagged along.” Arun’s one of the department’s writing assistants, basically an authorized tutor for students who need help with papers and composition. Darius’s gaze shifted over my shoulder. “There he is now.”

Arun came strolling toward us, talking to Professor Hilson, Lockridge’s preeminent Shakespeare scholar who’s the selling point of the whole department. She’d barely said two words to any of us student workers but she was looking at Arun fondly, like a mother hearing about her kid’s class project.

Arun gave me a small smile as they arrived at the reception desk. “Ava,” he said. “How are you settling in?”

“I’m good,” I said softly. “Hello, Professor Hilson.”

“Ms. Le.” She nodded at me. “Is the conference room ready for the meeting?”

“Just cleared it out,” I confirmed.

“How about the agenda, Stefka?”

“I’m almost finished, Professor.”

“I’d like you to email it to me so I can review. But first I need some help setting up my laptop to project. Would you mind?” Professor Hilson gestured toward the conference room.

Stefka’s eyes flicked to Darius, then Arun. “Of course, Professor. Happy to.”

As soon as they went inside, Darius said, “Walk us out, Ava.”

“Um, I shouldn’t just leave—”

“You can take it as a bathroom break,” Monique called.

I was suddenly aware of the other students nearby. If Darius got flirty I'd want that to be private. I got up.



“How are you liking the department?” Arun asked, as we hit the stairwell.

“It’s all right. Still early days.” I was already anticipating Stefkattitude once I got back to my desk. But since Literature is Arun’s major and he probably knows the department fairly well, I didn’t want to say anything negative. “Are y’all heading back to Milner?”

“Yeah, Darius thinks I need to take up video gaming.”

“Ah. I’ve been there. Just go ahead and let him have this.”

“I’m sure he’s got good taste.”

“I certainly do,” Darius interjected.

“I’m just hoping the plans for tomorrow night will be different,” Arun went on.

“Tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Looking a little apprehensive, Arun said, “Darius wants to do some kind of boys’ night.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Seth also,” Darius said. “I’m still working on Colin.”

We got to the ground floor, and I used the pretense of opening the stairwell door to process the news.

“Obviously we’d rather spend the time with you,” Darius said quickly. “It’s not about trying to exclude you. It’s just that Arun and I got to talking the other day and—”

I gave him a steely look. “This isn’t gonna be like the three of you putting Arun through some kind of hazing process, is it?”

“I mean...define *hazing*.”

Arun's eyes widened. I swatted Darius's elbow. "Just bring him back in one piece."

"So you're okay with this?" Arun asked.

"Sure, if you are." He and Darius exchanged glances. "What? Did you want me to not be okay?"

"We just didn't want you to feel left out. But it's only one Friday night," Darius said quickly.

Aside from Mimi sexiling me out of the room, Friday nights at Lockridge never used to mean anything to me. They were just one of the seven nights per week I passed alone and friendless. I didn't love the reminder that Friday nights were supposed to have some kind of special status, that it was a bigger deal to spend them solo.

I pitched my tone light. "If you're dragging Colin out of his room, hopefully you can keep him past curfew."

"Technically we haven't managed to get him onboard yet," Darius admitted, "but maybe we can stop by and see you after. Entice him with the possibility of Ava time later in the night."

I wrinkled my nose. "Phrasing it like that might get me thinking the worst if he turns down the opportunity. And I don't want to pressure him."

"If I know Colin, he's secretly hoping someone *will*. As long as we don't do it too often, it'll be fine. He can't be shut in all semester."

As someone who'd basically been a shut-in, and not for valid academic reasons, I didn't feel qualified to judge. "Well, have fun. But not *too* much fun. Feel me?"

Darius grinned. "We'll do our best to keep out of scandals."

"Let's hang out this weekend, though," Arun said. He touched my upper arm lightly, just a whisper of contact, and *looked* at me with those warm dark eyes.

"I'd love to." I smiled. "I should head back now. Thanks for taking those." I nodded at the cardboard box in Darius's arms.

"You can thank me later." He winked.

When I got to my desk, Stefka was already typing away on her keyboard. She ignored me, but Nadia and Monique and Joe were all curious about how I knew Darius and Arun.

“Oh, um.” I decided to go with the simple version. “Arun’s my RA and Darius lives across the hall.”

“Ugh, so lucky,” Joe said. “I’d be thirsting day and night.”

“About which one?” Monique asked in amusement.

“Both, obvi.”

“Arun for me,” Nadia said. “I love that he’s a Lit major. Hope he stops by more often.”

“Yeah, Ava, tell them they can come visit during your shift *any* day,” Monique added.

“Ava,” Stefka said coolly, “I need twenty copies of this, front and back, stapled.” She handed me a sheaf of papers.

Joe waggled his eyebrows behind her back, and we all returned to work.

16

AVA

When I talked to Arun about therapy that first night, I was only halfway there in my own mind. I figured he'd be a hundred percent for it, given his parents' jobs—not to mention his own. I was right, and the way he talked through the process made it feel like something real, like something I could actually do. But still, I wanted to sit with the choice for a bit.

In the end, I dithered about it for weeks, until the last hour before the student health center closed on Friday afternoon. My last class of the day, Comparative Poetry, finished at three p.m. Afterward, I went over to the health center. I stepped up to the front desk, my heart pounding. When the receptionist asked how she could help me, I had to clear my throat—twice—before asking for a therapy appointment.

Apparently oblivious to my struggle, she simply nodded and handed me a form to fill out, as well as a couple of pamphlets. “Would you prefer a therapist of a particular gender?” she asked. “Or with a particular specialty?”

I stared at her. “Um, I don't know. I guess it doesn't matter.”

She clacked her fingers over her keyboard. “We actually had a cancellation for this coming Wednesday at nine. Would that work for you? Intake appointments usually last ninety minutes.”

My first class that day wasn't until eleven, so I really had no excuse not to take it. I cleared my throat again, said, “Yes, thank you,” and found a seat to work on the form.

There were questions about why I was seeking therapy, whether I was feeling depressed or anxious or suicidal, how well I was sleeping and eating. There was a lot of space to write, but I kept it short and sparse and factual. My father had died. My mother and I weren't speaking. I'd had three panic attacks. I didn't think I was suffering from anything else, but hopefully the therapist would be able to figure out what was

up with me and give me the “tools” for dealing with it, as Arun had said.

As I came out of the building, I heard someone call my name. Coming up the path toward me was Haley, the sophomore I’d met while visiting Darius.

“Hey, lady,” she said. “How was the rest of your break?”

“Pretty good. How was yours?” What if she asked why I’d gone to the health center? I racked my brain to think of questions to keep her talking.

“Yeah, it was all right. Hey, I’m glad we ran into each other. I’ve been meaning to email you about hanging out. You wouldn’t happen to be free tonight, would you?”

“Um. Actually, yeah, I am.” Was it weird for a girl with three and a half boyfriends to confess that she had no plans for a Friday night?

Haley at least didn’t betray any surprise. “Awesome. The international students are throwing a party. Want to come?”

“How would we get in?”

She laughed good-naturedly. “You remember Martina, my girlfriend? She’s from Argentina and as a resident of International House, she’s technically a host. You don’t want to miss this. Their parties are *legendary*.”

“Well, okay, sounds cool.”

“Great! Let’s see, you’re in Milner, right? My dorm’s Janice, which is in between you and International House. So why don’t you stop by around eight and we’ll walk over together? And feel free to bring anyone else who wants to come!”

We’d reached an intersection with another path, and Haley had some business in the opposite direction from Milner. So we exchanged numbers and went our separate ways. I found myself walking faster, like I’d been injected with caffeine. Someone had invited me out! Someone I wasn’t dating or interested in dating, and who wasn’t forced to live with me.

Someone who could potentially be a friend. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd made a new friend.

It was only a few weeks into the new semester and compared to the first couple of months of last semester there were already so many more people in my life. I'd been stuck in an asocial cave in a shitty roommate arrangement, convinced I didn't deserve any better. Now I felt like I was breathing fresh air, taking flight into a beautiful sky.



Kaya hopped and squealed when I asked if she was interested in going to the international party. "Yes! Yesyesyes! Now what are we going to wear?" She went to her closet, and her voice floated from the depths as she rummaged. "Layers? It's cold out, but there's going to be a shitload of people there and we want to be versatile as well as cute. But then we also shouldn't wear anything we'd be heartbroken to lose, so it can't be any of our favorite pieces."

"Um, hold up. Why would we lose our clothes?"

She poked her head around her closet door with one eyebrow cocked. "The one they threw last semester was batshit bananas. Like, I don't even remember half of what transpired. But I for sure didn't make it back to my room with all my same clothes."

"And you want a *repeat* of that experience?"

Kaya stuck her tongue out at me. "I didn't say it was a bad experience. Anyway, don't worry. You'll have me and this Haley chick and we'll all look out for each other."

For her outfit, Kaya went for a tight navy top which showed off the chest she'd been blessed with, plus a black skirt and patterned tights. Meanwhile, I settled on a strappy black top layered under an off-the-shoulder gray sweater, over black skinny jeans and black ankle boots. Kaya let me borrow a pair of chunky black earrings to complete the look, and I topped it off with the bracelet the boys had gotten me plus Darius's

matching necklace. I planned on removing precisely none of those items until after the party when I got back to our room.

It was cold as a witch's tit, so we had to cover up all our cuteness with winter coats and scarves. As we crunched through a fresh layer of snow toward Haley's dorm, I was glad I'd gone with boots instead of Kaya's fancy heels.

Haley, for her part, was wearing heels as well, but she'd contrasted them with tight ripped jeans and a hot bomber jacket. Her makeup also looked super dramatic. Kaya's did, too. I'd opted for bronze eyeshadow and a dark lip, but I didn't have the patience or the bravery to try anything complicated.

Still, Haley gave me an admiring onceover. "Girl, you are *servin'* looks. A whole four-course meal. No wonder you got those boys on such a short leash."

"Right?" Kaya said. "Can you believe she pulled this together in twenty minutes?"

"Some people are just unfairly and unnaturally gifted."

Kaya nodded. "Queen shit."

I rolled my eyes. "Y'all are so OTT you're making me sound like some kind of self-esteem charity project."

"She does this a lot," Kaya explained past me.

"What? Refusing to take compliments?" Haley said. "Not acknowledging her feminine mystique?"

"Exactly. It's like, know your impact, ma'am. Revel in it. But nah, she keeps tryin' to play humble."

"So frustrating." Haley nodded.

"We're all tasty snacks, all right?" I said brightly. "Can we move along to the party now?"



International House is in fact a house. It apparently used to be the residence of the Lockridge College president back in

the day. Now the president lives off-campus, and International House is a remodeled and repurposed Victorian mansion where about two dozen students live, in what amounts to a luxury mini-dorm. Apparently the multi-million-dollar remodel of the house came entirely from private donations made by several international students' families.

"I can believe it," Kaya said as we walked over. "You know Lockridge doesn't award any kind of financial aid to international students, right? So they're all rich as fuck."

"Facts," Haley confirmed.

Lockridge has way more international students than the ones living in the house, so each year's residents are decided in a super-competitive lottery. But according to Kaya and Haley, the lottery can be gamed if you have the right connections. Hearing about that process—and I suppose the parties and general swankiness—gave International House an exclusive mystique in my mind.

It was packed when we arrived, with people spilling out into the snowy garden around the house. White Christmas lights were strung over the exterior and also the surrounding tree branches, lending an air of elegance to the scene. That was in stark contrast to the explicit music pounding through the open windows, and a raucous cheer that went up from somewhere in the depths of the building.

Kaya turned to me with starry eyes. "Baby, you better hold my hand because I am about to do so much damage in there."

I laughed at her. "I'm not sure I want to witness any of that."

"Let's look for Martina," Haley said.

I'd met Martina during Darius's video game night, but we hadn't had a chance to chat in-depth. It didn't seem like we'd get a chance tonight either. She was already lit as fuck when we found her, damn near spilling the *two* drinks she was holding when she immediately grabbed Haley and attempted to lick the lips off her face.

"Niiice to meet you," Kaya said, amused.

Martina came off Haley with a fuzzy smile. “Here!” She shoved the drinks at us. “Have!” She pressed her cheek against mine, dewy with perspiration. “Where’s your entourage?”

“She’s flying free tonight,” Kaya offered. “Independent woman.”

Martina’s eyes widened. “Oooh, love that for you!”

I snorted. “This is my roommate, Kaya. Thanks for inviting us.” I paused. Actually, had Martina technically invited us or had Haley?

Martina didn’t take issue with my phrasing. She flapped her hand vaguely. “Thank you for coming! Come on, come on, we’ve got dancing.”

She grabbed my hand and Kaya’s, and Haley put her hands on Martina’s hips to follow behind. With all of us in tow, Martina pushed her way through the crowd like a ship carving through ocean waves.

I really freaking love dancing. I’m not necessarily good at it, but who cares about skill level when it’s so fun? Unfortunately in Juniper, other than prom, I could only get my fix at parties and it was always with people I grew up with. Invariably someone would make a dumb joke or act a fool and it would shift the mood. The only time I was ever able to really let go was when Jodie and I went to see BTS in Charlotte. Being surrounded by strangers—albeit fellow ARMY—had felt so liberating.

Dancing with Martina and Haley and Kaya felt a lot like that. We made a little unit of our own in the crush of people. With no room to be shy about making contact, we danced right in each other’s spaces, checking out each other’s moves, giving props where due.

I finished my drink and accepted another from Kaya, stronger and fruitier. A pleasant buzz descended and I went outside for some fresh air. All the pretty Christmas lights had bright halos and seemed to be dancing as well. I took a picture and sent it to the guys along with a message: **Hope y’all are having a good night!**

Darius had told me they couldn't convince Colin to leave the dorm, so they'd taken the party to him instead. The plan was to post up in the common room on Colin's floor and play poker—or some other high stakes card game that was probably actually about dick-measuring.

Sure enough, Seth messaged back with a picture of what looked like a huge pile of betting chips. **Issa bloodbath!** he wrote, along with the money face emoji. Colin sat in the background, looking into the camera over the top of his cards. He was a little blurry compared to the clear chips. I sighed. I really missed his face.

But they deserved guy time as much as I deserved girl time. And it was good that we didn't have to be in each other's pockets at every chance. It meant I could just relax and enjoy flying free, as Kaya had called it.

I went back into the party, intending to do just that.



Around midnight, Kaya started comparing notes with a couple of British guys about creampiees in porn, of all the fucking things. We were playing what I'd thought was a perfectly friendly game of snooker. But turns out there's nothing the Brits can't turn into sexual innuendo, and when it comes to sexual innuendo, snooker is low-hanging fruit.

“Some would call it the lowest hanging,” one of the guys said, smirking.

That was Allen. He was the one who'd invited us to play, and he seemed to be on a serious mission to get some *private* playtime with Kaya. Based on their professed mutual appreciation of a well-timed cumshot, I had no doubt he'd accomplish it. I just hoped they'd decide on a venue other than Milner 2nd.

The other guy was named Ian, and he was at least quieter about his kinks. Compared to the happy over-sharers, he was pretty quiet overall, mostly focusing on whether we all

understood the difference between snooker and pool. He made sure to call out which balls we were supposed to be pocketing when, and was apparently sober enough to keep an accurate tally of everyone's individual points. The problem was, for all his sober counting he'd apparently forgotten my name. He'd just say, "You're at six now," or "That's nine for you."

We'd lost Haley and Martina a while back. The two of them had whispered smilingly into each other's ears before disappearing upstairs. I wasn't betting on seeing them again tonight.

Speaking of whispering, Kaya was now doing that with Allen, propping her elbow on his shoulder as she cupped her hands around her mouth and leaned in. Her chest pressed into his side.

It seemed she'd asked him for help with hitting the cue ball. The two of them bent over the table, Kaya in front and Allen behind. He stretched his arms over hers, adjusting her hold on the wooden cue.

"That's a bit of the blind leading the blind," Ian remarked. We were standing together at the far end of the table

"How so?" I asked.

"Allen's actually a terrible snooker player."

"That's funny, because Kaya's actually a killer at pool."

Ian cracked a rare smile. "So she's hustling him?"

"Well, it's possible the skills aren't that transferable," I said loyally. "Maybe the differences are throwing her off."

"Not to worry. Allen would say they're both doing well where it matters." He inclined his head in their direction.

And yep, they were full-on kissing now. I turned ninety degrees, not wanting to look at them but also wanting to keep an eye on them. Now I was facing Ian. "I think the next turn is Allen's, right?"

Ian nudged his glasses up his nose. "Unfortunately. Suppose the game's on pause now. Do you, ah, want another drink?"

I shook my head. “No offense, but I’m gonna stay close to her until she tells me not to.”

“No, of course. But I can fetch you a drink if you’d like.”

I wasn’t about to sip something from a dude I’d just met. “I’m good. Maybe you could go ahead and take Allen’s turn. I doubt they’d notice or care.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough.”

I wasn’t more than a passable pool player. What skills I had were thanks to my ex Matt, whose parents kept a pool table in their basement. I’d never used it as a pretext for making out, though. *Maybe if I had, he wouldn’t’ve stepped out on me*, I thought tipsily.

“Something funny?” Ian asked.

“Huh?”

“You were smiling.”

“Oh! Nothing. I mean, I wasn’t smiling for any specific reason.”

Ian made a *hmm* sound and sank another ball into a pocket.

We kept playing—although for me, playing consisted of watching and waiting for Ian to miss once in a while so that I could finally have a turn. I suspected he only did so because he felt sorry for me.

The game wrapped up in under half an hour. Kaya and Allen still hadn’t come up for air, so Ian gently poked his cue between their bodies. They sprang apart and Allen snatched the cue, pretending to come at Ian with it.

Kaya pulled me aside. “Sorry,” she said breathlessly, not sounding sorry at all.

“Having fun?”

“I’m going to ask him to show me his room. Then I’m going to climb him like a tree.”

“Are you sure?”

“Like a damn *cat*.”

I grinned at her. “I’ll hang around for a little while just in case. But then I’ll probably head back to Milner. Call me if you have any problems, okay?”

“Yup. Hopefully I don’t see you until tomorrow.” She gave me a quick hug and bounced back over to Allen.

I played another quick and mostly silent round with Ian. A couple of times he offered tips on where I “might like to” aim, or that I “might consider” holding my cue differently. I took the suggestions, but in the end he beat me handily.

“Good game,” I said when he sank the final ball. “Thanks for the lessons.” I turned to the cue rack.

“Can’t interest you in another?”

“I think I’m at the point in my snooker career when I should take a break between seasons.”

“Are you leaving the party, then?”

“Yeah, I figured since I haven’t heard from Kaya, my work as a wing woman is done.”

He frowned, looking at the time on his Apple watch. “It’s almost two in the morning. How far is your dorm?”

“Um, maybe fifteen minutes?”

“I’ll walk with you.”

If wasn’t going to accept a drink from a stranger, I sure as hell wasn’t going to walk alone in the dark with him. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine.”

“Do you have anyone you can call right now and then say you’ll call them again in fifteen minutes?”

I stared at him. “What?”

“So you’ll feel safe walking with me,” he said patiently. “If someone’s waiting to hear from you, you can trust I’ll get you there in time.”

“But I could just do that anyway and save you the trip.”

Ian shook his head. “I can’t in good conscience let you go out into the night alone. We’ve been drinking, and I feel

responsible.”

“I was drinking before I met you!” I said stupidly.

“Which may make my estimate of your level of inebriation potentially dangerously inaccurate. Even more reason to make sure you get back safe. Look, if you prefer, I can walk three feet behind you. Or ahead of you, if you want to keep an eye on me. I’m quite adept at walking backwards.”

I folded my arms and lifted my chin. “I’ll only let you come along if you can actually remember my name.”

“Ava Le,” he replied promptly. “First year. And your roommate is Kaya Lopez. Killer pool player. She’s just gone upstairs with Allen Thompson, who lives around the corner from Martina Garcia, whose girlfriend is Haley Newton, who invited you to this party. Martina’s room, incidentally, is just across the hall from mine, and I see both her and Haley regularly. So they’ll know whose balls to come for if I fail to get you back to your dorm in one piece.” He gave me one of his rare smiles. “And I don’t mean snooker.”

I held up my hands. “Let me find my coat.”

But before doing that, I’d text the guys.

17
COLIN

My top choice for how to spend a Friday night off would *not* have been two hours of losing epically to Seth at Texas hold ‘em, especially since unlike the other guys I hadn’t laid eyes on Ava in weeks. But I understood why Darius wanted to carve out the time. I hadn’t seen him in weeks either, and Seth only in passing because we live in the same dorm. Friendships need tending, no matter how close.

And as Darius pointed out—in increasingly adamant text messages over the week—there’s the whole Arun thing.

Darius always speaks highly of the guy, and Seth’s had a couple conversations with him, but I only really know him by reputation. I’d sort of concluded, without thinking too deeply about it, that anyone Ava wanted to be with outside the three of us was really up to her. We all wanted to acknowledge the basic fact that she has the freedom to be with whoever can make her happy. I just assumed those other *whoevers* were her own business—that if I didn’t already know them, then I wouldn’t have to deal with them directly.

Darius had other ideas. Apparently he wanted me to spend my Friday night not just tending friendships, but forging a new one.

I ended up sitting across from Arun, so I had a lot of opportunity to study him directly. He seemed like a chill dude with a good poker face, and he handled the ups and downs of the game well enough. We’d also been drinking a fair amount and he barely seemed buzzed. No surprise there. Arun’s known for being polite and perfect and generally unruffled.

But how can you be friends—much less lovers—with perfection? Acquaintances, sure, but for something lasting and mutual you need more. The guy’s so reserved, so tucked away behind that smooth exterior. How much work would it take to get to anything real or raw?

I had to wonder how hard Ava had to work for him to drop those guards. He had to be giving her something she thought was worth the wait, right?

I studied Arun as Seth, who was on a sick run tonight, dealt the cards for our latest hand. Since this was supposed to be a friendly game, and none of us were experts, the dollar stakes were only high enough to keep things interesting. So far no one had felt the need to fold, and Seth kept it gentlemanly by not raising us out of play. We just kept dealing, betting, showing, and—except for Seth—losing. Each time Seth swept the pot into his pile, Darius and I grumbled, again to keep things interesting. Arun would simply shake his head in amusement.

“All righty folks,” Seth said. “Forty bucks in the pot and the turn is a seven of diamonds.”

No help for me. I’d started with a pair of queens and it looked like that was what I’d end with when all was said and done. But I could see possibilities for the other guys. I’m only so-so at calculating odds, so I like to play based on impressions. Darius had only looked at his hole cards once the entire hand, compared to Arun who’d checked his three times. I guessed Arun was strategizing, re-calculating every time we added to the community cards. Maybe he wasn’t doing too well either.

Then again, his expression now was calmly contemplative. Maybe that meant the turn had been good for him.

It was my bet, so I put in two dollars. Darius raised to four, unsurprisingly. Arun took a moment, then said, “Raise to eight.”

He’d been betting conservatively all along, electing to call more often than raise. For him to raise on Darius now made me think he did have something.

Seth folded. I shot him a surprised look, and he smirked. “Sometimes a hand just doesn’t go your way,” he said.

“Why didn’t that happen an hour ago?” I griped.

“Thought y’all might be motivated with a nemesis to defeat.”

Darius snorted. “What’s next, Colin?”

I took another look at Arun across the table. He was inscrutable, and suddenly I wanted to see that mask crack a bit. “Call,” I said, throwing in the extra chips.

Darius called as well. Seth dealt the river. I watched Arun take it in before I looked at it myself. A slight tightening of the eyes was all he let loose. The man really had a natural born poker face. What was he thinking?

I checked the river card, and it was a seven of spades, which put a pair of sevens on the table. So now I had two pair. I glanced up again and found Arun watching me. Had he been doing that all along?

“The bet is sixteen,” I said, tossing in my chips. Arun didn’t blink.

“Damn, what’s with the sudden aggression?” Darius said. “If I’d known we were gonna play *real* poker I would’ve pushed for free booze and regrets at the international party instead.”

“So are you staying in?”

“Hell no. Fold.”

“Arun?” I queried.

“I’ll meet your sixteen and double it to thirty-two.”

Seth whistled. “They pay RAs that much?”

“Why do you think I want to win the pot?” A rare joke, delivered in a typically even tone.

“All right, I want to see *both* of y’all’s cards.” Darius grinned. “I know Colin can afford it.”

“Fine.” I tossed in the extra. “Arun?”

“Let’s show ‘em.”

Since I’d bet first, I showed my two queens. Arun glanced at me in surprise before laying down his hand—four sevens.

Darius whistled. “Now that is some damn good poker. Deadass.”

Seth shook his head. “You should have bet higher. You could have taken Colin’s whole bag.”

“I didn’t think he’d go past thirty-two,” Arun said. He looked at me again. “Actually, why’d you even stay in? You only had two queens until that last seven arrived.”

And Arun had found himself with three of a kind at the turn. I’d been right about why he finally started to bet on that round.

Seth chortled. “Colin doesn’t care about losing money. To him it’s *only* money.”

I shrugged. “I’m here to play poker.”

“So you *would* have bet higher?” Arun asked. “Bluffing on a pair?”

“Like the wise ones say, go big or go home.”

“Helps a lot when you brought a big bag to begin with.” Seth chortled.

I watched Arun stack his chips. If I wanted to extrapolate poker to real life, I thought this hand had shown he wasn’t much of a risk taker. He played things cool, waiting until the odds were in his favor before making moves. And even when the odds were extremely good, his moves stayed conservative.

What would it mean for Ava to bet her feelings on a guy like that? A guy who thought being with her was too risky, who wanted to wait for better cards to hit the table. And did I have the right to feel any kind of way about that, given how I’d decided my semester should go?

These questions buzzed in my mind. One thing was for sure—I didn’t feel any friendlier to Arun for stirring them up.



Poker morphed into Big Two, which was at least faster paced and didn’t require betting. We played for another hour

before I told the guys I needed to get to bed. I left them in the lounge and took a shower, then did my usual late-night check to ensure all my study outlines were saved and backed up.

Someone knocked on my door. I pulled on a T-shirt—I was just wearing shorts for sleeping—and went to answer. It was Seth.

“Hey, look at that, I can still calculate how long your night routine takes,” he said, slinging himself onto my desk chair.

“Did Darius and Arun leave?”

“Yeah, I think they’re gonna try and pick up Ava on the way back to Milner.”

Seth spotted my guitar and scooped it into his lap. He’s never moved beyond strumming beginner chords, despite my efforts to teach him over the years.

“You didn’t want to go with?” I asked.

“I’ll see her over the weekend.”

Wish I could say the same. “So what’s up?”

His long fingers twanged a buzzy G chord, which he silenced quickly. “Just wanted to check in with you.”

“We just spent like three hours hanging out.”

“Well, I’m still getting used to all this timekeeping we gotta do to stay friends with you.”

I shot him a look. “The first month back and you’re already busting my balls on this? Doesn’t bode well for the rest of the semester.”

“I’m not tryin’ to bust anything,” Seth drawled. “I’m literally just checkin’ to see how you’re doin’.”

“Fine. Kind of tired. Been up since six this morning. Been up at six every morning.”

He made a face. “Can you relax that tomorrow at least? It’s midnight already.”

“Six is for hitting the gym. I need to get that out of the way before hitting the books.”

“Dude.” His hand came down on the strings, making a sound of consternation. “That’s not sustainable. You know you need rest days.”

I shook my head. “I’m focusing on muscle maintenance, not building. But I’ll be fine as long as I regulate my sleep. So…” I glanced at the door.

“All right, already, I get it. But Colin—”

I sighed. Seth’s always tiptoeing up to the edge of a very specific conversation about me and med school. It’s clear what he wants to say. It’s clear what I’ll say back. I’ve always been grateful that he hasn’t outright done it, that he’s respected the boundaries of friendship.

But those boundaries have started to feel blurrier lately. Something between us is shifting. A large part of it is Ava, of course. She’s got us shook, rattled, emotional and raw. I feel like I’m walking around the world with my heart peeled open, and that means a lot of things are finding their way in—or out. Like I’m starting to see those things for the first time. And some of them aren’t even exclusively about Ava. They’re Seth and me things.

I braced myself for whatever he was going to say, preparing what I hoped he’d take as a gentle and reasonable request to postpone the discussion for later.

He surprised me, though. “I’m guessing Ava hasn’t had a chance to talk to you since we got back to school. She’s still having panic attacks.”

The news lanced through me like an arrow. “How many? What did she say about them?”

“I had the privilege of witnessing one in person, when she was visiting. She said it’s been three so far, including fall break. The other one was at Thanksgiving.”

“But we were all together then. I don’t remember anything being off.”

Seth shrugged. “And I had no idea anything was off until a few weeks ago, when it happened right in front of me.”

“Damn,” I breathed. “I did tell her it was possible she’d have more. I just figured she’d say something.”

“Seems like she didn’t want us to know. Didn’t want us to worry about her.”

“I should have paid more attention. Panic attacks are no joke.”

“Yeah, it was fuckin’ scary, dude.” Seth shook his head. “I almost wanted to suggest I do all the driving back to Lockridge in case she had another one on the road. But I don’t think that would have gone over too well.”

“Honestly? I don’t blame you for being freaked out. It’s believed to be a common factor in drowning cases, when swimmers panic and can’t calm down. Even people who’ve specially trained to be in the water can drown like that.”

Seth glowered. “She thinks it’s Juniper that sets her off. I was talking about stopping on the way, maybe trying to see her mom. And then all of a sudden—bam. It was almost like she *was* drowning, just on dry land.”

I nodded slowly. “It makes sense. The other two times she was actually *in* Juniper.”

“It really messed with her. Everything with her parents. It’s like a minefield.” He shook his head again. “I hate that she’s suffering so much.”

I thought of Ava’s tearful, frightened face after I’d talked her through the first attack. Why hadn’t I followed up, urged her to talk to a professional? Hell, Arun would have been a better help than me. Fake-ass wannabe doctor, acting like I had all the knowledge when she was hurting right in front of me.

And what if she’d wanted to tell me she was still having these attacks, but held back because I was so focused on myself?

Fuck, I’d really failed her.

“I might’ve broken the rules ratting all this out to you,” Seth was saying now. “I promised her I wouldn’t tell Darius or Arun, but with you I’m kind of exploiting a loophole since you

already knew about the first one. I just think it's a little too serious to sit on by myself, you know?"

Guiltily, I nodded in agreement. Seth didn't seem to have noticed what his statement had implied about me. "I'll call her tomorrow," I said. "Let her know we're here if she needs us."

"I was thinking about asking her to walk on the trails. No chance you've got time to join us?" Seth asked lightly.

"I don't want her to think we're ganging up on her." The excuse sounded so much weaker outside of my head, but there was still some legitimacy to it. This was something to handle delicately, at Ava's speed.

"Yeah, that might be the right approach."

"Seth, man... thank you for telling me."

"Absolutely. We all care about her." He stood, propping my guitar back up on its stand. "Don't beat yourself up too much. You gave Ava space and you were right to do it. A loner like her won't change overnight."

I stared at the door for a while after he left. How had he known exactly what I needed to hear?

Maybe the same way he always knows what you don't want to hear. The way he always knows exactly what your limits are.

The boundaries between us were blurring, but not because of Seth stepping over them. That wasn't his way. It was because I was finally acknowledging them, questioning them, re-navigating them.

18
AVA

“So did you get into International House through honest luck of the draw,” I asked, “or did you *leverage some connections?*”

Ian peered at me through the darkness. “D’you know, I’m feeling very accused. Is that something you do to everyone you meet for the first time or is it my honest luck of the draw, as you call it?”

“Nothing accusatory,” I said innocently. “I’m just curious how it works.”

“Straightforwardly, in my case. I put my name in the hat. A day later I got an email with a room assignment.”

“So you beat the odds.”

“I like to think that can happen on occasion. Then again, promising to gift the house a snooker table might have helped a bit.”

“You bribed them?”

“Hardly. A snooker table just doesn’t have the same weight as a yearly endowment.”

I gasped. “People do that? And it works?”

“I don’t know. But I should be able to tell you for sure when I apply for a room next year.”

I glared at him suspiciously, but he just walked calmly on, his feet crunching on the sand that had been sprinkled onto all the campus paths to melt the snow.

Deciding to dial it back, I ventured, “So what do you do when you’re not knocking balls with wooden sticks? Academically, I mean.”

“Are you asking what my major is?”

“Sure, why not?” Hard to troll somebody about such a pedestrian subject.

“I haven’t chosen one yet. I’m only in my second year.”

“Oh.” He’d seemed older. Maybe it was the Britishness. “What’s on the shortlist?”

“Political science or philosophy. You?”

“No idea. I wish I’d had time to take a Poli Sci class this year. Philosophy too, actually.”

“Well, as my mother likes to remind me, Wikipedia can tell you everything there is to know about both, *gratis*.”

“She doesn’t approve?”

“Let’s just say she’d be much more approving if I’d decided to forego an undergraduate degree completely, in favor of attending what she likes to call the School of Life.”

“I know a few people who’d love it if their parents gave them that kind of choice.” I thought of Colin, buried in books when he could instead be playing the guitar.

“I suppose I should prefer it as well, only my mother approaches it from a place of hypocrisy. She’s rather overeducated herself, you see. Both my parents are Cambridge professors,” he said, waving a hand with an explanatory air.

Arun’s parents were professors, too, but maybe *Cambridge* professors were cut from a different cloth. Now that Ian and I were actually talking about something real, I could see all the little details of privilege tucked inside his otherwise average, ordinary demeanor. He had plain brown hair and brown eyes, not very flattering metal-framed glasses, and he was wearing unremarkable jeans and boots under an old aviator jacket with a sheepskin collar. At first glance I wouldn’t have noticed anything interesting enough to go back for a second glance.

But when he spoke, he had an easy way with words that was just on the right side of superior, sort of lowkey expensive which probably meant he was actually highkey rich. And

when he didn't speak, he had an air of quiet confidence like a stroll down a runway, remote and untouchable.

Not that anyone would ever mistake Ian for a model. It was just that he had something else. Charisma, maybe.

I drew back from that observation like yanking my hand away from a hot burner. The point was, it felt like nothing had ever rocked this guy's foundation. Colin comes from money, of course, but he works so hard that it always feels like he's striving rather than thriving, like he doesn't take anything for granted.

I searched for something to say. "So why Lockridge? Like, why come to school in the US rather than Cambridge, where you could benefit directly from your parents instead of indirectly with snooker tables?"

He snorted. "You don't know my parents. Anyway, I thought it'd be more interesting to try America for a spell."

"And is it?"

"Some days are certainly more interesting than others." He tilted his shoulders forward, angling his head to look at me.

Before I could ask what *that* meant, I heard my name being called. I looked around and saw Arun and Darius striding up the central campus's snowy, hilly slope.

It was entirely possible that those two *could* pass as models, or at least some kind of romantic dream of male perfection. They looked like a pair of tall, chiseled movie stars emerging from the frosty night, their visuals eating up everything in their path. As usual, I wanted to pinch myself for somehow wishing and winning them into my life.

Darius slung an arm around my waist and pulled me close. "Hey," he said warmly, dropping a kiss to the corner of my mouth. "We got your message about leaving the party so we thought we'd try and catch you."

"Naturally," Ian muttered under his breath.

"How are you?" Arun asked, then glanced around. "Where's Kaya?"

“I’m good. Kaya found more interesting company than me. How’s boys’ night going?”

Darius grinned. “Colin actually just kicked us out, so it was good timing.” He nodded at Ian. “Hey, man. I’m Darius.” He held out a friendly hand to shake.

“This is Ian,” I said. “Ian, this is Darius and Arun. They live on my hall.”

“Ah,” Ian said, taking Darius’s hand. “I was just walking Ava over there.”

“He thought I was drinking too much,” I blurted out, and immediately wanted to smack my forehead.

Arun drew closer. “Are you all right?”

“Of course. *I* think I drank the perfect amount.”

“And who are we to judge?” Darius agreed. “So we walking?” He gestured down the paved path.

“Um, Ian.” I hesitated. “You don’t have to...I mean, now that I’m not on my own.”

He glanced at the guys flanking me. “Right.”

“It’s up to you,” I said quickly. “I’m just saying, if you wanted to go back to the party.”

“I suppose I will. Nice to meet you both.” He executed a polite salute, two fingers softly touching his temple, and turned back.

“Ava out here breaking hearts,” Darius murmured.

“What? I literally met the guy two hours ago.”

“More than enough time.”

“Yep,” Arun said. “Plenty.”

I rolled my eyes and linked arms with them. “And how much did *y’all* have to drink?”



Colin called around ten the next morning. I was still asleep, with an entry-level hangover head that didn't appreciate being woken up by my phone ringing. At least his soft voice soothed some of that.

"Sorry, I can call back later if you want to keep snoozing."

"No, I need to get up." I yawned, stretching underneath my comforter. "How are you?"

"Bummed I couldn't see you last night. I wish I'd made the time."

"Don't even worry about it." I smiled into the phone. "How are things going?"

He talked for a bit about how he was still refining his schedule. It sounded brutal, and not for the first time I wondered how long the internal engine that drove Colin could keep running.

He asked about the party last night, and as I answered I turned onto my side, spotting Kaya sprawled in her own bed across the room. I kept my volume hushed so as not to wake her.

Then Colin said, "So...Seth told me about the panic attack at his house. And the one at Thanksgiving."

I sat up straight, wide awake now. No surprise that Seth would go to Colin about it. In a way it was actually a relief that I didn't have to tell on myself. "Yeah. Um. I guess you were right about them reoccurring."

"I really didn't want to be. I'm sorry I didn't pay more attention. You shouldn't have had to suffer alone."

"Or I could have just said something. I don't know why I felt like I couldn't."

"Well, I'm worried about you. I wish I could make them stop somehow."

"Me, too. But I promise I'm working on it." I smiled to soften my voice. "Speaking of, I'm worried about you too, you know."

“Me? Why?”

“Because I know exactly what it’s like to hole myself up in my room spending all my time studying and not talking to people. I don’t want you to get burned out.”

“I promise I’ll send an SOS before that happens.” His tone was light, his laughter soft. Sufficiently distracted, the conversation turned after that, although it was far too short in the end.

Later, as I went to plug in my phone at my desk, Kaya rolled over and peeked out at me from the fluffy pile of her pillows.

“Which one of your honeys was that?” she asked sleepily.

“Colin,” I whispered. “Sorry if I was too loud.”

“Nah, I couldn’t sleep anyway. My stomach’s been trying to decide what to do with itself for the last fifteen minutes.”

I snatched up her trash can and put it next to her bed, then pushed her water bottle into her hands. “Do you need anything else?”

Kaya levered herself upright and sipped from the bottle. “Thanks. I’ll be okay.”

I perched on the edge of my bed, ready to spring to action if it looked like her hangover might get the best of her. “What time did you get in? Were you with that guy the whole time?”

“With Allen, yeah. I stumbled back around seven. Didn’t want to wake up with him.” She held up a finger to stop me from talking while she took another sip. “Not because there was anything wrong with him. The exact opposite, in fact. I just think for the first morning after, less is more.”

I nodded in understanding. “Leave ‘em wanting.”

“You got it.”

“So you had fun? Do you want to see him again?”

She smirked. “I’ll spare you the gory sexy details and just give you the TLDR version. Which is basically, hells yeah and sure why not. But I don’t want him living in my head until it’s clear *he* wants to see *me* again.”

“You’re so enlightened,” I laughed. “Have you considered teaching classes?”

“Girl, you should talk.” Kaya blinked at me. “Why are you waking up alone, anyway?”

“I’m not alone. I’m with you.”

She blew a raspberry at me. “Why are you waking up with a honey on the phone instead of in bed next to you?”

“Nothing dramatic. I just don’t want to overdo it.”

“Oh, sweetie. You *do* need lessons from me. With three and a half guys in your stable, it’s not possible to overdo anyone.”

I grabbed my own water bottle and flicked some at her. “I don’t even know where to start with that so I think I’ll just end it.”

Laughing, Kaya stood and grabbed her bath towel from the hook on her closet door. “I gotta go wash the sex off. But hey, wait a second! I should have said you may well have four guys at this point.”

“For the last time, I’m not dating Arun—”

“No, no, he still only counts as half. I’m saying I picked up vibes for a potential new half.” Kaya waggled her eyebrows.

“Okay, the half a guy talk is gross and putting me off breakfast. Can we just use names like normal people?”

“Allen’s friend Ian.”

“The guy we played snooker with?” I wrinkled my nose.

“What, not interested? He was hot in a *tsundere* kind of way.”

I put my water bottle back on my desk and started making my bed. “Not really.”

“Not really interested or not really hot?”

“Both. And I’ve got enough going on anyway.”

Kaya fluttered the end of her towel at me. “True. Maybe I’ll take a lesson from you and snatch him for myself. Get my own harem going.”

I rolled my eyes. “I only have one teaching to pass on. Learn how to be flexible.”

“What, physically or mentally?”

I gave her a wink.



When I went to Arun’s room to invite him to brunch, his door was partly ajar. I knocked gently and pushed it open. He wasn’t alone. Bonnie, a sophomore from the other end of the hall, was sitting cross-legged on his rug. Her face was blotchy from crying, and she was hugging one of his throw pillows to her chest.

“Oh, s-sorry,” I stuttered. “I didn’t realize—”

“It’s okay,” Arun said quietly. “Do you mind coming back later?”

He’d used his RA voice, his authoritative and responsible voice. It was my clearest reminder since we’d gotten back to school: Arun didn’t just live on Milner 2nd. He *worked* here. He was the grown-up taking care of all of us, supporting us like a pillar, trusted with our private problems, as reliable as a clock. And right now, he didn’t have time for brunch with some first-year who just wanted to debrief about the fun party she went to last night.

I met up with Seth instead, and we followed brunch with a walk in the afternoon. It had warmed up enough to melt a lot of the snow from the trails. We didn’t risk crossing the creek, as the rocks looked frosty and slippery. But we stood on the bank and contemplated the clear water as it babbled its way past. Seth stood behind me and put his arms around my chest for warmth, speaking into my ear with a low voice.

“I told Colin about the panic attack. I’m sorry if that was the wrong thing to do.”

“I know. I talked to him this morning. It’s fine. You shouldn’t have to treat it like some awful secret.” I shifted my

weight. “I’d still rather tell Darius and Arun on my own.”

“Yeah, understood. I guess I just felt like maybe Colin could help. Even if it’s mostly moral support rather than medical.”

“Actually...” I took a nervous breath. “I made an appointment to see a campus therapist on Wednesday.”

Seth gave me a tiny squeeze. “That sounds great. I hope it helps.”

“I asked Arun about how therapy works. It’s possible I’ll never be okay about this stuff. And if that’s the case, I might never be able to forgive my mom. And if I can’t forgive her...”

I braced myself for Seth’s disappointment in me, but he gave me another small squeeze and said, “No worries, there’s plenty of time to keep trying. “

He sounded sincerely optimistic, and maybe that was why I’d felt okay telling him about my decision, despite the nerves. Only now I felt more stirred up than comforted. I thought of how easily Seth had asked me about stopping by Juniper and seeing my mother, like it was some good fortune I’d of course want to snatch. He’d posed the question so naturally because he’s *that* guy. The guy who met up with his toxic ex and felt grateful for the experience she put him through. The guy who believes in the power of healing closure, and would probably never be in danger of a panic attack after seeing the person who’d hurt him the most.

Whereas for me, just thinking about the panic attack I’d had seemed dangerous, like my mind remembered the awful sensation so incredibly clearly that it wouldn’t take much of a push to slip right back into it.

I couldn’t be Seth no matter how much I wanted. My heart isn’t a soft goose down pillow. My heart is a tank, armored up and embattled, with only a select few allowed in to look around.

It made me feel small and shriveled and mean. I knew Seth didn’t intend it that way. He was simply being understanding and non-judgmental as usual. And yet his generosity of spirit

was like a glowing light that showed all my armored plates for the scarred, beaten, terrible things they were. I didn't see a future where I ever got rid of them completely. But I did want to stop hiding behind them. Someday.

OceanofPDF.com

19

AVA

That was the mentality I took into my first therapy appointment. I showed up fifteen minutes early, feeling so jittery that I paced in front of the therapist's door just to deal with the excess energy.

After about five years, the clock on my phone finally ticked over to the appointment time. I counted ten seconds and then knocked on the door.

The woman who opened it didn't immediately look like someone who could listen to all my deepest darkest secrets and figure out what was wrong with me. I'd vaguely pictured someone around Professor Chudasama's age, fifty or so, with a similar air of authority and knowledge. But this woman was shorter than me, dressed casually in a plaid shirt and jeans, and she seemed young, closer to my age than to my mom's. Her long dark hair was streaked with subtle purple, matching her nails, which I spotted when she held her hand out to shake. "Hi, you must be Ava," she said, in a deep carrying voice. "I'm Mary Khoury."

I somehow reached past her hand entirely and grabbed her wrist. "Hi. Um. Sorry." I dropped her arm. *Ava, the fuck?* "Should I call you Dr. Khoury?"

"No, Mary is fine. I'm not actually a doctor, but I am a licensed professional counselor." She smiled, smoothly not acknowledging my awkwardness. "Anyway, it's lovely to meet you. Please take a seat anywhere you like."

There was a desk next to the window, full of papers, with bookcases lining the nearest wall. In front of the desk, facing each other, were two pale green sofas with throw pillows of different designs and colors. A coffee table sat in the middle. I immediately noticed the fact that there were two tissue boxes, each housed in some kind of fancy woven container. Maybe

therapists needed more than one because of all the crying that happened.

I chose the closest sofa, which happened to put me in view of the clock on the opposite wall. Mary took the other sofa and crossed her legs, propping a notepad on her knee. “Now, just to get some admin stuff out of the way. When you made this appointment, the receptionist should have given you some materials about how the health center works and the various therapists we have. Did you get a chance to review them?”

In fact, they were sitting in my bag, where they’d remained untouched since I first put them there. *Already failed the first step, great.* “No, sorry,” I said. “I thought they were just—I didn’t realize they had all that...”

“That’s completely fine.” Mary gave me a reassuring smile. “I always like to talk through everything anyway. So maybe we can start with me telling you about myself and my own personal practice. And hopefully if you like what you hear, you can then tell me what brings you here today. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good.”

She nodded. “Feel free to ask me questions as well. Think of this first session like a job interview. I work for Lockridge, and by extension that means I work for you. You’re my client, which means two things. First, I owe you certain duties of care which I’ll discuss. And second, you can fire me at any time, for any reason, and ask for a different therapist. That includes right now, an hour from now, tomorrow, next week, whenever. The most important thing in therapy is for you to feel safe and supported. Okay?”

I realized I’d tangled my fingers together in my lap. I pulled them apart and tucked them beneath my thighs. “Okay.”

“I’ve been with Lockridge for about five years. I specialize in trauma and abuse counseling. My methodology is primarily centered around talk therapy.”

Mary continued describing her work, but I found myself focusing more on her demeanor, the way she was dressed, the

way her office was decorated. I decided she felt comfortable. I didn't know how good she'd actually be at the therapy part of it all, but I thought she made it feel safer to try.

“So,” she said finally, “why don't you tell me what's going on with you? Whatever you feel okay sharing at this point is fine.”

And just like that, trying starts right now.

I cleared my throat. “Uh, well. I guess the main reason I'm here is that I've been having panic attacks. Three so far. They're pretty scary, and also pretty embarrassing when they happen around other people. And they also just take me out for the whole day afterward. Like I'll struggle to have enough energy to hold even a simple conversation.”

“That's very common. Panic attacks put your body in extreme fight or flight mode. There are real physiological effects from that. Your adrenaline spikes, your muscles clench all over, your heart races, you sweat... It's an intensely emotional *and* physical experience.”

“Yeah, I have a...friend who's pre-med, and he said the same thing.”

“I can definitely give you some techniques to help whenever a panic attack hits, but the harder work is in trying to resolve the deeper underlying cause. Do you have any idea why these are happening? I reviewed your paperwork and I know you lost your father recently. But panic attacks can be caused by any kind of life change or transition, including the act of moving away to college.”

“Well, um. I don't know if ‘triggered’ is the right word...? But I think they're triggered by my mom.”

“That's one of the words we typically use, yes,” Mary said. “Tell me about your mother.”

I crossed my left leg over my right. “Well, to begin with, we don't talk right now. I haven't seen her in person since the day I left for Lockridge. The last time I heard her voice was months ago when we had an argument over the phone. Then she texted me to ask when I'd be home for winter break, and I

told her I wasn't coming, and she called me a disappointment."

"What would you say was the reason for breaking contact?"

"Well, like you mentioned, my dad died last year. He'd had stomach cancer for a while." As I spoke, I found myself focusing on the clock on the wall, the second hand ticking steadily around the face. "He really suffered, especially toward the end. And my mom just didn't seem to care."

Mary nodded, her eyes rounded in clear sympathy. "Let's take some time to unpack this. First of all, I'm so sorry you lost your father. Especially at your age, it's a terrible and traumatizing thing, and it sounds like it was a long process which you witnessed up close."

"Yeah," I said softly. "I took a year off school because I wanted to be there for him—for them. We knew he wouldn't be able to beat it. I mean, we hoped. But really...we knew."

"And you're an only child, is that right?"

"Yeah."

"So in the house, it was just you and your parents?"

"Yes, just the three of us."

"Including during your dad's illness?"

I nodded. "During the daytime, Mom was at work. They owned a coffee shop. Well, she still owns it, but what I mean is they owned it together and ran it together. Then Dad got too sick to work and we worried about him being at home alone. So I kept him company."

"And what did that look like? What was your typical day?"

Somehow my hands had moved to my lap again, my fingers twisting into a knot. "In the morning I'd make sure he took his medications. I'd make breakfast for both of us. If he wasn't feeling too bad, he'd lie on the couch watching TV for most the day. If he did feel bad, he'd stay in his room so he could get to the bathroom faster. Sometimes he'd need help because he felt too weak to walk or stand." My throat tightened, and my voice roughened. "So I'd let him lean on me. A few times I

had to clean up after him. Help him into the shower. Scrub the mess.”

“That must have been very hard for you. You had to take care of your dad almost like *you* were his parent.”

I nodded again. In my mind I saw Dad’s face turned away in shame, heard his soft gruff murmur. *I’m sorry. Thank you.*

“And it sounds like, since you were the one at home while your mother was at work, those kinds of burdens fell much more on you than on her. And so as you said, it felt like she didn’t care?”

“It was more than that. Because when she did get home, she didn’t help. She might make dinner or bring takeout if she was too tired to cook. But I was still the one who gave Dad his evening meds. I helped him get ready for bed. Meanwhile she hardly ever asked how he was doing, even. And besides that, I took him to his appointments. When he had to be in the hospital, I was there. I was the one talking to the doctors and nurses and aides. I spent so many nights sleeping in the chair next to his bed. And she was just nowhere. I barely saw her.”

I could hear myself talking faster, getting heated. I’d already told some of this to the guys, but somehow it felt even better to let it all out to a stranger, to someone older, a professional.

“Do you know what she thinks about her level of involvement?”

I sucked my teeth. “She’s in complete denial. She wouldn’t even listen to me when I tried to talk to her about it.”

“When was that?”

“October. That fight we had on the phone. But even before that, we lived in the same house for months between the day Dad died and the day I left for school, and we just...didn’t talk to each other. She never tried to talk to me about losing Dad. It was almost like he was never part of our lives. If it weren’t for his pictures and his stuff you’d doubt he existed.”

“That sounds incredibly lonely. For both of you.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t really care how lonely it was for her. Sometimes I think she doesn’t even have the right to say she lost him. Like at the funeral, when everyone was giving her their condolences. I just wanted to scream about how they had no idea what really happened. I wanted everyone to know the way she *really* treated him, that he deserved so much better than her.”

“And did you?”

I stared at her. “Of course not.”

“Why do you say of course?”

“It just...wouldn’t have been right.”

Mary tapped her pen on her notepad. “I’m not saying you should have. What I’m getting at is that you had and still have a lot of anger and resentment about the way your mother handled things. And you never really got a chance to express that to her or to anyone whose opinion might have mattered to her. You felt silenced. And when people don’t have an outlet to express their feelings, the expression tends to happen in other ways. Ways that are more volatile and uncontrolled than they might have been otherwise, because the emotions have been suppressed for so long.”

“Like panic attacks.”

“Like panic attacks,” she confirmed.

“So what’s the solution? Call my mom and unload everything I’ve been suppressing?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t give you guarantees. I can’t promise that speaking to her would be a quick fix or even a fix at all, because people rarely react the way we hope they will. It’s not like the movies where every conflict resolves with catharsis and a happy ending.” Mary smiled almost apologetically. “But we can do a lot to dig into the things that are bothering you, and in the meantime, we can teach you how to take better care of yourself and your mental health.”

“What if I have another panic attack?”

“That’s part of what we can work on. I’d like to teach you some breathing exercises, and also some techniques to redirect your focus when you’re in the middle of a bad moment. How does that sound?”

I sighed. “I mean, obviously I’ll try anything.”

“It’s not so obvious.” Mary shook her head. “Give yourself credit for the sheer effort of trying. First of all, it’s huge to recognize that you need some help. Most people never get there. Then it’s another huge step to *seek* help. And following that, I think you’ll find that actually working on yourself day to day, week to week, is absolutely a real and intensive form of labor. There may be some things you don’t want to do but you push yourself to try anyway. There may be some things that don’t help so you push yourself to try something else. You deserve to acknowledge those moments as achievements.” She paused. “What’s on your mind, hearing me say these things?”

“Mostly I guess...that we’ll have to see. This is only my first day, right?” I heaved another sigh. “It sounds really hard.”

“It is hard, but you’ve already shown incredible bravery and strength to put yourself on this path. You had those qualities inside you. Remind yourself of that when things get difficult.”



Mary warned that I’d probably feel tired the rest of the day, which was definitely true. All of my classes passed by like a TV left on in another room, distant light and noise. Yet my thoughts raced. I kept going over what I’d said during the session. So many memories had been raked up, and now they were zipping around my mind, making me question everything. Was I remembering it all correctly? And how much had Mary been able to psychoanalyze me based on the things I’d said?

And I wondered whether any of it was serious enough for therapy.

Most people go through something shitty in their lives, that inner doubtful voice of mine pointed out. Most people get over it just fine.

I glanced around at the other students in my classes, studiously taking notes, raising their hands to say smart things in response to the professors' questions. They were all so focused and unbothered and *normal*. I couldn't imagine any of them were dreading the next messy-as-fuck panic attack, lurking like a hidden time bomb, ready to announce their weakness to the world. As far as I could tell, none of them had weaknesses at all.

Why was I different?

OceanofPDF.com

I was super hype about signing up for Advanced Game Design with Professor Rao this semester, and so far the class was living up to it. The first day, she distributed a whole packet of materials about how to protect our intellectual property. She told us, “Some of you might well come out of this class with concepts that develop into future triple-A titles. Some of you may simply stick them in a folder and never look at them again. But even if an idea isn’t ultimately profitable, it’s still valuable to you on your journey as a creator.”

Our final grade was based on creating a game of our own and developing a minimum viable product. We had the option to work solo or in groups, but groups would have the additional requirement of documenting each member’s tasks and workloads. Professor Rao would also be able to see all of our code commits.

At the end of the fourth week, she said we needed to start thinking about our eventual product. “This is not something you’re going to pull together at the last minute during finals,” she explained. “You’ll be developing throughout the semester with specifically scheduled sprints, and I’ll be assessing the results of each sprint and expecting you to process my feedback during the next sprint. So use this coming week to think long and hard about your concepts and your teams.”

As I walked out, Lena joined me. So far, I hadn’t had much opportunity to talk to her during class, which was probably for the best since I remembered she and Ava had kind of a problem at Monroe’s party in Chicago. But then Ava ended up going to the international party with Lena’s friend Haley, so I figured it was just a bad first impression. Anyway, Comp Sci is a small major and it’s not a bad idea to keep it copacetic with people you’re going to see again and again in the same classes over multiple years.

Case in point: Lena opened the conversation with, “This is so much more interesting than OS last semester, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely. And way better than the Intro Game Design class with McLoughlin. This is actually gonna be hands-on real.”

“Have you had a chance to think about what you’re doing for the final?” Lena asked.

We hit the staircase and started heading down. “Yeah, but some of that’s gonna be limited by my coding skills. I’ll never be a software engineer.”

“Sounds like you’re better at the conceptualizing than the mechanics?”

Professor Rao’s lecture today had been about the dichotomy between these two fundamental kinds of expertise and how some game developers lean more toward one than the other. “Yeah.” I paused at the bottom of the stairs. “I could probably make up a whole game on paper, but ask me to code it into existence? That’s like asking a kindergartener to do a self-portrait with crayons.”

“Come on, you still had to pass Rao’s proficiency test to get in the class.”

“I mean, sure, I can do the shit. I’m just saying it comes a lot harder for me.”

“Meanwhile I’m the person with all the fancy paints and brushes but I only know how to copy what’s in front of me.”

I grinned at her. “You angling for a team up? I’m the idea person and you’re the one who makes it all happen?”

“If you have some actual ideas, I wouldn’t just be angling. I’d be actively saying.”

“I might already be brainstorming, yeah.” I checked the time on my phone—almost noon. “Are you free later today to talk through some of it?”

“Why don’t we talk over lunch now?”

“I’m supposed to have lunch with Ava. But we could meet at the coffee bar at five. I need time to organize my notes anyway.”

Lena pursed her lips and nodded. “Fine, see you then.”



Ava had specifically asked if we could meet up, because she had “something important” to tell me. Her news punched me square in the chest. I stayed quiet as she explained her panic attacks, how Colin and Seth had helped her through them, how Arun had helped her decide to go to therapy.

“Are you mad I didn’t tell you before?” she asked.

“No, of course not,” I said automatically. “But...I’m really the last to know?”

She reached over the table and took my hand. “It wasn’t intentional. Colin and Seth just happened to be there at the time. And I asked Arun about seeing a therapist because I thought he’d have some insight, but technically he doesn’t know the whole story.”

“Why not though? Why hide any of it?”

Ava sat back in her chair. “You do sound mad.”

“I’m not, I’m just—” I pushed my food tray aside and folded my hands on the table. What was I feeling? I recognized that I shouldn’t be making this moment about me, that I should be focusing on the fact that Ava had been suffering. But when I pictured her having a whole panic attack at my grandmother’s house at Thanksgiving, then coming downstairs and trying to act like everything was normal around my family...it fucking *bothered* me.

And then on top of that, for me to have stayed oblivious for months while everyone else knew? I took a breath. “Obviously I would have wanted to be there for you.”

“I know,” she said quickly. “But it’s not like you could have done anything.”

“Maybe, maybe not. That’s not the point. How would you feel if you didn’t know one of us was going through something that bad?”

“It doesn’t happen that often though.”

“Again, not my point. How would you feel if the situation was reversed?”

Ava sighed. “I don’t know. Like, I know what you want my answer to be. But I also think of myself as someone who respects people’s right to privacy.”

“But we aren’t just *people* to each other.”

“Well, maybe I’m wired differently or something. You know how I was perfectly fine being on my own. Maybe I got too used to that.”

I leveled a look at her. “Really? You were perfectly fine with it?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I guess not. Because what I actually know is you were pretty lonely. And if the situations were reversed and we were talking about me and I’d finally found people who cared about me, I think I’d have a hard time keeping something like this a secret from them.”

“Darius, everybody cares about you.”

“Not the way *I* care about *you*.” I shook my head. “Not the way all of us care about you.”

Ava pushed her hair behind her ears and waved her hands. “I’m sorry, okay? It’s true, I didn’t think about how y’all would feel. I was only thinking about myself.”

That stopped me in my tracks. Fuck, what was I doing ragging on her? “Hey, hold on. I wasn’t looking for an apology. I’m just—” I sighed. “I’m just reacting. Right now you *do* need to be thinking about yourself. I’m not trying to make you feel bad about that.”

“Well, that’s how it’s coming across.”

“Well, that’s not intentional. Okay, so I don’t like how all this played out with you keeping it to yourself and me being the last to find out. But I’m not trying to blame you for *my* feelings. My feelings are my problem. I was just... explaining my perspective. And I want to understand yours.”

She shifted in her chair. “I don’t know if I have much of a perspective. I’ve been thinking about it, and I guess I was just in denial that something was wrong. Maybe I felt like if all of you knew what was happening, it would mean I couldn’t be in denial anymore.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “That makes a sort of sense.”

“But—” Ava held up one hand. “I also see why you would have wanted to know about it. If the situation were reversed like you said, I admit I probably *would* feel left out. Or like you didn’t trust me. And I’d want to know why.”

“Maybe it’s that you didn’t trust how we feel about you?”

Her brow furrowed. “Are you saying that’s how you’d feel or how I’d feel?”

“No, forget the hypothetical. I mean right now, with the real situation. Maybe you didn’t tell us because you still aren’t sure of our feelings. That we—this—” I motioned between her and me. “—is serious enough for that kind of sharing.”

“At this point I’ve shared more with y’all than anyone in my life.”

“In a lot of ways, yeah. And vice versa. But in other ways we’re still brand new, still figuring out what we expect from each other.”

“And how we argue with each other.” Ava gave me a wry smile.

“You think that was an argument?”

“Maybe a baby argument. An argument-in-training.” She paused. “I’m not sure I’ve ever had a real fight where both sides were mad and then we made up. I mean, in a relationship. Jodie and I had lots of fights, but we were besties, practically sisters. I never fought with Matt.”

“I don’t necessarily believe in the philosophy that fighting is totally normal. But sometimes people get heated. And it’s understandable if it makes you say some shit.”

“Mmm. Now that I think about it, we probably never fought because I just let him have his way on everything.” Her expression looked rueful. “I was so convinced he was out of my league that I didn’t dare rock the boat.”

“*That* dude? Out of *your* league?”

“I told you about him and his many superlatives. You called him prime American beef, remember?”

“Yeah, but then I met him.”

“Well, he was my first real boyfriend, so I guess I didn’t know any better. And in the end I never learned what fighting with your boyfriend is supposed to look like because he up and got my best friend pregnant and then we broke up.”

I paused, not sure how I should respond to that, but then she smirked and I busted out laughing. “All right, well, I’m here to tell you he wouldn’t have been worth the energy. But as for you and me, I want us to be able to say when we’re feeling bothered or we don’t agree on something. Not that I’m advocating for us to fight on the regular or anything. Just that you should feel safe speaking out. And if I’ve got disagreements, I’ll only ever come at you in good faith.”

“Same.”

“And...” I leaned forward, gazing deeply into her eyes with an unmistakable intent. “I’ll make it up to you so good, you won’t even care about me winning all the time.”

Ava glanced down, smiling coyly, then the last part hit her. Her eyes narrowed. “You just keep trying it!”

I cackled. “I’m being real. Making up is the best part. You’ll be wanting to pick fights with me on purpose.”

“Fantasy land.” At least she was still smiling.

But I had a couple of sobering questions to ask. “So you’ll be seeing this therapist once a week?”

“Yes, but I’m still considering it a trial period. Because what if I don’t like her, or what if it just makes me feel worse?”

“Would you try another one?”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“Are you planning to tell Arun about the panic attacks?”

To my surprise, she shook her head. “I’m not sure.”

“After everything we just talked about?”

“I just don’t feel like telling the whole world.”

“I’m not saying to do that. How is Arun *the whole world*? He’s Arun!”

“First of all, like I keep reminding everyone, he and I aren’t actually together.”

“Debatable. But even if you aren’t physically doin’ it, he’s still a person who cares about you.”

She started sorting through the stuff on her food tray, clearly getting ready to leave. “I just think it’s different with him and there are limits, okay?”

I gathered up my shit as well and scrambled after her. “Well, how about he’s also your RA whose job it is to look out for your mental health?”

“Which he did by recommending therapy.”

“Ava, come on now. You know he’d want to know.”

She put her tray on the conveyor belt for disposal and turned to me. “Right now, *I* don’t want him to know.”

I bit off my reply, because wasn’t that the most important thing? If she didn’t want to tell him for whatever reason, then I had no say. Even if I felt like I had plenty to say.

I also wasn’t about to kick off a whole fight in the middle of the dining hall, not after we’d just narrowly escaped one. She was clearly getting agitated and despite us agreeing that we could disagree not five minutes ago, this wasn’t the place or the time or the topic. As much as I’d been teasing Ava about

makeup sex, I didn't want to be the asshole provoking her when she was clearly dealing with something already.

"Okay," I said. "I'll drop it. I'm sorry."

She immediately deflated. "It's fine. I'm sorry, too. I have to get to my Physics class. See you later?" She scurried off before I could tell her she had nothing to apologize for.



I thought about sending Ava a text to reinforce my apology and reiterate that hers was totally unnecessary. But my mother always told me when you're apologizing to a woman, better do it in person.

After my last class got out I trekked to the Science Center, intending to catch Ava after Physics and do some penance. I decided to cut through the central admin building so I could grab my mail on the way.

Big mistake.

I walked into the main entrance, turned toward the alcove with the mailboxes, and there she was. Framed perfectly in the archway like someone had placed and arranged her there, frowning slightly at her phone, her nails manicured in a dark and deadly color, her equally deadly dark hair cascading over her shoulders.

Jenn.

Maybe she sensed me stopping still in the flow of students, because she looked up and spotted me right away. Her full lips spread in a smile. "Darius."

I felt my eyebrows trying to climb my forehead. "Look at you. Remembering my name and everything."

She strode toward me, apparently ignoring the dig. She seemed a little taller, probably thanks to her high heels. Even if her beauty didn't set her apart already, her footwear and clothes and the leather bag slung over her shoulder made it

clear she wasn't a student. College kids just did not look like Jenn.

Before I knew it, she'd pressed her cheek to mine, followed by a fragrant kiss. "It's so good to see you," she murmured.

I drew back. "What are you doing here?"

"I came with my boss. She gave a presentation to the intro Poli Sci class." When I furrowed my brow in confusion, she explained, "I work for the White House Communications Director. Do you know Arun Deshmukh? He interviewed me a couple months ago for the campus paper and the article caught Professor Sturgess's attention."

"Mmm, I think I did see something in the paper. Didn't get a chance to read it, though. No shade to Arun—just the subject matter didn't seem like it was for me. But cool that you're doing all right for yourself."

"It's not a bad gig." She smiled, exposing her white teeth, and cut her eyes modestly. "But most importantly, it's a launchpad for other opportunities down the line."

Yeah, Jenn was good at that maneuver in her personal life, too. "I'm sure you'll land wherever you want," I said thinly.

Her gaze traveled down my body, then up, and her tongue touched the corner of her mouth as she met my eyes again. Lord, I was having a little trouble believing she was right there in front of me after all this time. Especially given how she was acting all sweet like we were old friends.

Speaking of which, she said, "Are you free later? I'm waiting to have coffee with Arun right now, but afterward maybe you and I could get some dinner."

Well, that's the last damn time I defend your honor, Arun. "I'm actually busy," I said. "And now I've got a meeting."

"Mmm." She held up a business card between her index and middle finger and proceeded to tuck it into the open pocket of my bag. "Give me a call if it turns out you can join us for dinner after all."

“I thought you were just getting coffee with him?” I blurted out.

Jenn shrugged lightly. “I’m open to anything.”

“You might be but I don’t think Arun is. Best keep your distance.”

“Are you his keeper?” Her mouth curved in amusement, but there was a sharp edge to it. “I’ll just find out for myself, I think.”

“Good luck with that. Don’t know why you’d be dipping back into the Lockridge pool after you dropped all your other fish, but do you I guess.”

“Well, if you want me to make comparisons...”

There it was—her teeth bared for real, and not just in a smile. “Nah, I’m good. Interesting talk.” I gave her a jaunty grin, paying her back for all the sugary sweetness, and headed to the mailboxes.

I purposefully did not look around for Jenn when I left, but maybe I kind of accidentally out of the corner of my eye spotted a tall dark-haired figure approaching her that could have been Arun. Inwardly, I tsked. *Dude, we really need to talk.*

21

AVA

I picked up a term from my Comparative Poetry class: *disgruntled*. It was the perfect descriptor for how I spent the weekend.

Darius had apologized again, and I'd accepted, but I felt we hadn't quite settled it. He still clearly believed I was in the wrong, even if he wasn't saying it out loud. And that just made me think, who the hell was he to judge my choices, even silently?

He's your boyfriend, my ever-conflicted inner voice pointed out.

And another quieter inner voice asked, *Are you so sure you're not wrong?*

The unspoken conflict tainted our time together. When we hung out on Saturday, playing video games, he was perfectly affectionate and flirty and completely himself. But I felt his judgment in the air like a bad smell—or what I perceived to be his judgment, anyway. I lost two rounds because I couldn't focus, and then made up an excuse that I needed to catch up on my class reading to go back to my room alone.

The unease followed me when Arun invited me to watch a movie that night. I sat next to him on his bed, carefully distanced with his laptop between us, and although I stared at the screen for two hours I couldn't have said what any of it was about. It was so different from the movie night we'd had in his parents' apartment over winter break, snuggled close on the sofa. He'd dozed off for most of it and I was just able to enjoy the sight of him, the two of us relaxed and cozy in our warm little bubble, far away from school.

"PTA is a master filmmaker, don't you think?" Arun said as the credits rolled. "He makes such good use of all the cinematic tools—setting and sound and cinematography—to build atmosphere."

“Yeah, very intense,” I replied, vaguely recalling some interesting shots.

“What was your favorite part?”

Well, he had me there. But luckily I had some experience making shit up in my Literature classes. “Um, hard to pick just one. The scene on the water seemed really profound.”

Arun leaned closer. “How so?”

Okay, maybe I wasn’t as good as I thought. “I liked how it was filmed. It reminded me of...a memory.” In response to his curious look, I continued, “Not that the memory itself is relevant. I just mean like...the way he took advantage of the sunlight reflecting on the waves was very—” I searched for a word. “—evocative.”

Nodding enthusiastically, Arun said, “Yeah, that’s exactly how I feel. He knows how to use specific components in nature to provoke reactions in the audience based on shared and sometimes universal human experiences. Instead of letting you stay a passive viewer, he makes sure you’re always feeling something.”

At least, I thought that was what Arun said. It was hard to pay attention because I was bracing myself for the moment he realized I was full of shit.

“You sound like you’re writing a Lit paper right now,” I remarked, trying to lighten the mood. “Are movies that serious?”

“They can be. They all start as written material, right? It’s just that they benefit from the added layer of cinematic language.” He shut the laptop and turned to me, his dark eyes drinking me in. “What are some of your favorite movies?”

Somehow, despite *Mean Girls* being an objective classic, I didn’t think he’d rate that on the same level as what we’d just watched. I thought about my namesake, Ava Gardner, and some of her movies which I grew up watching with Dad. “Have you ever seen *On the Beach*?”

“The Stanley Kramer version? That’s pretty bleak.”

“I like disaster movies,” I ventured. “I guess they’re like a safe way to look at the worst thing that could happen, you know?”

“What other ones do you like?”

“Um, *The Day After Tomorrow*. *Deep Impact*. The 28 series. *Train to Busan* and *World War Z*.” I faltered. Somehow I doubted Arun would be into zombie apocalypses. “My taste is kind of trash, I know.”

“Not at all. You like what you like. And actually, you’re right—disaster stories on that kind of scale are ultimately examinations of humanity’s willpower and survival instinct. Have you seen *The Road*? Or read the book?”

I shook my head.

“It’s more like *On the Beach* than *28 Days Later*. It’s about what comes after—post-apocalypse. The story follows a boy and his father as they struggle through a world that’s devastated by something that’s most likely climate change. It’s by Cormac McCarthy, one of the great modern American writers.” As he spoke, Arun got up and went over to his overstuffed bookshelf, pulled out a slim paperback, and handed it to me. “If you’re interested, you can borrow it.”

I flipped through the pages and saw that there were a number of slips of paper tucked into them, with handwritten notes. “Do you need these?”

“Don’t worry about it. I like to scribble my thoughts as I read, but it’s never anything important.”

“At least you don’t write in the margins. Seth hates when people deface books.”

I bit my lip. Bringing up one of my boyfriends, excellent move. But Arun just grinned. “I’ll co-sign that. Although some of these pages might not be pristine. The ending especially made me bawl like a baby and I definitely dropped a few tears on it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, complete waterworks. I was on a bench in the middle of a park in New York, just flat-out sobbing while all these people in suits pretended to ignore me so they could enjoy their lunch breaks.”

“I honestly can’t picture it,” I marveled.

“Oh, it happened. There’s nothing quite like having an uncontrollable breakdown in a crowd of strangers.”

It had never even occurred to me—Arun crying? I looked up at him and thought about how he’d comforted me when I broke down in the stairwell after fighting with my mother on the phone. All of Mimi’s insults echoed in my memory; she’d hurled them at me with Arun sitting right next to us, right where he now stood. He’d seen me at these incredibly low moments, but on the flipside, I’d never seen any chip in his cool demeanor.

Of course, none of the other guys had ever been as badly shaken as me with my panic attacks. But as I’d told Darius, it *was* different with them. We’d shared things together that were private and intimate and vulnerable; I felt like I knew them quite deeply now.

I couldn’t imagine Arun vulnerable. He was always in control of himself. Even when we were making out in his apartment and I got within a millisecond of tearing off our clothes and climbing on top of him, he’d still managed to hold himself back. And whenever he gave me advice, it hit a little differently. He was a counselor, a person I sought out because I believed he had all the answers, because he had a kind of wisdom that no one else did.

It was more than a barrier between us. It was a staircase I’d never be able to ascend. He was at the top of it looking down at me, and all I could do was stand at the bottom staring up at him.

I wondered if, at the end of the year when he stopped being my RA, we could really move beyond friendship. Could we ever get totally comfortable with each other?

Abruptly I realized Arun had just said something, and I'd missed it. "Hmm? Sorry, I was looking at this." I motioned to the book in my hand.

"I said do you want to try and make it a double-header?" he asked, then explained further: "Watch a second movie?"

"Oh, um. Actually, I'm getting kind of sleepy. Sorry," I said again, scrambling to my feet.

"No worries. Next time we'll have to start earlier." He smiled.

"Thanks for the book. I'll finish it and return it as soon as I can."

"No rush at all. Enjoy it. Through the inevitable tears, anyway."

I hovered awkwardly, standing in front of him with the book clutched in my hand like a life preserver. If he were one of the other guys we'd probably kiss goodbye, or at least hug—that is, if we didn't end the night in bed. But although we'd established in our rules that we *could* hug, we hadn't actually tried it since coming back to school.

"It's okay," Arun said softly.

I looked up at him, and the expression in his eyes was all gentle understanding. Somehow, that made it worse. With a grimace, I said, "I'm not sure it feels...safe yet." But if he reached out first, then maybe I could—

"I know," he said, just as softly. "You're not the only one thinking that."

Inwardly, I sighed. "Thanks for the movie. Have a good night." My voice rose involuntarily at the end, like a question.

"You too," he answered. "Sleep well."

A clear enough dismissal. I couldn't do anything but trudge back to my room.



At least I'd enjoyed a fair amount of solo time in the room over the past week. Kaya's party hookup Allen had indeed come back for more, and she was quite willing to bestow it upon him. Since he had his own room in the big luxe International House, I never found myself sexiled. In fact, I barely saw her.

I finally texted her Sunday night. **Are you locked up in a sex dungeon? Have you even been back for a change of clothes? I miss youuuu roomie!**

She wrote back immediately. **Come to my improv tonight. Admission free.** She'd attached a link.

I sighed. As *disgruntled* as I felt, I probably wouldn't be the most cheerful audience member, and I didn't have high expectations of amateur undergrad comedy. But as Kaya's roommate and friend, I wanted to support her. **Do you know how late it'll go?**

Hour and a half tops, she replied, with the prayer hands and party hat emojis. **Haley and Martina are coming too!**

I checked the location of the performance. Apparently it was in one of the theaters in the performing arts center, which wasn't too far from the library. Maybe I could head over there before it closed and wait for Seth to finish his shift.

Lockridge was in the middle of a cold snap—not as bad as Chicago, but I layered up for warmth. Slim gray sweater over a dark blue flannel shirt, with a sleeveless top under that. My legs might be cold in my slim jeans, but I went for a long pair of thick wool socks which I turned down over the tops of my boots. I finished off with my long coat, red scarf, and gray knit hat.

Darius's door was closed; he'd scribbled on his whiteboard that he was at a group meeting for one of his classes. On my own whiteboard I wrote, **Out being social like people do!** Hopefully he'd see it and be proud of me.

I found Kaya inside the performance space, where she and the other members of her improv group were milling around greeting people. It wasn't at all like the Broadway theater I

went to with Arun. It was a “black box” space, as Kaya called it: the audience seated on wooden risers around all four sides of the room with the square stage centered below, and everything painted black. Kaya said the setup was meant to create “an intimate and informal feeling.” Because it was improv, there were no costumes or sets either, just a few pieces of barebones furniture for props.

Kaya’s cheeks were rosy from excitement, her eyes sparkling. I nudged her hip with mine. “Enjoying life?”

She giggled. “Have to say it’s been kind of an upgrade.”

“Damn, girl!” I pressed a hand to my chest. “We haven’t seen each other all week. What are you trying to say about living with me?”

“Come on, I slept in the room just the other night.”

“One night out of the whole week? Do I need to negotiate a custody arrangement with this Allen dude?”

Kaya hugged me with a laugh. “I repeat—I don’t know how you manage to hold down four guys. I can barely handle one.”

I peered at her. “So do you think this has legs? I know you’re in the honeymoon phase right now but are you catching feelings or any of that?”

She winked at me. “I’m feeling *myself*. And I’m not making him any promises.”

Kaya got more ragging from Haley and Martina when they showed up. Apparently even they hadn’t seen much of her because she and Allen were always holed up in his room fucking.

“Is this a thing with straight girls, getting dickmatized so easy?” Martina asked.

“When the dick game is that nice, what can I do?” Kaya lifted her hands accordingly.

“We shacked up pretty quick, too,” Haley confessed. “No shame in it when you’re happy.”

Although I couldn't exactly assess his dick, Allen's performance as an audience member who happened to be fucking one of the performers was pretty decent. He sat on the opposite side of the black box, and I could see that his eyes were glued to Kaya.

The performing group seemed to have a good reputation; although the theater space wasn't big, it was completely packed. I haven't seen much improv outside of high school drama stuff, but I could tell the Lockridge group were several levels above anything Juniper could produce. They didn't break the mood to laugh self-consciously or make fun of each other. They commanded the stage with presence, like real actors. Each skit, inspired by suggestions from the audience—some pretty crackbrained—lasted about fifteen minutes. The biggest crowd reactions came whenever one of the performers seemed to momentarily get stuck, only to flip it into something random that still worked brilliantly.

Before I saw the black box setup, I'd told myself I could cut out early if it sucked. But there was no way to sneak out of that place without drawing attention. Luckily, they were so good that the time flew by. Before I knew it, the performers were bowing to huge whoops and applause. I stood up along with the other girls, cheering louder when Kaya bowed in our direction.

She came up the risers when the audience started breaking up, looking flushed and happy. "Let's get some coffee," she said, grabbing my arm as well as Haley's.

"Actually, I was planning to go to the library—" I began.

She cocked an eyebrow at me. "To see Seth, right? Weren't you just complaining that you don't see me enough because of Allen?"

Well, she had me there.



Allen met us in line for refreshments inside the performing arts center. He gave Kaya a big kiss and told her, with foreheads pressed together, “Congrats. You killed it. Dead impressed.”

Kaya beamed at him. Feeling herself, for sure.

The whole place was mobbed. By the time we crowded around one of the tall tables with our drinks, we could only grab two stools to sit on. Haley and Martina shared one, and Kaya and Allen shared another. I volunteered to stand, thinking I could escape faster that way.

But then a voice came over my shoulder. “Here, I managed to snag another.”

I glanced around to see Ian, the guy from the international party, placing the stool next to me. “Have at it,” he offered.

“Top lad,” Allen said, lifting his coffee cup. “Perfect entrance.” I noticed Kaya nudge him with her shoulder.

“Thanks,” I said politely. “I’m good, though. I have to head off in a bit.”

“Nonsense. Drinking coffee while standing? Couldn’t live with myself if I let that happen.”

I snorted. “What if I like standing?”

“I suppose you’d say it outright if you did.”

“Well, I do. Feel free to use the stool yourself.”

“Oh no, I quite like standing as well.” He caught the attention of the table nearest to us. “Pardon—can we donate this to you? We like using our legs over here.”

I could feel the others watching our exchange avidly, especially Kaya. And now that Ian and I were standing next to each other, the odd ones out, I wished I’d just taken the stupid stool.

Fortunately he turned to Kaya at that moment and said, “Another great show. Seems like you’ve changed up some of the format from last semester?” That got the conversation running on a different track.

Everyone else was super talkative and wanting to give Kaya props about the show, so I was able to just keep quiet and finish my drink. Secretly, though, I couldn't help observing Ian. I hadn't noticed him anywhere in the audience, but now that he was here I found him interesting to watch, his chats peppered with quick witty banter, his accent flitting between clipped and drawling. It only reinforced my initial impressions. He did remind me of Colin's grandparents: smooth and wealthy. Except that Ian's family probably traced their wealth back to William the Conqueror and had portraits of their whole line hanging in their private home gallery.

I made a show of shaking my empty coffee cup so everyone knew I was finished. "I'm trying to hit the library before it closes. Send me a text if you want to do dinner sometime this week?" I said to Haley and Martina.

"Oh, by the way!" Haley piped up. "I'm doing another couples night on Friday. Feel free to bring any of your guys—they're all welcome."

"Does she have a stable of them or something?" Allen joked.

Kaya chortled and slapped her thigh. "You don't even know and couldn't even guess."

"Haley's playing," I said stiffly. "It's just a movie night for friends."

Allen turned to her. "And you never invited me?"

Too late, I remembered that they already knew each other through Martina. I shot Haley a look.

She took mercy on me. "It's always been more of a girls thing. But I've started inviting guys as well. You and Ian should come!"

"Yes, the more men the merrier," Martina said. "I've always said that's what lesbians need."

"Anyway," I interjected, wishing I'd managed to make my exit twenty minutes ago. "Have a good night, y'all."

Kaya slipped in one last poke. "I won't wait up for you!"

I rolled my eyes and escaped into the night.

The path between the performing arts center and the library wandered up a slope and then, at the top of it, intersected with a small paved square with benches and tables where students often hung out in warmer weather. Another path led away from the square in the direction of Milner. I paused there to call Seth and make sure he was still working.

“Yeah, I’m finishing up in about half an hour,” he said. “If you don’t mind waiting for me, I can walk you to your room and we can hang out for a while? I’ll tuck you into bed and everything.”

I smiled into the phone. “Sounds perfect. See you in a bit.”

I turned toward the library, but stopped as I spotted Ian walking up the path toward me. He saw me as well and quickened his pace.

“Good, I’ve caught you,” he said.

“For...what?”

He came to a halt in front of me, well-illuminated by the four light posts at the corners of the square. “Well, for one thing, I see that you’re again walking alone.”

“It’s not even ten o’clock. And I’m totally sober.”

With a small, cheeky grin, Ian shrugged. “Now you’ve caught *me*. I’m just making excuses.”

“For what?” I repeated.

“For the chance to see you again.” And he looked directly into my eyes, his meaning as clear as a torch lighting the way.

All I could do at first was stare back at him, my face going so warm I couldn't feel the cold anymore. Stupidly, I thought of Kaya and how she'd probably go, *Girl, how is this news? I already told you!*

"All right," Ian said finally, "it's cold as bollocks out here. Aren't you meant to be going to the library? Shall we mosey on?" He started walking.

"Hold on," I sputtered, hurrying to catch up. "I'm sorry—I just don't know what to say."

He nodded. "Well, you might start with how you feel about me *wanting* the chance to see you again."

And I remembered Kaya asking if I was even interested. Now, faced with the real possibility of it, how did I feel? "I mean, we don't even know each other."

"That's rather the point of wanting to see you. To get to know you."

Which was a fair point. Besides, I'd fucked Colin after spending about as much time with him as I'd spent with Ian so far. But that was then, and my life was different now. "The thing is...I'm kind of not single."

"Right." He didn't seem surprised. "Darius, I assume? The one I met the other night?"

Technically, yes. "Um, yes," I said.

"And when you say *kind of*, is it considered less than respectful for me to ask how serious it is?"

"It's actually pretty serious." I spread my hands open. "I guess I'm flattered? I'm happy to be friends."

"Friends, hmm. Would that not be a problem for your man, being friends with someone who wants to be more than that with you?"

God, he was bold. He really didn't give a fuck about dancing around his feelings. It was strangely compelling, adding to that inexplicable charisma of his.

"Darius isn't the jealous type," I said. "He trusts me and wants me to be happy."

"Living the relationship dream."

I wasn't totally sure whether Ian meant it in a mocking or appreciative tone. He had a way of doing both at once, like striking a chord where the notes weren't quite harmonious.

We reached the library, and I stopped just in front of the doors. "Look, I'm just not in a place to think about dating someone else. But I do think of you as someone I'm interested to know more about. If you don't want to be friends, it's fine. If Kaya and Allen keep hanging out and you happen to bring me another chair, I can still be polite and say thanks."

He smirked. "No need for all of that. My friends and I are usually rude little shits to each other. It's how we stay laughing. Hopefully that won't be too offensive for you."

"You want to free rein to be offensive in this day and age? Looking like you do? Coming from where you come from?" I gave him a deliberate head-to-toe perusal.

"Ah," Ian said, looking right back at me like he was marveling at a piece of art. "You're a natural, aren't you? We'll be fast friends in no time."



Seth was behind the circulation desk, scanning the inside covers of a huge stack of books. He winked at me and flashed all ten fingers to indicate he'd be ten more minutes. I decided to check my email at one of the public computers.

But mostly I found myself staring at the screen, thinking about Ian.

I'd found him instantly attractive. I could admit that to myself. There was just one major difference compared to the

instant attraction I'd felt for Colin and Seth and Darius and Arun: he didn't feel quite safe. There was a coldness and a distance to him—maybe a sharpness as well. I didn't know what kind of person I'd find underneath all those layers. But I did know that some instinct had held me back from explaining my relationships with the other guys. Whether that meant I actually cared about his reaction or was potentially afraid of his reaction, I wasn't quite ready to confront it head-on.

Seth's voice came over the intercom system, lilting and jovial: "Folks, we're closing up soon. Come on out of your hidey-holes. The outside world is waiting."

I heard the scraping of chair legs on the floor, papers rustling, bookbags zipping, the rising murmur of voices as people no longer had to be quiet. I logged out of my email—none of which I'd actually read—and got up to leave.

A familiar red-headed figure walked past the computer bank. Mimi. Her hair was shorter and I only caught a quick glimpse, but it was unmistakably her. She was hard to forget, even though we hadn't seen each other since she left our room last semester. Curious, I scanned the stacks as I headed toward the circulation desk, wondering what she was up to these days.

I spotted her again, arriving at one of the many study tables. She hugged a girl standing there, exchanging greetings. The girl seemed familiar as well, although I couldn't place her immediately. I took another couple of steps, and more of the table came into view. Mimi and the unknown girl were talking to someone else on the other side of the table—a guy—and as the girl reached across to hand him a book, I realized it was Darius.

I remembered the girl now. Lena, the one I'd met at the party in Chicago. She and Haley had flirted with Darius right in front of me, only Haley had said, *I wasn't trying to take your man. Can't say the same for Lena.*

Automatically, I swerved away. My feet carried me along a random set of shelves with no heed for direction or destination. As if to chase me off, Darius's booming laugh rang out.

He could laugh like that? Hanging out with Mimi and this girl?

I hit the end of the aisle and just stood there, staring at the books on the shelves without reading any of the words on the spines. The sounds of hustle and bustle continued as the library emptied, but they were far away and muted.

Suddenly, a few lights turned off overhead, plunging me into darkness. It shocked me out of my daze. I realized belatedly that the library had now gone completely silent; it was empty. All other thoughts flew out of my head as I fished through my bag for my phone.

I had three missed calls from Seth, and one message he'd sent to begin with: **Getting ready to lock up. Meet me at the front door?**

I called him back and launched into an apology before he could say anything. "Shit, I'm really really sorry. I just lost track of time."

"No problem. Where are you?"

"Still inside." I started making my way out of the stacks, moving carefully so I didn't bump into anything. "Are you outside already?"

"No, I'm in the staff office behind the circulation desk."

"Be there in a second."

A few lights were still on over the long counter, as well as inside the staff office, which was visible through an internal window. I could see Seth inside, his bag slung over his chest, tapping on the keyboard of a computer. His sandy hair fell over his forehead in gentle waves, accentuating the strong lines of his cheeks and jaw. *He should be illegal*, I thought. But at the same time, the sight of him was a healing balm. I put my elbows up on the counter and just admired the view.

When he came out of the office, he left the light on and leaned on the other side of the counter from me, gazing into my eyes. "Hey," he said softly. "Damn, you're pretty."

I smiled. "I was thinking the same thing about you."

“Sorry for making you wait. I had to record my hours.”

“Why are you apologizing? I’m the late one.”

“Well, our mutual timing worked out, cuz here we are. In fact, are you in a rush to get back to your room?”

I shook my head. “No. What’s up?”

“Thought I’d give you an afterhours exclusive-access tour.” Seth took my hand and held it as he walked us down the counter until we could meet at the end. Then he looped his arms around me, drawing me close into his warmth. “Very private. For VIPs only.”

I tipped my head back to peer up at him through the dimness. “Hmm, does this tour include any interesting activities?”

“I do have a few in mind. Maybe you’ll recall when we first met, I told you about how popular certain parts of the library are with students?”

I shivered.

He led me up the central staircase, which wraps around the elevator shaft and lets out onto large mezzanines on the middle and top floors. As we stepped away from the stairs on the top floor, I whispered, “Does the library have a security guard on patrol or anything?”

“No, the internal cameras send everything straight to the campus police.”

I hit the brakes and pulled on his hand. “Are you serious?”

He snickered. “Don’t worry, I’ll shield your face.”

“Seth!”

“I’m kidding. I mean it! There *are* cameras, but only in the special collections. We won’t go near those.”

“And the security guard?”

“Usually only checks in after midnight.”

“Usually?”

He just grinned at me.

“You know, you and Colin are like two peas in a pod,” I griped. “He trolled me the same way when I visited him over break.”

“What can I say? He learned from the master.” Seth ran gentle fingers down the sides of my neck. “If you want to go, we can go. I know it’s a school night and all. But I kinda think the possibility—the *tiny* possibility—of getting caught actually makes it more exciting.”

I shivered again, feeling a delicious heat trembling low in my belly. My voice oozed from my throat, husky and deep. “So...aside from special collections, where will this tour take me?”



The library is just three floors and a basement, but because of the extensions built on over the years, it sprawls over a fair amount of square footage. The stacks on the third floor are broken into sections, with study tables and sofas in the spaces between. There are also study nooks, little cubicles with a desk and chair, where I used to spend hours whenever Mimi’s presence made the room unbearable.

The thought of her brought up Darius again. I remembered how we’d played video games one night in the admin building, how I wasn’t sure we were allowed to be there either. That was the first time we’d kissed.

I pushed the memories away.

Like downstairs, the main overhead lights were all off, but there were security lights, evenly spaced at the top of the walls, casting faint orange illumination. Still, I held tight to Seth’s hand, trusting him to navigate.

He took us past the study nooks and toward a row of three glass-walled rooms. I could see through the glass that two of the rooms were furnished with a table and chairs, but the middle one had a more comfortable looking circle of upholstered armchairs, as well as a couple of two-seater sofas.

“These are the meeting rooms,” Seth explained. Even though we were completely alone he kept his voice hushed, which emphasized the illicit nature of what we were doing.

“Not exactly private,” I said, as he drew me into the middle room. The stacks surrounded us on all four sides, and beyond them were the building’s exterior walls and windows.

“Each room has blinds that can be motored down.” He pointed to a switch on the wall. “But where’s the fun in that?”

“If a security guard *does* show up and we get in trouble...”

“We won’t. I know all the best hiding spots.”

Seth’s hands found their way inside my coat, smoothing over my waist and hips. My nerves, already keyed up, jumped at the touch. I was pretty well-bundled, three layers of shirts plus jeans tucked into boots. My mind raced ahead of me, picturing us getting caught having sex, scrambling for our clothes, leaving something crucial and incriminating behind.

“Maybe we shouldn’t get too undressed,” I murmured.

“You’re probably right.” His nose pressed into my hair. “Just a little bit undressed. Just a button here and there. Maybe a zipper. Maybe two.”

“We can take our coats off,” I offered. I was already feeling way too warm anyway.

“Mmm, sexy. Love the way you throw modesty out the window.”

“Keep trolling me and the coats stay on,” I threatened.

In answer, Seth lifted me up and backed toward one of the sofas. We landed with me straddling his lap. He pressed a kiss to the place where the bottom of my ear met my jaw, making those jumpy nerves fairly leap. “No more trolling,” he whispered. “Teasing, though...”

His kiss was fierce and distracting, his mouth opening mine, his thumb stroking my cheek while his other hand pressed against my ass, bringing our hips into contact. I felt the soft swipe of his tongue along my bottom lip and tried to chase it,

but he pulled back and kissed the corner of my mouth instead. I whimpered in protest and he chuckled.

Still feeling a little paranoid, I kept my eyes open, scanning what I could see of the library through the glass walls. It really was a dark, vast, empty space. And yet the feeling that anyone could come in and interrupt our solitude, that the lights could turn on and suddenly expose us like a fishbowl, made a pulse quicken between my legs. It was almost painful, in an exquisite torture kind of way. I wanted to hurry, but I also *wanted*.

Quickly, I shrugged off my coat and pushed Seth's off his shoulders and down his arms. He was wearing a flannel shirt like mine, but his was softer and thinner. I could feel the bulge of his muscles, the flex of his chest, the flat plane of his stomach.

As soon as he'd taken his coat all the way off, I caught his fingers and put them at the hemline of my own shirt. "Touch me," I moaned into his mouth.

"Mmm, but where?"

His hands slipped under the fabric, found my undershirt, and then my naked skin. I gasped, even though he'd barely done anything. My hips, on pure instinct, undulated against his strong thighs, seeking relief through the friction.

"I fucking love how you're always so ready for us," Seth said. "I bet if I touched your cunt right now you'd already be wet, wouldn't you?"

"Why don't you find out?"

"Oh, I will, sweetheart. Just give me a little while to make some other stops on the way."

"Seth, *please*," I moaned. "Don't take forever. We have to get out of here."

"It takes as long as it takes," he said, ruthless.

Occasionally he got like that, dropping his usual sweet generosity to become an absolutely evil dirty-talking tormenter. That change in him always got me so hot. To have

him pulling it now, when I was feeling so fretful about the time and place, drove me crazy.

He moved his hands around to my back, stroking up my spine, skating over my bra clasp. Meanwhile, he applied his mouth to mine, but again his kisses were soft, like controlled sips when I wanted us both to be drinking our fill. I kept chasing his tongue and he kept drawing back, limiting us to small, tantalizing tastes.

Deciding to take the reins, I reached around and unclasped my bra myself. The cups fell away from my breasts. I caught Seth's arms and guided his hands around to my front.

"Is this your idea of being careful?" he said, sounding amused.

"Well, you seemed lost. Thought I'd help keep the tour moving."

That earned me a light smack on my ass, but he followed up with a purposeful squeeze. I felt his cock, hard in his jeans, and ground down. I heard him catch his breath.

Still, it was a battle. I finally got his hands on my breasts, only to spend the next few minutes whimpering and writhing as he circled my nipples with his thumbs, never progressing past that. Then I tried unfastening my jeans, but all he did was cup my ass while licking my neck. Hot for sure, but didn't quite get the job done. Even the constant pressure on my clit as I rolled my hips on him wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed everything he wasn't giving me.

I kept watching the area outside our little glass room, hyper-alert for any sign of a problem. That urgent paranoia warred with my arousal. I had to finish somehow or I'd just fucking implode.

"Seth," I pleaded. "Stop making me wait."

"Can't help it, honey." He nipped my jaw. "You're just too delicious, on the edge like this."

But the edge was killing me. He'd only budge if I pushed him off it. So I climbed down from the sofa, sank to my knees

on the floor, and got his jeans open. His cock, heavy and thick, fit perfectly in my hand.

“Oh hell,” Seth muttered.

I wrapped my lips around the tip and slid down as far as I could take him. Then I slipped back up, swirling my tongue on his cockhead the way I knew he loved. I worked the base of him with my hand, strong and coaxing. His guttural moans filled the quiet. The sofa rustled as his thighs moved helplessly.

My pace was relentless, and I didn't let up until he finally shot. “Ah fuck,” he gasped as I swallowed him down. “*Ava.*”

He was still breathing hard when I climbed back on top of him. “Now make me come,” I demanded.

In answer, he flipped me onto my back. His hand slid into my panties, his fingers going unerringly to my slit. “I was fucking right,” he murmured. “You're slicked up so good.”

“So do something about it.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

His fingers slid up to my clit and started their magic. *Finally!* From the way he rubbed me, I could tell my pleasure was his absolute focus now. I lifted my shirt, and his mouth latched onto my nipple, heightening the sensations that were already rippling through my body.

It didn't take long before everything coalesced into a single flaming point that exploded outward. If somebody had walked in on us at that moment, I couldn't have stopped. My back arched with the force of my orgasm, my hips bucking into Seth's hand as he expertly drew the moment out. When the last waves had pulsed through me I just laid there shaking, shattered.

“Beautiful,” he whispered against my breast. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

I giggled into his shoulder. “Was I too aggressive?”

“Nah, you're always perfect. Was I too annoying?”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave him a long kiss. “You made up for it.”

“You still want to hang out in your room? I’ll make up for it even more.”

I sat up and started straightening out my clothes. “Let’s go.”

OceanofPDF.com

23
SETH

All day Monday and Tuesday, I kept thinking about that time in the library. It had always been a small fantasy of mine to play with Ava after a night shift. It actually wasn't all that risqué in principle—even during open daylight hours tons of Lockridge kids make use of the library for clandestine purposes. But still, reality had far exceeded my relatively tame daydreams.

And then when we went for round two in her room... The next night, alone in my bed, I startled awake hard enough to pound nails. All I had to do was remember the sight of her on her desk, legs spread. I came practically the second I touched my dick.

Suffice to say I was distracted. Classes? Whatever. Monday shift? Practically drooled all over the book cart as I pushed it past the stacks. Meals? All I could taste was her.

I hadn't been this crazy about someone since Kyle. I'd always assumed I'd fall in love again someday, but Ava had snuck up on me. She was just completely unexpected. One of a kind and precious. I was continually amazed at how strong she was, how brave, how full of life despite all the shit life had thrown at her.

But Tuesday evening I had to settle back down to earth. It was the day for tutoring in Chinatown, and cold winter wind gusted through the open-air Metro station where our group waited for the train into DC. One of the other tutors, Melanie, huddled with me behind a scratched glass panel which was meant to serve as a windbreak for a couple of benches, but really blocked nothing except our view of the platform.

She ducked outside to check on the estimated arrival time of the next train, then stepped back in, her cheeks redder than the weather could be responsible for. "Oh God, I just saw this guy

from my seminar. He's so beautiful and I look like I've been tossed around by a tornado."

I snorted at her. "Who? Where?"

"Don't look!" But she grabbed my arm and pulled me to peer around the glass. "I mean, don't let him catch us looking. He's down there at the end of the platform." She pointed.

I might have known. Only one dude on campus has the power to intimidate an objective winner like Melanie. "Are you talking about Arun?" I asked. "I know him."

He was the only one standing there, a tall figure full of mystery, as if he'd been divinely designed to draw the eye. I remembered that we'd once shared a train back to campus from DC, so maybe he was making a similar trip this evening.

"Want to go say hi?" I offered to Melanie.

"No way. I said something completely brainless in seminar yesterday and I can't even make eye contact with him now." She plunked herself on the bench, clearly not willing to move.

I ambled down the platform toward Arun. He noticed me approaching and took out his earphones. We slapped hands hello.

"You're going to DC for tutoring?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, surprised that he'd remembered. I tried to think back to that other time. "Are you doing another interview?"

"Ah, not exactly." He shrugged one shoulder, seeming self-conscious. "I'm meeting up with a former interview subject. I think you know her—she mentioned she used to live on the same hall as you. Jenn Silviana?"

A trickle of unease made its way to my stomach. "But you're not interviewing her now?"

"She wanted to introduce me to some of her colleagues so I'm meeting them for happy hour."

Right. Sounded innocent enough. But Jenn wasn't the type to do something like for nothing.

“We’ll actually be in walking distance of Chinatown,” Arun went on. “Maybe we can meet up for dinner after you’re done tutoring.”

“With Jenn?”

Arun’s eyebrows shot up at my suspicious tone. “Possibly. Unless that would be a problem?”

Now I was the one feeling self-conscious. I’d met up with her just a few months ago, looking for closure. While it hadn’t left me with overwhelmingly positive feelings, I’d prided myself on shedding any lingering negative feelings. That self-congratulatory belief in my own enlightened behavior suddenly looked a little thin.

“Nah,” I said finally. “Just...you haven’t told her about Ava, have you?”

Arun furrowed his brow. “No, why would I?”

Why indeed. My relationship with Jenn wasn’t only my business to spill—it involved Colin and Darius as well, and of course Jenn herself. If she’d only told Arun that we used to be hallmates, as opposed to hallmates who used to fuck, then he probably had no idea. Which meant he’d also have no idea why she might be interested in our relationship with Ava.

Arun was looking at me curiously. “Just...thought you and Ava had an understanding,” I said, trying to cover.

The approaching whine of our train put a halt on whatever he was going to say. “Seth!” I heard someone call, and I saw Melanie and the rest of the tutoring group beckoning to me from further down the platform.

“Do you want to come sit with us?” I asked Arun. “We usually use the train ride to decide where dinner’s going to be.”

He hesitated, then nodded. We headed toward the others. Melanie shot dagger looks at me as I introduced Arun around, although he was perfectly friendly to her and even tried some small talk about their seminar reading.

There wasn't a chance to get Arun's response to what I'd said about Ava—or to ask him more about Jenn. Why *were* they hanging out? I found myself hoping he did end up bringing her to dinner, so I could see exactly what their kind of “hanging out” looked like.



Tutoring my kids went well in the first half but maintaining their focus in the second half was harder. Since this was their last semester of eighth grade, they were already thinking about starting high school in the fall. Two of them were going to different public schools, while the third's parents were thinking about a Catholic private school. They were angsty about the impending separation as well as the huge change of it all.

“It's gonna be weird,” I told them. “No getting around it. Sometimes scary, too. Everyone's bigger than you and they've known each other for years. But just focus on being good people and eventually you'll attract good people as friends. Learning to surround yourself with folks who'll uplift you instead of tearing you down—that's the most important thing.”

“Seth's so corny,” Hiram said with a grin. He was the one probably getting sent to Catholic school.

“Good people attract good people.” Xavier waggled his eyebrows. “This is high school, not *Game of Thrones*.”

Frankie laughed and coughed up a mouthful of Coke, which set the other two off.

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair. “Since I'm the only one here who's actually been to high school, maybe y'all don't want to be questioning my wisdom and authority. And I know y'all ain't old enough to be watching *Thrones* either. Do I need to say a word to your folks?”

That just sparked a fresh round of snickering. These three little shits hardly ever let on that they take me seriously. But I

don't mind. When I was their age, I also rolled my eyes openly while taking notes secretly.

“Come on.” I let the front legs of the chair drop to the floor and tapped Hiram's notepad. “There's still four questions left on your worksheets.”

While they worked, I checked my messages. Arun had said he'd meet us at the restaurant which the Lockridge tutors had settled on. But now I had something else from him.

Jenn's craving this tapas bar instead. But she says it gets pretty crowded so might not be good for the whole group. How do you feel about just meeting up as a trio?

I might have known she'd finagle something like that. A smaller and more intimate setting meant she'd be able to control the conversation better; it was why she'd always preferred to be with Darius and Colin and me separately. My initial reaction was to say screw that and screw her. But then I thought, why should she be the only one who can play that game? Maybe I could too—if only to find out what was going on with her and Arun.

Because of DC's spread-out Metro system, it was faster for me to walk to the restaurant from Chinatown. Still, it took a good eighteen minutes in the cold evening wind, just long enough to make me wonder if Jenn had selected the venue specifically for the annoyance factor. At least I got there first and was able to snag a table. I ordered a hot coffee right away and clutched it between my hands as I waited.

After almost fifteen more minutes—again, just long enough to annoy?—I spotted them arriving through the big front window. They were both wrapped up against the cold, and Jenn was huddled close to Arun with her hand tucked into his elbow. Very cozy.

I drained the last of my coffee and settled back in my chair as they came inside and got pointed my way by the hostess. The oil of the coffee seemed to have settled on my tongue and on my skin, tangy and unpleasant.

Jenn's long dark hair was tousled by the wind, but the way it cascaded over her shoulders, she might as well have stepped out of a photoshoot. Her eyes lit up at the sight of me and she came rushing forward. I let her kiss my cheek but didn't return it.

"How are you, babe?" she asked. She'd always called me that. She swatted my arm playfully. "I thought after we met up that time you'd do a better job of keeping in touch."

"Had a busy semester. You look well," I said, with an easy air I was sure sounded fake as hell.

She didn't seem to notice. "Thank you. So do you."

We sat down, me on one side of the table with Jenn and Arun across from me. They made a beautiful-looking pair. I'd be able to feast on visuals along with my dinner.

Jenn beckoned a server over with her typical disregard for other people's standards, and proceeded to order a round of dishes. "Everything's good here," she assured us. "But you'll especially like these."

Arun met my eyes, amused. I remembered feeling the same way when I first met Jenn, totally impressed by how she took charge of everything from ordering dinner to having sex. "I'll skip the sangria," he said. "I already indulged at happy hour and it's only Tuesday."

"Same," I said.

"Then I'll have a white wine—feel free to choose one for me," Jenn told the server, and handed him the menus. "Seth, you're still tutoring?" She smiled when I affirmed. "You're so dedicated. Still the same kids?"

"Yeah, although they're growing by the day. Seems like work's going good for you. Introducing Arun around and whatnot."

"Well, he did me such a solid with that article. I shared it with everyone when it came out. He's a fantastic writer, you know."

“Sure is. But I didn’t think you were interested in doing more in politics,” I said to Arun.

“Not the way Jenn is, but I’m applying to journalism internships for the summer. It doesn’t hurt to start developing contacts.”

“Is that all I am to you?” Jenn said playfully.

I tried to clock Arun’s expression in reaction to that, but he just gave her a small smile. “You’re my number one source.”

She preened at that, and then her wine arrived along with the first dish she’d ordered—fried green peppers. I love spicy food, so I tucked right in. Jenn took a sip from her glass and swirled it around her mouth before swallowing. Then she said, “Are you seeing anyone lately, Seth?”

A bit of pepper went down the wrong way. I coughed and gulped some water.

Arun passed me an extra napkin. “Is it too hot for you?”

“Oh, Seth loves the heat,” Jenn said. “He and Darius and Colin used to have competitions with bottles they bought off the internet. What was that one ridiculous pepper called? The scythe or something like that?”

My poor throat could barely make a sound. “The Carolina reaper. Bastard.”

Arun glanced between us, amused. “Who won?”

I motioned to Jenn to answer.

“Seth did. Mostly through sheer determination, I think. He might seem easygoing on the surface, but you can’t underestimate him.”

Now Arun looked speculative. “It sounds like you got pretty close as hallmates.”

I was just taking another gulp of water and had to cough again.

“Not really,” Jenn said. “He’s terrible at communicating. Case in point, I still don’t even know if he’s dating anyone.”

“I am.” I put down my glass.

Her eyes widened. “Tell me about them!”

Again, I was saved by food. Multiple dishes arrived this time and we all got busy clearing space for them. I attempted unsuccessfully to catch Arun’s eye—not for any practical reason, but mainly because I was feeling so out to sea, uncertain what support I had under my feet.

But my dad always told me that it’s just easiest to be upfront with the truth. Anything else takes too much effort to maintain. “Her name’s Ava,” I said. “She’s a first-year.”

“Oh, *really*?” Jenn chewed on a piece of chorizo, unfazed despite her tone. “I thought this might finally be the year you got together with—well.” Her lips spread enigmatically. “What’s this Ava of yours like?”

“She’s great,” I said. As with telling Arun everything about Jenn, there were still limits to exactly *how* upfront I wanted to be. “We’re pretty serious.”

But Jenn wasn’t just anyone. “*We* as in you and she?”

“Who else but us?” I said shortly.

“Oh, I was just wondering how she gets along with Darius and Colin.”

“They get along just fine.”

Jenn evaluated me for a moment over her wine, clearly contemplating whether to keep poking or drop it. I raised an eyebrow at her. In the end, she seemed to think better of it. “Well, hopefully one day I’ll get to meet her. Anyone who makes you happy makes me happy. Not to mention if she’s been vetted by Darius and Colin...”

“Then you should be very happy,” I confirmed, and made myself stop right there.

“As for Arun.” Jenn tilted her head at him, her eyes half-lidded. “He’s pretty cagey about his relationship status. I don’t know if that’s because the status itself is still up in the air, or if he just doesn’t like talking about his personal life.”

I sat back in my chair, released from my interrogation. Arun, on the other hand, hunched forward, swirling the ice in his water. “A bit of both,” he said.

“Well, I won’t push your boundaries,” Jenn replied smoothly. *Hah, since when?* “But I have to say that any person who isn’t jumping at the chance to resolve their status with you must be blind, deaf, and possibly also challenged in some way.”

I stared at Arun in consternation as he just shook his head and chuckled. “Things are complicated when you’re an RA.”

“How so?” Jenn looked like a cat who’d spotted a bird out the window. “Are you trying to date someone on your hall?”

“I’m not trying to date anyone right now,” Arun said cagily. “I honestly think any relationship could be distracting from my duties.” He went through a more generalized what-if version of the spiel I’d heard before, from both him and Ava. Jenn nodded along thoughtfully. “Anyway,” Arun finished with shrug, “even if it weren’t for my position, I’ve got enough going on right now. I don’t date casually so I’d want to make sure I could give any relationship the time and dedication it deserves.”

“Very practical,” Jenn said. “In a way, I admire that structured and disciplined approach to life. But in another way, I think if you met the right person, none of those issues would matter. All of those structured principles would melt away like tissue paper.”

“I just think it’s the respectful approach,” Arun said. “I want to get the beginnings and the foundation right.”

“Then do you plan to stop being an RA next year?”

A good question. I studied Arun as he answered. “I’m not sure. I really like the job. Maybe it would be easier and less time-consuming to be an RA for a junior-senior hall.”

“Yes, the young ones are a lot more work.” Jenn sent me a wink, which I pretended not to see. Then she continued, “I guess I just don’t see why it all has to be so angsty. Relationships don’t have to be that serious.”

“Easy for you to say,” I remarked. “You don’t believe in relationships anyway.”

“They are serious for me,” Arun said quietly.

Jenn waved her wine glass. “I do believe in relationships. I just have my own definition. I think of them as a continuous way to get my physical needs met. I’m not a one-night stand kind of girl—I prefer to have ongoing partners. It cuts down on the uncertainty and risk, and I know what they can do for me and vice versa.”

“But?” I countered.

“But I also don’t get attached. I like having the freedom to move on or choose differently, without all the hassle of breaking up.”

Despite our messy history, I’d never heard her elaborate on her philosophy of sex and relationships in such detail. She just hadn’t bothered, I supposed. Or maybe she hadn’t felt we were important enough to hear it.

“Even sex without feelings can be complicated,” Arun said.

“Not for me,” Jenn declared. “Although I can’t help how other people interpret things.”

“It’s not just the two people in the relationship interpreting, though. It’s also how other people perceive the relationship.”

Jenn shook her head. “If something’s not in my control, I can’t let it be my problem.”

“The world doesn’t work like that. You’re in politics. You know what happens when the wrong people are caught together in the wrong situations.”

“Point,” she conceded. “Then I guess I’ll have to change the world one person at a time. Because in my world, no one I sleep with can affect me personally, politically, or professionally.” She leveled a speaking look at Arun. “If I want someone, I won’t let any of those concerns get in the way.”

Did she just...?

He looked right back at her, but his expression was inscrutable.

Yeah, she did just. But no idea what Arun made of it.

Jenn stopped pestering us with questions after that and spent the rest of the meal talking about herself—her job, her apartment, all the amazing things and places she'd discovered in DC. At least she picked up the check for dinner, although it felt more like a flex than generosity.

When we were leaving the restaurant, getting ready to part ways on the sidewalk, she brushed a hand down the lapel of my coat. "I ran into Darius the other day, did he tell you?"

"Can't see any reason why he'd care to."

Jenn smirked knowingly. "Well, tell *him* I say hello."

She kissed Arun's cheek, and then he and I stood next to each other watching her strut off in her high-heeled boots.

"So," Arun said, "just how close *were* you with Jenn?"

I hefted the strap of my bag more securely on my shoulder. "Bruh, that's a long story. And it ain't just my story, if you feel me, so I won't be spilling any of it. All I can say is, you should try and avoid getting that close to her yourself."

"She's just a friend."

"Really. I thought she was just a source." I started toward the Metro station, and after a second Arun followed.

24

AVA

I went to my second therapy appointment half-convinced it was all going to end in humiliation and me slinking off to hide in a cave. That Mary would say I couldn't be fixed, that I didn't even need fixing so I should stop wasting everyone's time, that I should just get over it because unlike me, other people are suffering from some real shit.

But what actually happened was that she greeted me warmly and asked how my week had gone, and whether there was anything urgent I wanted to discuss before we picked up the thread from the last session.

"Um, no," I said. "I mean, there is something I might want to ask. But the stuff with my mom and the panic attacks is more important."

"That's perfectly fine. We'll leave maybe ten minutes at the end of this appointment to talk through your question—do you think that's enough time?"

"Sure." I gestured with my hands to sort of say, *Okay, go on and do your therapy thing.*

"So I wanted to start by asking whether you've ever heard the term 'gaslighting' in reference to relationships."

"No." I furrowed my brow. "Like, romantic relationships?"

"Not necessarily, although that's where the term began. It's actually the title of a film noir from the 1940s, and the plot involves a husband who makes his wife believe she's losing her sanity. But in some mental health circles, it's evolved into a larger concept and the term is now used to describe a pattern of behavior where one person manipulates another into doubting their own perceptions or memories."

"Isn't that just lying?"

Mary shook her head. "It certainly can and often does involve lying, but it's not always consciously done. There are

a lot of possible behaviors. Denial, dismissal, misdirection, avoidance. Withholding information from you. Acting one way in public versus another way in private. Blaming you for their own choices or conduct. Or simply criticizing yours.” She paused. “Does any of this resonate with you?”

I nodded slowly. “Most of what you said.”

She nodded back. “I especially thought the long silent treatment, and the behavior when you confronted her over the phone, and her negative judgment about you not visiting for the holidays—all of that ticked the boxes of gaslighting in my opinion.” She paused. “How does it feel for you to hear that?”

“I don’t know. I guess it makes it feel more concrete? Like, I knew what the truth was. But for her to keep acting like there were two truths was just so...inexplicable. Then to hear that the problem really is her, that the way she’s acting is actually a whole *thing* that matches up with what professional psychologists say...” I searched for the right words. “It’s almost a relief. It’s not me. It’s *her*. But then it makes me wonder what’s wrong with her. If we know that gaslighting is a thing, then why do people do it? Why does she?”

“Unfortunately, you may never get an answer for her behavior. Manipulation is about control—control of others, but also control of one’s own circumstances and perception of the world. I can’t diagnose your mother from afar, but it seems clear to me that she had trouble handling your father’s illness and death. She may have constructed her own narrative around it, as a way of harnessing and managing her emotions. And as her daughter, you were caught up in that.”

“You mean...it’s not that she didn’t care about him, but that she cared too much?”

“Possibly.”

I rubbed my hands down my lap, squeezing the parts of my thighs above my knees. “Am I supposed to feel sorry for her?”

“I’m not asking you to do that,” Mary said firmly. “I don’t think empathy is a bad thing at all, of course. I encourage it. But what I’m seeing with you is that your mother’s behavior,

whether it was her own coping mechanism or not, has inflicted a lot of damage. My focus is on addressing that damage, mitigating it, and helping you to deal with it.”

My throat tightened. “How am I damaged? My panic attacks?”

“Rather than saying you, as a person, are damaged, I’d like you to try and think of it as parts of you have suffered from damage. Your panic attacks are a clear manifestation that something in your life is unhealthy. However, there are other issues to look out for. Many people who’ve been manipulated or emotionally abused by their parents—or other loved ones—end up experiencing low self-worth, which can lead to withdrawal, isolation, depression, anxiety.”

“Otherwise known as my first few months at Lockridge.” I probably meant that to sound sarcastic and cynical, but the wavering in my voice kind of undermined the effect.

“That wouldn’t be a surprise normally. Adjusting to college is hard for a lot of people. But for you, all of this comes on top of the grief you were dealing with—that you’re still dealing with. Not just because of losing your father, but also grieving the loss of your relationship with your mother.”

“I never thought about relationships being something you could grieve.”

“Oh, they very much are. It’s why we’re so bummed out after breakups.”

I frowned. “I guess I was grieving other relationships too, for a while. I had a boyfriend in high school. We were really serious, but...he and my best friend were sleeping together behind my back. I found out a couple months after my dad died.”

“That must have been awful for you.”

“It was pretty fucked up, yeah. She got pregnant, too. She had the baby right after Thanksgiving.”

“How did you handle it when you found out?”

“I screamed at them both, in front of a bunch of people. Then I basically stopped talking to them completely.”

Mary’s eyebrows raised. “So you lost the four most important people in your life, in the span of months?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I sort of patched things up with Jodie—my best friend—in October. But it was more like...like we just needed to talk about what had happened. Process it. We were as close as sisters. We couldn’t just let it all go without a word. But I don’t think we’ll ever be real friends again.”

“So you had an incredibly rocky start to college. You had virtually no support network at all.”

God, she made me sound like a charity case. “But I feel like I’ve been doing pretty okay lately. I mean, aside from the panic attacks. I’m making new friends. I’m dating again. I’m enjoying my classes.”

“That’s good,” Mary said encouragingly. “Those are all good things to be doing, and I’m glad to hear you have relationships that make you feel like you’re doing well. Whenever we’re missing love and validation and acceptance in one part of our lives, it’s great if we can find that kind of support elsewhere. But the strongest and best love is self-love.” She smiled. “Excuse me for being cheesy.”

“It’s okay,” I told her. “BTS has like, a whole album on the topic.”

“Ah, yes. No doubt more palatable coming from them.”

“I don’t know. I’ve devoted big hours to them and it still didn’t sink in. I could probably stand to hear it more often from people I actually interact with.” I cupped my elbows, sighing. “But sometimes even my relationships can torpedo my self-confidence.”

“Many people feel the same. How does that happen for you?”

“It’s almost like...like I don’t believe I deserve to be with anyone I’m with.”

“Ah. Well, the notion that people need to deserve each other in order to be together has harmful implications,” Mary said. “Can you consider thinking about it simply in terms of whether you’re compatible? Or whether you’re healthy for each other?”

“I know I *should* think about it that way.” I shook my head. “It’s just that part of me is always questioning why they’d want someone like me. It’s the worst with this one guy. We aren’t officially together, but we sort of are.” I stopped. “TLDR—it’s complicated. My point is, I don’t feel like we’re on the same level at all.”

“Explain?”

“I don’t know, I just feel underdeveloped compared to him. For one thing he’s, older than me. He’s accomplished. He writes for the school paper. He’s an RA. People go to him for help because the school legitimately thinks he’s good enough to have that position. It’s intimidating. I haven’t done anything with my life except get into college.”

“Not *yet*,” Mary pointed out. “You have the whole rest of your life to become accomplished, as you call it.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t really help me feel more confident right now.”

She tapped her notepad lightly with her pen. “How much of this comes from you versus him, do you think? Does he do anything or say anything to put you down? To make you feel intimidated?”

“No, not at all. He’s the kindest guy ever. Literally perfect.”

“Well, no one’s truly perfect. Everyone has flaws.”

Only someone who’d never met Arun could say something like that. I lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I’m just saying, I recognize it’s mostly my problem. I feel like I can’t measure up. And I’m worried that if we ever did get together, I’d always be waiting for him to wake up and look at me like, *well, that was a big mistake.*”

“Those kinds of thoughts put unnecessary obstacles between you and your happiness. And yes, I think they do indicate

some damage to your self-esteem and your sense of self-worth. Those are issues we can work on, so that you can start feeling like you *do* deserve love. Not that you deserve to be with a particular person—but that you deserve the love and respect of any person you're with, no matter what supposed accomplishments either of you have.”

“Well, all of this sort of ties into the other thing I wanted to ask about. I haven't told this guy about what's going on with me. The panic attacks and all of that. And I wonder if I should.”

“What's stopping you from telling him?”

“Honestly, everything I've been saying.” I thought about the disagreement—was it a whole fight?—with Darius. “I didn't want to admit it came from lack of self-esteem. But yeah, it kind of does.”

“Because you think he won't find your problems important?”

“More like...why would he want to deal with someone who's so messed up? Why should he?” To my horror, tears pricked my eyes. “And also, I don't want to be someone he's always counseling or helping. Sometimes I just feel like I'm already failing at life and I've barely even started and nobody who's anybody would want anything to do with me.” My fingers were all twisted together in my lap. I shook my head, unable to continue.

“Let me ask you something,” Mary said. “How would you feel if your positions were reversed? If he were the one talking to me about his panic attacks and his family situation and his sense of self-worth?”

First of all, I thought, *that would never happen*. But I tried to think about what she was looking for with that question. Darius had also asked me to look at the reverse. “I guess you want me to say it wouldn't matter to me.”

“Would it?” she pressed.

I pictured Arun, perfect Arun who lives full-time on a pedestal in my mind. I tried to strip away all of the things that

make him shine on paper—his work and the Literature department who loves him and his amazing parents. Who would he be?

He'd still be someone who listened to me. Somehow I had no doubt about that. He'd have the same warm eyes and gentle voice. The same calm way of answering all my questions and giving me advice. The same wisdom and caring.

He'd still be on my side. And I'd still want to know him; I'd still want for us to be in each other's lives. And if he was the one having trouble, well... "I'd want to help him," I said out loud. "I'd want to make things better for him."

"But would you look down on him? Think he was a failure? Think you shouldn't be with him?"

"No," I said, my voice soft. Then, more assertively, "I wouldn't think any of that."

"Then you certainly shouldn't think any of that about yourself," Mary replied. "And if you see him as someone who sincerely wants to be with you and help you in the same way...then consider letting him."



Things with Stefka at work hadn't really improved. She was never outright nasty, but in comparison to Joe, Monique, and Nadia, the Stefkat attitude was noticeably frosty. It helped though that by my second Thursday with the department, I'd gotten more used to the rhythms and routines. I didn't have to ask her tons of questions anymore, which greatly reduced our necessary interactions.

What didn't help was that Arun stopped by during my shift. His presence always seemed to ruffle Stefka's feathers—hell, he ruffled everyone's feathers. The others all visibly perked up and preened when he came strolling down the hallway, and I immediately went rigid, like a statue on display. I could feel their eyes on us as Arun came to a stop in front of my desk.

"How's it going?" he said, smiling down at me.

“Um, good. Are you here seeing a professor?”

“Nope, just thought I’d stop by and say hi to you.”

It was almost tangible how everyone’s attention sharpened.

Arun’s easy manner was in direct opposition to how I felt. I hadn’t seen him since before the therapy appointment when Mary had urged me to be more open with him. But I’d certainly been thinking about him. He’d even had a starring role in my dream last night; it had faded to a vague memory, but I knew it had involved a fairly on-the-nose pursuit of him through the library while he ducked around corners trying to get away from me.

Now here he was in person, in his full shining glory, and I was clumsily trying to thump a pile of papers into order on my desk. One of the pages sliced my index finger, and I sucked in a breath. “Ow, papercut.”

Arun reached over to grab my hand, his eyes rounded in concern. “Are you okay?”

“Stefka’s got a first aid kit,” Nadia said helpfully.

“For a papercut?” Stefka said, like someone had just told her the sky had turned yellow.

“I’m fine.” I pulled my hand back from Arun. “No big deal.”

“Can I see that first aid kit?” Arun asked Stefka.

Lips pressed together, she opened the bottom drawer of her desk and handed him the white plastic box. While he fished through the bandages and ointments, I repeated, “Seriously, I’m fine. It’s barely bleeding.”

“Indulge me,” he murmured. “I haven’t had a chance to use this part of my RA training yet.” He came around my desk and sat on the edge, then proceeded to dab ointment onto the cut, followed by a bandage. It was all very smooth and quick, but inwardly I cringed, feeling like the girl who cried wolf and made the whole village come boiling out of their houses with weapons hefted. I could just imagine Stefka’s internal monologue.

I inspected the bandage, which Arun had applied like an expert—naturally. “Thanks. I guess it was kinda high stakes there. I probably wouldn’t have survived if you hadn’t remembered your first aid training so well.”

Stefka gave the faintest of sniffs. Arun didn’t seem to notice. He gave the first aid box back to her. “Appreciated, Stefka.”

Just then, Professor Hilson came out of her office and spotted Arun. “Ah, Mr. Deshmukh! I’ve been meaning to email you about a possible conference proposal. I’ve got a couple of brochures in my office if you have time to discuss. Shouldn’t take long.”

“Sure, Professor.” Arun nodded at me. “Back in a sec.”

“Ava,” Stefka said, as Arun turned away. “I have some books that need to get delivered back to the library. Can you go ahead and do it now? I’ve also got a list of books some professors have requested. If you can pick those up, that would be great. I don’t think it would take you more than half an hour to locate everything.”

“Uh...okay.”

Of course the pile of returns was massive. I stuffed as many into my bag as I could, but I still had to carry a stack in my arms. “Can you handle everything?” Stefka said, faux-sweetly. “They just tend to pile up over time.”

“I can help,” Joe offered.

“No, I’ve got it,” I said. The last thing I wanted was to give Stefka another millimeter of weakness from me.

“We’ll tell Arun to expect you back in half an hour,” Monique said with a wink.

“Oh, he doesn’t need to wait for me—”

“The sooner you go, the sooner you can get back.” Stefka punctuated this with a loud clacking on her keyboard. The sound chased me out of the department.



Even though I knew Seth wasn't on-shift at the library, I couldn't suppress a small hope that I'd see him behind the circulation desk anyway—or the resulting feeling of disappointment when he was nowhere in sight.

Luckily, I got another surprise. Colin.

He came down the main staircase just as I'd finished depositing my load of books at the return area. He looked as handsome as ever—maybe even more so since I hadn't seen him in a while—cutting a dramatic figure with his tall body draped in a dark coat and Burberry scarf, pulling gloves onto his elegant hands. I just had to pause and drink in the sight of him.

He should come with his own soundtrack, I thought. Or a warning label.

Looking more closely, though, I noticed the tight set of his jaw, the way his eyebrows were drawn down over a clouded gaze, his mind clearly elsewhere. I'd never seen him so stressed.

Hurriedly, I zipped my bag shut and crossed the wide space toward him. He didn't notice me approaching until he was practically about to trip over me.

“Hi,” I said, my voice wispy thin. “Are you okay? I mean—how are you?”

Colin's mouth fell open. His eyes searched my face. “Damn, you're a welcome sight.”

“Same to you. What are you doing here?”

“I've got a paper to write for my Bioethics class. Needed to do some research.”

I wanted to run my fingers over him and smooth out all of his worries and troubles. I settled for lightly touching his sleeve. “Do you have time to chat for a bit? Just a few minutes. I'm supposed to be finding stuff for work and they're expecting me back.”

I saw the split second it took him to calculate and make the decision. He grabbed my hand firmly. “Tell me whatever you need to find is in a dark and secluded corner.”

“I don’t know, but hopefully the professors have some really obscure requests.”

OceanofPDF.com

I really did want to talk to Colin. I thought maybe I could give him an outlet to vent to, or at the very least a quick study break. I imagined him barricaded inside his room, hunched over his desk, alone, only allowing himself out for food, hygiene, and classes. In short, like me last semester.

But he quickly pulled me into the space between a pillar and a bookstack. In that narrow area our bodies had to press together to fit. His coat was open, so I could feel the hard muscles beneath his clothes—his strong chest and flat abs and thick thighs. And between his thighs...

“I miss you,” I told him, gripping his beltloops to pull him a few millimeters closer. I gazed up into his beautiful face. “Do you miss me?”

“Of course. I never thought I’d be jealous of the other guys but the fact that they get to see you every day—” He paused. “Should you just move into my room? Is that the answer?”

I didn’t tell him that I’d barely seen Darius over the past few days either. “I wouldn’t be too distracting for you?”

“*You’re* not distracting. *Life* is.”

“That sounds terrible.”

He sighed. “It’s just temporary. Most of the stress is because of time management. I’m basically going to school double-time and I’m just trying to fit it all into the twenty-four hours I get each day, trying to pace myself so I don’t burn out.”

“I get it.” I smoothed my hands up and down his sides. “I know you’ve worked everything out the best way possible.”

“I can’t believe I have almost two months left of this. God, what a grind.”

“Can I do anything to help?”

“You are now, just by being in the right place at the right time.”

I wanted to tell him that he really risked burning out from too much isolation. But I also didn't want to nag or drag him down. So I just smiled up at him. “I'm the lucky one.”

He dipped his head and kissed me. It felt like pulling into the driveway after a long journey, when you haven't seen your house in days and the front door is right there, welcoming you home. I put my arms around his neck and kissed him back.

Colin stroked my jaw, as gentle as petting a cat. His tongue dipped briefly between my lips, but we kept it PG by silent mutual agreement. Unlike with Seth, this wasn't the library afterhours.

After a moment, Colin pulled back and pressed his forehead lightly to mine. “You're not a distraction, but you're definitely a temptation.”

“Speak for yourself,” I teased. With our hips clamped so tightly together, I could feel the stiffening of his cock through both sets of our clothes.

“I should get going soon, though,” he said reluctantly. “Let's go find those books.”

I shook my head. “I can get them on my own. I'd rather maximize my time with you.”

He ran his thumb over my bottom lip. “Trust me, so would I, but I don't want to get you all worked up unless I can finish the job.”

I mouthed his thumb. “Not necessarily a bad thing. It'd just give me something to think about later.”

Colin groaned. “Seriously, we gotta get out of here.”

We eased out of the space, Colin holding my hand. That was when I noticed someone standing at the far end of the bookstack. He would have had a clear view of Colin over the top of the stack, but until now he couldn't have seen my face.

It was Ian. He stared at me, obviously surprised. “Well, hello.”

“Ian, hi.” Self-consciously, I pulled my hand away from Colin’s. I hadn’t seen Ian since the night of Allen’s performance, but the memory of rejecting him was sharply awkward.

“Nice to see you.” He was holding a book, which he touched to his temple in a sort of salute. I guessed the salute was a signature move. “I’ll, ah, leave you to it.” Before I could reply, he walked off.

Colin turned to me, brow furrowed. “Who was that?”

“Um, his name’s Ian. I met him at the international party.” I didn’t know how to explain that he’d hit on me without it sounding weird, so I just said, “Kaya’s dating his friend. Sorry, I would have introduced you, but...”

“Maybe he’s not a fan of PDA.”

All I could do was shrug. Colin took my hand again, and we headed to the Literature section.



That moment in the library didn’t cross my mind again until Saturday, when Kaya and I finally ended up in our room at the same time. I arrived after a run on the trails with Seth to find her shoulders-deep in her closet, re-organizing her clothes.

“Hey, stranger, you finally came up for air,” I teased. “How does the outside world look?”

Kaya peeked out at me. “Bright and optimistic.”

I leaned on her desk to take a messy slug of water. “As opposed to the world indoors with Allen? Trouble in paradise?”

“I just needed a breather. Maybe more.” She shut the closet door and started attacking the shoe collection under her bed. Then she burst out, “The problem with paradise is that admission is temporary. There’s always some kind of snake in the grass just waiting to trick you and get you kicked out.”

I wiped my mouth, straightening. “What happened?”

“I realized I don’t know him well enough to be spending all my time fucking him.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “What made you realize that?”

She cut her eyes in my direction. “He irritated me.”

“Is it fixable?”

“Let’s just say it’ll take a *lot*, and since in my experience most men ain’t shit, I don’t have high hopes.”

I tapped the water bottle with my fingernails. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Not really.” Kaya paused, a Doc Marten in one hand and a pointy heel in the other. “Are you still talking to Ian?”

“I ran into him in the library the other day,” I recalled.

An unreadable expression flitted across her face. “I mean *talking* talking.”

“Oh. No. I wasn’t ever, not like that.”

“That’s good.”

“Why?” Then I answered my own question. “I guess it *would* make things weird if I’d actually been interested in him only for you and Allen to break up.”

“Well, you’re a better judge of character than me. The kind of friends someone has can tell you a lot about them.”

“Aw, I’m sorry Allen turned out to be a shitfucker, babe. But there are plenty of guys on campus who I’m sure can improve your average viewpoint of men. Don’t let one bad apple sour you on all of ‘em.”

“Says the girl who rounded up four of the best ones all for herself!” But her griping was good-natured, and her irritation seemed deflated.

I’d been thinking about seeing if Darius was free for dinner, to kind of clear the air between us. But I figured he was probably booked and busy anyway, and Kaya needed me more. We decided the best ointment for getting burned by a

guy was the ultimate girl-does-it-better story: *Legally Blonde*. As Kaya set up the movie, I sent Darius a text message to invite him to hang out tomorrow. He replied just as Elle got her acceptance letter.

How about doughnuts and coffee? I'll come get you around ten.

I sent back the relevant emojis and a thumbs up.



Sunday morning, Kaya went to meet up with some of her other friends she hadn't seen in a while. After I got dressed, I left the door open like usual. Darius's was still closed, but I'd heard him arriving back pretty late, so he was probably still sleeping. It seemed I'd been right about him going out to party.

But at quarter to ten, he leaned in through the open doorway. "Hey, you ready? I already went out and grabbed stuff." He held up a box of doughnuts from the local place just off-campus. In his other hand he hefted a carton with two coffees in paper cups. "You want to set up in here or my room?"

"Let's go to yours," I said. "I don't know when Kaya will be back."

I took the box and carton from him while he unlocked his door, then followed him in. I hadn't been to his room for a whole week, and at first I just stood there, not sure if I should wait for him to invite me to sit. Then I mentally kicked myself and took his desk chair, taking out the coffees and opening up the doughnut box.

"Got a bunch of different kinds," Darius said, taking his other chair next to me. "But I'mma have to call dibs on at least one of the old-fashioneds."

"We'll see," I told him. "Depends on whether you got my coffee order right."

"All black of course," he said, smirking a little.

I didn't let myself hesitate this time. I leaned forward and kissed him sweetly. "Thank you."

"No problem." He grabbed an old-fashioned, broke it in two, and gave me the bigger portion. "So how's your week been?"

I shrugged. "Not bad. You?"

"Same."

We hadn't resorted to monosyllabic small talk like this since our earliest days on the hall. I gathered up my insecurities and told them to take a break. "I'm actually surprised you were up and about so early. Sounded like you partied kinda late."

He smiled around the bite of doughnut he'd just taken, and I saw the smallest hint of those dimples I'd been missing. "I didn't get up to anything crazy. It was a very sober yet inspired kind of party."

"Inspired?"

"Yeah. I've got this project I'm working on for a class, developing a game from scratch. It's been going around and around in my mind ever since we got the assignment, but I haven't had time until last night to really sit down and get to work on it."

I stared at him, mystified. "You spent Saturday night on schoolwork? Are you actually Darius Johnson?"

He snatched up a chocolate-frosted doughnut and pointed it at me. "Hey now. I've been known to ace an assignment or several."

I grabbed the other side of the doughnut and we engaged in a little tug-of-war. He ended up with the big piece this time. "So what's it about?"

"The idea is for the player to scavenge and compete for resources and coalitions in a post-apocalyptic desert world. I'm designing it as a mobile game. Well, Lena and I are—she's my partner. She does the actual coding and I do the story, like the narrative and dialogues and UI. We'll need an artist at some point, but we can outsource that." He paused. "I could

actually show you some of the sketches I drew up, but it's pretty barebones."

"I'd love to see them."

"Let me pull 'em up." Chewing on the last bite of doughnut, Darius opened his laptop and started clicking around.

So Lena, the girl I saw him with in the library, was his project partner. And since she was friends with Mimi, it made sense that Mimi had stopped to talk to them. But did it make sense for Darius to act so happy and carefree around them both? Or even to be partners with someone who'd treated me rudely? Just because he was friendly with everyone didn't mean he had to be *that* friendly with two girls who actively disliked me.

I could still hear his booming laughter.

"All right, so just remember there's a reason we're getting someone proper to do the art," Darius began. He gestured to the screenshot of a hand-drawn figure on his laptop. "It might be hard to visualize the details, but this is one of the possible avatars for the player. They've got all this gear to help survive the harsh conditions of the setting. Everything can be upgraded as the player progresses."

I tried to concentrate on what he was showing me, asking questions and nodding along as he answered. It *was* a cool idea, and even if he hadn't already said he was up all night working on it, I could tell just from his expressions and his voice how excited he was. But then, as he was closing his laptop again, my stupid treacherous mouth said, "You and Lena...were you assigned as partners?"

Darius paused. "No, she asked if we could work together. We have different skillsets, so we're each running our own part of the overall project."

"She asked and you agreed?" *Don't do this, Ava.* But it was already happening.

"Well, yeah." He turned to face me fully. "I doubt I'd have been able to do the whole project on my own."

“There wasn’t anyone else in your class? I’m sure everyone would have loved the chance to be in a group with you.” *Ava, seriously, shut up!*

“I didn’t really think about recruiting people. Lena asked me pretty early and made a convincing case, and I figured, why not?”

It rubbed me wrong how he was talking, slow and careful like he was dealing with a fragile, skittish animal. It made me want to shove aside all the warning bells in my mind and just bare my fangs. “I’m wondering why she chose to partner up with you when she knows you and I are together.”

Darius pursed his lips. “You said just now that everyone would want to work with me.”

“Okay, but why would *you* want to work with her? Not why *not*, but why *would* you?”

He raised his hands defensively. “Because she’s a good programmer. But you know what, clearly I’m missing some kinda undercurrent here. Can we hit reverse for a second?”

I crossed my arms, sitting back in the chair. “Sure.”

He seemed to be waiting for me to continue talking, but it seemed I had control of my mouth again. I stayed stubbornly silent, wanting to see if he even had a clue. Finally, he said, “Is this about what happened with her in Chicago?”

“So you do remember that.”

Grimacing, Darius ran a hand over his face. “I thought y’all were cool now. You’re friends with the other one we met—Haley?”

“Because she wanted to be friends with me. Lena just acted like a wench, period.”

“She was a little aggressive, but that’s just how she is. No one’s gonna be besties with everyone they meet.”

Great, now I felt condescended to. Which I probably half-deserved, for making a big deal out of dust, but again it just made me want to dig my heels in. “She was rude to me

because she's friends with Mimi, which is a whole other thing in itself, by the way."

Darius shook his head. "So really, your point is that I shouldn't work with someone who happens to be friends with your old roommate."

"I actually never said you shouldn't work with her—"

"Good," he interrupted. "Because I just want to be clear that this *is* work. It's about my class, which is part of my major, which I need for my future career."

Suddenly I thought of him saying to me in Chicago, *I wouldn't ever let work get in the way of you*. I told myself this situation had nothing to do with that—that nothing was actually in my way. But his words still smarted. "Thanks for the lecture. Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

He blinked. "I'm not trying to lecture. I just don't understand why you feel so bad about it. It's not personal. It's not about you. Your name's never even crossed her mouth."

The doughnuts weighed unpleasantly in my stomach. "Well, maybe if you let me finish, I can explain it to you. I wasn't saying you shouldn't work with her. I'm just trying to tell you that it bothers me. You were mad at me before because I didn't want to let Arun know all of my private business. But now when I'm trying to express to *you* how I feel about something, you're basically belittling that."

"No, I'm trying to reassure you. I'm not trying to be this girl's buddy, okay? I want a good grade—that's it."

My stomach burned, but strangely, I felt no emotions. It was like that part of me had just thrown up its hands and stood back as the damage unfolded. "Then what was all that joking around with her and Mimi in the library the other day?"

For a moment, Darius just stared at me like he had no idea what I was talking about. "I don't know. Maybe someone said something funny. What were *you* doing that day? Lurking somewhere watching me? Why wait until now to bring it up?"

"I was there to meet Seth," I protested. "I didn't expect to see you buddying up with a girl who'd physically attacked me

just a few months ago. Or was that supposed to help you get a good grade too?”

“I was being polite!”

Now it was my turn to stare at him. “Look, I know you’ve got this whole *friend to the world* thing going on, and normally I really admire that about you. But that just crossed a line for me. I’m gonna take a page out of your book and ask, how would you feel if the situation was reversed and you had beef with someone and I was acting all good with them?”

Darius glanced away for a moment. “I admit I wouldn’t like it. Okay? All I can say is, at the time, I honestly wasn’t thinking. We were about to leave, the library was closing, and I was focused on the project and the fact that it was cold as fuck out and I had a long walk back to my room.” He sighed. “And you bringing it up out of the blue is kinda blindsiding me. It sounds like you were waiting to spring a trap on me or something.”

The air in the room abruptly deflated, taking the wind out of my sails. “That’s not it at all. I didn’t *want* to let this bother me. That’s why I didn’t say anything. But I guess I can’t help how I feel.”

“So what do you want me to do? Stop working with Lena?”

“No, I—” I stood up, suddenly needing to move, unable to meet his eyes. “I realize where you’re coming from with that and I’m not trying to endanger your project. Honestly, this whole discussion is barely even about Lena or Mimi. This is just me and my stupid fucking insecurities running my life again.” I heard the trembling in my voice and knew I was about to break. “I need some space. I’m sorry I ruined our breakfast.”

I got out of there.

My plan for the weekend was to prepare for an interview with the *DC Daily Courier*, a small paper that Jenn had recommended I apply to. I didn't have a strong impression of it, but she'd told me that some of her colleagues had started developing it as a pipeline for small exclusives. Even though I wasn't sure about political reporting as a long-term career path, I figured any foot in the door would be helpful at this point—especially since I still hadn't heard back about any of my other applications.

The interview was scheduled for Monday afternoon. Jenn offered to come over on Sunday to help me practice—although *offer* wasn't quite a strong enough verb to capture the spirit with which she apparently assumed I needed her help.

“Trust me,” she insisted. “I’m a boss at interviews.” And since it was her suggestion that had led to the most hopeful prospect currently on the horizon, I didn't feel I had the luxury of declining.

She texted from her train that she'd arrive around noon. I walked down to the bottom of campus, intending to meet her on the way from the Metro station. There was actually some warmth to the air for once; I had to unwind my scarf and unbutton my coat. Spring was around the corner. Soon the campus would start blooming, the days would get longer, and I'd see the end of my junior year. The end of being Milner 2nd's RA. The beginning of a real relationship with Ava.

The thought of it sent a thrill through me. I picked up my stride as I hit the big central hill, letting gravity pull me faster down the sloping path. I wondered if she was free for dinner. Hopefully I'd be feeling good about the interview prep by then.

I didn't find Jenn until I was already mostly at the station. I spotted her sauntering along the sidewalk toward me, her dark

hair rippling behind her in its usual picturesque waves. She looked up and caught sight of me, and a smile broke over her face, revealing her perfect teeth.

When we reached each other, she kissed my cheek. “You came down to meet me?”

“It’s the least I could do when you traveled all this way.”

“Well, you came to DC last time, so it’s my turn.”

Technically, I’d come to DC because she’d invited me to meet her colleagues. I shrugged. “You were doing me a favor. And you’re doing me another favor now. Since we’re off-campus already, can I treat you to lunch or something?”

Jenn looked sheepish. “Do you know, I was actually craving the Sunday brunch buffet.”

“You mean at the dining hall?”

She nodded. “They don’t make biscuits anywhere like those. Believe me, I’ve looked all over. I’ve been craving them since I graduated.”

I had the meal credits to burn, and the Lockridge Sunday brunch *was* pretty nice. “Fine by me, I guess.”

“Beautiful. I’ve been looking forward to this!” As we turned back in the direction of campus, Jenn threaded her arm through mine. “It’s so cold out,” she said brightly. “Let’s walk fast.”



With our trays loaded, I followed Jenn away from the food counters. She chose a table by the windows overlooking the hill. “This was always my favorite spot,” she explained. “God, this really brings me back. Even though it hasn’t actually been that long, it feels like forever.”

“You’ve probably experienced a lot, being out in the real world,” I said.

“It’s like night and day.”

We chatted for a while about what had been happening for her at work—a new bill that the President really wanted to push through, which required Jenn and her colleagues to help drum up public support. Over the time I'd gotten to know Jenn, I'd learned that while she didn't necessarily love her job, she could talk about it all day long. The world of politics from an insider perspective was packed with stories both great and small, both horrific and inspiring. Even five minutes of her day could make history forever, as she put it.

She was such an intense salesperson. The way she spoke, politics should be the top subject on people's minds. I felt a little small, thinking that it wasn't for me. Of course I made sure to vote, and I cared about how government works for the people. But I was starting to understand that I like intimate stories on the micro level, longform journalism, the intersection between non-fiction and literature.

I found myself nodding along automatically, while letting my mind wander. Finally, Jenn said, "I'm going to grab a few more biscuits to take back to the city with me. Can I get you anything?"

"No," I replied, "but I was going to get some coffee for myself. Need some energy for the interview practice. Can I grab you a cup?"

"Please. One dose of sugar, no cream. Let's meet back at the front when we're done."

There was a crazy long line at the coffee machine, so I decided to persuade Jenn to go for the coffee bar in the central admin building. As I walked back through the dining hall, I spotted Ava taking a tray toward the trash disposal. I hurried to intercept her.

"Hey, are you heading out?"

She looked up at me with surprise. "Hi. Um, yeah, I just finished."

"Me too. Sorry I didn't see you until now."

"I was off in that section." She waved at an area around the other side of the food counters, a small alcove where students

sit whenever they want some quiet away from the echoing hubbub of the main room.

I took her tray from her and put it on the conveyer belt. “How’s your weekend been?”

“To be honest...” Ava shrugged. “Not that great.”

We turned in the direction of the main entrance, and I leaned down to concentrate on her as we walked. “What happened?”

“Um.” She sighed, not meeting my eyes. “You know what? I don’t want to bother you. It’s no big deal.”

“Ava.” I reached for her hand, gently pulling her to a stop. She kept her gaze on the floor, and I had to bend down to look into her face. “Whatever it is, tell me.”

“That’s the thing.” She bit her lower lip, and to my shock, I realized it was trembling. “It isn’t just one *whatever*. It’s more a pile of *whatevers*.”

A spark of insight made me ask a question I’d been sitting on for a while. “Does it have anything to do with what we talked about before? About you seeing a therapist?”

Her mouth worked. “Yeah. I’ve had a couple appointments now. Sorry. I should have told you before.”

“Not at all. You’re entitled to privacy.” But a mix of feelings was swirling through me, like jagged pieces of sleet strewn by the wind. I’d very consciously tried not to ask her about it, knowing that the decision was a sensitive and private thing, but also because part of me had been hoping—maybe even expectantly waiting—for her to trust me with developments. The fact that she’d come to me for advice had made me start believing we were at that level, that she saw me as someone who could be that kind of person for her.

Now it seemed I’d assumed too much. Had it actually been on me to reach out to her first? Maybe her silence on the subject was my own fault—for being too passive, for standing on the sidelines instead of striding boldly forward.

But this wasn’t about me. Ava stood before me, chin lifted, shoulders back. Her face, always so expressive, showed her

own mix of feelings: nervousness, defensiveness, resolve. Like she wasn't sure how I'd receive this revelation, but she was nevertheless determined to make it.

We were standing between two flows of traffic, students entering and exiting the dining hall. Probably not the best place to be talking about such a personal matter, but I wanted to give her my immediate and full attention. *I'm here now. You can talk to me about this, about anything, everything.*

"How did it go?" I asked softly. "Do you think it could help you?"

"It's probably too early to tell," Ava said. "But I like her. It's a her, by the way. The person." She glanced around and stepped closer, lowering her voice. "To be honest, I was kind of still debating whether I really needed it. But now...now I wish I didn't have to wait until my appointment day."

A pile of whatevers, she'd said. "What's going on?"

"Oh, you know." She gave a little laugh, and it felt like another gust of cold, sharp sleet. "Ava's insecurity hours, as usual."

I wanted to pull her into my arms and shield her from everything that had caused this brittle mood. "Tell me."

"It just feels like I'm a mess right now. I'm constantly second-guessing myself and everyone around me." Ava shook her head. "This morning I kind of blew shit up with Darius. I don't even know why anymore. It was like watching a train wreck, only I was the one driving the train."

"Hey, first of all, it takes two people to argue. I don't know the details, obviously, but that's universally a true statement."

She crossed her hands over her chest and rubbed her upper arms. "What about if the two people aren't equally at fault, though?"

"Maybe it's that insecurity that's making you think so," I reasoned.

"Well, I'm sure Darius is over dealing with my insecurity."

The misery on her face lanced through my chest. “I obviously can’t speak for him, but I do have a pretty good idea of how he feels about you. What you have together is more than strong enough to handle a fight. Just talk to him.”

Her dark eyes seemed to speak volumes. “I keep getting that advice. Not only about Darius, either. I just think it’s a lot easier to say *talk to him* than to be the one to actually do it.”

“Can I help? What can I do to help?”

Ava opened her mouth to reply, but then her gaze shifted to my right. At that moment, a familiar arm slithered around mine, followed by the light press of Jenn’s hand.

“Hello,” she said lightly. “I was heading outside to meet you and here you are. Our brunch just hit me like Thanksgiving turkey and suddenly I’m craving that coffee.” She looked at Ava, then looked at me. “Am I interrupting?”

“Sorry,” I began, “I wasn’t able to get the coffee. Actually, I might just need a minute first—”

“No, it’s okay,” Ava said quickly. “I didn’t realize you were with someone.” She glanced at Jenn, then paused, her brow furrowing.

My heart sank. “Ava, it’s fine. We can just—”

She backed up a step. “I have to run anyway. Really, it’s no big deal. Thanks again for the advice.”

“Oh, is this RA business?” Jenn tilted her head curiously.

“Ava’s...” I caught myself in that weird nebulous space of how to define our relationship, on top of which was Ava’s own private business, and decided to just complete the sentence the easy way. “...on my hall. One of my residents.”

“Then please don’t let me stop you. I could just go to the coffee bar and wait for you there. I still remember the way.”

The furrow in Ava’s brow deepened. “You’re not a student?”

“Former actually. I graduated last year.” Jenn put her hand out to shake. “Jenn Silviana.”

I only noticed the miniscule widening of Ava's eyes because I was already laser-focused on her. "Right," she said, taking Jenn's hand. "You were in Arun's article." There was the slightest, almost indiscernible pause. "For a second I thought we'd met before, but I must have just recognized you from the picture." It seemed like she was going to say something else, but she only ended the shake and put her hands in her pockets. "Well, um, have a good rest of your weekend."

"I could stop by your room later?" I offered.

"I might crash at Seth's," she said. "But text me whenever."

As she headed for the doors I had the impression of a dandelion disintegrating in a breeze, but before I could interrogate the image, Jenn turned to me. "Seth as in *my* Seth?"

"If you mean Seth Gallant, your old hallmate..."

Her eyes flashed with some animated expression I couldn't quite place. Unlike with Ava, I didn't have as much dedicated experience reading Jenn. "And now *I'm* the one who should have recognized her. That day we had dinner—he said he was dating someone named Ava, didn't he?"

He'd said it with rather an edge, I recalled. I'd found it notable at the time because Seth's usually such a teddy bear.

"Too bad I didn't put the pieces together sooner," Jenn murmured. Then she smiled brightly, apparently changing topics. "So! I was thinking about where might be the best place for us to practice. But then I figured, why make it complicated? Since you're an RA, I'm sure you have a nice private single. Shall we just go there?"



Based on my research, I'd already drawn up a list of likely interview questions. Jenn scanned it with a small frown of concentration.

“We can certainly run through these,” she said. “But I know the editors you’re likely to meet, and they’ll want to throw curveballs. Do you mind if I pepper some in?”

“Do your best. Or worst?”

Her lips pursed in a small smile and she leaned forward. I’d let her take the desk chair while I sat on my bed. At our first meeting, for the article I’d written, we’d gone to her apartment. Outside of that instance, we’d always met in public, in cafés and bars and restaurants where she wore her work suits and carried the air of someone proudly conducting important business. Even though she now wore—somewhat—casual clothes for the weekend, she still seemed out of place in my small room with its standard-issue dorm furniture. I couldn’t puzzle out the feeling, except that she just seemed to overwhelm the space.

The mock interview started as planned: we covered where I see myself in five years, how I’d handled an adverse situation, my biggest weakness (Jenn nodded approvingly at the way I spun it as a strength). Then she tapped the back of her phone with her long fingernails.

“What do you think people say about you behind your back that isn’t actually true?”

I blinked. “Do you mean other people on the *Rundown*? Or my fellow RAs?”

“Anyone.”

“Well...” I sat up straighter. “I’ve gathered that some people see me as...a bit out of reach. Not relatable.”

“Why is that?”

“I’m not sure. If I knew how to change people’s impressions of me, I’d certainly do my best not to have that reputation.”

“What do you want people to think of you?”

I stared at her. This curveball question sounded more personal than professional. “I just want to be known as a dependable, conscientious, hard worker.”

Her teeth gleamed in another smile. “Not the most creative answer, but I’ll let it slide.” For the next few questions, she went back to my prepared list. Then she said, “What’s something you wish you could change about your life right now?”

Ava’s face, never far away, rose to the top of my mind. *I wish I’d stopped her from leaving the dining hall. I wish we hadn’t promised to wait.* “I’d like for it to be summer already, so I could start this internship.”

Jenn laughed softly. “Smooth. Do you know where you’d stay in DC? I highly recommend Cleveland Park.”

Her neighborhood. “Ideally a place near the office. I know how time-sensitive political reporting can be.”

“Well, Mr. Deshmukh.” Jenn extended her hand, “I must say you’re an extremely strong candidate. I’d love to recommend you for any position here.”

Relieved to have finished the practice session, I took her offered hand, expecting we’d shake just as she’d done with Ava. I already had a *thank you again for all of your help* ready to go.

But Jenn slipped her fingers toward my wrist, rising from her chair in one fluid motion to bring her face to mine. This sudden closeness was nothing like the time she kissed my cheek hello. We were head-on, her eyes big and luminous, her breath washing over my mouth.

For a moment all I could do was stare at her, frozen. I hadn’t been ignorant of her flirtations and innuendos, but she was so casual and careless about it that I’d just filed the behavior away as part of her personality—harmless and meaningless. It simply hadn’t occurred to me that she would actually try anything more.

“What do you think?” she murmured now. “Are you still interested?” And she pressed her mouth to mine.

Her lips were soft and plush, but they weren’t the lips I wanted. I drew back immediately. The problem was, my escape route was limited: I was on my bed, with her arms

braced on either side of my thighs. For another hanging moment, she kept leaning over me, searching my face with narrowed eyes.

“I’ve surprised you,” she said. “In a good way or a bad way, I wonder.”

I found my voice at last. “I’m sorry. I can’t do this. I don’t know if I gave you the wrong idea, but—”

“But you don’t want me.”

I hesitated, trying to think of a way to phrase it. “It’s not about you. I’m just...not on the market.”

Now it was her turn to be surprised. “I thought you said you weren’t trying to date anyone because of your job.”

“I did, and it’s still true. I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“And if you remember what *I* said, then you should know that’s perfectly fine with me.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to change the relationship you and I already have. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done to help me, all of your advice and the introductions and now this job...”

Jenn stood, and I sat up straight again. “So I *am* only a source to you.”

“I was hoping you could be a friend. But if this complicates things, I understand.”

She shrugged, the picture of cool dignity. “You’ve forgotten again. I don’t believe sex has to complicate anything. The lack of sex certainly doesn’t have to, either. But just to be clear—*is* there someone else? Is that the real reason you’re saying no?”

I’d tried to be careful with how I rejected her, but she deserved the truth, I supposed. And even though Ava wasn’t here, so did she. “Yes,” I said simply. “There’s someone else.”

“Lucky someone,” Jenn replied, her tone as light and carefree as if nothing of import had happened. “I hope they realize it.”

OceanofPDF.com

I'd met the legend herself. Jenn, the worldly and sophisticated heartbreaker who bewitched everyone she met, body and soul. She'd apparently sunk her manicured clutches into Arun while I'd remained totally oblivious, stuck in my own head angsting and worrying and wallowing about how someone like him could possibly be interested in someone like me. Well, here was yet another piece to add to the puzzle of Arun, one that fit him far better according to all the known rules of the universe.

And while I hadn't disintegrated into a measly pile of dust upon meeting her, it had been a near thing. Because *damn*. She was such a smoke show even I might have signed up to be a member of her admirers club.

Seth noticed my glum mood that night, even though I tried not to show it. He asked me gently if I wanted to talk about anything. I told him about the fight with Darius, and he whistled through his teeth.

"Want me to give him a reality check?" he offered.

I sighed. "It's actually not the first time we've had a... strong disagreement. In fact, the whole reason I wanted to hang out with him was because I felt like we hadn't really gotten over the last one."

"Fights are normal, you know. You've both got such strong personalities, but in different ways. So you're gonna clash sometimes."

"Until when, though?" I scowled.

"I mean...I think as long as you're not intending to hurt each other, as long as you're both coming from a place of love, then you can always resolve things."

"I guess it's just—" I shook my head, burrowing into his side. "How do you think I'm strong, exactly?"

We were lying on his bed, Seth's arm around my shoulders. He gave me a light squeeze. "How would I not? You took care of your dad when he was dying. I can't even imagine what it took for you to do that. You came to Lockridge and started a new life all by yourself. You never let anyone disrespect you—not your roommate or your boyfriend or your closest friend. Not even your mom. You handle four needy guys and you don't have any problem telling us how to make you happy. And most importantly..." He propped himself up on his elbow to look down at me. "You looked for help when you needed it."

"You think that was me being strong?"

"Absolutely." The soft light from the lamp next to his bed highlighted the green tints of his eyes. "It takes some real guts to admit you can't solve everything on your own. Believe me. I come from a long line of Georgia hard-scrabble rednecks who'd sooner shoot off their right nuts than admit to having feelings." Seth grimaced. "If they weren't drunk, anyway. And it was always worse for men. My dad and my older brothers have some of that, and when I was a kid I hated the way they'd totally shut me down whenever I cried or wanted to talk about something emotional. They'd get awkward or quiet or even worse, crack jokes."

"I had that too," I said softly. "With my family."

He stroked my cheek. "My mom always tried to teach her sons differently, but she didn't really figure it out until me and Zach. I never would have been able to be with Kyle—to take a chance on opening my heart—if it weren't for how she raised me."

I lifted my hand to cup his cheek as well, cradling it delicately. The air between us felt fragile and precious, like we were encased in a golden gossamer bubble. "She did a damn good job with you. You're an amazing person, Seth. Every part of you is just filled with life and caring and wisdom. I think your future students are always going to remember you as the best teacher they ever had."

“Thank you.” He beamed down at me. “But hold up. I didn’t mean to change the subject. We were talking about you.”

I let out a groan. “Let me guess, you’re going to tell me I should just talk to Darius.”

“No, Darius is a big boy who can clean up his own messes. And I’ll support whatever you want to do or not do. I just wanted to make sure you heard everything else I said.”

“About me being strong?”

“You know it. Because—” He shifted, bringing himself a little higher so he could look directly into my eyes. “I get that you’ve been having a hard time. And I also know that’s when people have a hard time believing the good stuff about themselves.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I might feel a little bit seen on that point.”

Seth traced his thumb over my lower lip. “I just wish you could really, truly see yourself the way I see you. The way all of us see you—Darius included, but also Colin and I’m pretty sure Arun.”

“How do you see me?” I whispered.

A smile of pure happiness spread over his face. And he answered, in a hushed whisper of his own: “I love you, Ava.”

He kissed me, and the intimate golden bubble I’d imagined seemed to glow with a light and warmth that suffused my whole body. I felt his love in the way he kissed me, in the tenderness of his lips, his fingers caressing my face and then twining in my hair. My heart thumped wildly, trying to turn cartwheels.

He broke the kiss but kept shining that smile down on me. I looked up into his beautiful eyes and said, my voice steady, “I love you, too.”

If anything, his smile brightened. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. So much, Seth. I wish I knew how to show you or tell you how much.”

“I’ve got the same struggle, sweetheart. But I think trying’s half the joy of it.”

It felt like we’d dived off a cliff together, only to discover we’d learned to fly. I rolled us over so that he was on his back with me on top. He grinned up at me as I pulled off my shirt, then sat up so I could tug his off as well. His arms came around my waist to unhook my bra, and for a moment we just hugged, our naked torsos pressed together.

So this is what it’s like, I thought. The big jump, only to be caught and held and cherished. Why was I holding this back?

When I finally took him inside me, the connection between us resonated like the deep ringing of a gong. I could have sworn I felt the thrum of it in my soul. Tears sprang to my eyes and I pressed my face against Seth’s neck. “Are you okay?” he murmured, his hips stilling beneath me.

I took his hand in mine and kissed his fingers, then let him feel the wetness on my cheeks. After all, as he’d said, it wasn’t something to hide. “Everything’s perfect,” I told him. “Don’t stop. Keep loving me.”

“That’s the plan.”



Seth had agreed to sub for a Monday morning shift at the library. For a while I snoozed alone in his bed, wrapped in the comforting warmth of his blankets and pillows just like those early hours when he’d go running on the trails around his family’s house. But eventually my phone alarm went off and I dragged myself out into the cold.

I had to go back to Milner for a shower and a change of clothes. As I walked, I checked my emails and messages. There was one from Darius, asking if we could meet up. Another from Arun, asking if we could meet up. One from Colin, just to say he missed me.

And one from Kaya that made me frown: **We really need to talk. Are you going to be in the room again any time soon?**

She'd sent it the night before. I knew on Monday mornings her first class was at eleven, and it was only nine now, so she was probably still in bed. Just in case she was awake I replied, **On my way back**, and walked faster.

She was indeed awake. When I stepped through the open doorway she rushed forward, grabbing my arm. "Okay, fuck, you're here."

"Um, hi back to you." I shrugged off my bag and started peeling off my coat. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I mean, nothing's wrong with me, exactly, but I just—okay, actually, you might need to sit down for this."

Something in Kaya's face told me to just do what she said. I sat on my bed, my coat draped over my arms and resting in my lap. "You're kinda freaking me out."

"Sorry." She sat next to me, holding her phone between us so I could see the screen. "Have you heard of the Lockridge Locked Room?"

I heard the capital letters in her voice. "No? Should I have?"

"It's an Instagram inspired by The Shade Room, but it's specifically for Lockridge. That's where the name comes from, I guess. It's all campus gossip and secrets and whatnot. People send things in for posting, and when it goes public, people comment, repost, tag other people, all that shit."

"Oka-ay..."

"It got created over winter break, but it's starting to pop off lately. And, well." She handed me her phone. "You should look at the three posts at the top."

My blood ran cold. The posts were screenshots of Seth, Colin, and Darius from Lockridge's online student directory—I could tell they were screenshots because their full names ran across the bottom, just the way they appear in the directory. Darius was the rightmost on the row, the first chronologically. I tapped it open and read the caption.

Bruh, are you cool? Because it seems like your girl's running around on you. Might want to pull that freshman up

before she pulls YOU up.

There were already hundreds of likes and nearly a hundred comments. A fog of numbness descended over me as I scrolled through them.

OMG who?

The audacity!

Darius, chuck the wench. I BEEN available to you.

Anyone who wants to know the girl, DM me. I saw them outside the dining hall.

And in reply to that last one, *EVERYONE* saw. *Don't be shy just drop her @*

When had my hands started trembling? It took me two attempts to open Colin's photo, in the middle of the row.

The only thing skankier than a cheating whore is the so-called friend she cheats with. Y'all used to be roomies? Where's the loyalty?

"Oh my God," I breathed. "What are they talking about? What the hell is this?"

Kaya looked at me guiltily. "I have a theory, but just go ahead and look at Seth's."

Thanks for the input, folks. Apparently it's not cheating but a whole ass orgy and this hippy dude's all up in there as well.

"Holy fuck," I whispered.

I skimmed the comments, scrolling quickly, stopping whenever something particularly stood out from the sea of horror. A lot of it was just straight-up trash talk about me, calling me a slut, a skank, a desperate whore. I did catch my name a few times, so I'd ended up being outed anyway. Even though we hadn't been hiding the nature of our relationship around campus, seeing all of the insults and vitriol made me feel like I'd been dangled from a window with a crowd below, jeering and waiting for me to fall.

But what hurt most deeply were some of the insinuations being made about the guys. More than a few comments speculated that they were taking advantage of me, even blackmailing me, that they'd fucked with the head of a vulnerable young first-year. One even called them abusers.

I dropped Kaya's phone in her lap and bent over my knees, pressing my face into my hands. I couldn't even cry. It was all I could do to just breathe while my stomach churned and my head spun.

Kaya rubbed my spine soothingly, her hand smoothing over my hair. "You okay?"

"Not really."

"I'm sorry. It was all posted pretty late last night, so I didn't see until this morning. Was I right to tell you? It's just that it's gotten so much attention that I thought if I didn't..."

I propped my head on my clenched fists. "No, I needed to know about this. The guys too. This is...god, the things people are saying about them, about me."

"They're fucking cowards," Kaya bit out. "Whoever's behind the account obviously doesn't use their real name, so half the commenters don't either. Real brave, talking shit when they'd never say anything like that to your face."

"So you don't know who made the posts?" I thought back. "You said you had a theory."

"I do." Her tone immediately changed to worried. "Um, the thing is...I never told you why I broke up with Allen."

I sat up and looked at her.

She bit her lip. Huffed a breath. "That day, we were hanging out at International House and Ian came storming in. He was super pissed, ranting about seeing you in the library with another guy."

My jaw dropped as it dawned on me where she was going with this. "I was with Colin."

"Apparently Ian thought you and Colin were cheating on Darius. He said some really fucking awful misogynistic shit.

Like—” Kaya gestured at the phone. “You get the idea. I started yelling at him, and fucking Allen took his fucking side! Like, I get that Ian was upset, but for one thing it wasn’t even his business, and for another thing he completely crossed the line. Then Allen defending him was just...I didn’t have time for it. I told him under no circumstances am I gonna just sit and let anyone say that kind of crap about *any* woman, much less my friend. And anyone who defends it is not someone I’m gonna continue dealing with.”

She was getting heated recounting it, and paused to gust out another breath. I stroked her arm. “Thanks for that.”

Kaya shrugged. “Anyway, I haven’t heard from him or Ian since then. But my theory is, one of them made the submission about Darius to the Locked Room. It fits, because that post is about him getting cheated on, and that’s what Ian was all heated about. I don’t know if he or Allen figured out who Colin was and made that submission as well, or maybe that information came from the commenters. But the thing is, I never said anything to them about Seth. That last post was definitely because of other people adding onto the initial story.”

It took me a moment to digest everything she’d said. “It’s snowballing.”

“Yeah,” she said solemnly.

Even though it felt like sticking my hand into a steaming pile of dogshit, I picked up the phone again and took another look at the Lockridge Locked Room account. There were already over three thousand followers. The bio proudly boasted, ***We publish the real campus news. DM us your scoops.*** There were eight posts before the three about Darius, Colin, and Seth, but at a quick glance none of them seemed as ugly.

I checked the guys’ personal Instagrams to see whether they were catching flak there. The Lockridge Locked Room hadn’t tagged them—maybe to avoid drawing their attention—but that wouldn’t stop anyone else. Colin’s IG was private, luckily, but Darius’s and Seth’s were public and neither of them had

restricted tagging. Unfortunately, it looked like more than a few shit-stirring anonymous assholes had already reposted the Locked Room crap onto their own accounts, and they'd definitely made sure to tag. So if Darius and Seth didn't already know what was going down, they soon would.

"Fuck," I said again.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Ian before," Kaya said softly. "I just thought it would hurt you. I was planning to run interference if you ever hung out with him again. I never thought he'd do something like this."

"Probably because you're not a flaming pile of inbred limp-dick mayonnaise."

Kaya stared at me. Then she burst into teary-eyed laughter. "Holy shit. Please tell me you're gonna do something with that righteous fury."

I clenched my fist and stood, heart pounding. "I don't know what I *can* do. But this isn't just about me. These fuckers messed with my guys."

We publish the real campus news. God, the smugness just leaped through the screen.

Well, I knew a reporter, too. But I didn't need Arun in that capacity. I needed him as my RA. I'd felt reluctant to bother him with my personal problems before, but this was different. This was about Darius, Colin, and Seth, and so there was no question of holding back. I'd do anything—beg anyone—to help them.

"Thanks for telling me so soon at least," I said to Kaya. "I'm glad you were the one to do it." I gave her a quick hug and went out into the hall.

I knew Darius was already in class. It was actually a relief to see his closed door. I wasn't quite ready to witness his reaction to all of this, whatever it might be. For such a happy, people-loving guy, having his name dragged through the mud by possibly thousands of fellow students would be the worst kind of blow.

And selfishly, something in my chest quailed at the idea that maybe he'd think this was the last straw. Maybe he'd think being with me was just too much trouble, too much fighting and drama. Maybe he'd cut his losses and run.

I shoved the thought aside. Whatever Darius's response, I'd still do everything I could to fix this.

I didn't know Arun's class schedule that well, and only a vague conviction that he had Monday mornings to himself. But my heart sank as I came in sight of his door: it was shut, too.

Just in case, I raised my shaking hand and knocked. And oh, thank fuck, I heard his voice call out, "One second!"

Tears were already threatening to spill from my eyes, blurring my vision by the time he opened his door. He was drying his hair with a towel, clearly just out of the shower. He dropped the towel as soon as he saw me. "Ava, what's wrong?"

I gulped in a breath and forced my voice out through a tight throat. "I really need your help."

Arun's mouth settled into a grim line as he looked at the posts, once and then again, the same way I had. The seconds stretched while I waited for him to say something, shifting my weight from foot to foot, gripping my elbows so tightly I'd probably have finger-shaped bruises tomorrow.

Finally, his long fingers moved over the buttons of his phone. "I'm taking screenshots," he told me. "For the Dean."

I perked up. "Dean Hoffman?" He's Arun's boss, the Assistant Dean in charge of student life.

"Yes. He'll need the evidence."

"Do you think he can find the people who did this?"

Arun hesitated. "I think he—specifically Lockridge—may be able to get the account shut down. Maybe also anyone replying to or reposting content from it. This is basically harassment and it's a pretty blatant violation of the Instagram terms of service, the Student Code of Conduct, and possibly the law."

"Oh. Wow, that sounds promising."

He cut my budding feeling of relief short. "The problem with figuring out who runs any of these accounts is that it depends on whether they're using school wifi. If they were signed into Lockridge's internet at the same time, the IT department could probably find them through IP tracing. But if they were using the internet somewhere else, or their own private cell phone signal, that could be more difficult. A lot of providers won't divulge that information without legal proceedings."

My heart plummeted to my heels. "Kaya said the Locked Room got created over winter break. So they probably weren't at school."

“Well, we just have to hope they *were* at school for at least one of their posts.” Arun stooped down to peer into my eyes. “Don’t worry. I know Dean Hoffman will attack this with everything he’s got.”

I nodded, although it was more of an automatic response. “I remember him helping with Mimi last semester.” Although she’d gotten by with a slap on the wrist, as far as I was concerned.

“The first priority is getting the Locked Room account deactivated and any reposts taken down. We could go to him right now if you want. Unless you have a class?”

“I don’t think I could concentrate on anything. Plus...” I rubbed my hands up my arms. “What if people there saw the posts?”

He looked at me with evident sympathy. “It’s possible. But I wish you wouldn’t let it bother you.”

“How could it not? Being surrounded by people thinking the worst about me and the guys, wondering if someone in the room is writing the next shitty comment at that exact moment?” My breath left me in a watery sigh. “We should have been more careful. What the hell was I thinking, acting like it would be okay to openly date three different guys? Obviously people would think I was a slut.”

“Hey, no.” Arun gathered me up in a quick, fierce hug. “Don’t think like that. This is not a problem with you or anything you’ve done. This is a problem with cowards believing they have the right to judge a situation they know nothing about. They’re the only ones who deserve any blame here.”

More tears welled up, obscuring his kind eyes, choking my voice away. All I could do was shake my head.

“Ava,” Arun whispered. “It’ll be okay.” He pressed a soft kiss to my forehead, then an even softer one to my mouth. He took my hand with a firm, reassuring grip. “Let’s go see the Dean.”



The walk to the admin building was excruciating. I tried to hold my head high as I kept pace with Arun. But every person we passed made me think, *Are you looking at me? Do you know? Are you one of them?* Before we were even halfway there, I started staring at the ground, wishing I'd just stayed in my room. Surely Arun could have handled it, filed some kind of anonymous report on my behalf, right?

And then maybe he'd help me arrange to take all my classes remotely, so that I'd never have to leave the room again. I could get meals delivered, tell the dining hall I had extenuating circumstances.

Or I could just withdraw from Lockridge completely. Move all my shit out in the dead of night when no one was awake. Disappear into the darkness where no one could ever find me.

Dean Hoffman listened to my sorry tale with a grave expression—pretty much the exact one he'd had last semester when I made the formal complaint about Mimi. I wondered what he was thinking. Did he see me as some kind of problem child, always dumping drama onto his desk? I cringed in my chair as he took his own tour through the Instagram account.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention.” He folded his hands on his blotter. “I can tell you that we take this kind of thing very seriously at Lockridge. We will do everything we can to shut down the account and penalize whoever's responsible, along with any other students spreading their content.”

“How soon do you think it can be done?” I ventured.

“I can't give you a firm deadline as it won't be entirely in our hands. But we do have robust procedures in place for handling cases of online harassment of students. You can be confident about that.”

I didn't feel confident of anything. Damage had already been done; he couldn't turn back time.

“Unfortunately,” he went on, “if we can’t prove they’re students, we’ll have to rely on the law. Maryland isn’t as strict about cyberbullying of legal adults, which you are, as opposed to minors. So we’ll need to take a few extra steps to reinforce our position there. One thing Lockridge can do is act on your behalf in terms of reporting the content and requesting that it be removed. I’ll give you a form to sign giving us that authorization.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“I’ve taken screenshots of the most egregious comments,” Arun said, “including the ones where Ava’s named. Those accounts should be looked at too.”

“We will,” Dean Hoffman promised.

I sensed that he was about to end the meeting, and it felt like sand slipping out from under my feet. I leaned forward and blurted out, “I think I know who might have submitted these posts.”

Both he and Arun turned to me, attention sharpened.

“I don’t—I mean, I don’t have proof. But there are a couple of students you should question.”

“I’m listening,” Dean Hoffman said.

“Basically, they had the mistaken impression that I was cheating on Darius, which is the whole basis of the posts about him and Colin. My roommate witnessed one of them talking about me in a really derogatory way right after he came to this conclusion, and his friend apparently defended him vehemently. So she’s pretty sure they did it.”

The Dean took out a pen. “Remind me, what’s your roommate’s name?”

“Kaya Lopez. And the other students are Ian Roberts and Allen Thompson. They live in International House. Ian was... interested in me. But I told him I was with Darius. Then he saw me with Colin one day and, well...” I trailed off. Arun shifted in his chair next to me.

Jotting down notes, the Dean said, “I’ll want to talk to Kaya first. Colin and Darius as well.”

“Why?” I asked. “I mean, why not talk to Ian and Allen directly?”

He cleared his throat. “I just want to get as much of the facts and context as I can. Questioning them cold may not be the most strategic approach.”

Part of me had, probably unrealistically, been hoping that all it would take was me naming and shaming them. Dean Hoffman would believe me and they’d be expelled right away. But no, of course he couldn’t just take my word for it. As I’d admitted, I had no proof. And it wasn’t like he was a detective or a judge who they had to swear under oath to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. No doubt they’d lie their pasty faces off.

“Thank you for hearing us out, sir,” Arun said. “Obviously, as Ava and Darius’s RA, I’m available to help in any way you need.”

“I appreciate that, Arun. I’ll be in touch as things progress.”

And that was that for now. After I signed the Dean’s form, we stepped out into the hall and I found myself fighting tears again. I turned my face away from Arun, trying to get a grip.

“The school really does have procedures to follow,” Arun said gently. “Procedures they’ve developed from experience. That should be helpful for us.”

For us, he’d said. I discreetly wiped my eyes. “Have you had experience, too? You seemed to know right away what to do.”

“It’s part of RA training, actually. A lot more students than you’d think suffer from online bullying, revenge porn, hacking, invasions of privacy, you name it.”

Cold comfort to think I wasn’t the first such target in Lockridge’s history. Which of course I wasn’t, I reminded myself. I wasn’t the only target currently. It hadn’t been *my* photo posted, after all.

“What can I do for you?” Arun asked. “Do you want me to stay with you?”

“No, that’s okay,” I said. “I have to talk to the guys. I was planning to just camp out in my room until then.”

“I don’t know if it would help for me to be there too, but I’m happy to share my perspective as an RA. Or just give you support as a friend.”

As *just* a friend? Or did he mean as a friend to the guys? “Thanks,” I said. “Maybe if you stick around the hall? I don’t know how they’ll feel about any of this, or if they’ll feel comfortable talking to anyone else. It’s just so...private, you know?”

Arun’s mouth tightened, but he nodded. “No, I get it. Just thought I’d offer. Feel free to knock on my door any time.”

It struck me that I really didn’t know how this was going to play out. Until now, it was always me in some kind of emotional crisis, me needing their help. Now they were the ones in trouble. Darius wanted to design for Triple-A video game companies; Colin was applying to medical school; Seth wanted to be a teacher. And their names and reputations were getting dragged through filth.

Even though Arun had tried to tell me this wasn’t my fault, I couldn’t help the waves of shame and guilt threatening to drown me. The flat truth was, if it wasn’t for their relationship with me, this wouldn’t be happening.

What if there’s no way to fix this? What if this breaks us?

I shivered as Arun and I left the admin building and plunged into the cold morning. But it had nothing to do with the temperature.



The Dean didn’t take long to call Kaya to his office. She came back to the room at lunch time, bringing sandwiches and fruit from the dining hall. “I didn’t think you’d eaten yet.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I told her honestly, even as her thoughtfulness made me have to fight back tears again. “I feel like I’ll throw up everything.”

“Well, save it for later.”

“How’d it go with the Dean?”

“Fine. I basically just told him all the stuff Ian and Allen said, and he wrote everything down. He said to tell you he’s already contacted Instagram support to try and get the account deactivated. But that their review process can take a while.”

That was something. But while the account remained up I couldn’t help doomscrolling through all of the comments. More got posted throughout the day, maybe a hundred in total across the three posts by the afternoon. Taking Arun’s lead, I screenshotted the worst ones. Then I’d go back and refresh everything, morosely checking the Locked Room’s follower count—it kept ticking steadily up—as well as the tags for Darius and Seth—likewise.

In the group chat with the guys, I’d dropped the link for the account, briefly summarized what was going on with the Dean, and asked if they could come to Milner after everyone was done with their classes. Then I waited for them to respond.

Kaya offered to skip her afternoon classes to stay with me, but I told her I’d rather be alone anyway. I paced the room, checked Instagram, curled up in bed, checked Instagram, attempted to do some reading for class, checked Instagram.

Colin was the first one to respond, around two p.m. **Holy FUCK. I’ll be free after 4. Thanks for talking to Hoffman.**

Seth replied ten minutes later. **Locked down my IG. Don’t worry, Ava.** He sent a heart emoji. At that, I did burst out crying. I buried my face in my pillow, alternating between sobs and shouts.

Then, through the storm in my head, I heard someone knocking on the door. I pulled myself upright and stumbled toward it. I had the presence of mind to keep the security bar in place, just in case one of the thousand-plus commenters had

taken it upon themselves to come harass me in person. But when I cracked the door open, I saw that it was Darius.

Hurriedly, my heartbeat hammering wildly in my chest, I undid the security bar and pulled the door wide. I didn't have time to wonder about his reaction: he simply swept in and picked me up in his arms. Stunned, I wrapped my own arms around his strong shoulders and just held on as I broke all over again.

His hand came up to cradle the back of my head, fingers stroking my hair. I heard his voice murmuring in my ear, soft and soothing. "I know, I know. We'll be all right. Ava, honey, it'll be okay..."

I cried until empty. I felt like the wreckage left behind after a tornado, barren land where there used to be trees and houses. Darius guided us toward my bed and for a while we just laid there in silence. We were on our sides facing each other, but my chin was tucked down into my chest so that only his hands, wrapped around mine, filled my field of vision. I *wanted* to talk to him, but there was too much to say, too many words weighing on me, like a tower of bricks piled so haphazardly that moving even one would bring the whole thing crashing down.

I dared to look up at him, and saw that he was looking right at me. His cheeks were tear-streaked like mine. Wonderingly, I reached up to swipe at them. "Why were you crying?"

"Because you were," he said quietly.

"Me? Not for your own sake?"

Darius sighed. "To be honest, I'm feeling kinda numb about all that. Like, it's fuckin' unreal." He seemed to run out of words—maybe he was feeling the weight of them as well.

Well, I'd predicted this would rock his whole worldview. I wondered exactly how much of the negativity he'd seen. "How did you find out?" I ventured. "From my messages?"

"Yours and lots of people's," he said simply. "Seemed like everyone wanted to be the first to tell me."

I winced. "Has Dean Hoffman been in touch with you yet?"

“I already went over there on my own. I’m not expecting much though.”

“Still, he seems to be taking it seriously.” I pressed my lips together; I knew I was trying to convince myself as much as Darius, but I felt I had to say something hopeful. “If he can at least punish someone, then maybe that’ll kill it. I don’t want to worry about future posts, you know?”

“Maybe. The problem is that the internet’s big and wild, and also it’s full of people. And people are assholes.”

“You think it’ll happen again no matter what?”

“I’m saying I wouldn’t be surprised. So what’s the point in feeding the fire? Like we could literally die mad about it because we’d never see the end.”

Cynical words—not the kind of mood I ever associated with Darius. “Tell me this is like an inner peace happy social butterfly acceptance kind of thing. Darius, they’re out here calling you an abuser and a predator and fuck knows what else.”

Darius sat up, his shoulders slumping wearily. “And they’re calling you all kinds of shit too. Believe me, I’d make anyone pay for that. But if you hit one, two more are gonna crop up. It’s free and it’s anonymous. We’re always outnumbered.”

I got to my feet. “Well, I can’t tell you how to feel, but I can tell you how *I* feel. I *am* mad about it and I don’t care how long it takes to play whack-a-mole with these assholes. If you’re not up for it, fine! I’ll handle it for you. Because I’m super fucking pissed. I want to know the kind of animals who raised these fuckers. Who told them this shit was okay? I’ll bust in and correct their asses myself and I don’t care how many times it takes. I’ll enjoy it every time because I won’t be fucking gentle about it. They need to remember who not to fuck with!”

By the end of my rant I was shouting and pointing and slashing the air with my hand. My cheeks were still tear-streaked, but my eyes were dry. I was done with crying. I wanted other people’s tears.

Darius stared at me throughout, his expression blank. And then he blinked. A laugh gusted out of him. “Damn, girl, you big mad, huh?”

“Of course I am!” I exploded. “Pay attention!”

Still laughing, he got to his feet and cupped my face. “I love you,” he said, and dropped a smiling kiss on my lips.

My anger disappeared like the wind. “Wh-what? You... huh?”

“Now who needs to pay attention?” He kissed me again. “I said I love you.”

“But—but we’re in a fight.”

“I can’t love you while we’re fighting?”

“When we’re fighting you don’t even like me!”

“Yeah, I do. Impossible not to.” Darius’s smile softened. “Listen, I’m sorry, okay? I’ve been giving you a hard time and not listening to you and making you feel bad, and that was wrong of me. Not just wrong—stupid. I was already planning to tell you all that. As well as the *I love you* part. But I was holding back for...I have no idea why. Now here you are about to go into battle for me behind some internet bullshit and you know what? It’s time to stop being wrong and stupid.”

“Um,” I sputtered intelligently. I collected what was left of my brains and took a deep breath. “I’m really sorry I’ve been so difficult. You weren’t wrong. You were right that I should have been more open with Arun, and you were right that you should be able to work with whoever you want.”

Darius shook his head. “We were both wrong and both right. We just made talking through it way rockier than it had to be. But underneath all that—what we should remember—is that we love each other.” He paused. “Right?”

I could have slapped myself—how had I not said it back yet? “Yes,” I told him firmly. “I love you. Crazy go-into-battle-for-you amounts of love.”

Those dangerous dimples of his flashed. “The Chief told me to pull my head out of my butt and just say the damn words

already. Start from there and let all the nonsense conflict shape itself around that.”

“You talked to your dad about telling me you love me?”

“Yeah. I knew I needed somebody grown to slap some sense into me. I just happened to call when my mom was out of the house.”

I grinned, melting into a sun-warmed puddle of syrup.
“Remind me to send the Chief a thank you card.”

OceanofPDF.com

COLIN

Despite my intention to get over to Milner as soon as I could, Dean Hoffman called me in to talk, and I figured I should give him my statement sooner rather than later. Not that I had much to offer. He basically asked two questions—did I know of anyone who might hold a grudge against me, and would I be willing to file a police report if things should escalate. I told him *no* and *yes*, and he thanked me for my time.

Because of the meeting, I ended up being the last to arrive at Ava's. I was about to knock on her door when I heard her voice coming from Darius's room, so I swerved back across the hall.

Her face lit up at the sight of me, and she stepped into my arms for a long hug. Over her head, I met eyes with Darius and Seth. In contrast to Ava, they both looked grim.

"Wait, Hoffman didn't ask you about Ian?" Ava demanded, when I recounted our meeting. "What did you say about him?"

"No," I confirmed. "And I didn't bring him up."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know the guy, and all we have is vague suspicion. I wasn't going to proactively point fingers unless the Dean's already asking me to go there. Otherwise *I* sound like the one with a grudge."

Darius smirked. "I'm gonna go ahead and let you know that won't be a satisfactory answer. Better watch yourself. She's on a rampage."

Ava shot him a glare, but his smirk only deepened. Surprisingly, her lips pursed like she was fighting a smile. Then she turned back to me, serious again. "I'm just saying we need to be aggressive about this. The longer those posts are up, the more attention they're going to get."

“But it could also blow up in our faces if someone’s wrongly accused,” I pointed out.

“So how do we get proof?” Seth asked. “I’m thinking the same as Ava. I don’t know how long we can just sit and wait for Hoffman to poke around.”

“I’m ready to go to International House right now and make that fucker confess,” Ava said.

“With what, your bare hands?” Darius winked at me.

“I actually hope that’s what it takes,” she retorted.

I didn’t know why Darius was in such a jokey mood, but I did know confronting this Ian guy directly probably wouldn’t go down well, and I said as much. “If he really is the one who did it, then we should all stay away from him. The dude’s clearly got issues. Not to mention he’s just the start of the problem. Unless you think he’s been writing thousands of hate comments all by himself.”

“Oh, she’s got plans for those too.” Darius chortled.

“Well, whatever we might feel like we *want* to do,” I said, “I think we should make sure we’re coolheaded about it. Not lashing out blindly.”

“I’m not doing anything blindly,” Ava declared.

Seth crossed his arms, and just from the look on his face I already had a good idea what he was going to say. “Sometimes raising a little hell is good for the soul.”

I gave him a quelling look right back. “Not when there’s so much at stake. The best-case scenario here is that the account gets deleted and takes all the comments with it. Without fuel, the fire will die out and people will move on. So let’s not give it more fuel by stirring shit up, okay?”

It was like whoever ran the universe had been eavesdropping and decided to try me. Ava’s roommate Kaya rushed in almost before I’d even finished speaking, thrusting her phone toward Ava. “They just posted again,” she said breathlessly.

We all crowded around to look at the screen. The new picture was Ava's, screenshotted from the Lockridge student directory. As I read the caption, my head began to pound.

Supposedly this is the face that launched a thousand dicks. I'll let y'all tell it—but personally I don't see it. IMO she's just working the PICK ME vibe. The accompanying emoji was the thinker stroking its chin. And it already had over a hundred comments.

"Let's all go ahead and report the post," I heard someone say. It wasn't Ava—I knew because I was waiting for her voice, waiting to hear the words that would probably break my so-called coolheaded resolve.

"Are you okay?" Kaya murmured.

"Um." The phone, which Ava had been holding, dropped out of my field of vision. "I think I'm really not."

"Hey, come here and sit down," Seth said.

"Actually, I feel like moving. I've been cooped up inside all day."

I chanced a glance at her. She looked pale, but her jaw was set, her chin lifted. "I'm sorry," I said. "I was hoping they wouldn't get a chance to post about you."

"No, I was expecting it. I guess that's why I've been hiding out, just counting down until the last piece dropped."

Seth's phone went off with a notification sound, and he fished it out of his pocket. "Looks like Hoffman's ready for me."

"Let me come with you," Ava said. "No reason to hide anymore. And maybe if I talk to him about this new post in person, it'll light a fire under his ass."

DARIUS

I'd heard from more than a few people over the day, messages of support and the like. But after the initial flood, things trickled down. And when all was said and done, it wasn't the majority of my Lockridge contact list by any means. I chose to believe that was because it was a silent majority who didn't concern themselves with troll-ish drama on Instagram.

Meanwhile, it seemed there'd been an unspoken decision that everyone would hunker down in my room until we had some news. When Ava and Seth got back from seeing Dean Hoffman, they reported that everything had gone smoothly. No one on campus had come after them with tar, feathers, or scarlet A's. I got to thinking maybe it was just a tempest in a teapot, as my Grandma Evelyn would say—that troll-ish drama on Instagram was really just that and nothing more.

So when dinnertime approached, Colin and I gambled that we'd be okay getting food from the dining hall for everyone.

Big mistake.

It wasn't like we stopped crowds, but all along the way I had the palpable feeling that we were being watched. Like maybe people turned around to look at us after we passed. Like maybe a heavy, muted hush swept over the lines at the dining hall when we stepped inside, as everyone paused their activity to give us a good long look.

It wasn't just me. Colin seemed to feel it, too. Although we didn't exchange any words, he stuck close to my side instead of peeling off to a different area. Solidarity in numbers.

As we were loading our to-go boxes into bags, a couple buddies of mine came up. "Hey, man." Kwaku slapped hands with me. "You all right?"

I took a shoulder pat from Jordan. They both nodded at Colin. Friendly, easy, but their eyes were clearly concerned, searching my face for some kind of reaction.

“Been better,” I admitted. “What’s the word out here?”

“Weird,” Jordan said, in his faint French accent. “People keep asking me what’s true and what’s not.”

Colin’s eyebrows hit the overhang of his hair—apparently he hadn’t had time for a cut lately. “How many people?”

“Not tons. And not strangers or anything. All of them have been friends of Darius.”

Messages of support were fine and welcome, but questioning others about the truth of the matter had me feeling some type of way. “Why not ask me directly then? I haven’t been out of pocket. My phone’s still on. Email still receiving.”

“You did lock your Insta,” Kwaku pointed out.

“Because I didn’t want tags and DMs from randos.”

“Well, I guess people took that as a sign you didn’t want to talk.” Kwaku pushed his glasses up his nose.

I scowled. “At least y’all two have some sense.”

“Of course. You know we got your back,” Jordan said.

“Well, I don’t like people talking *behind* my back, discussing all of my business and whatnot.”

Kwaku shook his head, spreading his hands in a gesture of *What are you gonna do?* “People talk about you a lot, D. Like in general. Just...not everyone feels close enough to talk *to* you.”

That turned my mood dark like a storm cloud. Kwaku and Jordan and I go all the way back to first-year orientation. They’re my boys—not like Seth and Colin, but definitely on the level where we’ve shared pretty personal shit. Of course I don’t do that with everyone, but maybe I’ve been wrong this whole time. Maybe I actually don’t have as many *real* friends as I thought.

“Neither of y’all heard anything about who might be behind the account?” I asked. “Or the posts? We’re trying to find out if this is some kinda grudge shit against me or Colin.”

Kwaku scuffed his foot. “To be honest...it’s not like y’all have haters or anything that intense. But people do find the situation strange. We all know you and Colin and Seth are good people. Maybe if we knew Ava better, folks would talk less.”

“She doesn’t need anyone’s approval.”

He held up his hands in defense. “That’s not what it’s about. I’m just saying, you know, the idea takes getting used to, all right?”

And that was how people I called friends felt about it. Imagine anyone else.

I turned to Jordan. “You know anyone in International House?”

“Darius,” Colin said in a warning tone.

“I mean folks you’re close to,” I pressed on. “There’s a possibility a couple of British dudes there are the ones behind these posts. Maybe they’ve been running their mouths.”

Jordan had missed out on the lottery, or the connections, or whatever it took to get into International House. He liked to joke that it was because he was from a Francophone former colony rather than the mother conqueror. But I knew he still hung out with a lot of the international students he’d met at various campus events.

“Of course,” he said. “I can ask people.”

Ignoring Colin’s clenched jaw, I gave him Ian and Allen’s full names. “I don’t know if they’re the kind of dumbasses who’d actually brag about what they did,” I said. “But I’m sure they’d relax their jaws around other likeminded dicks, if you know what I’m saying.”

Jordan nodded. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

Colin was silent on the way back to Milner, except to say one thing: “This fucking sucks, man.”

“Yup,” I agreed.

OceanofPDF.com

SETH

While we were all tucking into dinner—or to be more accurate, picking at dinner—Arun stopped by. He spotted the food in front of us and said, “I was going to see if any of you wanted to grab something to eat, but looks like you’re good.”

Ava shoved her barely nibbled burger to the side. “I’m not that hungry anyway. Is there news?”

Arun nodded. “Dean Hoffman was able to escalate the matter through a contact at Instagram. He thinks the account could be down by tomorrow.”

An audible sigh of relief went around the room. “What about tracing the student IDs like you mentioned?” Ava asked.

“From what I understand, the school’s IT department can track which students were using Instagram at the time of the posts, but since it’s such a popular app it could be anywhere from one student to a thousand at a given time. It’ll take a while to cross-reference all the timestamps and see whose student IDs keep cropping up.”

I propped my hands on my hips. “They can’t just look and see if any of those students actually logged into the problem accounts? Like their keystrokes or whatever?”

“No.” Darius waved his fork. “I took a cybersecurity class last year. Instagram’s sign-in is encrypted. The school shouldn’t be able to see anyone’s usernames or passwords.”

“So it’s just straight-up detective work,” Colin said grimly.

“Exactly,” Arun confirmed. “But Hoffman was optimistic he could have a list by the end of tomorrow. Then it’s just a matter of questioning the students.”

“That should include looking at their phones and Instagram app,” Ava said.

“Well, technically the school doesn’t have the right to inspect personal devices unless it’s an emergency or they’ve

got law enforcement executing a search warrant. But Hoffman will ask if he can look, yes.”

“And if any of ‘em say no,” I said, “then they’ve got something to hide.”

Darius shrugged. “Not necessarily. I wouldn’t let people snoop through my shit just on principle.”

“Let’s hope the folks getting questioned ain’t as paranoid.”

Darius looked like he wanted to say something, then glanced at Ava, standing in the middle of the room with her arms wrapped around herself, and seemed to think better of it.

I’d been keeping an eye on her. I can always tell whenever she’s recently cried, and as soon as I saw the faint dewy flush around her eyes and nose, I knew she’d had a real one. Funnily enough, I could tell Darius had, too. But both of them were apparently okay now. In fact, whenever their eyes met, they broke into the occasional smile. Kind of like the smiles she and I were exchanging.

Guess they kissed and made up.

“Well,” Arun said, “let me know if you guys want anything else from the dining hall or anywhere on-campus.” He shifted his stance, angling toward the door in that uncertain, hesitant way of a person who didn’t actually want to leave.

But Ava was already distracted by her phone again, frowning at her screen. And Colin, who’d never quite warmed up to Arun, just shrugged one shoulder.

Arun nodded to himself. The resigned look on his face as he turned away struck me. I stepped forward and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll walk out with you,” I offered. “I haven’t had a chance to check my mail today.”

The admin building and the dining hall were in different directions, but I stuck to Arun’s side when he made the turn toward the latter. He glanced at me curiously. “Just wanted to stretch my legs.” I shot him a grin.

After a couple of minutes, Arun said, “So what’s the real reason?”

Busted. Although it didn't feel right to just come out and say, *Actually I felt kinda bad for you, man*. I went with the next thing that came to mind. "I was thinking I want to meet that guy. The one Ava thinks is behind all the posts."

Arun looked at me sharply. "Why?"

"I mean, aren't you curious?"

He didn't answer right away. "I have met him. That night we all played poker, he was walking Ava home from the international party. Darius and I caught up with them."

"Huh. So everyone's met him but me."

"You're bothered because you're the only one who hasn't been introduced to an asshole?"

Had I ever heard Arun cuss or even speak mildly negatively of someone? I gave him a sideways glance, but he was staring off into the distance, looking moodily Byronic in the dim winter evening. "I'm just saying, if some piece of shit is out to ruin not just my life but my friends' and my girlfriend's lives, then I should at least get a chance to look him in the eye."

"And that's *all* you want to do?"

"Why? You worried about something?"

"Forcing a confrontation is just going to escalate a situation that's already pretty hot. The admin's taking care of it. We should let them do their jobs."

"I'm not aiming to have a duel at dawn. I literally just want to see who this dude is."

He stopped and peered at me through the darkness. "Fine. I can't stop you. But you realize we already passed the turn-off to International House?" He pointed in the direction we'd just come from.

"Well," I said, "I figured I'd give you a chance to join me. You know, in case shit escalates."

ARUN

It was a terrible idea, and I damn well knew it, but I couldn't stop myself. All day I'd been running around trying to do something, anything, while accomplishing absolutely nothing. I couldn't make Dean Hoffman or the IT department work faster. I couldn't hunt down the people responsible. I couldn't even give Ava comfort—she had the other guys for that. I was barely involved, except as a peripheral person with a nebulous and largely unspoken relationship to her. If I weren't her RA, she probably wouldn't have found me any help at all.

That sense of powerlessness roiled in my gut like a nest of worms, wrestling to break free. I wanted to sprint to the top of the main campus hill and bellow at the sky. My neck literally ached—probably from every cell in my body straining against the wholesome Arun act.

I wasn't afraid of Seth escalating the situation. I was afraid of myself.

All three floors of International House were lit up, making the mansion shine brightly against the surrounding darkness. I'd only been inside a couple of times over my years at Lockridge, but never at night; I'd always avoided the crazy parties.

Like all Lockridge dorms, only student ID cards for residents worked on the door locks. But like most Lockridge dorms, someone had propped open the front door. Seth and I walked right in.

My heartbeat quickened as we crossed the main foyer to look at the bulletin board, which was covered in candid photos of the residents: hanging out, partying, enjoying the luxe life. I scanned the faces and pointed. "That's him."

Seth unceremoniously yanked the photo from its thumbtacked position and flicked the edge with his fingers. "Straight-up detective work," he said softly.

I followed him upstairs. It really did seem like a house, or a boutique hotel, rather than a dorm. Rugs covered the polished

wooden floors, art hung from the walls under special lights, and armchairs and console tables were placed at regular intervals, the latter decorated with real flowers—in the middle of winter, naturally.

Each door had a burnished metal plate stamped with the name of the room's resident. A lot of them were closed, probably because it was dinner hour. But we rounded one last corner and saw, through the open doorway, the guy we were looking for.

He was wearing a T-shirt and basketball shorts with a towel slung around his neck, sitting at his desk scrolling through an iPad. When I'd met him, and in the photograph from downstairs, he'd worn thick-framed glasses. But now he was barefaced.

Seth rapped two slow knocks on the doorframe. Ian looked up. His eyes widened immediately, but his voice was calm. "Yes?"

"My name's Seth Gallant. This is Arun. Y'all met before."

He clearly knew who we were, but even so he made a show of furrowing his brows. "Hmm, you'll have to remind me."

It made that pile of worms in my gut writhe furiously. "I think your memory's pretty clear. But if you want to play this game, I was with Ava Le and Darius Johnson. I'm sure you remember them *very* well."

Ian broke into a smile, of all things. "Ava, right. How's she doing? Haven't seen her since the day my mate dumped her friend."

Grimy as an oil slick. "Also the day you met Colin Kim."

"Hmm, now that one does ring the bell a *bit* harder. Although I don't think it was really a proper introduction. He seemed rather preoccupied."

It was an exploratory jab. I knew from my parents that it's better to let such provocations slide, but Seth hadn't been raised by psychologists. "You were creeping on their private moment," he said.

Ian's eyebrows shot up. "Private? In the library in the middle of the day?"

"Whatever they were doing," Seth snapped, "it wasn't your business. But you got mad about it and decided to put them on blast."

Ian stood. "Now you've lost me. Gentlemen, if there's some agenda here, kindly provide me a copy so I can follow along."

Seth crowded into the room, all shoulders and attitude. "You know good and goddamn well why we're here."

"No, I believe I really do need specifics."

I caught the gleam in his eye, but Seth was already shouting. "You want to run that game? Okay, how about you making hate posts about all of us on IG? How about you being so bothered by what people do on their own time when it doesn't concern you? You had to go that far out of your way to talk shit about complete strangers?"

"How can we be strangers when you keep insisting I've met you?" Ian asked, blinking innocently.

I snatched Seth's arm to keep him from charging forward. "You seem to be having fun," I said pointedly. "Almost like you expected a confrontation."

"Oh, no. I simply enjoy people barging angrily into my room."

"Yeah, I bet it happens a lot," Seth snarled.

"I think it's clear from your attitude that you were already prepared for suspicion," I said tightly. "And that, in my mind, confirms that you're suspect."

"How circular." Ian folded his arms. "Don't tell me you're meant to be the smart one out of the entourage of meatheads."

Seth tried to shake off my hand. "Dude, do you come at everyone with that cartoon villain small dick energy? No wonder Ava thinks you're weird."

Ian made a show of wincing. "Has Ava been talking about my dick, then? Unfortunately she never got a chance to make

its acquaintance. But then, it probably is confusing for her when she's getting plowed by so many."

I didn't even think. I was only half-aware of dropping Seth's arm, of him grabbing for me in turn. I was already looming over Ian and his disgusting smirk, my hands clawing his shirt collar. "Keep her name out of your mouth," I spat.

The seconds afterward unspooled like a yo-yo in slow motion. I heard Seth grunt in surprise. Ian stumbled backward to yank free and thumped his hip on the edge of his desk. His face filled my vision as he stared up at me, all of his mocking frivolity gone, leaving behind an uncertain wariness. Then his gaze shifted to something behind me, and I heard a new voice say my name.

The yo-yo hit the bottom of the string and jerked back up again as time resumed its normal speed. I turned around and saw, in the open doorway, Maameyaa Addo, the RA for International House. We were RAs in the same dorm last year, when I was a sophomore and she was a junior.

"I heard shouting," she said. Her eyes were narrowed. "Arun, tell me I didn't just see you put hands on one of my residents."

"Maameyaa, excellent timing." Ian's tone was the definition of smug. "How might I go about filing a complaint?"

Seth came back alone a couple hours later, his eyes hooded, but all he said was that he'd needed time to concentrate on a paper. I could tell something was bothering him, though. I wondered if he'd been harassed by anyone and just didn't want to bring the mood down—well, bring it down even more. I knew he *would* talk if he felt he had a reason to, so I just kissed him and let him be.

Around ten, Colin said he needed to get back to his room. A torrent of guilt crashed over me. Despite the circumstances, it had been so lovely having him close. I hadn't let myself think about all the work he'd put off, or how much he really did not need this to distract him right now

I walked him downstairs. The night temperature was easily twice as cold as the last time I'd come outside, when Seth and I went to see Dean Hoffman. Colin drew me close with an arm encircling my waist, guiding us around the corner of the building where there was a more private alcove with benches. When we got there, he threaded his other arm around me so that we were pressed front to front. Unlike in the library that day, we were both fully buttoned up. I couldn't feel him at all. But I could look up at his beautiful face at least, so I just tried to drink him in before he disappeared again.

"I'm sorry I can't stay," he said.

"Don't be." I pushed my fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. "You didn't even have to stay this long."

"Of course I did. Besides you and the others, it affects me too."

"Well, I wish you didn't have to be alone tonight. Do you want Seth to go back with you now?" I didn't want to give up Seth's company either, but if they had each other...

Colin chuckled. “He’d just get underfoot. I’ll be okay. I’m more worried about you. What are you thinking about tomorrow?”

“It’s gonna be rough,” I admitted. “I’ve got classes *and* I’m working at the Lit department in the afternoon.” The thought of Stefka seeing those IG posts made my stomach curdle.

“You’re not skipping anything?”

I shook my head. “I lost too much class time today. And I’m *not* losing paid time tomorrow. That’d just be letting these fuckers win, and I’m not about to do that.”

Colin grinned and leaned down to bump his nose gently to mine. Our breaths, white and billowing in the cold, mingled as he bent his head over me. “So I’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Nope, sure don’t.” I went up on tiptoes to kiss him, quick and firm. “Okay, it’s cold out here and I don’t want to keep you too late. Message me when you get into your room?”

I tried to step back, but his arms tightened around my waist again. “Wait a second. I just...” He swallowed, and his breath trembled out. “I just wanted to tell you we’ll be okay, you know? In a month and a half everything will be back to normal with my schedule, and as for all this, we’ll barely remember any of it happened.”

“I believe it,” I assured him, even though I didn’t really.

“But I do want there to be one good thing for us to look back on.” Colin took a deep breath. “Because you’ve made this whole school year good. You’ve been the best thing about it, by far. And no matter what happens, one thing won’t change. I love you, Ava.”

My heart swelled, and tears pricked my eyes. I knew that, unlike Seth and Darius, he’d been the most unsure about getting serious with another relationship, and how much it pained him that he couldn’t fully commit his time or attention lately. But I also knew that it didn’t make his heart any less true. So with all the deep feeling I’d been silently carrying until now, I told him, “I love you, too.”

I surged up to kiss him again, and he lifted me up and twirled me around. Laughing into the kiss, I felt like even the night sky overhead wasn't big enough to capture all of my joy.

Colin set me gently on my feet again, brushing my hair over my ear. "I've been wanting to tell you since New Year's. Now I'm not sure why I held back. Maybe I thought it was too soon, but then again, we've always moved at our own pace."

"Damn right," I murmured. "You know, you changed my life that day we met in the bell tower. You showed me I could be strong and confident enough to go after what I wanted. That I could chase down happiness and catch it. You make me feel so safe and supported, even when I'm at my lowest."

"I think we helped each other realize, together, that we could love again." With the lightest of touches, Colin traced the path of a tear that had escaped my eye. "That we could trust each other with our hearts. I'm so glad I met you, Ava. I'm so glad *we* met you."

I watched as he took the path away from Milner, following his progress through the pools of light cast by the lampposts. Just before the last curve, he stopped to turn and wave at me. I waved back. Then he turned again and stepped out of my view.

I stood there a moment longer, hugging myself for warmth and marveling at everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours. What a roller coaster this past day and night had been. Some of the best moments of my life, and also some truly awful ones.

On balance, I thought I'd definitely come out ahead. I loved my boys, and they loved me.

How's that for winning?



I had two Tuesday classes before my afternoon shift in the Lit department. I made sure to get to each of them early so that I could choose a seat toward the back of the room. I was ready to face the world—but I'd start with staring at the backs of

people's heads rather than letting them stare at me. As each class filled up, I'd just bend my head over my laptop, pretending to focus so intently on the screen that I couldn't be distracted by curious glances, whispers, or subtle gestures in my direction. Then the lecture would start and I could breathe again.

Since there was really no way to sneak into the dining hall for lunch, though, I reverted to cowardice. Kaya had ducked out early that morning to grab breakfast for me, and I'd stashed a couple of extra muffins in her minifridge for later. Not that I had much appetite. I spent most of the lunch break flipping between my messages, my emails, and Instagram, leaving one half-eaten muffin to dry out on my desk.

There was no update from the Dean, and meanwhile the comments on Instagram continued to pile up, like a landfill receiving a steady stream of trash.

Two p.m. approached, and it was time to go to work. The chances were probably high that at least one of Joe, Monique, or Nadia knew what was going on, and I had to assume they'd share. Probably they'd be chill about it, but not necessarily kind. As for Stefka, I could only hope for a sliver of professionalism.

True to expectations, the silence when I arrived was tangibly awkward. Nadia gave me a small smile, so there was that at least, but Joe was on the phone and Monique wasn't at her desk yet. Stefka—that wench—actually arched an eyebrow at me, followed by one of her classic sniffs. I lowered myself into my chair and imagined a huge construction crane dropping her off the side of the building.

Before my computer had fully turned on, Stefka pushed a stack of documents at me. "I need twenty copies of each of these, organized and bound exactly like the originals."

Joe was off the phone by then. "Stefka, I told you I needed the photocopier today."

"Oh, that's right," Stefka said, as if she'd just remembered. "Ava, you'll have to see if one of the other departments has a

photocopier free. Remember they get first priority, so stop immediately if someone comes by.”

“I’m sorry, Ava,” Joe said. He sounded sincere. “My stuff has to go out ASAP. But I’ll message you whenever I’m done and you can come back then.”

“It’s fine,” I told him, not sure if I’d quite managed a polite smile. “Stefka, when do you need these by?”

“Today.” *Her* attempt at a smile, if she’d actually intended it politely, was a complete fail. But I supposed I’d expected nothing less or more.



With half an hour left on my shift, I still hadn’t heard from Joe and I’d already been kicked out of three other departments. All the searching for places to work had eaten up so much time that I was nowhere near finished. Stefka would be fuming—and probably happy for another excuse to take a swipe at me. And now the cherry on top: the copier I was currently using, which may well have been commissioned before I was born, had decided to jam.

Swearing, I squatted down to inspect its guts. I could see the culprits, two pages that had crinkled up and blocked the rest of the feed. I reached in to start tugging them free.

“Hey, careful. I don’t know if your fingers can take anymore abuse from sharp pieces of paper.”

I whirled around as Arun stepped into the space. “Hi! What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you. Your co-workers said you’d be somewhere in the building. I’ve been roaming the halls for a while.”

“This was the only free machine I could find.” I gestured around at the secluded storage room, where other outdated office machinery had apparently been retired.

He shut the door behind him, which combined with his serious expression made me swallow in nervous anticipation. But he only knelt on the dusty floor next to me, nudging my hand out of the way to work on the paper himself. “This is giving me war flashbacks,” he said offhandedly. “I used to be a research assistant for Professor Hilson. She’s a busy woman who generates a lot of paperwork. My fingers got cut to shreds.”

No wonder Arun’s such a darling of the department—he’d worked closely with their big name. “Well, you don’t have to suffer new wounds on my account,” I said. “This is *my* job.”

A smile graced his lips briefly, then disappeared. He yanked out the pages while turning a gear at the same time. “I have some good news and bad news,” he said, as he fished for the scraps that had been left behind. “Which do you want first?”

So I’d been right to be nervous—he was here with an update. My legs went to jelly and I sat on the floor completely. “Um...surprise me.”

“Okay. The good news is, the Locked Room account has been removed, and they’re actively hunting down and removing reposts.”

A surge of energy jolted me back to life. “Oh, thank God. I was hoping it wouldn’t drag on.”

“Yeah, it’s really lucky Hoffman had that Instagram contact.” He crumpled the last bits of paper in his palm and turned the wheel again to make sure the feed was clear.

“So,” I said hesitantly, “what’s the bad news?”

Arun sat back on his heels. “The bad news is...it looks like the IT department is having a hard time linking any student IDs to times when the Locked Room had activity. The way the Dean described it to me, they can’t find enough to support a reasonable suspicion.”

I’d been thinking about this. “What if multiple people were running the account? Then they’d have to look for multiple IDs, right?”

Arun shook his head. “They did consider that. They still couldn’t come up with a short list. The thing is, when you’ve got hundreds of *possible* student IDs, that actually makes it harder to justify *probable* IDs. It’s difficult to prove a pattern of multiple suspects when *anyone* could be a suspect. It would be a much stronger case if they could find a single ID, or even two, that had enough correlation with all of the timestamps. But they just can’t.”

“Well,” I sighed heavily, “you did say it would depend on whether they were using the school’s internet. Maybe this means they were smart enough not to.”

“Yeah, that was the Dean’s conclusion.”

It was hard not to indulge in the feeling of sinking disappointment—to sink into it myself, like quicksand. Arun’s eyes searched my face, his own expression knowing and sad. I reached out and grabbed his hand, like he was the one needing comfort. “It is what it is,” I said. “It’s okay.”

“Will it really be okay if we never know who was responsible for this? If they go unpunished?”

No, I thought, and it felt like drowning. I already knew what it was like to be surrounded by lies, to be made a fool of by people I should have been able to trust. Jodie and Matt had taught me that with their betrayal, and Mom with her gaslighting. Now I wondered if I’d always walk around campus feeling afraid of what was behind people’s masks, of what ugliness they might be hiding inside while showing me a friendly face. I wondered if I’d ever truly be comfortable again.

Arun seemed to read my thoughts. “I’m sorry you’re going through this,” he said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t fix this for you.”

I shook myself back to reality. “I don’t need you to do that for me. I’m just thankful you’re *with* me.”

He gave a rueful headshake, and I knew he was going to say something in protest. Using his hand for leverage, I hauled myself forward and caught his lips in a kiss. I’d surprised him. He caught on quickly though, kissing me right back.

It was breaking our rules, yes. But right now all I could think of was that I'd been so afraid of scaring Arun off with everything that was wrong and difficult in my life, yet he was still here in front of me. Despite my fear he was the first person I'd gone to for help, and he didn't hesitate to give it. He was always that person for me, a pillar of unflagging support.

We hadn't kissed like this since New York, but it was already ten times as heated. We both rose up to our knees, our bodies coming together. As I tilted backward, his hands swept over my back, urgent, one lodging behind my neck to cradle my head and the other finding the lower curve of my spine. I didn't know how much I'd missed being in his arms until I was back in them—I hadn't let myself think about it. Now I seized these precious stolen seconds, knowing the memory of them would have to tide me over until the next unknown point in the future.

Arun seemed to be feeling the same desperation. He licked into my mouth, opened my lips with his kiss, his own mouth hot and ravenous. I sucked his tongue and felt his groan deep in his chest. All thoughts of work, time, place, or drama blew away like snow on the wind. I only existed for this embrace.

Then, like an avalanche, it came crashing down.

“Oh, whoa, excuse me—”

We broke apart, panting, and turned simultaneously to the door of the storage room, which was now open. Joe stood in the frame, his eyes averted to the ceiling.

“Sorry, guys. Um. Ava, when Arun didn't come back with you, I thought I'd look for you myself. I didn't realize, uh...”

We both scrambled to our feet. I brushed dust off of my legs with my head bent, heat suffusing my face. God, was this not the third or fourth time someone had walked in on me like this? You'd think I could learn.

It was just kissing. You think you're the only person who's ever fooled around while working?

Easy thing to tell myself, but not quite so easy to pull off for others. “You mean the copier's free now?” I said, aiming for

nonchalant and breezy but landing somewhere around high-pitched and trembly. “Great.”



Arun was doing better than me at shrugging off the incident. In the corridor he brushed a hand down my arm, asking with a look if I was okay. I nodded. He chatted smoothly with Joe as we all walked back to the Lit department together, the two of them carrying the stacks of copies I’d managed to produce. According to Joe, he would have finished a lot sooner, but Stefka had kept interrupting him to do “emergency” work of her own. Naturally.

Stefka’s lips pursed when she spotted us. “We thought you might have gotten lost.”

“It’s been taking longer than expected,” I explained. “I’m sorry, but I’m not going to be able to finish by the end of my shift.”

“I told you they needed to be ready today,” Stefka said sharply. “What have you been up to for three hours?”

Joe deposited the stack he was carrying for me onto my desk. “She had to use an ancient machine. I’m sure that slowed her down a lot.”

I hadn’t expected him to come to my defense. I took that moment to compose myself, but Stefka beat me to it. “I hope you’re not thinking about passing the rest off to Lacey tomorrow. That wouldn’t be fair to her.”

Never mind the fact that Lacey and her smiley-faced sticky notes *always* dumped her leftover work on me and I never said a word about it. “I’m happy to stay longer to get it done,” I offered. “It probably won’t take me an hour, even.”

Stefka folded her arms, clearly spoiling for a fight. “I have to lock everything up at five.”

That was in ten minutes. “I’m sorry,” I said again, “but I literally can’t do it unless you give me more time.”

“I can’t leave you here unsupervised. It’s a security risk.” Her mouth twisted. “I’m also not authorized to pay you overtime.”

“I wasn’t thinking about that,” I protested. I honestly hadn’t realized I *could* get overtime. “It’s my fault I didn’t finish my assignment so I just want to make it up for you.”

“This isn’t *class* work,” Stefka scoffed. “Not completing your tasks is unprofessional and unacceptable.”

The fact that she was giving me a whole-ass dressing down in front of everyone, including and especially Arun, made me want to both throttle her and also physically fly away, like the snow on the wind I’d been thinking of five incredibly long minutes ago. I took a breath. “I acknowledge that and like I said, I’m sor—”

“Stop apologizing. This is bullshit.”

Everyone’s heads whipped around to gape at Arun.

I’d never seen him look like this before, his eyes narrowed, his jawline stern. He’d been standing silently by my side while Stefka dragged me, but now he took a step toward her, propping his hands on her desk as he leaned into her face.

“Stefka, you know damn well it’s easy to arrange anyone’s overtime access *and* pay. But if you’re so concerned about that, or about the security risk, then it’s on you personally to finish the assignment, isn’t it?”

Her jaw had dropped the moment he first spoke up and hadn’t closed since. Couldn’t blame her; it was frankly astonishing. “Excuse me?”

“You’re the one who manages this office and plans Ava’s tasks,” Arun said curtly. “You should have kept track of who was using the equipment and budgeted enough time for her to do the work that *you* assigned. If she couldn’t get it done on time, then the responsible party is right here.” He thumped his pointer finger down in front of her.

Stefka’s eyes had widened to rival dinner plates. Other than that, she somehow kept her composure. “I’m not going to

discuss our office operations with someone who doesn't work here.”

“I'm a writing assistant, remember?”

“Not in this area of the department, and these aren't your work hours. Your presence is a disruption and I'm going to have to ask you to leave.” Her gaze flicked to me. “And *you* shouldn't be entertaining any of your *friends* during your work hours.” The way she said *friends* carried a dictionary's worth of implications.

“You don't set department rules,” Arun said firmly. “The professors do.”

“Absolutely.” Stefka blinked up at him. “I'm more than happy to take up Ava's performance with them. I know how they value a peaceful, professional work environment. And I also know how many other students would be happy to provide that in Ava's place.”

Her words were precise and clear. I pulled my wits back together and tugged on Arun's sleeve, trying to draw him away. “It's okay,” I said softly. “I'm okay. Stefka, I'm really sorry about all this. But please, if you give me a chance, I'll do my best to make this right.”

Arun stiffened, but I held tighter.

Stefka's lips compressed for a second. “I'll be here at nine tomorrow morning. If you come in then, I'll make sure the copier is free.”

I had therapy then—and this was not the week to cancel. “Would it be all right for me to come at ten instead? I have an appointment at nine.”

“I'll have to shift some things around.” Her tone frostily implied that I was pushing it. I tried to take some strength from how Arun had defended me—misguided and OTT as he was—and stand my ground. Finally, she relented. “But if that's what we have to do...”

“Great, thank you,” I said. I pointed at the clock, which said five p.m., and pulled my bag from under my desk. “See you

tomorrow.” Then, with my hand looped around Arun’s rigid arm, I hurried us both out.

OceanofPDF.com

31

AVA

I waited until we were back at Milner to say anything, and it seemed like Arun was doing the same. By unspoken agreement, we went to his room to talk. Still baffled by his actions, I let him go first.

“Listen, Stefka has no right to treat you that way.” He shrugged off his coat and draped it over his desk chair with quick, forceful motions. “I let it slide before but this time she really did too much. There are dozens of other campus jobs that’ll treat you better.”

“I don’t want another job. I want this one. It was hard enough getting it to begin with.”

Arun paused. “Ava, you shouldn’t have to put up with abuse.”

An incredulous laugh huffed out of me. “After everything I’ve been through, a bitchy boss is nothing to me. *Less* than nothing. What I can’t handle is you potentially getting me fired because...why? What’s up with you?”

He rolled his shoulders and turned away. “Nothing.”

“Do you...” I hesitated, not sure I wanted the answer. But maybe it was better to know. “Do you feel weird about what happened earlier? Kissing me? Is that why you lashed out?”

“What?” He spun back around. “Not at all!”

“Then what’s going on? I’ve never seen you say a negative word to anyone. So either something’s bothering you or you’ve been replaced by an evil twin.”

Arun blanched. “I’m not a saint, okay? Far from it. I’m allowed to lose my temper once in a while.”

“I never said you aren’t. I just want to know if there’s a reason.” I raised my hand to forestall the predictable response. “Beyond Stefka.”

“Just—” He ran a hand through his hair. “How am I supposed to go from kissing you to watching you get mistreated like that? No one would stand by and let that happen to someone they care about.”

“Okay,” I said calmly, trying to soothe his agitation. *Me, soothing Arun? Did the world flip upside down?* I stepped into his space, sliding my arms around his waist to hug him. “I get it. But there really wasn’t a need for it.”

“That’s the problem!” He stared down at me, his hands gripping my shoulders. “I just—I feel like I don’t know how to make things better for you.”

“Are you serious? That’s all you ever do! But I don’t *want* you to make everything better for me.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s...it’s unbalanced.” I searched for the words, feeling out my thoughts even as I spoke them. “If all I ever do is run to you with my issues and expect you to fix them, that’s not very fair to you, is it? And it’s not fair if it’s only *me* doing it and never the other way around.” It struck me that I might be coming off as ungrateful or something, so I smiled, wanting to lighten the mood. “Also because apparently it makes you believe you have to swoop in and save me from petty assholes like Stefka. You should keep it for stuff that actually matters.”

“I’m not a saint and I’m also not a hero.” He let me go and stepped back. “Look, there was another reason I came to find you. Something happened yesterday.”

My breath caught in my throat. “Something good or something bad?”

“Definitely not good.” His mouth twisted wryly.

I took off my own coat and scarf, draping them over my crossed arms, and sat on his desk chair. “Tell me.”

He dropped onto his bed, elbows propped on his knees. “After I stopped by to see you guys last night, Seth and I went to see Ian. It was stupid, and wrong, and it just made things worse. He not only refused to admit he was behind the

Instagram posts, he also ran his mouth about you. So I got angry—no, I went there angry. And I lost control.”

The roller coaster of emotions that I’d been riding for the past two days suddenly plunged to its deepest depth yet. An icy cold closed over my head. “What did you do?”

“I just grabbed him by the collar.” Arun winced in memory. “But the International House RA happened to see it. She made a report to Dean Hoffman this morning. From what I understand, they’re both claiming that I outright hit him. Seth and I already made our own statements saying I didn’t. But it’s our word against theirs. Luckily they didn’t make a complaint against Seth at least—he’s being treated as a witness only.”

I remembered Seth’s troubled expression when he came back to the room last night; he’d claimed it was because of a paper. *All men do is lie*, I thought nonsensically, then castigated myself. *Girl, this is not the time for memes*. But my thoughts were fluttering wildly, like birds newly trapped in a cage. I tried to concentrate.

“Why would the RA lie?” I asked.

“I don’t think she had the best angle to see what happened. Maybe she truly believes it. It’s her job to look out for her residents.”

“Does Ian have any injuries?”

Arun shook his head. “He says a bruised hip from hitting his desk, which he wouldn’t have gotten if I hadn’t touched him.” He scrubbed a hand over his hair, making it fall messily. “Either way, I made contact which Ian didn’t consent to, which under the Student Code is a physical assault and battery. Hoffman’s already asked me to pause any RA duties, so I wouldn’t be surprised if I ultimately get fired. I could possibly lose my WA position as well. If the Dean comes down harshly enough, I could also be barred from unpaid positions in campus organizations, which would take me off the *Rundown*. Worst case scenario, I’ll be suspended or expelled.”

Arun recited all of this dispassionately. Meanwhile, the world seemed to crash down around me. These positions

meant so much to him. Not only that, he was applying for summer jobs, which he needed to build his future.

I moved to sit on the floor directly in front of him. I wanted to comfort him; I wanted to make all of this go away. I wanted to reach out, but could only run my fingers helplessly over his rug. “Dean Hoffman knows you. He knows all the good you’ve done. One mistake shouldn’t make him go nuclear.”

“He said he was extremely disappointed in me.” Arun’s face looked bleak. “Maybe he’s inclined to make the punishment worse *because* he expected better of me.”

“That would be completely unfair!”

“Would it? When Mimi attacked you, you wanted to throw the book at her. Technically I did worse, because I actually got hands on Ian. I’d be a hypocrite to think I don’t deserve worse.”

“But the Dean was totally lenient with Mimi. She barely faced any consequences at all.” My throat burned, thinking of Arun suffering all of these punishments and repercussions while actual assholes like Mimi and Ian got away with everything. I hated the shamed hunch to Arun’s shoulders, the shuttered darkness in his eyes—the stark opposite of his normal easy-going confidence. I wished I’d been the one to confront Ian instead of him.

The trapped birds in my mind settled, landing on a single thought. *Would any of this be happening if it weren’t for me?*

“I’m sorry,” I said. “This is all my fault.”

“What?” Arun lifted his head to stare at me. “Not at all.”

“It is, though. I know I didn’t make Ian do what he did, or whoever ran that account, or any of the people who helped it blow up. But I was the starting point.”

“You didn’t make me go over there. That was *my* decision. My own bad decision.”

I shrugged, unconvinced. Arun got down on the floor as well, kneeling in front of me like he’d done in the copier room.

“Ava, don’t take on blame or fault for something you didn’t even know was happening.”

“But would you have done it if it weren’t for me? Would you have done it for anyone else on the hall?”

He blew out a long breath. “I don’t think that’s the right way to look at it. I also think maybe we’ve been trying too hard to pretend like you mean the same to me as everyone else. At the end of the day, you do mean more. So much more. And although it was wrong of me to act on it the way I did, the feeling beneath that action isn’t. What I feel for you is incredible, and good, and not something either of us should apologize for.”

“You mean a lot to me, too,” I told him. “But getting in trouble for me? Not worth it.”

Arun stroked a thumb across my cheekbone. “I wish you could see yourself the way I see you. I wish I could show you somehow.” He tilted his body over me and brushed a gentle kiss onto my lips, the sensation like a sweet sting to my core.

I wish you could, too. The wildly flapping birds had found their way to my heart. Suddenly I was finished with talking, tired of second-guessing, no longer willing to wait and wonder. I wanted to *know*. I wanted Arun’s decision—and any consequences arising from it—to truly be about something real.

I threaded my hand through his hair and opened my mouth against his, trying to make my intentions clear. There was only the briefest, blink-and-you’d-miss-it hesitation from him. Then he nodded into the kiss and swept me up in his arms.



We laid out right there on the rug, too impatient even to heft ourselves onto the bed. I unbuttoned Arun’s shirt and pushed it off his shoulders, kissing him the whole time, not wanting to waste a moment on the path to our inevitable destination. I licked his bottom lip as he pulled the shirt off the rest of the

way, then got my hands on his naked chest and abs, smooth and solid under my palms.

Arun groaned into my mouth as I attacked his jeans next, my knuckles bumping his erection. His fingers slipped under my shirt, around my back, and freed me of my bra. I was just about to reach for his cock when he slid down. The protest died in my throat as he lifted my shirt hem and his mouth captured my right nipple.

“Oh God,” I said out loud. I arched into him and his arm went around my back, pulling me closer.

Despite our urgency he took his time tasting each of my breasts, going back and forth, his tongue circling and flicking before his lips surrounded the tip to suckle me. Then he'd lick a hot path back to the other one, repeating the same torture, only to return again. His dark eyes stared up at me the whole time, measuring my responses while his clever mouth played its tricks.

I looked right back at him, trying to communicate my wonder and awe that we were finally crossing this boundary, but eventually the intensity of the connection overwhelmed me. I threw my head back and just let go of everything but physical sensation.

My jeans felt too tight against my crotch. My hips writhed, blindly seeking some kind of relief. “Shhh,” Arun whispered. “I've got you. Beautiful Ava.”

He eased the heel of his free hand over my mound, and the simple pressure of it through my clothes made me shudder. I whimpered my plight to the ceiling, thrusting my hips against his hand. “Feels so good...”

Another circling rub which unleashed a moan from me, and then his fingers landed unerringly over my clit like he'd found and memorized a map of my body. I could feel the dampness as he pressed the seam of my jeans into me, heard his huff of pleasure as I responded to his strokes. Then his lips firmed up around my nipple and he sucked with just the right amount of pressure.

I peaked. Maybe he'd only intended to tease me a little more, but I was already so keyed up that I was gone before I had any clue what was happening. A soft cry broke from my throat as my body shook beneath him, helpless to hold back.

It took me a moment to recover, but when I opened my eyes I saw Arun hovering over me. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's amazing, holy *shit*," I gasped. "I wasn't expecting...I mean, I guess we *have* been waiting a while..."

"I guess so." With a cheeky smile that darted straight to my heart, he sat up. "Although I wasn't quite ready to be finished."

The view of him framed between my raised knees—mouth slack with desire, bare torso sloping into the open waistband of his jeans—was so fucking hot I had to clench my fists. "Me neither," I said.

Now it was Arun's turn to get me out of my clothes. I sat up a bit, helping him pull off my shirt and bra completely, then laid back down and raised my hips so he could work my jeans and panties off. The heat in his room had ticked on at some point; the air flowing over my skin was comfortably warm. But the fiery look in his eyes had me shivering in anticipation.

"Beyond anything I ever imagined," he murmured.

"In a good way?" I asked shyly.

His fingers trailed down the insides of my thighs. "In the best way."

"I want to see you, too." My fingers played at his waistband, dipping below where he felt impossibly hotter.

Arun sucked in a breath. "We'll get there. But first—"

My own breaths gusted in and out as he traced teasing patterns over my skin, drawing ever closer to my cunt. He licked his lips, his gaze intently focused there, at the juncture where I wanted him most. He looked like a conqueror surveying his next siege, formulating strategies, calculating angles of approach—except that I'd already thrown the gates wide, ready to welcome him.

“I want to taste you,” he said roughly. “Here.” He feathered his thumb through my slick, just missing my clit, then brought it to his mouth. I watched him roll the taste over his tongue, his jaw going slack.

“Don’t you want more?” I whispered.

Arun nodded. Slowly—agonizingly slow like he was moving through water—he bent down and kissed my knee. I trembled. Even though I’d already come, his kiss seared me like a brand.

Goosebumps broke out over my body as he dragged his mouth downward. His hand nudged my other knee toward the floor, opening me even more. Thanks to Colin and Darius and Seth, I’d left a lot of insecurity and shame far behind, but still, this feeling of exposure with Arun was incredibly new, unpredictably vulnerable.

Again, seeming to hear my thoughts, he glanced up at me. “Tell me any time you want to stop.” His hot breath was so close to my pussy that I swore I could feel it change my wetness.

“I won’t ever want you to stop,” I vowed.

For a second, his face looked impish. “Don’t make promises I’m going to want to hold you to.”

And then he closed the last couple of inches and swiped his tongue over my cunt.

I fucking convulsed, still so sensitive from my orgasm that my entire body throbbed in response. I think I might even have sobbed. But it was so achingly good that I found myself flexing my fingers through his hair, wanting to hold his head to me as I ground against his mouth.

Wanted to, but didn’t have to. Arun was thoroughly in control, his hands wrapped around my thighs, holding them open as he dove into me. And goddamn did he know what he was about. He licked me without mercy or respite, his tongue delving for every last drop, swirling around my clit. All the while he looked up at me, reading my expressions as intently as a sacred text, knowing exactly where I was on the journey

to completion. He kept me hovering at the edge, the end tantalizingly in sight but just out of reach.

I heard myself pleading, my voice hoarse. “Let me come, please, please, I need to come...”

His eyes sparked wickedly, and finally his lips fastened directly onto my clit. I came within seconds, blood roaring in my ears like a tunneled train bursting into light. Even then he didn't let up. His thumb pushed into me, taking the convulsions of my cunt as his fingers splayed over the sensitive dip above my thigh, keeping me spread. His tongue laved my clit, drawing out the last aftershocks of my orgasm.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and urged him up. “I'm not telling you to stop,” I said between kisses, tasting myself on his mouth. “But I want to take care of you now.”

Arun nodded, eyes shut with strain. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Sounds good.”

“Do you have condoms?”

“In my night table.”

I stood on tingling limbs and found what we needed. We met on the bed. Arun had shucked his jeans, and his cock stood out long and proud, so hard it was practically touching his stomach. As he knelt between my legs I ran a hand up his shaft and he shivered. “I'm this close to losing it,” he said, catching my fingers in his. “You have no idea how sexy you are, how crazy I've been going for wanting you.”

“Then let's not lose any more time.”

Arun took the condom from me and rolled it on. Still kneeling upright, he hefted my hips to meet his cock, nudging me open. He looked at me, waited for my nod. And then he plunged into me.

I gasped. At this angle, the fit between us felt insanely tight. I could see the muscles in his arms and abs flexing. I could see my own body rising toward his, and the place where we joined. I could see his face, the way his eyelids fluttered, the way his hair fell over his brow as his head tipped forward.

“You okay?” he rasped.

“Perfect,” I told him. “You?”

“Amazing. You’re amazing.”

He pulled out a bit, then pistoned back in, teeth sunk into his bottom lip. The single stroke seemed to drag on forever, a lengthy heated invasion that I could feel in every nerve. Arun cursed—I didn’t think I’d ever heard such filth from his mouth before, and it was so hot I wanted to make him do it again. I squeezed down around him and was rewarded with a broken sound in his throat.

“Don’t hold back,” I whispered. “I want you to feel as good as you made me feel.”

“If you felt even a small piece of this...” He huffed out another ragged breath as he pulled my hips into his. “I can’t even imagine. I’m already about to fall apart.”

“Go ahead. I’ll catch you.”

He smiled down at me. “Let’s fall apart together.”

Having just come, I felt like I was suspended on some high plane, full of sensation but not quite able to tip over. But he circled his thumb around my clit and I quickly had to reevaluate my immediate future.

Arun picked up the pace, his thumb working persistently, and it didn’t take much more than that. My orgasm this time was more of an aftershock, but as soon as I started to quiver around his cock he cursed again—a win for me. “Fuck, Ava, I’m—” He lost his rhythm, and on his final surge I felt the intimate throb of his climax.

For a long moment we just looked at each other, seeing ourselves in the new light of what we’d shared. Then I held my arms open, and he drifted down into them, our bodies pressed skin to skin.

COLIN

The afternoon's experiment in Organic Chemistry ran long as usual, but I'd messed up a crucial step an hour in, so this one was on me. As I helped my lab partner clean up our bench, I apologized. "I should have been paying more attention," I told her.

"It's okay. I guess you were, um, understandably distracted."

I paused rinsing the flasks. Ashley hadn't said a word about anything but Orgo for almost four hours—which probably should have been suspicious in itself, since we're usually pretty friendly. I hadn't realized how business-y she'd been acting until now. More evidence that I was too in my head.

"Yeah," I said carefully. "It's been a little crazy." I paused, not sure how deep to take it. Ashley and I have known each other for a while, taking the same pre-med track since we were first-years. But while we might have good chats when there's nothing to do in the lab but wait, we don't really hang out aside from that. Maybe she hadn't said anything because she didn't have anything good to say.

"Are they gonna catch whoever was behind it?"

I started mounting the flasks on the drying rack. "I don't have high hopes."

"God, I can't imagine what y'all are going through. How's—Ava, right? That's her name?"

"Ava, yep. She's...I guess she's doing her best to deal with it, like all of us."

Ashley huffed. "You're so calm. If it was me, I'd be out for blood."

"Ava's more like that," I admitted. "She's out for blood, organs, bones..."

“And you?”

I stuffed my laptop into my bag and reached down the bench to retrieve Ashley's. “Of course I'm mad about it, but I can't exactly tear up the school hunting down villains.”

“I don't know if I'd be able to help myself.” Ashley zipped her laptop into its case and we started walking out. “But you're always so calm and collected. Gotta admit, I'm kinda surprised your girl isn't. I figured you'd go for the refrigerated cucumber types.”

“Damn, tell me how you really feel.”

“Well, how I *really* feel is that if I'd known you were open to something different, I would've made a move a while back.”

I stopped in my tracks. “Oh. Really—I—wow.”

Ashley grinned at me. “Relax. I'm all stupid about my girlfriend.” I remembered now that she'd been dating a Chem major since last year. The three of us had even shared a couple classes. “I'm just saying you've got hidden depths,” Ashley continued. “Especially with you and Ava's, you know, arrangement.”

“Uh, thanks.”

We'd reached the outside now—already dusk. “I guess from Ava's perspective, it makes sense for time management,” Ashley mused. “You're hella busy, so she's probably glad she can shtup other guys.”

I gave her a look. “It's a little more complex than that.”

“I'm not pissing on your arrangement, promise. I'm just saying I barely get any time with Lisa these days. And I'm always feeling guilty about that, wondering if she's looking around, wondering if I should just let her go. Now I see how you're moving and I'm like, that's actually kinda cool and progressive. Everybody wins, you know?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I guess that's true.”

“Anyway, I'm rooting for Ava to get her revenge,” Ashley said. “Don't let the fuckers get away with this bullshit. They

clearly don't know their way around their own ugly bits. That's why they're so interested in yours." She patted my elbow and headed off.

I had a shitload of work to do—what else, really—and my evening schedule was already in danger of being thrown off because of Orgo going late. But Ashley's words weighed on me. Without conscious thought, my feet turned in the direction of Milner.

I took the steps up to Ava's floor two at a time, drafting a monologue in my head. But when I got to her room, the door was shut. No one answered when I knocked. Same with Darius across the hall.

It was definitely late enough that most people would be out of class, but not early enough for dinner. It could be that Ava was just delayed. I had a sudden idea to kill time by talking to Arun. Maybe he'd have an update on Dean Hoffman's investigation. I'd never been to his room before, so I checked the nameplates and whiteboards carefully as I walked down the hall.

Near the center point, a door opened ahead of me. Ava stepped out, but a hand reached to pull her back. She laughed, low and husky and familiar, and let herself be drawn in for a kiss with whoever was in the doorway.

Two thoughts went through my head. First, I knew that laugh well; that was Ava feeling loved-up and well-pleasured and happy. Second, I knew the person she was kissing, who'd leaned out of the doorway to chase her lips; it was Arun.

Ava ended the kiss and turned in my direction, probably on her way back to her room. She spotted me and smiled. "Colin!"

Arun whipped toward me, so fast it was almost comical. He was wearing a button-down shirt, but it was completely open, exposing his bare torso above his jeans.

It seemed that caring about his RA position was no longer a concern.

“Hi,” I said, slinging an arm around Ava’s shoulders. She felt warm and relaxed, like a cat stretching in the sun. “Looks like you’ve got some news.”

Arun cleared his throat, but he met my eyes squarely. “Yes, we do.”



Ava squeezed my waist as we walked back to her room together. Once inside, I gave her a discreet once-over while she busied herself hanging up her coat and unpacking her bag. I was certainly used to seeing her after she’d been with Seth or Darius, and I’d always believed myself to be theoretically fine with anyone else. But this was the first time I’d be putting theory into practice.

She seems happy. That was the undeniable conclusion I had to draw, evidenced by the small smile playing about her lips, the lightness of her movements, the tiny hums under her breath. *Carefree and content, despite everything she’s been going through.* Which, really, was all I needed to know.

Arun had been saved by the bell—literally—his phone ringing from his jeans pocket just as I was about to launch a pointed question. His eyes had widened, seeing the caller ID, and he’d said only, “Sorry, I have to take this,” before retreating back through his doorway.

So it fell to Ava alone to provide answers, but even if she hadn’t been in such a good mood, I wasn’t about to subject her to some kind of post-coital interrogation. That’s not how we work or how I want us to work.

All the words I’d half-prepared on my mad dash over to Milner evaporated. I said, simply, “I like seeing you this way.”

She paused, her hands crossed over her waist to catch the hem of her sweater. “How do you mean?”

“Like someone made you happy.”

Ava beamed. “Does that mean you’re okay about me and Arun?”

“I’m more than okay about you. As for Arun, I still barely know the guy, but obviously if he can put a smile on your face, we’re good.”

She came over to embrace me, and I was struck by how right it felt to have our arms around each other. It was like my heart opened and brought her inside, even as it let warmth and affection flow out toward her. I dropped a kiss on her, enjoying the feel of her smile against mine.

“Does it help to know that I take my relationship with him seriously?” she asked. “I wouldn’t be with him otherwise. I think I’ve gotten to that point now. It’s only worth it if I truly care about and trust someone.”

“I can agree that there must be something to him if you care about him that much.” I winked at her.

“And just to be clear, it doesn’t mean I love you any less.” Ava winked back at me.

“Good, because I feel the same.” And, I marveled, it was completely true.

She finished taking off her sweater, leaving her in a soft T-shirt with cutely frazzled hair, then exchanged her jeans for a pair of comfy pajama pants. Meanwhile, she told me what she’d heard from Arun about the Locked Room account getting shut down, and how it was still up in the air whether they’d find who was actually behind it.

I nodded morosely, unsurprised. “Actually...I wanted to talk to you about all that.”

Ava sat cross-legged on her bed, her expression curious. “Sure.”

I perched on the edge of her desk. “I’ve been feeling guilty about my initial reactions. Not just guilty. Responsible, too.” Ava opened her mouth, brow furrowed, and I said quickly, “Let me try and explain. The thing is, I don’t think I was wrong exactly in wanting to avoid escalation. But in the light of a new day, I can see how I expressed it wasn’t constructive.

The whole situation *is* infuriating, and it's totally valid to be fired up about it. Instead of being a wet blanket I could have just allowed everyone the space to feel their feelings. Especially you, being at the center of it. I'm sorry for being so dismissive."

I paused to take in her reaction. She was frowning now, evidently thinking through a response. I wasn't finished, though.

"Beyond all that," I went on, "I feel responsible. We brought you into this relationship. We convinced you we could make you happy. We had prior experience, right? But apparently we didn't learn from it. Even though we knew Jenn had damn good reasons to keep things private, we chose to be public with you." I swallowed around the painful lump that had bloomed in my throat. "And even though we knew you'd already suffered so much in your life, we didn't do enough to protect you from the consequences of that choice. I'm sorry," I repeated. "We should have done better. *I* should have done better."

Out of steam, I bowed my head to collect myself. In my mind, we'd failed Ava. I'd already felt that way about not following up on her panic attacks, and about distancing from her this semester. Compounded, all my failures swarmed in a stinging attack.

Ava's hand slipped into mine. She leaned against the desk next to me. "So...I don't accept your apologies," she said. "I'm grateful for them? But today I've realized that the only people who should be apologizing are the people who hurt us. And that's definitely not you, or me. Or any of the other guys."

I gave her a wry smile. "Are you dismissing *my* feelings now?"

"Not at all." Ava squeezed my hand. "We both have a lot of feelings around this whole situation. I just have somewhere else I want to direct them."

DARIUS

My friend Jordan messaged to let me know something had gone down at International House last night. I met him at the coffee bar after our afternoon classes. The line was packed with students also just out of class—I got more than a few curious glances—but luckily Jordan had arrived early. He handed me a paper cup and led me to a table far from eavesdropping ears.

“Okay, here’s what I was told,” Jordan began. “This guy you asked me about, Ian? Two guys stormed into his room and punched him out.”

My jaw dropped. “Who? Was it behind the IG business? Was he hurt bad?”

Jordan raised his hands to slow me down. “My buddy Pukar—you remember him?”

“The guy who whupped all of our asses at Warcraft that one time?”

“Right. He lives on the same hall as Ian and that other dude. He said last night he overheard someone shouting. He definitely heard something about Instagram. But by the time he poked his head out, he saw the RA going in. She shut the door and he went back into his room. Didn’t think anything about it until I started asking him stuff today.”

“So he didn’t see it happen himself? Or whoever did it?”

“That’s the thing. It’s just a rumor around the house right now, but apparently one of the guys who did the punching was an RA.”

Jordan’s accent was a little difficult to make out in all the din of the crowd. I leaned forward. “Hold up. An *RA* hit Ian?”

“That’s what Pukar heard. Ian’s not confirmed it, and neither has the International House RA. I think they want to keep it under wraps because the Dean’s still deciding what to do.”

“You’re telling me that fucker’s got the Dean working for him as a *victim*? He should be getting investigated his own damn self!”

“Well, honestly, most of I-House is on Ian’s side. They’re pretty clannish over there, and no one knows what the fight was really about, you know?”

My head spun. It was always possible that a guy like Ian had pissed off people in multiple directions, but Pukar had overheard something very specific. And I knew exactly one RA with a personal stake in anything happening on Instagram right now. Except he was the last person who’d get into a whole fight behind it.

Then again, I recalled, he hadn’t been holed up with the rest of us last night, so there *was* opportunity...

I stared right through Jordan, remembering something else. “You said it was two guys who confronted Ian, right?”

“That’s what I heard. Although no one knows who the other one was.”

Seth had left the room at some point, too. In fact, he’d gone with Arun.

“The whole incident’s got Ian and his friend Allen raging,” Jordan continued. “Pukar says he doesn’t think either of them have been to class today, and he’s heard them yelling a couple times.”

I barely registered what he was saying. *Seth and Arun...the fuck did y’all do?*

“Anyway,” Jordan finished, “Pukar said he can message you if anything else comes up. Can I give him your number?”

“Definitely. Thanks, J.” I stood and clapped him on the shoulder. “I gotta run.”



Seth didn't answer any of my calls or messages despite me blowing him up. Then I clocked the date on my phone screen: Tuesday. Which meant he was probably tutoring in Chinatown and wouldn't have privacy until he got back to his room. I decided to grab dinner to-go and look for Arun.

Ava's door was open. Colin was sprawled on her bed with one of his thick textbooks, but he was alone.

"Well, this is unexpected," I remarked. "You waiting for Ava?"

"She's in the shower. You just missed her."

"How's she doing?"

"Good, but uh, kind of a long story. I'll let her tell you."

I nodded. "You hanging out for a particular reason or just to keep her company?"

"Probably a little of both." Colin sat up and shut the textbook, a pen in the spine to mark his page. "It's just...been a weird few days, I guess."

After a split second of internal debate, I sat down at Ava's desk, thumping my box of lasagna onto her mousepad. "It's about to get weirder. Have you talked to Seth today? Or Arun?"

Colin's brow furrowed. "Now that you mention it, I haven't seen Seth since I left Milner last night. He usually stops by my room before I go to sleep, to chat for a bit. But maybe because of everything yesterday, he thought that would be redundant. Or that's what I figured, anyway. I didn't want to ask in case it would bother him. Not like it's that big of a deal if he misses a night." He paused, noticing my face. "What?"

"I was just looking for a simple yes or no." I gave him a wide-eyed guileless look.

Colin pressed his lips together. "No, I haven't talked to him. But I did talk to Arun a few minutes ago, actually."

"I don't suppose he mentioned him and Seth paying Ian Roberts a visit?"

“No. They did that? Seriously?”

“Serious as a heart attack. Apparently one or both of ‘em threw hands and roughed the dude up. They got reported to the Dean and everything.”

“Holy fuck. I literally *just*—” He got to his feet. “I should’ve known Seth was up to something, he was so off when he got back here. But you’re telling me Saint Arun of all people got into a fight?”

“He could’ve just been a witness,” I said doubtfully. “I don’t know the details since I heard it like, fourth-hand.”

“But if Seth hurt the guy...” Colin trailed off. Worry and fear chased across his face.

We met eyes and turned to the door as one. Colin got there first, and I followed him down the hall. Arun was standing in the middle of his room, typing on his phone with a frown. He looked up as we blew through the doorway, and the resignation in his eyes told us he’d been waiting for our arrival.

“What happened with you and Seth and Ian?” Colin demanded.

Sighing, Arun pocketed his phone. “We went over to talk to him. He denied everything. He insulted Ava. I grabbed him.”

“And Seth?”

“Didn’t do anything except yell. It was all me.”

“What’s gonna come of it?” I asked. “I heard the I-House RA reported you to the Dean.”

Arun’s mouth twisted. “Well, it seems like you already have the whole story. So you know as much as I do at this point. Everything from here on out is up to the administration.”

There was a moment of silence as we absorbed that. We all remembered what had happened with Ava’s old roommate.

Colin visibly puffed up. “This is exactly what I was trying to avoid happening. I *told* you guys.”

“If you did, I wasn’t there for it,” Arun pointed out. “Next time you think I could benefit from your moral wisdom, make sure to invite me to the lecture.”

I shook my head. “You’re salty right now? You’re the one we would’ve expected to be *giving* the lecture.”

Arun scowled and rubbed a hand down his face. “Guys, I get that you’re involved, but this guilt-tripping or whatever you’re doing is...less than helpful. I assure you that I already feel like crap about it.”

Colin crossed his arms. “Does Ava know?”

“Yes,” Arun said simply, then added, “Of course.”

“Everything?” Colin pressed, his tone skeptical.

“Exactly what are you implying?”

Their odd vibe—never quite *unfriendly*, always just *nonfriendly*—had acquired a new flavor. But this was not the time to let it play out. I rolled my eyes and got between them. “Look, we’re not here to guilt you about anything,” I told Arun. “We honestly just want to know what the hell happened. So please, fill us in on the details.”

The more I heard, the less I understood. Of course part of me would have got my whole life to see Ian folded up like a lawn chair, but the part of me that actually had grown-up self-control recognized that wasn’t the way. I couldn’t help a sense of disorientation that Arun was the one, out of all of us, who’d messed up. He hadn’t been lying earlier—he was clearly also shocked by and disappointed in himself—and yet I also detected a note of defiance. He’d accept the consequences, whatever they might be, but he wasn’t wholly regretful. He might even do it again.

Colin didn’t know Arun as well as me; the stern set of his jaw as he listened to Arun’s recap indicated he was interpreting something unfavorable from it. I knew that as far as consequences went, his concerns began and ended with Ava and Seth. Whatever happened to Arun or whatever Arun was feeling, Colin didn’t care.

“Really impressive,” he said sarcastically, when Arun finished. “This is what you get up to with your big RA job and your big reputation. A whole role model.”

“Bro.” I put a placating hand on his upper arm.

“No.” He shook me off. “Seth didn’t do anything, but he could still get fucked just for being there. He wants to be a *teacher*, Darius!”

“It was Seth’s idea to go there,” Arun pointed out.

I sucked my teeth and shot him a warning look, but Colin was already bristling.

Arun cut him off. “Seth will be fine. The Dean’s not looking at him for punishment. Only me.”

With spotless timing, Ava happened to walk past, evidently just finished with her shower. She caught sight of us and paused. The fresh, heady scent of her shampoo wafted into the room. “Are we having another meeting?”

“No, Darius was just looking for you,” Colin muttered. He headed out past her, back down the hall.

“No issue,” I said lightly. “I only wanted to say hi.” I nodded awkwardly at Arun and stepped out after Colin.

“Wait,” Ava said. She glanced at Arun, then back at me. “We’ve got something to tell you.”

I had therapy with Mary in the morning, and I had no idea how we'd fit everything I had to talk about into a single session. It felt like years since I last saw her, not just one week.

"So," she said, once I'd sat down across from her. "How's it going?"

She deserved props for taking it all in with a straight face, only occasionally widening her eyes. Up until now, we'd mostly spoken about my mother. I'd never actually told her that I was seeing Colin and Darius and Seth, much less my holding pattern with Arun. I probably should have rehearsed a summary of it all, because I kept rambling from subject to subject, like a drunk person trying to walk the line. What even was the most important thing, anyway, the most impactful event? The negative stuff, meaning the Instagram drama? Or the positive, meaning the mutual *I love you*'s with the guys? The negative, meaning Arun getting in trouble? Or the positive, meaning the two of us finally being together?

I knew that Arun would be talking to the Dean about his future at some point today—maybe even right at that moment. It felt like the most immediate issue, at least, so I finished up with, "I don't know what I can do for him. I can't prove anything that would help his case with the Dean."

Mary folded her hands on her notepad. "Why do you think you need to do that?"

"Because he went after Ian for me."

"Has he told you that?"

"No. The opposite, actually. He said it was his decision alone. But I still can't help thinking it was my fault."

"Okay." Mary set the notepad aside. "When it comes to issues of fault and blame in relationships, we have to tread

very carefully. Those words themselves can be problematic, especially when used by one partner to put the other one down, or to build themselves up. I prefer to speak in terms of *responsibility*, because it emphasizes what's within your control. In this case, it sounds like Arun has a healthy perspective on that. Did he actually use the word *decision*?"

I thought back. "Yes."

"I think that's great. I like that word as well, and also *choice*. They acknowledge personal agency, and they help keep the focus on owning one's actions. Because while you may worry that he did this for you, the truth is, he actually did it for himself." She paused. "What do you think, hearing me frame it like that?"

"I get it—mentally, I mean. But emotionally..." I gestured in futility. "How can I just act like I'm not involved?"

"You are certainly involved, and it's only natural to feel you have a stake in the matter. What I'd like you to be clear on, however, is that it's not on you to deal with the consequences of someone else's actions, no matter how much you care about him. You didn't intentionally cause this situation. You didn't ask for this Instagram to be created. You didn't ask or force Arun to confront another student about it. You certainly didn't ask or force him to put hands on that student. Did you?"

I swallowed and shook my head.

"Would you have wanted him to do those things?"

"No!" Although I admitted, "But I would have loved to take his place."

"It's natural to feel that, too. But ultimately, the only person who acted out these urges was Arun. He didn't even consult you about it beforehand."

Sighing, I slumped against the back of the sofa. "I mean, he barely consulted himself. It was completely in the heat of the moment. Which is part of what trips me up about it. It's so unlike him. He's got such strong morals and ethics. He's the perfect specimen of a person."

“I’m sure you know that no one’s truly perfect. Maybe it would actually help your relationship to recognize that Arun is a human being with flaws just like anyone.”

My knee jiggled. “Probably. I’ve always struggled with confidence around him. He can come across as so untouchable, so above it all.”

“Hopefully not by his design.”

“No, he’s just...one of those people.”

Mary smiled. “Well, it seems to me he has quite a high regard for you. Mutual respect is a great foundation for a relationship. So, can you respect his position that it’s not your fault or responsibility to fix what he did?”

I fidgeted in my seat. There was something about hearing this sentiment from Mary, as opposed to one of the guys, that hit different. My sessions with her had been minute-to-minute full of smart, helpful substance. I wanted her to approve of me, like a teacher I really liked. “I guess I can try.”

“Trying is good. And let me just note that I’m happy to hear you have a strong and mutually loving support network. I hope you realize that there’s nothing wrong or shameful about non-traditional relationships between consenting adults—whatever anonymous internet commenters might say.”

That made me smile. “It’s definitely been a journey to believing that. If it hadn’t been for them, I think I’d still be an unhappy asocial lump.”

“Well, I happen to believe you have a tremendous well of inner strength. You would have found your way eventually.”

I crossed my legs. “You know, in spite of everything this week, I haven’t had a panic attack.”

Mary nodded. “That’s something to be grateful for. But it’s possible that you haven’t been triggered in the same way as you are with your mother. This kind of experience, while undeniably traumatic, has different roots and different effects on you. So I just want to caution you that we still have work to do on that.”

I contemplated her words. I supposed my most important and impactful issue was still my mother. In a way, that thought gave me a kind of freedom. She presented such an impossible obstacle that everything else looked smaller and surmountable in comparison. This situation with the guys was fucked up and horrible, but it didn't have to be ruinous.

And above all, what I'd learned from my mother—and Jodie and Matt—was that I didn't have to just sit back and take it.



By the end of the day, however, the fallout had gotten worse. After therapy I'd spent an hour of my morning finishing up the copying project for Stefka. Luckily she had a meeting, so I was spared an awkward encounter with her. Unluckily she was very much around during my regular afternoon shift, her jaw set mulishly as she tested my limits with one meaningless task after another. I took a page out of her book and stayed frostily polite, reminding myself what I'd told Arun: *I want this job. I need this job.*

Toward the end of my shift, he walked into the department, his shoulders hunched. He met my eyes and gave me a grim headshake. My heart plummeted. He went straight to Professor Hilson's office without stopping to say anything to me. I pretended not to hear Stefka sniff.

He was still with Professor Hilson when I clocked out. I sent him a text message: **I'll wait for you by the big window downstairs.**

There was an assortment of sofas, armchairs, and ottomans arranged in front of the ground floor windows, where I guess the liberal arts majors like to hang out. I settled into one of two empty armchairs which were positioned across from each other and tried to catch up on some reading.

I must have lost track of time, because when Arun finally sat down, I realized the daylight outside the window had disappeared. Our area wasn't well-lit, and the darkness made him look tired and withdrawn.

“What happened?” I asked softly.

“Basically, everything’s still up in the air.” A breath gusted out of him as he tilted his head to rest on the armchair’s back. “The Dean thinks that, because there was actual physical contact, it’s a big enough infraction that I should go before a CJC panel.”

“And that’s...?”

“College Judiciary Committee. It’s a group of representatives for the professors, admin, and students, all appointed by their respective bodies. For disciplinary hearings, a smaller panel gets convened. I think it’s something like two students, two professors, and one admin.”

“So it’s like the Lockridge version of a court with the panel as the jury? Do you get to have a lawyer or anything like that?”

Arun shrugged. “I’m free to consult one, but I can’t technically be represented by anyone during the process, because I’m supposed to speak for myself. I *am* allowed to have a faculty member or a Dean as a sort of case manager who can give me logistical support, help me understand all the procedures, that kind of thing. That’s why I met with Professor Hilson just now. She’s agreed to be my case manager.”

“That’s great. She must really care about you.”

“But she can’t speak for me, not even as a character witness. I really just asked her because...I needed to know someone was on my side.”

“Hey.” I reached over and took his hand. “You’ve got me. And besides me, you’ve got a whole bunch of people who’d take your side any day of the week.”

Arun turned his hand over, interlacing our fingers, and brought his other hand to sandwich mine. “Thank you. I think I just—when Hoffman told me about this CJC panel, I felt like that was him giving up. Like he was washing his hands of the matter. We’ve always had such a good working relationship. But now that I’ve screwed up, he’s abandoned me.”

“Or maybe this is his way of giving you a fairer chance.”

“Maybe.” His tone was doubtful.

“So when will this hearing be?”

“If neither side has objections to the panel members or the procedures, it could be as soon as next week. But in the meantime, I’m definitely suspended from any student employment or activities.”

“If the panel finds you not guilty, would you be able to go back to normal?”

“Not guilty is not likely,” Arun protested. “I still put hands on the guy.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “Anyway, I’m not letting you face it alone.”



Kaya was incensed. Arun had sent a hall-wide email that evening explaining in brief, eloquent terms that he’d been suspended from RA duties for a violation of the Student Code of Conduct. He didn’t go into details and said he wouldn’t be answering any questions pending the results of the disciplinary hearing. So outside of him, Darius, and me, Kaya was the only Milner 2nd resident who had the whole story.

“It’s fucking unjust!” she ranted. She stormed up and down the space between our beds, whipping around so fiercely that her loose pajama pants flapped around her ankles. “He was there defending your honor!”

Sitting on my bed, I hugged one of my throw pillows to my chest. “Well, let’s be real, it was a dumbass thing to do.” When it was just the two of us, I could at least be honest about that.

“Oh, no doubt,” Kaya agreed. “Men are stupid as hell, even when they’re Arun. But why out of all the men involved is he the only one seeing repercussions?”

“There’s still a chance the panel lets him off. If I can help prove that Ian was the one behind the Instagram posts, maybe they’ll understand how Arun felt provoked.”

“Would that work?” Kaya looked skeptical.

“I have to try, right? If Arun has to go down for this, Ian fucking well should.”

Kaya swooped over to hop onto the bed next to me, sitting on her heels. “Okay, so we need to smoke him out.”

The fact that she said *we* made me puff up with warmth. I tossed the pillow aside and wrapped my arms around her. “I’m open to ideas.”

“I’m thinking since the direct approach was a fail, we should go with straight-up trickery. Problem is, I bet those two fuckers are on guard now. Thanks to your knights in shining armor, they’ll know they’re suspected.”

“Maybe we should ask Martina for help,” I said. “She lives on their hall. She might hear something.”

But neither Martina nor Haley had any good suggestions about what to do, although they were certainly hopeful for opportunities.

“You wouldn’t believe the shit they were saying after Kaya broke up with Allen,” Martina said the next morning. “Right in the open. Every time I see their pasty faces I want to just—” She thwapped her fork through the air and then stabbed it into her scrambled eggs.

“Oh, I’d believe anything,” Kaya told her.

“They were seething,” Haley confirmed. “But now that I think about it, did they clam up after the Instagram posts? I feel like we only heard them bitching through that weekend, and then they stopped. At first I thought they’d gotten over it, but now...”

Martina sniffed. “I wish I’d been there when Ian got thrashed.”

“I mean, that’s not exactly what happened—” I began.

“Did you ever hear them say something about Ava?” Kaya demanded. “Or the guys?”

They shook their heads. “Nothing about Ava,” Martina said. “Only you and Allen.”

“They didn’t get the opportunity to say more,” Haley added. “Basically, we heard two instances. The first time, Allen just seemed bitter he got dumped. The second time, he and Ian were drunk ranting, and Martina told them off. We walked away when they tried to argue back.”

“Since then, they just sulk around me,” Martina finished.

I stared out the window of the dining hall at the morning sky, stretching flat white and wintry over the big campus hill. Although it was early breakfast, the dining hall had steadily filled up with students over the hour we’d been sitting and strategizing. I’d kept glancing around, waiting for some stranger to make eye contact, to nudge their neighbor and whisper and point. Now that I’d turned to the window, I wondered if people felt free to stare at me—like I couldn’t catch them with my attention directed elsewhere.

The Locked Room had been down for days now, but in this huge space, I felt just as exposed and naked as when I first found out about it. At least being with the girls was a bit of an antidote. They were spiky and vengeful—just like me. I felt seen, heard, and held. I felt like anyone who dared to fuck with us might very well get that fork to the face.

And then, like a bolt of sunlight piercing the leaden clouds, help came from a completely unexpected source.

“Ava?” Someone said my name from the far end of the table, and I pulled my focus from the window.

It was Mimi.

She stood there looking at me with an uncertain expression, her hands clasped around the straps of her bookbag. “I thought that was you. Hey, um, can we talk?” She looked around at the other girls. “Privately?”

Aside from the day in the library with Darius, I hadn’t seen her since we parted ways as roommates. “Why?”

Mimi folded her lips. “I just...heard about what’s going on. And I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Why?” I said again. “Were you involved?”

Everyone’s heads swiveled toward me. Kaya’s eyebrows had shot halfway up her forehead.

“Look, you have a right to be mad at me,” Mimi said. “I probably shouldn’t even be talking to you. The Dean warned me not to, as part of my probation. But I just saw you sitting here and—”

“Stop a minute,” Kaya interjected. “Are you *Mimi*?”

“Yep,” I said. I sat back in my chair, ready for my fellow vengeful Valkyries to do their worst.

But Mimi spoke first. “I know you don’t believe it, but I do feel bad about what happened last semester. And I just think you don’t deserve any of this mess. I mean, she’s my friend and all, but I hate the slut-shaming. It makes me feel like a hypocrite. Not to mention Darius, who did nothing to deserve getting dragged when he’s supposedly her friend, too—”

My brain spun, trying to follow along. “What are you talking about? What friend?”

Mimi faltered. “Seriously, can we go somewhere else?”

I stood up, my chair scraping the floor and knocking into the chair of the neighboring table behind me. More heads spun to look at me, but I didn’t care. I was remembering one particular person who’d said, *Mimi always thought you were thirsty for Darius*—“You have a friend who’s slut-shaming me? Are you talking about Lena?”

Haley’s jaw dropped as she glanced between the two of us. “You’re saying Lena’s making nasty comments about Ava?”

Mimi was practically cringing. “She didn’t come up with the posts, okay? Someone just submitted them and...” She trailed off.

Blood rushed through my ears. “She didn’t come up with them, but they were submitted *to* her? *She’s* the one behind the Locked Room?”

Kaya’s glare could have ignited wet paper. I almost felt sorry for Mimi, being on the receiving end of it. “So Lena can

tell us who sent her the posts. *Where is she?*”

OceanofPDF.com

“I don’t know what this is, but I have class in ten minutes.” Lena crossed her arms and glared up at us.

“You’re gonna be late,” I told her. My own arms were crossed, mostly to keep my hands under control because they kept itching to snatch her face off.

She was seated in her desk chair, facing outward to the room, and the rest of us were standing in a half-circle in front of her—except for Mimi, who sat gingerly on Lena’s bed. Lena’s roommate had cleared out with a quickness when we all marched in looking like thunder. Kaya would have demanded to know what the fuck we were doing if the situation was reversed, but it seemed like Lena and her roommate didn’t have the same kind of relationship.

Kaya, in fact, had been the one who turned the desk chair around and intimidated Lena into sitting—despite being half a head shorter. I supposed she could rely on her acting experience. She stepped forward now, projecting all kinds of looming menace, and Lena actually craned her shoulders backward for distance.

“Or you could just tell us who sent you the posts about Ava,” Kaya said, “and go on your miserable way.”

“What posts about Ava?”

Kaya scoffed. “The Locked Room. Don’t waste time acting innocent. Mimi already spilled.”

Lena turned to stare at her. “Mimi might be confused.”

“Come on, Lena,” Mimi protested. “It went too far, okay? People are getting hurt.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Didn’t you see all the comments they were making about Darius? Don’t you care?”

“You’re his project partner,” I remembered. “He trusts you with his *grades*. How can you work with him—how can you even look him in the eye—when you’re letting all those people talk shit about him?”

“It’s more than that,” Mimi said.

Lena’s eyes sharpened. “Don’t.”

“What, were you saying crap about him, too?” To think that Darius and I had actually argued about this conniving wench, and I was fucking *right* about her snake ass. “He thinks of you as a friend!”

“That’s the problem,” Mimi started, but Lena interrupted her.

“Mimi, *hush*.”

Kaya nodded, curling her lips. “Ohh, this is all making sense now. She wants your man.”

I didn’t bother listening to Lena’s denials. I’d thought she liked Darius from the moment I met her. I realized now, with crystal clarity, that I’d never felt threatened by that in itself. It had always been her two-faced negativity, the blatant differences in how she acted depending on who was in the conversation. Damn, I hated a liar.

“If you feel that way about him,” I said, “you should have shut down those posts. You were the one who first told Haley about me and the guys, so you knew there was no cheating or any other bullshit. I’m sure you don’t care what people say about me, but they’re calling Darius and the other guys abusers, predators. How could you just sit on that?”

“They talked that way because of how she spun the posts,” Martina said. “Trash creates more trash.”

Lena flicked her gaze between us. “Everyone likes Darius. He shouldn’t worry about a couple of losers flapping their lips.”

“Don’t downplay it,” Haley retorted. “Accusations like that can follow him around for the rest of his life. The internet is forever. And this affects the other guys, too.”

“How would you like it if someone spread the same rumors about you?” Kaya piled on.

For the first time, Lena seemed uneasy. Shifting her weight in the chair, she said, “You don’t have any proof I was involved.”

“We have Mimi’s word against yours.”

Lena looked at Mimi again, but now I thought I could see her resolve cracking. “Meems, you want to take sides with *her*? She almost got you kicked out of school.”

Mimi sat up straight. “That whole thing was my fault. And this isn’t right, Lena. You know it’s not. You should have deleted as soon as things got ugly.”

Lena turned back to me, and I could see her sizing me up. I tried to remember what Arun had said about how to investigate the owner of the Locked Room account. “Look.” I cracked my knuckles. “You realize online harassment is a crime, right? If we tell the police, they’ll trace your phone activity. Dean Hoffman has a personal contact at Instagram, so the school has inside access. When they match up your login times, it’s over for you.”

“I’ll stay glued to your side until your phone’s in police custody,” Kaya vowed. “Until they’ve downloaded your whole miserable bottom-feeding life for the jury.”

There was a long silence, during which I prayed Lena hadn’t taken the same cybersecurity class Darius had. I’d just cobbled together a bunch of Arun’s most impressive-sounding words, but I was pretty sure anyone with real knowledge would knock me down like a house of cards.

Before Lena could call my bluff, I continued. “*Or*...you could work with us on this. We’re not even after you, anyway. We just want to know who sent you the posts. If you tell us, then I promise your name won’t cross our lips.” I looked around for confirmation from the other girls. “Right?”

Haley, Martina, and Mimi nodded, albeit with varying degrees of reluctance. Kaya said, “She needs to give us something actionable. Something we can use.”

“Well?” I said to Lena. “Do you have anything that can help us? Or do we go the long way around and get the cops involved?”

Still, her jaw tightened.

“Lena, seriously,” Mimi said. “Maybe you thought it was just for fun or maybe you were trying to cause trouble for Ava, but this was never the way. Do the right thing.”

Lena’s mouth twisted and she got to her feet. “For the record, by which I mean the record that *does not leave this room*.” She pointed at me. “I don’t care about you or Darius or who you’re fucking. I’m just here for the drama. But I figured since someone else seemed to care plenty, why not let ‘em use the platform?”

“I’m sure that’s what you told yourself,” Kaya snapped. “Self-delusion is a helluva drug.”

I shook my head at her. Bad idea to piss off a sociopath before we got her fully onboard with helping us catch the *other* sociopaths.

Lena opened her bookbag and pulled out her phone. “Lucky for you, they were weird enough that I decided to take screenshots.”

“Send them to me.” I recited my phone number for her.

The images showed several DMs to the Locked Room, with the sender’s account clearly displayed. I saw my name and Darius’s and Colin’s in the first DM, but it looked like a long text—we’d have to read through it later.

Lena had the gall to meet my eyes as we left. “Are you going to tell Darius? About me?”

Kaya muttered under her breath from out in the hallway, but I held up my hand. “I keep my promises. I just know if it was me in your position, I couldn’t live with having a black void where my morals should be. But you do you, I guess.”

I shut the door on her and Mimi.



The only thing skankier than a cheating whore is the so-called friend she cheats with.

Lena had copied that verbatim from the DMs, in the caption for her post on Colin. All her other captions, I guessed, came from her own nasty editorializing. Except she supposedly didn't care about my sex life. Whatever, Lena.

As she'd implied, the DMs were bugfuck. They were basically a treatise in three parts about how I was the epitome of every lying, dirty slut who had ever cockteased or cuckolded an innocent gentleman. A short fourth message, apparently sent after Lena made her final post about me, thanked and congratulated her for "taking out the rubbish."

Kaya said the account that submitted the DMs wasn't Allen's, but that he did follow it. Unfortunately, despite the account having a feed going back years, there were no pictures of him or Ian or any other people. It was mostly reposts of other people's stuff—landscapes and buildings and artwork. The captions seemed like pretentious nonsense, and there were very few comments. Maybe the anonymous obscurity of it was why he'd felt safe enough to DM the Locked Room.

The girls and I spent the rest of the day organizing via group chat, combing through the account for the few original photos in case they could give us clues about the owner.

Can't we just take this to the Dean? Haley asked. **I bet his Instagram insider could close this case with the press of a button.**

Where's the fun in that? Kaya replied.

In the middle of my shift in the Lit department, Martina sent a link to a picture of a stone bridge over a canal. The bridge had walls and a roof like a building, with skinny Gothic windows.

That's Cambridge University, she wrote. **My brother goes to one of the colleges. I have almost this exact photo myself.**

A hot tide of fury rolled through me. **Ian's parents teach at Cambridge.**

idk I looked it up and lots of people take pics of that bridge, Kaya sent, with the tired emoji. **Not a smoking gun, more like a match to cover yr poop smell.**

But I was sure this was it. Somehow, I knew it was Ian—the self-professed son of “overeducated” Cambridge professors who’d donated a snooker table to ensure his placement in the fanciest dorm on campus—Ian with his witty mouth and deceptively ordinary demeanor. I could just see him hunched over his phone, looking for all the world like he was composing a fond yet formal email to his professor parents, but actually rage-spewing his entitled incel filth.

It wasn't a smoking gun, but maybe it would be enough for me to leverage what I really wanted: proof from the mouth of the monster himself.



After I got out of work Martina let me wait in her room, her door cracked open so I could hear sounds from the hall. The minutes ticked slowly along, like waiting for water to boil. From Martina's window, the evening gradually deepened into night. Occasionally someone walked past, their winter outerwear rustling, a snippet of one-sided conversation as they talked on the phone. None of them were the person I was here for.

My stomach felt queasy; I was skipping dinner for this, not wanting to miss my chance. But I'd felt grimy all day. I was making my friends cosplay as stalkers for my own personal drama. And while Ian had been living rent-free in my head since Monday morning, poring over his Instagram feed thinking about vengeance currently had me laser-focused on his entire existence. Seeing his DMs was like seeing straight into the toilet bowl of his mind. It felt like his words had infected me as well, sliming around, touching everything.

I kept reviewing all that he'd told me about himself, methodically reconciling the person I thought I'd met with the author of the diatribes in Lena's DMs. He'd asked me out so calmly, so casually. I'd been intrigued by his dry humor, by what I thought was a sort of attractively aloof aura. But it had all been a façade. Now I couldn't believe I'd felt even mildly tempted to spend a single minute in his presence.

The guys had no idea what I was up to. I knew Colin would frown on me being here, that Arun would urge me to let the Dean handle it, that Darius would dismiss the whole scheme as not worth the energy. But I didn't let myself dwell on what they'd say. Like Arun, this was my decision, and I'd decided I was doing this for myself above all.

Seth had messaged me earlier. **I guess you heard what happened. We fucked up. I'm so sorry.**

The truth was, I was pissed at him for getting himself and Arun into trouble. But I also knew I didn't have a leg to stand on, because here I was acting just as reckless.

I wrote back to him, **We can talk about it later. Just tell me everything Ian said that night. And don't hold back.**

Ian's room was across the hall and one door down from Martina's. It had been closed when I arrived. Periodically I peeked out to see whether I'd missed him getting back, but it remained shut. So I just kept waiting, reading over everything Seth sent, reading over the DMs, flipping back and forth between nervous anticipation, dread, and the desire to string Ian up by the balls.

Then I heard the telltale sign of steps approaching down the hall, a key grinding into a lock, the lock opening. I heaved in a fortifying breath and went out.



He was sitting on his bed, toeing off his shoes, and for some reason that made me glad. I'd caught him in an unexpected

moment, surprise clear on his face when I appeared in his doorway. His eyes shifted right; I could see him thinking.

When he looked back at me, he'd schooled his expression. "Here to follow up on that offer to be friends?"

I stepped inside. Maybe part of me had expected to find a crime scene—evidence of a mustache-twirling villain plotting my demise, or even debris from the blow-up with Arun and Seth. I'd definitely been bracing myself for an IRL version of the DMs. What I hadn't expected was outright denial.

"You know why I'm here."

Ian pulled off his second shoe and sat there in his socks. "No, I can only speculate. Ah. Have you decided you want to be *more* than friends?"

"Absolutely not." I glared at him. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He blinked at me. "I seem to be receiving a lot of aggression lately. Is there something in the air? Got something on my face?"

I knew this feeling. I felt it whenever I talked to my mother these days. The way I'd think we were on parallel tracks only to find that we'd actually diverged, the view from each of our windows no longer the same. Like my mother, it was as if Ian wanted to front like we were still traveling in the same direction, when all the evidence told me otherwise, when the evidence was objectively undeniable. Reality was *this*, yet they tried to convince me it was *that*.

"Stop playing innocent," I said. "I can prove what you did."

"Then by all means." Ian spread his hands and leaned back a bit, projecting a total lack of concern. "Tell me whatever it is you think I did."

I wanted to knock him off his smug, comfortable ass. Anger coiled in my stomach, tensed like a spring. But it was important that I get this part out calmly: "You sent horrible DMs to the Locked Room Instagram so they would post about me and the people I'm dating. I know this because the owner of the account gave me screenshots of your messages."

Ian's eyebrows rose a millimeter before his face smoothed again. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but in order to do any sort of business on Instagram, I'd have to have actually be *on* it to begin with. Isn't that right?"

"You're denying it was you?" His slick confidence oozed over me like the grease leftover in a pan. "You should know it's only a matter of time before those DMs get linked to you. If you were dumb enough to use your own account, then you were dumb enough to leave traces."

I watched Ian's face carefully as I spoke, but he kept it locked down, shaking his head with an air of regret. "Ava, Ava. I really liked you. Hell, I still do. Won't you give me a chance?" He turned his eyes up to me, glinting under the harsh ceiling light.

The fucking balls on this guy. "I thought you wouldn't want a skanky cheating whore."

He actually gasped. "Has someone said that about *you*? People can be so cruel."

"And you enjoyed making us targets for them. Because I dared to reject you, I guess. You didn't get what you wanted so you made a stink like a baby having a tantrum."

"I assure you, I nursed my bruised heart all by myself, quietly and with great maturity."

Ian's toying—his gaslighting—made my skin crawl, like ants skittering beneath my clothes. I didn't know how to outwit him; I wasn't that smart, and also I hardly knew anything about him, what made him tick, what his weaknesses might be.

But what I did know, I thought, was my own reality. And what I could do was stick to it. I could make it so that Ian couldn't deny my truth.

I pulled out my phone and opened the screenshots. "*If you want more mess to expose,*" I read out loud, "*how about Darius Johnson's girl cheating on him?*"

Ian sat up straight, arrested.

I kept going. *“Word is the other dude is one of his best friends. And bet, it won’t be a one time or one person thing either. She puts it out all over campus like the sloppiest slut. No idea why anyone would want sloppy dozenths much less sloppy seconds but suppose there are desperate dicks everywhere.”*

Despite a slight tremor in my voice over the words *best friends*, I managed to hold it together. I paused and looked at Ian again. His mouth hung slightly open, his gaze focused and curious. I’d seen that expression on my own face, in the mirrored backslash in Bio lab, waiting for an experiment to play out.

I turned back to my phone and located the next line in the DM. *“Still I think the males on campus should be alerted about where this gash has been and try to avoid it for cleaner pastures. Who knows what kind of disease it could be carrying after all the carrying on its done.”*

That was only the first screenshot. I let my phone drift down to my side as I took in Ian’s reaction.

He was smiling faintly. “Whoever this is, he certainly has a way with words.”

“Actually, it reads to me like the crazy ranting of a pathetic loser.” His nostrils flared, the smile evaporating. I pressed on. “I assumed your overeducated parents would have made sure you could at least string two coherent words together. Or is this toddler trash the best their money could buy? Wait, I remember, they could only afford a snooker table. I guess that’s all you can expect from a couple of glorified tutors trying to keep up with their social betters.”

“Don’t mouth off about things you don’t know.” His lip curled.

A chink in his armor at last. I hoped my blades would be sharp enough to widen the wound. “What’s there to know? You aren’t that mysterious. Just a lonely little boy worried about the size of his dick.”

Ian lunged to his feet. Even though I was still standing by the open doorway, all the way across the room from him, it took every last bit of willpower not to recoil. “Get out of here,” he snarled.

“Why? I thought you still wanted a chance with me. Sloppy dozenths and all.”

“I wouldn’t touch you with someone else’s dick, much less my own.”

“But that’s your whole problem, isn’t it? That it’s *not* your dick and it’s never gonna be your dick. I wouldn’t be surprised if no one wants to touch you.” I tilted my head thoughtfully. “Should I feel sorry for you? Is it possible to feel sorry for a malignant troll?”

“A slut feeling sorry for me?” He sneered. “That’ll be the day.”

I let the insult roll right off. His words meant nothing; they were only a means to an end—*my* end. I used them to sharpen my edge. “Admit it. I hurt your feelings, baby boy. You can’t get me out of your head. You want me so bad. That’s why you wrote all those DMs about me. You wanted my attention, didn’t you?”

He stormed forward, and this time I held my ground. “If you *were* actually paying attention, you’d know I never gave a fuck about you. I just didn’t like seeing a whore acting like God’s gift to men.”

Sharper. “And you wanted to convince other people to agree with you.”

“Other people *do* agree. Hundreds of them.”

“All of those Instagram cowards would zip it if they had to show their faces. Just like you. You’re trying to hide because you don’t have the balls to stand behind what you wrote. You talk a big game but you’re actually the biggest loser of them all.” I said the next words with deliberate malice: “Aren’t you, baby boy?”

Ian was in my face now, looming over me, his teeth bared. Even though I’d come here fired up for this confrontation, my

heart rattled in my chest. I was glad for the open doorway right behind me.

“I don’t need to hide shit,” he spat. “You want me to admit it? I want *you* to know it was me. You’re disgusting. Riding any dick that would have you, right in people’s faces. I’m glad I could air you out even if it was just for a day. I’d do it all over again, too.”

“Well,” I said steadily, “at least you finally found a speck of a spine. Thanks for showing me what you’re made of.”

I turned away on legs that were *not* shaky, shutting his own door in his face. Then I went into Martina’s room. She and Haley and Kaya stood in a row staring at me, wide-eyed.

“Did you get everything?” I asked.

Martina showed me her phone, still recording. “Every last word.”

SETH

Arun's hearing with the College Judiciary Committee was scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. Ian's was the next day. Ava and I got called to be witnesses at both.

Colin and Darius were only called for Ian's, since they weren't directly involved in Arun's incident. Right up until the day, they let their anger at me simmer. I went to see them individually, on a sort of mini apology tour, and they each read me the riot act.

"You're damn lucky the whole thing didn't blow up in your face," Darius said. "What would you have done if Ian fought back? Probably had a whole Georgia redneck brawl, huh?"

"Honestly, you're probably right," I acknowledged. "I went there looking for blood. I just didn't expect Arun to be the one trying to draw it."

Darius snorted. "You know you owe him, right? He's a grown-ass man and all but you know damn well he was following you. So you better put it right at his hearing."

"That's what I'm aiming to do," I vowed.

I approached my reckoning with Colin with the same creeping dread I'd felt going to see Dean Hoffman about the incident. Fear scabbled around my ribcage: fear of what might be said, fear of the unavoidable repercussions, fear of facing myself and the damage I'd wrought.

Like with the Dean, I started with an apology. Like the Dean, Colin brushed it off and launched into lecturing.

"You put your future at risk," he said implacably. "I know you don't care too much about other people's futures. But I care about yours, and I know you have to stay inside the lines just like I do. You can't afford to slip up like that."

“You’re right,” I said softly. “It was a stupid mistake. Boneheaded.”

Colin had looked stern and icy from the moment I stepped into his room, but now he thawed half a degree. His eyes searched my face. “You want to be a teacher so much. I want that for you, too. So just remember, if you’re feeling like you’re at a crossroads with a potential bad decision, come and talk to me first.”

“Thanks. I mean it.” I glanced at Colin’s guitar, collecting dust in the corner of his room. “For the record, I care about your future, too. And I respect whatever you choose to do about it.”

He blinked. “Do you really?”

“*Of course* I do, man. I’m sorry that’s even a question in your mind.”

“Maybe if you weren’t always making sideways comments about it, I’d believe you.”

I sighed. “I just want you to be happy, Colin. That’s all I ever want for you.”

“Then take better care of yourself. That’ll go a long way for me.”

He didn’t say it unkindly, and when I looked at him, his eyes burned, speaking volumes. I swallowed and nodded. I wanted to say a whole lot more as well, but now wasn’t the time. Colin had further to travel on this road than me, so I needed to wait for him. I just had to stay close enough that whatever future he found himself in, I could be there, too.



The CJC panels for Arun and Ian would be made up of different people and would be focusing on different things, but Dean Hoffman had firmly reminded Ava and me that there should be consistency in our accounts across both. We would only be allowed into the room for as long as it took to give our

testimonies, but since it wasn't certain when exactly they'd need us, we were requested to stay in the admin building and be on-call the whole time.

I arrived at Arun's hearing early, intending to hover outside in the hallway until someone told me I was needed. I rehearsed my statement over and over under my breath, only stopping when I spotted Ian and Maameyaa, his RA, going into the hearing room. A minute later, Maameyaa came out again and walked off, I supposed to go hang out somewhere until she was called. Neither of them had looked at me, which was probably on purpose and also probably a good choice for everyone.

Arun and Ava arrived a few minutes later, arms around each other's waists. She'd told me that they'd finally made things official, but this was my first time seeing them coupled up and lovey-dovey. They looked soft together, Ava stroking her hand along his side, both of their coats draped over his free arm. I was glad they'd learned how to be happy together in the middle of everything else.

"Ian's already here," I told them.

Ava stepped away from Arun, rolling her shoulders. "I guess I'd pleasantly forgotten that he's technically the complainant today." Since the case against Ian was more complex, Dean Hoffman had been appointed as his complainant, on behalf of everyone Ian had targeted.

"Thank you for doing this." Arun extended a hand to shake. "I really appreciate it."

I took his hand. "Bruh, even if I hadn't basically been subpoenaed, this is my fault. I'm so sorry. I never meant for you to get in trouble. Fact is, I asked you to come along because I figured *I* was going to and I wanted you to be the voice of reason."

"It's fine," he said, and he sounded like he meant it. "I take full responsibility for my own part in it. I'm just glad you weren't dragged down, too."

I wanted to keep protesting, apologizing, *something*—but the door to the hearing room opened. A woman poked her head out and spotted Arun. “There you are,” she said. “We should go over a few things before it begins.” She nodded in greeting at Ava. “Ms. Le.”

“Hello, Professor Hilson.” Ava took the coats from Arun and nudged him. “Go on. I’ll see you inside. Good luck.”

Arun pressed a hand to her elbow and disappeared into the room.

Ava and I strolled a ways down the hall. I’d seen her just once since that night. We’d met for coffee on Sunday, the first stop on my apology tour, and she told me how she got the recording of Ian. “Just keeping you in the loop,” she said coolly.

I was so stressed about facing her again that I could hardly take in what she’d done or even think about what it could mean. I just told her I was sorry, over and over.

Her only response was, “I don’t have any business forgiving you or being mad at you. But still, Seth. *Still.*” And her eyes spoke volumes.

Now we stood on opposite sides of the hall, regarding each other warily. I pushed my back flat against the wall, feeling the pressure down my spine, in my thighs. I wanted Ava to speak first. She shifted the coats in her arms, tapping her fingers against her wrist while anticipation scratched at my nerves.

“You know, I’m not happy this happened,” she said frankly. “In fact, I wanted to scream at you about it. Not just because of Arun, but because the situation could have been so easily flipped and you’d be the one in trouble now. But then I went and did the exact same thing, so what does that make me?”

I shrugged, my shoulders rustling against the wall. “If you hadn’t, Ian might be getting away with it. At least you got shit done.”

“Well, Colin and Darius don’t agree, which they let me know without a doubt. They said what if I couldn’t get Ian to confess, or what if he got violent.”

Truth was, that had been the first thought that came to my mind—that Ian might have done something to her in retaliation. But Ava had been very clear that her friends were just a few feet away and ready to spring to her defense, and I didn't want to pile onto the second-guessing and lecturing. As Ava had said, we were in the same boat.

“But it would have been worth it,” Ava went on, not bending an inch. “I was never *not* going to try. I just had to, whatever the fallout.”

“I guess we're the problem kids,” I said, opting for solidarity. “Now it's my turn to get shit done. I've kinda been losing sleep over it,” I confessed.

“I think Arun's pretty resigned about the outcome. Just think of this as moral support.”

“Aren't you a little bit worried for him?”

“If he's okay with whatever happens, then I'm okay.” She glanced down the hall, where the hearing had likely already begun. Then she looked back up at me, her gaze fierce. “It's gonna be *fine*. And tomorrow? It's gonna be fun.”



“The Instagram posts were too specific to have anyone but Ian behind them. I'm sure that this body frowns on circumstantial evidence, but we felt what we had was strong. And in fact, as you'll be hearing from another witness's testimony later, we were right.”

I stood at the podium that had been placed in front of the table where the CJC panel sat. I had my statement open on my phone in front of me, but I'd only consulted it once since I began speaking.

“We had no intention of violence when we went to Ian's room. All we wanted was to talk to him face-to-face. We wanted to understand why he did what he did.”

I don't tend to get nervous with public speaking. I've done enough student teaching and presenting that, if I'm sufficiently prepared, a roomful of faces won't intimidate me. Still, I couldn't look the panelists in the eye. I gave my statement to the wall behind them, a projector screen on which the words *Lockridge College Judiciary Committee Hearing* appeared above the date and a case number.

"It was Ian who escalated the situation. He insulted another person targeted by the posts, who's also one of the residents on Arun's hall. I've already detailed what he said in my written statement to Dean Hoffman, which I understand you all have copies of, so I won't repeat those terrible words here. But in essence, he cast aspersions on her sexuality and morality. She's our friend and it hurt us to hear him talking about her that way, on top of our conviction that he'd already attacked her through the Instagram posts. I don't blame Arun for having a strong reaction to it. In my opinion, Ian knowingly provoked him."

They were both sitting behind me at separate tables with their individual case managers, like a plaintiff and defendant with their lawyers in a courtroom. I could feel them watching me, the weight of their regard like a heavy hand on my shoulders.

"If Arun deserves any punishment," I said, "it should be minimal. He was defending the honor of a fellow student against someone who had already committed a terrible act against her. He was goaded and incited to anger. He's an exemplary student, resident assistant, writing assistant, and journalist. He shouldn't be unduly penalized for a momentary mistake."

I concluded with thanks for letting me participate in the hearing. The panel was supposed to ask me any questions they had, but after a few brief mutters, they dismissed me. I walked out on numb legs, only just catching Arun's nod—and a sneer slipping from Ian's face.

I'd done what I could. Whether it made up for anything, it was now out of my hands.

OceanofPDF.com

ARUN

Dean Hoffman did me the favor of requesting that the CJC panel formalize their decision within twenty-four hours. They managed it in less than that, so he got it to me before Ian's hearing. It came in the form of a letter, which he delivered at yet another meeting in his office.

"I'd just like to emphasize," he said, once I'd had a chance to read and digest the contents, "that you have the right to appeal."

I shook my head. "I won't be appealing. I was expecting this. I think it's more than fair."

"Well, I agree." He folded his hands on his desk blotter. "Although I'm very sorry to be losing you as an RA. You've done excellent work, this year and last year. In fact, both I and the panel heard from multiple Milner residents urging leniency. Not just from those on your hall, to be clear."

It gave me some comfort to know it had been more than Darius and Ava. People throughout the dorm had been asking me all week what they could do to help, telling me that even if they didn't know the details, they felt I must have suffered some sort of injustice. I'd thanked them all, but also told them nothing was likely to sway the panel. It seemed some had tried anyway.

"I don't think it's necessary to move you from your room," Hoffman continued. "But I'll direct the residents on your hall to seek out the other Milner RAs for any support they might need." He cleared his throat. "Of course, I can't restrict anyone from speaking to you informally about any subject they wish. So long as you make clear you're not helping them in an RA capacity, such interactions would be considered private student matters."

"I understand."

"As far as employer references," Hoffman went on, "should prospective employers ask about the circumstances of your dismissal, the school is obligated by law to explain that it was

due to a violation of the Student Code of Conduct. However, as a matter of policy, we're not allowed to say anything positive or negative about your actual performance in the role." He paused. "I'm sorry. I know that must sound unfair. But that would be the case no matter who we were talking about, or how you ceased to be an RA. You'll find this sort of neutrality is common in the job market, which most employers will understand and abide by."

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"That having been said, at this stage in your education and your career, you're more likely to rely on letters of recommendation from faculty anyway. And I know that Professor Hilson and many others will be happy to give you glowing reviews. Particularly since you'll be taking a research assistant position in the Literature department, if I have that right."

"I will," I confirmed.

Professor Hilson had told me, after the hearing, that the CJC panel could rule me unfit to hold any campus position which involved substantial interaction with other students in a counseling, coaching, or mentorship capacity. This, in fact, was what they had done. But a research assistant primarily interacted with faculty. So while I could no longer be a resident assistant or a writing assistant, Professor Hilson was happy to re-hire me as her research assistant. With about equal amounts of guilt and gratitude, I'd accepted on the spot.

I had another concern, though. Fingering the letter in my hands, I said, "Sir, I don't see anything here about volunteering with student organizations. I'm an occasional contributor to the *Rundown*. Would I still be allowed to do that?"

"Correct, the ruling was very narrow. In my view, it does not restrict you from such participation."

Relief rolled through my body. I could still write for the paper. I could still be a journalist one day.

“But,” Hoffman warned, “remember you’re on probation for the rest of the semester. Even though Lockridge College honors your right to free speech and the freedom of the press, these are not unlimited rights even under the Constitution. I don’t think you should test those limits. Is that clear?”

Even that warning couldn’t dent my optimism too much. “Don’t worry, sir. I definitely plan to stay in bounds.” I smiled. “Until I graduate, anyway.”



Ava was in her room with the guys, strategizing about Ian’s hearing. Since I wasn’t one of the direct victims of the Instagram posts, and my matter had been dealt with today, I wouldn’t be a witness like they were.

Their faces fell when I told them the verdict—even Colin’s. Ava came up to me and I pulled her in for a hug, my chin resting in her hair. It was starting to feel natural, being in a relationship with her in front of the others. Not just something I could get used to, but something I could actually be content with.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I really hoped they’d see reason.”

“It was entirely reasonable,” I said. “In fact, I consider myself lucky.”

“At least you get to stay on the hall,” Darius noted.

I sat with them as they went over each other’s witness statements, and I offered a few mock questions to prepare them for the CJC panel. During Ava’s testimony at my hearing, they’d only asked one question—whether she’d told me or Seth to confront Ian.

“No,” she’d replied calmly. Her chin lifted to a proud tilt. “But despite what happened, I’m thankful that they did.”

I couldn’t totally regret losing my RA job. I knew I would miss it, and that I would worry about whether my hall

residents were getting proper help from the other Milner RAs. I'd also have to figure out whether it was even worth listing the position on my resume, given how ignominiously it had ended. But I wasn't sorry for defending Ava, for choosing her over the rules and my reputation. I was only sorry it had taken me so long to be that brave.

Kaya returned just as the preparations seemed to hit a natural stopping point. The guys left, and Ava came to my room. We undressed quietly, both of us full of our own thoughts, but when I gathered her into my arms the world fell away as it always did, and there was only the two of us.

Her eyes searched me. In answer to her unspoken question, I said simply, "No regrets. I'm falling in love with you, Ava. I can't regret anything about that." And I pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

With everything going on, we'd been able to get together only once since the first time. Each encounter felt like a luxury, a holiday, like time we had carved out for ourselves for the sole and precious purpose of pleasure. I looked forward to a future when we had all the time in the world to be together, but for now I enjoyed the sense of us escaping into each other, the magic trick of these moments turning my whole day around. I remembered once thinking of her as a dandelion blowing away from me. Now that we'd decided to hold onto each other, I wanted to cherish her, cupped protectively in my palms.

Ava's hands wandered over my shoulders as I sipped her breasts. Her breath hitched when I traveled down over her belly, her skin gilded in the lamplight. I loved the feel of her thighs spreading and flexing beneath my fingers, the heat of her cunt against my face. My gaze traced the arch of her body, the way her breasts tipped to the ceiling. I listened for her climax, the soft cry from her throat and the desperate clutch of her hands in my hair.

When I slid into her, she welcomed me with a close embrace. Our bodies rocked, gently at first and then with greater urgency. I staved off my own finish, letting her thrust

against me until she came again, her tight ripples eviscerating my control. I buried my shout in our kiss.

“I love you, too,” she sighed into my ears, as we drifted back to earth. It was the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard. “And the only thing I regret is how long it took us to get here.”

“Stay overnight?” I whispered. It was an indulgence I’d never dared ask for before.

She kissed me in agreement. “Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

OceanofPDF.com

In the end, there wasn't much to Ian's hearing. The evidence spoke for itself. In my written statement, I'd declared that the screenshots of the DMs were provided to me anonymously, and that they'd given me enough additional clues to prompt my conversation with him. Martina's recording did the rest.

Ian had submitted a formal protest about the admissibility of the recording. The CJC panel ruled on it at the outset of the hearing. First, they pointed out that the hearing was not a court of law, and that they could admit any evidence they wished. If Ian had a problem being recorded, he could take it to law enforcement. However, the CJC panel further determined that under state law, since we'd left the doors to both Ian and Martina's rooms open and had no expectation of privacy, anyone would have been allowed to record what they overheard.

Kaya sent me a little victory dance emoji when I texted her about the ruling from the hall outside the hearing room. **Mama Lopez, Esq. will be happy to know I actually listened to some of her lectures.**

Tks for all the help planning, galaxy brain, I wrote back.

Since I was on the recordings, the CJC panel played them during my testimony. And, I supposed, since the recordings and my statement were pretty clear, the panel had no questions for me. Ian didn't meet my eyes once, but I did have the small and bittersweet satisfaction of seeing him glower as the audio rolled and his voice rang out in the room.

"You want me to admit it? I want you to know it was me. You're disgusting. Riding any dick that would have you, right in people's faces. I'm glad I could air you out even if it was just for a day. I'd do it all over again, too."

Bittersweet because there were five strangers listening to Ian call me disgusting, a whore, a slut. Bittersweet because I

didn't know if, in their heart of hearts, they agreed with him. Or how many other people might.

Bittersweet because for all my righteous vengeance-seeking, when I heard from Dean Hoffman on Friday that Ian had been suspended for the rest of the semester, I didn't feel joy. I didn't even feel angry. I just felt like I'd reached the end of a long and confusing reading assignment, wondering whether I'd actually learned anything from it.



Saturday happened to be Arun's twenty-first birthday. Never one to let an excuse for a party go to waste, Darius arranged a gathering at a restaurant in DC. "I reserved the rooftop of this place," he explained. "It'll be real luxe. They've got heat lamps, nice seating, all cozy and shit. And y'all know we need to get out of this fishbowl and get some fresh air."

I felt a little intimidated by the size of the party. Arun had invited his own friends and acquaintances, which along with Darius's crowd basically filled out the rooftop. I reminded myself it was a crowd of people they trusted.

I didn't think Colin would come, but he must have been feeling all the campus scrutiny as well. It had only heightened this week once word of the dual hearings got around. He mostly stuck close to me, although he did shake Arun's hand and buy him a drink at the restaurant's bar.

"Who's Darius talking to?" he asked me at one point.

"The other Milner RAs," I said. "Also the reason I'm not drinking tonight."

He nodded in understanding of my underaged status and clinked his glass of sparkling water to mine; even a Saturday night party in the city wouldn't keep him from hitting the books later.

We were sitting on a couch, taking advantage of a nearby heat lamp, plus each other, to keep warm. I knew he'd

probably want to go back to campus soon, so I was maxing out on quality Colin time for as long as I could.

“Where’s the birthday boy run off to now?” he asked.

“He was talking to Kaya by the bar a few minutes ago...” I turned to look for him, and trailed off. “Um.”

“What?” Colin turned as well, and I felt his arm around me go rigid. “That’s Jenn.”

“I know. We’ve met.”

He looked at me sharply. “When?”

I stroked his hand soothingly. “You remember, Arun interviewed her for that article? She came to campus to see him once, and I ran into them. He must’ve invited her tonight.”

“I didn’t think they stayed in touch.”

“I guess they’re friends. I didn’t mention it to you because...” I hesitated. “I guess I didn’t want to give it more weight than it was worth. I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about the possibility of you seeing her.”

“No, you’re right,” he said quickly. “It’s fine. It’s not a big deal.”

Despite his jump to reassure me, it was probably a good thing that he’d spotted her first. It gave him a moment to get over the surprise. Still, his arm stayed tensed, right up until the moment Jenn locked eyes with us and walked over.

Maybe she looked like this every Saturday night, but I had to admit she hadn’t come to play. She was probably the most glamorous and gorgeous person in the whole crowd, every last detail of her makeup on point, her hair rippling in a non-existent breeze, her cocktail glass elevated in a well-manicured grip. She seemed to project a whole aura that gently pushed people out of her way like the Red Sea parting in front of Moses. I belatedly noticed myself breathing through my mouth, because apparently it had fallen open.

I didn’t even blame Colin for getting to his feet to greet her, because I did, too.

“Colin,” she said softly. “It’s nice to see you. Hello, Ava.”

At least his arm was still around me. “Jenn. You’re here for Arun?” And at least his voice sounded normal.

“Yes, but it’s good to catch up with old friends, too.”

Colin craned his head around. “Can you actually claim anyone here?”

Jenn smiled, unruffled. “It’s also good to see you happy, Colin.” She glanced at my hip, where his hand had settled. “From what I understand, both you and Seth are pretty happy. I hope the same goes for Darius.”

“It does,” Colin told her. “In fact, we were on our way over to him. Private chat though. Sorry.”

He started moving, but I stayed still. “Actually, I wanted to talk to Jenn for a bit.”

Colin’s eyebrows shot up. “Okay,” he said after a moment. “I’ll be with Darius if you need anything.”

“I’ll just look for the biggest loudest group,” I confirmed.

Jenn’s eyes on me were amused as Colin faded into the crowd. She settled onto the couch we’d just vacated, her long legs crossed. I sat down as well.

“I’m glad we’re getting a chance to speak,” Jenn said, while I was still formulating what the hell to say to her. “Should we just put all our cards on the table?”

My heartbeat quickened. Yes, this tête-à-tête had been my idea, after all. “You know about me and the guys.”

“And you know about *me* and the guys.” Her smile broadened, flashing her white teeth. “Don’t worry, it’s not like they kissed and told about you. But it wasn’t hard to put the pieces together.”

I tilted my head at her. “How are you even getting these pieces? From Arun?”

“Just here and there. But I wasn’t one hundred percent sure until the Locked Room.”

My jaw dropped for real this time. “What do you know about that?”

“Word gets around. Recent graduates don’t just leave Lockridge behind forever.” Jenn shrugged before taking a sip of her cocktail. “And whatever the guys might have told you about our time together, I do care about them. In my own way.”

She was playing it light, but I supposed she wouldn’t be the first or the last girl to stalk her exes on social media. Hell, even though I’d frozen out Matt and Jodie, I’d still snuck a few glances at what they were up to—before I got together with the guys, anyway.

It struck me that Jenn had a unique insight on the whole Locked Room ordeal, as someone who’d managed to evade campus gossip when she was in my place. “Did you see the kinds of things people were saying about all of us?”

Jenn played with the rim of her glass. “I did.”

I tucked my fingers underneath my leg, then pulled them away when I thought how childish the gesture looked. “The guys tell me they’re okay about it, that it’s all over now. But I know it’s not something they can just move past overnight.” My therapist had told me, in fact, that it could take a very long time to process and heal. “It’s made me wonder if you were right to keep your relationship with them on the DL.”

Jenn looked down for a moment, giving me a view of her spiky mascaraed lashes. “There were multiple reasons for that. The main one being that I don’t go for relationships at all, in your sense of the word. Keeping things private meant I didn’t have to deal with the hassle of anyone expecting more from me than I was willing to give. Simply put, secrecy eliminated headaches.”

Pretty cold, but also pretty much expected based on how the guys had described her. “And you didn’t have to deal with the hassle of anyone outside your... whatever you wanted to call it... passing judgment on you.”

“I didn’t care about public opinion for my own sake. I suppose the way I’d phrase it is, I wasn’t serious enough about any of my partners to subject *them* to public opinion.”

“Well, whether our reasons are similar or different, I wish *I’d* thought more about what the possible consequences would be.”

The ice in Jenn’s glass clinked as she swirled it. “Listen, Ava. There will always be people who don’t understand and want to cut you off at the knees because of it. The question is, why should you let them?”

It was a question my therapist had asked me, although she had her own version. Hearing it from Jenn now, I realized I’d never been able to come up with much of an answer. I knew what they both wanted to hear from me, though, so I tested it out now. “I shouldn’t care what other people think.”

“No one should, but everyone does. That’s only natural. What I’m asking is, are you getting something out of your... relationships...that’s worth dealing with all the other nonsense?”

And after everything, that statement in all of its simplicity was what finally clicked. I let my gaze travel over the people gathered on the patio, catching sight of my guys one by one. Darius seemed to be in the process of organizing a toast, passing drinks enthusiastically to anyone in reach. Arun was shaking his head bashfully, a smile playing about his lips. Meanwhile, Seth had just handed a glass of water to Colin, leaning close to say something directly into his ear. Colin replied in the same way, his free hand grasping Seth’s upper arm to hold him in place.

“Folks!” Darius’s booming voice carried over the noise. “Get up on your feet. Get some liquid in your glasses. Get your souls ready. It’s time to pay tribute to my dude right here.” He lifted Arun’s arm in a victory pose. “Today he’s officially legal!”

A cheer went up around the patio. Jenn sent me a smirk, not unkind, and we both stood. I saw Seth register the fact that we were together. He mouthed, *Are you okay?* and I nodded back.

Maybe he wasn't sure, though, because he nudged Colin and gestured toward us. I knew Colin would tell him I could take care of myself.

"Now," Darius continued, "some of y'all here are lucky enough to call this man a friend. Some of y'all are even luckier to have received his help when you found yourself in some shit and had to take a look at your life and your choices." Laughter rippled through the crowd. "And while that was a precious time for all of us who live on his hall, he's moving on now. It's a loss for us, but the good thing is, I know for a fact that his future is gonna be bright and beautiful."

Darius sent me a completely unsubtle wink and wave, and I felt Jenn's gaze land on me. Some heads swung in our direction, but Darius kept talking without pause.

"So let's wish for Arun that this next year is one of his best, and that it's full of happiness and love and all the success he deserves. Happy Birthday, man." Darius raised his glass.

We all raised our own glasses, and a big "Cheers!" went up, along with whoops and whistles and applause. My heart felt full, watching Darius pull Arun in for a hug, followed by a whole host of people with more hugs, handshakes, and backslaps to dispense.

I met Jenn's eyes. "Is there a reason you're not in line for birthday greetings?" she asked. "Because I'm pretty sure Darius wasn't looking at me when he was talking about Arun's amazing future."

"It's not exactly widespread news yet. Things are kind of wild for all of us right now, Arun especially, so we're being discreet."

"He told me he was let go from his RA position," she said, surprising me. "I'd introduced him to some of my work colleagues for networking purposes, and I guess he wanted to be upfront with me about that. But he didn't say why it happened."

I could see that Jenn wanted to ask, and also that she didn't want to ask. It made her seem human for once. "He didn't like

what was going on with the Locked Room,” I explained briefly. “We figured out who was behind it, and one thing led to another, and he had a lapse of judgment. Probably his punishment could have been worse, but I think the CJC panel held back because I got proof to show them who the real bad guy was.”

Jenn’s mouth pursed in a delighted smile. “You make it sound like a case of campus espionage.”

“You’re not far off. But I had to do what I could.”

“You know,” she said after digesting for a moment, “Arun didn’t strike me as the type to be one of a group rather than a couple. At least, that was the impression I got when he rejected me. That he was...straightlaced.”

Well, that was interesting news. I couldn’t help feeling a *little* pleased about it, deep down, though Jenn didn’t seem at all embarrassed. “I thought the same as you, at first. I guess I got lucky with him.”

“No, I wouldn’t call it luck.” She tapped her glass thoughtfully. “I honestly wondered about it before, but now that I’ve met you and had a chance to talk to you properly, it’s clear to me.”

“What is?”

“That you’re good for each other. You’re good for Darius and Seth and Colin, too. You fit. Don’t worry about anyone who wants to trip you up. You’ve got something quite rare. It’s good that you already know how important it is to protect it.”

For a few seconds I just gaped at her. “That’s...a lot of nice stuff you just said. I feel like I’m supposed to thank you? But that also seems like it’d be kinda weird.”

“Oh, no.” Jenn laughed, again without any sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness. “I’m only speaking the truth.”

I hesitated, then thought, *Fuck it*, and asked the thing I’d been dying to know. “Do you have any regrets? About leaving them, I mean. Because...it almost sounds like you do.”

Her smile spread wider, mysterious as a sphinx. “I wasn’t a good fit for them. I doubt I’m a good fit for anyone. Let’s leave it at that.”

She hadn’t exactly denied having regrets. But I supposed it didn’t matter. And I supposed if there *was* a reason to thank her, it would be for stepping out of the guys’ lives just in time for me to step in.



Seth and Colin decided to go back to campus together, and Jenn left shortly after. The party went on for another couple of hours, with people peeling off gradually until Kaya, Darius, Arun, and I decided to close up shop. A sizable group headed to the Metro with us.

During the walk, Darius’s friend Pukar told me about the day Ian left International House. “So mad about it,” he chortled. “Him and Allen both. You could have made bacon out of their pig hides, they were that salty.”

Kaya and I squeezed each other’s hands. I knew she’d gotten a couple of angry messages from Allen over the past week. She was assembling her own collection of screenshots just in case.

On the train, the group had to spread out to different seats. Kaya and I grabbed two next to each other, and Darius and Arun settled into the two facing us.

Darius tapped my knee. “So what did Jenn want with you? Did she say some shit?”

“Who’s Jenn?” Kaya asked.

“My ex. And Colin and Seth’s as well.”

“Wait, you mean y’all dated a girl together before Ava?”

“I wouldn’t call it dating,” Darius said. “But yeah, you could say she helped us realize we were good with sharing.”

Arun’s eyes had gone wide. “This...kind of explains a lot.”

“She was fine,” I told Darius. “I think she honestly wishes all of us well. I kind of liked her, actually.”

He shook his head. “As long as y’all two aren’t about to be besties. I think that’d be a little weird even for us.” Then he sat up straight. “Speaking of weird moves, Lena quit our group project. When I asked her why, she said to talk to you.”

Wow, who knew she could find a conscience in there after all? “Is it going to hurt your grade?”

Darius shrugged. “We talked to the professor and he let us switch up with another pair that was having issues. I’ll need to put in some overtime get up to speed with my new partner, but it should be okay.” He inclined his head toward me when I didn’t respond right away. “Nothing? You don’t wanna enlighten me?”

“It’s not what you think,” I said. “I really did understand and accept that y’all were just project partners. But until she confirms with me directly that it’s okay to speak on it, I think it’s her personal business why she wanted to quit.”

Darius looked skeptical, but he didn’t press. Kaya, meanwhile, snorted. “You are way too good to all these shady bitches,” she said.

“I mean, none of them are ever gonna do me as dirty as my own mother, so I figure I don’t need to let them suck my energy.”

“And I love that for you,” Kaya said, “but it couldn’t be me.”

“Well, it helps to have a therapist reinforcing my philosophy.”

Kaya stared at me. “Since when have you been seeing a therapist?”

I glanced at Arun and Darius. They both knew about it, but I still hadn’t told Arun about the panic attacks. I hadn’t thought that this would be the time and place—on a noisy Metro train with everyone buzzed from birthday drinks. But I knew now that this was nothing to be ashamed of. And I finally felt ready to let these two people I was so close to see all of me, my

weaknesses included. So with Darius's steady hand on my knee, grounding me and easing my jumpy nerves, I told my truth.

"I started seeing her a few weeks ago. I was having panic attacks, and I was worried something was wrong with me. The therapist helped me see that it's because I have all of this unresolved anger toward my mom."

"Because of her gaslighting?" Arun asked, his eyes steady on me.

I wasn't surprised he knew the term. "Yeah." My throat tightened. "The way she keeps denying reality, how she never gave a shit about my dad dying and that's why I don't talk to her anymore...it's just shitty, you know? I started having the panic attacks when I went back to Juniper last fall. Now if I think there's a possibility I might be seeing her, I have another one."

"It must be incredibly scary to have your own parent manipulating your mind like that," Arun said. "No wonder your body reacts that way."

"Hell, if I was in your place and it was anyone else, I'd be throwing hands," Kaya added. "But because it's your *mom*, that's gotta be conflicting."

I nodded. "That's basically it. The way my therapist explains it, I never felt like I had an outlet or a way to fix the situation. I was suppressing all these feelings, and the panic attacks are like the feelings leaking out. It's explosive because of all the pressure they've been under."

"Do you think you'll ever get closure with her?" Darius asked.

"I'm trying to find peace with the possibility that I won't." I sighed. "But yeah, part of me still feels like...she's my mother, you know? I don't have my dad anymore, which means she's the only parent I have left. It's like you said to me in New York." I looked at Arun. "I can't just forget about her."

"Well, I'm glad you're getting help," he said. "And I'm so glad and grateful you trusted us enough to tell us all this."

Kaya put her arm around my shoulders. “A mental health queen.”

Darius smiled at me. And meanwhile, Arun’s eyes were eloquent, sending me warmth and acceptance so clearly it was like he’d written the emotions into my heart. Why had I ever worried about his reaction?

In our sessions, Mary often reminded me that loss wasn’t necessarily all bad. The people who had left me had also left me with lessons. The pain I’d experienced had also given me wisdom and insight.

“All of it is an opportunity for education,” she said, “just as valid as anything you’ll learn in class.”

She said it was up to me to choose what to do with these teaching moments. And she reminded me that they were never really going to stop—that life would be full of them, perhaps most especially over the next few years.

I had to admit it scared me. I felt like with the guys and with my friends, I’d finally found a bubble of happiness and contentment—almost burst by recent events, sure, but then somehow we’d come through it stronger than ever. Now I had to take it on faith that we’d be able to weather whatever came next, and I didn’t know yet if life had taught me that it was safe to take things on faith.

But what I did know was that if I hadn’t taken a chance on reaching for love and friendship, I wouldn’t have them at all. And I would rather have them than not.

So for this teaching moment, I chose to learn the lesson that it was worth it. It was worth it to reach, to step outside, to stop hiding. It was worth it to take off the armor and share my soft, vulnerable self.

“It’s not yet midnight,” I said. “Any last birthday wishes?”

“I’m good, I think. After everything that’s happened, I’m trying to relax instead of assuming I have any idea what the best path forward is.”

“I hear that.” The train rattled on, carrying us to the future. “Let life surprise us.”

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

Lockridge blooms in the spring. Cherry blossom trees burst to life all over campus, their dark branches adorned with delicate pink and white blossoms. All the bushes and trees that went dormant over the winter are full of color and fragrance. Students sprawl on the lush grass, baring as much skin as they dare for the sun, forgetting all about books and exams and job applications.

This year, spring fully hit in the middle of April. Colin took the MCAT finally. And suddenly it was my twentieth birthday. Like Arun, I decided to keep any wishes lowkey, and just be grateful for the good things.

I sat on the central hill with Martina and Haley, all of us sozzled after a full Saturday of day-drinking in solidarity with Colin and celebration of me. At the bottom of the hill, Kaya and the guys were playing a game of pickup soccer, their distant figures dashing around haphazardly. Kaya's new man, Jerome, had played all-state in high school, and was still mostly sober besides. But if I was interpreting the drunken laughter from the others correctly, they didn't seem to mind getting their asses kicked.

"God, the campus is beautiful right now," Haley said. "I'm almost jealous of you getting to stay here this summer, Ava."

"Oh yeah?" Martina asked. "What are you doing?"

I'd only just gotten the word yesterday. "I'm going to be an assistant for Professor Chudasama in the Lit department. She's writing a book so I'll be helping her with research and editing."

"Where will you stay?"

"She offered me a spare room in her house, but I'm thinking about applying to stay in a dorm. Arun had basically the same job last summer and that was his advice. It doesn't cost too much, and it would give me more privacy and freedom."

“You won’t get lonely?”

I shook my head. “Lots of students stick around campus to work during the summer. And both Arun and Seth will be in DC. They’re even subletting an apartment together. So we’ll see a lot of each other.”

Seth had had his summer teaching position lined up since last semester. Meanwhile, Arun had gotten a summer internship at a DC paper. He told me Jenn had helped him practice for the interview, and even put in a good word for him. She’d also tried to convince him to apply for a job in the White House press office, but he preferred to stay on the reporter side. A tiny, deeply buried part of me really didn’t mind them not being co-workers.

The other benefit of me staying at Lockridge over the summer—actually, one of the main reasons—was that I’d be able to continue therapy with Mary. She thought I was making good progress, and I wanted to keep building on that.

“How about Colin?” Haley asked. “I know Darius got that job in Silicon Valley.”

“Colin’s still thinking about it. He’s applied to some research labs, but he’s most interested in volunteering with patients. I think he wants to figure out if medicine is really something he wants to do.”

“Yeah, best to get that straightened out before dropping all that money and time on med school,” Haley agreed. “Does he want to be in DC at least?”

I shook my head. “He’s got relatives and family friends who are doctors with their own practices, so he’ll probably choose between them. None of them live close by, though.”

“Aw, I’m sorry, dude. That sucks.”

It did, especially after the past few months when Colin had been so scarce. But Seth and I had talked about it, and we’d concluded that Colin was doing the right thing. He needed to know if he’d be happy being a doctor. And if we also wished for his happiness, then...we also had to wish him well.

Martina and Haley took off to meet up with other friends, so I held down the fort, lying back on the old quilt that Seth had brought to serve as a picnic blanket. The spring sunlight warmed me like a second blanket, and the alcohol drifting through my bloodstream lulled me to sleep.

The heat from the sun became the heat of the bonfire at Matt's family's annual Fourth of July potluck. Dad and I were sitting together in front of it. It had been a while since I last dreamed about him, and for the first time since he died, he appeared alone instead of with Mom. He handed me a beer and said, *Don't tell on me, okay?* and gave me one of his rare smiles.

I blinked awake, not sure why the sunny sky seemed so blurry until I wiped the tears from my face. As the fragments of the dream evaporated I pushed myself upright, just in time to see the soccer game breaking up.

"I'm taking this winner back to the room!" Kaya hollered, motioning to Jerome. "Only hanging out, promise! Wanna come with?"

Even from a distance, her cheery mood was infectious. "I'll pack up and meet you later," I called back.

She and Jerome peeled off, holding hands, while Arun, Colin, Darius, and Seth climbed the hill toward me. They shone in the sun, glowing with perspiration, tall and beautiful and full of love for me.

Arun noticed my face first. "Have you been crying, honey? On your birthday?"

They knelt on the blanket around me, their faces concerned. I shook my head. "Just had a sad dream. But then I woke up and here y'all are."

"Can we help?" Colin asked.

"Just being with me is enough." I met eyes with each of them. "You make me happier than I would have thought possible when I first got to Lockridge. I wasn't sure I'd ever be happy again, but now it's as normal as breathing. And I

think that's kind of amazing. And I don't think I say it enough, but...thank you, all of you, for giving me that.”

Seth stroked my ankle. “You know you do the same for us.”

“And since there's only one of you—” Darius kissed my fingers. “—that's the truly amazing thing.”

They stretched out on either side of me. Our bodies took up the whole quilt, so we had to pull in close. The afternoon was hot and all of us were sticky and tipsy, but no one complained. We still had a month left in the semester, a month left for us all to be together, and I vowed to make the most of it.

PREVIEW OF FOREVER AVA

LOCKRIDGE LOVES Book 3

**Ava and her loves will be back with more romance,
friendship, and growing pains!**

(And you also haven't heard the last of Jenn...)

Ava has finally graduated from Lockridge College. Now it's time to figure out her life.

Her four gorgeous guys are already navigating adulthood. Unfortunately, that means long distance relationships with medical student Colin and Silicon Valley success Darius. Ava's not sure how long they can stand being apart.

Meanwhile, handsome academic Arun and bold teacher Seth have invited Ava to live with them for a summer of passion and love. Still, Ava's independent streak makes her wonder: how close is too close?

But when her estranged mother reaches out after years of no contact, stirring up unresolved emotions, Ava spirals into a series of hasty choices with huge consequences. She's never needed her lovers more, but two of them are discovering a special connection of their own...

“Touch me,” I gasped against Colin’s mouth, then turned to lick Darius’s ear. “Please. Touch me everywhere.”

Darius slipped his big hand beneath my skirt to cup my ass. I pursed my mouth around his earlobe, tasting the subtle salt of his skin, rubbing my cheek against the stubble on his jaw. Meanwhile, Colin tugged my shirt out of the waistband of my skirt, giving him a path to skim up my bare torso.

Arousal flooded my body; my world seemed to tilt. I swayed on my heels like a weathervane in the wind, buffeted by their attentions. When Darius turned his head to capture my lips in a deep, searching kiss, I craned forward, trying to devour him. When Colin pressed his hot mouth to the taut skin of my belly, I pushed my hips into it, seeking more.

I needed to be properly between them. I needed them wrapped around me. But at the same time I wanted to feast on them, visually and tangibly.

As Colin had said earlier: it had been way too *fucking* long.

I pulled free of their hands and mouths, just enough to kneel on the floor. Darius cursed under his breath. Colin's eyes widened. "Take off your pants," I said, surprised at my own intensity. "Actually, take off everything. I want you both naked."

FOREVER AVA (LOCKRIDGE LOVES BOOK 3) will be available exclusively on Amazon in February 2023! [Pre-order here now!](#)

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stay up to date with Mei Dansen at
<https://linktr.ee/meidansen>

Mei Dansen is a graduate of a Lockridge-like college. After many sideways and wayward moves in life, she is currently settled in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. with her loving husband and sometimes-loving feline. In her spare time, she daydreams about romance plots and someday attending a nearby BTS concert.

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)