

TASTING MADNESS BOOK TWO



TOUCHING OBLIVION

ALBANY WALKER

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Also by Albany Walker

DEAR READER,

This novel is a work of fiction and contains content intended for a mature audience only. Due to explicit language, mental health issues, medical misdiagnoses, drug and alcohol use/abuse, graphic depictions of sex, and other triggers it may not be suitable for all readers.

Thank you,

Albany

AFTERMATH



Oswald

MEMPHIS' face is the only thing that stops me from shoving him off the tiny porch the second the door closes and she locks it behind us. For the first time in forever, my brother looks lost.

"You heard her admit the pills were hers, right?" he questions as if he doesn't even know what's happening right now.

I shake my head before I begin speaking. "I heard her admit to being on a prescribed medication."

"The label was gone." He rubs the tips of his fingers over his thumb. "I touched the bottle, opened it."

"Why were you in her purse anyway?" I ask, mad that any of this happened. There's no way I think Waylynn is using anything. She doesn't even drink, for Christ's sake.

"It fell over when she set it on the counter, and shit came out," he defends as we walk down the sidewalk, but I wouldn't put it past him to go through her stuff. I glance back at her house before it's completely out of view, but the place is still closed up tight.

"So? You could have ignored it."

"I fucking panicked," he yells, and a woman getting out of her car across the street jerks her head to look in our direction.

“Please tell me you at least asked her nicely and didn’t start accusing her of being a junkie right away.” I keep my voice down so we don’t draw any more unneeded attention, but my tone is harsh. I still can’t believe he talked to her like that.

“I tried,” he whispers.

“Fuck, Memphis.”

“I know.”

We walk in silence for the next three blocks. I’m too mad to talk to him without yelling, and I know it won’t solve shit if I do. At the corner of State Street, I tell him, “I’ll talk to you later,” then head toward my dorm. It feels like a small betrayal, but not an undeserved one. I keep seeing Waylynn’s face right before we left. It was like all the anger had bled out of her features and the only thing that was left behind was an empty shell of the girl I know.

He doesn’t even try to stop me from walking away, not that I expected him to, but it still feels strange as hell to leave him like this.

The atmosphere in the south quad is completely off. There’s loud music playing as soon as I step out of the elevator on the third floor, and most of the doors are wide open, with people walking in and out of rooms like it’s some kind of wack house party. Once the first person notices me, it starts a rolling onslaught of people trying to talk with me and congratulate me about the game. I even end up posing for a few pictures with a bunch of people I’ve never met.

When I finally make it to my room, the door is open and KJ is sitting on my bed with a girl damn near in his lap. His eyes come up to meet mine, and his easy smile slips into a scowl. He’s not happy I’m here. Well, too bad. He can fuck right off.

“Oh my gosh, you’re Oz Gravlin,” the girl says, as if I don’t know my own fucking name.

“Last I checked. You’re on my bed.” I gesture, and she giggles like I’m flirting with her.

KJ rises to his feet. He's got a few inches on me and several pounds, but I'm still not intimidated by his ass.

"Alexis, do you see who it is?" The girl's eyes are super wide as she looks at KJ's side of the room. That's when I notice a brunette leaning against the wall with a straw poised at her red lips. Her eyes roam over me in a clear invitation, and I'm not going to lie, it feels good. For just a second, it makes me forget that Memphis ruined my night, but my thoughts quickly revert to Waylynn and how my brother did a lot more than ruin her night.

"Fancy meeting you here," she says, her voice all smoky and teasing.

"It is my room," I respond, and my tone might be a little teasing too, but not intentionally.

"Kismet then," she replies, but the curl of her lip makes me think fate didn't have anything to do with her being here. There's this ball in the top of my stomach, like the feeling you get right before climbing on a roller coaster—part dread, part excitement.

Glancing into her dark eyes, I see possibilities, an easy route, one that is comfortable and predictable. All it would take is a few words, and I could spend the night with her. There wouldn't be any movies and takeout or any cuddling after. I wouldn't even need to feel guilty about it. Boundaries haven't been set with Waylynn, lines haven't been drawn, and we're free to do whatever we want.

So why do I feel like shit for even entertaining the idea?

I look away from the girl I don't want but allowed myself to think about using just because I'm feeling sorry for myself, like I deserve something just because I played well today and I wasn't the one who fucked up. Mostly, though, it's because I know it would be easy to be with her and easy to walk away after. That ball of anticipation in my stomach pops, leaving behind a vile feeling of disgust with myself.

"You guys going out?" My inviting tone is gone, replaced with irritation, but I'm mad at myself. I pull my phone out of

my pocket, feeling the need to apologize to Waylynn for something that didn't happen but knowing I won't. Telling her how I was feeling just now would be a death sentence to anything we might have.

"We were talking about going to the Alley, you interested?" the brunette asks.

"Nope," I answer with a ring of finality, and I'm not just talking about the bar.

"Do you have other plans? I'm open to other possibilities." She doesn't give up easily or take the hint.

"Just me and my bed...alone," I reply, adding the last part quickly so she doesn't think it's a proposition for her.

"You're staying here tonight?" KJ's brows are furrowed with confusion.

"Yeah." I don't feel the need to elaborate.

KJ lets out a heavy breath, making his nostrils flare. I'm not happy about it either, dickhead. "I thought you were staying with your brother," KJ says like he's reminding me and I might change my mind about being here.

"We could swap roomies for the night. Nina can stay here, and Oz can stay in our room," the girl offers, picking up on the notion that KJ wants to be alone with the chick he was cuddled up with.

"I've been staying with my girl, not at my brother's." I give them the truth, hoping it will deter any more offers.

"Uh-oh, looks like somebody got in trouble," the girl singsongs. "A lot of girls can't handle their man getting attention."

"That has nothing to do with it," I retort defensively.

"But you admit you did get in trouble. What happened?" She comes a little closer to my bed, pretending to be a soft ear, someone I can tell my problems to.

"No, I didn't admit shit, you assumed." I feel strangely protective about Waylynn being upset. I know she had a

reason to be mad, but I'm not explaining that to this girl or anyone else here.

She places her drink on the table next to my bed and lifts her hands apologetically. "I'm just talking to you. You seem upset."

"Yeah, whatever. Are you guys going out or what?" I drop down on my bed, but I'm rethinking staying here after all. Maybe I should suck it up and go stay with Memphis. His brooding ass will be easier to deal with than this. I look down to check the time on my phone, and the next thing I know, I feel something land on my lap.

The moment I register what's happening, I put my hands on her hips to push her off while she tries to apologize and pretend it was an accident that she fell on top of me. "Yeah fucking right." I roll my eyes. Talk about stupid. Does she think because her ass touched my dick, I'm going to get all bricked up and want her now?

"I tripped on the rug," she continues.

"And fell on my lap? Doubtful. I don't have the patience for this shit." I leave my bag on my bed and walk to the door.

"I told you he was a dick," KJ says before I'm even out of the room.

"Fuck off," I tell him without even bothering to look back over my shoulder.

MEMPHIS

THE ANGER I felt the moment I saw the pill bottle with no label has continued to fade since walking away from Waylynn's house, leaving me feeling mostly embarrassed, with breakthrough moments of anger at her for not just telling me what they were and explaining herself when I asked. I know it's completely misplaced, but it's easier than thinking about how badly I fucked up.

When I reach my apartment, I don't even remember how I got there, my feet carrying me from habit more than anything else. Without even turning on a light, I head to the fridge because I don't know what else to do with myself. I end up closing it after staring at the contents for several long seconds, realizing I'm not hungry anymore, not that there's much in there anyway.

I look around, feeling a bunch of crap I'm not used to dealing with, like loneliness, but the worst is the helplessness, because there's a part of me that's convinced I was right about the pills and maybe Waylynn does have a problem, and I don't know if there's anything I can do about it.

The temptation to call her is so overwhelming, I leave my phone on the counter in an attempt to distance myself from the opportunity and walk over to sit on the couch.

I have no idea how long I've been sitting in the dark when there's a knock on my door. My heart starts beating fast, thinking it could be her, but the thought dies just as quickly as it was formed. She doesn't even know where I live.

I debate if I should just ignore the knock, but realistically, there's only one person it could be and he has a key, so I don't know why he's knocking at all.

"It's open," I croak out. I haven't spoken in a while, and it's evident in my voice.

The knob turns, and Oswald slowly pops his head in the door, like he doesn't know what he's going to find. Our eyes meet, and there's an exchange between us. He's still pissed, but not mad enough that he's willing to be in the dorms. I guess I'll take what I can get.

He shuts the door behind him and drops onto the other end of our shitty futon. The lights are still off, so I can't see his face without the glow from the hall, not that I really want to. The silence stretches between us, uncomfortable and awkward, until Oz eventually breaks and admits, "They were partying in the dorms. I didn't have anywhere else to go."

That feels like an intentional dig at me, but I'm probably just feeling guilty we're not at Waylynn's house, because his tone isn't confrontational.

"Celebrating the win?" I surmise.

"I guess. KJ had some girls in the room, and I didn't want to deal with it."

I hear what he's saying, but my thoughts are already drifting to something else—the tension between us and the reason why my brother is explaining why he's here. "Have you tried to call her?"

"No," he says quickly, like he thinks I'm stupid for even asking. "Should I?"

I'm surprised he's asking for advice from me. "Maybe. I mean, the sooner we figure this out, the better, right?"

"Shouldn't you call to apologize then?"

"I don't think she will answer if I call," I admit, wondering if maybe I should text her and tell her I'm sorry for how I spoke to her.

"I don't think she'll answer me either," he says, but his phone is already lit up in his hand, and he's hitting the button to call her. It's so quiet, I can hear the phone ringing, and my hope dwindles with every tone that passes without her picking up. There's not a prompt for a voice mail, but it doesn't seem like she blocked him, which is a good thing...I hope.

"No answer," he says, placing his phone on his leg.

"Probably too soon." I rub my hands over my thighs, feeling an even bigger sense of urgency to do something now that I know she didn't answer, but I have no idea what. I'm afraid if I go back over there, it could devolve even more.

"Maybe you should text her first and tell her you're sorry for accusing her of using and for all the garbage you said," Oswald proposes.

"Jesus, I called her a junkie." I close my eyes and rub my forehead.

“And told her that her parents used money to make the problem go away,” he reminds me, and the bottom of my stomach falls down to my balls. I jump up to grab my phone off the counter to text her.

My thumbs fly over the keys.

Me: I’m so sorry, Waylynn.

I hit send, then start typing again immediately.

Me: I don’t want to say anything that will sound like an excuse for my behavior because there isn’t one, but please know I’m so sorry. I wish I could take it all back.

“I sent it,” I tell Oz, not feeling a lick better about anything. This isn’t like the other day, when I knew I made a mistake. I was in the wrong then too, but this is so much worse. I can’t just pressure her into forgiving me this time.

“Does it show she read it?” he questions.

I glance down just to be certain, but it only shows delivered, not read. “Not yet.”

FLIGHT WHEN THE FIGHT IS GONE



W aylynn

MY CHEST ACHES, but I ignore it as I lock up the house and walk up to my room. For the first time in a while, it's a relief to be alone. I go through all my normal motions, taking off my shorts and pulling on a pair of lounge pants, then goes the jersey. I brush my hand over the number before I shove it as far back in my closet as I can get it to hopefully forget about the thing.

It's still pretty early for a Saturday, but it doesn't stop me from climbing under the covers after I finish changing. I flip on the television to distract myself with a movie.

About halfway through the film, I get bored and start scrolling through social media. I should have known better. I'm not prepared for what I see.

I forgot I followed Oswald the other day. It feels wrong to see his face pop up in my feed so soon after he left my house, but there he is, standing next to a guy in a hallway that is packed with people. Because I'm dumb, I click on the hashtag with his name, and it takes me to a page filled with recent photos of him. The worst of which is him sitting on a bed with his face half concealed behind a girl's neck, like he could be kissing her shoulder while she's sitting on his lap wearing a coy smile.

My stomach pangs with a hollow ache when I see his fingers curled around her waist and hips. I can't help but

notice how pretty she is before I examine the rest of the room, but it doesn't tell me anything about where he is. I've never seen where either of them live, and other than yesterday, when Memphis mentioned his place, which he knew was a bad idea, they have never even brought it up.

I commit the picture to memory, then scan the other recent photos. He's definitely at a party. I'm pretty sure it's at one of the dorms, but my suspicions are confirmed when I see into one of the rooms from the hall, and I recognize the same wooden bed Oswald was sitting on but with a pink bedspread.

I scroll through all the photos one more time to see if I can spot Memphis, but I don't see him, so I type a hashtag and his name into the search bar. There are some photos, but I don't think any are from tonight, and most seem to have been taken without his knowledge.

Seeing his face, even looking away from the camera, reminds me of the things he said tonight and the way he acted. I close the app entirely and toss my phone on the bed seconds before it lights up with a text notification.

The message is short, and I don't even have to click on the window to see it all. It's an apology, and another text pops up right behind it. Instead of reading more than the first line, I power off my phone and pretend the movie I've already seen is interesting.



SUNDAY MORNING, I'm up early, even though I didn't sleep for crap. I know I'm going to get my feelings hurt today, but I don't know if it will be self-induced or not. I cram a few things into one of my larger bags and lock up the house with a simple plan.

I can't stay here today. I'll be a wreck waiting for them to show up and hating myself every minute for expecting them to when they don't. Being lonely isn't all that bad, I can definitely learn to live with it, but what I can't live with are two guys acting like I'm important to them when clearly, I'm

not. I wonder if they do this crap to all the girls they hang out with. I chastise myself for even thinking about them again.

Getting a hotel is easy. They ignore the over twenty-one policy when I hand over my black card without a limit. I decline the offer of help up to my room and head to the elevator by myself. The room is on the smaller side for a suite, but it's just me, so I don't mind. Once I take a good look around, I kick my shoes off and turn my phone back on.

The two messages from Memphis are still showing as new on my screen, and there aren't any others. I want to ignore them so badly, but I'm too curious, so I give in and read them. It doesn't make me feel better. In fact, it makes me feel worse because now he will know I read them. A range of ideas go through my mind—getting a new number, dropping the class, even heading back home to California gets a tiny bit of attention, but my pride won't allow me to run home. I'm not letting them push me that far.

To punish myself a little more, I open up my social media, not even pretending I'm not here to check out their pages. I try Memphis first, but he never accepted my request to follow him from a few days ago, so there's nothing to see, not even any new tags from photos. I should have known there was an issue days ago when he didn't accept me, but I never really thought about it. Neither of them seemed to be on the phone all that much, and we never talked about it.

I prepare myself before opening Oswald's page, but he hasn't posted anything. His tag is a different story though. There are more pictures from last night, and I scroll through slowly until I see the same girl who was on his lap making a kissy face to the screen in nothing but one of Oswald's shirts. I know it's his because I've seen him wear it. The same bed is in the background, and the date stamp is from this morning. The caption reads "xoxoxo" with a flame emoji.

I wonder if he took the picture. Her hair is a little messy, but I can't deny she still looks cute, even with her makeup all gone.

I let out a heavy breath and give a small thank you to whomever it is that allowed me to see their true colors now instead of later when I was in even deeper with them. I was nuts to ever entertain the idea that there could have been something between us. I mean, they admitted they wanted to share me, so I guess I was too excited at the idea to examine it much further and consider how it would extend to me sharing them.

When I open my laptop, I click on my email drafts, then make a few changes to the message I already prepared for Professor Hilbrand, ensuring her email is the only one listed, and then send it off before I can talk myself out of dropping the class.

Now I just need to avoid the south quad, and I should be fine. We don't have any other classes together, and it's a big school. *Yeah right.*

Oswald

I CHECK the time on my phone as soon as I open my eyes. The screen is blurry as hell, but there's a shit ton of notifications. I click on the screen and see a bunch of pictures of me from last night, but the one that makes me sit straight up is the one of me with a girl in my lap. Without any context, it looks like I'm holding her, maybe even kissing the back of her neck.

"What a fucking bitch," I snarl. "That was a total setup." I drop my phone on the bed and get up to piss.

"What's going on?" Memphis lifts his head up off the pillow and sends a narrow-eyed glare my way.

I leave the door open and answer him while I'm pissing. "I told you about the girls KJ had in the room. One of them pretended to fall on me then posted a picture that made it look like she was sitting on my lap." I flush and wash my hands before brushing my teeth. "After I told her I had a girlfriend," I finish once I'm back in the room.

“There’s more than one picture.” Memphis looks up at me from behind my phone.

“Everyone was taking pictures,” I tell him and pull my phone out of his hand, but this isn’t just any picture. It’s of the same girl, only in this one, she’s wearing my shirt and nothing else but duck lips as she does that kissy face bullshit into the camera. The inference is clear, and it doesn’t help that this picture was posted this morning in my room. It looks like she spent the night with me.

“What a bunch of bullshit.”

“Oswald,” Memphis says slowly in a warning tone.

“What?” I snap.

“I have a request from Waylynn from a few days ago. Do you?”

“Oh shit.” I hit the notifications button, but it’s filled with too many for me to sort through quickly. “I’m not set to private. She could have followed me at any time. I don’t even check my shit.”

“If she asked me, she followed you,” he tells me somberly. “Maybe she didn’t see it, you’re not tagged.”

“It would be better if she fucking tagged me, because then I could delete that. She used a fucking hashtag.”

“It says Waylynn was active ten minutes ago,” Memphis divulges.

“Did she respond to your text from last night?”

“No, but she did read it.”

“What should I do? Should I say something or play dumb? I mean, none of it is true, so it’s not like I’m lying.” I do feel a slight twinge of guilt for sizing the girl up last night though.

“I don’t know.” Memphis slides his legs off the bed and lowers his head into his hands. “It’s bad timing.”

“You fucking think? Maybe it would be easier to explain if she didn’t just see you out on a *date* with some chick you used to fuck, or maybe if you didn’t call her a junkie last night, I

wouldn't have to explain at all because I would have been with her."

"You think I don't know that I fucked up?" He glares over his shoulder. "That I don't regret what I said or how I acted? I want to help her."

"Help her?" I'm confused. "She told you it was prescribed medication. You don't need to help her, you need to believe her!"

Memphis' head tilts to the side, and he looks at me like I'm being naïve. "Why would she have scraped the label off if it were hers?"

"Because she wanted to? Because she got bored? I don't fucking know, but can you sit there and *honestly* tell me you think she is using drugs?"

"Sometimes she's evasive. Look how she acted when we first tried to talk to her."

"Evasive? She just met us and basically let us take over her life. Can you blame her for trying to avoid us? The first words you said to her weren't actually nice or inviting. I told you she said she was scared she was in trouble because she bumped into you."

"Why is she always worried about being in trouble?" Memphis asks as if that's some sort of admission of guilt.

"I don't know, I didn't get the chance to ask her, but you've seen her at school. She's always quiet and reserved. Maybe her parents are strict assholes."

"Yet they just gave her a house and left her on the other side of the country?" he asks incredulously.

"That's less plausible to you than the idea that they moved her across the country so they didn't have to deal with her or her *drug problem*? Are we even talking about the same girl? I'm talking about Waylynn, the girl who sat at a bar drinking a virgin Mai Tai."

"Just because she didn't ask me to get her a drink doesn't mean anything," Memphis argues, but I can tell by the way he

won't meet my eyes that he's doubting his own words.

"You're a fucking idiot," I tell him when I can't think of anything else to say. He doesn't dispute my statement.

"What are you going to do?" he questions after a few seconds.

"I'm going to text her, call her, and try to explain that last night was a clusterfuck of epic proportions. I'm going to hope she forgives me for being related to you, and then I'm going to tell her the truth about the pictures. The last fucking thing I need is for that shit to come up after all this, that is *if* I can get her to even talk to me."

"You don't think she's using?" Memphis asks me, and for the first time, I feel like he's looking to me for answers, for reassurance.

"No, I don't think she's using anything, Memphis. I think you let our fucked-up past mess with your head, which I get. We're both guilty of doing shit like that, but this time, you might have gone too fucking far."

"I know," he murmurs.

SEARCHING



*M*emphis

I'M NOT surprised when calls and texts from both of us go ignored all day. I'm not even shocked when I go to her house Sunday afternoon and find the place empty and her car gone. Waylynn is a runner.

I have to force myself to leave her driveway and not sit around waiting for her to come home, but it's with the promise to come back later tonight, when I think I might have a better chance to catch her.

Oswald left after lunch, and other than a few texts to check in to see if I've heard anything, we haven't talked. I know if I can get Waylynn to forgive me, he'll come around, but I don't know how to bridge the gap until I do.

Around eight, I lock my apartment and walk to her place. It only takes me about ten minutes, and some of that time was wasted at the crosswalk waiting for the light. I know before I reach her kitchen door she's not home—there isn't a single light on in the house. I peek into her garage again just to be sure, but her car is still gone.

Where the hell could she be? As far as I know, she doesn't really know anyone else other than us. I try her phone again, but it just rings. I drop my ass on the porch to wait for her to get home, thinking maybe she just went to grab dinner.

At midnight, I finally give up and walk back to my apartment, struggling with the fact that I know I'm the reason she's not home and wondering where the hell she might be.



I GET to Angell Hall even earlier than I usually do because I can't sit at home another minute. I broke down last night and texted her, begging her to call me and tell me she was okay. I even promised I would leave her alone if she answered, but there's still no response. Nothing is even showing as read past my two messages yesterday morning.

"You're in early," Hilbrand observes from behind her desk when I close the door to her office. If she notices I look and feel like shit, she doesn't comment on it.

"I had some extra time this morning." It is kind of the truth. I didn't have to drop Oz off at the field, since he left early this morning without speaking to me, plus I've been up for hours. I didn't sleep much at all actually.

As I'm rounding the table to take my seat, my phone chimes with a text. Hilbrand looks up at me with interest. She's never heard my phone make a peep because I always have it on vibrate, but I wanted to make sure there was no way I would miss Waylynn's response if it ever came.

The text isn't from her, it's from Oswald. He probably just got done with morning lifting.

Oz: Did you talk to her?

Me: No. She didn't go home last night.

I know the information is going to worry him, but he should know the truth. The shrill ring of my phone cuts through the room next. He doesn't even wait for me to say hello before demanding, "What do you mean she didn't come home? How do you know?"

"How do you think?" I answer cryptically so Hilbrand won't know what we're talking about.

“You went there. What time?”

“Eight to twelve.”

“You stayed there until midnight and she didn’t come home?” He sounds suspicious.

“Yeah. No car, nothing.”

“Did you check yet today?” Oswald questions.

“No, I’m in the office.”

“Is that why you sound like a fucking vague robot with those short-ass answers?”

“Yes,” I admit, realizing his assessment is accurate—my voice is dead and flat.

“Whatever. I’m going to head over there now. I’ll catch her before class,” he tells me.

“Good, tell her...” My throat tightens. “Tell her I’m sorry.” I don’t care if Hilbrand overhears me. This is more important.

“I will, see you in a bit.”

“Bye,” I mumble out of habit because I’m pretty sure he already hung up on me. I can feel Hilbrand looking at the side of my face, but I don’t acknowledge her, nor do I owe her an explanation.

I check my phone over the next hour more than ever, but I don’t get any messages or calls from Oswald. I’m hoping that’s a good sign, until I see him slink through the door alone one minute before class starts.

He doesn’t even have to look at me for me to know, but when our eyes connect, he shakes his head in denial before finding an open seat.

I think about walking out of the room right then, but I know there’s nothing I can do to find her right now if she doesn’t want to be found. It takes me a few seconds to regain my composure so I’m not completely disengaged from the class, but focusing on something else actually allows my mind to rest for ninety minutes.

As soon as the class is over, I make my way over to Oz. “She still wasn’t there?”

“No, do you want to check with me again?” He gathers his bag from the floor.

“Yeah, meet me at the truck.” I hustle my ass back to Hilbrand’s office to get my bag. The professor lowers her glasses and looks at me.

“Everything all right, Gravlin?”

“Yeah, just headed to lunch,” I lie smoothly.

“Okay,” she says slowly, making it clear she doesn’t believe me, but I don’t really care at this point. “I got my first class drop over the weekend. We can sort it when you get back.”

“Okay.” I start to walk away until what she said sinks in. “Who dropped?” My hand is on the knob, preparing to leave, but my gut tells me I already know the answer.

“I forwarded the email to you earlier.” She’s already focused on something else.

“See you this afternoon.” I close the door behind me, then pull out my phone while walking to the truck.

Waylynn’s name stops me dead in my tracks. “Fuck,” I bark out, then rush outside before bothering to read the full email.

Oswald is already in the cab when I get there. He rolls his wrist when he sees me, telling me to hurry up. I get in and start the truck so we can roll the windows down and turn on the air, but I don’t move out of the parking space.

“She dropped the class,” I inform him.

“She what?” he asks, even though he knows what I said.

I don’t repeat myself. I just allow the info to sink in.

“Just the class though, right?” he asks after a few seconds.

“I haven’t read the email yet,” I admit because the same thing crossed my mind.

“Well, read the goddamn email, Memphis!” he snaps.

DEAR PROFESSOR HILBRAND,

This message is to inform you that I will be dropping your course for this semester. Please know that my decision to drop your class is not in any way due to you or your style of teaching. If given the opportunity, I will take your future classes.

I have personal reasons for dropping this class, and I cannot fully commit to attend and focus on this course. I would rather not waste both of our time and effort if I cannot properly devote myself to the learning process.

I am grateful for the effort you put into the learning experience. I look forward to being part of your classes in the future, when I can give my full attention to what you have to share.

Sincerely,

Waylynn Graff

I READ the entire thing out loud, then drop my hand with my phone onto my leg. I can't believe she actually dropped the class. At least she mentioned taking a course from Hilbrand in the future. I'll take that to mean Waylynn hasn't dropped out altogether. I know she is upset, but dropping is a big deal. I also know how much it cost, not to mention it's a required course, so she'll have to retake it anyway.

“Fuck,” I whisper.

“Can you delete that email?” Oswald asks.

“No. She didn't send it to me. Hilbrand forwarded it to me. She expects me to take her off the roster when I get back this afternoon.”

“Don't take her off, not yet,” he says, looking out the front window. “Let's check her house. If she's not there, I know what her next class is.”

Waylynn

INSTEAD OF PARKING in one of the visitor lots, I drive around until I find an empty meter. I feel like I've pushed my luck far enough without getting towed, so I'm going to break down and ask my mom if she knows how I can get a parking pass tonight.

It's easier to traverse the campus now that I'm more familiar with the layout, but I have to force myself to keep my eyes trained on the sidewalk in front of me so I don't look around nervously like I really want to.

Once I'm through the door to my math class, I breathe out a sigh of relief. I'm early enough that I'm able to take a seat in the back row. My hands are a little shaky as I pull my laptop out of my bag, but I don't think the girl next to me notices.

A few of the people I met in the study group come in together, and for one long second, I wish I wouldn't have blown them off for the Gravlin brothers. Then I see the girl who said, "Hit it and quit it," and I get embarrassed.

Oswald pretty much put it right out there that he wasn't looking for more than a hookup, and I chose to ignore it. I thought I felt something for them that was obviously just a figment of my imagination. I still can't help but wonder if I was some sort of game to them and why I fell for it so easily, when I've never let anyone else get close to me. I just feel dumb now.

"Waylynn." I jump when I hear him say my name. I know it's not my imagination, because I can feel his hands curled over the back of my chair and his breath stirring my hair.

I don't turn around. If I didn't think he would make a scene, I wouldn't even answer him at all. "What?" I keep my voice flat, indifferent.

Oswald sighs as if he thought I might have ignored him too. "Can I please talk to you?"

“I have class,” I inform him needlessly.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” he says after a long pause.

That makes my heart beat faster, damn stupid organ. “We don’t really have anything to talk about.” I’m trying to keep my voice down, but I feel like everyone is looking at us. It’s irrational to think everyone knows he spent the night with another girl and he’s here talking to me, but my brain is telling me that’s why I feel like everyone is staring at us.

“We have a lot to talk about. Please stop ignoring me,” he pleads, and I almost look over my shoulder. I hate the sadness in his tone, and my chest actually aches.

“I think enough has been said.”

“He didn’t mean it, Waylynn.” Oswald lowers his voice even more. “He... Our... I promise we’ll give you an explanation, but he’s so sorry. I’ve never seen him so sorry,” he implores again, and my stomach cramps up.

“I appreciate the sentiment and the apology, but I don’t need an explanation. See you around.” My throat tightens up the second I’m done speaking. I’m dangerously close to crying in class, but I’ve done that before, and the aftermath is too much to bear, so I grit my teeth and pretend I’m not sobbing on the inside.

“Don’t say that, Wavy,” Oswald beseeches, and I jerk away when he tries to lay his hand on my shoulder.

“Dude, take a hint,” the girl next to me scoffs.

I hate that she said anything to him at all, that she’s even witnessing this, but I also hope it makes him leave. “I won’t take a fucking hint. Mind your own business.” Oswald sounds completely different when he talks to her. I can’t let this escalate.

“If you leave, I will text you after class,” I bargain, but I’m lying.

“Don’t let him blackmail you into talking to him.” She sounds outraged for me.

“If you don’t answer, I’ll show up at the house. I’m not letting this go, Waylynn.”

“Jesus, restraining order anyone?” the girl jeers.

“Okay, just go. Everyone is looking,” I whisper and lower myself in the seat. Oswald lets out a huff and presses his lips to the side of my head roughly. I close my eyes because it surprises me, not because the ache in my chest subsides for just a second...at least that’s what I’m telling myself.

THE HEART WON'T LIE



Oswald

I LEAVE HER CLASS, but only because I was upsetting her. I don't give a fuck what any of those other people think. Memphis shoves himself off the wall as I exit. "What did she say?"

"I had to fucking bribe her to even talk to me," I admit.

"With what?"

"I told her I would leave if she talked to me after."

"Your bribe was leaving?" he questions flatly.

"The other chick called it blackmail. It was coercion if anything." I don't even regret it. I would do that and more if it meant she would listen to me.

"The other chick?" he asks.

"Some girl sitting next to her. I saw that fucker she went to lunch with too. He was eyeballing me."

"So what are we doing?" Memphis dismisses the other guy, but he didn't see the way he was looking at Waylynn when I found her in the dining hall with him.

"I told her I would wait for her, so I'm going to stick around until she gets out."

"Did you tell her I was sorry?"

"Yeah." I wince.

“What did she say?”

“That she appreciated the sentiment. Then she tried to tell me she would see me around.”

“She’s still mad,” Memphis murmurs.

“I don’t think she’s mad at all. I think she’s hurt. She wouldn’t even look at me.”

“Shit. I think that’s worse,” he admits.

I think he’s right.



AS SOON AS the doors open, releasing the class, I start searching for Waylynn, even though I know she won’t be the first one out. She always lingers and allows everyone to clear out before she does.

Memphis is standing behind the door so she won’t see him when she walks out. It feels a little shady, but I know she needs to talk to him too. Predictably, she’s with the last of the stragglers, but sadly, she’s not alone. The girl who was sitting next to her is walking with her and giving me a look that promises cockblocking. “Damn it,” I mutter under my breath.

“What’s wrong?” Memphis steps away from the wall as if he’s ready to snap into action.

“She has backup.” I pretend I’m just rubbing under my nose, but really, I’m covering my mouth so she doesn’t suspect I’m speaking to someone, namely my idiot brother.

“Who the fuck is it? That guy?” Memphis takes another step forward.

“No, later.”

“If it isn’t the stalker,” the stranger patronizes in a mocking tone. Memphis’ brow furrows, but at least he knows it’s not the study group dude.

“Wavy, do you even know this chick?” I ignore the girl on purpose and only look at Waylynn.

“Her name is Gwen,” she answers as if that proves she does.

“Cool. Can I walk you?” I offer, not wanting to be too much of a dick, but I want this girl to leave us the fuck alone.

“Um... I was...”

“I invited her to hang out, so she doesn’t have a lot of time. We have plans,” Gwen says, speaking for Waylynn, which bugs the shit out of me.

Memphis takes a step forward, and I shove my arm out to stop him, but then I have to pretend I was pushing my hair back in an awkward ass kind of way. Waylynn’s lips curl down in a frown as she examines me. “Okay.” My voice is tight. “How about ten minutes? We can go chill outside, then she can come find you when we’re done.” I make it clear I want to talk to her alone.

“Dude, she doesn’t want to talk to you. Catch the vibe.”

“Waylynn, you don’t want to talk to me?” I question, but I shouldn’t have left it open like that.

“I just don’t think there’s anything else to say.” She looks down at her feet.

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” I snap because I’m worried she’s not even going to give me a chance to explain.

“Give it up, man. I did a two-second search on you and found the pictures. I’m sure she did too, which is why you’re here begging to explain your hookup last night.”

My stomach drops when I see Waylynn take a deep breath and hold it like the girl’s words caused her pain. I knew there was a possibility she would have seen the pictures, but I wasn’t prepared to see how it affected her.

When she looks up, it’s straight past me. All the emotion is erased from her face, leaving behind a girl I don’t know. “I need to get going,” Waylynn says and shoulders right past me and the girl who said they had plans together without looking back.

I'm still too shaken to do anything but stare after her. Memphis springs out from behind the door and barks, "Stop!" Waylynn freezes for half a second, and then she does something she told me she never does—she actually runs.

Waylynn

MY KNEES FEEL wobbly when I stand up. The girl who introduced herself to me as Gwen and spent most of the class on her phone turns to me. "I can walk out with you," she offers.

"Okay," I accept. I don't know if Oswald really stuck around, but there's a chance he did, and having her with me might make it easier to walk away from him. *Might*.

My heart is beating too fast, and I'm feeling way too hot for having been sitting in the air-conditioning for the past hour. "If it isn't the stalker," Gwen snarks as we make it to the door. It's horrible that I get a thrill knowing he waited or came back for me, which I smash down with the image of the other girl on his lap.

"Wavy, do you even know this chick?" Oswald looks at me doubtfully.

I give him the only thing I know about her. "Her name is Gwen."

"Cool." He speaks in a way that makes it clear he thinks it's the opposite. "Can I walk you?" I stammer for about a second before Gwen intervenes, telling Oswald that we have plans, which is a lie. "Okay. How about ten minutes? We can go chill outside, then she can come find you when we're done."

Gwen informs him I don't want to talk, which prompts Oswald to ask, "Waylynn, you don't want to talk to me?" I notice he doesn't use my nickname, and it bothers me that I even notice.

“I just don’t think there’s anything else to say.” The truth is I don’t think he has anything to say that I want to hear. I know I’m weak-minded when it comes to him and Memphis, so I’m afraid I’ll let them bend me until I break.

Oswald calls me out on my lie. “That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“Give it up, man. I did a two-second search on you and found the pictures. I’m sure she did too, which is why you’re here begging to explain your hookup last night.” Gwen throws out my insecurities without me ever having told her. No wonder she spent the hour on her phone. Now I’m even more embarrassed.

I shoulder past Oswald. I need to get out of here fast. I don’t want him realizing what a hypocrite I am when he sees how I feel about him with another girl when I let his brother whisper in my ear and kiss me after he already kissed me.

“Stop!” Memphis’ dark tone halts me flat out for a breath, but as soon as the primal part of my brain that reacts to him isn’t controlling my limbs, I haul ass out of the building and run, not caring who sees me or how stupid I look holding down my boobs while I’m doing it.

I get a stitch in my side twenty feet from the building and slow my steps, but the moment I do, someone collides with my back. The only thing that stops me from eating pavement are two strong arms that wrap around me and lift me right off my feet.

I can feel him breathing against the back of my neck, and I know just from the feel of him and his scent that it’s Memphis. This tight hold could only ever be Memphis. I don’t struggle or fight, but I do pant, “Put me...down...please.”

“Not if you’re going to run,” he says darkly near my ear and lifts me even higher as if to prove he can.

“I won’t run,” I promise. I don’t think my legs would even allow it. I might actually need help standing up after this. I feel all wobbly, and it doesn’t have anything to do with the short distance I ran.

Slowly, he inches me down, but he doesn't release his grip.

"I won't run," I remind him.

"I know," he murmurs against the back of my head. "I just need to make sure you hear me. I'm sorry I freaked out." His fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt, holding me even tighter around my waist. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you and said all those awful things. It took me back to a place when I felt helpless, and I thought it meant I would lose you."

I can feel my shoulders sag when I exhale. This is exactly what I was afraid of. The problem is I want to forgive him. I want to pretend he didn't rub me raw with his words and bring so many of my fears to the surface.

"I need you to know that I understand I was wrong. That I will never...never... I will never let something like that happen again."

My walls are crumbling. He's saying everything my heart wants to hear, even if I didn't admit it to myself, but there are still so many other things between us. I don't think I'm ready to tell him why I take the medicine, and I know after seeing the pictures and wanting to throw up, there's no way I can have the kind of relationship they want.

"Waylynn, please say something." He lowers his head so I can feel every breath he takes on the back of my neck.

"I don't know what to say," I admit softly.

"Tell me I'm an asshole and to never speak to you like that again, then tell me you'll let me make it up to you, even if you're mad. Tell me I haven't ruined this." It's the only time Memphis has said the words *tell me* and they haven't come out as a demand. The plea is clear in his tone, and I feel it all the way to my core.

"You were a asshole," I admit, unable to commit to the stronger word because I do understand why he overreacted to the pills after Oswald's confessions about their parents' drug overdose, but I was hurting from his accusations. I also can't explain why I was defensive and just as sensitive as he was

about the entire thing because I'm not ready for my illusion of normalcy to collapse around me.

"I know, sweetness." He sighs, and his body begins to relax behind me.

"Let her go before I call the campus police," Gwen orders. I feel Memphis lift his head to look at her, but he doesn't move to release me.

"Does anyone else not see this?" She looks around for help from everyone else walking by.

"What's your problem?" a guy mumbles as he walks right past us, irritated that we're blocking the sidewalk.

"Him, he's holding her against her will," she answers, even though he's clearly not listening.

"No, Gwen, it's okay," I say because my first instinct is to make sure Memphis doesn't get in trouble.

"It's not okay. He chased you down," she tells me as if I need the reminder.

"I know, but really, it's okay. Thank you for sticking up for me." I place my hand over Memphis' and pull a little to get him to release his grip, and thankfully, he does.

"See? She's fine. We wouldn't hurt her." Oswald walks around Gwen and stands closer to Memphis and me.

"Yeah, because forcing a girl to talk to you and then chasing her down when she tries to walk away is so normal." She looks directly at me. "Red flag, girl. I can get the cops over here and make them leave you alone."

"I promise I'm okay. It's better if we talk, but thank you again," I tell her in earnest. She probably thinks I'm senseless, and I can't even blame her for it.

Gwen jerks up her phone, and I'm pretty sure she snaps a picture of all three of us. "If she ends up missing, I'm sending the cops straight for you two, *Oz Gravlin*." She puts an ominous note on his name, as if she wanted to prove she knows who he is.

I don't have time to formulate words before she spins and walks away, but I do mutter, "I'll tell her you guys aren't serial killers next time I see her."

"I doubt she would believe you, but I don't really care," Oswald says, then turns so he's facing me. It's the first time I've really looked at him since I saw the pictures. My throat feels tight, and my mouth feels so dry, I don't even think I could swallow.

Something must register on my face, because I watch as his expression shifts to one of distress, his lips curl down in a slight frown, and the set of his shoulders shifts. "It wasn't what it looked like."

I don't think that phrase has ever been said and proven true. It's always what it looks like or worse. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him he doesn't owe me an explanation, but I can't make my mouth work, nor is it really how I feel.

"It was a setup," he continues when I don't say anything in response to his proclamation.

"Can we talk about this somewhere else?" Memphis interjects. I get that standing in the middle of campus isn't the best idea, but I'm not inviting them back to my house. I'm not that weak. *I hope.*

"Um..."

"Please let me explain." Oswald steps forward like I might bolt again.

"Do you want to meet up at a coffee shop or something?" I offer, trying to set some boundaries. Oswald shoves his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, causing his shoulders to hunch and curl. Somehow it makes him seem smaller or less sure.

"We can go to my place," Memphis offers.

"Is that a good idea?" I hedge. I know I dropped the class, but I don't want him to have an issue.

"I'll text you the address. Where did you park?"

“I’m not on campus,” I share, like he might reprimand me if I was.

“Oswald can walk you to your car. I’ll pick him up, then we’ll follow you to our place.” Memphis pauses for a slight second and adds, “If that’s okay with you.” It feels wrong in so many ways. Memphis doesn’t ask for permission, not with stuff like this. It makes me feel a little off-kilter, like I’m not sure what to expect from him when he’s not being his normal self, bossing me around. I must be messed up because it kind of makes me sad.

“I have GPS,” I offer so they don’t need to waste time following me.

Memphis closes his eyes, then slits them open very slowly as he takes a rather deep breath. “I can meet you at the apartment.” His words come out half strangled.

“Okay,” I mumble softly, unable to meet his eyes.

“It shouldn’t take any longer than ten minutes,” he warns, and I feel like it might be his way of telling me he doesn’t think I’m going to show.

“See you in a minute,” Oswald tells me, then jogs after his brother, who has already walked away.

RESETTLING



W aylynn

MY PHONE VIBRATES, and I actually check the message this time. The only thing listed is a simple address and an apartment number. Somehow, I feel like I'm the one who has done something wrong as I wander back to my car.

When I pull into the small dirt lot to park, Memphis strides forward and reaches for the door handle of my car. I glance at him through the window. His face looks a little more relaxed, but I still can't hold his stare for more than a second. Does he know I dropped the class? Will he think I'm being too dramatic?

My hands shake as I push my backpack into the backseat and slip the strap of my purse over my shoulder, so I have a few extra seconds before getting out. It should allow him time to step back after opening my door, but he doesn't. Even my heart is beating too fast, making me feel like I'm panting, which is embarrassing.

I eventually slip out of the car, trying to keep some distance between us, but he makes it nearly impossible as he stands in the doorjamb. I pretend not to notice how close he is and keep my eyes down. There's a jolt of awareness that passes through me when my arm touches his chest, not only the physical feel of him, but a heavy sense of frustration too.

"Oswald is waiting inside," Memphis says after closing my door for me. I linger at the back of the car, expecting him to

lead the way, but he remains behind me until I feel pressured to get moving by just his presence.

“Up there?” I question quietly when we enter the front hall.

“Yup, door on the right.” He places his hand on the newel post behind me, preventing me from retreating out of the building.

The heat of his body has me hustling up the stairs to find the door on the right of the hall is cracked open. I place my palm on the wood, hesitantly push it the rest of the way open, and peer inside. The room is small. There’s a futon with a desk opposite it, placed under a window, with a tiny kitchen off to the right. I’ve never seen such a little stove.

None of that bothers me. What gets me is how hollow it feels. There’s nothing personal, no pictures or even a blanket on the sofa. It feels more like I entered a hotel room than Memphis’ house. I can’t even feel his presence here, which is strange because he is so...big.

Oswald exits the only door down a short hall, half wiping his hands on his pants as he does. His brows rise like I’ve surprised him, but he recovers quickly and meets me in the sitting area. “You made it,” he observes.

“Did you think I wouldn’t come?”

“No, I figured you would, it’s just...” He shrugs like he doesn’t know what else to say. The door behind me snaps closed, and I hear a lock turn. If I thought being around them at my house was hard, this is nuts. The room feels even smaller with both of them in it. There’s nowhere to go to get any air or escape their stares.

The awkward silence lasts until Memphis offers, “You can sit down.”

I take the two steps over to the front of the futon and let my bag skip down my arm before placing it on the floor at my feet, then lowering myself to the couch.

Oswald takes the desk chair but spins it to face me and Memphis, who continues to linger near the door. I have a

feeling he's blocking my exit, though it could just be in my head. "You wanted to tell me something," I remind Oswald, feeling uncomfortable for all the wrong reasons. I should be worried they have me cornered, that they pursued me when I made it clear I was trying to pull away from them. Instead, I'm wondering why Memphis' existence permeates my house more than his own and lying to myself about being able to handle what they will give me, just so I can have a small piece of them. It's frightening.

"Yeah." Oswald shifts his knees from left to right, swinging the chair a little as he does. "First, I just want to say sorry." He glances past me, and I know he's looking at his brother. "I should have stopped him before he went that far."

"It's—"

"Not okay," Memphis interrupts, assuming I'm going to absolve him.

"Not your fault. *I know* it's not okay."

"Uh, okay, well...I still feel like I owe you an apology," Oswald says rather slowly like he's not sure which one of us, probably Memphis, is going to speak again.

I don't respond because I'm not ready to accept his apology or forgive Memphis about this yet. *Crap*, why did I think yet?

After a few more seconds of silence, Oswald starts again. "I know it sounds like total bullshit, but the picture was a setup. She and her friend were in my room with KJ that night when I went there. She pretended to fall on my lap, and her friend must have taken the picture." His shoulders are high, and his head is tilted to the side, as if he's doing some weird half shrug.

The image of the photo is clear in my head. I looked at it for way too long, even screenshotted it so it wouldn't be obvious I kept looking at it, then tortured myself with it all night every time I thought about answering their calls and texts.

It didn't look like she fell on him, it looked like he was holding her on his lap. I think he can see the doubt on my face because he rushes to add, "I swear. Right after it happened, I came here. I told her I had...that I wasn't available. She posted that shit on purpose, and the ones from the next morning, that was my shirt, so that means she went through my shit and KJ let her." He actually sounds a little pissed, which could be because he's telling the truth or because she got evidence about them being together and he didn't know it.

"Why would she do that?" I question, not understanding her motivation.

"Because I let her know I wasn't interested."

The face I make might be a wince, but really, it's more doubtful than anything. "Wouldn't that be more embarrassing for her if she posted something that wasn't true, and you told people it never happened?"

"No," Oswald scoffs. "Somebody who's willing to do shit like that after I told her I had a girlfriend doesn't get embarrassed. She would probably just say I was lying anyway." He leans all the way back and the chair creaks.

"Then how do people know who to believe?" I ask, looking for some insight, or maybe I just want him to convince me *he's* telling the truth. I also want to know more about the girlfriend comment. Could he be referring to me? I'll have to work my way up to asking that one.

"Honestly, Waylynn, I don't care what anyone else believes beside you. I'm telling you this girl knew exactly what she was doing."

"He was here that night. His shorts are probably still on the bathroom floor where he left them before showering," Memphis chimes in.

Oswald makes an annoyed face for a second, then peers at me with a cautionary gaze. "You can go look. I'm kind of a slob."

"I don't want to check if your panties are in the bathroom," I retort dismissively with an eye roll.

“Panties?”

“You know what I mean.” I wave off Oswald’s outrage at my slipup.

“I do not wear panties,” he mumbles under his breath.

Memphis finally walks over and takes the seat beside me. As hard as I try not to, I can still see him out of the corner of my eye, and I’m pretty sure he notices when I stiffen a little. It’s not intentional.

“I just don’t see what she would have to gain from pretending.”

“She gets this.” Oswald gestures between the two of us.

“She doesn’t know me, Oswald.”

“I told her about you. KJ was running his mouth about me staying with my brother, and I told him I’d been staying with my girl.” My heart starts to pound, but Oswald continues, unknowing that he just made my heart flutter. “They made the assumption you were mad at me and that was why I was home on a Saturday after a win. I got defensive, which was like blood in the water, and the next thing I know, she’s in my lap, telling me she fell. I had no idea her friend took the picture until the next morning. That’s the honest-to-God truth.” Oswald raises his hands as if to swear to it.

It’s hard not to believe him when he’s so adamant, and there’s also the fact that I want to believe him, but does any of it matter when it comes down to it? I don’t think I could deal with the sharing thing they seem keen on. I’m already too emotionally invested, and this proves it.

But how do I tell him that without them trying to convince me I could handle it? I’ve already proven I don’t have any willpower when it comes to them, and I’m still mad at Memphis, plus there’s also my big secret between us. I have no clue what to say or do. I wish we could just go back to how it was, when I was naïve and hopeful.

“We can go talk to KJ,” Oswald continues when I don’t respond to his vow.

“We don’t need to do that.” I shake my head.

“You believe me?” He leans forward, sounding much more hopeful.

“Oswald,” I say softly.

He jumps up before I can say any more. “I’m telling the truth. Come on, KJ will tell you what happened, or I will beat it out of him.”

I stand and grab his arm. “No, it’s fine. I really don’t have the right to be upset, but I can’t lie and say I wasn’t.” I pull my hand back slowly. Touching him, even his arm, isn’t a good idea.

“Why wouldn’t you have the right to be upset?” Memphis asks, and I turn my head to look at him on instinct but quickly avert my gaze. I feel like he can see through me. “Waylynn,” he prompts when I don’t answer right away.

“You know why,” I say with too much intensity.

“No, I really don’t,” Memphis retorts.

“Oswald kissed me, then you kissed me,” I blurt. It’s not like it was a secret.

Oswald opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, but he just lets out a heavy breath, then furrows his brows in confusion.

Memphis catches on much quicker. “You don’t want to share.”

I clench my back teeth as hard as I can, feeling shame and the sting of anxiety making the backs of my hands feel tingly. I nod once briskly. This will be it. Now they know I can’t be what they want, and as much as I hate it, there’s also a sense of relief that comes along with the awareness, or maybe it’s just knowing I don’t have to tell them my secret before they walk away. It will be so much easier this way.

Oswald drops back into his chair. “What?” He’s looking at me in total disbelief. “You like us both,” he says as if that’s not already obvious.

Memphis fills in the blanks. “No, she doesn’t want to *share us*.”

I’m not going to deny it, even if it makes me a hypocrite. I can at least admit that much. “Sorry if I misled you. I just... Yeah, sorry.” I take a step to the right, intending to pass Memphis and get back to the door. My ears are on fire, and I can feel heat spreading up my neck, but he stands up and blocks my path.

“We’re not asking you to,” he whispers. My skin even reacts to his tone, and I get goose bumps on the backs of my arms.

“Please don’t tell me I can do this.” I close my eyes. If he even puts the slightest demand into his words, I’ll listen to him, even if it’s only until I can get out of here, and my heart will break in the process.

MEMPHIS

“PLEASE DON’T TELL me I can do this.” Waylynn is standing in front of me with her eyes closed, and I’m warring with everything inside myself not to command her to look at me so I can tell her we want her and no one else.

When her eyes finally open at my silence, I ask, “Why would Oz be apologizing and trying to explain if he wanted to be with her too?” I’m trying to let her come to the right conclusion without putting too much at her feet. I feel like she’s a scared rabbit right now and any wrong word will have her bolting again.

“Because the pictures got posted,” she reasons.

“Oswald, do you plan on seeing anyone else or hooking up with other people?”

“No,” he scoffs as if I’m dumb for asking.

I wait a second for that info to sink in, then add, “Me either.”

“But—” Waylynn starts, but I cut her off.

“But nothing, Waylynn. I’m trying to let you get comfortable so I know I’m not forcing you to do something you don’t want, but I need you to understand. You’re already ours, whether you get that or not.”

“Bro.” Oswald huffs, and I realize my statement is a mess of contradictions, but I don’t care, because I’m not willing to take it back. “We won’t *force* you into anything, Wavy.”

I don’t give her the same reassurance Oz does. I’m not sure I could at this point. If the last two days have proven anything, it’s that there’s no way I’m walking away from her, plus there’s another matter we need to deal with. “You need to email Hilbrand, tell her you reconsidered and you no longer want to drop the class.”

“There is that,” Oz admits, proving maybe he’s willing to do more than ask her nicely, despite what he said moments ago.

Waylynn lifts her chin and directs her eyes to my forehead. “No.” My fingers tighten on her arms, but she still doesn’t look at me.

“You can’t have both. I won’t be in that class and be... around you guys. If I decide to...let you be around.” Her brows furrow deeply. She’s fucking adorable, acting like she has a choice.

I slide my hands down her arms and circle her wrists instead while taking a step closer to her. Her breath catches when I invade her space and press my chest against hers. I can see the thrum of her racing pulse at the side of her neck. I get a thrill knowing I affect her so much. “I like having you in my class, like feeling your eyes on me.” It would be so easy to lower my lips to the side of her throat and taste her. Her head bobs a little when she swallows. “I really don’t want to give that up. Tell me why I should.”

“You could get in trouble,” she confesses in a sweet, soft voice with just the slightest tremble.

She just gave me everything I need to know. Even after what happened Saturday, she's still concerned for me. I give into the temptation and lay my lips on her skin. She exhales with a shudder, and it only makes me want more, so I pull back before I sink my teeth into her skin to mark her. "Let me deal with it."

Waylynn shakes her head before telling me, "No." I have to admit, I don't like it. It takes effort to tamp down the urge to convince her. I'm fairly certain I could, but I'll let it go... *for now*.

I feel her hand tug to the side and look down to see Oswald pulling her fingers, so I release her wrists and give her a little breathing room.

"I don't want you to drop the class either. I look forward to those classes. Plus, I'm always at practice, so this way I get to see you a little during the season and not just at night," Oz reasons, and I see her soften even more when her shoulders slip down a little. Maybe I should let him persuade her on this. He's not nearly as demanding as I am.

"Will you stay here for a little while?" he asks without pressuring her the way I would have.

She looks back at our shitty couch, then releases his hand before she lowers herself to sit demurely on the front edge, as if she might try to bail at any second. I hate the tension in her back and shoulders. I much prefer the way she was relaxed against me, but I can't complain if she's not leaving.

I sit down next to her and place my arm along the back of the couch, hoping she'll get comfortable enough to sit back at some point. I meet Oswald's eyes and tip my head, so he knows I want a second alone with her. I'm not worried about her seeing, because she's working hard not to look at me, which I hate.

As much as I would rather forget what happened after the game, we need to address it. "Be right back." Oswald gives me a warning glare before heading back to the bedroom.

"Waylynn," I say the moment he's out of sight.

“Mmm,” she hums.

“I don’t want you to be mad at me.” I use words I know she will understand because she’s said them to us more than once. It must break through the wall she’s trying to keep between us, because she turns her head and actually examines me.

“I’m not mad...not anymore,” she adds.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.” She blinks rapidly. I don’t think she was expecting me to say that to her, at least not right now.

“I understand. I could have been less defensive.” She takes some of the blame unnecessarily.

“No, you had every right after how I spoke to you.” I always want her acquiescence, but not like that. Not only because I demand it, but because I earned it. “The bottle brought back old memories, and I reacted poorly.”

“I understand, but I got defensive too.” She’s barely whispering, but she’s at least still looking at me.

“It won’t happen again,” I promise with every intention of keeping it.

Waylynn lets out a breath, then looks away from me. My goal was to ease her doubts, but she looks even more anxious now as she worries her thumbnail over her bottom lip. Is it the fact that she’s alone with me?

I pull her hand down and keep it held in mine. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t, not like that,” she replies.

“Then tell me why you look like you’d rather be anywhere else but sitting next to me.” It sucks to admit the truth out loud, but there it is.

“There’s a lot going on. I have school to worry about, and I just moved here,” she says slowly. I can feel her pulling away, even though she’s in the same room with me. She’s making excuses. “We don’t even know each other very well.”

“Then let’s change that. What do you want to know?”

Waylynn peeks at me. “Um... What are your plans after school?” She hits me with a question you’d ask a stranger, but I’ll play along for now.

“I want to be a teacher, primary or middle school. Does that surprise you?” I ask when her eyes widen.

“A little, you’re pretty intense in the classroom.” She’s finally looking up at me again with those big hazel eyes I can’t get enough of.

“Teaching is important to me, but I think my attitude has to do with the student body. I don’t imagine a fourth grader is going to hand me her number when she turns in her assignment.” I toy with the ends of her hair because she lets me.

She cringes and wrinkles up her nose. “I was so embarrassed that first day when the girl asked about dating you.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “I’ll try not to take offense that it embarrassed you.”

“Not like that,” Waylynn offers quickly, even turning so her knees are closer to me. “I mean, it was so rude and just...I could never... It felt wrong, like she was objectifying you.” She nearly whispers the last part.

“She probably didn’t see it that way, and I know you wouldn’t do that.” I scoot a little closer, and she doesn’t back away.

“What made you want to be a teacher?” she asks. This feels like a real question, especially with the way she’s looking up at me like I’m the center of her universe, or maybe I just feel that way because she might be mine.

“I had a teacher who made a big impact on my life. Without him, things could have been very different for me, and I want to be that for someone else. I want to make sure no one falls through the cracks.”

The corner of Waylynn’s lips curls up in a small smile, and she looks down bashfully. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“And I’ll get summers off.” I throw in the little tidbit, even though I know that won’t happen right away. I’ll be working to pay off the loans my scholarships and grants didn’t cover for a while.

“That is a nice perk,” she agrees, and the tension from a few minutes ago is absent.

Oz makes a lot of noise before exiting the bedroom. He’s probably been eavesdropping the entire time anyway, but at least we had the illusion of privacy. “Sorry about that, I had to let them know I would miss practice.”

Waylynn snaps her head to look in his direction. “Oh no, will you get in trouble?”

Oswald drops back into my desk chair. It creaks in protest, but he doesn’t notice. “No, it’s fine.” He dismisses her worry, but I know he’ll get some shit about it. “I need to lie low for the day since I told them I wasn’t feeling good though. Naturally, that means I’m starving. Do you have anything to eat?”

“Go look.” I wave him toward the kitchen. “It’s the same shit that was in there yesterday.”

“I wish the dining halls delivered,” Oswald complains while trudging to the kitchen.

“I can go get something,” Waylynn suggests.

“Nah, I’m good. There’s ramen.” He tosses two packages on the counter. His lack of excitement is clear by his tone and the slump of his shoulders.

“It’s not a problem. I’m a little hungry too,” she offers. I start to tell her no, that she doesn’t need to go get him food, but she’s watching me with her lip pressed between her teeth as if she’s expecting me to deny her.

“Are you sure?” Oz turns, already discounting the ramen he left on the counter.

“Absolutely, what would you like?” She tucks her dark hair behind her ear, allowing me to see the curve of her jaw,

and I want to kiss her there and anywhere else she would permit.

“Anything other than microwave noodles.”

“Any requests?” She turns her soulful eyes to me.

I can't voice my true desire, that I would like nothing more than to lay her back and feast on every inch of her, so I grumble, “I'll go with you.” She's shaking her head before I can even finish my statement, and I know what she's going to say, so I stop her with my finger pressed against her lips. “I wasn't asking, sweetness.”

She looks down at her lap, removing my touch from her skin. “Yes, sir.”

The huff that leaves my nostrils has her peeking up at me, and it only makes matters worse in my pants.

“Sorry.” She winces as if she's done something wrong.

“Waylynn.” My voice is gravelly with desire. I clear my throat to speak again, but Oswald tugs her up from the couch, then wraps his arms around her chest from behind before he lays his chin on her shoulder.

With his mouth near her ear, he mutters, “I've got a secret.” When she turns her head to look at him, he continues, “You are the only person I've ever seen render my brother defenseless with just words and a glance. Look at him.” Waylynn slowly turns her gaze back to me. “He's not upset with you,” he tells her, reading her response to her words.

“He doesn't look happy,” she mutters back.

“What does he look like then?” Oz turns his face toward her neck, and she tilts her head to the side just enough to make the invitation clear. I'm not even sure if she's aware she's doing it.

“Frustrated?” Her voice goes a little high, making it evident she's unsure. Waylynn's lips part, and she shivers as Oz chuckles against her smooth skin.

“You would be correct, but probably not for the reasons you're thinking.” Oz pulls her back into his embrace a little

more.

“I keep slipping and calling him sir, reminding him I’m a student,” she acknowledges, but I think he’s right in assuming she doesn’t understand why it affects me so much.

“Yes, you do, and that’s all it takes for you to crack Memphis’ composed exterior. But don’t kid yourself, he loves it every single time. Remember that if you ever want something,” the traitor divulges while kissing the side of her neck tenderly. He’s right about that too—one look, and I would probably give her anything she asked for, unless it would keep her away from me.

I stand, not bothering to hide the bulge in my pants, but her eyes are on mine anyway, so I’m certain she doesn’t notice. I beckon her toward me with the crook of two fingers. “Come on, let’s go, or maybe I’ll start spilling secrets too.” I glance up at my brother. His eyes slit. He’s probably wondering what I could tell her, but I’m not the only one with easy tells. Oz is nearly as possessive as I am when it comes to her, and I’m pretty sure her walking around in the shirt with his name on her back would be just as effective as her addressing me as sir.

Oswald must see something in my eyes that tells him I’m not bluffing, because he releases her, and she jumps forward with a surprised look on her face, making me think he probably swatted her on the ass to get her moving.

“Are you sure you should come?” Waylynn asks.

I grunt in response. Hearing her ask me if I should come shouldn’t be arousing, but it is.

“Believe me, he’s dying to come,” Oswald quips, proving we both think alike.

“Just like you, the other night, on the phone?” I don’t miss a beat, and that shuts him up. It looks like he doesn’t want me to mention he was jerking off while they were on the phone.

Waylynn looks back and forth between us, knowing she’s missing something but not willing to ask what it is.

“See you when you get back.” Oswald drops onto the futon heavily.

I place my hand on Waylynn's back as we reach the door. "Memphis." She looks up at me. "Let me go alone, I don't want to get you in trouble."

"You're not. I talked to Hilbrand." The lie tightens my throat, but if she can tell my voice is strangled, she doesn't act like it.

"You did? What did she say?" she whispers as we enter the grimy hallway.

I urge her down the stairs. I don't really talk to the other people who live in my building, and I don't want them knowing my business now. "We can talk in the car," I say near her ear, and she gives a slight nod.

Being this close to her, I can smell the strawberry soap she uses, and my mouth waters for all the wrong reasons. I guide her to the driver's side of her car and open the door. Waylynn slips inside like it's something she's used to but looks up to say, "Thank you," before I close it.

I round the car, looking across the lot for the first time to see if anyone is paying attention to us, but the area seems empty. In those short few seconds, I decide to tell her the truth about Hilbrand—that I haven't talked to her yet, but I plan to. I can't expect her to trust me, not if I'm lying to her.

"Where are we going?" She checks the screen in the center console while putting the car in reverse. The video is clear, but yet it still looks weird to me.

"How does pizza sound?" I offer, thinking it's easy and I can direct her to the five-dollar place in Ypsi so we have a little extra time to talk, plus it's cheap.

"Sure, which way?"

"Make a left, then a right at the light." I'm eager to talk to her about school since I don't want to fuck anything up again. Once she gets on the road, I start. "I haven't talked to Hilbrand yet. I want to do it in person, and I took the afternoon off." I don't want it to sound like I'm making excuses, but that's what it feels like.

Waylynn glances over at me. “Then this *could* get you in trouble.” Her tone is lacking her usual soft quality.

“I’m not going to lie to placate you. You’re too smart, and I respect you too much for that, but I will ask you to let me worry about it. I’ll talk to her tomorrow and explain that...” I run my hand over my hair, unsure how much I should divulge.

“Explain what?” She’s sitting forward, gripping the steering wheel while stealing quick glances at me.

“How much I tell her is up to you.” The moment the words are out of my mouth, it feels like I’m giving her another burden instead of my intent, which was to make things easier. “I can tell her you’re with Oz and I don’t feel comfortable grading you because of the connection, or I can tell her the truth.”

“What *is* the truth?” She bites the corner of her lip but keeps her eyes on the road.

“That you’re ours, and I would step down from my position before I risked losing you over it.”

Waylynn jerks her head to the right and gawks at me, but something in her eyes softens the moment our eyes connect. “You can’t do that. I already dropped the class,” she pleads.

I should have told her to turn a mile ago, but it doesn’t seem important right now. “I don’t want you to drop the class. I don’t want to step down either, but I will because I’m not giving you up.” Other than moving onto campus and leaving Oswald with Bates’ parents, this feels like the most important decision I could make. It’s selfish and could fuck things up for all of us, but I also know it’s worth it.

The last few days have solidified just how important she is to me, and I refuse to give that up.

Waylynn

MEMPHIS' words wiggle their way into my heart and every other organ I own until my entire body feels filled with his confession. The problem is, it's terrifying how badly I want to be as important to him as he's making me seem. I want to forget how this could blow up in my face and how horrible the last couple days without them were, but I'm scared.

I'm scared of what they will think if I tell them the truth—that I'm still hearing voices, and worse yet, that the voices belong to them. That will surely have them running for the hills and calling the hospital for a 5150 on the way. "You can't do that. I already dropped the class," I argue.

"I'm not giving you up," are the next words that get stuck in my head. I swear I hear them echo in my mind and out loud—proof I should tell him about my past.

"You don't even know me." I try to sound like I'm being dismissive, but it comes out all wrong—part challenge, part plea.

"I know that I have never felt for anyone the way I do about you. I know you give me something I didn't even know I was missing, and I know I want to possess every inch of you. The other shit will come," Memphis says with complete confidence.

"So you want to have sex with me," I scoff, but it's only because the other stuff feels too real to say out loud.

Memphis gives me a droll stare and calls me out on my crap. "Since the first time you looked up at me and called me Mr. Gravlin, but don't pretend that's what is important."

"Since then? I thought you hated me," I mutter mostly to myself.

"I hated how much you affected me and how badly I wanted to know everything about you when I didn't even know your name," he admits without shame.

"I don't think you should risk your career or put it on hold for...this," I tell him. Once he knows the truth about me, he'll regret it.

“It’s not *this* or just *you*. It’s us. I have put the needs and wants of everyone else before my own since I was a kid cleaning up after my parents. I did it for Oswald because he deserves better, but...so do I,” Memphis says slowly, as if he’s only now coming to that conclusion since the words have been uttered out loud.

“You do deserve better, Memphis. I’m just saying I might not be that.”

“Make a left when you can. We passed it,” he grumbles darkly.

For the next few minutes, he just gives me traffic directions, and my heart actually sinks. I did what I set out to accomplish. He’s distant and a little gruff. I hate it.

He told me things girls dream of hearing, and I was too afraid to listen, too scared for them to be true. I feel like crying.

When I park the car in front of a chain pizza place he directed me to, Memphis threatens, “Get out of the car,” in a menacing voice.

I snap into action, not even shutting the engine off. The minute I’m standing, he pushes me back against my door with the weight of his body. It’s hot outside, but it’s nothing compared to the heat of him pressed into me. Memphis tips my face up, so I have to look at him with his fingers pressed under my jaw. “Do you want this?” I open my mouth to answer, but I’m not even sure what I’m going to say before he interrupts, demanding, “And don’t you dare lie to me, because I will know.”

I search his eyes, feeling a slight edge of panic welling up inside me that’s reflected in his gaze. If I tell him no, I think he really will leave me alone. My stomach sours.

“Yes,” I whisper, even though it’s selfish and it’s going to hurt even worse when they do leave. I will eventually have to tell them the truth, but I can’t force myself to lie and tell him I don’t want this. I won’t even try.

“Good fucking girl,” Memphis rumbles before crashing his mouth down onto mine.

WORTH THE PAIN



Waylynn

MY HEART actually skips a beat when our lips meet, but then the muscle remembers to fire again, only now it's pounding so hard, I can hear it in my ears and I'm not breathing right.

None of it seems as important as the feel of Memphis' thumb pressed over my throat, his fingers curled behind my neck, and the soft brush of his tongue against mine. I part my lips a little more to steal a breath, but he tilts his head and covers my mouth again, sliding deeper inside.

The weight of his body pushing me against the car almost feels like it's too much, but it's also not quite enough as I struggle to find a full breath. My fingers dig into his forearm when he nips my bottom lip roughly.

My entire body sags in surrender, and Memphis makes a sound that makes me shiver. It's sexy and needy, but it's a clear approval of me surrendering to him. His grip tightens on my neck as he tilts my head in a clear display of dominance as he controls my movements. It should be restrictive, but it has the opposite effect on me. I feel free and untethered, like I could touch the stars, and my mind swirls.

A spike of envy I don't understand pierces through the perfect fog of my thoughts, allowing outside sounds to puncture my blissful bubble.

"Why don't you kiss me like that?"

I tuck my head down, breaking the kiss. Memphis allows it, and he even manages to shield me as I work to catch my breath. His chest is rising and falling rapidly too.

“Because you never keep your mouth shut long enough,” a man quips with an edgy tone that sounds irritated.

“You’re such a jerk,” the same woman mumbles under her breath, but it’s clearly loud enough for us to hear as they pass by.

Memphis shifts again, effectively hiding the other side of my face with the move. A giggle works its way up my throat when a bell chimes from a door opening. “I’m sorry.” I cover my mouth. Nothing is even funny. I think I just need an outlet for everything going on inside my body.

Memphis’ thumb swipes across my neck a few times before he puts a little pressure under my jaw, forcing me to look up at him. His eyes are lidded, and his lips are still damp from our kisses. My belly does this flop thing that makes my breath catch. “No more running, no more not answering your phone. Even if one of us messes up.” I open my mouth with a denial on my tongue, but his brow rises the tiniest bit and my rebuttal dies. “Tell me,” he demands while continuing to peer down at me.

“Yes, sir,” I answer, eager to please him. Memphis’ eyes slip closed when I speak, and he’s slow to open them again. Before, I might have thought his reaction was annoyance at my mistake, but since Oswald mentioned Memphis likes it when I address him as sir, I see his response in a new light... especially when he leans down and places a soft, wet kiss where my shoulder and neck meet.

“Let’s order the food before Oz sends out a search party.”

When Memphis opens the door for me, I hear the familiar bell chime, so I know the couple who caught us kissing is probably in here. I try to act unaffected, but I steal glances around the space, wondering who it might have been. A blonde in the corner catches my eye. She’s looking down at her phone, but the set of her shoulders as she leans against the wall next to a guy in a chair makes me think it’s her. The

moment I look away from her, the slight pang of hurt I didn't even register I was feeling slips away.

Memphis holds my hand in his while we wait in the short line to get up to the register. "What kind of pizza do you like?" he asks while looking at the menu board behind the counter.

"Thin crust or deep dish, there's no between."

"See? I learned something new. Toppings?"

"What do you like?" I counter. People have very strong feelings about certain pizza toppings, and I don't want him to judge me for liking pineapple.

"I usually get pepperoni." We take a step forward as the line moves.

I scrunch up my nose. Pepperoni isn't my favorite. Ideally, I'd get a white pizza with chicken, mushrooms, and spinach, but I don't see anything like that on the menu. "I like mushrooms," I offer.

We step up to the counter, and a girl in an orange shirt greets us. "Hi. Just so you know, we have about a fifteen-minute wait on hot and ready's."

If I hadn't seen the signs all over advertising the hot and ready pizzas, I might think her comment was strange. "I'll take a deep-dish mushroom, a deep-dish pineapple, and two orders of crazy bread," Memphis tells her.

I glance over at him as the girl rings us up. I'm already pulling out my card, and I decide I'm going to distract him so I can pay. "I thought you said pepperoni?"

"That's when they have it ready." He has an amused expression curling his lips. "Don't like pineapple?"

"I do. I was worried it would freak you out." I hand my card to the girl, and his smile drops.

"Waylynn." His tone is a warning.

"Memphis," I reply, but I add a little extra sweetness to my tone. His eyes narrow, and I see him reach for his pocket. I lean a little closer and keep my voice below a whisper so no

one else can hear me and add, “Please, sir.” I almost lose my nerve to say it at all, but I’m so glad I didn’t, because his stunned, silent reaction is so worth it.

MEMPHIS

HER WORDS RENDER me useless for about two seconds, long enough for the girl to swipe Waylynn’s card. I wrap my arm around her neck and haul her back so she’s covering half of me. My forearm is resting above her full breasts, and my fingers are dangling just barely off the side, grazing her. The curve of her ass and full hip are pressed against me, but I won’t grind on her, no matter how badly I want to.

“That wasn’t very nice, sweetness.” I inhale her strawberry scent, softening my words of censure with a gentle tone.

Once she takes the receipt, I walk us right out the door and into the sweltering heat outside. She comes willingly. “It wasn’t meant to be mean,” she replies shyly, as if she took my words to heart.

I need to find a way to tell her—no, *show* her that she doesn’t have to be nervous about me being mad at her, but I also need to know why she’s always worried about it. “It wasn’t mean,” I agree, “but it does have an effect on me.” I fight the urge to pull her hand down and let her feel just how much, but we’re in public, and I’d probably be jumping the gun on the intimacy steps. I’ve barely been able to kiss her, and I want to enjoy each and every moment of the journey.

My phone vibrates, and I sigh before releasing her to pull it out of my pocket. “Guess who’s calling?” I deadpan. “Hello.” I’m a little cross with my brother at the moment. You’d think knowing she called me sir on purpose would make the word less effective, but it fucking didn’t. Instead, it felt like she was giving me something, which made it just as potent.

“Where are you guys? It’s been forever,” he whines.

“We’re waiting on the pizza.”

“Oh, what did you get?” He sounds happier now.

“Green pepper and feta.”

“Holy shit! Please tell me you’re joking and that’s not Waylynn’s pizza pick.”

“You said anything,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but you know I hate peppers, and is that the crumbly cheese?” He makes a retching sound. “I think I just threw up in my mouth.”

That makes me smile, but the fucker deserves it. I’m standing here with a semi because he told Waylynn I like it when she addresses me as sir. “We’ll be home soon,” I say, about to hang up.

“Wait, will you order me a pineapple pizza? I’ll pay for it,” he rushes to say, but I hang up anyway.

“What’s so funny?” Waylynn is watching me with a soft smile of her own.

“Oz hates green peppers,” I divulge.

“That’s why you said peppers. Does he hate feta too?”

“Yup, with a passion.” I grin.

“Now that’s mean,” she says, but she’s still smiling.

“I know.”

Oswald

I DEBATE MAKING the ramen so I won’t be as hungry when they get back, but something tells me Memphis was just trying to fuck with me...at least I hope he was.

I thumb through my phone, feeling bored. They have been gone a while, and they don’t even have the pizza yet, which means I have to continue to wait. I know better than to open my social media, but I do that shit anyway. The number of

likes on the post of the girl in my shirt pisses me off. The fact that it pops up in my feed without me looking for it makes it worse.

I shut down the app and almost drop my phone on the couch, but I get an idea instead. It takes me a minute to find his number because we've only texted a few times, but when I see KJ's name, I tap on it.

Me: Tell that girl to delete those photos.

I keep my phone in my hand after hitting send, waiting for a reply, before remembering he's at practice. "Damn it." I really do toss my phone down and reach for the remote for the TV instead.

The option guide is slow as hell to pop up, only giving me the choice of a streaming service and some other weird channels we never watch. Thank fuck Bates' family never changed their passwords for Netflix and we can still watch.

It only takes me a minute to find a movie I haven't seen yet to distract myself, but it doesn't stop me from looking at the time more than I should.

I jump up when I hear Memphis' voice through the thin walls of his apartment. It's risky for us to have Waylynn here tonight. For me, it's because I'm skipping out on practice, but the gamble is much more of an issue for Memphis. Maybe we should let her drop the class. It would make shit easier.

I open the unlocked door, and the smell of pizza wafts into the tiny apartment. Damn, it smells good. I step to the side to allow Waylynn in and note that Memphis is carrying more than one box. That means my chances of not having to choke down peppers and cheese is good. I snag the bags of bread off the top of the boxes as he passes, then shut the door.

Waylynn moves toward the couch and desk as my brother sets the boxes on the tiny counter. When I try to open the lid, he pushes me to the side so he can wash his hands in the sink. "May I use your bathroom?" Waylynn asks while searching around.

“I’ll show you,” I offer, placing the bags of bread on the counter.

It takes all of three steps to make it down the short hall and to the door of Memphis’ room. The bed is not made, it never is, but other than that, it’s pretty tidy...no thanks to me. “Right through here.” I slap my hand on the wall to turn on the light switch. It’s warm in here. The window air conditioner never seems to make it into this room or the closet just beyond it.

“Thank you,” she says softly before turning to close the door. For just a second, I wonder what she’s thinking, if she’s contemplating what she’s doing here with us when she could be someplace much nicer, but I push those thoughts out of my head and head back to the food.

“You guys were gone forever.” I flip open one of the boxes and find a mushroom pizza. It’s not my first choice but definitely edible.

“I talked to her about Hilbrand. We got distracted.” Memphis sets three paper plates on the stove, because the counter is all used up.

“Sounds interesting.” If I weren’t worried about her overhearing us, I would ask what the distraction was, but the walls are like cardboard.

Memphis puts two slices of mushroom pizza on a plate, along with some bread, then sets it off to the side before switching boxes and helping himself to the pizza below. “Sweet! Pineapple,” I singsong, reaching for some myself.

“If she didn’t already think I was crazy, she might now.” He walks to the couch and sits down.

“What the hell, Memphis?” I keep my voice low and follow him.

“She needs to understand we’re serious. I can’t have any more of this running. I was ready to tie her to the bed if needed,” he comments blandly as if he doesn’t sound as unreasonable as he admitted to being.

Before I can make a joke about his kinks, Waylynn exits the bedroom. She’s not freaked out, so I don’t think she heard

Memphis' comment about tying her to the bed, but then again, maybe she did. She's put up with all his shit so far.

"I have your plate," Memphis says, nodding his head toward the small seat between us in the center of the couch. I watch Waylynn assess the spot, then bite her lip. It's clear she's not sure she should sit there, and I nearly get up so she will have more room, but in the next second, she steps forward, picks up her plate, and spins to sit down.

Her hip is against my leg. It's such a small thing I might not have even taken the time to notice it if she were another girl, but with her, I do. I don't know if it's because I can appreciate the small stuff since I didn't rush into sleeping with her, or if it's just something about her that makes me more aware.

I lean in even closer and softly tell her, "Sit back, we won't bite." Her eyes dart over to peek in my direction before she scoots back the rest of the way. I lift my left arm to give us a little more room, but I don't mind the tight fit.

The movie is still playing, but I wasn't paying much attention in the first place, so I'm completely lost. Just when I take a bite of my second slice, the sound of a phone vibrating against something interrupts the quiet.

My head turns to the side when I realize it's coming from Waylynn's purse. "Want me to get that for you?" I question after swallowing the food.

"I've got it." She uses my leg to push up, probably not even realizing it. I watch her ass as she crosses right in front of my face. I'm still watching when she bends over to grab her bag off the floor. I make a sound in the back of my throat that has her looking back while bent over. Yup, I'll be thinking about that later.

"Are you okay?" she asks while rising with her phone clutched to her chest.

"I'm good." Jesus, I have a fucking boner from her bending over in jeans.

Her phone starts ringing again.

“Are you going to answer that?” Memphis questions.

“It’s my mom,” she explains.

“Should we be quiet? Are you not allowed to talk to boys?” I tease.

“Would you please? I just don’t want her asking five hundred questions.” When Memphis and I both remain quiet, she adds, “I don’t want to be on the phone all night.”

“We’ll be quiet,” I assure her, looking over at Memphis to make sure he agrees. Sometimes, we forget people have to answer to their families.

“Hello,” Waylynn answers softly, then spins to face the other side of the room. Memphis and I exchange a look. Mine says, *maybe her parents are strict*. His says, *they better not try to come between us*.

“Sorry, I didn’t get to it in time.” She runs her hand down the side of her leg repeatedly like she’s nervous or something.

“Out with a friend. We’re having pizza.” Waylynn pauses, then replies much quieter. “Oswald, you remember.”

I smile wide as hell at that. She talked to her mom about me. When I look at Memphis, he lifts his lip in a snarl. His name doesn’t get mentioned.

“Yeah, everything is good. No, I don’t need that.” Her voice is pitched even lower like she really doesn’t want us to hear her.

“I should get back, but I wanted to ask if you know anything about a parking permit.” She’s quiet for a few seconds. “I don’t mind driving myself. I like being able to come and go.” Another short pause. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll make an appointment with someone,” she urges quickly, as if she regrets bringing it up.

“Yeah, I’ll talk to you later. Love you too, bye.”

Waylynn is slow to turn around, like she might be embarrassed, but I can’t just let that go to waste, so I tease, “So you told your mom about me?” I knew she’d be flushed

all pink when she turned around, and man, I love being right. She's adorable.

"She asked what I've been doing," she defends.

"She knows you're doing me?" I feign innocence.

"Shut up." She groans and her head drops back on her shoulders.

"I don't warrant a mention?" Memphis' tone is haughty. He's so offended. I kind of love it.

"I told her about you too," Waylynn admits reluctantly.

"Good. Come sit. Tell me about your parents." Memphis doesn't make it a request.

"That's weird. I don't want to talk about them." Despite her protest, she does return to her seat.

"At least tell me if you get along and if they are nice."

"Yes, we get along, and yes, they are nice," she says with ease. I don't think she's lying, or if she is, she's really good at it.

Memphis watches her closely for a few seconds, as if his stare will make her confess some truth she omitted, but she doesn't crack.

He continues the conversation. "They are in California?"

"For now."

"What does that mean? Are they moving here or something?" I question, knowing it would probably be harder for both of us to date her if that were the case.

"No," she scoffs. "They travel a lot, but not here."

"Is that why you chose Michigan?" I wonder.

Waylynn licks her lips, and I swear she thinks about how to answer for a second. "I went with my gut," she finally says.

"Your gut?" Memphis tilts to the side to see her better.

"Yeah. When I was checking out schools, this one felt right." Her fingers are tangled in the ends of her hair, tugging.

She seems nervous.

“I’m glad you trusted your gut.” I bump her shoulder, drawing her attention back to me. “You should always listen to those little voices.”

Her face goes stark white for a breath, and then she lets out a forced little laugh as her color returns. “I usually do, that’s why I talked to you that day outside the south quad.”

I lean forward and smack a kiss on her lips, not caring that I have pizza breath. I just want her to know I’m happy she’s here. “Want another slice?” I ask when I stand.

“No, I’m still working on this.” She motions down to her lap.

“You?” I ask Memphis, who lifts his plate in response.

“You good if I try the mushroom?” He directs his question to Waylynn.

“Of course, I’m not going to eat an entire pizza.”

When I’m in the kitchen, my phone chimes in my pocket. A text from KJ lights up the screen.

KJ: You tell her.

Me: I don’t even fucking know who she is.

KJ: Like I do?

Me: She was there with you.

KJ: She was there for you.

Me: Bullshit. She was in the room with you and that other chick.

KJ: Not my problem, man.

Me: It will be your problem when I tell the RA you let some chick in our room who went through my shit, violating my privacy.

KJ: You’re such a dick.

Me: You’re such a dick.

I feel superior, even though it’s petty as hell.

KJ: I'll ask Nina to tell her.

Me: Good. If she takes it down, I'll get my shit out of the room.

KJ: I'll call her now.

Damn, he's eager as hell to get rid of me. Oh well. I don't like him either. I set Memphis' plate, with two slices of mushroom, on top of my plate of pizza so I can keep my phone in my other hand. He takes the top dish and scowls at me when he looks on the underside, seeing red sauce. I shrug. It's a fucking paper plate.

"Think you can make room in the closet for me?" I question when KJ texts back with a single word—*done*.

"Of course. Do you need me to store something?" Waylynn answers before Memphis.

I lift my brows. Well, I'm not one to deny a gift when it's placed in my lap. "I told my roommate I was leaving the dorms since he let that girl go through my shit. Are you offering to let me stay with you?"

Waylynn licks her lips. "I already told you I don't mind the company. As long as it's not too weird." She looks back and forth between Memphis and me.

I was only half hoping she would offer to let me leave some stuff there, but this is even better. Is it strange that I'll be living with a girl I'm dating before we even sleep together? Yes. Do I give a fuck? Hell no.

"You're a fucking angel." I reach for her, sealing my lips to hers in a kiss that I hope shows her just how much I want what she is offering.

SEAL THE DEAL



Waylynn

OSWALD'S LIPS are on mine, and he's kissing me like I really am the angel he accused me of being. He's gentle and sweet, but it's more than enough to make me breathless as he leans closer to me.

It's so consuming, I nearly forget Memphis is behind me until I feel him shift. I drag my mouth from Oswald's, even though I don't really want to. "Is this okay?" I feel like I might be doing something wrong. We haven't talked about any of this.

"Does it feel okay to you?" Oswald asks between kisses and teasing his tongue over my bottom lip.

"Yes," I whisper. "But I don't know if it should with both of you here." It's hard to think about them being okay with this. Does that mean they don't like me as much as I like them?

"Lean back," Memphis instructs, and I end up with my back leaned half over his lap. I'm so close to him, I can see the dark stubble on his jaw. I run my tongue over my lips, still tasting Oswald, but the desire to kiss his brother's jaw is strong.

Memphis looks down at me, his eyes serious and so calm. All the weight of the worry I was holding slips away. There's no way he could look at me like he is if I were doing

something wrong by allowing Oswald to kiss me in front of him.

The only thing I feel in his stare is acceptance, adoration, and maybe a little anticipation, all things I'm experiencing right now.

Oswald's hand curls around my waist as he leans down. At the same time, he pulls me up just enough to arch my back. My shirt slides up, and his lips find the skin of my stomach. My breath catches, but Memphis leans down and steals the gasp, placing his lips over mine in a kiss that sears me.

My mind blanks for a second, then heat flushes over me from head to toe, but it lingers between my legs. My pants feel way too tight, even though that wasn't a problem ten minutes ago.

My nipples are hard, brushing the soft fabric of my bra with every exhale, and I want to come more than I ever have in my life. It's nothing like how it feels when I slip my finger between my legs or even when I use the showerhead on my clit.

"Jesus, you smell good," Oswald says against my stomach, still kissing and licking.

I can't respond to Oswald because Memphis is still kissing me, but I do thread my fingers into his hair as he leans over me more, getting closer to my breasts. Oswald shifts on the small futon, and the next thing I know, we crash to the floor. My lip and nose are stinging like crazy, and I'm so confused, all I can do is stare up at Memphis' shocked expression.

"Holy fuck," Oswald murmurs. He's half on the floor, half lying across my leg.

"Ouch," I say softly as I come to the realization that we broke the couch. It might be funny if my face and ankle didn't hurt so badly.

"Get up." Memphis shoves his brother, rolling him the rest of the way off me.

"Ahhhh," I howl and sit straight up, narrowly avoiding headbutting Memphis' chin.

“Oh shit, oh shit.” Oswald scoots farther back until he slams up against the desk chair and it tips over.

A red drop falls into my lap, and I look down, noting it’s not the first. I was just in too much pain to notice a few seconds ago. I roll my tongue on the inside of my lip and feel the nasty texture of raw, ground beef while tasting blood. I reach for my nose and pull my hand away, noting it comes away clean, so the blood is only coming from my mouth, despite how much my nose hurts.

Memphis is still just staring down at me, but the shock on his face has morphed into horror.

“I bit my lip, and I think my ankle might be sprained,” I tell him.

That spurs Oswald into action, and he jumps up and runs to the kitchen. The little fridge tips when he jerks the freezer door open, nearly falling over, but he steadies it with his left palm on the top corner. He pulls out some blue plastic trays, and there’s a loud cracking noise followed by something spilling on the counter.

Seconds later, he’s walking over to me with a wadded up dish towel and a damp piece of paper towel. He shoves the wet cloth at Memphis and barks, “Clean up her face,” before dropping heavily to the floor on his knees.

The weight of the ice-filled towel on my ankle has me stifling a moan. “We need to take your shoe off before it starts to swell.” Oswald looks up and curses. “Clean up her fucking face, Memphis.”

“I’ve got it.” I twist to take the paper towel, but he doesn’t release it.

“Christ,” he mutters, reaching for my chin with one hand and gently wiping under my lip with the other. The cloth is stained red after two swipes. “There’s a little cut under her lip.”

I roll my tongue over the spot, realizing I might have bitten right through it. Fabulous. My mother is going to have a fit and insist I need cosmetic surgery to repair it.

Oswald grabs the back of my heel, holding it firmly, before he slips off my shoe. I look down and see an ugly blue splotch forming, along with some swelling. “Is it broken?” I wonder, thinking that’s a fast reaction for a sprain.

“We need to get some X-rays,” Oswald says solemnly. “Do you feel okay to stand?”

“On my leg?”

Oswald is shaking his head. “Only the good one. I’ll help you,” he offers, reaching out his hands.

He mostly pulls me up. The change in position makes the heavy throb in my foot intensify, and I get scared. “Oswald,” I whine. I’m not proud.

“You’re all right, baby. We’ll go get it looked at.”

“I need to pee,” I tell him, and he freezes with his lips parted.

A weird chuckle comes from his chest, but he just leans down and scoops me up bridal style. “I just needed help, not for you to carry me,” I protest, but he’s already in the bathroom. When he lowers me, it’s slow and careful, but the moment my foot is near the ground, it throbs with my heart.

“Do you need help with...” He’s looking at me, but he’s at a loss for words.

“No, I can do that.” I shake my head.

“I’m leaving the door cracked so I can hear if you need anything.”

“I don’t want you listening to me pee. Go away. I’ll call if I need you.”

“I could just wait here.” He crosses his arms over his chest and stares down at me with a clear challenge.

“Fine!” I grit through my teeth, and he closes the door most of the way. Shimmying my pants down isn’t easy. I have no idea how I’m going to get them off later. The sounds of their murmurs can be heard through the door, but I can’t make out what they are saying.

Thankfully, the bathroom is tiny, so I can hop while leaning myself on the counter to get to the sink to wash my hands after relieving myself. The door pushes open as soon as the water turns on, and Memphis comes in, looking pale.

My nerves ratchet up. Seeing Memphis unsure and worried freaks me the heck out. Oswald pokes his head into the small room too, taking up all the available remaining space. I focus on his calmness so I don't really start to panic.

"I'm ready," I tell them, even though I'm not.

MEMPHIS

MY STOMACH IS in knots while Waylynn is in the bathroom. Her foot already looks bad. While I've dealt with this kind of shit with Oz—sprains and bloody noses are fairly common at his level with sports—it has never freaked me the fuck out because I always knew he would be okay.

When Waylynn looked up at me, clearly in pain and her chin all bloody, I fucking froze. Oswald steps out of the bathroom, leaving the door cracked a little. "Jesus, I think her foot is broken," he whispers with urgency.

"Not sprained?" My voice is flat.

"I don't know, it's swelling fast." He pushes his hair back, then shoves my chest roughly as if he just remembered I'm flaking out. "Snap out of it. She's scared enough already."

"I'm good," I lie. Oz rolls his eyes, then the water in the bathroom turns on, and I push past him to get into the bathroom ahead of him. Maybe seeing her standing will help.

Boy, was I fucking wrong.

She's pale and her lips are a little blue, or maybe it's just the blood has stained them, making her mouth look like a darker color. Her eyes are wide, and she's watching me as if I might be able to do something to help, which finally makes me pull my head out of my ass.

“Where are your keys?” I ask after she says she is ready. I think it will be easier for her to get in and out of her own car. The truck doesn’t have great leg room with her crammed in the middle.

“In my purse.”

“I’ll grab it,” Oswald pipes up and disappears behind me.

I step closer to her. “I’m so sorry you got hurt, Waylynn,” I murmur as I lean down to pick her up.

Effortlessly, she wraps her arm around my neck but argues about the position. “I’d rather walk.”

“And I’d rather carry you.” I angle us to get out the door and find Oswald waiting near the apartment entrance with the door already open for us. If I weren’t so worried about jostling her, I could get down the stairs faster, but as it is, I’m thankful that I only live on the second floor.

Oswald ran ahead so the car is parked on the grass right in front of the main door. My arms are shaking a little as I lower her into the front seat, but I manage to set her down as gently as possible.

I slip into the back after closing her door, and Oz backs up, probably doing a burnout on the grass because he’s in such a rush. “The hospital is just a few blocks away,” he tells her as she leans her head back and lets out a heavy breath.

The minute we arrive at the emergency entrance, I hop out of the car, ready to carry her again, but she waves me off and points at a wheelchair in the vestibule. “You are not carrying me through the hospital.”

I think about arguing, but her face is still pinched in pain, so I growl and stomp on the rubber mat for the door to open. “I’ll park and be right in with your purse.” Oswald leans forward and addresses us both, but mostly Waylynn.

It’s a little awkward getting Waylynn into the chair, but she manages it mostly on her own. I spin her, being careful not to hit her foot on anything, because she’s holding it out beyond the footrest.

“Hi,” Waylynn says softly to a woman behind a high counter.

The woman looks Waylynn over, then her eyes rise to me, and they narrow for just a second. It’s like she knows this is my fault. “What’s going on, young lady?”

“Um, I had an accident. I hurt my foot,” Waylynn tells her.

“It looks like your chin has a cut too.” The nurse or whatever she is looks up at me again. I hold her stare, but she can probably see my guilt.

The doors behind us swoop open, and Oswald comes plowing in with Waylynn’s purse clutched in his hand. “Here you go,” he says, handing the bag over to Waylynn.

“I’ll get you checked in, and we’ll call you back just as soon as we can. I’ll need an ID and your insurance card if you have it.”

Waylynn unzips her bag, and I see her shove the pill bottle to the side before rummaging around and pulling out a wallet. It takes her a second to get her driver’s license out from behind the plastic because her fingers are shaking. The ID is from California, and the picture shows a girl who looks so sad. Her insurance card gets handed over next.

“This will just take me a few minutes. Have a seat in the waiting room and fill this out while I get this entered.” The nurse hands over an iPad in a big bulky case. I reach for it and hand it down to Waylynn. She gives me a soft, appreciative smile as Oswald pulls her away.

I lean over the counter to ask, “How long will it be? She’s in pain.”

“We’ll call her when we’re ready. Have a seat please,” she instructs me as her fingers fly over the keyboard. I huff and walk away. I’m sure that’s the same exact thing she tells everyone.

As I spin, I glance around the large waiting room. There are several people sitting around in tiny clusters. One guy has been coughing since we got in here, but it’s easy to ignore.

None of the others look worse off than Waylynn. I hope she doesn't have to wait for all these people to go ahead of her.

As I amble over to the corner Oz wheeled her into, I watch Waylynn hold the tablet at a strange angle as her fingers move over the screen. Oswald is watching me, not paying much attention to what Waylynn is doing.

“Do you want me to fill that in for you?” I'm so used to doing this kind of shit for Oz, I'm already holding my hand out.

“No, I've got it. Thanks.” She pulls the tablet even closer to her chest as she types, making it clear she doesn't want anyone seeing what she's writing. I haven't forgotten about the pills in her bag, and I still want to know what they are, but now isn't the right time to pressure her.

“Waylynn Graff,” a woman calls loudly. I hop up and get my hands on the back of her wheelchair. I know from experience they may only let one of us back with her if they let us at all, and I want to be the one with her. I'm selfish.

“Hey, hurt your foot, huh?” The nurse angles me out of the way smoothly, taking the handles on the back of the chair. “I'll take it from here. Give us some time to get her settled, and we'll give you an update,” she tells me without committing to allowing us back.

“Do you have your phone, sweetness?” I call out as the nurse pushes her through the double doors. “Call us.” I order the last part. I know how long it can take the staff to update families. Shit, we're not even her family.

“I will.” She bites her bottom lip and looks back at us like she doesn't want to go in alone either. Damn it.

Waylynn

“I'M AMY. We'll get you triaged, and you can finish filling that out while I get you all set up,” the nurse says, pushing me down the long hall.

“I’m almost done,” I admit. I was rushing a bit because I didn’t want the guys seeing my medical history. It feels dumb now though. I’d rather they be here. “Will they be allowed to come in and sit with me?” I feel like a little kid asking for their mom, but I don’t really care. My foot hurts, and I don’t want to be alone.

“Let’s see what we have going on first. I have a feeling we’re going to need some X-rays, and they can’t be with you for that anyway,” she answers dismissively. This probably doesn’t feel like a big deal to her. I’m sure she sees worse stuff all the time.

“Okay,” I say softly.

“Do you think you can get on the bed yourself?” she asks after wheeling me into a small, individual room.

“I think so.” I lean my palm on the bed and hop on my good foot. The jostling of my other foot has me hissing, but I manage to get my butt on the bed with my eyes watering a little. It’s harder not to cry now that I’m alone—well, with this stranger.

“Oh, that is swollen. I’m going to lift your foot onto the bed,” she warns, grabbing my leg high on the back of my calf.

“Ouch.” I wipe a tear off my cheek when my ankle lands on the noisy mattress.

“I’m going to get an IV started so we can give you some medicine that will help after we get you X-rayed. Any latex allergies?”

“Not that I know of.” My teeth start to chatter.

“Can you tell me what happened?” The nurse rounds the bed, going to a computer mounted on the wall.

“Um, we were all sitting on a futon and it broke. I think Oswald kind of landed on my foot, then he rolled off.” She doesn’t need to know we were kissing, right?

“Are those your friends? Brothers?” She takes the time to look over at me, waiting for an answer.

“Um, friends?” It sounds like a question even to me.

“What happened to your chin under your lip?” She’s still watching me. Damn it, I forgot about that.

“Um...” I can feel how hot my face is. This is so embarrassing. “I was kissing someone when it happened.” I can’t bring myself to say his name. What if this gets out on my record or something? I can’t have him getting in trouble.

“Talk about bad timing.” She snorts. “Are you sure it was just an accident and no one hurt you?”

“Oh gosh no!” I say quickly while shaking my head for good measure.

“Okay then, we can call them back in a little while. We’re going to need to get you into a gown and get that paperwork finished up.” She nods toward the iPad on the end of the bed.

“Anything in your medical history I should know before the IV?” She pushes the computer away and comes to the side of the bed.

“I’m on medication,” I whisper, even though we’re alone in a closed off room.

“What kind and for what?” She’s slightly disinterested as she flips my arm left to right, looking for a vein.

“Xanax, for an anxiety disorder.” I lick my dry lips.

“Do you take it for panic attacks? When was the last time?” she asks in quick succession.

“I take it twice a day.”

Her eyes come up to mine. “Okay, any alcohol or drug use?”

“No, none,” I answer hastily. I hope she doesn’t think I’m lying.

“Any other medical conditions besides the anxiety disorder?”

“No.” I shake my head, meeting her eyes. That’s what my therapist and Dr. Tobin call my issue, so I’m not lying.

“Okay, your veins look good. We need to get you out of these clothes. Do you want me or your friends to help you?”

“Um, I think I can manage.” I really don’t want a stranger helping me, and asking Oswald and Memphis might be worse.

My phone buzzes, interrupting my thoughts. I lean to the side, careful not to move my foot, and see a message from Memphis.

“They want to know when they can come back.” I look at the nurse.

“It’s up to you, like I said. They’ll have to wait here when you go to get X-rays anyway.”

“I guess they can come back and help me,” I tell her, but I have every intention of doing it myself before they get here.

“Okay. Put this on so it opens in the back. I’ll leave an extra you can wear like a robe.” She drops some folded fabric on the end of the bed she got out of the cabinet. “I’ll bring them back once you get that paperwork submitted. You can leave your undies on, but take off your bra if it has an underwire.”

“Okay.” I lean down and finish up the rest of the form, which goes easily after my medical history, then hit submit.

Now for the sucky part. Getting my shirt and bra off is easy. I slip one gown on, and my back is freezing within seconds. My teeth start chattering again.

I’m dreading taking my pants off.

The door opens as I lean back on the bed, unbuttoning my pants. I lift my head to see Memphis’ stormy gaze land on mine. I have a second to think this is the first time he’s seen me without a bra and it’s in a stupid hospital gown, then Oswald walks in right behind him with the nurse in their wake.

“Decided to go at it alone?” She eyes me with a hand on her hip.

“Um...”

“What do you need?” Memphis touches my shoulder.

“I have to take my pants off. Do you think you could just cut them?” I’m not joking at all. There is no way I can get my foot through the material and not die.

“Let me grab some shears.” The nurse heads out of the room.

Oswald comes to the other side of the bed and half lifts me until I’m in a sitting position. I feel his fingers trace over my back, and the ends of the strings tickle my skin as he ties them. Then, without instruction, he grabs the other gown, shakes it out, and slides it up my arms just like a robe.

“Something tells me you’ve done this before,” I remark.

“A time or two. It’s okay, it’s just your nerves.” He brushes his finger down the side of my face, and I try to stop my teeth from knocking together by clenching my jaw, but then my body starts to feel jittery.

“Here we go. Want me to do it?” the nurse offers.

“I’ve got it,” Memphis says darkly and angles himself so the nurse can’t get any closer.

“Be careful. They are really sharp.”

Memphis doesn’t make a sound, but in my head, I hear, *I’m not an idiot.*

Once he makes the first cut, the process is pretty painless, until I need to lift my butt up for Oswald to pull out the wasted jeans after his brother cuts both sides.

“Let me get that IV started and we can get you down to X-ray.” The nurse nudges Oswald out of the way, so he ends up on the same side as Memphis. “You guys will need to wait here for her to get back.” She barely looks up at them while scrubbing my arm with a cold alcohol wipe.

I turn my head to the side and close my eyes. I don’t hate needles, but I hate watching them go in my skin. It freaks me out. Memphis cradles my head to his chest, and I breathe in his scent. It reminds me of the first day I ran into him. It’s strange how things change so quickly. I didn’t want him to know I existed then, and now he consumes half of my thoughts.

Oswald grabs my hand in his, rubbing his callused thumb over the back of my palm, and I let out a sigh. Too bad they can't come with me to X-ray. This is probably the most relaxed I've been since it happened.

I jump a little when the needle slides in, prompting Memphis to slip his fingers into my hair and massage my head.

CONFESSIONS



Oswald

IT'S LATE AS FUCK when I pull the car around to pick up Waylynn from the hospital. Memphis is standing behind her wheelchair, looking a little more relaxed than he has in the past few hours.

Her sprain is pretty bad. The doctor said it was between a grade two and three and sent her home with a prescription for crutches. After the images came back, they gave her something for the pain, and she's been extra sleepy since. When the nurse was looking over the cut on her chin to see if it needed a stitch, she confessed to making out with Memphis when it happened. If the nurse thought it was strange that I was holding her hand while it was happening, she didn't react.

Memphis helps her into the front seat, lifting her leg for her, then closing the door. Waylynn lets out an exhausted breath, closing her eyes. "I'm so glad that's over."

"Me too, baby," I tell her softly. I've apologized twenty times, but it doesn't feel like enough.

"I like it when you call me baby. Did you say that out loud, or were you talking in my head?" She blinks over at me.

I grin. "Do you mean did *you* say that out loud?" I ask.

"No, I'm all fuzzy, and I can't tell if your words are real or coming from in here." She points to the side of her head. "Don't tell, but I've been hearing you guys in there since I was

little. That's why I was so freaked out when you talked to me. I thought I really was losing my mind," she whispers and shakes her head slowly.

"Oh yeah? What do I say?" I question, wondering what kind of drugs they gave her.

"Just stuff, words...words...words. Is that how you say it? It sounds weird now. Words," she mumbles.

"Let's get her home and into bed," Memphis tells me while I continue to smile at Waylynn. At least she's not in pain, and adorable I might add.

I'm pretty sure she falls asleep on the short ride home. When we get to her house, she doesn't stir as I park. "Get the door. I'll carry her this time," I tell Memphis. He grabs her bag and fishes around for her keys.

"Do you think she changed the alarm code?" Memphis asks as he climbs out.

"Let's hope not. She probably won't be able to remember what it is if she did." I lean down and slide my hand under the backs of her legs.

Waylynn's eyes pop open, and she stares at me all glassy and confused. "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?" she asks, sounding like she's about to cry.

"No, baby, you're not crazy."

"Stick around for a while, everyone eventually does," she mumbles, and her head falls backward while her eyes roll up in her head.

"Goddamn, she's out of it. I don't like seeing her like this," Memphis says from over my shoulder.

"It's better than seeing her in pain." I hoist her up into my arms and use my side to push the car door closed.

"Yeah, I'll get the alarm." He rushes in after unlocking the door. Thankfully, the damn thing stops beeping, so I'm pretty sure the code is correct.

Memphis races up the stairs and pulls back the covers in her bed so I can lay her down against the sheets. Her shoes are in a clear bag, along with her pretty purple bra, which we probably left in the car, but she is wearing a weird, hospital grippy sock on one foot and blue pants that look like scrubs but feel like paper. They had to split the bottom of the pants to get it over her air cast, but it's better than leaving her in nothing but panties. I think Memphis was about to have a fucking heart attack when he realized she didn't have anything to put on to get home.

She reaches for me as I pull away. "Please don't go."

"I'm not leaving, baby. Go back to sleep," I tell her softly and straighten when her arm falls back to the bed.

Memphis leaves her room, and I follow behind him. "I'm going to make sure everything is locked up," he tells me.

"Fuck, tomorrow is going to suck." I groan. I can't skip lifting since I bailed on practice last night, but I don't regret staying home with Waylynn. I do regret our cheap ass furniture though.

"Yeah, go get some sleep." He knocks his head to the side when we pass a room. I slow down to take him up on the offer, but I know where I'm going, and it's not back to the room I stayed in before. What if she wakes up and needs to pee or something?

"I'll set my alarm for six-thirty. I'm not showering or anything. They can all kiss my ass," I say to his back.

"I'll drive you to the field house in the morning."

Once he's downstairs, I backtrack to Waylynn's room and slip off my jeans. Usually, my dick would be hard at the thought of climbing into bed with her, but not tonight. Just as I'm pulling the covers over both of us, I see a silhouette in the dark hallway.

Memphis strolls into the room and slips his shirt over his head before I hear the zipper of his pants. "Guess we both had the same idea." I chuckle into the dark, and he freezes.

“It’s a king, we’ll be fine,” he says, his voice pitched low so he doesn’t wake her.

“Just don’t crush her,” I warn.

“You should have put her in the middle. I’ll be careful.” In the next second, Waylynn is pressed up against me, and that hard-on I thought I was too mature for springs to life with a quickness I take a moment to appreciate.

“That okay?” Memphis asks after sliding her across the bed.

“Yeah, I’m good.” My voice might be a little strangled, but at least he would understand why.

“Is your alarm set?” Memphis adjusts the pillow.

“Yeah, night,” I tell him. Even with the hard-on, I’m exhausted enough to fall right to sleep. It’s been a long night.

Waylynn

MY BLADDER IS SCREAMING at me to get up, but I don’t want to move. I fall back asleep for a few more minutes, hours, who knows, but when I wake up again, there’s no holding it. I gingerly move my leg, and the pain that was there last night is just a deep, dull ache now. I’m not supposed to walk on the air cast, I’m supposed to use crutches for two weeks, but I don’t have them yet and I’m going to pee all over myself if I don’t get to the bathroom quickly.

“What are you doing?” Memphis asks. His voice is deep and sleepy, and my heart takes notice, thumping faster.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I confess. I wasn’t even awake enough to realize I wasn’t alone like I usually am. Now that I realize it, I recognize both of them are here...in my bed...sleeping with me.

“I’ll help you.” He sits up, and I can see him rub his hand over his face in the moonlight coming through the crack in the curtains.

“I’m okay,” I offer, not wanting to bother him.

“I wasn’t asking, Waylynn,” he tells me, and his voice is even deeper.

When he spins and tries to slide his hands under me, I sit up and scoot closer to the edge of the bed, thwarting him. I stand, using only one leg, and hover my bad foot behind me with my knee bent. “I just need to lean on you, if that’s okay?” He makes a huffing growling sound but wraps his arm around my back. “I’ll get the crutches tomorrow,” I promise so I won’t have to bother him.

“Just stop before I pick you up and end up fucking something else up,” he says with a little bite in his tone.

I roll my lips in to keep from saying anything else, then push the bathroom door open. The little night-light gives off enough of a glow that I can see without being blinded.

Memphis stands next to me, facing the toilet like he doesn’t know what to do next. It takes me a moment to muster up the courage to say, “I’m okay now. Thank you.” I hate feeling like a burden.

I watch Memphis head toward the door. He twists the little lock on the knob around and starts to close it, but I call out, “Please don’t lock it.” My voice is a little too loud and a little too shaky, exhibiting the panic in my tone. I don’t like locked rooms. It makes me feel like I’m back at the Netherwood Treatment Center.

“It was mostly from habit. Do you want me to stay?” He sounds perplexed.

“No, just don’t lock it, please.”

“I won’t. I can leave it cracked,” he offers, probably picking up on my panic.

“No, it’s okay. I’m okay.” I’m trying to convince both of us. *Is she really?* His voice rings clear in my head, and I have to look away from him because I’m afraid he will somehow know my mind is playing tricks on me. Shame tightens my throat, along with a hefty dose of bewilderment I don’t really understand.

“Waylynn, I’ll be right here if you need anything,” he promises. When he pulls the door closed, I notice it doesn’t latch. He left it cracked because I was uncomfortable.

When I push down the pants the hospital gave me, I let them slide all the way off, being careful not to jostle my leg too much. I’m not putting those things back on, since they smell funny. Hobbling to the sink is easy enough, but moving does cause the ache in my ankle to intensify. Thankfully, it’s not as bad as it was earlier.

“Can I come in?” Memphis taps on the door lightly when the water shuts off.

“Um...” I stall for time so I can get closer to the door. The bedroom is dark, so he probably won’t even know I took the pants off in there.

He steps inside without waiting, and his eyes go down to my bare legs just as I’m looking at his exposed torso. I don’t know how I didn’t notice that before. Holy crap, he’s stunning. He’s not chiseled with muscle, but he’s solid, thick, and sturdy. There’s a thin dark trail of hair below his navel. I have never once thought body hair could be sexy, but it sure as heck is on him. When my eyes dip even farther, I force my gaze back up to his. He’s in a pair of boxers. I was sleeping next to him like that, and I don’t even remember. What a damn shame.

“I don’t like the pants,” I blurt out when we continue to stand there.

“I wasn’t a fan either. Want me to get you something else?” *Please say no.* He takes a step closer, and I swear his eyes trace over me again in a way that makes me forget all about locked doors, despite just hearing his voice in my head again, proving why they thought I needed to be sealed away.

“No, I’m okay,” I tell him, feeling daring for some reason.

When he continues to approach, I expect him to turn to put me under his shoulder again, but he stops when he’s only inches away from me. I have to tilt my head back so I can see his face. “I’m so sorry.” His hand comes up slowly to cradle my cheek.

“It was an accident—not your fault,” I tell him for what must be the fourth time since we broke the couch.

“I should have been more careful, then I rolled Oz over your leg.” He shakes his head like he doesn’t understand what happened himself.

“Memphis, I don’t blame you for anything. I wouldn’t even take it back if it meant my leg didn’t get hurt. I’ll be fine—*I am fine*,” I amend.

He lowers his lips to mine in a soft, chaste kiss. “You better quit talking to me like that or I might never leave your bed.”

“Is that supposed to scare me?” I think I’m still a little loopy from the drugs, because I was not planning on saying that out loud.

Memphis makes a grunting sound, and the heat of his body brushes against mine. The shirt I’m wearing that felt too revealing only seconds ago feels too long now, since it creates a barrier between our skin.

“I’m going to put you back in bed now, sweetness, before I set you on this counter and taste every inch of you.”

I swallow a gulp. The visual he created has me squeezing my thighs together and wondering why that would be a bad idea.

“Because you’re on medication and hurt. I won’t make that worse.”

“Crap, did I ask that out loud? That’s so embarrassing.”

“I promise you have nothing to be embarrassed about. Let’s go.” He moves next to me now so I’m under his shoulder, but I get a thrill when I feel his bulge brush against my stomach as he does it.

“Scoot in,” he instructs when I reach the bed. Oswald is sleeping on his side, facing away from me, with the covers down by his waist. I take a peek under the blankets when I lift them, but it’s too dark to see if he left his pants on with his shirt.

I scoot backward, dragging my bum leg, and the shift of position gives me instant relief from the heavy throbbing.

I curl on my side, and my butt is touching Oswald a little. Again, this seems like an okay thing to do right now as Memphis climbs in bed, facing me. When his arm wraps over my side and he tucks my face deeper into his chest with his palm on the back of my head, I let out a heavy sigh. That calm that sometimes invades me with his touch soothes me, and I fall back to sleep nearly instantly.



MY HEAD HAS BEEN POUNDING since I woke up, and I'm pretty sure I know why. I didn't take my medicine last night or this morning, which sucks because it's pouring outside with brief rolls of thunder, meaning it's my favorite kind of day. I love rain. The gloomy mistiness that blankets the world in a fuzzy haze makes it feel okay to cuddle up in a chair and read all day.

However, I'm feeling overstimulated, even though I've been sitting in silence for two hours, other than a brief phone call to my mom to explain I hurt my ankle. I wanted to inform her in case she somehow gets notified.

She didn't get the real story. Frankly, I'm not sure if she would be ecstatic that I was kissing someone or terrified. I'm leaning toward the latter, but I do think I earned Memphis and Oswald brownie points by telling her they took me to the hospital and stayed with me the entire time.

The text message on my phone from Memphis told me he would be back at lunch and not to do anything while he was gone, but that goes ignored, right along with the snacks and water he left on my bedside table. He's not going to be here for a little while, and I need my purse. I'm not looking forward to trying to get down the stairs, but scooting down on my butt doesn't seem like a bad option right now.

The banister creaks when I use the post to pull myself up at the base of the stairs. I look around, only now realizing I'm

going to have to hop around on one foot a lot more than I was thinking. There's just not as much stuff to lean on until I get to the wall, and that's not that helpful.

I could either cry in frustration or scream when I set my butt on one of the stools in the kitchen. I haven't found my purse yet, and I have no idea what they did with it last night. I hope they brought the damn thing home. Then I remember they would have had to have it in order to drive me home and get in the house, since my keys were in it.

I pull my phone out of the pocket of my sleep shorts I hastily put on when I woke up in just my panties this morning. All the boldness of last night fled me in the morning light, or maybe it was because I didn't have Memphis there to make me feel daring.

I have my finger over his name, but then I look higher at the time. I don't know what his schedule is on Tuesday and Thursday. I could interrupt his class if I message him now, but I'm feeling desperate. This is the longest I've gone without my meds in a long time.

I decide to text Oswald instead. He may be in class, but he's not teaching it.

Me: Sorry to bother you, but do you know where my purse is?

While I wait, I hobble over to the cabinet next to the sink and find a small bottle of Tylenol I use for cramps when I need it, which isn't all that often since I got on birth control a while ago.

My phone vibrates while I'm washing down the tablets that will hopefully help with my headache and the ache in my foot.

Oswald: Memphis had it last night. How R U feeling?

Me: Okay. Do you know if he's teaching now? Can I text him?

Oswald: Go ahead, he keeps his phone on vibrate. I'll see you after practice. Rest up.

Me: Thank you. Have a good practice.

I debate adding an emoji, but I just hit send and pull up my thread with Memphis.

Me: Sorry to bother you. Do you know where my purse is?

I get more antsy with every second that ticks by. After two minutes, I decide I can't just stand here and wait any longer, so I hobble jump, trying not to put any weight on my foot as I search around. After looking through the living room and still coming up empty, I drop onto the couch to catch my breath for a few minutes.

I need those crutches, getting around like this is ridiculous, but I don't even know where the prescription for those is. I decide to forget about the prescription and call the pharmacy directly. I'm sure I can just buy a pair and have them delivered.

Twenty minutes later, I get confirmation that Instacart will be delivering my item in under an hour. I'm finally making progress.

As my good leg starts to shake, I start to wonder if Memphis wasn't even just a little right about the junkie thing. I feel desperate for my pills. My anxiety is welling up, making me too aware of everything, and my heartbeat, the sound of my breathing, and the obsessive thoughts are getting harder to ignore. How long do I have before the voices return full force? Will I be able to handle it if they do? What if the pills don't work or take longer to take effect, since I skipped doses?

Should I call Maxwell, my therapist? But what if he talks to my parents? I really don't want to field any more questions from my mom. She let me off kind of easy. It may have been because I played up how sore my foot is to get her to let me off the phone.

I scrub my hand down my tingly face, on the verge of shouting in frustration, when a rumble of thunder actually shakes the house and the power flickers off at the same moment. "Crap!"

When I glance out the window, I see the storm is raging, making the trees and shrubs bend and bow against the heavy wind and rain. I count to thirty in my head, and the power doesn't come back on. I don't even know what to do in this situation, which makes me feel woefully naïve.

How far does this extend? Does it mean school will get canceled? I move to stand up with the intention of finding some candles, but the moment I set my foot down, I remember why I need those crutches. My leg tries to collapse, but I manage to keep myself up by gripping the end of the couch.

My phone vibrates as I'm clenching my teeth to ward off the pain, but I still hurry to get it out of my pocket.

Sir: Downstairs. I will bring it to you when I get back.

Me: Where downstairs? I can't find it.

Sir: Are you downstairs...

Why do those dots seem so ominous?

Me: Yes. I need my bag.

Sir: How the fuck did you get downstairs on a sprained ankle?

Me: On my butt.

Sir: □

The text bubble comes up and disappears several times before he finally texts.

Sir: I'm on my way.

There's no way it took that long to write that, so he either changed what he was going to say or got distracted while he was texting, but I have a feeling it was the former. His language also makes me think he's not happy, which builds this edgy excitement inside me I'm not familiar with. It's part fear I've done something wrong, and part interest in what he might do about it.

TOLERANCE



*M*emphis

I'M SOAKED by the time I make it to the truck. I shake the water off my hand before slipping it inside my bag to get my keys.

The rain is coming down so hard, even the wipers can't keep up when I'm only going twenty-five miles an hour. Thankfully, there's barely any foot traffic, so I can turn on red, making it that much faster to Waylynn's house.

Her car is still in the driveway, so I park behind it, then tuck my bag into the floorboard. I'll come back for it when the rain lets up. Her house key is in my pocket. I took it off her key ring last night. Would someone think it was a little shady that I did it without her knowledge? Maybe. But I really don't give a shit what anyone else thinks, and I haven't made a copy yet. I'm showing some restraint.

In the few minutes it took me to drive here, I forgot how cold the rain felt until I'm running for her kitchen door with my head ducked low. The overhang from her little porch offers a slight reprieve as I slide the key into the lock and open the door. The house is as silent as I've ever heard it. There's no whir of a fan or even the hum of a fridge.

When I look toward the keypad for her alarm, the screen is red with a warning showing the battery symbol. "Waylynn," I call loudly.

“I’m...coming,” she pants. A few seconds later, I see her entering from the shadowy hall. She leans her shoulder against the wall and tries to give me a smile, but it’s flat and filled with frustration.

“You should be up in bed,” I scold and rush over to her, forgetting about my wet shoes and clothes until she hisses when I haul her against me.

“You’re soaked.” She tries to push off of my chest but gives up in the next breath, leaning against me for support instead.

“It’s raining,” I tell her needlessly.

“I hate feeling helpless,” she mutters under her breath, ignoring my comment.

“You’re not helpless, you just need to be careful for a little while,” I remind her, pressing my lips to the top of her head. I can still smell her strawberry scent, and my entire body relaxes.

“Will you find my purse please? I need my medicine,” she admits in a small voice.

My first instinct is to ask her what the pills are for, but I stifle the question. “Let me help you sit back down, then I will find it.”

“Okay.” She gives in, leaning against me as I take her back to the living room. She even allows me to lift her leg and place her ankle on a pillow before her head falls back and she blows a raspberry.

I try to turn on the lamp on the table next to her, but it just clicks.

“The power is out.” She lifts her head to look at me. “I was going to find some candles, but...”

“Where are they? I’ll get them.”

“I know there are some in my bathroom linen closet, but there might be a few in the laundry room.” She adjusts a little so she’s not lying down so much. “Can you find my purse first?” Her eyes are a little wide, and she looks wary. I’m

trying to tell myself it's because of the storm and not because of the pills.

"I'll be right back," I answer noncommittally. In truth, I have no idea where her purse is. I know we had it last night, so I think back to the last time I remember seeing it. During the ride home, it was in the car when I took her keys out. Shit, I may have left it in the backseat. I hope it's still there.

I duck back out into the heavy rain and round the car. The rear door handles don't even pop up for me to grab. I realize too late I need her keys, so I stomp back into her house, making a mess as I do, and grab her key fob off the counter.

The handles ease out when I hit unlock, allowing me to lean into the backseat and grab her bag off the floor. This thing probably cost more than my rent for a year, and I left it in the car. Good thing she lives in a nice neighborhood.

Once I'm back inside, she calls for me. "Is everything okay?" I'm sure she can hear me going in and out like a psycho.

"Yeah, I had to run outside," I explain without telling her why. I don't bother drying my hands as I search through her bag for the little bottle. My movements are rushed as I open the top as quietly as I can and snap a picture with my phone.

A pit of shame forms in my stomach, but I don't delete the picture. I want to be able to identify them later. I shove the bottle deeper into the bag after drying it off a little with a hand towel.

"I found it." I slip my shoes and socks off, leaving them by the small rug near the door. After I give it to her, I'll clean up my mess and make us lunch.

She reaches for the bag the moment I get close, but her eyes are avoiding mine like the plague.

With a tremor in her fingers, she unzips the bag and jerks it open to find the pills. My head is telling me this is so wrong, that I shouldn't be allowing her to take whatever is in the bag, but I keep my mouth shut so I don't fuck things up like last time.

Knowing I have the picture helps. I'll figure out what they are, and if she does need help, we'll get her into a treatment center. They never worked for my parents, but I'll make sure they work for her.

She lifts her palm to her mouth, and I watch her swallow with her head still tilted back. When she replaces the cap on the pill bottle, she tries to look at me, but her eyes keep darting away like she's ashamed. Damn it, I knew I should have stopped her.

"It's for an anxiety disorder," she confesses. "I take Xanax twice a day to help me manage...things."

Waylynn

At first, Memphis seems stunned. I don't know if it's because I told him what the medication is without him asking, or because I admitted I have a mental health disorder, or if he doesn't believe me. I'm having a hard time looking at him.

Either way, a huge weight is lifted off my shoulders. I haven't told him everything, but it's a start. Within seconds, the feeling of relief gets eclipsed with shame. When I try to glance at Memphis, he's not looking at me. His eyes are on the floor between us.

There's a sour taste in my mouth, and my throat tightens. My first instinct is to hide or ask him to leave, but I don't because I told him I wouldn't run anymore.

The doubt comes next, myself and every other variant making me feel inadequate, not good enough, not normal enough.

The doorbell rings, and I actually jump at the sound. Memphis glances around like he's expecting someone else to materialize in the room. "It's probably my crutches." Good timing. At least I'll be able to get around on my own.

I push myself off the couch and hop down the hall. He doesn't try to stop me. When I open the door, there's a man on the other side. He's probably in his forties and soft around the

middle. Not that I'm judging, it's just so noticeable because his shirt is sticking to him from standing in the rain. He's holding an umbrella over his head, but the rain is coming down sideways, so it barely matters.

I feel guilty that I didn't think to leave better instructions about parking around back, but he pushes the silver crutches at me and says, "Your walkway is nuts."

"Sorry about that." I contemplate giving him a larger tip, but I don't think I can amend my already generous tip after the fact, and I can't race back to my purse, so this time, he's just going to have to think I'm a jerk.

"You should have said that in the notes." He turns and stomps down the walkway in a strange angry jog.

"Thank you," I call out, then close the door. A scream flies from my mouth when I turn. Memphis is standing right behind me, and I had no idea he was even there. The crutches crash to the ground when I raise my hands to cover my mouth so I can stifle the shout.

"Oh my gosh." I bend down, using only one leg while swinging my casted foot out behind me to pick up the crutches. They are wrapped in loose plastic, and it looks like I might need tools or something to get them set up, since they are way too short right now. Hopefully, there are instructions. If not, I'm sure the internet will tell me how to do it.

"I thought they would be ready to go." I chuckle nervously. The awkwardness is killing me. I should have kept my mouth shut and not said anything about the pills, but I could feel how badly he wanted to know and I thought it might be okay if I told him.

"You have to adjust them to your height," he says, but his voice is devoid of any emotion.

"Cool. Well, I'm just going to get these set up. You can get back to school or whatever."

Memphis pulls the crutches out of my hand and leans them against the wall before stalking over to me. I start to back up,

but there's nowhere to go, so my back hits the closed door. He bends at the waist and scoops me up into his arms bridal style.

He did this yesterday, but I was hurting too badly to be concerned with much else. Now, all I can think about is him putting me down. "I can make it," I argue lamely, because I know he will do whatever the heck he wants, and truthfully, there's some comfort in that.

He doesn't speak on the way to the living room, but he places me carefully back in the same spot, even fluffing the pillow under my foot again.

"I'm going to get the crutches. Don't move." He even points at me for emphasis.

It takes a long time for him to return, but when he does, the crutches are out of the bag, and he's gripping them sideways under his arm with two jar candles held in the fingertips of his other hand. He has to angle himself oddly to get into the room.

The candles get placed on the table, and he fishes around in his pocket. "I found this in the drawer." He holds up a lighter. "Apparently, I have zero fucking boundaries when it comes to you. I want to apologize, but it feels wrong considering I'll probably do it again." He drops onto the sofa, placing the hollow metal crutches across his lap. "I will admit that I recognize it's fucked up, and it always seems to land me in trouble, but I can't stop."

"Um..." I don't know what to say to that. Is he really saying sorry for looking for a lighter, or is he referring to something else like it seems?

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you, Waylynn, and that I pressured you into telling me something you weren't ready to."

He's staring at me, and I fully admit I don't know which way is up. Five minutes ago, I thought I'd scared him away, but that's not what it seems like now.

There's a part of me that wants to confess everything to him now. It's actually exhausting waiting for them to find out, and then there's an even smaller part of me that thinks they

really will leave me alone when he knows the truth, and I want to get that over with. Thinking about the pain of them forgetting me and treating me like he does everyone else makes me want to throw up.

I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't tell him I spent years in and out of treatment for months at a time. That it's not just an anxiety disorder or a plea for attention. There is definitely something different about me, and someday, it might get worse.

I think I'm getting close to the point where I owe them the truth, but I just can't risk it. Not yet. I'm selfish. "Don't apologize to me. You weren't wrong to think...something. Can you help me with those? I need to use the bathroom," I say while pointing at his lap.

I need a few seconds away from his stormy blue eyes that make me want to confess all my secrets with the promise it might be okay.

Memphis blinks, then looks down. "How tall are you? Five-five?"

"Five-six." He gives me a dubious glare as if out of everything, that is a lie.

After a few adjustments—no tools needed—he stands up with the crutches in one hand and pulls me up with the other. "Try this."

I slip the things under my arms, but they hurt my armpits when I try to swing forward. "Give me those, five-six," he mocks. I balance on one foot while he makes another adjustment. This time, when I put them under my arms, I have to lean down a little. "You need to hold yourself up a bit. You don't want to put all your weight on your underarms. See if that works okay."

"It's better, but I feel like this is a little too low." I swing myself around the room a little. At least I can get around, but this feels nearly as exhausting as hopping everywhere on one foot.

“We can pad them.” He crosses his arms over his chest and leans his head back, watching me. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, for him to ask me more about the medicine and why I take it, but instead he says, “Go to the bathroom. I’m going to get you something to eat, and we’re going to watch a movie.” He’s back to being his bossy self. That, more than anything, helps me relax.

Just as I’m about out of the room, I remind him, “Power’s out, so we’ll have to use my computer.”

MEMPHIS

THE BANG on the backdoor has me jumping up. When I look around, I realize just how dark it is. The storm has passed, but it’s still raining. Waylynn is looking up at me, just as confused as I feel. I must have dozed off at some point.

The knocking comes again. “Shit, what time is it?” I pull out my phone after uncurling myself from around her and head to the kitchen. I know who’s at the door before I open it, and there’s an apology poised on my lips. “Sorry, I didn’t hear the phone.” I turned it back on vibrate this morning, which is why I must have slept through his calls.

Oswald steps inside and shivers a little. “I didn’t think you guys were here. Why is it so dark?”

“Power’s out.” I walk over to the utility room and grab a towel from a basket of folded laundry.

“Uh...” Oz looks at me in confusion while rubbing the thing over his head. “No it’s not. Look next door, or at the streetlights,” he says like I’m being dumb.

I walk over and flip the switch, but I know there’s no power. Something would have kicked on at this point, even if it were just the fridge.

“Shit, I assumed it was just from the storm.”

“You should call Bates before it gets later.” Oswald takes his shoes off and tips them sideways near the air-conditioning vent, even though it’s not working now.

“I’ll check the panel. Maybe it’s just the main breaker or something.” I don’t know much about electrical stuff. I’ve worked with Bates a few times when he was doing a side job or just needed an extra body for grunt work, but if it’s more than flipping a switch, I will need to call him.

“You do that. I’ll call.” He holds up his phone.

“Go tell Waylynn it was you and let her know what I’m doing,” I instruct. “Wait, I don’t even know where the electrical panel is.” I tag along behind him.

“Hey, beautiful, how’s my girl?” Oswald leans down and presses a kiss to her lips, then pulls away a few inches so he can continue to watch her closely. He makes it look so easy.

“I’m good. How was your day?” Her reply is soft, relaxed, and I take a little credit for that. It took her a little while to unwind after telling me she has anxiety, but after we ate and I pulled her close to cuddle while we pretended to watch a movie on her computer, she melted against me.

“Where is the fuse box, sweetness?” I interject before Oswald can go into a detailed explanation about his day.

Her lips pull down in a wincing frown. “The basement?” she guesses.

“Where is the basement?” I ask, realizing I should explore this house more.

“Oh, the hallway off the kitchen. There’s a false front, so it looks like a shallow linen closet.”

“What? That’s cool as shit. Are there any other hidden rooms?” Oz sinks next to her on the sofa with his phone still clutched in his hand.

“Kind of. Some of the windows in the sunroom actually work like doors.” Waylynn smiles like she’s excited to share the tidbit.

“We should play hide and seek,” Oswald suggests, making Waylynn snicker.

I think I might like roaming through this place looking for Waylynn. Whoever found her first would get to have her. “Don’t forget to call Bates if the lights don’t come back on,” I remind my brother and head to the hallway using my phone as a flashlight.

“What’s going on?” I hear Waylynn ask, much more serious now.

“Everyone else on the street has power. Looks like the issue might just be your house.”

“Oh no. I didn’t think to look. I didn’t even know who to call to fix it. I just assumed they would take care of it.”

As I walk away, I hear Oz telling her there’s a number you can call or even an app you can sign into. I should have made sure she did that, but I didn’t even think about it and I didn’t really mind. Now the food in her fridge and freezer are probably wasted because I fell asleep.

Clunking noises alert me that Waylynn is coming, which might be a good thing because these closets just look like closets to me.

“It’s this one.” She uses the end of her crutch as a pointer. “The realtor said it sticks sometimes, but I know it opens because the movers put some boxes down there for me.”

I open the door and tug roughly on the shelf. There’s a definite cracking sound and the shelves shift. With one more wrench on the left edge, the thing swings forward on a hidden hinge.

“That is cool as shit!” Oswald repeats in awe over my shoulder. “We should totally make a panic room down here.”

“It’s kind of creepy,” Waylynn hedges.

“Since you’re here, you can bring your light down and help me find the box,” I tell Oswald, and he starts to snicker.

“You don’t know where the *box* is, Memphis.”

“Shut up.” I roll my eyes.

“I don’t know where the box is either, but I know it’s down there,” Waylynn says innocently, which makes Oz really start to laugh.

“Your box is down there?”

“Oh my gosh, shut up.” There’s outrage in her tone now that she caught on. I hear a thwack and smile when I realize she just hit him with her crutch.

Oswald bounces down the steps behind me, trying to get away from her while still chuckling. “Holy shit, it’s like a castle.” He shines his light on the stone walls. “And freezing.” He shivers.

I ignore his explorations and shine my light on the walls, looking for the electrical panel. There’s not much down here, so it’s easy to spot on the back wall. When I open the heavy black door, I know I’m out of my league. “Did you call Bates?”

“I did, and he said he’d be over in a few minutes.” Oswald comes to my side. “Jesus, that looks ancient.”

“What are you guys doing?” Waylynn asks from the top of the stairs. “Did you find it?” The slight tremor in her voice makes me think she’s scared.

I walk back to the base of the staircase. “I’m going to let Bates have a look at it. I don’t want to mess with anything.”

“Okay. I feel bad it’s so late. I wish I would have paid attention earlier.”

“He won’t mind,” Oswald promises, and I know it’s true. He likes Waylynn, especially after the night we went to see him play. Maybe even a little too much.

HELPING HANDS



*B*ates

IT'S STILL RAINING, but thankfully not as hard as it was earlier, as I make the familiar drive to Ann Arbor. This late, it only takes me about twenty minutes because I don't have heavy traffic to contend with.

My tools are in the back of the van, but I really don't know what the problem is, other than Waylynn's house doesn't seem to have any power. Sure enough, as I turn into her driveway, I see the surrounding houses all lit up like normal, while hers is pitch-black.

I check behind the van to make sure I'm not parked in the way of the sidewalk and grab my tool pouch out of the backdoors. The rain is already wetting my shirt, so I hustle over to knock.

Memphis opens the door and steps to the side quickly, allowing me to enter the kitchen. The room is dim, lit up by only a phone light on the counter, but I can just make out Waylynn and Oz standing on the other side of the kitchen.

"Holy shit, what happened to you?" I find myself walking toward her when I see her propped up on crutches.

"It's just a sprain," she says softly, not answering my question. I look over at Oz, expecting him to fill me in.

"I didn't do it." He holds his hands up defensively. "Or at least I didn't mean to."

“What?” I could not have heard him right. If Oz was somehow a part of hurting her, I’m going to kick his fucking ass. He knows I don’t fuck around with that shit.

“It’s my fault,” Memphis admits, and I spin on him. “We were all on our piece of shit futon and it broke. I shoved Oz off her, and it messed up her ankle.”

“It was an accident. My foot got hurt when we fell, not when he rolled over me,” Waylynn chimes in, coming to Memphis’ defense.

“She has a small cut under her lip too, so don’t freak out when you see it,” Oswald informs me. He knows me well. Seeing a woman with bruises is a problem for me.

“What’s going on with the power?” I ask to distract myself from the memories of my childhood that are trying to make me question if that’s really what happened. I played a part in so many lies to help my mom cover up the truth, even if it was just keeping my mouth closed. I still feel responsible for being part of the coverup, but I know that’s not the case here. Neither Memphis nor Oswald would hurt a woman. I know that deep down. It’s just my head fucking with me and making me second-guess the situation.

“I’m not sure. When the power went out this afternoon, right after a loud crack of thunder and lightning, I assumed it was from the storm. It wasn’t until Oswald got home and said everyone else had power that I realized it was just us,” Waylynn tells me.

“You didn’t notice?” I ask Memphis.

“It was still daylight when I got here. I didn’t notice the other houses,” he admits.

“Panel?”

“Down this way.” He tilts his head to the side as I slide little blue booties over my still damp boots.

“Do you know where the drop is? Where the service connects to the house outside?” I ask the room.

Waylynn shakes her head as the others chorus, “No.”

“Any tree damage?” I question.

“Not that I know of, but the house did feel like it shook when it happened. I thought it was the thunder,” she replies.

I didn’t see a meter on the back of the house, so I’m guessing it’s on the side, between the neighbors. “Let’s see if it’s just the breaker.” I click on my flashlight. It’s bright enough to light up most of the hall that Memphis disappeared down. There’s an open door where Memphis is waiting.

The stairs creak under my weight, but I’m not worried about them. These old places were built to last way better than shit built even ten years ago.

The basement walls are stone and mortar, and the floor is uneven concrete, but it’s clean and bone-dry, even after all the rain, which is a really good sign about the structure of the house.

“Back here,” Memphis says, and I follow him around the stairs to the old box. Before he even opens it, I know it’s going to be glass fuses. It looks original. This should have been updated ages ago.

“She needs a new service.” I set my pouch on the ground and aim my light at the old box. All the fuses seem fine, but to check the main, I need a meter.

“Yeah, I had no idea what to do with this,” Memphis admits. “It must have passed inspection though, right? She just bought this place.”

“Yeah, it’s functional. The people in these neighborhoods like to try to keep shit original for some reason, but there’s no benefit here.” My meter tells me there’s no power with the house. “We have a bigger issue than a fuse. There’s no power at the box. I need to check the drop outside for damage.”

Waylynn and Oz are waiting at the top of the stairs as we emerge from the basement. “I forgot to say thank you for coming out so late. Sorry about this.”

“You should be sitting down, and don’t thank me yet. I haven’t fixed anything. I think the issue might be outside, which means we might have to deal with DTE, and that

probably won't be until tomorrow. I'm going to take a look around."

"Okay, thank you. Sorry," she replies quickly.

"I'll come out with you. I'm still damp from the walk home anyway," Oswald offers.

"He made you walk in the rain?" I tease.

"I fell asleep and didn't hear the phone," Memphis defends.

"You didn't hear the phone?" I'm a little surprised. Memphis is probably the most responsible person I know, especially at his age. He's been taking care of Oz forever, and he's never missed a call before.

"It's been a long few days," Memphis explains with a small sigh.

Waylynn lowers her head a little like it's all her fault, which makes me wish I hadn't said anything. "All right, I'll be back in a few. Take her to sit down," I tell my friend.

Memphis urges Waylynn down the hall with the pressure of his body, not needing much encouragement. "I've been sitting so much, my butt hurts," she gripes as she swings down the hall. Memphis mumbles something under his breath, but it's too low for me to hear as he follows behind her.

Once they are out of earshot, I ask Oz, "Think he was really sleeping?" with raised brows.

"Probably. He's too worried about her to do much else. Besides, don't you see how comfortable he is here? It's been like that since the first day... Well, maybe the second day." He tilts his head to the side, thinking. It would have to be the second day, since we all got kicked out the first day.

We take the small path leading around the side of the house, where there's a privacy fence that separates Waylynn's yard from the neighbor's. There's a fallen tree limb wedged in the narrow space, and when I shine my light up, I see the wire from the drop is no longer taut. "Stay back." I hold my arm out as Oz makes a move to pass me when I stop.

“Oh crap, no wonder she said the house shook.” He observes the heavy limb dangling off the wire.

“It’s good she didn’t come out here. We need to report the issue. The neighbor is probably going to lose some of that tree.” I point to the oak on the other side of the fence.

When we get back into the house, I think about taking my boots off, but I would just have to put them back on, so I call out, “Memphis,” loud enough that he should be able to hear me.

“What do you need?” Oz asks, using the toe of his shoes to push down the back of his sneaker.

“I have a small generator at home I can grab,” I tell them as Memphis and Waylynn enter the kitchen.

“That’s okay. Is it not fixable?” Waylynn asks, leaning her butt on one of the stools.

“Not tonight, unless they decide to come out, which I doubt. You need to call your electric company. There’s a tree limb on the line.”

“Oh no.” The glow of my light is enough to let me see her scrunch up her face. “I haven’t even gotten the first bill. Our house manager set everything up for me,” she explains, looking around.

House manager? I don’t even know what that is. “The address and your name should be enough to report the problem, but you’ll need account details eventually.”

“I can talk to Beth.” She looks at a clock over her shoulder. “Wait, she might still be up. It’s earlier there. Let me call her now.” She peers up from her phone and glances over at us. “Please be quiet. I really don’t want to answer questions tonight.”

Oswald mimes zipping his lips, but I watch Memphis lean back into a stance that makes me think he doesn’t like the idea. He doesn’t voice it though. I’m not going to say anything. I still live at home in an apartment on top of my parents’ garage, so I get what she’s saying.

“Hello, Beth, sorry to bother you so late. I need to report an issue to the electric company. Would you be able to get me the account details?” she says into the phone.

“It’s good to hear your voice too.” Waylynn smiles. “And yes, tonight if possible. There was a storm, and we have a tree limb interrupting power.” After a short pause, she turns to the side. “Just me, I didn’t mean we,” she says softly.

“Oh, okay, can you just text me a screenshot? Thank you, Beth. No, I’m perfectly fine, promise... Yeah, I’ll let you know when it gets fixed. Bye.

“She’s going to text me the info,” Waylynn tells us when she turns back around to face us after ending the call, even though we were all listening to the entire conversation. Her phone chimes a few seconds later, and she looks down.

“I’ll call.” Memphis holds out his hand, and she readily gives him her phone without any hesitation. “That’s your phone number, correct?” He holds up the phone for her to look at it.

“Yes.” She nods.

Memphis makes the call directly from her phone but puts it on speaker as the automated service picks up, identifying her account by the number he’s calling from. He goes through the prompts, telling them the power is out due to a downed tree, then gets a canned response about heavy storm damage and to stay away from the area until they can repair the line, with no timeframe when they will come out to fix it.

“I guess that’s it,” she says when he hangs up.

“I can get you a generator. It might save what’s in your freezer. I have one at home in the garage,” I tell her, wanting her to understand it’s no big deal to grab it.

“I don’t think the food is salvageable.” She wrinkles up her nose again. “The power has been out for hours. I’m not worried about it. Thank you for the offer though.”

“Are you sure? It’s no problem.”

“I’m sure. It’s just groceries.”

I take turns looking at Oz and Memphis. That could be a couple hundred bucks in the fridge if it's stocked up, which is not something we would waste, but it's clear Waylynn is in a much different tax bracket than any of us.

"Looks like I get free rein," Oswald says, hauling open the fridge to look inside.

"Don't eat that, you'll get sick," Waylynn warns.

"He'll be fine," Memphis and I say in unison.

Waylynn

I'M SILENTLY DREADING my next words, but I say them anyway. There's no reason anyone needs to suffer here with me. "You guys can go home. I can't even offer you decent food." Once I say the words, I dart a glance at Bates. I'm not sure if he knows Oswald and Memphis have been staying here. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything.

"I hate to admit it, Wavy, but your place is way nicer than ours, even without power."

"We're not leaving you here alone," Memphis says, then turns to Oswald. "Unless you want to go back to your dorm? Then she would have a decent place to sleep at the apartment." It's strange how he doesn't call it his home. Oswald doesn't even offer a response, other than a snort.

"Already forgetting about me, huh, or do I get the broken futon?" Bates chimes in.

"Looking to join the party, are you? Can't say I'm surprised," Oswald remarks with a wide grin that looks a little freaky from the shadows created by the glow of Bates' heavy-duty flashlight shining up at the kitchen ceiling.

"You know how much I hate being left out." Bates turns his attention to Memphis. "My only question is, am I too late?" Something about the way Bates asks the question, specifically to Memphis, and the stiffness of his posture,

makes me think he's wary of either the question itself or the answer Memphis might give him.

Whatever is going on, it's clear I'm not privy to the entire context. It's like being with a group of people who are sharing an inside joke and no one cares to let you in on the punch line.

Memphis takes a long time before responding—so long, I think he might ignore the question altogether—but eventually, he says, “Maybe,” which seems completely noncommittal, but then again, I know I'm missing something.

I'm looking back and forth between them with thinly veiled confusion and scrunched up features until Memphis sets his sights on me, and then I rein in my curiosity.

“Do you mind if Bates crashes here?” The question is posed so soon after his weird response to Bates, I don't immediately know how to reply. My instinct is to say that I don't mind and he's welcome to stay. He did come over to help sort out the power situation, but I don't know if that's the right answer now.

“If it's okay with you. I don't mind,” I hedge. It's probably unfair that I'm making him take responsibility, but I do it anyway.

MEMPHIS

I CAN'T SAY BATES' interest in Waylynn has gone unnoticed. I saw the way he looked at her the first day we showed up here, but I'm a little surprised that it seems like he might want to be included in what Oz and I are already sold on.

About fifty thoughts slam into my brain at the same time. Would I be able to handle sharing more of her? Would she be okay with it? What if Bates tried to take her from us? The only time we ever shared a woman, it was strictly sex and we both knew that going in. This would be different.

Would it be nice to have my best friend around more, the only other person besides my brother I care about? Yes. That

response is the only easy answer. Did I ever think he would be into it? Not really, so I never gave it much thought. After his real dad left and his mom married Jimmy a few years later, he had a pretty normal upbringing, but I know his past scarred him too. Did I miss cues along the way?

I'm still mulling everything over, including Waylynn's answer that Bates is welcome to stay as long as I'm okay with it. Of course she has no idea everyone else here isn't referring to him crashing in one of the spare rooms for a night.

That, more than anything, causes me not to have to answer, because all of this is ultimately her choice, and there's no way she's ready to answer that kind of question.

I never really worried about Waylynn accepting both Oz and me. From the beginning, I could feel her attraction to both of us, but this might be too much to ask.

"Let's go watch a movie." Oswald breaks the silence, and I'm grateful for the reprieve. He angles his way toward Waylynn and bends his knees a little so he's hunched in front of her. "Hop on."

"I will not!" she snaps quickly and starts hobbling away on her crutches to get away from him faster.

He looks back at us with a smirk. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he's pleased with himself, but the grin drops in the next second and he points between Bates and me. "Don't fuck this up for us. We've been family forever. This is our chance to keep it that way, to be happy." He's eyeballing me and our best friend like our roles have somehow become reversed and he's the more mature one. "Bring us some snacks in a few minutes." With those parting words, he jogs after Waylynn, leaving us alone.

"That's fucking weird." Bates snorts.

"No doubt," I agree.

"So how mad are you?" he says in the next breath, as if he's been waiting to ask.

"I'm not mad," I tell him truthfully, and that should tell me something, but I don't know what yet.

“You’re not stoked. Maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut.” He backs away a step.

“I’m surprised you’d be down for it at all. You never seemed interested.”

He lifts one shoulder in a half shrug. “I’m not sure I took you seriously.”

I can kind of understand that, especially when I never thought I would find someone like Waylynn, someone whom I actually wanted and could feel something for. It was just the only solution I could come up with so I didn’t lose the only family I had left, but it brought me here and I’m fucking grateful.

“I’m serious about her, about this. She’s it for me...and Oz too, I think.”

“I know. I realized something was different that first day. I’m happy it didn’t put a wedge between you two, and I thought... Shit, I don’t know, I don’t want to lose you guys either. You’re like my brothers, and she’s...” He doesn’t say anything else, but he doesn’t really have to. I’ve felt Waylynn’s pull since the first time she bumped into me.

“She knows what we want. I’ve been honest with her, and she’s receptive, but you should let her get to know you a little. I can’t have her running for the hills.” It’s as close as I can get to possibly agreeing to this. I’m actually concerned with how comfortable I am with the idea.

“Yo! Bring some snacks,” Oz yells from the other room, and Bates chuckles, breaking the thick tension.

I head over to the pantry to get some chips or something, and Bates follows me. “I can tell you love her, Memphis.” His words are as effective as putting a vise around my chest. Everything feels too goddamned tight. “I won’t fuck this up for you guys. If it doesn’t work, I won’t cause a problem.”

I don’t respond because I’m not sure I would even be able to speak. I know she’s important to me, but love? He said it so casually, like it’s something I should already be acknowledging, and it’s fucking with my head.

He ends up picking up a bag of pretzels and chips while I stand here, trying to catch my breath. If he notices I'm freaking out, he doesn't say anything about it. Instead, I end up following him to the living room by the dim light of his phone, where I spot Waylynn on the couch with her legs in Oswald's lap.

Bates pauses to hand over the bag of chips to Oz, and I slip past him to take the remaining seat on Waylynn's other side. She cuddles against me when I lift up my arm and lay it on the back of the couch. My lips dip down to the top of her head, and I realize Bates was right—I do love her.

IN THE MIDDLE



W aylynn

OSWALD ACTS like it's completely normal for him to say goodnight as we leave Bates in the room next to mine, while he and Memphis walk with me toward my bedroom. I'm not feeling nearly as sure of myself. In fact, I feel like Bates must think it's pretty strange, but he doesn't allude to that.

"I have to leave early for work. Want me to drop you off at training?"

"How early?" Oswald keeps shuffling to my room.

"I need to be at the shop by seven, so six-thirty. I get to sleep in a little since I don't have to deal with traffic."

"That works." Oswald waves over the back of his head.

I stop at my dresser and dig around for a fresh pair of panties and some sleep shorts. I haven't showered in two days now, and I'm feeling a little funky, plus it gives me something to do so I can pretend not to notice as Memphis strips off his shirt and pants until he's only in a pair of boxers.

I was tired when we were downstairs, but now I feel wide awake as I wait for my turn in the bathroom. Oswald exits with his phone in his hand, and his flashlight blinds me for a second. "Sorry about that. Want me to leave it for you?" He leans back, about to place his phone on the counter.

"Sure, if you don't mind."

“I’ll never mind anything if it’s for you. Hurry up, baby.” He taps my butt as I pass him.

I place my clothes on the counter so I can get a better grip on the handholds of my crutches. Getting around like this sucks. Thank goodness it’s only for two weeks. At least I should be able to score a parking pass, even if it’s only temporary.

Thinking about the parking pass reminds me I need to call my mom back. I avoided talking to her this evening when she called by texting her. I was resting, but that will only last so long.

The stupid crutch falls to the side when I reach over for my clothes, making a loud racket. “You okay?” Memphis yells through the door. Geez, is he standing right there?

“I’m fine, it just fell,” I explain, leaning over to pick it up. I’m slightly worried he’s going to open the door while I’m sitting on the toilet to make it easier to change, so I rush through the motions and hastily get dressed.

When I turn the water on to wash up and brush my teeth, he comes in unannounced. I give him a wide-eyed stare, but he either doesn’t care or notice as he sidles up next to me to shove his toothbrush under the water.

“What if I were still going to the bathroom?” I ask.

He turns to look at me with his toothbrush already behind his lips, and an indifferent shrug lifts his shoulders. “You weren’t.”

“I could have been.”

“You left the door cracked, and I heard the water come on.” He resumes brushing.

“It’s dark, and I don’t love closed doors at night,” I admit, feeling slightly defensive like I’ve done something wrong.

Memphis bends a little and spits in the sink. My stomach hollows out in a strange way. It seems like such an intimate thing to witness, yet I don’t think I’ve ever thought that about anyone else.

“Why don’t you like closed doors?” He licks his lips, and my eyes track the movement.

“Um...” I glance down so I can form a clear thought. He’s so distracting.

“Eyes on me, Waylynn.” Memphis doesn’t give me a second to recover. Instead, he demands my attention in a way that makes me want to give it to him. When I meet his gaze again, he asks the same question. “Why don’t you like closed doors?”

“I don’t like being locked in, especially in little places. It makes me feel trapped, helpless.” The confession is a little frightening to admit out loud, but I feel like I’m sharing something and giving him a tiny fragment of what’s in my head.

Memphis brings his arm up, wraps it around the back of my neck, then pulls me close to him so he can press a soft kiss to my temple. “Thank you for telling me. Finish up so we can get you in bed.”

As soon as he releases me, I get busy brushing my teeth, feeling self-conscious the entire time because he barely gives me any space and continues to watch me like a hawk.

“Are you guys coming out or are we moving into the bathroom?” Oswald calls out with a harrumph.

“It’s called oral hygiene, you should try it sometime,” Memphis tells his brother when he exits after me.

“Oral...hygiene, you say? Maybe I need some education.” Oswald’s voice is low yet teasing.

Memphis takes my crutches from me when I reach the side of the bed and leans them against the wall, just out of my reach if I were lying in bed. I’m pretty sure it’s intentional to make sure I have to wake him if I need to get up at some point.

“You need help brushing your teeth?” I purposely misunderstand Oswald’s words as I crawl into bed on my hands and knees. It’s easier than scooting on my butt and dragging my leg.

He lifts his head off the pillow and watches me come closer. “Keep coming, plenty of room.” I wish it weren’t so dark. I’d like to be able to see his face right now, because his voice is all deep and sleepy, but that’s not the vibe he’s giving. “A little more.”

“I would be on top of you.” I lean to the side and start to slide my arm under the pillow.

“That was the point. I guess I’ll do all the work.” He turns on his side and pushes his mouth against mine in a kiss that speaks of his impatience. My lips part, and Oswald slips his tongue into my mouth. The only thing I can taste is minty toothpaste for the first few seconds, then the heat of his mouth invades my senses until there’s nothing more important than the swipes of his tongue...except maybe the feel of Memphis as he slides up behind me and presses his body tightly against mine.

The overload of sensations is almost too much for about twenty seconds, but my mind clears and I become hyper-focused on where each of them are touching me. I can feel Oswald’s slightly callused fingertips and palm brushing along my cheek and delving into my hair, and Memphis’ steady hands on my lower stomach, pulling me back so I’m cradled in the bend of his body.

My breath catches when I feel him pressed up against my butt, the hardness leaving no question as to what it is. I push back against him a little more, and he makes a sound right behind my ear that could just be an exhale leaving his lungs, but it feels like so much more.

Oswald deepens our kiss, shifting his angle so he’s leaning over me slightly, which pushes me against Memphis. His hand slides out of my hair and down to my chest, where he cups my breast over my shirt and moves his thumb back and forth over my nipple.

Muscles low in my stomach clench, and my hips swivel, grinding against Memphis. His fingers curl over my hip in a punishing grip, and he holds me in place while he rocks

against me. His lips find a spot on the back of my neck that has me releasing a small whimper into Oswald's mouth.

The heat building between my legs surprises me, along with the desperate, edgy feeling that comes with it. When my back arches the little bit it can between them, Oswald slides his hand farther down my body until he reaches the hem of my shirt, where he teases his fingers under the fabric. The rough skin on the tips of his fingers trails up my stomach. The higher he gets, the more I inhale, until I'm left holding my breath as he brushes his thumb over my nipple.

I melt into Memphis, exhaling as I do, but it only lasts until Oswald pinches my tip, and I arch again, shoving my ass backwards. No one has ever touched me like this. I've always been too guarded to let myself go, to feel anything remotely close to this, but I can't deny how badly I want them to keep going, and when Memphis' hand slides over my hip until he's just barely able to slip a few of his fingers between my legs, it can only be described as relief.

I can feel the slightest pressure on my clit, and the throb there intensifies even more, making me feel needy. My panties are wet, and now he probably knows it too, but I don't care.

"Tell me this is okay." Memphis bites my earlobe after his demand, and my back arches again roughly. His hips are right there to meet me, as if he expected the response.

I sigh out the only phrase rattling around in my head. "Yes, sir." He fists my long dark hair and tugs backwards, pulling me away from Oswald's kiss.

"That's my sweet girl, but those words are mine, you only answer to me that way, understand?"

"Yes, sir," I reply easily as Oswald moves his kisses down my chin and neck until he's kissing a path to my breast. When he takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks, my clit throbs so hard, I think I'm about to come, but I don't. Instead, I let out a little whimper.

"Christ, when was the last time you got yourself off?" Oswald murmurs between kisses and sucking on me.

I squeeze my thighs together and feel the heat of Memphis' palm covering the center of my panties, but I need more than that. "Why? Does that make it harder?" I whisper.

"To come? No, baby. I can just tell how badly you need us," Oswald tells me as Memphis moves his hand a little, prompting me to release the death grip I have on him squeezed between my thighs. He takes advantage by lifting my leg and hooking my knee over his thigh. The hem of my shorts is loose enough that he can slip his hand in and push aside my panties.

My instinct is to close my legs, but Memphis sinks his teeth into my shoulder, and all the tension in my body eases as my head falls back. The first brush of his fingertip under my panties has me holding my breath. He makes an appreciative humming sound, and I exhale on a sigh.

I feel the waistband of my shorts shift, and when I look down, I see Oswald pulling on the stretchy fabric, creating a space where he can look down my body and see into my shorts. It must not be enough, though, because in the next second, he's trying to push the material off my hips as he continues to move lower.

Memphis' hand, which is still barely teasing me, is the only thing that stops Oswald from getting my shorts and panties off easily. I sure don't offer any resistance as he tugs. Eventually, Memphis moves his fingers, and the fabric slips down my legs to be kicked under the covers somewhere near our feet.

My heart is beating so fast, my words sound a little funny when I say, "I haven't...um..."

"Never?" Memphis asks darkly, then nips me again with his teeth. Why do I like the way that feels so much?

"No, not even this," I admit readily. I need them to know I have no idea what I'm doing.

"What about this?" Oswald runs his tongue up my center between my legs, and I gasp while reaching for his head to pull him back up in the same breath.

“No,” I whisper breathily. My voice betrays my conflicting emotions. That felt amazing, terrifying, and different than anything I’ve ever felt or imagined. My clit is actually tingling, and he didn’t even touch it.

Oswald wraps his hand over my hip and tugs me to the side a little so my back is leaning against Memphis’ chest, then he climbs over my bad leg, careful of the air cast, and places himself between my open thighs.

When he looks up at me, I can just make out the seriousness of his face in the dim light, and all his usual humor and lightheartedness is gone. “I’m going to lick your pussy until you come on my tongue.”

“Um...”

“Shhh.” Memphis places his hand over my mouth, stifling the words that were eluding me, and murmurs near my ear, “Let him taste you, sweetness. If you want him to stop, I’ll know. I promise you’re safe with us.”

Oswald looks over my shoulder at his brother, then dips his head down and licks me again, but this time, his tongue slips a little deeper and I nearly come up off the mattress. If he weren’t holding my thighs down, I might have.

Before I can decide if I want him to stop or not, he swirls the tip of his tongue around my clit, and I groan behind Memphis’ hand. My breaths are coming hard and fast, but his hand over my mouth doesn’t loosen.

“Tell me how she tastes.” Memphis licks up the side of my neck, and the dueling feelings tighten my stomach, forcing another whimper up my chest.

Oswald jerks me closer to his mouth by tugging my hips down, and his words are muffled as he grates out, “Delicious, sweet. Even better knowing she will only ever be ours.”

“You hear that, sweetness? My mouth is watering just thinking about it.” Memphis kisses my shoulder, tracing his tongue over my skin again as if to prove his words.

Oswald pushes my leg up a little, and I feel his face press against me as his tongue slips up and down my slit. I’m so

wet, I can feel it dripping down to the bed. I don't even know if I should be embarrassed, but my mind can't focus on that anyway. I'm too busy wondering why my legs are starting to shake and why I feel so lightheaded.

I know I'm lost the second my hips lift off the bed to get closer to Oswald's mouth. He tilts his head up as if he's watching me, but I can't see his eyes in the dark. I'm not sure I could handle that anyway. There's a little safety in knowing he can't see me clearly either.

When he swirls his tongue again, I reach for Memphis' wrist because I know I'm about to come. He starts to move his hand from my mouth, but I sink my teeth into the side of his palm to keep in the sounds threatening to spill from my lips. Still, I moan around his hand, and the shaking in my legs intensifies until I can't handle it anymore. I release my bite and open my mouth to let out soft cries and groans as he continues to lick me even more feverishly.

As the feeling of euphoria starts to wane, I become aware of the ache in my ankle because I'm using my heel to hold me up. I drop back to the mattress a panting mess and feel chilled wetness under my butt. I almost move, but I don't want either of them to feel it, so I pretend it's not there while I try to catch my breath.

Oswald inches his way up my body, caging me as he does so, and leans his weight down on me. I can smell me on him and see his damp lips. The way he's looking down at me is so intense, I don't need light to feel his gaze.

His boxers offer very little barrier as his hard-on pushes against my center. I'm still so sensitive, I make a little gasping sound. He leans down and slides his tongue into my mouth, kissing me with sloppy abandon, and when he jerks away, my lips are wet. "Kiss him."

Memphis turns my head to the side before I can heed the command and kisses me. He licks my lips and shoves his tongue deep into my mouth. Reaching under my arms, Memphis hauls me up, so I'm now leaning over him. I have a second to think about Oswald feeling the wet spot, but then the

thought is erased by Memphis' touch and the way he's kissing me as if he couldn't wait to taste me himself.

I don't even bother trying to use my legs to hold me up. I can still feel them spasming every so often, which happens to coincide with when Memphis nips my lip. My heart rate slows back to normal, but it's still pounding hard against my chest.

Oswald eventually wraps his arms around my upper thighs and lower stomach, then puts his head in the middle of my back. It's a little weird that he's kind of hugging my butt, yet I don't do anything to change our positions.

When our kisses become lazy, Memphis finally pulls away and smooths my hair back from my face. "Is your ankle okay?" His voice is thick and gravelly, and I work to suppress a shiver from just the sound alone.

"Yes." I sigh contently. I haven't even thought about my foot since I collapsed to the bed.

"Tell me if it bothers you again."

"Again?" I question. Could he really know that it was hurting for just a second?

"Yes, again. Now close your eyes and go to sleep before I decide it's my turn," he warns gruffly.

"You don't scare me, you know." I nuzzle my cheek against his chest.

"Oh yeah? Well, you terrify me."

I click my tongue in outrage. "I couldn't scare you if I tried."

"Uh-huh," he says unconvincingly, but I'm sensing some truth to his words.

"I could never hurt either of you, Memphis, never on purpose." I tip my head back so I can see his chin and the planes of his face in the shadows.

"I know, sweetness." He kisses the top of my head and lets out a long sigh.

In the back of my mind, I think about how I could be hurting him right now by not telling him the truth about me, but I convince myself it's okay. I will explain when the time is right, at least that's what I'm telling myself hours later, when I'm still not asleep.

WATCHING AND WAITING



*B*ates

I FEEL like the biggest prick when I toss back the covers and sneak my ass down the hall. The door to the room they all went through is ajar enough that I can hear a heavy thump and soft murmurings. My heart is beating fast at just the thought of what I might see or hear, and my dick takes notice, thickening in my boxers.

If someone comes out of the room, it's going to be pretty fucking clear what I'm doing. I don't think Oz would mind. Hell, in any other circumstance, I know Memphis wouldn't either, but he's never loved a girl he let me watch him fuck.

"Oral hygiene, you say? Maybe I need some education." Oz's voice is pitched low.

"You need help brushing your teeth?" Waylynn teases him. I shift to the side, peering through the crack in the door, which allows me to see her crawling into the bed. Her silky little shorts ride up, allowing me to see the backs of her thighs and ass as the fabric tightens in the moonlight.

"Keep coming, plenty of room... A little more," Oz instructs.

"I would be on top of you." She lets out a little huff.

"That was the point. I guess I'll do all the work." I can't make out what they are doing in the bed, it's too dark, but I hear rustling, then see Memphis climb in after her. It's quiet

enough that I can hear my own heavy breathing, but I know they are too distracted to notice.

Memphis groans, and my mind takes over, imagining what she's doing to both of them. My dick is so hard, I reach down and cup my balls, then tug a little. Only seconds pass before I hear a soft, feminine sound of a plea for more in the form of a whimper.

"Tell me this is okay," Memphis demands harshly.

Waylynn sighs her response. "Yes, sir."

"That's my sweet girl, but those words are mine, you only answer to me that way, understand?" Memphis' words are slightly muffled, like he might have his lips against her skin. Goddamn, I wish I could see more than a few lumps on the bed.

"Yes, sir," she agrees again, and my hand moves from my balls to the base of my shaft, squeezing. I feel a drop of pre-cum fall from the tip of my cock.

"Christ, when was the last time you got yourself off?" Oswald damn near growls.

"Why? Does that make it harder?"

"To come? No, baby. I can just tell how badly you need us," Oz admits, and I can imagine her wet pussy greedy for them. I slide my hand up my dick and run my palm over the head, collecting the drops of liquid, but it's not enough, so I bring my hand up and spit in my palm with the backdrop of all three of their pants and groans filling my ears.

Every time I get close to coming, I squeeze my cock just under the head until I know I'm not going to spill on the floor before they come. My knees feel weak when I hear her admit, "I haven't...um..."

"Never?" Memphis growls possessively.

"No, not even this." Her voice is barely a whisper.

"What about this?" Oswald asks, and she lets out a strangled groan that might be a no. "I'm going to lick your pussy until you come on my tongue."

“Um...” She sounds unsure.

“Shhh. Let him taste you, sweetness. If you want him to stop, I’ll know. I promise you’re safe with us.” Oh shit. I take another step closer to the door, and I’m rewarded when I hear her soft little pants.

“Tell me how she tastes,” Memphis grates out. I’m surprised he let Oswald go first. It makes me wonder what he’s doing to her at the same time, or at least what his plans for her are.

“Delicious, sweet. Even better knowing she will only ever be ours.” Oswald’s words are muffled.

“You hear that, sweetness? My mouth is watering just thinking about it.”

Waylynn moans softly, and the bed creaks, then there’s a little rustling before I hear the muffled cries of ecstasy. Christ, what’s in her mouth? Is it Memphis’ cock? In the next second, her cries grow louder, and I nearly come myself.

I’m so close to the door now, I can see Oswald climb up her body and lean down. I know he’s kissing her, but fuck, I wish I could see it. “Kiss him,” he orders, and that’s when I lose it. My hand jerks up and down my dick, trying to prolong the pleasure that caught me off guard at the thought of her sharing her taste with Memphis after Oz kissed her with her pussy on his lips.

The room is quiet, so I give myself a few moments to recover before slipping to the bathroom and getting some tissue to clean up my mess. Good thing she has hardwood floors. I’m still sporting a semi when I creep back to my room, but once I climb under the covers, my body relaxes and I fall asleep almost instantly.

Waylynn

“WHY IS the door closed and locked?” Memphis asks with an edge in his tone after trying to turn the knob, which makes me

glad I locked it.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I say loud enough for him to hear over the rush of water.

“You locked it.” He sounds accusatory.

“It’s not nighttime,” I answer. That’s the only time it really gets to me. Well, not the *only* time, but the worst.

“Unlock it. I won’t come in.” I hear a small thump on the door.

It takes me less than a second to decide, so I hobble over and turn the lock. A sense of relief washes over me, but it’s short-lived as the knob turns. I cover my chest with my arms and cross my legs. I have no idea why, he literally had his hands there last night, but the door only eases open a crack.

“Thank you, Memphis,” I tell him softly when I realize he did it for me.

“Do you want me to come in?” I can hear him a little clearer. He’s right on the other side of the door. I shift my arms from my breasts, and my nipples are already hard. *Geez*.

“Don’t you have to get to class?” I avoid answering.

“Yes,” he snarls. “I can stay if you need help,” he offers in a smoother voice.

“I think I’m okay.” I sound a little sad, but I can’t really help it. I sort of wish he could come in.

“Can I kiss you goodbye?”

“Um...” The door opens before I form a full response, and Memphis trails his eyes over me. I pull my arms up again, pretty much only covering my nipples and squishing my boobs against my chest. “I’m not dressed,” I add weakly.

“Fuck,” he grates out through his teeth. It’s bright as heck in the bathroom from the morning sun. The window is covered in a privacy film, so the curtain doesn’t even close. It’s more for decoration than anything.

He takes two fast steps, bringing him so close, I can feel the fabric of his white shirt against my arms. While staring

into my eyes, he pulls down one of my hands and brings it between our bodies. When I feel his bulge, my fingers open right along with my mouth as I huff.

“Look what you’ve done,” he murmurs.

My fingers tighten over him, exploring a little, and his eyelids lower. “I’m sorry,” I tell him, even though I’m not. I like knowing I do this to him, that he wants me. It makes me feel powerful. God, he’s thick and so warm. I want to run my nose up near his neck, so I lean in and do just that. He smells incredible.

His hand leaves mine, but I don’t pull away or stop touching him. Instead, I run my fingernails over the soft material of his dark denim jeans. It makes a strange sound, but I feel it vibrate up my fingers. Memphis grasps the back of my neck in a firm grip and pulls my face back from his collar. His eyes roam over my face for just a second and then his lips crash onto mine, pushing, demanding, and driving me wild.

“Unzip my pants,” he says after nipping my lip. I fumble for his zipper and belt. Once I have it open, he puts a little pressure on my shoulder, and I start to go down, but he grabs under my arms and directs me back so I’m sitting on the edge of the tub.

“I don’t want you to be late,” I whisper while looking up at him.

“Then you better make me come fast.” He slips his fingers into my hair above my ear and pulls me forward a little.

“I don’t know how.” The confession is easy.

“Oh, sweetness, just open for me.” He pulls his dick from his pants and guides it to my lips while pulling me forward by my hair. I open my mouth, and he traces the tip over my lips. His skin is so soft, I slip my tongue out, and it brushes across the head and the liquid at the slit. He groans, and his hand in my hair tightens as he pushes farther into my mouth.

I roll my lips over my teeth when I feel the underside of his dick hit my tooth, and he slips the tip in and out of my

mouth slowly. “Look at you, so eager to please me,” he mutters softly, appreciatively.

My mouth is stretched around him, but he’s doing all the work, holding my head right where it needs to be and pumping into my mouth. He goes a little deeper, and the back of my throat spasms a little, which makes him release a shaky breath that causes me to squirm on the tile ledge.

Without giving me any time to recover, he does it again and again until my throat feels tight and I can only breathe out of my nose in shallow pants. “Swallow for me,” he orders roughly. It takes my body a few seconds to comply, but when I do, I’m rewarded with his praise. “Good girl.”

My lower stomach cramps when my inner muscles tighten to the point of near pain, but it feels good at the same time. I shift again, hoping to relieve the pressure.

“I’m going to fill your throat with cum, and you’re going to swallow every drop, understand?” His pace quickens, and I nod the slightest bit. I feel something hit the back of my throat, and I flinch but swallow just like he told me to while he continues to hold me in place as he fills me just like he promised. My throat spasms a few more times before he pulls out of my mouth and tilts my head back with his fist in my hair.

I gasp, greedy for air, but even more ravenous for his approval. Memphis draws his thumb under my lip, gathering the liquid that escaped, and slides it into my mouth. I close my lips and suck. His eyes roll back in his head, and a wave of pleasure levels me. *How did I live without her?*

His voice in my head pulls me from the moment. I hate that my head couldn’t give me these few moments of bliss. I release his thumb and glance around, wondering what time it is. I need my pills.

“What’s wrong?” He drops to a crouch so he’s peering at my face.

“I don’t want you to be late,” I lie, saying the first thing that comes to mind, and I can’t meet his eyes when I do it.

“If I’m late, it’s my fault, sweetness, not yours.” The sincerity in his tone makes me feel even worse. He takes my hand and stands, pulling me up right after. “Waylynn.” He says my name softly, like a plea, as if he knows I’m not telling him something, and I bury my face in his chest. I’m going to have to tell them. It’s not fair of me to do this, but there really is no time right now. He needs to go, and I need to check my emails for all the assignments I’ve missed so I don’t get too far behind. I’m making excuses for myself.

He leans down and says, “I would never blame you,” right near my ear. I hope he feels that way when I tell him the truth, that I’m probably certifiable and hear random voices and probably always will.

“You should go,” I tell him, but my words are belied by my actions when I wrap my arms around him even tighter.

“I know.” He sighs. “I should have stayed to make sure you were safe in the shower, not for...that.”

“I liked that.” I nuzzle him, allowing myself to enjoy the moment instead of overthinking.

“I more than liked your mouth on me, I loved it, but now I need to leave you here and I hate that.”

I smile against his chest, where he can’t see me. My girlish little heart does a happy shimmy, thinking about Memphis saying love in association with anything that involves me. He kisses the top of my head again, and I take it as my cue to release my grip.

“We’ll be back to check on you at lunch, but I’ll need to head back after. I can’t miss my office hours, and I have some tutoring sessions I have to deal with.” His tone makes it clear there’s a great many other things he would rather be doing, but I understand. “I texted you Bates’ number. Call him if there are any issues with them getting the power restored. He’s going to stop by tonight after work anyway. He said your panel needs to be updated, but I think you’ve captivated him too.” He pushes my hair back from my face while staring down at me. I furrow my brow, not understanding his meaning. He kisses me softly. “Don’t overthink it, sweetness.”

“Okay, have a good day.” I start to step back but remember I’m naked and get all shy again.

He leans forward a bit and does up his pants, not seeming to care that I’m watching. “It would be better if you were there. I’ll be talking to Hilbrand today. I expect you to keep up with the assignments so you can rejoin the class next week,” he warns and backs away after he’s dressed. His eyes roam over my body. “Text me when you get out of the shower, and I’m going to need to know if you make yourself come.”

I squeeze my thighs together. I hadn’t thought about it until he put the idea into my head. “I’ll wait,” I promise, knowing he can make me feel so much better.

“Christ, I need to leave.” He spins on his heels and stomps out of the room.

“Bye,” I call out to his retreating footsteps.

TO PUSH OR PULL



*M*emphis

I PAUSE with my hand around the doorknob in the kitchen. The last thing I want to do right now is leave. I would much rather take my ass right back upstairs and help Waylynn in the shower, then take my time making her come before I claimed her.

I look over at the clock hanging on the wall, knowing I should have left twenty minutes ago. I'm barely going to have time to talk to Hilbrand now. *Damn it.*

The five-minute drive feels like it takes too long, but I actually make good time. Hilbrand looks up from behind her glasses when I enter her office. "Morning, Gravlin." Her lips are a little flat, where before she used to be all smiles when I came in. It probably has a lot to do with my performance over the last few days. I've never bailed on my office hours. If anything, I've stepped in for her a few times, and she had to return the favor the last two days. "Everything okay?"

"Yes, but there's something I need to speak with you about." I set my bag on my small desk and face her.

"Okay." Her tone is hesitant.

"I have an issue with one of the students in class."

Her head falls back on her neck, and she lets out a groan. "Do I need to get the administration board involved this time?"

“No.” I wave my hand dismissively. I can handle a few emails that border on being inappropriate. “My brother is in the class.”

“Yes, Oswald.” Her brows furrow. “Is he having problems?”

“No, he actually has a girlfriend, Waylynn Graff.” I wait to see if she recognizes the name, but her face never changes. “She’s in the class too, and we’ve gotten pretty close.” I hate that I can’t just tell her the whole truth about Waylynn and me, but the only thing that would do is make things more difficult for both of us.

“I wanted to let you know, since I don’t feel comfortable evaluating her work because we spend a good deal of time together.”

“Oh.” She leans back in her chair, and her eyes grow a little unfocused. If she fights me on this, I don’t know what I’m going to do. Allowing Waylynn to drop the class doesn’t seem fair.

The longer she stays quiet, the more I start to worry, but I don’t let her see how uncomfortable I am. I keep my features and posture relaxed as her eyes pass over me in an assessing manner. “This is important to you,” she observes. “I have to say I’m curious, Gravlin. Why would you bring this to my attention at all? It would have been very easy for you to continue on as things were. Are you concerned you wouldn’t be fair to her, or are your personal ethics at play here?”

I hate the way she’s looking at me. I don’t want to give her any more of an explanation than I already have, but I will if I think it will help my cause. “I don’t want her having an issue later because of me.”

“Oh!” Her eyebrows rise well above her glasses, and the corner of her mouth curls into a smile. I gave her too much information. I should have just said it was an ethics issue. *Fuck.* “I see. Make sure you both follow the same protocols that have already been put in place for your brother. All assignments come directly to me. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you not to share anything with them that you

shouldn't, but I will anyway to cover our butts and I think we'll call it good." She adjusts her glasses on her nose, then looks down at her computer before adding, "I'll delete her email if she's going to return to class. I expect her to be caught up with work though."

Her comment catches me so off guard, it takes me a second to form a response. I didn't think she remembered Waylynn dropped, but she does have an unusual name. "Thank you. I'll make sure she knows."

"Of course, Gravlin. I'm happy to see you're letting someone in." Her remark bothers me. It implies she knows me, and she doesn't.

After I lower myself into my chair, we resume our status quo, working in relative silence until it's time for her first class to start.

BATES

THE HOUSE I'm working at is only a few blocks away from Waylynn's, but it's a shithole. The house has been divided into several small studio apartments that share two bathrooms and look like they haven't been cleaned in years.

The company I work for has been hired to replace several of the outlets with plugs that have USB ports. The leasing company will probably up the rent by a hundred bucks a month and call it an improvement. It's shit work. I hate being in the rooms if the resident isn't there, and I hate it even more if they are.

I'm working with Michael. He's twice my age and only wants to work half the hours we should, so I end up picking up his slack. I would rather do his job than listen to him bitch about his back and everything else. If he weren't with me, I would have gone to Waylynn's at lunch, but instead, we end up at a shitty drive-thru that I regret before my burger is even fully eaten.

We're back at the shop by four. The only perk of working with him is getting off earlier than usual. As soon as I'm in my van, I send Memphis a text.

Me: You good if I stop by?

I kick on the air as I wait for his reply, which takes a few minutes.

Memphis: I'm stuck at school for a while longer.

Memphis: Waylynn is at home.

Me: I'll stop by and see if her power is back on.

I'm surprised he's offering an invitation without him being there. I doubt it was easy for him. He probably just wants to make sure she's okay since he can't be there. It's also a good excuse for me to see her, so I'll take it. I just don't know if it will be weird for her if I stop by since she doesn't know me very well.

Me: Should I text her to let her know?

Memphis responds by sharing contact info with me. I have to type in her name when I save her number since he doesn't have it listed, or maybe he's just not sharing what he has her listed under with me.

Memphis: Don't try to steal our girl for yourself.

Me: Not that I would, fucker, but she wouldn't go for it anyway.

Memphis: I know.

I snort. That's more like my cocky best friend.

Me: Hey, it's Bates. Memphis gave me your number. Mind if I stop by?

Waylynn: Sure. I'm here.

Me: See you in a few minutes. Do you need anything?

Waylynn: No thank you.

I check around the side of her house before I even knock. The tree limb is still on the line, meaning she still doesn't have power.

When I rap on the door, she answers it quickly and steps back for me to enter the kitchen. The cast on her foot is dangling behind her with her knee bent. She's wearing tight shorts that go to mid-thigh and a gray shirt that is probably supposed to be loose, but it's pulled tight across her chest because of the way it's tucked under her arms by the crutches. "Hey, have you heard anything from the power company?" I meet her eyes so I don't stare at her body like a total creeper.

"Nothing yet. Did you want to come in and wait for the guys? I don't have anything cold to drink, and it's getting pretty warm in here," she confesses on a wince.

"The company is worth the inconvenience." As soon as I say it, I realize how dumb that sounded, so I try to recover. "Not that it's an inconvenience to be here at all. I just mean I'd go through much worse for your company." *Smooth, Bates.*

Waylynn tilts her head to the side. "Um, did you want to sit down?" she offers after a second of weird silence.

I look down at my clothes. I didn't really think this through. My jeans are grimy from crawling around on my knees in shitty apartments. At least the stools at the counter don't have fabric. When I move over to pull one out for her, she says, "Come on in here."

I follow her into a room off the kitchen filled with windows. She lowers herself into a brown leather chair and props her foot up on a matching leather ottoman. "My battery on my computer died, so I've just been catching up with schoolwork," she explains, piling a few textbooks on top of each other. "Are you going to sit down?"

"I just got off work. I don't want to get anything dirty."

"Oh gosh, you're fine. Please sit," she urges.

At least it's leather, I think before sitting down across from her in a matching chair. "What are you working on?"

"Math." She makes a cute face that tells me everything I need to know about how she feels about the subject.

"Memphis is good with numbers. He was always able to make it make sense to me in high school. I swear the teachers

made everything more difficult.”

“Oswald pretty much volunteered him as tribute when he found out I was going to the study group.” She laughs softly.

“I’m sure Memphis doesn’t mind.”

“I haven’t needed help yet, but I might ask him later since I wasn’t there today just to make sure I have it down. Did you work nearby?” She changes the subject smoothly.

“Only a few blocks away on the other side of campus. We were putting new plugs in an apartment. Speaking of electrical, you should call the power company to see if they have a time estimate for you yet.”

“Oh, okay.” She grabs her phone off the arm of the chair and pokes at the screen a few times before setting it back down. She goes through all the prompts again, but this time, it announces they know about the power outage in the area, and it should be restored by nine PM.

“Good news,” I say once she hangs up.

“Yeah, I hope my phone makes it until then. I’m all out of backup chargers.”

“It’s good that you have one since you don’t have a generator.”

“I think I’ll get something after this.”

“They have whole house units. It fires right up when the power goes out, works off natural gas.”

“I’m definitely going to need that.” She points for emphasis.

“You should also have your service updated. The panel you have is pretty obsolete. I could have the guys help me do it for you.”

“No, I can hire you though, if you do that sort of thing.”

“I do it all the time. My boss can pull the permit for us. We’ll do it like a side job. Nights and weekends. Those generators can get expensive though, especially for a house this size.”

She waves her hand. "I'm confident it will be worth it, and not nights and weekends. I can wait until you have an opening and hire you."

"Now you're just trying to take away my excuse to be here," I tease.

"No, you're welcome anytime. I just don't want to take up all your free time."

"I'm confident it will be worth it." I repeat her words, and her cheeks get a little pink. *Yup, so worth it.*

Oswald

PRACTICE IS GRUELING, but it's the only thing that actually takes my mind off Waylynn for more than a few minutes. Every time there's a break where my mind can wander, it goes right back to last night, when my head was between her legs and she was grinding her pussy on my face.

"Dude, are you even listening to me?"

"What?" I snap at Higgins when he hits my arm to get my attention.

"Damn, what's going on with you?"

"Nothing, why?" I pull my shirt on over my head, and it sticks to me because I barely took the time to dry off.

"Wanna eat?" he asks, and I feel bad for ignoring him and acting like a dick because I have pussy brain.

I grab my phone and look at the time. I'm sure Memphis is with Waylynn, so she'll be fine for a little while, and I am hungry. She still didn't have power at lunch, and I don't want to have to buy dinner when I can eat for free. "Yeah, I can't stay too long though."

"You got a hot date?" He grins.

"What do you think?" I smirk right back.

“Ain’t never a shortage of pussy for players.” He pushes out of the field house door. I think about correcting him, but there’s really no point. He’s speaking the truth, just not mine because I’m only interested in one girl.

There are several of our teammates headed in the same direction, so we take up the bulk of the sidewalk as we walk over to the dorm. Considering we just got our asses kicked at practice, there are still a few guys who are pretty rowdy, which means they didn’t leave it all on the field. Higgins and I hang back a little.

“Got any plans this weekend?” he asks.

“Don’t think so. You?”

“A few guys mentioned a party Friday at one of the frat houses. I might make an appearance. We’ll have to see how the game goes to see what I want to do on Saturday.” His shoulders hunch a little.

I chuckle softly. “Just don’t get too fucked up before the game,” I warn. I did it a few times in high school and always regretted it, and not just because Memphis chewed me out when he found out.

“Yeah, with my luck, Bronson would get hurt and I’d have to play the entire game hungover.” He smiles in a way that makes me think he really wouldn’t mind, which I get. Field time as a freshman isn’t easy to come by.

“The dorms were pretty packed last week. Did you hang out there after the game?” I almost regret even bringing it up, but then I kind of want to vent about KJ and the chicks he brought to the room.

“For a little while, man, but a few of us went over to a party. It got kind of nuts, which makes me hesitant about Friday at the frat. I saw you in a bunch of tags. How was it?”

“Garbage.” I snort. “My roommate invited some girls over, and one of them posted some shit that made it look like we were fucking around.”

“You weren’t?” He leans back, clearly surprised. “There were a bunch of people talking about it.”

“Who?” I ask, hauling the door to the south quad open.

Higgins shrugs. “Just people. I got the impression it was on the DL for you, so I just stayed out of it.”

“Nah, man, nothing happened except her making shit up to look like it did.”

“Oh shit. Well, what I heard was all good, so at least she’s not talking crap about you.” He shrugs like it’s okay she’s making it seem like we hooked up because she’s not telling everyone I have a little dick or something.

“Well, I don’t think my girl will see it that way, you feel me?” I grab a plate and a to-go box off the stand so I can grab Waylynn something just in case she didn’t have dinner yet.

“Oh, it’s like that now? You already wifed up?” he questions, heading deeper into the dining hall as I follow behind him.

“Yup.” I’m familiar with the term. It’s used for serious girlfriends only—the ones you know will always have your back and understand how much work goes into this kind of career, even at college level.

I used to worry that I loved football too much to be worthy of that kind of attention, which is why I thought Memphis’ plan was perfect. I can’t always be around as much as most girls want or need, and knowing he would be there when I can’t made sense to me, but now I know I can do both—love football and Waylynn the way she deserves. Plus, she’ll still have Memphis to take care of her, maybe Bates too. What could be better than getting to spend my life with the three people who matter the most to me?

“Dude, I’m happy for you, but there’s too much snatch here for me to settle down so quickly.” He’s smiling in a way that makes me think he’s not happy for me. It’s more like he feels sorry for me, but I don’t care. “When can I meet her?”

“She’ll be at the game this weekend,” I tell him noncommittally, then change the subject. “What are you eating?”

“I’m starting with salmon, that way I don’t fill up on pizza and fries,” he mumbles dejectedly. The trainers have gotten to him, noob.

“You do that.” I back away from him. I know my body, and I need some carbs to refuel.

A few of our teammates are already in the lines, but everything moves pretty quickly, and they stay stocked up. I swear the food staff knows what time practice will end better than we do.

I load two chicken sandwiches on my plate and a heaping pile of fried rice with vegetables I can’t even name, but they taste good, then save the to-go box until I’m ready to leave to pack for Waylynn and Memphis.

Higgins finds me at a table near the corner, along with a few other linemen, and we shove our faces as if we haven’t eaten all day, barely speaking to each other until our plates are nearly empty, while some have gone up for seconds.

“KJ said your girl made you move out of the dorm?” Hughes, a junior I’ve only spoken to a few times, says conversationally.

“No.” I snort. “I never stayed there anyway, but I’m moving my stuff out because *KJ* was letting people go through my shit. There are pictures of some girl in my room, wearing my clothes, and I sure as shit didn’t give her permission.”

“Oh hell.” He makes a strange expression, but I can’t tell if his round face is confused or sympathetic.

“He needs to quit running his mouth about me and my girl.” I ball up my napkin. I have no idea what his problem is. We don’t play the same position, and we’re not in competition for anything. His beef makes no sense.

Hughes lifts a heavy shoulder. “I figured him for a shit talker. I just didn’t know he was an idiot too. He won’t make it much longer if he doesn’t pull his head out of his ass.”

“I don’t get him, but I really don’t care enough to try to either,” I admit.

Hughes leans over and presents me with his fist to bump. “Real talk. Tell your girl she can sit with mine at the game if she wants so the wannabe WAGs don’t fuck with her. Becky will tear a bitch up,” he says proudly.

“My brother takes care of her, but thanks.”

“Good, but the offer always stands if he’s busy though.” I nod at the gesture, and we talk football for another thirty minutes until I start to get antsy. I want to go home and relax. See Waylynn.

I pick up my plates and pile them on my tray. “I’m heading out after I grab some more grub, see you guys tomorrow.”

After putting my dishes into the wash table, I send a quick text to Memphis.

Me: Can U pick me up from SQ?

Memphis: If you can give me thirty. I’m finishing up.

Me: With what? U can’t last that long with Wavy.

Memphis: With work, you idiot, and yes I fucking can.

Me: UR not with her.

Memphis: No, I had to make up my office hours.

Me: Damn it, U should have told me. I was eating at the quad.

Memphis: I told you at lunch.

I don’t remember him saying anything about it, but I probably wasn’t really listening. I thumb back to the other screen and tap her name.

Me: Will U pick me up?

Wavy Baby: Yes, where should I come?

Me: On my cock.

I delete that comment and text something else.

Me: SQ.

Wavy Baby: Be there in a few.

Me: Thx, baby.

I fill up the box with a bunch of stuff that's ready to go and add a few cookies. I plan on claiming at least one of them, but she can have the rest.

I'm leaning against the brick wall when she pulls up in her slick Tesla about ten minutes later. I probably could have walked almost as fast. When I see her silver crutches propped up in the passenger seat, I realize what took her so long, and now I feel like shit.

I open the passenger door and lean my head down to look at her. "I'm a dick. I wasn't thinking about your foot."

"No, you're not," she chastises me. "I'm fine and so is my foot. I can't sit home on my big butt for two weeks."

"Hey now, why are you bringing one of my favorite parts of your body into this?"

"Get in the car, Oswald." She clicks her tongue at me.

"Are you sure you don't need me to drive?" I offer.

"You can if you want." She reaches over for the crutches, but I beat her to it.

"I'll bring them around." I jog to the other side of her car, trapping her crutches under my arm, and help her out of the seat before placing them under her arms.

"Thank you." She gives me a soft smile. I drop my lips to hers in a too short kiss, then follow behind her to make sure she makes it up on the curb and gets into the passenger seat okay. "I feel like we're making a big deal out of nothing. Everyone is staring," she mutters under her breath as I pass the crutches and my bags into the backseat. I grabbed a few more things from my dorm room, but the rest will have to wait until this weekend.

I didn't even really notice the people around until she mentioned it. I hope it's not me kissing her that made her wary. Just to make sure, I lean down close to her lips again with clear intention but hold back just enough so she has to lift up to capture my mouth, which she does easily. Good, I'm not

planning on holding back my affection just because someone might see it.

“Buckle up, baby.” I close the door for her and round the car again to get behind the wheel. “I didn’t know Memphis wasn’t home. I was eating at the quad,” I tell her as I pull away from the curb.

“That’s okay, you don’t have to babysit me.”

“I know, but I would have come home after practice if I knew he wasn’t there. Did they get your power fixed?”

“Not yet. Bates had me call again. It said it should be restored tonight by like nine PM.” She sighs.

“He was already there?”

“Yeah, just for a few minutes. He went to get his generator, even though I tried to tell him it was fine. Thank goodness it’s been a little cooler after the storm, but it’s still getting a little toasty in the house.”

“We could always camp out in the basement. It’s cool down there,” I offer, only teasing a little. I’ve slept in much worse places.

“Maybe if we finished it up down there, but not like it is now.” She scrunches up her nose.

“I’ll work on it when the season is over. What do you want to do with it?” I make the turn into her driveway, while she reaches forward to hit a button, and her garage opens.

“I don’t care, but Bates mentioned I needed to update my electrical panel. I don’t know how much room that will take, plus he said there are generators you can get that turn on automatically if the power goes out. I want one of those.”

“Oh yeah, his parents’ house has one. Wait for me to come around,” I tell her, grabbing everything out of the backseat.

Her feet are already out of the car, but she’s still sitting on the seat when I hand over her crutches. I turn to look at the driveway when I hear the sound of the truck pulling in. “Great.”

“What’s wrong?” She looks over at Memphis, then quickly back to me.

“I should have just walked. He’s going to be pissy because I made you drive.”

“No, you walked yesterday, and I wasn’t doing anything but diddling my thumbs anyway. The battery on my computer’s been dead all day.”

“Diddling?” I question her word choice.

“Twiddling, whatever.”

“Tell me more about this diddling. Does it involve lots of flicking and rubbing? Can you give me a demonstration?”

“Oh my gosh, Oswald,” she cries and swings away from me as fast as her good leg will take her.

“What are you doing?” Memphis asks before he’s even fully out of the truck. “Why is her face all pink?”

“She was just telling me about how she diddles.” I can’t even keep a straight face when I say it. She gapes at me with her pretty little mouth hanging open in outrage.

“You didn’t tell me.” Memphis looks like someone just took his favorite toy, and I start howling with laughter. He thinks I’m serious.

“I didn’t... That’s not...” Her face continues to get pinker as she looks between us. I love how flustered she is, until she tries to turn around and nearly slips when the rubber on the bottom of her crutches hits a small patch of mud right next to the walkway up to her door.

“Oh shit.” I drop my bag and rush over to her side. Thankfully, she’s already recovered, but I notice the way her face is pinched and her lips are thin. She used the front of her casted foot to catch herself, and now she’s hurting because of it. Damn it.

“I’m fine,” she says before I can even question her, but she doesn’t look fine, and I feel like crap for teasing her.

Waylynn

THE PAIN in my ankle only lasted a second, but it's enough to make me fearful of stepping down again. I feel like such a baby. Who knew a sprained ankle would hurt this badly and cause this much inconvenience?

My fingers cover my keys after unzipping the small bag looped over my chest, but when I look down to find the right one, I realize my house key is gone. My mind swirls for a moment, wondering how the heck I could have lost it, but then I look up and my eyes connect with Memphis', and I know without a doubt he has it. I'm not sure why that's comforting, but it is.

"You can keep it. I'll get Oswald one too." Memphis' head tilts the tiniest bit at my words.

"How do you know I have it?" He keeps his eyes trained on me while walking to the door.

"I just do," I reply. Maybe it's his controlling nature, or maybe it's intuition, but either way, I know I'm right.

"Get me one?" Oswald questions.

"A key," Memphis and I say at the same time.

"You took her key? What if she got locked out?" Oswald jogs to retrieve the bags he dropped when I slipped.

"I meant to return it this morning, but I got distracted." Memphis peers over his shoulder at me after unlocking the door. Warmth creeps up my neck, but surprisingly, it's not from embarrassment this time. "Plus, I wasn't expecting her to leave. Where were you two going?"

"I asked her to pick me up." Oswald holds up his hands in surrender. "You don't have to say it. I already know."

Memphis' lips twitch like he still wants to say something, but he just places his laptop bag on the island. I have the urge to tell them both to stop worrying so much, but if Memphis can drop it, so can I. I already told Oswald it wasn't a big deal anyway.

“Still no power.” Memphis looks around.

“Not yet.” I sigh.

“Bates went to get his generator,” Oswald informs his brother with his brows raised high on his forehead. They exchange a glance that makes me feel like I’m missing something.

“I told him not to bother,” I offer, continuing to watch their reactions.

“No, it’s good. You said your computer is dead. I’m surprised your phone isn’t.” Oswald digs through one of the bags he brought and brings out a plastic takeaway box. “I got food.”

“I have a portable charger I’ve been using, but it’s almost dead now. I’m all caught up on class work though.” Oswald flips the box open. It looks like a mess but smells good.

A loud beeping noise interrupts the quiet of the house, and Memphis walks over to the door to peer out. “Looks like they are finally here. I’m going to see if they need me to move the truck.” He steps outside, and I hear some muffled speaking.

“I didn’t think they would actually come tonight,” I confess.

“They should have been here earlier.” Oswald unwraps a napkin on top of the pile of food, revealing a few chocolate chip cookies. I do a little swooning on the inside when he lifts one up to my mouth to give me a bite. “Good?” he asks while I’m still chewing, so I nod.

He steps a little closer with the cookie still in his hand and feeds me the entire thing slowly. It’s adorable, even though he’s watching me so closely, I feel like I need to cover my mouth while chewing.

After giving me the last bite, he plants a kiss on my lips, then backs up and motions to the box of food. “I didn’t know what you would want, so I grabbed a few things.”

“That’s super sweet, but I ate a little while ago.” I have to admit the stir fry with noodles looks pretty good though, at

least I think that's what it is, since there's a slice of pizza on top of it.

"What did you have?" He crosses his arms over his chest as if he doesn't believe me.

"A Nutella sandwich."

"Christ, that's not dinner, Waylynn. Find something to eat, or tell me what you want and I'll go get it." Memphis enters the house in the middle of Oswald's insistence.

"What did they say?" I direct my attention to Memphis, ignoring his brother.

He moves over to the sink and washes his hands before answering. "That the power should be on in an hour or two, but we'll need to take care of the tree limb ourselves after the line is untangled." He pulls a couple of plates out of the cupboard and walks over to the island, where I'm still standing with Oswald. "Do you want this?" He motions to the pizza.

I shake my head, and he plops it on one of the plates. "The sub?" I shake my head again, which leaves the stir fry and what looks like a burger wrapped up in white paper. "Which one?" he asks, not giving me much of an option to say no.

"The noodles." I sigh.

"See how easy that was?" He scrapes all the chicken, vegetables, and noodles onto the other plate. "Go sit down and eat," he instructs.

It's on the tip of my tongue to say, "Yes, sir," but I stifle the urge, because it would be mocking this time and I don't want to do that.

MIXED FEELINGS



W aylynn

“SHOULD you text Bates and let him know not to worry about the generator?” I ask after I eat most of the food Memphis put on my plate.

“He’s probably already on his way back... What the hell?” Oswald is looking down at his phone with his lip curled up.

“What’s wrong?” I lean to the side, not even hiding the fact that I’m looking at his screen.

“My phone is blowing up.” Even as he says it, messages start to pop up so fast, I can’t read them. Several are texts, but most of them are from his social media app. “Jesus Christ,” he curses after tapping the notification. There’s an image of him taking up the entire screen.

“Oh my gosh.” I cover my mouth with my hands but still read the caption. *New star player injured—what happened at practice today, on and off the field.* They make it sound so ominous.

The picture is from this evening, and it’s of Oswald holding my crutches against his body. They must have snapped the photo right before he helped me out of the car.

Messages and notifications continue to ding on his phone, which is kind of silly because if anyone took the time to actually look at the picture, they would see the crutches are way too small for him and both are under one arm.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, feeling guilty, even though it’s not really my fault.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” he says quickly, but I can tell he’s distracted. “Damn it, it’s been shared and reposted a bunch of times already.” He leans his head back and lets out a loud growl.

“Why are you worried about it? It’s bullshit!” Memphis asks.

“Because they tagged the football program, and I don’t want to deal with this.” He pushes his phone across the island, and it continues to get notifications.

“You could hire someone to manage your social media for you,” I offer. I had a few friends that used a PR firm.

“I can’t afford something like that,” Oswald scoffs.

“You should check with the football team’s PR department. They might have a solution.”

“Should I make a post saying it’s not true?” He’s looking between me and Memphis.

“I would delete the app and forget about it.” Memphis gathers our plates to rinse and then puts them in the dishwasher.

A knock on the door has me turning, but Oswald gets up and walks over to answer it before I can. “Hey,” he says in a subdued tone as Bates enters and wipes his boots on the small rug. I notice he changed into a different pair of jeans and a faded maroon T-shirt that fits him nicely.

“Looks like you might have power soon.” He gazes around the room, and his face slips into a slight frown. “What’s going on?”

“Someone posted a picture of Oz with Waylynn’s crutches, and now everyone is saying he’s hurt,” Memphis answers.

“It’s not a big deal. I’m just tired of people talking shit,” Oswald grumbles.

“You’re going to have to get used to it, man, especially if you go pro.” Bates takes the stool Memphis vacated when he got up.

“You want to go pro?” I don’t know why I didn’t make that assumption already. I bet everyone who plays in college hopes to go pro.

“Maybe. How else am I going to keep you in this kind of luxury?” He finally smiles, and my heart feels a little lighter, knowing he’s not quite so upset.

“Just so you know, that’s certainly not a requirement of mine.”

“Oh yeah, what is required then?” Oswald leans his head close to mine and peers down at me with eyes so sweet and blue, I almost confess he’s one of those needs, but I’m not brave enough.

“People are much more important than things,” I manage to say right before the light above the sink clicks on, drawing my attention. There’s a strange whir as the power surges through the house, turning the fridge and other appliances back on.

Oswald captures my lips in a soft kiss, and my eyes sink closed. I have lots of money, and it’s never once made me feel like this.

MEMPHIS

MY EYES ARE STILL on Waylynn when Oz leans over and kisses her. She probably has no idea how much her words mean to him. Hell, to both of us. She might not have come right out and said he was more important to her than money, but it was as good as.

Bates is sitting right next to them, and he’s not even trying to hide the fact that he’s watching them kiss with a hell of a lot more interest than what would normally be acceptable. I’m not surprised, since he’s always been a bit of a voyeur.

When Waylynn pulls back from the kiss, her eyes are hooded with desire as she runs her tongue over her bottom lip. She's still watching Oswald's mouth as if she's trying to fight the urge to kiss him again. She's fucking beautiful.

I try to think about how I would feel if she were kissing Bates instead of Oz. Would I accept it as easily or be jealous of the way she's looking at him? No anger or resentment builds in my gut, but I'd be lying if I didn't say there was a little unease. What if she likes him more? Or what if she realizes that my attitude and need for control are too much to deal with when she has the option of two much easier going men who want her nearly as much as I do?

As if she can sense my eyes on her, she finally tears her gaze from Oswald and looks directly at me. The moment our eyes connect, all the insecurities I felt slip into the background. I don't question how she feels about me when she's looking at me. There's no need—it's written all over her lovely face.

"I talked to Hilbrand," I confess, and her eyes widen a bit.

"You did? What did she say?" Her voice is just above a whisper, as if she's afraid of what I might tell her.

"All your work needs to go directly to her, just as Oswald's does, but she's agreeable that it isn't an issue."

"Does she know..." Waylynn's eyes dart over to Bates briefly before she continues. "That we spend time together like this?" I'm certain that's not what she was going to say, but that's okay for now.

"She knows me well enough to know that I never would have brought it to her attention unless you were important to me."

Waylynn's lips curl into a sweet smile, but she drops her head bashfully. If we were alone, I would demand her attention so I could see the pretty flush on her cheeks, but I'm content knowing I've pleased her for now.

"So, no more illicit, teacher-student affair. Too bad. I liked having something to blackmail you with," Oswald teases while

wrapping his arm around Waylynn. “I’ll find something else to hold over your head to make sure you can’t ever escape us.”

Waylynn actually rolls her eyes at him good-naturedly, considering the topic. “Did you eat? Oswald brought an entire buffet,” she offers Bates.

“Hey, what if I wanted that?” Oz reaches for the burger I left in the box.

“You just told me you ate. He’s been running around trying to help me get power. He might be hungry too.”

“Oh, I see how it is. Now you’re homing in on my girl and my food.” Oswald shoves Bates playfully.

“Yup,” Bates states without any shame and pulls the takeaway box over to him. The act of unwrapping the burger and taking a huge bite seems to say more than he was hungry—it’s a confirmation of Bates wanting everything. It takes me a minute to realize I’m smiling instead of panicking, but when I do, it’s a relief.

Now I know it really is up to Waylynn to decide if she wants Bates in her life the same way she’s accepted us. I don’t want to kick him in his teeth for looking at her. I’ll take that as a good sign that this won’t ruin our friendship.



BATES

“WAVY SAID you’re going to give her a service.” The way Oz coos the words makes it sound lascivious.

“Yeah, as a side job.”

“And put in a generator. Sounds like we get to hang out a bunch again.” He leans forward and presses his knuckles to mine in a show of support.

“As long as it’s okay with everyone.” I trade glances with Waylynn and Memphis. She’s nestled between the two

brothers on the couch, looking sweet and a little sleepy.

“As long as you promise to charge me,” she chimes in.

“For the material,” I counter. I’m not charging her more than I have to.

“What does that mean?” She looks at Memphis.

“It means he’s not charging you for the work, just the material he has to buy for the job.”

“No, I want to pay for your time too.” She turns her hazel eyes on me.

“That’s not how it works,” I tell her.

“Why not?”

“Because you get the friend and family discount.”

“Another reason you can thank me.” Oz licks her cheek. She barely reacts except to rub the side of her face on his shoulder to get rid of the dampness.

Memphis tsks. “Why would she be thanking you for what Bates is doing?”

“Because he’s like family and we introduced him to her. However, he’s the one who should be thanking us.” He lifts his chin in the air and sniffs, acting all hoity-toity, but I know he’s just fucking around when he cracks a wide grin.

“Don’t thank him.” I roll my eyes. “But seriously. If it were Memphis or Oz’s place, I would do the same.”

“And you said we could stay here, meaning you should thank me. I’ll take many forms of payment, but my favorite currency...” He leans in close, so his lips are right near her ear. Her pupils dilate as she pulls in a lungful of air, making her chest rise sharply. “Is your complete devotion and access to your pantry.” He smacks a wet kiss under her neck. She scrunches up her face, then shoves him away playfully while smiling.

“You only like me for my food. Admit it, you saw me and thought, now there’s a girl who knows how to eat.”

“Bullshit,” Oswald snaps, clearly affronted, even though it’s obvious she was teasing him back. “Don’t ever talk like that, Waylynn. I saw you and my brain scattered. There was no football, no school. Nothing besides the need to know more about you, and hell yes, I noticed your body, but I was not thinking about what you eat. I was thinking I would like to eat your puss—” She smacks her hand over his mouth, red-faced and wide-eyed, before he can yell the last syllable, but we all know what he was about to say anyway.

“Okay,” she murmurs softly. He glares down at her in warning but allows her to continue covering his mouth. “Okay,” she says again for good measure.

When she lowers her hand slowly, he grumbles. “Don’t let me hear that shit again, Waylynn.” He’s not yelling now, but his tone is harsh.

She tucks her hands between her knees and pretends there’s something interesting on the tops of her thighs. The silence is heavy. I think I know why Oswald got so mad. I saw how pissed he was when he heard the girls at the bar talking shit about Waylynn, and her having the same insecurities about her weight probably pissed him off because he knows where she got it—from chicks just like those ones.

Memphis glares over the top of her head before he tries to wrap his arm around her neck, but she jerks upright, coming to her feet and leaning on her good leg before he can fully embrace her. “I need to use the bathroom,” she announces. Her eyes are searching frantically for her crutches, so I jump up and hand them to her before she tries to get away without them.

The muted thump of her escaping the room fills the silence until I hear a door down the hall snap closed.

“Do not yell at her like that again, do you hear me?” Memphis’ quiet tone makes it all the more menacing.

Oswald scrubs his hand over the top of his short hair with his face locked in a heavy scowl, but he doesn’t respond. I’m pretty sure he knows he overreacted. He’s probably almost as embarrassed as she is.

All three of us lift our heads to watch the hallway she disappeared down when we hear the thud and squeak of her crutches returning.

“I think I’m going to head to bed. Getting around tomorrow is going to be exhausting.”

“You’re going to campus tomorrow?” Memphis rises to face her.

“Yeah, I got a handicap parking permit.” She tries to smile like she thinks it’s silly, but it’s super weak.

“That’s still a lot of walking between buildings,” he informs her.

“I know, but it’s just two classes, and I have a break between. I’ll be able to park close. Night, guys.” She pivots and flees, not giving anyone a chance to say much else.

Memphis’ shoulders are rigid as he shoves his hands in his pockets. He doesn’t turn to face the room again for several long seconds, making me think he’s giving himself a little time so he doesn’t react out of annoyance just like Oz did.

When he does finally turn, he looks calm, but I know the signs that he isn’t—the ticking of his jaw, the flat stare, his stiff movements as he returns to his seat and lowers himself to the couch. I also know he’s doing his best, so I pretend the façade is working and act like the show none of us were really watching has my attention.

Oswald finally lets out a loud huff about fifteen minutes later and jumps to his feet. “I’m going to apologize,” he grumbles. I never would have made it that long, not that it’s a competition, but I do think she wanted some time alone and I’m glad he respected that, at least for a little while.

Memphis grabs his wrist as he passes in front of him. Oswald looks down at his big brother, who doesn’t even have to say a word. It’s all there in his glare. *Fuck around and find out.*

“I know. You should have just slapped me up the side of my head and told me to chill the fuck out.”

Memphis releases his grip, and Oswald trudges away.

This is the second time I've seen them get pissed at each other. Both rightfully so, but I'm wondering if they can do this and if I have any business getting myself involved.

SWEET PROMISES



W aylynn

I'M SO FRICKING EMBARRASSED, all I want to do is sleep, but every time I close my eyes, I see Oswald standing up for me, *to me*, and my inability to react like a normal person and just say thank you. I got all freaked out because he was so adamant and a little intimidating when he's usually so laid-back, but then I ran away to my bedroom like a thirteen-year-old.

"Gah." I punch my pillow again, trying to get comfortable.

I hear someone outside the room just as I heave myself down on the bed and try to calm my breathing so I can pretend to be sleeping if they come in here. I'll beat myself up later about still being immature, but I can't face anyone right now.

"Wavy," he whispers, and I tense up, forgetting all about pretending to breathe evenly. His footsteps are soft, but I still hear them as he walks around and sits on the side of the bed. The proof that I wanted him to come in is evident, considering I put myself in the middle of the mattress without even thinking about it.

"Sorry I yelled at you," he says solemnly. I think about trying to keep up the charade that I'm sleeping, but his tone and the slump of his shoulders don't allow it.

"It's okay."

"No, it's not." He looks back over his shoulder. "Don't tell me it's okay."

“Okay, you just...surprised me. That’s all. I’m not mad at you, promise,” I tell him truthfully.

“That’s because you’re too nice. You should be mad at me.” Oswald turns to the side, edging closer to me.

“How could I be mad at you when you were sticking up for me?” I question.

“Because my tone was shitty, and I want you to know you’re allowed to get mad, baby. You can get pissed or irritated or tell us no and we will still be here. You don’t always have to worry about how we feel. You have to worry about you too.” He slides his big palm over the top of my hair, petting me softly. “And we need to work a hell of a lot harder on not fucking up so much.”

“I’m not saying you F up, but you guys can be a little intense...and maybe a little confusing,” I admit with a wince.

“Can you even say the word fuck?” He grins down at me. It’s too dark to see all his features, but I can hear the curl of his smile in his words.

“Yes.” I shake my head in bewilderment, wondering how we got on this topic. See? Confusing.

He scoots a little closer and says, “Say it, say fuck.”

“Why?” Now I’m feeling self-conscious about it. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No, never. I just think you’re adorable, and I want to hear you say dirty things from this pretty mouth.” He trails his finger under my chin.

When he puts it like that, it’s hard to deny him. “Fuck.” It passes my lips softly, almost like a sigh, and Oswald sucks in a breath like I actually surprised him.

“Christ, Waylynn.” He places his thumb on the center of my bottom lip. It’s strange how sensitive it feels with his touch there. “I probably shouldn’t ask you to keep that word for me, but I’m going to anyway, because if I heard you say that, like you just did, I might not be able to stop myself from giving you exactly what you asked for.”

“Okay,” I agree without hardship. It’s not like it’s something I say often.

“I better go,” he tells me, but he doesn’t move.

“Are you leaving?” My question comes out a little desperate, but I can’t take it back.

“Just to go back down with Memphis and Bates. I already told you that you’re not getting rid of me.”

“Oh, okay.” I settle back against the pillow. I’m much more relaxed now, so I don’t think I’ll have the same problem falling asleep like I would have if we hadn’t talked.

“Unless you tell me I can’t, I’m sleeping in here with you,” he warns, then kisses me quickly as if to stop me from saying anything. I roll in my lips as he backs away. I have no intention of telling him anything of the sort.

“Night, baby,” Oswald says softly at the door, pulling it closed.

“Leave it open, please,” I tell him before it latches. He swings the door back open wide, then disappears down the hall.



I WAKE UP ALONE, just like I fell asleep, but the evidence that I wasn’t alone all night is on the floor in the form of Oswald’s socks and boxers. My eyes are hazy, but I force them open just in time to see Memphis coming out of the bathroom, hair damp, and in the process of buttoning his shirt. When he lifts his chin, I can tell he shaved, since his jaw is smooth and lickable. Dang it, Oswald must be rubbing off on me. I’ve never thought about licking a face.

My eyes are still fixed on him when he lifts the bottom of his shirt and starts tucking it into his open pants. I feel like I’m witnessing something I’m not supposed to, but I don’t look away, not even when he comes close enough to the bed that he catches me watching.

“Morning.” His voice is deep, as if he hasn’t spoken yet today, and I like knowing I’m the first person to hear him.

“Good morning.”

He lets out a small huff. “I wish I could crawl back in bed with you. Never has it been so hard to leave the house.”

“Sorry,” I tell him, but I’m not. I want him to climb back in bed with me too.

“Liar,” he accuses softly. I don’t argue because he’s right. “What time do you need to get up?”

I glance over at the clock. “Soon, since it’s probably going to take me longer to get around.”

“Do you need help?” He tips his chin down a little. The slight shift of his features changes the feel of our teasing. He’s watching me as if he’s ready to pounce at any moment.

“Do you mind handing me those things?” I flip the covers back and stretch languidly before scooting my legs to the side of the bed so I can get up.

“Are you trying to make me late again?” he asks with dark suspicion, yet he extends his hand to me as if to help me stand.

“No.” I rise, putting most of my weight on my good foot. Memphis doesn’t give me much room, so we end up nearly pressed together. “I thought you needed to go.” I tip up my brow, feeling brave for no reason at all.

“I do.” He leans down and kisses me softly. When I feel the tip of his minty tongue trace over my bottom lip, I pull back.

“I need to brush.”

Quicker than my sleepy reflexes can respond, he reaches up and grabs the back of my neck and pulls me to him. His lips are nearly resting on mine when he demands, “Open.”

My lips part, heedless of anything but his instruction, and I murmur, “Yes, sir.” His mouth descends on mine, minty and fresh. At least I can hope it will cover my morning breath, but

once he brushes his tongue against mine, I forget all about caring.

His free hand travels down my body and settles on the small of my back, pulling me forward a little more, so I can feel his entire lower body against mine. He's hard against my lower stomach, and my body answers his, aching in a way I don't really even understand, but I shift against him, needing something more.

I slip my hands up his back, wishing I caught him before he buttoned his shirt. I would much rather feel his skin under my fingers. The kiss is deep and slow but doesn't last nearly long enough. His fingers tighten on my neck right before he nips my bottom lip roughly with his teeth and pulls back.

Our foreheads are still touching, and I'm breathing embarrassingly hard, but I know he's just as affected so I don't mind. "I hate that I have to leave you here like this."

"I'm fine," I promise. Getting down the stairs is my least favorite thing about the crutches, but I manage.

"Are you sure?" He slips the hand that was on my back between our bodies and slides his fingers between my legs. He groans at the same time my breath hitches. I don't think we were talking about the same thing.

My shorts are thin, and he ends up pushing the cotton fabric of my panties up into my cleft with the tip of his finger. I think about spreading my legs and giving him more room, but he needs to go, no matter how much I wish he didn't.

I wrap my fingers around his wrist with the intention of moving his hand from between my legs, but he moves his finger, and I make a whimpering sound instead. Memphis clicks his tongue. "Sounds like you need my help, sweetness." His mouth is at my ear, and he still hasn't released his grip on my neck.

My muscles are all tense, and I'm on the edge of something that promises bliss at the touch of his finger. My eyes are heavy as I admit, "Yes," feeling powerful that he's

still here with me when he should be leaving, yet bad at the same time for the exact same reason.

When he twists his wrist, I release the death grip I have on him, allowing him to pull his hand back at the same time he releases his hold on my neck. “Slide your shorts and panties down your legs.”

Reason trickles back into my thoughts when his hands are off me. “You need to go,” I remind him.

His hooded eyes lower even more as he peers down at me. “Waylynn.” His tone is a warning. “Unless *you* don’t want me touching you and making you come, then take off your clothes and sit back on the fucking bed, now. I don’t give a shit what time it is.”

With trembling fingers, I hook my thumbs in the sides of my shorts and shimmy them off my thighs. Of course they get caught on the stupid cast, but Memphis doesn’t seem to notice as I sit on the edge of the bed and lift my other foot out.

MEMPHIS

I KNEW HAVING her sit down was a bad idea. The second she does, all my good intentions of making her come quickly with my fingers evaporates. I know I’m not leaving without tasting her. I drop to my knees and grip her hips to yank her to the end of the bed.

The shaky breath she exhales shouldn’t make me harder, but it does. When I get close to her pussy, I inhale her scent. I could smell her pussy on my finger even through her panties, and I knew she’d be even more intoxicating bare. I’m already resenting the fact that I’m going to have to wash her off of me before I leave.

When I kiss the inside of her thigh, she tenses slightly. I drag my tongue up to her pussy and lick her puffy lips, tasting her. One hand goes down to my dick, but the fabric covering me makes it hard to do much more than a light squeeze, while

I use the fingers of my other hand to spread her lips to slip my tongue inside her. Her back arches, and it opens her up more, so I push my tongue as deep inside her as I can get.

Her muscles tighten, and I feel her clench around my tongue. The tip of my cock is tingling, and the desire to shove myself inside her and stretch her until she's clamped around the base of my dick builds until I can barely stand it.

"Memphis," she pants softly, pleading for more.

I slide my tongue up and trace the letters of my name over her clit, claiming her until she's writhing. Just as she starts to cry out with her orgasm, I slip the tip of my middle finger inside her, making her take just a little bit more of me since I can't fuck her right now.

Her back is hovering off the bed in a beautiful arch as she cups her tits, my name on her lips and her taste on my tongue. She's fucking stunning. I don't stop licking her until she drags me up by pulling on the shoulder of my shirt. I'm mindful not to rub my clothes on her wet pussy as I come up. As much as I love her scent, I can't walk around smelling like pussy while I'm teaching.

She blinks up at me with starry eyes and parted lips while her chest is still heaving. My heart is thundering in my chest, and the words *I love you* are burning my tongue with the urge to tell her.

Her head tilts to the side, and she brushes her thumb over my lip, watching my mouth as if I might have muttered the words out loud, but I know I didn't. When her gaze comes up to meet mine, the storm that is always brewing behind her hazel eyes is calm.

Warmth that has nothing to do with lust or my desire to possess her stirs in my chest from knowing I'm the one who soothed her. "I don't want to go." The thought slips past my lips in a confession.

"I don't want you to go either," she admits.

"Next time I touch you, I promise I'll be able to hold you after." I kiss her again softly.

“I promise not to bother you tomorrow morning,” she says as I start to pull away.

“You have my express permission to break that promise. I’ll just wake you up earlier.” I kiss my way down her jaw and suck on her neck right under her ear, hard enough that I know I’m leaving a mark.

Waylynn tilts her head back, proving she wants more just as much as I do. When I pull away, the bruise is already forming. She reaches up with tentative fingers, touching the mark I left.

“Are you certain you want to go into school today? I’m sure you could get it excused,” I offer. I would like to imagine her here like this, where I left her, satisfied and waiting for more.

“No, I need to go, and so do you.” She pushes at me weakly.

“Fine.” I glance up at the clock as I stand. It’s only been fifteen minutes. I’ll still make it to school with a few minutes to spare. Not my usual time, but it’ll do.

“I’ll see you in class, Ms. Graff.” My voice is gruff, the same one I use to intimidate the students, but she just lifts her arms above her head and stretches like a lazy cat with a sweet little grin on her lips.

“I’m looking forward to it, Mr. Gravlin.”

A rough growling sound works its way up my throat as I adjust my cock while she watches. Her cheeks tinge pink, but she doesn’t look away. The next two hours are going to be torture.

BATES

IT MIGHT BE A LITTLE OVEREAGER, but when I went home yesterday to get the generator, I also packed a duffle with a

few changes of clothes and let my mom know I would be staying with Memphis for a few days.

When I get off work at four-thirty, I send Waylynn a text.

Me: It's Bates. Mind if I come by?

Oswald promised she was fine last night after he talked to her, but I don't just want to show up. She might be sick of having us around.

Waylynn: Sure.

Waylynn: The guys aren't here yet, just so you know.

Me: So long as it's okay with you.

Waylynn: Yup. Come on over, but you have to help me decide what's for dinner.

Me: That I can do. Need anything?

Waylynn: No thank you.

I don't break any speed limit laws, but I sure as shit bend a few to get to her place in record time. I regretted leaving her house the second I did yesterday when we had time alone, but I wanted to make sure she could charge her phone and computer.

I pull my van up near her garage, which gives Memphis more than enough room to park in the driveway behind me. I doubt it will be long before he gets home anyway.

When I knock on the door, she calls, "Come on in."

"Are you trying to give Memphis a heart attack?" I tease as she comes into the kitchen from the sitting room.

"No, why?" she exclaims as if I'm dead serious.

"The door was unlocked, and you just told me to come in."

"I saw you pull up." She points back into the room she just left with all the windows.

"The door was still unlocked." I let her see me flip the deadbolt.

Waylynn scrunches up her nose. “He probably would freak out,” she agrees.

There is no probably, he would when it comes to her. However, I doubt he ever locked his own damn door. “How’s your ankle today?” I notice she’s letting her foot rest on the floor more when she’s standing.

“Better I think.” She looks down at the white plastic boot. “I hope I can get off these things soon. Hobbling around campus is not fun.”

“You could get one of those little electric carts and ride that around.”

She scoffs. “Heck no, these attract enough attention, and could you imagine Oswald? He would make me give him rides everywhere.”

I chuckle because she’s right. “Imagine the headlines. *Football star falls hard for girl and ends up in wheelchair.*”

“Oh gosh.” She looks away shyly, but she’s smiling as she wakes up her computer that’s on the island.

“Homework?” I question, taking the stool next to her.

“No, I’m making a grocery order. If I don’t do it before they get home, they’ll insist on going for me, and I would rather just order it and have it delivered. I’m lazy like that.” She’s watching me as if she wants to read my reaction.

“Good plan. I hate grocery shopping,” I agree.

She pushes the computer a little closer to me and scoots her chair nearer. “Mind helping me make sure I get some stuff they like?” She glances up at me, and I can’t help but wish she were worried about what I like too.

“I can do that.” I nod and look away from her so she doesn’t think I’m staring too long.

“I got mustard. I know Oswald will eat anything, but he doesn’t like feta or peppers on his pizza. How about Memphis? Is there anything he doesn’t like?”

“I’m drawing a blank for what he doesn’t like, but they both eat pretty healthy for the most part—lots of protein and vegetables. Memphis is a sucker for ice cream though, and Oswald can’t pass up cookies.”

Waylynn grins over at me. “Now you’re speaking my language.” She types into the search bar. Before long, her cart is filled with all the fridge staples she lost from the power outage and a bunch of other food.

“So, what’s for dinner tonight?” I ask after seeing the delivery isn’t scheduled until tomorrow afternoon.

“It is pretty late, huh?” She frowns. “What sounds good to you?”

“Pretty much anything after all that.” I motion to her computer.

“I warned you that you would have to decide.”

“You said I would have to *help* decide,” I remind her with a smirk.

“You know the area and the food better.” She has no problem pushing it off on me.

“At least tell me what you’re in the mood for.” I lower my voice, flirting a little to see how she responds.

“Honestly, I could go for a good salad and steak.” I tilt my head to the side, disappointed. “I feel like I’ve been eating a lot of garbage lately. Know anywhere good we can call into? What?” she asks, touching around her face and mouth like there’s something there to wipe off.

I keep smiling. “I know a place. I wired it, and I’ve been dying to try it, but we can’t call it in. We have to go there. You up for it?”

“Are you sure Oswald and Memphis will be okay going?” she asks, already assuming I’m including them, which is good.

“Text them and find out.” She will get a faster response and have a better chance at them saying yes anyway.

“Okay,” she agrees and pulls her phone out of her pocket.

After only a few seconds, her phone vibrates and her face flushes pink, but she says, “Memphis said yes. He should be here soon. Oswald hasn’t responded yet, but he is usually at practice until six.”

“That’s all he said?” I tease, because I know there must have been more to it for her to get all pink.

“Um,” she hedges sweetly.

“It’s okay. I’ll figure it out someday so I can make you smile like that too.” Her eyes go a little wide, but she doesn’t tell me to get lost, so I’ll take it as a win for now.

She was right about Memphis being here soon—I hear the old truck pull into the driveway before I can see him. We’re going to have to move the cars around, since her car is the only one that can hold us all.

A key sliding into the lock has me peering over at her and whispering, “I won’t tell him it was unlocked when I got here.”

“Okay,” she mumbles back conspiratorially.

It’s like Memphis knows we were scheming the second he walks into the quiet kitchen. After closing the door, he sets his bag on the counter while watching Waylynn. With slow, measured movements, he unbuttons his cuffs and rolls them up his arms without speaking. As soon as he’s done, she blurts out, “I forgot to lock the door.”

I burst out laughing, and she spares me a quick glance before Memphis approaches her, his lips just barely curled into a smile that is so intimate, it tips my voyeuristic tendencies, and I’ll be damned if I don’t get hard watching him with her. It’s like he doesn’t even know I’m in the room, or more likely he doesn’t care, and I fucking love it.

I watch Waylynn tip her head back so she can keep her eyes locked on his as he nears. When he’s within touching distance, he slides his palm around the side of her neck, pushes his fingers into the back of her hair, then places his lips right over hers and murmurs, “Be more careful.”

Her head bobs a little when she swallows. He must take it as her acquiescence, because he kisses her tenderly and slowly. I watch his tongue slip into her mouth, and my balls tighten. As if his closeness isn't enough, he invades her space a little more, bringing his other hand up so she's cradled in his palms. Her fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt, squeezing like she never wants him to move.

After a few long seconds, the kiss slows, but not before Memphis nibbles on her lips, which makes Waylynn lean in closer to him, as if she can't get enough of the way he abuses her mouth. When the kiss ends, he stays close to her, wrapping his arm around her neck and shoulder, then turns to face me. "Hey." The thickness in his tone says he's just as affected by her and the kiss as I was by watching it.

"Hey," I reply.

The corner of his lip curls, and I know I've been caught. The good thing is he doesn't seem upset. "Have you heard from Oz?" he asks Waylynn, who only shakes her head. When her hair shifts with the movement, I notice the bruise on the side of her neck. It's not lost on me that was exactly where Memphis held her. I wonder if he was reminding her of when he did it. "He shouldn't be too much longer. Should we head over to the field house to pick him up?"

"We need to move the cars around, unless we're taking separate vehicles."

"Mind if we use your car, sweetness?"

"Not at all, as long as one of you drives. I don't want to be the cause of another photo op like yesterday."

"They say all press is good press, right?" I rise from the stool and present her crutches to her from where they were leaning against the counter.

"I don't know about that. I've seen some stuff that shouldn't have been printed." She sounds like she's speaking from experience, yet her tone doesn't make me eager to ask her about it.

“Don’t let it bother you. I need to use the bathroom, be right back.” Memphis pulls away from Waylynn, and she stands.

“Mind handing me that?” She points to a bag sitting farther down the counter. When I pick it up, I realize it’s a fanny pack. Instead of putting it around her waist, she loops the thing over her chest so the strap comes to rest between her tits and the bag is nestled under the right side. When she looks up after a small adjustment, she catches me staring...not that I was trying to hide it.

“Should we just leave the cars on the street so we don’t have to move them again when we get home?” Memphis asks as he comes through the doorway.

“As long as it’s not overnight. I don’t want anyone breaking in to steal my tools,” I reply.

“Nah, just park behind me when we get home, you leave the earliest.”

I keep an eye on Waylynn after Memphis’ words to see how she’s going to react to him basically telling me I can spend the night again. If she minds, she doesn’t show it, and to be honest, I don’t think she could hide it if she did mind. Her little confession to Memphis about the door proved that.

PARTY OF FOUR



W aylynn

THE SMOKE CURLING through the restaurant is evident the second we walk through the double door that Bates and Memphis held open. I glance around at the high industrial ceilings and modern black décor, noting it's pretty busy. I wonder if we should have called ahead.

Oswald saunters up to the counter, much to the delight of the three female staff members clustered behind the hostess area.

“Hey, how long is the wait for four?”

The girl in front of him looks down at a little laminated map after a short stare off as if she might not answer him. “I have a table leaving soon, you can put them in my section,” one of the other girls pipes up.

“It's Leah's turn,” the hostess finally says. When she looks up, I notice her blush, so her delayed communication makes a little more sense. Oswald is striking. He's tall, at least an inch taller than his older brother, and even in a non-fitted shirt, you can tell he's built. His muscles are defined without effort, and then you get to his face. He's pretty, there's no other way to put it. His lashes are long and enviable, while his lips are full and continually quirked in a slight smile, like he's always in on the joke. The baby blue eyes seal the deal. The first time I saw him, I thought they sparkled, and it's still a fitting description.

“We’ll take whatever you’ve got.” Oswald glances between the girls, waiting for one of them to address him.

“We could put them here.” The last girl points at the laminated map.

The first girl looks over her shoulder briefly. “That’s Michele’s section.”

“Yeah, but she has a four top available now.”

“Okay,” blushing girl agrees, while the waitress spins and walks away, dejected.

There’s a strange standoff when we reach the table that’s just a few steps away from the hostess station. All four of us are waiting for the other to sit down, so we end up just looking at each other. “Sit.” Memphis angles himself as close to me as he can get with my crutches, and I back into the high booth with him coming in after me. He hands my crutches to Oswald.

“Smooth move, ace, don’t think I don’t notice you trying to steal my girl.”

“Mine. Put those up,” Memphis instructs, barely even looking at his brother. His declaration makes me think of when I swear I heard him say he loved me in my head. I think it was one of the only times I wished the voices were real.

Bates scoots into the seat across from me, while Oswald leans my crutches against the wall in the lobby before returning to sit down.

The tables are high, so I feel like my boobs are practically sitting on the table. I lean back to make it less obvious. Once we’re all settled, the hostess finally hands the menus out, saving Oswald for last. “Your waitress will be around shortly to take your order.”

“Thanks,” he says without looking up at her. I wonder if he really doesn’t know how flustered he’s making her or if he’s just ignoring it. Once she’s gone, I lean over the table a little, and his eyes are already trained on my boobs. I think about asking him if he noticed her attention, but I’m afraid it’s going

to make me seem like I'm jealous, and in this situation, I'm not. I'm curious.

His eyes come up to mine, unapologetic that he was checking out my chest. "What, baby?"

I lean back again, deciding to wait until later to ask if I still want to know. "Nothing," I answer.

He continues to look at me for a few seconds, waiting to see if I'll change my mind, but I just start studying the menu, so he drops it.

A woman zooms by but stops short just after passing the table and backtracks. "Hey, guys," she chirps as she peruses the table. "I'm Michele, and I'll be your waitress. Can I start you off with anything to drink?" She leans her hip near Oswald, waiting.

"Two waters with lemon," Memphis says for us.

Bates glances up. "Dr. Pepper for me."

"Water, *no lemon.*" He bulges his eyes at me as if I've broken some law.

"Great, have you guys been here before?"

"Nope, you?" Oswald asks Bates.

"No."

"While you're looking at the menu, I'll explain how it works." The waitress leans in even closer to Oswald, pointing at his menu on the table and telling us how the steak comes raw and we cook it ourselves on a lava stone they bring to us. Now all the sizzling and smoke makes a little more sense.

"Make sure not to touch the stone. It's 755 degrees, but if you slip, I have been known to kiss a boo-boo or two," she teases, mostly looking at Oswald and Bates, but her eyes dart to Memphis quickly.

"I think we have that part covered. Right, baby? You can be our nurse." Oswald winks at me. I smile and give him a small, indulgent shake of my head. "That's a yes in Wavy,

she's just shy," Oswald explains when he finally looks up at the waitress, his playful smile still in place.

"Can't say I blame her with the three of you. I'll go grab those drinks, it will give you time to look over the appetizers and menu." She saunters away, handling Oswald's slight rejection in stride.

Oswald leans over the table to whisper once she's gone. "I can't believe I have to cook my own food and pay thirty bucks for it."

"I'm the one who picked it, so it's my treat. Plus, I passed my test, so you're looking at a journeyman."

Oswald shoves Bates' shoulder after the announcement. "That's fucking awesome! Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

Bates shrugs his shoulders. "I just got the email notification today. I haven't even told Ronny."

Memphis thrusts his hand out, and Bates clasps it in a firm shake. Their gazes linger with some unspoken words, but it's clear Memphis is happy for Bates. I congratulate him myself once the brothers are done. I don't know what being a journeyman entails, but it must be good.

"Thanks, it's been a long time coming." He nods his head slowly.

"Can you tell me what it means?" I ask with a wince.

"It means he makes a shit-ton more money," Oswald says just as the waitress bends down with a tray.

"Oh, are we celebrating?" she asks, placing the drinks on the table. Memphis rips the paper off my straw and puts it in my glass before sliding it carefully over to me.

"Thank you." I mostly mouth the words because Oswald is excitedly talking about Bates becoming a journeyman.

"That's amazing, and you're so young." She looks him up and down, even though he's half concealed behind the table. "I'm still in school for two more years." She sighs with a shoulder slump.

“I think we need a few more minutes,” Memphis tells her, interrupting any more chatting.

“Alrighty, I’ll be back in a minute. Any appetizers?” she questions before leaving.

Oswald dismisses her this time. “No, we’re good.”

“Do you guys know what you want?” Memphis asks once she’s gone.

“I do.” I push the plastic sheet away.

“What are you getting?” Oswald is still scanning his menu.

“Filet and shrimp.” I’m not that keen on cooking it myself either, but it might be fun to try.

“I think I’m going to do the same.” Bates places his menu on top of mine. “Being a journeyman means I’m certified and can run my own jobs. It would make it easier for me to get union work if I wanted to go that route, but the big deal is the jump in pay from being an apprentice.” I wasn’t sure he would remember to answer me.

“And you’re done with school,” Memphis points out.

“Hell yes,” Bates agrees. “I don’t know how you guys do it. I did a lot of it online, but I hated it.”

“I’m hoping to get signed early. I want out as soon as I can.” Oswald knocks his glass into Bates’ in a cheer.

“You should get your degree first,” Memphis tells him, and Oswald rolls his eyes in response.

“I won’t need a degree if I get signed.”

Memphis opens his mouth as if to say something more, but the waitress returns. “All set to order?” She looks around.

“Yes.” Memphis glances down at the menu.

I lay my hand on his thigh, and he immediately gives me his attention. “Go ahead,” he encourages.

I was going to ask if he was sure he knew what he wanted, but instead I order. “Dynamic duo with a salad and truffle fries,” I tell her while she nods and takes notes on a pad.

“For you?” She moves on to Memphis, who is still looking at the menu.

“I’ll go next,” Bates offers. “I’m going to have the same duo, but I want to add mushrooms. For sides, I’ll take the baked potato, loaded, and green beans.”

“Damn, my mouth is watering.” Oswald smacks his lips. “What’s the best?” He looks up at Michele.

“I usually get the Caesar or strawberry salad.” She leans in close to him again.

“Yeah, no.” He shakes his head quickly with his lips curled back in distaste.

“How big is the ribeye?” I interrupt.

“It’s a good size. The twelve-ounce sirloin is the biggest single steak.”

“That’s why you’re my girl.” Oswald points at me. “I’ll have the twelve-ounce sirloin with a loaded baked potato and mac and cheese. Thanks, baby.”

The waitress’ brow furrows as she glances at Memphis. I think she’s confused about why I’m sitting next to him since Oswald keeps calling me his girl.

“Taste of the rock, salad with ranch, and green beans.” Memphis turns to me. “What dressing do you want?”

“Ranch is good for me too,” I reply quickly, not even realizing I forgot.

“I’ll get that right in, shouldn’t be long.” She’s not quite as chipper when she walks away.

“I think you confused her.” Bates chuckles. “She couldn’t figure out which one of you Waylynn is with.”

Oswald snorts. “Good. I hope she’s right and it is fast. I’m starving.” He looks at the few tables we can see around us.



COOKING the steak wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be, but I feel greasy as heck by the time we're done.

"Memphis." I lean my cheek on his shoulder and look up at him. "Can I ask you a favor?"

His eyes narrow as he peers down at me with suspicion. After watching me for a few seconds, he lifts his eyes and says, "No." The single syllable isn't harsh, but my heart doesn't see it that way. He didn't even ask what I wanted.

I sit upright and try not to feel embarrassed by the rejection.

"What just happened?" Bates asks.

"Nothing," I rush to say, not making eye contact with anyone.

"Memphis?" he questions directly.

"She wants to pay the bill, and I told her no," he answers smoothly.

"She asked for a favor. How do you know she wasn't going to ask you to let her up or something else?"

"Because I know her." He meets his friend's stare.

"Next time, you should let her ask," Bates mutters. "You're going to make her think she can't ask you for anything."

I don't like that he's talking about me almost like I'm not here, and I don't want anyone to be bothered by my hurt feelings. "It's okay, he's right," I defend while plastering a small smile on my lips.

Oswald sends a glare at the side of Memphis' face, who is now looking at me with a frown. I don't think they buy my fake platitudes as easily as everyone else does.

My first instinct is to excuse myself to the bathroom, so I don't have to feel their eyes on me, but I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from asking to get up.

"Anyone save room for dessert?" the waitress asks happily.

“No.” Oswald’s tone is flat and indifferent.

“How about boxes? Anything *else*?” She has her pad and pen poised at the ready, as if we may order more, or maybe she’s waiting for someone to ask for her number. *I’m being petty.*

“Just the bill is fine.” Bates dismisses her.

“All together or...”

“One bill. We’re together,” Oswald answers in the same gruff tone. It’s clear the mood has shifted at the table, and I’m getting more and more uncomfortable.

“Be right back with that.” She pivots and slips away from the table. I wish I could too. I’ve made it all awkward and weird.

“I shouldn’t have assumed,” Memphis tells me softly. Now he’s upset too. I should have just kept my mouth shut in the first place.

“It’s okay, you were right. I didn’t realize I was that transparent and you knew what I was going to ask.”

“You never ask for anything but that.” He lifts one brow up in a challenging manner. “We eat your food, stay at your house, use your water and electricity, and watch your TV, and you still try to pay when we go out.”

When he says it like that, it makes me feel like I insulted him, and that wasn’t my intention. “I don’t want you to think you have to pay for me all the time, that’s all.”

“Don’t make her feel bad,” Oswald says softly.

“I’m not trying to.” Memphis scowls.

“But you are, look at her face.” Bates waves his hand toward me, and I blink a few times, clearing my features.

“I didn’t mean to make a big deal out of this. I just don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Oswald bursts out laughing, drawing my attention, which allows Memphis to wrap his palm around the back of my neck

and gently squeeze. “The fact that you’re serious makes it even more adorable.” Oswald continues to chuckle.

The waitress places a padded envelope at the edge of the table, which Bates reaches for. I watch his face as he opens it, scans the receipt, and places his card into the slot before closing it and putting it back on the table without much of a reaction.

“Thank you for dinner and the company.” I make sure to scan all three of them.

“You’re welcome.” Bates is the first to respond. Memphis pulls me over with his hand still on the back of my neck and kisses the top of my head. I relax against him. I don’t think he would kiss me if he were upset.

Oswald

AS SOON AS Memphis pulls into Waylynn’s driveway, Bates and I exit the backseat to pull the vehicles behind the garage. It’s a wonder the previous owner didn’t make the garage larger or change the driveway. There is plenty of room to make a horseshoe drive, so moving the cars around wouldn’t be necessary, but then I look over the garden, and even in the dim light of early evening, I realize why. It would be a shame to get rid of any of the shrubs or garden for concrete.

Memphis is helping Waylynn out of the passenger seat, so I head over to the door and unlock it, marveling at the key on the ring she told him to keep. I thought I would have to bust my ass for a place like this, and here I am, but more importantly, I’m with the people I care about.

Once I push the door open, I look back at Waylynn. She’s getting better at using the crutches, and she’s even letting her foot rest on the ground a little more.

I can’t help but think about what she said at the restaurant, when she was worried she was taking advantage of us. It boggles my mind a little bit, considering I’ve been troubled

about how I would be able to trust the people who came into my life. How would I know they were there for me and not what I could provide them with? And that was all contingent on the big maybe of me getting anywhere with football. There are a hundred guys just like me, putting it all on the field every weekend, and only a small percentage of us will go to the pros. I'm confident I can be one of those guys if I keep working my ass off, and I'm lucky enough not to get hurt, but how can she be so trusting?

"Hey, baby?" I call as she swings past me.

"Yeah?" she answers without the hesitance she used to, like she was questioning if I was really talking to her.

"Serious question," I state.

"Okay." She halts and faces me, making sure I know I have her attention.

"How come you trust us? Are you like that with everyone?"

"Um..." Her brows pinch. I've clearly caught her off guard. After a deep breath and a short pause, she says, "No, I don't trust that easily."

"I didn't think you did, so why us?" I press when she avoids answering part of the question.

Waylynn licks her bottom lip, like she's debating how to answer. At this point, we have Memphis and Bates' attention too. I feel a little bad for putting her on the spot, but I still want to know. Eventually, she says, "Just a feeling I guess." The way her voice goes up at the end makes it sound like she's not sure herself.

"That's it? A feeling?"

Her mouth slips into a frown. "Why did you talk to me in the first place?" She darts her eyes over to Memphis, and the look shared between them makes me think I'm missing something, but then she's staring at me again and I flounder for my own answer. Why was I looking forward to seeing her again the minute she was out the door that first day? Why was I reluctant to leave her when I ran into her later on the quad?

“Damn it,” I mumble dejectedly, realizing there’s no big revelation to be had here. It was the same for me—a feeling. “Okay, I get it.”

Bates bends down and unlaces his shoes. I notice the duffle bag at his feet. Seems like he’s making himself right at home, which I’m all for. We were always friends, and he never treated me like a little kid the way a lot of Memphis’ other friends did, but we got even closer after Memphis went to college and his parents took me in.

I helped him renovate the space above the garage into an apartment, and we hung out there pretty much all the time. He’s like another brother to me, and I missed seeing him since I’ve been at school.

“I’m going to change. I smell all smoky,” Waylynn announces. I have a feeling she is happy for the excuse to get away from the conversation. I trail behind her at a distance and watch her navigate the stairs to make sure she gets up okay. Once she’s at the top, I head back to the kitchen to get a drink, then find the guys in the living room.

Bates and Memphis already have the TV on when I plop my ass on her fluffy couch with a happy sigh. My belly is mostly full, I’m comfortable as hell, and I have my family. What more could I ask for?

Waylynn

AS SOON AS I step foot in my room, I know I’m probably done for the night. Just changing my clothes isn’t going to be enough, I need to shower too. I liked the restaurant, but I don’t know if I would rush to go back because I feel so greasy. I sort out some clothes, noting I need to do laundry.

After taking my pill and retrieving my phone from my bag, I hook it on the corner of the chair and head to the bathroom. When my phone screen lights up, I see I have several texts from my mom asking if I’m okay and growing increasingly urgent.

“Oh crap.” Instead of texting back, I call her.

“Waylynn?” Her tone reflects her worry.

“Hey, sorry I missed your message. I was out. Is everything okay?”

“Is that why you missed your appointment with Maxwell? You were out?” Some of the worry she was expressing morphs into anger, or at least irritation.

“Oh no!” I squeeze my temples. I forgot it was Wednesday. My appointments with my therapist used to dominate my thoughts, but not so much lately. Maybe I am getting better. “I forgot, Mom. I went to dinner with a few friends.”

“We were all very worried, Waylynn,” she chastises. It’s unusual that I get scolded. Other than my mental health issues, I would say I’m a pretty good daughter. “I almost called the hospital.”

I can just imagine her fretting away. I feel guilty, but it was one time. “I’m sorry, Mom. I’ll apologize to Maxwell and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Well...” She huffs, losing steam. “I’m glad you’re okay, but please don’t make this a habit, Waylynn.”

“I won’t.” I roll my eyes. I already promised it wouldn’t happen again.

“Are you home now?” she questions.

“Yeah, about to jump in the shower actually if you can hear the echo. We went to this steak place where you cooked your own meat at the table, and I feel gross.”

She clicks her tongue. “Yes, well, make sure you wash your face well. I can’t imagine all those oils are good for your skin.” Of course she would worry I would get a blemish. “Did you at least have fun? Who went?” The last part comes out much breezier, like she’s not really that curious, but I know she is.

“Just a few of us. Memphis, Oswald, and their friend, Bates. I’ve met him a few times...and Michele was there.” I add the last part so it’s not obvious I’m only hanging out with

guys. I feel like that might push my mom over the edge tonight.

“Oh, you’ve been spending a lot of time with those two boys,” she observes, waiting for me to fill in more blanks.

“Yeah, I like them both a lot.”

“Oh dear, well, be careful there. You don’t want them both trying to win your affection. That might cause some strain.”

I laugh a little, and I hope she can’t tell it’s from nerves. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“That’s good,” she agrees, not understanding the meaning at all, which I’m grateful for. I have no idea how my parents will react when or if they find out I’m already *dating* both of them.

“Well, I’ll let you take a shower. Make sure you send a message to Maxwell’s office so they know everything is okay.”

“I will. They called you?” I confirm.

“Yes, when you weren’t there for your meeting and didn’t answer his call.”

I suppose that’s reasonable, but it still feels like a small violation, considering I’m over eighteen and no longer even living at home. “Okay, I’ll send an email before I get in the shower and apologize.”

“I’m glad you’re getting out, Waylynn, and experiencing things. We all just worry about you.”

“I know. I’ll talk to you later. Love you, bye.”

“Love you too, bye.”

Right after I hang up, I send the email I promised, explaining I just forgot to set an alert for the new time and that I was out to dinner with friends. Hopefully, he won’t be too upset, since he did assign me the homework of making some friends.

NORMALCY



W aylynn

WE FALL into an easy routine over the next couple of days. There are times when I question how I went from living alone to living with three guys, two of which share my bed and one more that seems to hint he might want to too, but most of the time, I try not to overthink it. I've spent the past ten years overthinking everything.

It's after eight when Oswald gets home from practice on Friday. "How was dinner?" I ask when he and Memphis enter the living room.

"Fine. You guys had sticky chicken." He throws himself on the sofa next to me. His hair is still damp from his shower, and he smells amazing.

"There's some left. Do you want me to warm it up for you?"

"Nah, I'm full. They catered a bunch of shit we could eat while watching films." He leans his head back, and his eyes sink closed on an exhale.

"Sleepy?" I question, threading my fingers with his.

"A little," he replies.

"I got a call from that bar I played at. Their regular Saturday night gig had to cancel, so they wanted to know if I could fill in," Bates informs us.

Oswald lifts his head off the couch to look at Bates. “That’s awesome. They love you.” He grins.

Bates does this almost shy half shrug. “I’ll have to leave the game a little early. Do you guys want to come after it’s over?” He scans the three of us.

I bite my lip, excited, but I wait for Memphis and Oswald to answer first. “Hell yeah!” Oswald agrees easily, then his face falls into a slight frown. “Shit, do you mind if I invite a guy from the team? Higgins is a good dude, but I’ve been putting him off for a couple of weeks.”

“You can invite the whole football team. More at the door, more in my pocket,” Bates divulges.

“I haven’t heard you practice once this week, are you nervous?” I’m nervous for him, and I have no idea why. He did amazing last time.

“Not really, though I would have practiced a little if I knew I was playing this weekend.”

Oswald kisses the back of my hand, then releases it to pull his phone from his pocket. I watch as he sends out a quick text, inviting Higgins to the bar tomorrow. “What time do you play?”

“Nine, which is a little early for a Saturday night show.”

“That means we’ll have time to hang out after.” Oswald finishes his text and sets his phone down. Within seconds, it’s vibrating.

“Higgins will be there,” Oswald announces.

My attention is drawn to Memphis on the other side of Bates when I hear his voice in my head. *Oz’s girl*. Our eyes meet, and a small sense of regret fills me, but instead of pushing that feeling or the words down, I explore what it could mean. Clarity comes quickly, but without explanation. I know in some way, the regret stems from Memphis not being able to behave the way he did last time at the club, like we were together, exchanging kisses and touches. He’ll have to keep his distance.

What I don't know is if the regret is his or mine—probably both. “It's only a semester.” I realize too late that I said the words out loud.

Memphis' brows furrow deeply before he asks, “What?” with an air of uncertainty.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about school.” I try to recover, but it still seems way out of left field. “I'm excited to see you play again.” I change the subject back to Bates so they can't dwell on my weird outburst.

“I'm glad you guys are coming.” Bates bumps his shoulder into mine. “I will have to dip out a little early from the game, though, so I can clean out the back of the van and get my equipment, so make some moves early in the game,” he tells Oswald.

“I'll see what I can do.” Oswald grins and offers his knuckles to Bates.

“Next week is Iowa, right?”

Oswald's smile slips. “Yeah, we fly out Friday.”

“Do you already have a ticket?” I ask Memphis.

“No, I'll miss this one and New Jersey in a few weeks. The rest are close enough to drive to.”

“You don't fly?”

“I fly,” Memphis hedges.

“Do you have to work?” I'm not understanding.

“It's expensive to fly.” Oswald wraps his hand over mine.

“Oh, well, I said if you played, I would be there, so... would you care to join me, Memphis, Bates? I hate traveling alone.” That's not the absolute truth. I don't love traveling alone, but I don't hate it. I would, however, hate them not being with me.

Oswald grabs my face and kisses me hard and fast. It's filled with gratitude and appreciation, but my breath still quickens. He pulls back just enough that I open my eyes to stare into his.

“I don’t know what we did to deserve you, but I... Fuck, you’re amazing. Don’t worry about him. I’ll convince him, and as soon as I get my first check, I will pay you back for everything,” he promises.

When Oswald flops back into his own seat next to me, I glance up. Memphis is scowling, and he actually looks kind of mad, which makes me a tiny bit nervous. “You don’t have to go,” I offer, even though I really want him to.

“Will you still go if I don’t?” His words are sharp.

“Yes,” I answer truthfully.

“I’ll put the ticket on my card.”

“Memphis, all I have to do is make a call. There are no tickets to put on a card.”

“No tickets?” he questions in confusion.

“No tickets, and nothing to pay back.” There are many things I take for granted, and I’m realizing this is one. I’ve never flown commercial in my life.

“Waylynn...” Oswald says slowly. “Don’t tell me you have a private plane on standby.” He chuckles like what he’s saying is absurd.

“It’s not *mine* personally,” I hedge.

Memphis brings his hand up and covers his mouth, then pulls down on his chin, while Oswald gapes at me. “That is some next-level shit, baby. How rich are you?”

“Oz!” Bates chastises.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s just, you seem so normal,” Oswald defends.

Now it’s my turn to be shocked. “Being wealthy makes me not normal?” I question, trying not to overanalyze his word choice, but my voice is weak, even to my own ears.

“No,” Memphis answers for his brother.

“I just... I don’t know, baby, that one caught me off guard.”

“Should I request Friday off, or are you going later in the day?” Bates takes it all in stride, and I’m so grateful for it.

“We can go whenever. You have to work, right?” I include Memphis, because I want him to come. I want him to *want* to come.

“Yeah,” Memphis answers gruffly without commenting if he’s going to join us or not.

“Man, I’m jealous. I wish I could fly out with you guys.” Oswald seems to be coming around.

“You could,” I offer.

“The team won’t allow it. Not even for the flight back,” he says dejectedly.

“Oh, that stinks. We can go somewhere when the season is over if you want,” I tell him.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Memphis announces, then stands up and walks out of the room.

He usually showers in the morning, so it’s easy to pick up on the clue that he doesn’t want to be here or involved in the conversation. I don’t regret offering to go for Oswald, but I’m sad Memphis is upset. I should have done something different.

Oswald pulls my thumb down from my mouth, where I was worrying my lip. “I’m excited you guys will be there,” he tells me.

I wish his words could erase the unease I feel, but they don’t. However, I don’t let it stop me from telling him, “Glad to be there.”

MEMPHIS

WHEN I WALK into Waylynn’s room and look around, I can’t help but see it with different eyes. I knew she had money, but it never bothered me. Hell, it wasn’t long ago that I was telling Oz not to worry about it because it’s clear we come from

different backgrounds and she never seemed to care, so what's different now?

Knowing she has access to a plane, probably a private jet with just a phone call, freaked me the fuck out. I don't know how to deal with that. What kind of people is she used to being around? What will the people in her life think of us?

I lean my palms on her bathroom counter and hang my head down, avoiding the mirror. Never once has Waylynn judged us for not having money, but here I am, passing judgment on her and her family for having it.

Pissed at myself, I strip off my clothes, leaving them in a messy heap on the floor, then get in the shower, because that's what I said I was doing and I'm not ready to face Waylynn yet.

After a long soak, I grab a bottle of shampoo off the ledge. It's not the strawberry scented one she uses, but the same cheap shit I have at home in my bathroom. I examine the new bottle, realizing she took the time to notice our fucking shampoo brand the one time she was at my apartment and got it—not to rub it in my face that she could, she would never do that. She probably got it because she wanted us to be comfortable, to feel welcome.

I squirt it in my palm and scrub my hair. I really need to pull my head out of my ass and quit being an idiot before she decides she doesn't want me around.

When I exit the bathroom in just a towel, Waylynn is sitting on the edge of her bed. Her eyes are on me as the steam billows out into her room. I'm able to see the flush of her cheeks before she turns to the side, hiding her face and giving me privacy I didn't ask for.

“Gosh, sorry.”

“For what?” I play dumb.

“I should have waited for you to come out.”

It would be easy to pretend nothing happened downstairs and ignore the reason she came up here. It wasn't to catch me without my clothes, but I can tell she's flustered by seeing it. All it would take is a few steps around the bed and a tug on the

towel at my hip, and I could either have her panting or maybe fleeing from the room, depending how I played it, but I don't do that. Instead, I walk over to my bag on the floor, grab a pair of shorts, and slip them up my legs before untying the towel and tossing it in her bathroom with my other shit I'll clean up later.

She peeks at me, keeping her eyes above my waist as I round the bed and finally sit next to her. Her shoulders relax a little when my leg touches hers.

“Sorry I was pissy,” I say at the exact same time she says, “I'm sorry I upset you.”

I reach for her, putting my palm on the back of her neck and pulling her closer. “You don't have anything to be sorry for. Don't apologize.”

“I upset you. I don't want you to be mad at me.” She's watching my face with a pleading expression.

“Why are you so worried about me being mad at you? You know I would never hurt you, right?”

Her lips pinch just the tiniest bit. If I weren't so close, I wouldn't have been able to tell. “Physically, yes, I know.” She's quick to respond, but her answer doesn't make me happy. It feels like she's admitting she thinks I will hurt her in other ways, and I can't even argue with her right now, because I have done things to hurt her.

“Has anyone else hurt you?” I question with my throat tight.

“Like hit me? No.” She even shakes her head.

I take a deep breath as the knot in my chest unfurls. I don't know what I would do if I found out someone had hurt her. “Will you help me understand why you're always worried about people being mad at you?”

Her eyes drop from mine. “I'm hard to be around, I know that.”

An ugly feeling sours my stomach. “No, you're not. Who told you that?” My tone is harsh, but I can't help it.

“No one had to tell me. I just know I am.”

“Waylynn.” I squeeze her neck a little more, making sure I have her attention. “You are not hard to be around. You are the fucking opposite. Why do you think we pretty much moved ourselves in with you? And it’s not because you have a nice house. I could give a shit. We could all move into my shitty apartment,” I add before she has time to answer.

“Because... Because you don’t know me well enough yet, and I’m medicated.”

“You think I’m going to learn something that will change my mind about you next week or next year? Because I won’t. And you take Xanax. I’m sorry I gave you shit for it. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Do you know how many people take medication for anxiety?”

“You might,” she says gravely. “You might learn something about me that could change your mind.”

“I won’t,” I tell her with certainty.

There’s a small frown curling her full lips, but it’s her hazel eyes that get me. They are glassy with a sheen that speaks of unshed tears.

“Waylynn, I love you, and you are perfect the way you are,” I say, speaking the words I’ve thought before but couldn’t voice. I don’t want her to worry I’m going to leave her or that she isn’t good enough. I need her to understand just how important she is.

“Memphis...” She shakes her head, and I swear she looks even more distraught now. I watch her swallow thickly and open her mouth, but Oswald chooses that moment to dash up the stairs, down the hall, and crash onto her bed, making us both bounce with his weight.

“I thought I might be missing something. Bates is probably lurking in the hall, trying to sneak a peek, but you guys are totally G-rated.”

Waylynn’s face flushes crimson, and I know whatever she was about to say won’t be uttered now. I’m a little disappointed. I didn’t think I needed her to say it back until

she didn't. Before I said those words, I was completely confident she felt for me the way I feel for her, but she almost seemed sad when I told her, and I don't know what to do with that.

Waylynn

I'M SO SELFISH. That's what I'm thinking as I lie curled up between Memphis and Oswald. The only thing I felt when Oswald bounced into the room was relief when I realized it gave me an excuse not to confess my truth to Memphis. It bought me a little more time before I tell them about my past and admit I'm still hearing voices on occasion. I wonder if it's even worse that it seems like I only ever hear the three of them anymore.

Memphis tried to pretend that what happened in the few minutes we had alone wasn't a big deal, but I could see and feel the shift in his demeanor the moment we were interrupted. My brain is trying to tell me he already knows, that he somehow figured out my secrets even though I never uttered them, and that's why he made it clear we should just go to bed since we have a lot of plans tomorrow. That, though, is why I'm still awake hours later, wondering what the hell I'm going to do.

I shift again, trying to get comfortable, hoping my mind will shut off long enough to allow me to fall asleep, but it feels hopeless. For the first time in a while, Memphis shifts behind me, and I hold my breath on instinct. I don't want him to know I'm awake.

His hand snakes over my side to rest on my lower stomach, and he curls himself behind me. His warm breath is fanning against the back of my neck, and I let out a tiny exhale, forcing even breaths, and let my eyes slip closed.

For the first time since he uttered those three words, I allow myself to feel them instead of the dread I felt when I

realized I need to tell him the truth, because I love him too, and he deserves better from me, they all do.

The fear of rejection isn't gone, not by a long shot, but I shove it to the back of my mind and focus on what I have right now in this moment. Within minutes, I'm slipping into a peaceful sleep.



"I'M GOING to drop him off, then I'll be back." Memphis plants a kiss on the top of my head before ushering a keyed up Oswald to the door.

"I want to see my name on you at the game." He points at me, then disappears out the door with Memphis behind him.

"Crap," I mumble.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me you got rid of it," Bates asks from the stool next to me. He's sipping coffee and finishing an omelet he made for himself.

"No, but I wasn't expecting to wear it again so I didn't wash it." I glance at the clock. I might have enough time if I could dry it, but I don't know if it will shrink, and I liked the fit.

"I promise I won't tell anyone," he says in a conspiratorial whisper, "but don't let it slip to Oz, especially if they win again. Then he will think it's a good luck charm, and he won't ever let you wash it or wear anything else."

I wince. If the game weren't in a few hours, I would try to get another shirt, but I don't want to waste the time. "I'm going to make sure I didn't get anything on it. Be right back." Before I can spin to grab my crutches, Bates stops me with his hand on my arm.

"Let me go grab it for you, that way you don't have to go up and down."

"It's in the back of my closet," I warn, trying to think if I have anything in there that would be weird or embarrassing.

“So I get to paw through all your stuff?” He smirks.

Now I’m really nervous, but I can’t think of anything other than clothes in there. “Think you might find something you’d like to keep and wear yourself?” I tease.

“Something I might like to keep? Yes. Wear myself? No. Be right back.” He scoots off the stool and moves with a quickness I envy. I look down at the air cast, thinking I can’t wait to get the darn thing off. At least it doesn’t ache anymore.

Bates returns swiftly, and as soon as I see him, he brings my shirt up to his nose and inhales deeply. “Hey,” I mutter.

“Smells good, like you.” He tosses the shirt at me, and I do catch a slight sweet fragrance, thank goodness. “Looks clean too, I checked when I tried it on.”

“You did not.” I laugh.

“Nah, I didn’t want to stretch it out since it fits you perfectly.” He retakes his seat next to me, even though his plate is empty. Is he flirting? I feel like he’s being flirty, but then I feel guilty for noticing and kind of liking it.

I lean to the side and grab my crutches so I can put a little space between us. I don’t need anything else to feel guilty for.

I’m already resigned to the fact that I need to tell Memphis and Oswald the truth about my past, but I decided telling them right before the game is a bad idea, and we’re going to watch Bates play tonight, so that means tomorrow is the day. My stomach revolts at just the thought, and my toast feels like a lead ball in my gut.

Memphis returns home when I’m at the sink, loading dishes into the dishwasher. I feel his eyes on me, but I pretend not to notice and continue with my task. It’s shady of me, but I’m happy Bates is here. If we were alone, I wouldn’t have an excuse not to tell him now.

“It was already busy down by the stadium,” he says, sitting in the seat I vacated next to Bates. That doesn’t surprise me after being at the game last weekend. It was crazy busy. I’m glad I didn’t need to find a place to park.

“I don’t know how he gets out there. I would be so nervous, knowing everyone was watching me. You too.” I turn and point at Bates. The bar doesn’t hold as many people as the stadium, but they are all watching and listening to him.

“Oz loves it,” Bates shares. “He thrives off the attention, always has.”

“Not you though. Remember your first solo?” Memphis shares a smile with his friend.

“My stomach hurt so badly, I thought I was going to shit my pants on stage.” Bates tips back his glass of orange juice.

“How did you get over it?” He didn’t seem nervous at all when I saw him play.

“I think I just got used to it.”

“And he became the most popular boy in eighth grade,” Memphis adds.

It’s Bates’ turn to grin now. “You didn’t even want the throne. It was only fitting that someone else should have it.”

“I’m not complaining,” Memphis scoffs.

I can just imagine the two of them. I bet they made hearts throb everywhere they went. “Did you play sports like Oswald?” I lean my butt against the counter while resting my heel on the ground in front of me.

“Not really. I didn’t have time for after-school stuff.” He doesn’t say it like he resents the fact or anything, more like it’s just the way it was. I don’t need to know why he didn’t have time for after-school activities. It’s clear he was too busy taking care of Oswald.

I wonder if it was always like that or when it changed. I don’t want to ask. Part of me doesn’t feel like I have the right, but the other half of me doesn’t think it’s a conversation for right now. Even though Bates probably already knows, it still feels like too much to ask.

“When should we leave?” I change the subject before anyone can ask anything about my childhood.

“Two hours or so,” Memphis answers without missing a beat.

“I’m going to get ready then. I need to take a shower.” I lean over for my crutches.

“You need any help?” Memphis offers. His tone is low and sultry, but I pretend not to notice.

“I’m good, relax,” I answer without meeting his gaze.

TAKE A CHANCE



*M*emphis

WAYLYNN HAS BEEN AVOIDING me since I told her I love her. In the two minutes since she left the kitchen, I've tried to talk myself out of going up there and making demands of her at least five times, but I know it's a losing battle when I bolt upright so fast, the stool skids across the floor.

"I'm surprised you lasted this long," Bates says to my back as I haul ass out of the room and up to hers. I don't bother replying. It would be wasted breath.

When I fling her slightly ajar door open, I find her wide-eyed, clutching a small scrap of fabric to her chest like she's holding in a scream. "Oh my gosh." She gasps. "Is everything okay?"

I slam the door behind me and twist the lock for good measure. I don't need Bates up here witnessing this right now. I'm too raw.

When I turn, her brows are furrowed. "Memphis?" she asks softly.

"You told me you wanted this," I accuse, but I make sure my voice is calm. Her eyes dip down to my chest, and she swallows with effort.

There's a long pause, and I'm just about to demand she look at me, when she lifts her eyes without my prompting and admits, "I do. I'm just scared."

The band around my chest unfurls, and I take a deep breath. “It’s okay if you don’t love me.” The words hurt more than I anticipated, like watching someone stub their toe or slam their finger in a door. The dread is quick and gut wrenching, but short-lived.

I can come to terms with her not loving me. Maybe she will only love Oswald. Another spike of pain pierces my chest, but it’s still manageable.

“Memphis,” she murmurs softly. “That’s not the problem. I do love you. I love both of you.” She tosses the stuff she was holding onto the bed and regrips the handholds of her crutches, angling to face me.

In three strides, I’m so deep in her space, she’s forced to release the crutches and grip my shirt as if she thought I was actually going to bowl her over. When I look down at her, I no longer care why she seemed sad when she admitted to loving me. All I care about is hearing her say it again.

“Tell me.” My voice is gruff, too demanding, and borderline threatening, but I don’t take it back.

“I love you,” she answers as if compelled by the same intensity that drives me, but it’s not just in her words, it’s in her hazel eyes. There’s a confidence there that Waylynn doesn’t often show, and something unexpected happens—I get fucking scared.

It’s like I have the responsibility to make sure she keeps loving me, because now that I have the confirmation of her feelings, there’s no way I will risk losing it.

My hand trembles as I reach up and tip her head back even more with my palm on the nape of her neck, and then I kiss her slowly, fighting the urge to devour every inch of her like my mind is telling me I need to.

Her fingers trace up my sides, burrow under my shirt, and lay claim to my skin. Christ, it feels fucking good, but it’s also making me painfully aware of the few inches separating our bodies. I would like to pin her to the bed and sink inside her. Knowing I would be her first is almost too damn tempting, but

I need more time to truly make sure I own every inch of her, and we don't have that now.

Waylynn shuffles forward, and my dick rubs against her soft belly. I groan into her mouth, gripping her tighter, and she makes a soft sound in response that resonates at the base of my spine.

I know I need to slow this down, or I will have her naked in minutes, and that's not fair to anyone. I pull back from her mouth, panting like I'm already fucking her. Her lips are red and swollen from my kisses and nips, and I watch her tongue slip out and make a lazy sweep, as if she can't get enough of me either. My cock aches as I remember what her mouth felt like wrapped around me, swallowing me.

I place my forehead on hers and close my eyes. "I'll let you get ready, sorry. I just needed...you," I admit as the fear that caught me off guard settles into more of an awareness, a reminder not to take it for granted.

"It's okay," she says softly, still clinging to me.

"I'm going to get your crutches," I tell her, not moving an inch.

"Okay." We stay locked together for several more seconds that I wish could last longer, but eventually, I release her so she can get in the shower.

I watch her hobble away and trail behind her, placing her panties she left on the bed on the counter.

"Thanks."

"Need any help?" I offer.

She shakes her head before saying, "No," with a flush. We both know she wouldn't be getting clean if I stayed to help her.

I back out of the room, promising, "I'll leave the door cracked."

I hear the water turn on soon after I leave. My mind is already filled with thoughts of her, but knowing she's on the other side of that door, naked and slick, makes it damn near impossible to leave the bedroom.

The only thing that stops me from going right back in there is the clock. We need to leave soon if we want to make it to kick off. “Fuck,” I grumble and push out of her room, leaving that door mostly open too.

BATES

“THAT WAS QUICKER THAN I EXPECTED,” I say without really taking stock of Memphis’ face. His eyes are dark and shadowed, but he doesn’t look mad.

His movements are stiff as he jerks open the fridge and grumbles, “Don’t remind me.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened, or should I guess?”

He closes the fridge and backs away without having taken anything out. “I told her I loved her last night, right before Oz fucking interrupted us, and she was being weird after.”

“So naturally, you went up there to bully her.” I grin.

“I did not bully her, but I would have,” he retorts, making the second part of the statement much softer. He scrubs both of his hands over his face and lets out a frustrated huff.

“So?” I prompt when he doesn’t elaborate.

“She said she loves me.”

“That’s obvious, so why are you...?” I gesture to him, and then it all makes sense. His frustration is purely sexual. “You’ve got time for a quickie,” I say, glancing at the clock and hoping I can watch.

“No quickie,” he whispers harshly like she might hear me. “She’s never... I need to take my time.”

“Jesus Christ, she’s a virgin?” *Shit*, that’s what she meant the other night.

“Shut the fuck up!” Memphis takes a step toward me with glaring eyes. I was pretty loud.

“Sorry, sorry.” I put my hands up in surrender and look behind me to make sure she’s not standing there. “How does that happen? She’s gorgeous.”

“I don’t know, and I’m not going to ask her. It’s her fucking business. Mine is to make sure she’s taken care of.”

“And ruined for anyone else besides...” I leave the word *us* off, but it’s definitely what I’m thinking.

“Just shut up.” He rubs the side of his face again, looking up at the ceiling like he wants to storm upstairs.

“You’ve been sleeping next to her. I heard you guys fucking around.” I let it slip that I was creeping on their room, but I know he’s not surprised.

“I don’t want her to think that’s the only reason we’re here or rush her,” he admits, keeping his voice low.

“Man, I knew you had willpower, but damn.” I blow out a breath. I don’t know if Oswald’s game would keep me from being with her if I were given the chance.

“Yeah, I’m a real fucking saint,” he grates out caustically as if he believes the opposite. Memphis has always been hard on himself. I’m sure it stems from his parents thinking drugs were more important than taking care of him. He admitted a long time ago that he didn’t think he would ever love anyone because he was unlovable. I always knew that was bullshit, but I’m glad he knows it now too.

“Sit down and chill out before you bust a nut in your pants and have to explain the awkward wet spot.”

“Christ, Bates,” he complains, but he heaves himself onto the stool next to me.

“What should we talk about to distract you from thinking about her upstairs, getting all wet and soapy?”

He punches me in the arm, and I burst out laughing, even though it hurts like a son of a bitch. “You’re a dick,” he snarls.

“Ouch, I know,” I agree, rubbing the spot.

Oswald

I USUALLY DON'T PAY attention to the trainers that stretch us out, but the girl working on my hamstring is doing everything she can to turn this into something it's not. I continue to ignore her until she leans her tits on my thigh. "Hey, back up a little."

"Sorry," she replies with a little scowl like I'm being unreasonable. I look next to me to make sure I'm not being a prick about it, but the AT working on Higgins isn't lying all over him.

For the next few stretches, she maintains her distance, and my mind starts to get hazy as the burn from my morning warm-up returns.

"...excited to play?" She breaks my concentration, but I didn't hear her full question, though I can guess.

"I'm good on my own for the rest." I push my leg down, forcing her away from me. Maybe she's just trying for small talk, and maybe the other guys don't mind her chatter, but she's just a tool to me, something else to help me get ready for the game, and that doesn't include making friends.

"Fine." She backs away from me with her hands in the air, like I accused her of assaulting me. She's erased from my thoughts the moment she's out of my line of sight. I work through the rest of my stretches on my own until I'm loose and warm and my mind is clear for the game.

As the time grows close for us to hit the field, my heart starts beating faster, just thinking about running through that tunnel. My knees are bouncing with the need to move, and I can't seem to keep my hands still, so I grab the collar of my pads.

"Let's go!" someone shouts, and hoots fill the locker room. They echo off the walls but sound far away and tinny through my helmet. I spring to my feet, feeling light but solid. The seniors and starters shove to the front of the line, but I hang back. I don't need to be out first. I just need to be on that field.

Our footfalls are heavy and almost rhythmic as we start to stomp down the hall, like the beating of an erratic drum, but it finds a cadence that resonates in my chest. As the excitement builds, I push through my teammates, only to be stopped at the mouth of the tunnel. I'm breathing hard and feel like a caged animal. The second the staff moves to the side and allows us through, we burst forward, yelling and stomping with so much energy, it feels like I could play the entire game right now.

My feet leave the ground as I spring upward to place both of my hands on the banner, careful not to smack it too hard, then I'm sprinting to the sideline as my mind processes the packed stadium and riotous noise. I hope I never get used to this.

It takes several minutes to convince my body and the adrenaline coursing through my veins that we have to wait for the battle. This is the worst part. I wish we could get right on the field, but there's shit that needs to happen, routines and traditions that need to be upheld.

Once I know I'm not going to climb out of my skin, I look into the stands. I doubt I'll see Memphis, Waylynn, or Bates, but I still scan the crowd, searching. Strangers look back, many yelling and as excited as we are for the game.

By pure chance, as I start to look away, I see my number across a chest that's shaking back and forth from waving so hard. "Fuck yeah!" I shove my hand in the air, and she bounces, making her tits jiggle even more when she realizes I spotted her. I watch her grab onto Memphis and point with such excitement, my chest expands to the point where I almost forget I need to exhale.

She's looking at me like she looked at Bates that night at the club, but it's sweeter. I fucking feel like I could fly. I rock my fist against my chest and send it out to her, and she balls up her hand, placing it over her lips.

"Line up!" gets shouted over the group several times, and I fall into place, bouncing on my toes, because I know her eyes are on me. *Fuck*, my dick is hard.

It's tough waiting for my turn on the field, but I know my time is coming soon. Bevins just missed another play. "Gravlin, get your ass in there," the defensive line coach says, jerking me forward by my collar and shoving me toward the field.

I don't spare Bevins a glance as we pass each other, and I slip into my spot. My knuckles hit the sun heated ground, and I have to force myself to relax so I don't jump the start.

When the cue hits, I explode, propelling myself forward. The guy in front of me barely gets his hands up before I spin past him and zero in on a chest. His arm is pulled back, ready for a pass. His helmet turns in my direction, so I know he sees me, but there's not enough time for him to react before I'm on him. We hit the ground, and he grunts as I force the air from his lungs.

I pop up quickly and back away while his center helps him off the field and tells him, "Shake it off!" Our eyes connect, and when I see hate mingled with fear, I know I've got him. He's going to rush his handoffs and passes for the next few plays.

I feel hands on me, congratulating me, but I don't break our stare off until my knuckles are on the ground again and my eyes shift to the obstacle in front of me.

Waylynn

MEMPHIS LEAPS to his feet and howls, "Hell yeah!" when Oswald slams into the guy about to throw the ball. I watch him jump up, getting back to his feet, and stare down the guy still lying on the ground. My heart is in my throat, but that was amazing.

"A sack on his first play of the game." Bates taps his knuckles with Memphis'. "Showin' up and showin' out."

Memphis claps his hands together, applauding with most of the people around us. It's strange to hear people talking

about Oswald, saying his name and number, but a sense of undeserved pride fills me just because I know him.

Memphis retakes his seat, but he's only on the edge, and his eyes are glued to his brother as he prepares for the next play.

Oswald pushes the guy in front of him to the side with a quick shove and runs for the guy with the ball again, but this time, he throws the ball to the side, and Oswald stops before knocking him down. I look to where the ball was thrown, and it's on the ground with no one around. He was just getting rid of it. A few of his teammates pat Oswald on the helmet and back as they rush off the field and other players fill their spots.

I relax a little, knowing he's not out there, but I'm eager to see him play more. It's weird.



FIVE MINUTES BEFORE HALFTIME, we're up by fourteen, and I decide I better make my way to the bathroom before it gets too busy. When I lean over to pick up my crutches, Memphis eyes me. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to pee before it gets too busy."

He takes my crutches and stands up. I already know his intent.

"You don't need to come," I tell him.

He just looks at me instead of responding. I narrow my eyes and pout my lips at him, which he takes as an invitation to bite my lip. Anyone else would think he kissed me, but he didn't. My stomach reacts to his affection, flipping with butterflies.

I glance around when he pulls back, wondering if anyone noticed. I don't see anyone watching, but that doesn't mean much. "Memphis," I warn softly. He's going to get himself in trouble.

“I thought you wanted to get going.” He lifts one brow. I click my tongue, knowing he’s going to ignore me, and settle my crutches under my arms. At least we’re not in the student section.

“Gah, I can’t wait to get rid of these things,” I grumble when I have to stop for the fifth time because I can’t get through the crowd.

“Gravlin, your brother is on fire out there,” someone calls loudly. Memphis lifts his chin in acknowledgement, but that’s about it.

A mixed group of guys and girls move closer as I’m stuck behind people trying to get into a food line.

“Hey, Memphis,” a feminine voice calls. I look up, even though I know I shouldn’t, and see the same girl he was sitting with when I joined them for dinner in the south quad. If I could slip away, I probably would, but my crutches make that nearly impossible in the heavy crowd.

“Damn, the kid’s phenomenal,” a guy says, making it possible for Memphis to ignore the girl and respond to him.

“He’s not really a kid anymore.” His tone is flat and uninviting, but if the guy notices, he doesn’t act like it.

“He rocked that quarterback,” the guy continues.

That brings a small smile to Memphis’ lips. “He did.” I watch as the girl dips her shoulder to get past a few people as she approaches, but the thing that catches me off guard is she’s heading toward me.

I play it cool, just kind of glancing at the guys talking to Memphis and watching for a spot to open up so I can be on my way to the bathroom. “Hey,” she says quietly.

I do a double take, making it clear I’m wondering why she would speak to me. “Hey?” I respond.

Memphis stops mid-sentence and looks over at me, but I pretend not to notice, and he continues his conversation.

“You in line?” She motions to the food line a few seconds later.

“No, I’m waiting to get through. I think the end is back there.” I tip my head to the left.

“Oh, I don’t want to get in line.” She curls her lip in a little scowl, acting like even the thought of eating here is abhorrent while angling herself closer.

I don’t understand what she’s doing, but I react to her by scooting to the side a little, and that’s when she slips right next to Memphis. I just got played. I could admire her slickness if it didn’t bother me so much.

“Hey, Memphis,” she says sweetly while reaching up to lay a hand on his bicep. He shifts back the moment she touches him, shucking her fingers from his arm. It reminds me of when Mia mentioned he didn’t like people in his space or touching him, yet he’s always touching me and it never seems to bother him when I touch him. That probably shouldn’t make me so happy, but it does.

“Makayla,” he replies coolly, and I see my chance to slip away as the crowd shifts.

I swing my leg forward and say, “Excuse me, just passing through,” in case the group not paying attention thinks I’m trying to cut in line. My movement spurs them to move forward after I’m past, so the small gap is eaten up again by bodies.

Thankfully, the bathroom is nearby and I’m able to make it the rest of the way uninterrupted, but I still have to wait in a short line.

Using a public bathroom should be an Olympic sport when on crutches. I hover as best as I can while using one foot and making sure I don’t pee on myself or my shorts. When I’m done washing my hands, I take a couple Tylenol from my bag and swallow them down. I have a nasty headache brewing.

“Waylynn,” Memphis snaps, and my back goes ramrod straight before I look over my shoulder. He’s barreling toward me with his lips pinched in a thin line. *Oh no.* “Don’t move.”

I stay right where I am, only a few steps from the exit. Thankfully, the line to get into the restroom has shortened, and

there's not nearly as many people around to witness this. He steps up behind me. I can hear him breathing heavily, and I still don't move.

"You left when you knew I wanted to come with you," he accuses.

"You were busy with your friends. I just went to go pee." His hand snakes around my hip and his fingers curl into me.

"They are not my friends, and even if they were, I don't care."

I let my eyes roam around. We probably look pretty silly standing in the middle of the walkway the way we are. "Memphis, we should go back to our seats."

His fingers flex, tightening before he releases me and steps back enough that he can come to my side instead of being behind me. "Next time," he grates out near my ear, sending a tingle down my spine with his warm breath, "you will tell me before you leave."

"Yes, sir," I agree automatically, proving he has some power over my baser brain. My face feels warm, and my nipples are tingling. I look down at the ground, hoping nobody else can tell.

"Looks like you found her," the girl from earlier says with an air of suspicion and accusation in her tone.

When I look up, her eyes are narrowed on me, and I know my cheeks are still red, since the heat is actually traveling down my neck now. I probably look like a tomato.

Memphis huffs, and it stirs my hair. My heart starts beating really fast. There's no pretending he wasn't just whispering in my ear.

"Do you need something?" he asks her, barely moving away from me. I can still feel his chest pressed up against my arm.

Makayla eyes us. I know she's taking note of the fact that he's touching me, because that's where her stare stays focused. "I'm sure Oz would be grateful to know you're taking such

good care of his girlfriend.” Her words come out like a threat, one that thankfully doesn’t scare me. The only thing she could do that scares me is get Memphis in trouble with the school.

“He knows exactly how well I take care of her, but be sure to remind him next time you see him. Let’s go, sweetness.” He puts a scant amount of pressure on me with his chest to get going, and I swing my legs forward on the crutch in a rush to get away from her and create a little distance between myself and Memphis, but I don’t think it matters at this point. His insinuation was clear.

There are warring emotions in my stomach as I reach our section. I’m half prideful excitement because Memphis called me sweetness in front of her and touched me, but the other half is worried about the repercussions.

She did not look happy, and people can do nasty things when they are not happy. “Memphis?” I murmur the second I’m in my seat.

“It’s fine. She doesn’t even know you’re my student, and I already cleared everything with Hilbrand,” he answers without me needing to give him an explanation.

“What’s wrong?” Bates looks between the two of us. “You guys were gone a long time. I almost came looking for you.”

“We got held up near one of the food stands, and there were some people I knew.”

“Not just people. The girl from the dining hall was there, and she...she seems to know...something,” I finish lamely.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Memphis tells me with a relaxed confidence I wish I could possess.

“What if she says something?”

“What is she going to say? She saw me helping my brother’s girlfriend at the game who’s on crutches?” he challenges.

I tighten my brows. Now I’m wondering if I interpreted that all wrong myself. “I guess,” I agree without conviction. “I just thought maybe she could tell... Forget it.”

“She could tell,” Memphis confirms remorselessly. “Anyone who’s known me for five minutes can tell how I feel about you, but she doesn’t matter. Relax, sweetness. We’re not doing anything wrong.” Memphis pulls my hand over to his thigh and winds our fingers together.

My heart thumps hard against my chest as I look down at our fingers. I love that he touches me and encourages me to touch him when he doesn’t allow it from anyone else besides Oswald and Bates. It makes me feel special and cared for, so I decide to let it go like he asked. Memphis is pretty good at taking care of the things he loves.

FIRSTS



M emphis

WAYLYNN RELAXES her stiff shoulders when I take her hand and place it on my thigh. I was worried it would have the opposite effect, but thankfully, it didn't.

Fucking Makayla. Waylynn snaps her head to look at me, and I wonder if I uttered those caustic words out loud, but I know I didn't. I must have telegraphed my thoughts in some other way. I meet her hazel eyes, and she holds my stare for a few seconds, then looks out at the field.

I thought I made myself clear the last time I talked to Makayla in the dining hall that I wasn't interested, but I should have known she wouldn't ignore me. When I told Waylynn not to worry about her, I meant it. Makayla wouldn't go to an advisor. It probably wouldn't cross her mind, not only because she doesn't know Waylynn is in my class, but also because she would rather use the information in a way that benefited her, which is why she brought up Oz. She thought she could use the info to get me to spend time with her or force me into bargaining with her in some way. It's just proof she doesn't understand me at all or my relationship with my brother.

At the beginning of the third quarter, Bates leans over Waylynn. "Sorry I'm going to miss the rest, but I need to get going."

It takes me a second to remember why he's leaving. "We'll see you there tonight. Let me know if you need anything."

“I should be good, but thanks.” He leans back and wraps his arm around Waylynn and gives her a half hug while in the seat. She reacts and reaches her right hand over her chest and returns the embrace a little awkwardly while stealing peeks at me.

The minute he releases her, she places her hand back on my thigh with her palm up. I know it’s a big deal for her, especially here where anyone can see, so I’m quick to lace our fingers together and give her a little squeeze of reassurance.

“See you tonight.” She gives him a little wave with her free hand. I notice the mark I left on her neck is barely visible when she tips her head back. The first chance I get, I’ll be making sure to darken it up.

The last quarter is slow, made to seem even more so because all I can think about is taking Waylynn home and having her to myself for an hour while Oz finishes up after the game.

We’re up by seventeen with three minutes left to go, and the other team has lost all their fight, so there’s no point sticking around. I hand Waylynn her crutches and let her walk ahead of me as we make our way out to the walkway.

Lots of people had the same idea, so it’s already busy, but I lead us down a hall and flash my teacher’s badge to the security officer. He barely glances at it before letting us through the passageway.

Waylynn lets out a sigh. “I think it’s even busier than last weekend.” I doubt it, she’s probably just more aware because of her foot.

We take an elevator down to the floor the locker rooms are on and maneuver through the small crowd to wait for Oswald.

I see his wet head approaching before Waylynn does, so I’m not surprised when she lets out a tiny little shriek as he picks her up in a bear hug and buries his face in her neck with her feet dangling. I manage to catch one of her crutches, but the other one hits the wall before sliding to the floor.

“Aren’t you tired? Put me down,” she chastises him.

“Not yet, and no.” He pulls his face back, and she grins down at him.

“You pancaked that guy,” she says proudly, repeating what someone else said.

“He didn’t see it coming.” Oz beams with a well-deserved smirk.

“You got to play a lot. They love you,” she tells him, stroking his ego. He gets it a lot from others, but I know it means more coming from her. He hasn’t had anyone but Bates and me to praise him, and it actually means something.

“Are they the only ones?” he questions rather seriously, but his lips are still curled, making his question seem like it could be a joke.

“Nah, we all love you.”

He finally lowers her to the ground, making sure not to let her go, then his mouth presses to her ear. I can’t hear what he says, but I do see the way her breath catches and she fists his jersey.

I’m sure he’s telling her he loves her. The high of the win is flowing through his veins, making him feel invincible, but luckily, I know how she will respond.

“Yes,” she says softly, and her eyes dart to me. She probably thinks we planned our ambushed confessions. We didn’t, but our heads work the same no matter how different we are.

He pulls back, grabs her face, and plants a kiss on her lips, not even caring that people are snapping pictures and walking right past him. I don’t blame him. I just hope he can handle the shit people will say when they know the truth about our relationship with her, because no matter how open-minded people say they are about this kind of shit, they aren’t.

“I need to go shower and answer a few questions from reporters.”

“Eww, you’re famous.” Waylynn scrunches up her nose in a joking way, but I know there’s probably some truth to her

words. Waylynn is more like me in that regard—content being out of the spotlight.

“Not yet, baby, but I’m on my way.” He kisses her quickly, then looks at me. I hand her the crutch I have while he bends to retrieve the other. “I’m going to be a while. I’ll call when I get out,” he tells me.

“Take your time.”

Oz tosses his head back and laughs, catching on to why I would say that. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.” He points his finger at me, then runs his eyes over Waylynn in a leer before jogging to the locker room and disappearing down the hall.

“He’s coming with us tonight, right?” she questions as I lead her back to the elevator.

“Yeah, he’ll be there.”

By the time we make it to the sidewalk, Waylynn is out of breath. “Sorry, this is so much harder than walking.”

I think about having her wait here and offering to go get the car, but I don’t want to leave her alone. The streets are packed. “I can call an Uber?”

She bites her lip and looks around. “I feel bad because it’s only a few blocks,” she hedges, not saying no.

“It’s fine, let me check and see how long the wait is. I bet there are already drivers here to get people back to their cars.” Sure enough, all we have to do is walk down the block to find the car.

I lean my head in and give the guy her address while I’m shortening her crutches to fit into the backseat with us.

“I’ll get her home,” he says, checking his mirrors like he’s ready to pull into traffic with the door still open.

“She’s not going alone,” I answer, then climb in and shut the door. It smells like day old coney dogs, and when I look over at Waylynn, she has her finger trapped under her nose, daintily blocking her nostrils.

I'm not that nice. "Damn," I scoff, thankful we'll only be in the car a few minutes.

"You can just take Hill, the driveway is off the back." Waylynn's voice comes out nasally.

"You'll still need to pay the full amount," he says, easing into traffic.

"No problem." I crack the window, and he looks back at me through the rearview mirror.

"I have the air on."

"It smells like shit in here," I comment, meeting his stare, and he looks away quickly.

Waylynn covers her lips with her fingers, and her eyes get wide like she's worried the guy is going to do something or I offended him.

If she weren't on crutches, I would have asked him to drop us off down the street, but I direct him into the driveway so she'll have the shortest walk possible.

Once I give her the crutches and she's out of the car, I slam the door harder than needed. "That's fucking foul."

"Maybe he has a glandular issue," Waylynn offers kindly.

"You're too nice. His issue is being nasty. Christ, he smells worse than Oswald's gym bag after it's been baking in the hot sun for about a week."

She giggles, and I unlock the door.

"I feel bad for even wanting to kiss you. I feel like that stench permeated my clothes."

She looks over her shoulder. "Want me to do a sniff test?"

Her little teasing grin slips as I stalk over to her after flipping the door lock and tossing the keys on the counter.

I step so close, she tilts her head back to look up at me. I coil my fingers in her long hair, and her lips part with a tiny gasp. With complete trust, she allows me to direct her face to my neck, where I run her nose up the side of my throat as I tilt

her head back. She inhales deeply, then her lips brush my skin without prompting.

My eyes close as she kisses me with wet, open-mouthed nibbles that have me craving her mouth in other places. “You smell yummy,” she whispers.

My hand tightens in her hair, and I drag her back so I can see her hazel eyes. The black is eating away at the color, and her pupils are blown wide as she gazes up at me with complete trust while I have her at my mercy with my hold.

“I want to take you upstairs to your bed.”

“Yes,” she answers, even though it wasn’t a question.

“Yes what?”

Her pupils get even larger, and she breathes, “Yes, sir.”

I just barely hold in my groan at her words, but I don’t stop myself from softly kissing her lips. When I pull back, she’s still gazing up at me, waiting. I know what she wants to hear, but I keep that for a little while longer.

“Do you need help up the stairs?” I question, referring to why she isn’t moving yet. She blinks a few times, then hobbles away. Fuck, I can’t wait until her leg gets better. I hate the reminder that we were careless with her.

I walk behind her and watch as she props her crutches against the wall and uses the handrail to get up instead. It’s faster, so I don’t argue, and I’m right behind her, so if she were to slip, I would catch her.

Once we reach the top, she starts hopping with her hand against the wall for added support. It’s easy enough to get in front of her. She pauses when I get in her way, so I take advantage and put her over my shoulder.

“Oh my gosh,” she says, patting my lower back before grabbing a hold of my shirt for something to grip.

Instead of placing her directly on the bed, I lower her back to her feet and instruct. “Take your clothes off.” Her hands go to the hem of her shirt, but she hesitates as if she’s not sure she

wants to or should. “If you changed your mind, all you have to do is tell me.”

“I haven’t.” She shakes her head.

“Are you sure?” I move closer to her, and her shoulders relax. She even drags her shirt over her head and drops it on the floor.

I look down at her tits covered in black lace and see tiny freckles I’m going to trace with my tongue until I know the pattern, even in the dark. I slide my hand up her arm and shoulder until I reach the back of her neck, then I tilt her head to the side.

I need to leave my mark on her. She leans into my palm, and I run my nose along her throat, licking my way up the side of her neck, where I sink my teeth into her skin before sucking. She exhales a shaky breath and grips my sides.

Using my free hand, I guide her hand under my shirt. Her touch is so light and teasing, I have to remind myself this is new to her, even though it feels intentional, like she knows exactly how to make me wild.

I plant a few soft kisses on her neck after releasing her skin to ease the ache of the bite. She releases a soft little sound that makes me think she’s slightly bereft it’s over. My dick throbs with the need to be inside her.

I lean back. “Take my shirt off.” My voice is gruff, full of desire, but she takes her time running her hands up my chest to help me take it off. I help her a little when it’s clear she’s not sure how to get it off my arms, then drop it to the floor with hers. “Bra.” I’m reduced to single-word instructions now, but that’s all she needs to reach behind her back and unclasp the thing.

Her tits fall a little when she slides it down her arms, and my mouth actually waters. Her nipples are already hard, so I bend and give them the attention they demand with my mouth and tongue.

Waylynn’s hands delve into my hair, holding me in place as I suck on her hard. Her back arches at the same time she

holds my head, shoving herself even closer to me in the process. I use my fingers to pinch and pull on her right breast to mimic my mouth on the left until I switch sides to do it all again.

When I see her squeezing her thighs and moving her legs restlessly, I slide my hands around her full hips, heading for the waistband of her shorts.

Waylynn

I SUCK in my stomach when Memphis' fingers go to the button of my shorts. "Breathe," he reminds me, and I exhale. My heart is thumping so hard, I'm sure he can feel it. Once my shorts are loose, he slides his palms into the back, cupping my butt and pushing the material down at the same time.

My shorts and panties slip down my legs, getting hung up on the cast, but he bends, kissing his way down my stomach, until he unhooks the fabric and I'm fully naked. As he rises, he runs his hands up my body, sliding his palm between my legs while staring into my eyes as he does it.

The heat and press of his palm leave me wanting more, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous too. "Oh, sweetness, you're soaked," he rumbles, moving his hand back and forth until the tip of his finger slips between my lips.

My hips swivel, proving my body knows what to do, even when I feel overwhelmed.

"I want to sink so far inside you that you'll never get me out." He continues to toy with me, making me ache even more. I want to answer him, to tell him he's already carved out a spot in my soul and that I think it was there waiting for him before we even met, but I bite my bottom lip instead. "I want to know what you will sound like when I slip inside you for the first time."

My inner muscles clench, and he must be able to feel it because his eyes slip closed and he tips his head back, making

his neck look even thicker, stronger, before letting out a groan. I wonder if he'll let me leave a mark on him. I run my eyes over his chest and the fine hair covering some of him, noting the perfect spot to bite. It would be hidden behind the collar of his shirt. It could be my secret. While all the other girls in class are fantasizing about him, I would know what's under his clothes.

I lean forward while his eyes are still closed and kiss his chest. His head jerks back and his nostrils flare as if he wasn't expecting me to touch him. I pull back, unsure, but he palms my head, pushing my face toward his chest. His finger is still between my legs, teasing and swirling.

I kiss him a few more times, wishing I were tall enough to reach the spot I'm fixated on, but it's no use, so I go lower instead. Bending removes his fingers, and he makes a deep sound of warning before using his hand to direct my head back up.

"Uh-uh, get on the bed." He steps back, removing both of his hands from me. I feel like I did something wrong.

"Sorry," I tell him as I sit down.

He stops in the middle of unbuttoning his pants, jerking his eyes up to meet mine. "For what?" He moves a little closer.

I lift my shoulder in a shrug, tempted to pull the blankets over to cover below my waist. "I don't know, you just aren't happy."

"Sweetness." He takes his hands away from his pants and steps up, pushing his body between my legs hanging off the bed. "I wasn't punishing you. I just don't have enough control for you to put your mouth on me right now." He takes my hand and guides it to his pants. When my fingers brush the fabric, I can feel how hard he is.

"Oh," I whisper, feeling a little reassured as I trace his thickness with my fingers. While I'm still touching him, he tugs down his zipper, and the fabric loosens before he pushes his jeans down. My hand is still in place, so I touch his bare

skin tentatively. My fingers wrap around him, and his stomach tightens.

“Are you testing me?” he asks darkly with hooded eyes.

“No.” I let my fingers trace his tip before pulling my hand away.

“Scoot back,” he demands, then moves his legs, getting rid of his pants and crawling up after me. Instead of climbing over me, he lies down next to me, pulling me over with eager hands until I’m leaning over him and my leg is hiked up over his.

Even while lying under me, he’s still the one in control. He has one hand on my butt and the other on my neck as he pulls me down to kiss him. Once our lips meet and he slips his tongue in my mouth, his hand on my nape starts to travel until he’s teasing my nipple again.

My hips roll and rock, and he uses his hand on my ass to encourage the movement so I’m grinding against him, but I want more. I want to feel his fingers between my legs again. As if he’s reading my thoughts, he whispers, “Come here,” between kisses while pulling me on top of him.

Our eyes lock once I’m above him. It’s the most intensely intimate thing I’ve ever experienced. I feel more than naked, I feel raw and exposed, like he can see every inch of me. For a heartbeat, I worry it’s too much, but then Memphis reaches up and traces his thumb along my jaw. His eyes track the movement as if he’s just as enthralled as I am, leaving no room for self-doubt or worry.

He pulls me down to his mouth again, and my nipples drag along his chest with every breath I take. When our lips are barely touching, he says, “I’m going to make you come, and when you’re wet and dripping down my fingers, I’m going to slip inside you and make you mine.”

“Okay,” I answer. My heart is beating so fast, I can feel it throbbing in my head. Memphis kisses me then, sweet and unrushed. His hand trails down my back and around my hip, lighting a fire with his touch. I catch myself holding my breath

more than once, just so I can focus completely on the sensations he elicits in my body.

When he finally slides his fingers up my thigh, I lift up, eager for his touch. “Good girl.” His deep voice curls around the words, making them even more delicious than usual. I cannot explain why those two little words mean so much to me, but it’s almost addictive. The more I hear it, the more I want to.

When he touches my clit, my mouth falls open on a pant, and I can’t even pretend to focus on him kissing me. Instead, I bury my face in his neck, and I let my lips and tongue roam over his skin.

I lift a little more with his guidance, and he slides his finger back, pushing a little inside me before returning to swirl his finger around my clit until I’m anticipating the pattern and my hips are moving with him. With each pass, he pushes his finger a little deeper, preparing me.

I’m getting close to coming, and the knowledge almost makes me a little nervous. I start to wonder how badly it’s going to hurt and if it will hurt him too because I’m a virgin.

I find that one little spot on his shoulder that I wanted to kiss so badly earlier, and I let it distract me. I bite a little, just like he does to me, then I suck on him. Memphis huffs out a breath, tipping his head back, and the tip of his finger stays on my clit, swirling and rubbing, pushing me over the edge, and I start to come. I moan with my lips still on his skin, and his other hand bites into my hip roughly before he jerks me down, hard and fast.

My mouth pops off his shoulder where I was sucking, and I stare into his eyes. I feel a burning sensation between my legs, and my inner muscles tighten convulsively. He’s breathing so hard, I realize it must hurt him too, but I’m not in that much pain. It feels more foreign than anything, and I feel bad if he’s hurting.

My intent is to ask if he’s okay, but the only thing that comes out is, “Memphis,” in a whispered plea.

“I know, sweetness, I’m sorry.” His hand flexes on my hip again, and he goes unbelievably deeper when he lifts his hips. I squeeze my thighs against the invasion, and the burn intensifies, but then his finger moves over my clit again, and I clamp down on him. He actually makes a whimpering sound as his eyes roll back before he closes them.

I try as hard as I can to relax, but he feels huge, and my legs begin to shake a little because I’m hovering, but then Memphis sits up abruptly. I sink onto him even more as I lean back to accommodate his body against mine. His arms wrap around me, and I again bury my face in his neck, trying to catch my breath as the pain eases.

“Waylynn.” He runs his hand down the back of my hair in a gentle caress, kissing the side of my head sweetly. “Fuck, you feel so good.” His confession comes as a surprise. I thought I was hurting him. His hand comes back up, and he tangles it in my hair. “You’re going to make me come too fast.”

“Yes, sir,” I mumble against his skin. I don’t think that’s a bad thing, this is kind of intense.

He makes a deep grunting sound, then tugs me back so our mouths are lined up before he starts kissing me again. It’s languid and soft, and my body finally starts to relax. “My good girl, look how well you take me,” he mumbles between kisses. That makes something in my stomach flip. His words make the burn fade to the background, the ache unimportant compared to his praise.

I move my hips forward a little, and Memphis tightens his grip in my hair before slipping his thumb between our bodies. When he touches my clit, I grind down, chasing that sweet feeling of pleasure.

He rolls us until I’m on my back and he’s leaning over me. My knees are high on his sides, but he still has his thumb pressed between our bodies, coaxing pleasure from me I didn’t think would be possible, considering how uncomfortable I was a few minutes ago.

His eyes stay locked on mine as his shoulders roll right along with the slow drag of his hips. The shift of position feels like more than just placement. This feels right—being under him and seeing him moving above me while he’s caging me in.

Memphis brushes his mouth against mine, then bites my bottom lip, and I swear I feel the pressure between my legs. I make a sound I didn’t even know I was capable of that’s soft and sexy, and he rocks forward again.

“I need you to come for me, sweetness,” he murmurs in a deep, gravelly tone filled with an edge of urgency. He replaces his thumb with his finger, and then he circles my clit while his thrusts become shallower. I tilt my head back, gasping for breath. His lips travel down my neck, kissing and nipping, until I feel like I’m on the edge again.

“Fuck, Waylynn, you’re perfect. Made for me.” Memphis sinks his teeth into the top of my breast, and my back lifts right off the bed in an arch as a wave of pleasure catches me off guard.

He groans, and his hips move a little faster until he slams himself deep inside me, and then I feel a warmth between us that wasn’t there seconds before. He starts kissing me again, running his lips up my neck until he’s back to worshipping my lips. I have to pull away after only a few seconds to catch my breath, but he doesn’t slow his affection.

MEMPHIS

CHRIST, I’m still inside her, and I’m already thinking about when I can take her again. I thought I was going to come the second I slammed myself inside her. Her pussy was still clamping down from her orgasm, and I nearly lost it. Her face, pinched in pain, was the only thing that stopped me. I have never been inside anyone without a condom, and it was so different, it was like I was fucking for the first time.

I'm not worried about her being pregnant. My dick actually hardens again as I think about her swollen with my baby, forever tied to me, but I noticed the birth control pack in her purse, so I know that's not going to happen right now. A strange thought that has never occurred to me before stirs in the back of my mind. Her being on birth control is like a challenge.

I don't even know how to process the shit in my own head, so I shove the thoughts of filling her with my cum to the back of my mind and run my fingers over her soft skin, kissing and tasting her until she's breathing steadily, and then I roll to the side and pull her with me.

Waylynn lets out a sigh and snuggles into my chest. Her fingers are exploring my skin in a way that makes me ache for more, but she's not ready. I need to make sure the next time I'm with her, there's nothing but pleasure.

"I need to clean up." Her voice breaks the silence. I was so relaxed, I was nearly asleep.

I kiss the top of her head and tell her, "I've got you." When I sit up, my head spins for a heartbeat before I get to my feet and head to the bathroom. I flip on the tap at the sink, then grab a washcloth from the linen closet. It's impossible not to look in the mirror as I warm the cloth under the water. The sight of her blood on my cock does some strange shit to my head.

I get hard again so quickly, I can't believe I just had the most amazing orgasm I've ever had ten minutes ago. I knew she was a virgin, but I wasn't expecting to see the evidence. I've only ever slept with one other virgin. She didn't even tell me until after we were done, and I'd already tossed the condom. I felt like shit for not knowing, and I was pretty pissed at her for not telling me in the first place. It never would have happened if I'd known. She deserved someone that wanted more than sex, and that wasn't me.

I'm not surprised I feel completely different now with Waylynn. I want her to crave me, but I am surprised how badly

I'd like to fuck her again right now, even knowing she's bleeding.

I pull myself out of my own head, wring out the cloth, and take it to the bedroom. She's curled up on her side with the cover pulled up. Her eyes roam over me, stopping at my dick, then her gaze bounces up to mine. I can't hide how much I want her. I don't want to.

"Um..." She sits up, clutching the covers. "You're ha— Did you not... I mean, I thought..." Her lips are pulled into a frown.

I tug at the blanket, and she releases it without any more prompting. "Yes, I'm hard. Yes, I came. Lie back," I instruct, leaning over her so she doesn't have much of a choice.

I pull her leg to the side and see a tiny bit of blood on her sheets that most likely came off my cock when I pulled out of her. I get stuck staring at her puffy pussy lips and forget all about the damp cloth in my hand.

"Memphis?" She leans up on her elbows, watching me. There's an edge of worry in her tone, and that snaps me out of my stupor. "Is something wrong?"

I toss the washcloth. I can't bring myself to use it yet. "No, sweetness." I lean over her and kiss right above her pussy. She smells fucking incredible, so I take a big inhale. My dick hits the cool sheet, and I reach down and fist myself.

"Was it not good?" she whispers softly. I'm such a selfish prick. I should be holding her, not thinking of ways to slip inside her again.

"Waylynn, I promise you that was the best...everything." The one time in my life I wish I could be more articulate, I sound like a moron. "You are fucking perfect, which is why I want you so badly again. Seeing you, feeling you... I can't help myself." I kiss her lower stomach and force myself up her body without licking her nipple, even though it's right in front of my face. She curls into me when I wrap my arms around her, nuzzling. I'll let her get up eventually.

MUSIC FOR THE HEART



Oswald

I MUST BE A FUCKING SAINT. Instead of calling Memphis to pick me up, I catch a ride with a player and his family who are heading out to grab something to eat. His mom looked at me kind of sadly when she realized no one was there for me.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to join us? Our treat,” she offers for the second time since I got in the car two minutes ago.

“No, I have plans with my brother and our girl,” I explain instead of just declining. She looks back at me, probably wondering about my word choice, but I really don’t care what she or anyone else thinks.

“Shit.”

“Trevor!” the mom chastises.

He ignores her and continues, “This is where you live?”

“Yeah, it’s our girl’s place.” I can’t take the credit for the nice ass house, not yet.

“Her family doesn’t mind you staying with them?”

“Nah, thanks for the ride, man.” I don’t correct his conclusion about her family living here too. First, it’s none of his business, and second, I don’t want him spreading shit around or thinking it’s a party house.

They wait for me in the driveway until I pull the key Memphis had made for me out of my bag and unlock the door, like they thought I was lying or going to break in or something. Once the door is open, I hear them back out of the driveway, and I set my bag on the floor before closing the door.

The house is quiet. It's been a few hours since they left the stadium. I slide my shoes off and slink through the halls, checking the living room, even though I'm confident I know where they are. The bedroom door is open, allowing me to see the bed from the hall. Waylynn is curled up against Memphis. I can just see the curve of her tit and bare shoulder peeking out from the blanket. Her eyes are closed. She's sleeping.

I grin, knowing he wore her out.

I glance up at him, finding him sleeping too, lazy fucker. I want details. I also need to thank him. I didn't want to take her virginity. I can't even think about hurting her without wanting to punch myself, which is why we've chilled it in the bedroom since the other day, and it hasn't been easy when I wake up with her ass pressed against my dick most days.

I was scared neither of us had the balls to do it, but when Memphis told me to take my time today, I knew he had something planned. I lean my shoulder against the doorframe, letting my eyes linger on her.

I need to thank Waylynn too. I don't think Memphis has ever been this content. I didn't even know it was possible.

I take a step into the room, and Memphis snaps his eyes open. His glare only lasts a second before he's looking over at the clock on the nightstand. I make a grotesque gesture with my hands, asking if he fucked her, and he lifts his lips in a snarl. If he had something nearby, he would probably throw it at me. Thank goodness she's wrapped around him, or he might be beating the shit out of me right now. I chuckle, knowing he's trapped.

I inch around her side of the bed, partly to avoid my brother, and lift the covers. She's deliciously naked, but the small stain on the sheet erases all my mirth.

I glance up at Memphis again, this time not smiling, and his eyes convey his thoughts. *You're a dick!*

“What?” Waylynn lifts her head up like he just spoke, but the room is silent. I drop the blanket, and she looks over her shoulder, spying me right after I was peeping.

“Hey, baby.” I climb in bed on top of the covers.

“Hey.” She’s still sleepy, and her voice is all husky and sweet, but she doesn’t try to hide from me.

“Did we miss your call again? I’m sorry.”

“No, I caught a ride with someone else. They kept trying to get me to go to dinner with them because I was all alone.”

“Who? You’re not alone.” Her brows drop at the same time her full lips curl into a frown.

“Some lady.” I get a little thrill out of her wanting to know who it was.

“You should have called,” she insists.

“He’s teasing you.” Memphis kisses the side of her head and gets up to go to the bathroom. I notice he doesn’t close the door entirely, so I lean over and softly ask Waylynn, “You okay, baby? You need anything?”

“I’m good, thank you.” Her pretty face flushes pink, letting me know she understands what I’m asking.

I kiss her just because I can, and she responds, opening up to me. After a few seconds, I pull back and gaze at her. “Thank you,” I tell her, and her face scrunches up in confusion.

“For what?”

“For being you, for letting us love you and loving us back.”

Her mouth opens like she wants to say something, but a puff of air comes out instead. Her eyes get all glassy like she wants to cry, so I wrap my arms around her and pull her head into my chest while I relax against the pillows.

“What time do we need to leave? I could use a nap,” I say loud enough so Memphis will know I’m speaking to him.

“Probably seven, seven-thirty if we want a decent table, since it’s the weekend.” He comes out and rifles around in his bag for a pair of boxers.

“You can bring one of the other dressers in here. Sorry I have a lot of clothes,” Waylynn offers as an explanation as to why we can’t share the dressers already in the room.

Memphis doesn’t miss a beat. “I don’t want to clutter up your room. Do you mind if we use the closet next door?” It still blows my mind that we’re living here, like for real.

“Anything you want,” she agrees. “Have you eaten yet?” She tilts her head back, looking at me.

“No, are you going to feed me?” I’m ridiculously excited at the prospect.

“Sure, what would you like?”

“Not a fair question when you’re lying here naked, but... I’ll go with my second pick and say anything you’re willing to make me.”

Waylynn clicks her tongue like she doesn’t think my first choice would be her. “I can order you anything you want, or I can make you a sub. I got mustard.”

“You remembered.” I tousle her slightly messy hair. “I’ll take the sub.” Not only does that mean I can eat sooner, but knowing she made it for me makes it even sweeter.

“Okay.” Waylynn slips from the bed and rushes to the bathroom. I watch her ass the entire time, and I’m sure I’m not the only one.

Once the door is almost closed, I toss back the covers and reveal the stain on the bed. I’m a little freaked out. He made her bleed. I wonder if Memphis panicked like he did last time she got hurt.

“Bro!” I hiss and point needlessly.

Memphis, now dressed, comes over and casually puts the blankets back. “I’ll change them when she goes downstairs,” he says in a hushed tone. He doesn’t seem freaked out at all.

“Did she cry?” I’m a glutton for punishment.

“No.” He scrubs his hand over his face.

He looks like a mess. “Give me something.” I peek at the bathroom door to make sure she’s not going to come out too soon.

“It was addicting. How’s that?” Memphis confesses in a self-deprecating way. “I was already thinking about the next time I could get inside her before we were even done.”

“That good?”

“Better. Good isn’t even close.” He shakes his head, giving me a serious stare.

“Do you think it’s because you like, *love* her?” I feel weird asking this question, but I need to know. How can it be so different?

Memphis licks his lips, stalling. “Yeah, and I didn’t wear a condom.”

“What?” I shout. Before the single syllable is fully out of my mouth, he’s on me, shoving me toward the door to the hallway. “What?” I ask again much softer, but still with the same amount of outrage.

“She’s on birth control,” he hisses when we’re out of the room.

“You always said that doesn’t matter, to always wear a condom,” I accuse, shoving his shoulder back.

“That was before her.”

“What if something happens or she missed a pill or something?” I’m a little freaked out. He simply shrugs, giving me a bored expression. Holy hell. “You want a kid all of a sudden?” I’m back to whispering.

“No, but I want her.”

“For Christ’s sake, you’re the one you warned me about. You want to knock her up to keep her.” I point my finger at him.

“No, I don’t. I just wouldn’t care if I did. But you’re missing the point—she is on birth control,” he says it slowly, like I’m the one not understanding.

“That’s not always one hundred percent.”

“Let’s have this conversation after you’ve been with her. Let me know if you reach for a condom.” He starts to walk away.

My mind starts whirling with ideas. “Wait, I don’t have to either?” I don’t know why I didn’t think of that.

“That’s your call. I’m fully prepared to deal with any possibilities.” He peers back into the bedroom, and his shoulders relax as he pushes the door open the rest of the way. The room is still empty, and I can hear the water running in the shower.

“Well shit.” I hum under my breath.

“Help me find new sheets.” Memphis acts like he didn’t just make me question if I really know my brother at all, but then once my mind has time to come to terms with the idea, I’m not even surprised. He’s been possessive as fuck with her since the first day we met.

BATES

My equipment is already loaded into the back of the bar, not that I have much. The place is far from packed, but it’s still early and I know weekends draw more of a crowd, so I’m expecting a good turnout soon. I’m actually a little nervous. Cello, even my kind of cello, isn’t what someone might expect on a Saturday night at a bar.

I’m posted at the same table we sat at last time, nursing a beer, while I wait for them. I check the time on my phone again. I don’t want to call to see where they are, since it makes

me feel like a needy prick, but I do want to call because I'm tired of sitting here alone.

I'm tapping my foot to the house music when a woman approaches the table. I don't make eye contact because I'd rather she just keeps walking, but she doesn't take the hint. "Hey, are you waiting for someone?" she questions, already angling her body like she might try to sit down in the booth across from me.

"I am, they should be here any minute," I tell her with a small smile while looking beyond her.

"You're playing tonight, right?" she questions, ignoring my dismissal.

"I am," I reply.

"My friend is a waitress here. She told me you'd be playing tonight. She said we had to see you, so a bunch of us came. I'm the only one brave enough to come over and introduce myself. I'm Brittany." She extends her hand to me, and I release my beer to shake it.

"Bates."

"Is that your real name?" She twists her lips in a sly grin, and I pull my hand away from hers.

"It is." I don't tell her it's my last name, there's no point. "My friends are here. It was nice meeting you. I hope you enjoy the show." I rise to my feet, and her eyes rise with me. Once I'm standing, she finally turns to look where my attention is already directed.

Oz is clearing a path for Waylynn, who is angling her way over, passing tables and chairs on her crutches with her eyes locked on me. Her smile is wide and infectious. She's wearing a loose skirt that moves when she does, teasing mid-thigh. She has an ankle boot on one foot and a fitted T-shirt that shows off her curves. She looks beautiful, and I'm not the only one who notices. Heads turn to follow her as she passes.

Memphis is behind her, looming over her shoulder and eyeing everyone as if they might do something that will piss

him off. It's pretty shocking to see him so affected by a woman, but I get it.

Waylynn eyes the woman still standing next to me, and her smile slips just enough that I notice. I like thinking she might be jealous that someone else has my attention.

"Hey there, gorgeous," I greet, letting everyone know who really has my interest, and then I slip to the side so she can sit down.

"Hey, Bates." She flashes her perfect white teeth as she drops with a huff.

"Quite the group you have." The woman observes, eyeing both of my friends. They don't even look in her direction.

"Let me have those, baby." Oz reaches for Waylynn's crutches and leans them up against the wall.

"Gah, take them and this air boot," she scoffs, scooting deeper into the round booth to allow the rest of us to join her.

Memphis slides in next to Waylynn. "Few more days," he promises.

"You need help setting anything up?" Oz asks while eyeing the woman still standing next to our table like he expects me to give him an explanation as to why she's here.

"Nah, I'm good." I shrug, and with my eyes, I tell him, *I tried to get rid of her.*

Before I can sit down with them, two more girls join the other one at our table. The girl in the very back can't even look at any of us, and it's clear her friends are dragging her along.

"Hey, guys," the original girl coos at her friends, and I take the opportunity to sit down. "This is Shawna and Macy. I'm Brittany." She introduces all of them. Truth is, I didn't even remember her name.

"Hello." I'm the only guy that responds. I knew Memphis would ignore them, that would have been true even before Waylynn, but I figured Oz would at least be cordial.

“Hi,” Waylynn says hesitantly. I don’t blame her. The last time she was nice to a girl here, it backfired on her.

Memphis puts his arm on the back of the booth behind her—it’s a deliberate move to claim her—while Oz picks up her hand and kisses her fingers before their joined hands disappear under the table. It couldn’t have been choreographed better, and it wasn’t even planned. It does sort of leave me out to dry though, which sucks.

Brittany’s eyes are wide as she takes it all in. Her gaze roams over the three of them with undeniable interest.

“Are you guys here to see Bates?” Waylynn asks, filling the silence that was more than awkward.

“Yeah, we have a friend who works here. She told us he was amazing, and we didn’t want to miss it.” Brittany glances at me again.

“He is enthralling,” Waylynn agrees. My chest swells with the compliment, and I send her a wink.

“Well, thanks for stopping by, it was nice to meet you guys.” I try to dismiss them again, hoping one of them will take the hint. The girl in the back tugs on her friend’s shirt sleeve, proving she does, but the other two ignore it.

“We were hoping we could buy you a drink or something,” Brittany says, glancing around the table.

I answer for all of us. “No thanks, we’re all set.” I even hold up my beer that’s still more than half full and getting warmer by the second.

“We’ll be around all night if you change your mind,” Brittany says, still eyeing the group.

“Bye.” Waylynn waves before dropping her free hand to Memphis’ lap. She’s much more confident about her place with them this time, and it’s good to see. “Are you excited? I have butterflies for you,” she says the moment the other girls turn away.

“A little nervous,” I admit. I’ve only ever done small-town fairs on a Saturday, and those are usually pretty laid-back.

“You’ll be amazing,” she tells me.

“I’ll pretend it’s a private concert just for you guys,” I tease.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather imagine us naked? I thought that worked on nerves,” Oz chimes in, dirty bastard.

I snort and tip my beer to him. “That’ll do.”

We bullshit for the next twenty minutes. The waitress stops by just before I’m about to get ready to head backstage. Waylynn and Oz order some fruity drink without alcohol, and when the waitress calls it a virgin, Waylynn flushes pink and looks down at her lap. Memphis kneads the back of her neck, and I notice the hickey is back on her throat. I wonder what they got up to this afternoon. Whatever it was, I’m sorry I missed it.

Memphis orders a soda. He very rarely drinks, and never around Oswald, which is fine by me. The last time I saw him drink, he got blitzed out of his head and started a fight that almost got him arrested.

“All right, fam, I’m going to head back,” I tell them once the waitress leaves to get their drinks.

“Good luck, but you don’t need it.” Waylynn bounces in her seat, but she stops abruptly as if she moved wrong.

“You okay? Hit your foot?” I question as she bites her lip.

“No, I’m fine,” she replies.

Memphis leans over and says something in her ear only she can hear. Her lips part, and her gaze gets hazy as her lids lower. When she bites her lip this time, it’s for a completely different reason.

Whatever he said turned her on. I can see it in the way her breathing changed and how she leaned even farther into his embrace. Damn, now I really want to know what he said.

I glance at Oz, who seems to be in on the secret, when he mouths, “Little sore,” to me. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out he’s talking about something sexual. I just don’t

know if Memphis fucked her too hard or spanked her ass. I wish I did though. Maybe he'll tell me later.

I get up from the table, grateful my dark jeans will do most of the work to hide the semi hard-on in my pants. "I hate missing out on what you guys have going on here, but I need to go."

"We'll be watching," Waylynn says, and fuck, it does something to my gut. It could just be her word choice, or maybe it's knowing her eyes will be on me, but I need to go before I do something stupid like try to kiss her when I don't know if it will end my friendship with my best friends.

Once I'm in the back, I have about ten minutes to relax. I go over the songs I'm going to play and make sure I have my music. My fingers are already drumming on my thigh, moving to the melody in my head.

The door to the room swings open, and the same girl from the bar, Brittany, slides through the gap and puts her back to the door as if someone might be chasing her. Her face is a little red, and her eyes are wild. "I've never done this before," she confesses while shaking her head.

"What are you doing?"

She pushes off the wall and saunters toward me. "I don't know," she says, but I'm pretty sure we both know exactly what she's trying to do.

"You should go back with your friends," I tell her before she reaches me.

"I'd rather be in here with you."

"I'm not interested in hooking up," I tell her, but she takes it the wrong way.

"I'd love to get to know you."

"No, I'm not interested at all. I'm seeing someone."

"I didn't notice a ring." She finally stops when she's only a foot or so away from me.

“I never said I was married.” My eyes go to the door again when it swings open, and an employee pokes her head in. Her eyes roam over me and the girl, but she just says, “You’re on in a few minutes,” and then slips back out the door.

I stand up, fisting the neck of my cello. “You should get back to your friends,” I tell her again. I don’t know if she’s been drinking or just decided tonight was the night she would shoot her shot, but I’ve already told her more than once I’m not interested and that’s where it should have stopped.

“Want me to help you get ready?” She purposely looks down at my crotch.

“No. You need to go.” This is getting embarrassing for both of us. Instead of sticking around and waiting for her to listen to me, I walk right past her, out of the room, and into the hall. Being nice so people don’t talk shit does not extend that far. It’s bullshit that people believe they have full access to me because they think I’m available to them in some fucked-up way since I put myself out there with my music.

The excitement and adrenaline I usually experience before getting on stage is replaced with frustration. The same waitress who came to get me is on the stage, speaking to the smallish crowd in the bar. It’s a little busier than Sunday, but not packed. “We’re starting our show a little early tonight because we have something new for you. If you’ve been around, you might have heard him before, otherwise grab your drink and sit back, because he’s about to rock your world. Please welcome Bates and his cello.”

There are a few people clapping, and I bet I know what table is the loudest. Knowing they are here eases a little of the tension I was feeling, but when I take my seat, I still have to plaster a fake smile on my face. “Hey, guys, thanks for letting me play for you this evening.” That’s all I say before getting my cello seated, and then I draw the bow across the strings. Instead of starting with something slow to ease them into it, I throw myself into “Chop Suey” from System of a Down. It’s aggressive and complicated, and it will clear my mind from anything but the music.

I'm breathing heavily when I lower my arm with the bow. The crowd is eerily quiet for one second, and then it erupts into applause. My eyes go right to my table, where Waylynn is clapping so hard, her hands are going to hurt. I send her a wink, and her shoulders hunch up a little as she gives me a shy smile in return, waving her hands.

With my mind clear, I slip back into my planned set. I'm sweating when I take my first break. Memphis walks over to the stage with a glass I drain so quickly, it doesn't even register as water until the final gulp.

I hop down off the stage, and several people in the bar migrate over to me. It's like as soon as they see one person approaching, they all decide they should. I'm thankful for the support, but I could use a break. After saying thank you multiple times while edging my way over to the table, Memphis allows me to sit next to Waylynn, while he takes the seat on the end.

Most of the people ease away once I'm seated, but a few linger near the fringes. "You were amazing, even better than last time, but I don't know how that's possible." Waylynn grins at me.

I get caught staring at her mouth for a second too long, but then I force my eyes up to hers. "Thank you," I murmur, exhilarated and tired at the same time.

"I didn't even know the things you did were possible, and your fingers move so fast."

"I'm sure he'd love to give you a more personal demonstration some time." Oz smirks at me. I have to admit I was thinking the same fucking thing.

"I'd love that," she replies sweetly, while Memphis chuckles darkly, knowing we are not talking about the same thing she is. At least he's not shutting the idea down. I need to get twenty minutes alone with him to talk about her before I get any more invested than I already am, but I'm feeling pretty fucking invested.

“How long before you have to go back up?” she questions, unknowing where my thoughts have gone.

“Fifteen minutes or so, and I need to use the bathroom before I do.” I glance around, hoping the waitress will come by. I really don’t want to walk up to the bar, and I need a drink.

“Thirsty?” Waylynn pushes over her full drink.

“If you care at all about the way the waitress is going to eye you when you order that next, don’t bother trying it, because you will want it again.” Oz holds up his matching glass before taking a sip and setting it back down next to an already empty glass.

“I don’t give a shit what they think. Are you sure?” I look to Waylynn for confirmation.

“Absolutely, I love converting boys to the dark side.” She grins, pleased with herself. If only she knew how true that statement is.

“I think three is the limit, baby. Any more than that, and Memphis might start hurting people.” Oz sums up his brother with simplicity.

Waylynn clicks her tongue like she’s about to say she was only joking in the first place, but we’re all watching her, and no one is teasing. Her brows furrow before she shakes her head slightly. She’s probably trying to convince herself she’s thinking too much into his words, but she’s not.

“Any requests?” I question to change the subject. I don’t want her to feel too much pressure.

“I love everything,” she responds quickly, letting me know I made the right move with the topic shift. “What’s your favorite?” Even though I get to pick everything I play, people rarely ask my favorite, since they usually want me to play theirs.

“I’ll play it for you at home. I don’t do it at shows.” She nods her head, just as excited to hear me play privately, which swells my head a little.

“I would love that, thank you.”

“How about ‘Lose Yourself’?” Oz requests.

“I can do that,” I reply. I look over when I hear someone call out to Oz. There’s a group of guys nearing the table, calling for his attention.

“Higgins!” Oz extends his hand in greeting. “I figured you found some other trouble to get into.”

“Nah, we were a little late though. Man, that was dope,” he says, turning his focus on me.

“Thanks.”

“That’s Bates, my brother, Memphis, and this is our girl, Waylynn.” Oz wraps his arm around Waylynn and kisses the side of her head without an ounce of shame after calling her *our girl*. He’s fucking bold. His buddy doesn’t say anything. He probably doesn’t put any true stock into the words.

“Hey. I’m Kyle.” He points to himself. “This is Norris and Glenn.” He gestures to the others with him. “Ingle and Vin are around here somewhere. Mind if we pull up some chairs?”

“I’m going to hit the bathroom before I get back on.” I start to scoot out of the seat, and Memphis rises to allow me out, but then moves right back so he’s sidled up next to Waylynn.

On my way to the toilet, I pass the same waitress that introduced me, and I stop her. “Could I get a water and a beer on stage please?”

“Sure. I’ll keep ’em coming and close you out at the end of the night.”

“Great, thanks.” I make it to the bathroom and back to the stage with a few minutes to spare, so I pull out a couple of fresh bows. I eat through strings like crazy with some of the quicker stuff.

MEMPHIS

WHEN BATES ANNOUNCES his last song, I feel bad that it makes me happy, but I'm ready to get the hell out of here. Oz has been busy entertaining his friends and trying to include Waylynn, while her hand has been on my thigh all night, tracing up and down my leg and making me desperate for her.

I've been tempted to show her what she's doing to me more than once, but I don't want her to think I expect her to do something about it, and knowing her, that is exactly what she would think. Now if she weren't sore, it would be a different matter. She did seem to like it when I told her I could kiss away all the pain earlier after she bounced in her seat.

I know she's getting tired because she laid her head on Oswald's shoulder during the last song. I hope Bates isn't planning on sticking around for a long time when his set is over. I would feel obligated to stay here with him, even though he has his own car, but at least Oswald would be able to take Waylynn home.

"I love this one." Her soft voice pulls me from my musings. I wasn't even really paying much attention to the song. It's still hard to concentrate on it when she's looking up at me like she's begging for me to kiss her, or maybe I just want to kiss her. I lean in slightly, so fucking tempted, but her eyes get a little wide, scared.

I don't know if it's because she's playing Oswald's girl or if it's because she's worried someone might know she's my student. I fucking hope it's the latter, because I don't give a shit about the former.

I pull back though, mindful of her feelings. She squeezes my thigh under the table, and her lips curl into a frown. She looks sad now, like I was the one who rejected her. "It's okay, sweetness, I'm not mad," I say low enough to keep the others from hearing, but there's a guy across from us paying way too much attention, so I stare him down, letting him know I see him watching.

He breaks eye contact before I do, looking down at his foot like something stole his attention. Fucking right. He should

mind his own business.

“Thanks again. You can find my socials under Bates and his cello. Have a great night and get home safe.” Bates stands up, hauling his instrument and bows to exit through the back of the stage.

“Want to come with me to help him load up?” I ask Waylynn.

“Can we make a stop by the bathroom first?”

I nod my head. “Oz.” He looks away from his teammate who’s talking a mile a minute and using his hands to explain everything. “I’m taking her to the bathroom and checking in with Bates.”

“Need me to come?” He places his hand on the table, ready to leave with us.

“Nah, let me see what he wants to do. You might need to take her home if I need to stay with him.”

“You ready to go, baby?” he asks her.

She defers to him. “If you are.”

“She’s ready,” I answer for her.

“I’ll wait here for you guys to get back,” Oz says before I help her stand, then give her the crutches.

“Yo, that’s where the crutches came from. I was so confused, man, since you didn’t have them at practice.” One of the guys shakes his head.

“Fucking idiot with a camera,” I hear Oswald say as we walk away.

“You don’t have to make him leave for me,” Waylynn says as soon as we’re out of earshot.

“Yes I do. You’re tired.” That’s more important. I don’t say that, though, because she would try to argue.

The line for the women’s restroom is long, like always. I don’t know what the fuck they do in there that takes so long at places like this. I glance at Waylynn, who’s leaning on her

crutches, then the lack of a line for the men's room and make a decision. "Come on." I urge her forward with my body, angling us toward the door.

I love that she comes without question and even enters the bathroom once I poke my head inside then open the door for her.

"The women's has a better counter," some idiot behind us yells. I ignore him. I would take Waylynn to the car before I fucked her in a scummy place like this.

The doors to the two stalls are closed, but there are only feet in one, so I push the other one open as she shields her eyes from the guy zipping up at the urinal with her hand. "I'll stand in front of the door," I promise, and she maneuvers herself inside the stall with the crutches.

"Maybe I'll hold it," she mutters.

"You're good, sweetness."

"Why ain't you going in there with her? I can help her if she needs it," some dude who should have stopped drinking hours ago pipes up.

"Walk away," I tell him, looking him dead in the eye so he can see how serious I am.

"Memphis?" Her voice is small.

"Right here."

"Just tryin' to help the lady out," he defends and backs away. At least he's not drunk and dumb.

When I hear the toilet flush, I move to the side so she can get out. She makes her way over to the sink, squeezing her crutches to her side with her arms, and it smashes her tits together in the process.

Before I can pull the door open, one of the guys from the table enters, and he does a double take when he sees us. Waylynn's face blazes crimson, but none of us speak.

"Oh gosh, I don't want to do that again," she confesses the second we're back in the hall.

“It was better than waiting. You wouldn’t have even gotten into the bathroom yet.” I point at the line that seems to have gotten longer since we entered the men’s room.

She winces. “Maybe.”

I chuckle as I lead her toward the backdoor Bates used. Just to make sure I’m not going to cause an issue, I knock on it hard enough to be heard over the house music. When no one answers, I push it open, seeing a grimy hall. “Want to sneak backstage?” I taunt.

“Are we going to get in trouble?” she whispers with an air of caution and maybe a little interest.

“I’ll protect you.” I gesture for her to go past me.

“You shouldn’t be back here,” Bates snaps gruffly, hauling his instrument through a door down the hall. I know he’s not talking to us, because he’s looking into the room he’s leaving.

“Got a problem?” I call, and his head turns toward us.

“Not anymore. You guys ready to get the fuck out of here or what?”

“Yeah, I’ll let Oz know.” I pull my phone from my pocket and send him a text message to meet us at the car.

“I need to pay my drink tab and collect my door keep,” Bates tells us, heading our way.

A girl steps out of the room he was in and peers down the hall. I think it’s the same girl who was talking to him when we first got here. “What the hell?” I question Bates.

“No clue, man. She was back here before the show too. She said she knows one of the employees, but it’s not like it’s hard to get back here.” He glances at us as if to prove a point.

“What an asshole,” the girl grumbles bitterly.

Waylynn gasps and looks over her shoulder as Bates actually starts to laugh.

“He is not,” she defends with a bite of anger, which shuts Bates right up.

His eyes are glued to the side of Waylynn's face like he can't believe she's sticking up for him. "Thank you, but I don't care what she thinks."

"Well I do, and she knows it's not true." Waylynn glares at the girl for a long second, then swings away, leaving the rest of us to watch her go. I scramble to catch up and open the door for her.

The mood in the bar has shifted. It's louder and feels rowdier, but it could just be that I was away from it for a few minutes and I'm over this shit.

I glance over at the table we were sitting at, spying Oz still seated there. He probably didn't feel his phone since the music is so loud. A few girls have joined the group, but none are close to my brother. I steer Waylynn in that direction with my hands seated on her hips. She changes course easily, even on crutches. "We're getting out of here," I tell him, speaking over a few guys.

Oswald smacks a few hands and bumps knuckles with others while saying, "I'll see you Monday." The spot he vacates gets swallowed up quickly by the group. It looks like they'll be here for a while. I can't wait to get home.

THE TRUTH ALWAYS COMES OUT



Waylynn

SUNDAYS MIGHT BE my favorite day ever. The fact that I'm curled up between Memphis, Oswald, and Bates watching crappy television while we wait for the football games to start in a little while might have something to do with it.

Bates' cello is propped up in the stand across the room. He promised to play for me later. I'm still trying to figure out what his favorite song will be. He seems to play a little bit of everything.

The sound of the door opening has Memphis jumping up off the couch. "Waylynn?" a familiar voice calls loudly. "There's a work van and a truck in the driveway. Is everything okay?"

"Oh shit," I curse under my breath. Oswald snaps his head to the left to look at me as if my words are more shocking than my mom showing up unannounced on a Sunday before noon.

"Waylynn?" she calls again.

"Hey, Mom," I reply back loud enough for her to hear, and then I mouth, "I'm sorry," to the guys. Oswald is completely relaxed—he hasn't even moved other than to look at me—while Memphis still seems surprised someone came into the house.

"Do you need us to leave?" Bates asks in a rushed whisper, like he's ready to jump up and run out the back door.

“No, just...she doesn’t know we’re...” I look around, at a loss for words.

“Living here?” Oswald offers.

“Or seeing each other,” I reply.

“Oh shit!” Oswald exclaims just as Mom enters the living room and almost jumps back when she sees us all. At least Memphis is still standing and Bates was on the other side of him, so I’m only sitting next to Oswald.

“You have company,” she remarks, shocked even though she noted there were cars here.

I lean out to grab my crutches, and Memphis has them ready for me before I can get to them. “Hey, Mom. I didn’t know you were coming to town.”

“I wanted to check up on you, surprise you,” she amends. She hasn’t even looked at me once, but the guys have all received long perusals.

“You should have told me. Is Dad here?” I peek behind her.

“No, he’s working. Are you going to introduce me?” She finally looks at me with wide eyes.

“Oh, um, sorry.”

“Waylynn,” she chastises me softly.

“This is Memphis, Oswald, and Bates.” I point to each in turn while I’m still sitting, but I have my crutches at the ready, I’m just not sure for what.

“Your classmate and his brother, the TA?” she says slowly. I almost regret telling her anything about them, but this might be worse if I hadn’t.

“Yeah, and Bates, their friend—our friend.” Gosh, this is weird. I wish I had some warning.

Mom introduces herself. “Hello, I’m Cordelia.” Her eyes are taking in everything. I’m sure she can tell I don’t have a bra on and we’re all in comfy clothes. She probably already knows they spent the night here.

I pull myself up. “Let me get you something to drink.” I need to get her out of this room and away from all three of them so I can talk to her alone for a second.

“That sounds wonderful.” She pretends to smile. Her face falls when she actually looks at me. I don’t know if it’s because I’m in short sleep shorts or due to the air cast on my foot. “I thought it was just a sprain.” Well, that answers that.

“It is. I only have these for a few more days. I might not even need them anymore,” I answer dismissively.

“You didn’t mention crutches.” She keeps up as I leave the room. Her heels click along the hallway behind me. Once I make it to the kitchen, I reach into the fridge and give her a water bottle. “Are you seeing that boy? Dating him?” she whispers.

“Oswald?” I hedge because I’m not sure what I should say.

“He was the one next to you, right? He’s very handsome. They are all very handsome.” She frowns.

“Yes.”

“Yes, you’re seeing him?” Her head pulls back.

I nod. “Kind of.”

“Kind of? What does that mean? Are you not official?”

“Um...”

“Waylynn.”

“We haven’t really talked about it yet.” That’s partly the truth. It’s all been more implied with him. Memphis is more direct.

She watches me for a few seconds, scrutinizing me. “Why are they all here?”

“We went to see Bates play last night, and it was late, so they stayed over,” I confess. I’m nineteen and in college, so I don’t need to hide that, but then why am I so nervous?

“They stayed over? All of them?” Her eyes are wide, but her brows don’t even move. “See Bates play what? Is he in a

band? Waylynn, are these boys taking advantage of you?”

“No, they are not,” I hiss, afraid they might hear her. She clicks her tongue like I’m being foolish. “They took care of me when I hurt my foot, befriended me when I was alone at school, and helped when I lost power.”

“What did they expect in return?” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“Nothing, they don’t even let me pay for my lunch.”

Her lips curl as if she thinks I’m being naïve. “And there’s nothing else they want, not even Oswald?”

“Mom, stop,” I tell her with a conviction I rarely use. “They are real friends.” She knows the kids I hung around with at home were friends more out of obligation and association than anything else. “They didn’t even know I had money when they started talking to me.”

“If you say so.” She leans back a little, sinking into her pose, but her disapproving mien doesn’t waver.

Silence fills the kitchen for a long second, and I finally ask, “How long are you staying? Do you have plans?”

Her eyes narrow just the tiniest bit before she sighs. “Just the afternoon. Your father will be home tomorrow. I wanted to see you, and I had Beth make you lasagna.” She gestures to a container I hadn’t noticed on the counter.

Now I feel guilty. “That was really nice, thank you,” I tell her sincerely.

“Have you and your guests eaten?”

“No, we were going to watch a football game and eat in a little while.”

“Football game?” Mom walks over to the sink and washes her hands.

“Oswald plays for the school team. Football is important to him.”

“Oh, he does?” She sounds interested. “And his brother must be very smart to be a TA. You mentioned that, right?”

The shock of finding me with three guys must be wearing off. I hope that's a good thing.

"Yes, he's even helping me with math." I slouch onto the stool.

"You hate math." She turns to look at me.

"I don't hate it. It's just not easy."

"You never answered if Bates is in a band." She retrieves a dish from the container and spins with it in her hands. "Beth said thirty minutes on three fifty should do."

I point to the oven. "He plays the cello. It's quite remarkable. I've never heard anything like it."

"Really? He plays the cello?" she questions after putting the dish in the oven.

I nod. "Beautifully."

Her eyes roam over me, and I pluck at my shirt. "Why don't you go get dressed and freshen up? Let your friends know lunch will be ready in a few. Don't worry." She holds up her hands. "I'll wait here for you to get back," she promises. I take that to mean she won't try to question them without me.

"All right." I take her up on the offer just for the chance to talk to the guys alone for a minute.

"Oh, I hate to see you hurt, honey," she says when I grab the crutches.

"I'm fine," I assure her.

Memphis, Oswald, and Bates all look up as I enter the room. Memphis' mouth is drawn into a thin line like he's expecting bad news. "I'm sorry she just showed up." I don't know what else to say.

"You don't have to apologize," Oswald answers. "Is she freaked out?"

"A little, I think. I never had many friends, and none I invited over," I admit.

“That’s because we’re special. You were waiting for us.” Oswald smirks.

I lick my lips and glance over at Memphis. “She assumed I was dating Oswald. I told her yes. I hope that’s okay?”

Nothing in his expression even shifts, but I can feel his disappointment, even when he says, “Yeah, of course.” His acceptance makes me want to walk back into the kitchen right now holding both of their hands, but I’m afraid of what that could mean for me. Would she think I was unstable and not thinking with a clear head?

“I’m sorry, don’t be—”

“I’m not mad,” he finishes for me. “I understand.”

“I don’t want you to have to understand. There are just some things I need to tell you guys.” I trade glances with Oswald and Memphis.

“Don’t worry about it now,” Memphis urges.

After a short silence, I tell them, “She brought lunch. I’m going to freshen up. I’ll be back down to join you in just a few moments. Excuse me.” I don’t wait for anyone to say anything before getting out of the room as fast as I can.

My chest is feeling kind of tight, and I’m questioning whether or not I’m feeling tingling in my fingers and toes or just imagining it. Either way, I know I’m riding the edge of a full-blown panic attack.

When I make it to my room, I close the door all the way and head right to my purse. Taking an extra pill will make me sleepy in a few hours, but it will help me make it through lunch without feeling the need to run out of the house.

The pill is tiny in my hand. I debate if I really need it, but then my eyes are drawn to Memphis’ bag on my floor, and I toss the thing back and swallow it dry. I can’t chance my mom noticing anything right now and taking me away from the life I so desperately want.

I pull on a pair of pants my mother picked out and a loose shirt after putting on a bra. Glancing in the mirror, I notice I

look stiff and a little pale. I need to relax, or she will know something.

The door clicks open, and I see Memphis' hand on the wood as he sneaks into the room through the smallest opening he can fit through before he latches the door just as quietly behind him. "What are you doing?" I look at the bed through the mirror, spying the bottle of pills I didn't put away yet, and hope he doesn't notice them.

Instead of answering, he walks over to me and cups my cheeks while staring into my eyes. "I need to know you're okay."

"I'm okay," I tell him, and it's not really a lie.

He huffs out a breath, telling me he can see through my half-truth. "Waylynn, if something is wrong or you're scared, we can leave right now. We can take care of you. You don't need to live here or use their money."

My heart does a whole lot of melting. I almost tear up, but I manage to hold it in while I swallow the lump in my throat. "Memphis..." I shake my head, trying to find the right words. "I'm not scared for any of the reasons you're thinking. I'm not even sure scared is the right word, and I promise that I will explain everything to you later, but I just don't want to lose you guys," I admit, finally voicing part of what's really bothering me.

He bends his knees so we're eye level. "You couldn't lose us if you tried, sweetness." There's a part of me, a part that's a little bigger than it was yesterday, that believes him, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried at all. "I love you, and I'm not letting you go no matter what. Tell me you understand," he demands.

"I understand," I say immediately.

"Now make me believe it," he challenges.

"Yes, sir." I damn near throw myself at him. My arms go around his back, and my head goes to his chest, where I let out a sigh of surrender. Memphis folds me in his arms, and I feel

his lips on the top of my head. The urgency to get downstairs wanes, and I debate just hiding out in here, but I know I can't.

After a minute or two, I pull back. "Thanks for coming to talk to me."

"You should know I will always come for you, Waylynn, no matter what."

"I love you."

"I know. How else could you put up with me? I love you too." He kisses me chastely before steadying me so he can grab my crutches. "I'm going to head back down before you, unless you want me to wait?"

"I do, but I don't want to give my mom a heart attack. I think I need to warm her up to the idea of having more than one boyfriend since I've never even had one before."

Memphis makes a growly sound and slams his lips to mine again, but it doesn't last long before he pulls himself away and saunters out of the room without another word.

Oswald

"NO WONDER YOU LOVE LASAGNA." I smack my lips together after wiping my mouth. It's a damn shame her mom only brought one tray. I could definitely eat more.

"None ever live up to Beth's," her mom says, speaking for Waylynn. I've noticed her doing it once or twice. Waylynn nods, agreeing with her mom but staying quiet.

Memphis gets up from the table in the dining room we've never used and takes Waylynn's empty plate along with his own. He stops next to me. "Are you done?" I hand him my plate, wishing I would have thought to clear the table. He's making a better impression than me, and I'm the boyfriend.

"Oh," Cordelia says when he pauses next to her. "Thank you." She seems genuinely pleased that he took her dish. Less

than half her food is eaten, but she hasn't touched it in a while, so it wasn't hard to guess she was done.

"I'll help you." Bates stands up, leaving Waylynn and me alone with her mom. The traitor. I've never done the meet the parents, boyfriend thing, but I'm sure she's going to ask me a bunch of questions any time now. Dads are the ones who bring out guns, right? That's probably just TV anyway.

"So, *Oswald*, that's such an interesting name. Is it a family name?"

"To be honest, I'm not really sure. My parents never mentioned where my name came from." I don't elaborate on the fact that they were usually too wasted to talk about shit like that.

Waylynn places her hand on mine, and her mother's eyes track it. I feel her chilled fingers start to pull back, so I capture them before she can tug her hand away.

"Maybe you could ask them?" Cordelia tilts her head to the side.

"Mom," Waylynn cautions.

"It's okay," I tell Waylynn, and then I address her mom. "Our parents are both deceased." Again, I filter my words. Usually, I would have just said they both OD'd, but it doesn't feel right at the moment.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Cordelia makes a face that might be a frown, but it's stiff. She moves onto a new topic though. "Waylynn says you play football?"

"Yes, we won the game yesterday." I'm a little proud, but I should be. I work hard as hell.

"That must keep you very busy, along with your school schedule."

"Some, but I'm used to it," I reply.

Memphis and Bates return to their seats. I don't think her mother misses the way my brother looks at Waylynn. Anyone with eyes can see he's always watching her if she's in the same

room as him, and it's even more obvious now. It makes me wonder what she told him upstairs.

“Memphis, you're a teaching assistant, and you all met Waylynn in class?” It's like she's grilling us to see if we have the same story as her daughter.

“Actually, we ran into each other at orientation,” Memphis says, which makes Waylynn choke on air. I rub my hand over her back and grin.

“If you call me slamming my face into your back running into each other, then sure,” she says when she stops coughing.

Memphis smiles at Waylynn, and I watch her mother's eyes widen. He's usually pretty reserved, and this is probably the first time she's seen him not so serious in the short time she's been here. “The only stranger I've ever recognized,” he tells Waylynn, sounding all poetic and shit. Neither of them is doing a good job of hiding their attraction. Memphis might be doing it on purpose, but Waylynn isn't.

“How do you like Michigan?” I turn the tables on her mom, hoping to distract her from my suddenly loquacious brother. Hell, it's his fault I even know that word.

“The lakes are beautiful, but I have to admit the West Coast stole my heart a long time ago. I was truly surprised Waylynn decided to come here for school.”

“I'm glad she went with her gut.” I gaze over at our girl, probably looking a lot like my lovesick brother.

“Her gut?” her mom questions. Her facial expressions are hard to read. I can't tell if she's confused or curious since she looks a little plastic. “I thought it was the medical program.”

Waylynn's fingers tighten on mine. “It was.” She shrugs as if she has no idea what I'm talking about. I remember her telling me how I would think her reason for coming here was weird, and her denial makes a little sense. Her mom must not think intuition and instincts are good enough reasons to pick a college.

The small talk lasts another ten minutes before we head back into the living room at Waylynn's invitation to get more

comfortable. She's more formal with her mom around, more like when we first started talking.

"When do you see the doctor again, honey?" Cordelia asks as Waylynn lowers herself to the couch. Her face goes white for a second, but then she snaps out of it.

"For my foot? On Wednesday."

"You really must have taken quite the spill."

"It's feeling much better now." Waylynn doesn't agree or disagree with her mom about the fall. "You can turn on the game you wanted to watch," she tells me, and I reach for the remote without any more prompting. It's shitty, but I'm glad her mom lives on the other side of the country.

MEMPHIS

I LOOK over at Waylynn and Bates, wondering what is taking Oz so long to get back. He left to use the bathroom a few minutes after Waylynn's mom excused herself to make a phone call. That was about fifteen minutes ago. He didn't say he needed to shit, so I'm starting to get a little concerned.

"I'm going to find Oz," I finally say, suspecting Cordelia has him cornered and is questioning him again.

"I'll come." Waylynn stands, joining me.

"Don't leave me here." Bates follows us.

I can hear murmurs before we reach the kitchen, but it takes me a few more steps to hear the words. "I'm sure you understand why I ask. Waylynn is fragile. She's not like other girls you might have...dated."

Waylynn stops, and her face goes ashen. I'm not even sure if she's breathing.

"What are you talking about?" Oswald hisses in disbelief.

"You mean she hasn't told you about the voices? About being in and out of treatment centers for the past several

years? Oh dear.” She feigns dismay. “As I said, she’s fragile and not stable. She’s even missed her therapy appointments. That’s why I came. I was worried she was having episodes.” The night we left the hospital fills my thoughts. Waylynn was medicated and saying things that didn’t make sense, but some of it lines up with what her mom just said.

“What the hell is going on?” Bates shoves himself into the kitchen. “What are you doing?”

Her mother’s gasp is audible, even from the hall. Waylynn turns her glassy eyes on me, and the sheen of tears is already pooling on her lower lashes.

“I’m trying to protect my daughter and him. She’s not a meal ticket or a fling.”

“He never thought she was either of those things,” Bates snaps, pissed at the insinuation and fully on defense mode. “What you’re doing is fucked up. Whether you’re telling the truth or not, it’s not your secret to tell.”

Waylynn turns her head as if she can see into the kitchen. I’m rooted to the spot next to her while my mind reels. Her shoulders slouch, and a tear falls down her cheek. That spurs me into action. I wrap my arms around her shoulders and whisper in her ear, “It’s okay.”

“I was going to tell you.” Waylynn begs me to understand in the saddest voice I’ve ever heard.

“And you can when you’re ready,” I promise. Another tear falls, and my heart breaks. “Please don’t, please.” I palm the back of her head to my chest.

“You don’t even know her,” her mom scoffs, and Waylynn pulls back from me, scrubbing the tears from her eyes before making her way into the kitchen.

“Mom?” There’s so much emotion in that one word, but it’s mostly sadness and betrayal. I know that feeling all too well when it comes to parents.

“Waylynn.” Her voice is softer, coaxing, as if she’s speaking to a small child. “I’m protecting you. These boys” —

she includes me in her stare— “don’t really want you. They don’t even understand you. They just want a good time.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” I snarl. It takes so much not to be as cruel as she’s being to Waylynn, because I’m not even sure this woman knows how her horrible words are hurting her daughter. She probably thinks she is protecting Waylynn, but she’s also seen the way we look at her, and there’s no way she would think we’re only looking for a good time. If that were the case, we would have left as soon as she got here.

“What are you doing?” Waylynn begs her mom for an answer that would help her understand.

Her mom walks closer to us. Her face stays smooth, but her eyes tell a different story. She’s sad, and maybe a little scared. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You’re the only one here doing that.” My tone is flat, angry. I don’t know how much more I can take before I pick Waylynn up and take her out of here.

Her mom bristles, placing her hand on her chest. “Are you going to hold her hand when it’s dark and she thinks the voices are real?”

“Mom!”

“Fuck yes we will,” Oswald answers for both of us. Waylynn looks between us like she’s judging if he’s telling the truth.

“I told you, you can’t get rid of us,” I remind her.

The tiniest smile curls her lips, but it doesn’t cover her tears that make my chest ache.

“I’m calling Dr. Tobin.” Her mom dashes away.

“Who’s Dr. Tobin?” Bates demands hurriedly.

“Psychologist. I don’t need to go back,” she vows.

“Back where?” Oswald angles closer to us so we’re circled around Waylynn.

“Netherwood Treatment Center. I promised myself no more locked doors. I won’t go back.”

To be continued in *Feeling Forever*.

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Albany lives in Michigan where she's happily married to her high school sweetheart. She spends most of her time juggling her four children's extracurricular activities, with her nose stuck in a book. When not reading you can find her writing her very own book boyfriends. Albany's passion is writing romance with real characters that are far from perfect, but always seem to find their own happily ever afters

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