

LOCKRIDGE LOVES BOOK 1

WANTING AVA



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WANTING AVA

LOCKRIDGE LOVES Book 1

She left behind tragedy and betrayal. Can she find healing in the shared embrace of four different men?

Ava's first year at Lockridge College has had a lonely and bitter start. She left tragedy and betrayal in her small town. She might have left her heart as well.

Somehow, she's made connections anyway: Arun, her resident assistant with a golden reputation, and Darius, the confident party boy adored by everyone. These handsome juniors could never see her as anything more than a friend... could they?

One night, Ava meets another pair of gorgeous guys: Colin, ambitious and driven despite his wealth, and Seth, the slow-talking Southerner who coaxes her into the sunshine. In their arms, Ava finally opens herself to intimacy again.

But what happens when attraction ignites between Ava and all four of these men? Can she trust them to help heal the wounds of her past?

This is a Reverse Harem Contemporary Romance Novel with slow burn relationships and fiery hot explicit scenes. For adult readers only!

1

AVA

My first year at Lockridge College was almost two months in and I was already being sexiled for the third Friday in a row. My roommate, Mimi, had been working my nerves for a lot of reasons, like calling her mother every single day and stripping to her underwear whenever she got drunk. But over the past few weeks, locking me out of our room had turned out to be her most annoying habit by far.

“Mimi?” I called through the door. Like the past two Fridays, I’d tried to open it, and as usual its swing forward had halted abruptly as the security bar engaged.

“We’ll be done in half an hour!” she called back.

All I could see through the one-inch gap was darkness. “Come on,” I said, trying to sound like I was in on the joke even though I was actually edging toward Very Much Not Amused. “This is kinda shitty, you know.”

No response.

I shoved the door hard against the security bar. “Mimi!”

Again, no response.

Open the fucking door! I fumed silently.

Definitely no response to that. Sighing, I let it fall shut again.

I tried to tell myself I’d be able to deal with weekly sexiling if Mimi wasn’t so shady about it, if she could just give me some notice first. But that wasn’t Mimi’s style.

The first Friday it happened, she *did* give me a heads-up about a “friend” coming to visit. It sounded super casual, so I was surprised she bothered to say anything at all. Our hall, on the second floor of Milner dormitory, has an open-door policy so relaxed it’s horizontal. If you see a closed door, it’s probably because whoever lives there is in class, a state of

undress, or bed. Otherwise, people usually leave their rooms wide open and welcoming, and no one needs an invitation to hang out. That has its own set of pros and cons of course, but basically, this is the way of life on Milner 2nd.

All of that was why I said to Mimi, “Oh, is your friend staying over?” because that was the only reason I could think of for her to bring it up beforehand. “You should probably tell Arun so he can make a note of it.”

Arun Deshmukh is our resident assistant. The first evening of the semester, after everyone had moved in, he’d called us into the Milner 2nd lounge area for an orientation and meet-and-greet, which involved him going over the rules and making us play introduction games while we munched on chips and salsa.

“So let’s get this out on the table,” he’d said. “As you all know, this is a co-ed dorm and on top of that, roommates have the option of gender-neutral assignments. So there’s no need for me to police your overnight guests. But if it’s someone from outside the Lockridge student population, try and find time to let me know, so I have some visibility over who’s on the hall. It’s a safety measure, okay?”

Mimi poked me lightly in the ribs and waggled her eyebrows. We’d only met an hour before—not exactly on poking terms—so I didn’t know how to respond at first. I lost the opportunity when Arun continued.

“Speaking of which.” He held up a hand to grab even more attention, although he already had one hundred percent of mine. “The metal box on the wall across from the restrooms is always stocked with condoms. Don’t be shy. But also, don’t be greedy, in case your fellow hallmates have an urgent need.”

Snickers rippled around the group, and Mimi hummed. Poking terms or not, I couldn’t blame her. Arun, tall and wide-shouldered with coffee-dark eyes and a shock of wavy dark hair falling across his brow, was one of the most incandescently gorgeous guys I’d ever met. Like, I had to sit on my hands to keep them from running through his hair kind of gorgeous. I would have said yes to any rule he wanted to

lay down, if he spoke it into the world with that husky smoky voice that seemed to reverberate inside my ribcage.

So I might have developed a little thirst for our RA. The point was, if Mimi's "friend" was staying overnight, she should let Arun know.

"Oh, Ryan's just coming to hang out after class," she explained that first Friday. "You remember Ryan? My friend who goes to UMD?"

Mimi had tacked pictures of all her friends onto the corkboard above her desk. It was one of the first things she did as part of unpacking. I vaguely remembered her pointing out a guy in glasses whose name might have started with R, but there were three other people in the picture who she'd named as well. This was one of the (minor) items on my list of Mimi's annoying traits: the fact that she'd actually named all of her friends in all of her pictures for me, like I should care, *and* she expected me to remember them.

Possibly also my annoyance had something to do with the fact that her corkboard was completely covered in such pictures, and mine was, well, sparsely populated in comparison.

"Um, right, Ryan," I replied.

"He'll probably go back after dinner," Mimi went on.

"Okay, cool." I hovered by the door a moment, trying to think up a plausible refusal in case Mimi was about to invite me to dinner with them, but she just kept brushing her hair. So I gave her a breezy, "See you later."

But that evening, I got back to the room after a full day of classes and found the door locked shut. I knew Mimi had finished her classes hours before, but maybe she was out doing something. Then I remembered what she'd said about a friend visiting. Maybe they were out doing something together.

I fished my key from the bottom of my bookbag, getting a nice papercut on one of my Bio lab sheets for good measure, and unlocked the deadbolt. But the door, when I tried to push it open, was blocked by the security bar.

I saw through the sliver of open doorway that the room inside was dim, like the window shades had been drawn.

“Mimi? You in there?”

I heard rustling. Then her voice. “Ava? Um...sorry. Could you possibly come back in like half an hour?”

My bag weighed a ton and my back was screaming about it. “Can I just drop my books inside?”

“Um,” she said again. “Half an hour? On the dot, I promise.”

And she shut the door in my face. Complete with deadbolt locking.

“What the...?” I muttered. Confused, I went to the lounge. There was a water cooler in the corner, and I filled my thermos and gulped down half. We were almost into October then, but the area around Lockridge was apparently experiencing a last gasp of hot weather, and it felt like balls outside.

I was too tired to think. I scrolled through my phone for emails. Notifications of a few campus events, a confirmation of the day’s Bio lab results from my table group...nothing else. I demolished a few more levels in my latest phone puzzle game. And after thirty minutes precisely, I went back to the room.

Mimi had opened the door by then, and she was inside brushing her bright orange hair. Her cheeks were flushed pink under her freckles. A guy, Ryan I supposed, was at her desk watching YouTube.

“Hi,” I said slowly. “Sorry about earlier.”

“No problem!” Mimi chirped. “We’re just getting ready to head out.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ryan said as they left, barely looking at me. We *hadn’t* met, technically, as Mimi hadn’t introduced us.

I drifted down onto my bed, feeling strangely out of sorts. Nothing seemed wrong or odd in the room, as far as I could tell. But why had they locked me out?

Looking back, I can only chalk up my confusion to a case of the Fridays.

After ten minutes, our neighbor across the hall, Darius, rapped on the open door. “Your roommate’s a loud one,” he remarked.

I scrambled to sit up straight. I’d been slumped against the wall, staring into nothing. “Huh?”

“Maybe do her a favor? Let her know that in a communal living situation, privacy’s just an illusion.” He inclined his head meaningfully in the direction of his own room, just a few feet away.

If Arun provided the calm and authoritative presence on Milner 2nd, Darius Johnson provided the opposite. After Arun’s orientation that first evening, Darius had marched up and down the hall pulling all the first-years out of our rooms and dragging us to a party in the center of campus. “Have to get y’all started off right,” he’d declared, deep dimples flashing on either side of his adorable grin.

I was still reeling from the impact of meeting Arun; strolling into the party alongside the nuclear level hotness that is Darius made me think I’d won the lottery. All through the crowd, I saw girls—and guys—giving him their best flirty eyes. But he stuck close to us first-years. He even made a special point of getting to know something about each of us, even though the party was absolutely packed and we had to shout to be heard. But that was no problem for Darius’s deep booming voice. Within the first twenty minutes, he’d managed to find out I came from the same town as his grandma, and had vowed to invite me to his next family reunion so I could taste “the best soul food on earth.” Immediately I started wondering if I’d make acceptable granddaughter-in-law material.

Darius looked out for us, too. He waved off a guy trying to offer me a red cup, instead filling another from the keg himself. “Memorize that face,” he said, nodding at the guy and guiding me away. “Keep your distance. Dude gets creepy with women.”

Women, he'd said. Like I met the definition of woman in his eyes.

"And always make sure you know exactly what's going on with your drinks," he continued. "From the moment they're poured to the moment you're done with 'em."

He helped me get Mimi back to our room after she binged on too many fuzzy navels, and quickly exited when she shucked off her jeans and passed out on top of her bedcovers, legs splayed. The first of many similar instances.

But that first Friday, my slow brain was still working out this other thing she'd done. "Hold on," I finally said to Darius. "Are you saying you heard Mimi and that guy...*together*?"

"Or maybe they were watching porn." Darius grinned, his teeth showing white against his dark skin. "With the volume cranked real high."

"So when they locked the door, they were hooking up? I got sexiled? That actually happens to people?" My voice kept rising, making each statement a question. I sounded like a squawking parrot.

"It's a rite of passage in college," Darius confirmed. "At least you're checking that box early." He had the sound of a guy feeling equal parts nostalgia and relief for never having to experience sexiling again. Like Arun, he's a junior, and like Arun, his room is a single.

"But she told me he was a friend."

Darius raised his eyebrows. "Maybe he's some kinda *good* friend?"

"I mean, maybe, but..." I sputtered. "If she'd said *boyfriend*, I would have known to expect something. Made other plans."

Maybe it was a new thing. Like maybe they really were friends who were just now discovering a mutual attraction and had gotten carried away. That was how things had started with my high school boyfriend Matt—the only boyfriend I've ever had. *Y'all are like a romcom in real life*, my best friend Jodie used to say.

My former best friend.

That night, as Mimi and I got ready for bed, I said, “Hey, um, I’m happy for you and all, but could you please not lock me out again? Or at least give me some notice if you need privacy?”

“Sure.” She had the grace to look embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” I said magnanimously. “So how long have you been dating this guy? Ryan, right?”

“Dating?” Mimi shook her head like she’d never heard the word before. “We’re friends.”

“But you…” I remembered how Darius had described what he overheard. Had he been mistaken? It felt too awkward to dig into. Mimi and I never really talked; even though we lived together, we barely knew each other. “Anyway, just try and let me know next time.”

But the next Friday, it happened again. I got back to the room late, because a rack of test tubes in Bio lab got knocked to the floor and we had to start the experiment all over again. It was already six p.m. when I finally staggered up to Milner 2nd, only to find the door barred, the room dark.

“Sorry, sorry!” Mimi called out. “Can you come back in like ten minutes?”

I gave her fifteen. Just enough to win two more levels on my puzzle game. As I sat in the lounge, waiting, I felt cocooned away from the sounds of traffic in the hall, the outer doors to the stairwell opening and closing, voices in conversation. Through the doorway of the lounge, I sometimes glimpsed people passing by, busy with their own lives and concerns.

“I totally didn’t know Ryan was coming over,” Mimi said that night. “It was a complete surprise. Otherwise I would have said something to you, I swear!”

“I mean, it’s whatever,” I said tiredly. My head was pounding, and I just wasn’t up to a whole discussion.

It had been a mistake to let it go, though. Because here I was, stranded in the hallway staring at the wrong side of a locked door, for the third Friday in a row.



Fridays are my longest, most grueling days. All undergraduates at Lockridge College have to meet distribution requirements in order to graduate. By the end of all four years, we need to pass at least three classes in four core divisions: natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and a foreign language. Most students try to get them out of the way before choosing majors, which we're supposed to focus on in junior and senior year. Even though it's only my first semester, I decided to go big and take a class in each division now, plus one more on a pass/fail basis. Turns out I played myself, because the way my schedule worked out, on Fridays I get slammed by all of them.

My first class is at 8:30—Introduction to the Novel. Then 9:30—Introduction to Economics. At 11:00—Introduction to Psychology, which is my pass/fail option. By lunchtime my brain is already fried, and *then* I have an hour of Mandarin Chinese, and 3 hours of Biology lab. Finally, around 5:30 p.m., I get to trudge up the huge central hill of campus toward Milner with my heavy ass bookbag, and collapse on my bed until my stomach pulls me to the dining hall again.

Or at least, I *would* like to do that, if I weren't constantly sexiled.

At this point, Fridays were really taking their toll. In fact, the night before, I'd had a dream where I was wearing a Hogwarts uniform and spinning through space, head over feet, just like Hermione with her Time Turner. It was possible my subconscious wanted to have some words with me.

Everything about me hurt. My head, my shoulders and back under the weight of my bookbag, my thighs and feet from walking all over campus. All I wanted to do was sleep through the entire weekend. Instead, I stared at the solid wooden

barrier of the door and felt an embarrassing tightening in my throat. My name, stamped at the top of the empty dry erase board which Arun had hung next to an identical one for Mimi—hers by contrast was covered in messages—began to blur as my tear ducts sprang into action. I blinked rapidly to clear my eyes.

I turned away, appalled at my pathetic crumbling, and recoiled as I saw Darius step out of his room.

He took one look at my face and caught my elbow gently. “What’s up?”

“She’s locked me out again.” I had to force the words from my clenched throat, which made them sound angry. Not that I was angry. Or upset. Just annoyed. Because it was annoying.

“You’re sure she’s in there?”

“Yeah, I heard her. Plus, as you may recall, this isn’t the first time.”

My voice might have gotten louder on that statement.

Darius’s fingers were long and warm, stroking my arm like he was petting a cat. “You want to come and hang out in my room?”

“No, I want to hang out in *my* room. I’ve had a really long day—” *Month, year, life, whatever.* “—and this sucks!”

“I know,” he said soothingly. “Why don’t you drop your books in here and let me get you a drink? I’ve got Amazon Prime. You can pick anything to watch.”

Normally I would have jumped on an invite to hang out with Darius like that, just the two of us. But all I could think about was getting past that door. “Is Arun around? Does he have office hours?”

“You sure you don’t want to just chill for a bit first—”

“No, I want her to let me in!”

My voice had gotten even louder. Down the hall, I saw a head poke out from someone’s room, tilting curiously. Somewhere in a distant part of my mind, I cringed at myself.

Darius was looking at me, and I knew I should be playing it cool in front of him, like *Haha, here she is doing it again, crazy roommate. What's new on Prime anyway?*

I was sure he could tell I was fighting back tears, like a total loser. But if I were forced to be honest, this was bigger than just getting locked out.

And then of course, *of course*, Arun chose that moment to come out of his room. He spotted Darius's hand on my elbow and seemed to pause. Then he caught sight of my face and continued toward us. "What's wrong, Ava?"

His concerned expression made my eyes blur again threateningly, but I took a breath and tried to speak calmly. *Tried* being the operative word. "I can't get into my room." I gestured at the door.

"Mimi," Darius said in a meaningful tone, and Arun's eyebrows shot up, as if he comprehended right away.

Had Darius said something to him after that first Friday? Did they think I was ridiculous, making all this noise around something that apparently happened to everyone? Did they think I was a child, tattling on a mean girl?

My gaze fell on the dry erase board with the vast expanse of clear space beneath my name. Mimi hadn't even left a note for me, not any of the times she'd done this.

Without realizing I was going to, I pounded my fist on the door. "I'm not waiting half an hour. You've got five minutes!"

"Hey, let's go and have a chat," Arun said.

"I'd rather stay here until I can go into *my own room*."

"It's not only your room," he said reasonably.

"It's not only hers either!"

Voices murmured from the other side of the door, and then Mimi called through it. "You know we can hear everything you're saying, Ava?"

"Good!" I snapped. "That's the point."

“Come on,” Arun said. He cupped my left elbow—Darius was still lightly holding my right—and started to guide me away. “Mimi, this is Arun. Please join us in my room as soon as possible.”

I heard her scoff, but between Arun and Darius I didn’t have much choice about staying. I still had the presence of mind to realize they just wanted to help, and fighting them would not be a good look. So I went along.

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Juniors and seniors are automatically entitled to single rooms. RAs are also entitled to singles, but most RAs are juniors or seniors anyway. I'd heard you could become one as a sophomore if your application's really outstanding. Arun, of course, was an RA as a sophomore last year.

I'd only been in Arun's room a couple of times since school started. It had the same shape and size as other singles on Milner 2nd, except that his bed was pushed against the wall below the window, leaving plenty of floor space for a plush seafoam green rug and half a dozen brightly patterned throw pillows. He'd brought in his own bookcase, carved from real wood instead of the cheap particle board of the Lockridge dorms, crammed with novels and lit crit publications. I guessed that made sense for a Literature major. Being a single room, it was smaller than the double Mimi and I shared, but much more welcoming. It was cozy and homey and unified, instead of rigidly divided halfway between two different styles. He'd even added a little potted plant on the windowsill.

As our RA, Arun is supposed to be approachable and comforting, and he probably does seem that way to everyone else. But I could never fully relax around him. I always worried what he was really thinking behind that kind, handsome face—specifically, what he really thought of me.

For that matter, I couldn't relax around Darius either, although with him I just never felt cool enough. He's so friendly and flirty, like the hot quarterback who's actually a good guy capable of falling in love with the shy nerdy girl heroine way before the movie ends.

Only I'm not the shy nerdy girl. I'm the poor, troubled, unfriendly girl who has no business being around any good guy, much less two of them.

Arun and Darius settled on the rug, cross-legged, looking up at me expectantly. Sighing inwardly, I sat down as well, leaning my bookbag against Arun's desk.

"I don't need a talk," I said. "I can just go chill in the lounge."

"Maybe we want to hang out with you," Arun said mildly.

"Yeah, right," I muttered. "Look, I'm sorry for causing drama. It's really not a big deal. I was just, you know, in a bad mood."

"You don't have anything to apologize for. Your room is supposed to be a safe space. You're entitled to want access to it."

I listened carefully, like I always did when Arun spoke. "But?"

"But it's a shared space. Now, one of the reasons I asked Mimi to come here is so we can discuss ways to properly communicate about sharing. But before we do that, I wanted to get your perspective."

Well, *I* wanted to melt into his chocolate eyes and give him all the perspective he could handle. But Darius's presence made me hesitate. Why was he even here? RA discussions were supposed to be private.

Then again, besides Arun he'd been the only one on the entire hall to notice the brewing conflict.

I realized they were waiting for me to speak. "I know you're going to tell us to compromise," I said. "But that's not my problem."

Arun's gaze sharpened. "So what is the problem?"

"Nothing. I got pissed off momentarily, but I'm over it now."

"Hey, speak your piece," Darius said. "It's not good to bottle shit up."

"You thought that was me bottling things up out there?"

He grinned. “Nah, you were holding your own. But if you’ve got anything more to vent, we’re here for you. We’re on your side.”

His grin took root somewhere low in my belly, expanding into a warm bubble that seemed to crowd out the feelings of frustration and annoyance. It wasn’t a fix, but it was a balm.

I couldn’t stop a small smile from escaping onto my lips. “I don’t think Arun’s supposed to take sides.”

“He’s not supposed to *tell* anyone he takes sides. But he’s a dude of discernment.” Darius laughed when Arun thwapped him on the knee.

Arun’s lips were pursed like he was trying to hide a smile of his own, like he was sharing an inside joke. Darius was right—it made him seem like we were on the same team. Then he got serious. “How often have you been getting locked out?” he asked.

I told him about the three Fridays, how Mimi just sprang them on me, and how it always seemed to happen at the worst time. I kept it brief, self-conscious about dragging it out into some long story.

The real story of me was something I had zero wish to tell anyone.

A line appeared between Arun’s eyebrows, which arched above his eyes in an elegant sweep my fingers itched to trace. “It sounds like you’ve done your best to defuse tensions before this point. That’s good.”

“And that’s more than I would’ve done after the second time,” Darius added. “Rude is rude.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling my ears burn. Luckily my skin tone doesn’t show blushing too well. At least, I hoped that was still true.

“But you know,” Darius continued, “I’m usually around on Fridays at this time. My door’s always open to you.”

“Mine too,” Arun said firmly. “Although hopefully this won’t be an issue going forward.”

Mimi chose that moment to appear in the doorway. Her hair was looking frazzled again, and her eyes flashed dangerously.

“Come on in,” Arun told her, gesturing to a pillow on his other side.

“I’mma get back to coding,” Darius said. He gave me another light stroke on my arm before unfolding his big frame and disappearing into the hall, shutting the door behind him. Thankfully, some of the warmth he’d given me still lingered after he was gone.



Arun waited to speak until Mimi had finished sitting and crossing her arms and tossing her hair. “Thanks to both of you for being willing to talk,” he began. “I’m not here to do any lecturing. I’m just hoping instead to facilitate a dialogue about what’s been happening.”

God, that sounded so formal. At the Asian student organization meetings I’d attended, they tried to *facilitate dialogue* about identity politics and social justice. This on the other hand was just petty bullshit.

Mimi said what I was thinking. “We don’t need a dialogue. Ava needs to stop clutching her pearls about me having some fun.”

Okay, not quite what I was thinking. “Excuse me?”

She leaned toward me, clearly furious. “You’re always in the room! Or if you aren’t, then you want to be! Maybe you don’t have a life, but I do. Is it too much to ask that I get the room to myself for one freaking hour a week?”

A stab of pain punctured the warm balloon Darius had left. “I’m not keeping you from using the room! All I want is some *notice*.”

“It’s Friday night! It’s the weekend! That should be notice enough. But no, you want to *sleep* on Friday nights,” she

scoffed. “Weirdo behavior.”

Arun interrupted. “Keep it civil and nonjudgmental, please. We need to get to a solution that works for both of you.”

“I’ll move out and you can have the goddamn room *every* night,” I spat. My face had to be visibly burning now, I felt so heated. “Problem solved.”

Arun waved a hand in a placating gesture. “That’s a last resort, and not something the school would allow without a demonstrated special need.”

“This *is* a special need.”

“Fine, move out. That’s my issue solved,” Mimi hissed. “But you should think about working on all of yours.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you need to stop being such a slut-shaming prude. Like, talk about judgmental. How do you even live in the world?”

“The fuck? I never slut-shamed you. You’re the one who couldn’t even tell me you wanted privacy. If I didn’t know what you wanted or what it was for, how exactly did I judge you? Make it make sense.”

“Guys—” Arun interjected, but Mimi spoke over him.

“Oh, you’re gonna act all innocent and pure like you never had a clue. Please. A nun could have figured this out.”

“I shouldn’t have had to figure anything out to begin with! How are you not getting that? Act like an adult and use your words, Mimi.”

She turned indignantly to Arun, waving her hand at me. “Listen to how she talks! She’s like this 24/7. Like, I have a mother already, I don’t need another one sleeping three feet away.”

“How could anyone forget about your mom?” Bitterness gave me an extra vicious edge. “Every day you spend two hours on the phone with her yakking about yourself.”

“Okay,” Arun said, standing. “Let’s pause here and try another direction. You aren’t actually listening to each other.” He held up a hand again as Mimi tried to speak. “I’m not talking about the words you’re using. I’m talking about perspective. You’re not hearing where each of you is coming from.”

He’d tried to ask me about my perspective when we first came in with Darius, but I hadn’t been willing to share. I was even less willing to share now, with Mimi staring daggers and jumping on everything I said. But Arun turned to me, his eyes asking me to try, *expecting* me to try.

“You’re both mad, I get that,” he went on. “The important thing to remember is that sometimes words are just the surface. Sometimes words run away with us, or maybe someone isn’t as good at expressing themselves as someone else might be. It can take a little work to get to the truth of the moment. But I don’t believe either of you moved into the room with the intention to be hurtful, right?”

Mimi sniffed. “*I don’t.*”

I suppressed a sigh. “Me neither.”

“Well, good. That’s a good foundation for a relationship. Neither of you truly wants to be hurtful. But still, you’re both hurt. It wasn’t on purpose, but it’s happened. So maybe it would help to clear the air around that hurt by acknowledging both of your feelings. Then you can start approaching each other in good faith.”

I didn’t know what the hell Mimi had to feel hurt about. But Arun kept looking at me. I knew what he wanted me to say. He was practically reading from the minority student group manuals.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” I told Mimi. It was a total lie, but I looked her straight in the face and did my best to sell it.

And of course she sniffed again.

Arun raised an eyebrow at her. “Thank you, Ava. It takes a lot of strength to apologize, especially when you didn’t mean

to be hurtful. But it's brave to admit when your actions were hurtful nevertheless."

Mimi got the point. "I'm sorry. Okay?"

Arun turned back to me, angled so that Mimi couldn't see the side of his face, and dropped me a wink.

"All right," I said, "I'm listening if you want to talk, Mimi."

Arun sat back down again.

She looked at me suspiciously. "I just feel like we're not compatible. We bother each other."

That was surprising. I'd always felt she was oblivious to me. "We don't have to be friends to share a room. We just have to be considerate. And like, *talk* to each other about locking the door."

"You're not very approachable, though."

I was painfully aware of Arun between us, taking everything in. "What makes me not approachable?"

"I don't know, it's just this thing you give off. Like, *don't bother me*. You never talk about yourself. You barely ask about anyone's day or their life or whatever. It's like you're walking around inside a glass box."

"That's not true at all," I said automatically.

"How does that affect your ability to room together?" Arun asked her.

"I mean, I'm trying to explain my perspective. That's what you wanted, right?"

"It's fine," I said. "I'm listening. Maybe it feels true to her."

Mimi huffed a breath. "I know it's not just me. But *if* you're like this because you disagree with my sex life or whatever, then you can just get over yourself."

"For the last time, that's not the issue!"

"Well, it's something! All I know is, you *do* have some kind of issue, and it makes living with you completely suffocating."

It was like she'd punched me in the gut, and immediately after that, in the face. I wanted to hit her back, to return the damage with interest. But I was curled up in a corner of the ring, listening to the countdown.

"I'm sorry I made you feel that way," I heard myself say. "It wasn't my intention."

"Ava," Arun said gently, "what do you want to say to Mimi?"

"She can have the room every Friday," I said. "And during the day I'll just stay on campus. Every day. I won't come back until ten p.m."

"Oh, don't try and make me the bad guy," Mimi snapped.

"That doesn't sound workable even as a temporary bandage," Arun began.

"I'll make it work," I said. And I got up and yanked the door open.

"Ava, wait—"

"Well, what did you expect from someone with a stick that far up her ass?" I heard Mimi say contemptuously as I rushed down the hall.

3

COLIN

There's a bell tower in the central part of campus with an open-air space right under the bell. The tower is perched on a small rise of land overlooking a lower courtyard area. The whole structure is made of stone, with a staircase that curls down through the foundation, connecting the open-air space to the courtyard. If you're on the stairs at the top of the hour when the bell rings, you can feel the reverberations through your whole body.

The space under the bell is a favorite spot for musicians to jam because the acoustics are so good. And because, let's face it, musicians can be attention whores, and a spot like that is a great place to gather an audience. I've looked for attention there a few times over the years, doing a little of what my buddy Darius calls finger-dancing on the guitar.

Or at least, I used to.

Friday evening I found myself in serious need of putting the books down, so I sat in the stairwell of the tower to chill. The Lockridge Tunesetters had commandeered the open space for a practice session, just out of sight of where I'd perched on the steps, and I listened to them warming up. They're a good little a cappella group, about ten guys and girls, and they'd just chosen a couple of first-years to join the ranks.

The sun was sliding toward the horizon, but it was still plenty light out. People were hanging out all over the campus grounds, welcoming the weekend. I thought about texting Darius to see if he wanted to grab dinner at the dining hall, or maybe head into DC for something real.

The Tunesetters finished doing their scales and arpeggios. There was a pause, I guess while they talked about what song to do, followed by the sound of the tuner. Then they launched into some Ben Folds Five—a sad one, “Brick.”

Their voices bounced off the stone walls of the bell tower and washed over me in the stairwell. A soloist started the first verse, a semitone up from the original, and I smiled. He had a clear, ringing sound, perfect for the matter-of-fact melancholy of the song. And the slight echo produced by the tower gave me the shivers. Dinner could wait.

In the middle of the first chorus, I heard someone coming up the steps below me. I glanced toward the sound, and my breath caught.

Probably the word *striking* was the best way to describe her. She looked Asian, with wavy dark hair landing lightly on her shoulders. Her eyes were heavy lidded in a sexy, sleepy way, setting off high cheekbones and a delicate jawline, and full lips that looked made for kissing.

She looked familiar, but Lockridge isn't a big school, so it was possible we'd crossed paths before. Although why I wouldn't have tried to catch her name—and preferably more—was a mystery.

She saw me a second after I saw her, and halted her climb with her hand on the curved stone wall. "Excuse me," she said, pitching her voice lower than the singing. "I was following the music. Do you know what it is?"

Because my mother didn't raise an idiot, I slid over on the step and gestured for her to sit next to me. "It's the Tunesetters practicing," I whispered.

"Who are the Tunesetters?" she whispered back.

"The main a cappella group on campus. They win prizes and stuff."

"Like *Pitch Perfect*?"

"Not that flashy, but yeah." I grinned at her.

She sat gingerly on the step just above mine, leaving a good few feet between us as well. She was wearing black Converse sneakers, dark blue skinny jeans, and a red top with a wide neck that set off her skin—a golden brown several shades darker than mine.

We sat across from each other, leaning against the walls on either side of the stairwell, and listened as the song built. The bulk of the singers laid down the rhythmic heartbeat in the background while the soloist's tenor voice soared into the heights of the tower, taking us along on the song's lonely journey.

I snuck glances at the girl. The sun had sunk low enough to cast light into the upper part of the stairwell where we were, and half of her was bathed in radiance while the other half was in shadow. It was like a scene from a movie. I wanted to capture it in a photograph, but that probably wouldn't have gone down well. So I just tried to memorize the sight of her in my own mind, the fragile feel of this passing moment with a mysterious stranger.

The song finished softly, drifting into the evening air. Scattered applause rose from the slope of the hill, I supposed from people spectating.

"That was amazing," the girl said.

"They're the best," I confirmed.

"The lyrics, though...God, that was wrenching."

"Yeah. Apparently the guy who wrote the song, it was actually about him and his high school girlfriend in real life."

"I believe it. It sounded like real life."

When she didn't add anything more, I said, "I'm Colin Kim, by the way."

"Oh, hi. Um, I'm Ava."

"Ava what?" I gave her what I hoped came off as a winning smile.

"Ava Le."

She pronounced her last name somewhere between *Lay* and *Lee*, a familiar sound. "Vietnamese?"

She nodded. "On my dad's side. Chinese on my mom's."

"Cool. My good friend from back home is Vietnamese and he has the same last name. Where's *Ava* from?"

“Oh, my dad really liked the actress. Ava Gardner. He had like two old Hollywood movies he watched over and over again as a kid, and she was in one of them. He liked that she was from North Carolina like us.”

“Where in North Carolina?”

“Near Charlotte.” But her eyes turned distant, and I could tell she was looking to change the subject. “Um, how about you? Where’s home for you and your Vietnamese friend?”

“Pennsylvania. Just outside of Philly. It’s maybe two, two and a half hours driving from here. Where do you live now? Dorm-wise, I mean.”

“Milner 2nd.”

“Darius’s hall?” Maybe that was where I’d seen her. I’d been over to Darius’s room a few times to hang out.

“Yeah, I live right across from him, actually.”

I racked my brain for sightings of Ava, but couldn’t recall any. “Is your roommate the redhead?”

She scowled. “That’s her.”

“Not getting along?”

“Understatement.” Again, she fell silent instead of elaborating.

“So you’re a first-year?” When she nodded, I offered, “The first semester is hard. Everything’s just coming at you, all these classes and having to live with a stranger and being away from home. It takes a minute to get your feet under you.”

“Being away from home is why I came here.” Ava shrugged.

I waited, unsuccessfully, for her to continue. “Well, I hear that. Getting out of my house was like...” I searched for the right analogy. “Not like escaping prison or anything that dramatic, but just—liberating. I’m their only son, so they can be kinda intense. That’s on top of the whole Asian parents thing.” I paused. “Not to mention grandparents.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t really my situation.” She spoke so softly, and the Tunesetters had started up with a new song—continuing the morose mood with Miley Cyrus’s “Slide Away”—that I almost couldn’t hear her.

“Just saying, I can maybe relate a little. I couldn’t wait to get here. Be my own person. Figure out my future. But that first semester knocked me on my ass. I honestly didn’t think too highly of this place until I was a sophomore.”

I thought I was probably babbling a little. I don’t normally get intimidated by beautiful women—it’s never been about appearance, for me—but Ava had all that plus a huge hit of sheer charisma. If she were in a crowded room, my gaze would be drawn to her immediately, and would stay there.

All Darius had told me about the dating prospects on his hall was that he didn’t want to rush into anything, given how badly things fell apart with Jenn last year. But with someone like Ava living so close, he was either making moves already or there was a strong reason not to. That intrigued me.

Or maybe he hadn’t mentioned her because he wanted to keep her all to himself. If that was the case, then it was *really* intriguing.

“I should be a sophomore now, actually,” Ava said.

“Really? How so?”

“I deferred entry for a year.”

I understood right away that she hadn’t done that for anything fun like traveling the world or finding herself or whatever. So I didn’t ask her about it. But guiltily, I was glad to hear she wasn’t fresh out of high school. Any time spent outside the jungle makes a difference.

“So, um, what year are you?” Ava asked. I realized it was only the second thing she’d asked me so far.

“Junior. Same as Darius.”

“And what are you majoring in?”

I was starting to hear something a little off in how she spoke. It was normal enough small talk on the surface, but

there was a stiff, almost tensed quality to it—like she was a cat perched on a fence, ready to bolt if someone approached too quickly. I wondered if she'd relax after we talked more, and what she'd be like if so. The wide neckline of her shirt drew attention to her delicate collarbones, the graceful column of her throat. I pictured her with her head thrown back, laughing. Or maybe in ecstasy. My mouth went dry, and I had to shake myself out of the vision to answer her question.

“Biology. My parents want me to go to med school.”

“Do *you* want to go?”

“That’s the \$250,000 question.” In reply to her curious look, I explained, “Average tuition for med school. I like Bio, but I’m not sure what kind of doctor I’d even want to be.” *Or a doctor at all.* “You have any idea what you want to major in yet?”

She shrugged. “Ideas, yeah. But are they practical? I don’t know.”

“That’s what you’ve got the next couple of years for. Don’t rush into anything. Figure out what you like, what you’re drawn to, what you enjoy. Life’s too short not to like what you do.” That was Seth talking through me—my closest friend at Lockridge besides Darius, and the third side of our oddly tangled triangle. I could imagine him hearing what I’d just said and scoffing incredulously. *Listen to this dude tryin’ to big-talk a girl. Try takin’ your own advice.*

“You’re right about that.” Ava interrupted my thoughts. “Life *is* too short.”

“Sorry,” I said, feeling sheepish. “I’m in total condescending older student mode. And I do this thing where I try to tell people what *I’d* want to hear. So I end up lecturing and it’s not a good look.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re not the only one lecturing me today. But I didn’t mind this one.” Her smile looked a little watery, her lower lip trembling, but maybe it was a trick of the lengthening shadows.

“Hey,” I said on impulse, “it must be seven o’clock by now. Do you want to go to dinner? We could go off-campus somewhere.”

Ava clearly hesitated, and I braced myself for a rejection. Every line of her body seemed to telegraph her discomfort.

You got no chill, Colin, Seth said in my head. Couldn’t you see how skittish she is?

Then she seemed to steel herself. “Off-campus where?”

“Anywhere,” I said magnanimously. “If you don’t mind me driving my truck. And walking a bit to where I parked it.”

“Okay.” She nodded once, as if to herself. “You pick the place. I haven’t been off-campus much.” I could have sworn she smiled again, but it was so fleeting that maybe it really was the shadows. “I’m expecting to be impressed with your best, Doctor Kim.”

She’d remembered my name; that small thing warmed me despite the disappearing sunlight. I stood, thought about offering her a hand, then thought better of it and gave her space as she got to her feet. “I aim to please.”

4

AVA

Aside from instant noodles, I've never had Japanese food before, so I went along with Colin's suggestion of a sushi restaurant. "This one will be a little more authentic than most places," he explained. We had to take off our shoes before following a kimono-clad waitress to our table, which was set low down near to the floor. I thought we'd have to sit cross-legged, but it turned out there was a recessed cut-out underneath the table for our legs and feet.

The waitress gave us small towels, heated and damp, to wipe our hands. I followed Colin's lead on that.

Then I looked at the menu and my eyes bugged out at the prices. "Colin," I said urgently. "This is a little out of my range."

"Don't worry about it. It's on me, since I chose the venue."

I'd been worried that he would expect this to be a date. I didn't want this to be a date. At least, not *that* kind of a date. "You shouldn't pay for me," I protested. "We can just go get burgers or something."

"I'm in the mood for sushi, though." Colin's eyes twinkled. "Come on, you'll love it."

"I'm serious. We haven't ordered anything yet. Although we did use these towels, so let me leave a tip for the waitress and we can—"

And then, too late, I realized that I'd rushed out of Arun's room without my bookbag. Which had my wallet in it.

"Seriously, it's not a problem," Colin said, oblivious to my sudden distress. "And in case you're thinking I'm going to expect something in exchange, all I ask is that you don't tell my Korean grandmother I took you to a Japanese place over a Korean one."

"Colin—"

“I mean it. That’s borderline blackmail material. But next time if you want to pay, I’ll consider it.”

Next time. He said it so confidently.

I couldn’t help being seduced—a little—by his infectious smile. When I first saw him in the bell tower, I was struck speechless. He looked like he’d stepped straight out of a K-drama, with perfect chiseled features, smooth skin, and glossy black hair. He towered over me at six feet, with wide shoulders, muscular arms, and a flat stomach that his T-shirt clung to in a way that was, basically, porn. I didn’t know what he was doing in college when his looks should be making him millions of dollars somewhere, but I did know it would be the height of dumbassery to pass up the chance to sit across from him for an evening.

Not that I meant for our relationship to go *beyond* an evening. He was so cavalier about the cost of dinner. I’d known people who were that way about money, so generous about bringing me into their world like I had a right to belong in it. I’d learned my lesson about that.

Or maybe you could try not to assume the worst of someone you literally just met.

“Fine,” I relented. I didn’t mention the fact that I physically *couldn’t* pay even if I wanted to. “But do you mind ordering? That way I might not feel too guilty about pillaging your wallet. Plus I wouldn’t know what to get anyway.”

“You got it.”

He called all the items by their Japanese names, which was impressive. Then the waitress went to put in our order and we just had to wait, sipping hot green tea from beautiful painted cups.

We’d stayed largely quiet on the drive over, which had taken about ten minutes. Just the right amount to not feel awkward about the silence—or rather, my inability to fill the silence with small talk or whatever. But now there was nothing to do but stare at each other, or alternatively, stare at everything *but* each other.

I chose the latter.

I supposed I was still shaken up from the confrontation with Mimi. I didn't want to think about it, but the more I tried not to, the more her words slithered through my mind like venomous snakes. *How do you even live in the world?* she'd sneered, so incredulous about me, about everything I couldn't help being.

Her words choked out all of mine, leaving this strangled dead space between Colin and me. Desperately, I wondered how long our food would take and how quickly I could bolt it down.

Medical school, I remembered suddenly. Colin was preparing for medical school. So he clearly had smarts on top of the visuals. He must be regretting inviting such a dull, conversation-less lump out to dinner.

The waitress saved me from madness by bringing a couple of small bowls of cloudy soup. I recognized tofu and green onions floating in it, but there were other dark green bits that I didn't know.

"Miso soup," Colin explained. "It's very soothing."

I dove in. I'm not a picky eater at all—it's difficult to be picky with Vietnamese *and* Chinese in my background—and I do love trying new things. I'd always wondered about Japanese food, but just never had the chance in my tiny hometown.

The miso was surprisingly light, given the odd cloudiness, with an interesting salty flavor. "Delicious," I said, and proceeded to gulp it down.

Colin watched me, grinning. "Way better than the dining hall, huh?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

I'd accepted his invitation to dinner for no reason I could think of, other than that I wanted to be *away*. I'd been living on campus all this time and never strayed outside its borders. Everything I could possibly need was available in half a square mile of land: the dining hall where my meal plan

covered breakfast, lunch and dinner; the bookstore which carried toiletries and snacks and even clothes; the dorm where I retreated to at the end of every day. But listening to Colin talk about how difficult his first year was, I'd suddenly felt overwhelming claustrophobia, like that half a square mile was shrinking in around me.

Nothing had ever prevented me from going off-campus. I just...hadn't. Colin's invitation was like offering his hand to where I crouched in a dark hole, like him pulling me up to fresh air and wide-open pastures.

"I'm sorry I'm not, um..." I faltered. "I'm not feeling really chatty at the moment. It's not because of you. You're... perfect." God, had I really said that out loud? I rushed to cover it. "I just had a bad day."

He gave me a light shrug. "I guess I could sort of tell. Don't worry about it. All I care about is that I'm not making your day worse."

Yeah, he was perfect. "Trust me, this dinner is already turning it around."

The waitress's kimono rustled as she knelt down to distribute our sushi. It looked like art, every piece delicately assembled and arranged, with so many colors that complemented and harmonized. Colin showed me how to break the chopsticks apart, mix wasabi with soy sauce, and then dip the sushi. I tried one with and without the dip—both tasted lovely, light and fresh.

"We don't have anything like this in Juniper," I found myself saying. "We've got a lot of barbecue and a little bit of fast food. If you want ethnic, we've got a Chinese buffet—but we never went because my mother hated the owners and was snobby about the food. For anything remotely authentic, drive to Charlotte."

"Damn, how did your parents survive?"

"They put a lot of miles on the car."

Colin laughed.

“I didn’t think anyone had ever heard of my town, but Darius’s grandmother lives right outside it.”

“Yeah, she’s got an old farmstead that’s been in their family for years. It’s beautiful.”

Surprised, I said, “You’ve been there? Then you’ve been to Juniper, too.”

“I went for Thanksgiving last year. We didn’t go into town though, so I guess I missed a chance to run into you there.”

I glanced away from the sparkle in his eyes. “Still—small world. I thought I was leaving Juniper behind totally, coming here for school. But I keep getting reminded.”

“I think it’s like that for anyone who leaves home. Especially when you’re still newly out. Your mind is constantly comparing. Even when all you see is differences, even that keeps home in your thoughts.”

What if I honestly haven’t been comparing? What if I really just wanted to leave it all behind?

Colin must have seen something in my face. “Here, try this,” he said. “You’re okay with spicy, right? Spicy tuna is a staple.”

“Spicy’s great.” Quickly, I snared a piece with my chopsticks and shoved it into my mouth, just so I could use the excuse of chewing to let him do the talking.



As we drove back to Lockridge, I felt the claustrophobia closing in again, like storm clouds gathering overhead. Mimi’s voice slithered through my mind, so contemptuous. And Arun sitting between us, hearing all of it.

You thought he’d be on your side? My inner voice dripped with poison. Not after what she had to say.

The area immediately around campus is all tree-lined hilly roads. Colin guided the truck smoothly along the gentle slopes

and curves. It was one of those big gas guzzlers that required thigh muscles to climb into, but it was fancy inside, with chrome trimmings and leather seats. He had turned the radio on, and some sad indie singer/songwriter was crooning away in the dark. I thought of the song we'd listened to in the bell tower, the lyrics telling the story of a couple who had to make a terrible choice, and now they were each drowning alone and apart.

I saw Jodie's tear-stained face. *The worst part of this*, she'd said, *is that I really need my best friend right now. And I bet you do, too.*

I pushed the memory of her away.

"I can walk from here," I said, as Colin passed the entrance to the parking lot, apparently ready to navigate up the narrow campus lanes toward the dorms.

"It's fine," he said. "My dinner invitations include door-to-door service."

But when we turned onto the lane that led to Milner, we could see that it was blocked further up by a couple of campus police cars. Their lights flashed, illuminating the figures of uniformed officers and students crowding the lane. Most of the students seemed to be rubbernecking something, but a few had broken off from the pack to head in different directions.

Colin powered down his window as one of the students drew near. "Hey Seth, what's going on?"

"Colin, that you?" A male voice, with a twangy Southern accent, wafted through the window.

"Yeah, what's happening?"

"Campus cops busted some under 21s at a Milner party."

"Damn, anyone we know?"

"I don't know the poor kids myself, but they'll probably just get a slap on the wrist. It's the suppliers gonna be in the shit. Heard it's their third violation."

"Not Darius?"

“Nah, man, luckily he didn’t want to party tonight. We were just playing some GTA when we heard all the shit going down. I swear he’s gotta sixth sense for this kinda thing.”

“He really does.”

“Anyway, it’s kinda noisy around here now so I figured I’d call it a night.”

I leaned toward the window. “What about Arun?”

The guy—Seth, Colin had called him—seemed to notice me finally. “He-ey, sorry, didn’t mean to be rude. Couldn’t see you in the dark.”

“This is Ava Le,” Colin said. “She lives across from Darius.”

Seth whistled low. “Now, why did Darius never bother to introduce us before, Ava? I’m Seth Gallant.”

I also couldn’t see him too clearly in the darkness, but the flashing cop lights at least revealed that he was a tall white guy, with a shock of wavy hair that fell past his ears. His accent wasn’t quite the same as back home, but it was close kin, low-slung and warmly familiar.

“He never introduced us, either,” Colin said. He sounded amused. “So is Arun okay?”

I was glad he asked again for me. Seth nodded. “Most likely. It ain’t a good look for any of the Milner RAs that this happened in their dorm, but Arun’s a golden boy. My educated guess is he’ll be all right.”

“Makes sense,” Colin said. “So the cops are blocking this route for the foreseeable future, I guess.”

“Yeah, you should try to back it up or you’ll get stuck here.”

“Thanks, bro. Hit me up tomorrow?”

“Yeah, will do. Nice to meet you, Ava.”

“Same,” I said awkwardly.

“Hope we’ll get to meet again soon. In fact, I’m gonna have to make that priority one. Don’t let me keep y’all down here,

Colin, it's gonna be swarming soon." Seth slapped the roof of the truck and headed on his way.

Colin shook his head. "Slick fucker. Sorry about the traffic jam, Ava, I'll try and go another way."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him, *Don't be silly. I'll just get out here.* But then I saw a flash of red hair in the crowd. I couldn't tell if it was Mimi, but just the possibility of having to walk past her—just the thought of having to be in the same room as her—clamped my lips shut.



Colin reversed down the lane, expertly navigating around people who didn't seem to care that a moving vehicle was coming toward them backwards in the dark. He turned down another lane between two dorms, until we emerged into an area behind the Science Center, illuminated by a few orange bulbs set at intervals on the wall of the building.

"Sorry," Colin said. "Do you mind if I check the campus map?"

"Yeah, no problem."

He put the truck in park and the interior was suddenly lit by the glow of his cell phone. It washed over his chiseled face, highlighting the line between his brows as he concentrated on the screen.

"I usually cut through here after Bio lab," I said, to fill the silence. "But walking, obviously. I never thought about how to drive it." Then I felt silly—he was trying to concentrate and I was probably distracting him and—

"Same," Colin replied. "I mean, as a Bio major I know this building inside and out, but all the parking around here is for faculty only."

He sounded cheerful enough, but again I felt the urge to say he didn't have to do all this, that I'd just get out and walk—and again I suppressed it. I didn't really think about what I was

doing. I just wasn't ready to say goodnight, to break the bubble that had been our unexpected evening together.

"Okay, I think I got it," Colin said. He thumbed the phone back to sleep and dropped it in the cup holder.

We were awash in darkness again, with just a faint tinge of orange coming from the Science Center. My heart jumped, suddenly alert and pounding.

"Maybe, um...maybe we can just sit here for a bit," I said. "Let the traffic die down, you know? I mean...unless you want to get back already."

"No, no rush on that," Colin said slowly. "We can chill as long as you want."

He turned the ignition off, but left the radio on, volume low. His window was still down from talking to his friend Seth, and a cool breeze wafted in, signaling the arrival of fall.

Again, he seemed sensitive to my mood, like he somehow realized I was on edge. He just sat patiently, his elbow propped on the door, gazing out through the windshield. The clock on the dashboard read 10:22 p.m. The last time I was out of my dorm room this late was when Darius had taken all of us first-years to that party. I'd kept earlier hours ever since.

But that's not you, I thought. That's never been you. You don't have to be like that.

I used to love wandering around the sleeping streets of Juniper. The town's so small and isolated, and everyone knows everyone. It was perfectly safe, even for a girl alone at three in the morning, although obviously more fun with company. It was kind of the only thing us kids had to do, our way of letting off steam and acting like we were grown. The sheriff's department would occasionally try to be important and give us warnings just because, but they didn't care enough to enforce curfews.

Lockridge should have been the same for me. It was safe and enclosed and the only crime that ever occurred was underage drinking—a top Juniper pastime as well.

But *I* wasn't the same. And I'd locked myself inside my room at every opportunity, just like Mimi said. So when she locked me out, I lost my place of refuge.

I didn't want to be someone who needed a place of refuge. I didn't want to be that sort of person anymore.

My heart was still hammering hard. "Colin?" I said, my voice soft in the dark.

"Hmm?"

He turned toward me, and that made it easier. I leaned across all of that expensive leather and pushed my face close to his, hovering over his lips.

I wondered if I was making a mistake. Not in trying, because I wanted to try, but in reading his intentions. He'd been a total gentleman from jump, and a lot of guys like that prefer to take it slow.

Fortunately for my thundering heartbeat, I didn't have to wonder long. We breathed each other's air for the briefest of moments. Then his hand touched my cheek gently, and he leaned in to brush his mouth against mine.

Immediate heat sparked from the contact. I opened my lips and touched my tongue against his. I supposed I could have gone slower on that as well, but I wasn't doing this for some kind of sweet exploratory romance. This wasn't about Colin. This was about me.

His hand slid into my hair, and I pushed in closer. On top of all the other perfection, Colin apparently could kiss like it was his job. His lips were firm and mobile, tasting a little like the green tea we'd had at the end of dinner. I opened my mouth wider, trying to take in more, but he kept it teasing and light, sipping from me rather than devouring. It started to drive me a little crazy. I just wanted *more*.

I palmed his shoulder, reveling in the feel of dense muscle beneath his shirt. Sliding my hand down his arm, I felt his bicep harden beneath the smoothness of his hot skin. He felt so strong, bigger and more masculine than anyone I'd ever experienced.

Don't think about what you've experienced.

Quickly, I nudged his arm toward me. He got the hint and encircled my waist, huffing a little as I pressed my breasts into his chest. I loved the sound, the evidence of my effect on him. The storage compartment between our seats dug into my hip, but I didn't care. Held close in his embrace, I felt weightless, like he could pick me up and carry me away forever.

We kissed like that for minutes, warmth uncoiling in my belly as Colin stroked his big hand up and down my back. His fingers caught on the hem of my shirt, brushing my bare skin, and I couldn't help letting a huff of my own escape.

Colin broke the kiss. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah." The urgency in my voice made me thankful we were in the dark. "More than okay."

He kissed my jaw, then my neck, his mouth setting fire to all my nerves. Impatiently, I nudged his arm again, this time steering his hand toward my front. He rested his palm on my ribcage, fingers wrapped around my side and his thumb caressing tantalizingly close to the cup of my bra.

"Keep going," I whispered.

"How far do you want to keep going?" he murmured against my ear. His teeth grazed the lobe, making me shiver deliciously.

"I don't want you to stop."

"We're in my truck."

"I don't care," I said, catching his mouth again. "Please don't stop."

He let out a long harsh breath. "Then I won't."

His hand left me, and I almost whimpered in protest, but then I felt him move his seat back. He grasped my bottom and helped me over the storage compartment until I straddled his lap. We both groaned as my weight settled against the hard length of his cock, still encased in his jeans.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” Colin muttered. His hands flexed on my ass, then dragged up my sides. His thumbs dipped below my waistband, and I instantly went slick.

I leaned down and kissed him again, rocking my hips forward. Even though I was on top, he took more of the lead this time. I loved the feel of his tongue sliding against mine, his soft grunts of arousal, the solid mass of his body beneath me.

Still, it wasn’t enough.

“Do you have a condom?” I asked against his lips.

He paused. “I do, actually. If you’re sure.”

“I really am. Are you?”

“I really, *really* am.” He dug in his pocket for his wallet. “I don’t, ah, usually keep one on me like this. But I was at a thing for pre-med students the other day, this talk about sexual health, and they were giving these out and…” Colin trailed off with a laugh. “TMI? Do I sound like a nerd?”

Actually, he sounded like me. The flash of insecurity took the edge off my nerves, and I kissed him again, grateful. “Not at all. I was just thinking, lucky us.”

I drew back a bit, crouching over him awkwardly as I unfastened my jeans and pushed them down, taking my panties as well. His erection jerked toward my hands as I worked his button and zipper. Gently, I pulled his jeans and underwear toward his knees.

“Damn,” he moaned, when I rubbed my hand along the naked skin of his cock. His hips bucked, and he seemed to get even harder.

I heard the rattle of the wrapper as he got the condom out. Then I took it from his fingers and rolled it on, reveling in the length and breadth of him.

“Wait a minute,” Colin said, as I got myself into position.

His hand whispered up my thigh and cupped me, capturing some of my wetness. With his other hand, he lowered the shoulders of my shirt and the straps of my bra. I helped him,

exposing my breasts to the air. I was conscious of the breeze still coming through the open window, of how we were just sitting in a paved lot behind the Science Center where anyone could see us.

Then his mouth covered my nipple just as his fingers circled my clit, and I gasped. The rest of the world disappeared.

My body surged toward him. A fresh burst of searing heat rushed south to where his hand—that future doctor’s hand—cast some kind of dark magic on me. My lips parted as I sucked in air, then let it break from my throat in a sound of unashamed pleasure.

Colin licked a trail from one nipple to the other, stopping for a brief kiss in the valley between my breasts and a murmured, “You are so *fucking* hot, Ava.”

I was ready, more than ready, but he kept me there, suspended above him as his mouth and fingers pushed me higher and higher. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d gotten myself off, and here was this perfect guy, singularly focused on it. All the longing for physical touch, which I’d ignored and repressed for months, was now wide awake and screaming for release. I surrendered completely.

Colin pursed his lips and suckled me, pressing my clit at the same time. I shattered. My body bowed, head tilted toward the truck’s ceiling, as waves of hot ecstasy poured through me.

He kept it up until I pulled away, shuddering a bit. “Beautiful,” he breathed.

“Your turn now,” I whispered, once I’d gathered my brain back together.

Usually I have to go slow with penetration, but he’d gotten me so slicked up that I had no problem sinking onto his cock. He hissed as I took him in, his hands scrabbling for purchase on my shoulders, my waist, my ass, almost frantic. “Fuck, so tight,” he gasped.

I didn’t think I’d be able to come a second time, but after a moment Colin got hold of himself. His left thumb flicked my clit while his right hand massaged my ass. Another burst of

pleasure. Then he leaned up and took the tip of my breast again with his mouth.

I cried out. I'm not loud at sex—I'm normally too self-conscious—but this was so full-on, so consuming. Out of pure instinct I thrust my hips forward, bracing my hands on the driver's seat.

"Yeah," Colin moaned against my nipple. "Fuck, Ava."

I loved how he kept saying my name.

As stimulated as I already was, it didn't take long to climb that peak again. This orgasm wasn't as intense, but it was almost better, because Colin was inside me, because of his generous focus and patience.

He waited until I pushed his hand away from my clit. Then he gripped my hips and thrust upward. "Still okay?"

"Yeah," I groaned. "Go on." I stroked his muscular arms, marveling at his strength as he held me in place and pumped into me. *I wish it was light enough for me to see all of you.*

Belatedly, I realized that in my post-orgasm haze I'd actually mumbled that out loud.

"Oh, God," Colin said, his voice breaking. He thrust harder, faster, all control lost, until finally, he wrapped his arms tight around me and muffled his shout in my chest. I felt his cock pulse and his thighs shake. His panting breaths washed down my torso.

A full, heavy moment passed as we collected ourselves. Then I slid off him and fished my jeans and panties up from the floor of his truck.

"That was amazing," Colin said. "I mean...damn."

I could only agree. I'd started this, but I hadn't expected it to be *like* this. I pulled on my clothes as cold reality crashed over my head. What the hell was I doing, hooking up with a total stranger? Actually, not even a stranger—someone who'd spent Thanksgiving with the guy across the hall. I cringed at the idea of running into Colin. Would he act polite? Flirty? Would he assume I wanted more from him, which would be

the case for any normal human being he'd fucked? Would I be completely awkward and unnatural no matter what? Was the earth round?

"How are you?" Colin asked, once we'd both finished dressing. "Can I...?"

"I'm good." My voice sounded too high-pitched. It was already starting. "Um, thank you."

"Uh, I wouldn't say you need to thank me."

I forced a laugh. "I know, just...this part is always weird."

"It doesn't have to be." He leaned over and kissed me, all sweet and playful again.

Which was exactly what I didn't want. "Look, I've kept you out late enough. I'm just going to walk back. I had a good time tonight." I hesitated. It made sense to thank him for dinner, but then, I'd already thanked him for sex. "Get home safe."

God, just get moving already.

I opened the door and hopped down out of the truck.

I heard his door open as well, but I didn't look back as I hurried to the footpath that led toward Milner, where Colin's truck couldn't go. I shot down the dark tunnel of trees, leaving him—and what we'd shared—behind.

“Yes, sir,” I said, “I think I can speak for all of us in saying that sounds like a good plan.”

“Excellent,” Dean Hoffman said, a bit scratchy on my phone’s speaker setting. “Please send the email out before you go to sleep tonight, and tell the relevant individuals to report to my office at nine-thirty Monday morning.”

“Will do. Thanks again.”

After we hung up, I looked around at the other Milner RAs. Their relieved expressions no doubt mirrored mine.

“Hoffman’s a good egg,” I told them. “He always wants what’s best for the students.”

“He’s still got a Board of Governors to report to,” said Cassidy, the RA for Milner 3rd. “Not to mention alumni donors.”

Jamie, the RA for Milner 1st, shook his head. “He was probably impressed that it took this long for a dorm party to get busted.”

“But why’d it have to be us?” Nathan griped. He’s the RA for Milner 4th and is perpetually sour, probably because he really hates the fact that Milner has no elevators. “We’re a mixed-year dorm. If the campus po-po really wanted to catch underage drinkers, why not stake out Tooler?” Tooler’s the first-year-only dorm. It has a reputation for being somewhat feral.

Cassidy winced. “Please never say *po-po* again.”

I sent her a weak grin, but this wasn’t really a time for levity. “Okay, guys. I think it’ll be faster if one person works on this email and then sends the draft around to everyone for any changes. I’m happy to take point.”

“I was hoping you’d volunteer,” Jamie said, with audible relief. “It’s always best to let the Lit major hold the pen.”

“Hey, now, we’ll be taking turns over the year. Especially since I doubt this’ll be the last time.”

The others groaned, then said thanks and headed off.

Everyone had for some reason decided to convene in my room for the phone call to Dean Hoffman. As the Assistant Dean in charge of student life, Hoffman is basically our boss. He’d already been informed by the cops about everything that went down at the party, and had been texting back and forth with us as well. But he’s the type who likes to hop on a conference call just to make sure everyone’s on the same page. He’d announced on the call that he expected us, as the Milner RAs, to send an email about the incident to the whole dorm, with the dual purpose of informing and guilt-tripping. He would no doubt fire off a campus-wide version of his own tomorrow.

I settled down with my laptop to draft the email from the RAs. Dean Hoffman wanted it to go out as soon as possible, and it was already approaching midnight.

Despite assuring the others that Dean Hoffman would take a moderate approach, I felt rattled. He would have been entirely within his rights to come down on all the RAs like the hammer of God. The Lockridge College Student Code of Conduct, although lenient and forgiving for first offenders, still makes it clear that decisions get made on a case-by-case basis. And RAs who are supposed to be supervising students are held to a higher standard than the students being supervised.

But Dean Hoffman had accepted our explanations that we’d had no idea the party was happening, and that in fact it was more of a private gathering of first-years in the Milner basement. Or more specifically, they’d started in the basement before spilling out onto the public path in front of the dorm, then engaging in a fun little game of smashing their liquor bottles on the pavement.

Apparently, our first-years meant to challenge the Tooler residents for the title of “Loudest and Most Obnoxious.”

All except one first-year.

As if thinking of Ava had summoned her, I heard a gentle knocking on my open door, and there she was.

For a moment, I couldn't find my voice. She looked beautiful, as usual, but her beauty had always seemed mysterious and remote, like a castle with the drawbridge pulled up. Now there was a new quality about her, as if the castle had unfurled bright banners and sounded trumpets from the ramparts. Her brown skin glowed, her eyes sparkled, and her hair was tousled.

"Hi," she said simply.

That woke me from my dazed staring. "Hey. Are you okay?"

"I'm all right. I just wanted to say...I'm sorry about before. Running out like that."

"No, *I'm* sorry. I did a crap job at facilitating. You deserved an equal chance to speak."

"It's fine. Really. You did your best trying to broker a peace deal and all. You just didn't realize you were dealing with nuclear weapons."

I studied her. She didn't seem to be saying it just to say it, but I still felt like I'd failed her. "We can try again if you want, maybe when things between you and Mimi have cooled off. Or you and I can talk, one-on-one. I'm always here for you, if you have any concerns or if you just need to vent."

I wondered if I was as transparent to Ava as I seemed to myself. I really did want to help her with Mimi—that was my job. And I hadn't said anything wrong in my offer to listen, exactly, but in truth I was on the edge. Because I knew what I really wanted.

Time. I wanted time with her. I wanted to get to know her, to talk about real things and not just her roommate troubles. I wanted to hear about where she came from, where she intended to go, how she'd decided on Lockridge, what she wanted after. I wanted to learn about the sadness that she guarded inside her castle, and why such a fascinating,

attractive girl was so unexpectedly alone. I wanted to be a reason she wasn't alone.

But it wasn't my job to act like Ava's therapist or counselor. Lockridge has a whole center with licensed professionals for that kind of thing. And truthfully, I didn't want to play those roles anyway. I just wanted to be her friend.

Be real. If you weren't her RA, you'd want to be a lot more than her friend.

She seemed to be studying me as well, or maybe just thinking about her answer to my offer. "Thanks. You know, I might take you up on it. Or I mean, if I find myself needing a place to go, and if you meant it when you said I could hang out here..."

"I meant it," I said firmly. "Any time. And you know, things *will* get better. I know it doesn't seem possible right now, but it's still early days." I hoped she could tell I wasn't just talking about her room situation. "Either way though, my door's always open to you."

She smiled, a fragile and rare thing, and I found myself smiling wordlessly, foolishly back at her.

"Um, so when I ran out earlier," she said, "I left my bookbag."

Surprised, I looked around. "Is that it?" I picked up the bookbag next to my desk, which I hadn't even noticed. It *had* been a busy evening, though.

"Yeah, thanks." She slung it onto her back, visibly bowing under its weight. "Is everything all right? I heard about the cops and the party."

"Mmm, it was kind of a mess." I hesitated. RAs are supposed to keep rule violations and disciplinary affairs confidential, but with half of Milner swarming around the scene this hadn't exactly been a private matter. I compromised: "You'll probably hear a lot more about it from people who were actually there."

"You weren't? I was worried you might get in trouble."

“No, I’m fine personally. But the Dean wasn’t best pleased, as you can probably imagine. I think all of Milner’s going to be on an unofficial probation for a while.”

“That sucks. It’s not fair for all of us to be punished because of a few assholes.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Something like this happens about two or three times a year. As long as you aren’t one of the ones caught red-handed, it’s all good.”

“This is the kind of advice RAs are supposed to give?” She smiled again. Did her lips look fuller? Redder?

“This is advice from the secret unwritten Code of Conduct which only our favorites get to learn about.”

“I’m one of your favorites?”

“I might have added you to the list. Don’t get excited, though. It’s a long list. Includes just about everyone on campus except first-years.”

This time she laughed outright. I’d never heard her laugh before. It was a small sound, like she was trying not to let it escape her, but it was actual music to my ears. After the scene with Mimi, I would never have expected Ava to be in a laughing mood just a few hours later. I wondered where she’d gone, and what she’d been doing.

“Well, I’m glad I made the very generous cut,” she replied. “Um, by the way. You said we’re supposed to notify you about whether we’re staying in the dorm for fall break?”

My heart sank for her. Fall break was the week after next, beginning with Indigenous Peoples’ Day. There would be no classes for the five weekdays, and no events or activities during the weekends on either side. The dorms and dining hall would stay open, but the majority of students usually left campus as soon as possible, whether for home or other travel. Come next Friday afternoon, Lockridge would be a ghost town.

“Right,” I said slowly. “As far as I know, you’ll be the only one on the hall.” God, that would be lonely for Ava, especially with it being her first semester. I’ve stayed on campus during a

few breaks when stuff was busy, and by the end I always wanted to cling to any person I could find. “Cassidy’s going to be the RA on duty for the dorm. She’ll just be one floor up if you need anything.”

Ava nodded. “Okay.”

“Do you need me to send you the dining hall’s schedule? You know hours will be reduced, right?” *Mother hen much, Arun?*

“I’ve got their website bookmarked. Anyway, I should get to sleep. Thanks for...I guess, everything.”

“Sure,” I said softly. “Good night.”

She gave me a little wave and disappeared around the door frame. It felt like the lights had dimmed.

I was glad that she’d come back, that my last sight of her today hadn’t been that horrible argument where she’d basically turned into a doormat. I knew she wasn’t really a doormat, of course, that she’d just said whatever Mimi wanted to hear so she could get the fuck out of there. But she’d seemed so brittle. Now I’d seen, hopefully, that she’d been able to hold herself together and brush it off.

“Don’t wait for her to come to you,” Darius had said, when he first warned me they weren’t getting along. “I’m pretty sure she’s not the type to do that.”

Darius would have been a much more effective RA—he’s the social butterfly extrovert, he’s got the emotional IQ, he can instantly make people comfortable enough to talk. But he’d told me all the responsibility wasn’t for him.

“It’s like I’m the good cop and you’re the bad cop,” he explained.

“RAs aren’t cops,” I said.

“Ah, you know what I’m saying. You’re the authority. The Boss.”

I didn’t know if that was how Ava saw me, but she did talk to Darius more. And ultimately he was right. I should have

actively checked in with her before the situation with Mimi boiled over. I shouldn't have left her alone in her castle.

So going forward, I vowed, I'd do better.

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6

AVA

It turned out that Mimi was one of the underage drinkers caught at the party. Sweet karmic justice.

Not that she told me about it. I'd gone to sleep pretty quickly after getting back to the room, luckily before she returned from what I later presumed was the campus cops' drunk tank. When I woke up the next morning, she was buried under her comforter, apparently sleeping herself.

I ran into Darius on my way back from the bathroom, and he relayed the news.

"Damn, couldn't have happened to a nicer person," I said. "Any chance they'll kick her out of school?"

He grinned, and one of his dimples winked hello. "Nah, the school admin kinda takes a *kids will be kids* approach about booze. They usually get a pretty chill punishment, then campus cops bury the paperwork and conveniently lose track of it right around graduation time."

"So I'm stuck with her."

"Probably. How'd it go with y'all and Arun?"

The sound of Arun's name brought back a flood of memories. My heartbeat quickened as I tried to figure out how to answer. *Oh, wonderful. I hooked up with your friend Colin in his truck. I can actually feel a slight ache in my thighs from that right now. But also, I dreamed about Arun bending me over his desk. And did I mention you were about to join in?*

Never scratch an itch, apparently. It just gets worse.

"It wasn't fun, but it worked out fine," I said. "It's not like we're going to be living together forever. It's what, seven more months? So I decided I just need to be cool about whatever happens."

"Can you do that?"

“Yeah.” I met his concerned gaze. “I’ll be okay. I don’t want all this BS, you know?”

“Well, for the record, I think that’s the right choice. Everyone’s an asshole their first semester, especially the ones sharing a room for the first time. Then things usually settle down.”

“Are you calling me an asshole?” I teased.

“Never. You’re always an exception for me.”

“So you’re calling me exceptional.”

“Absolutely.” He tweaked a lock of my hair, flashed his dimple again, and went on his way.

Flirting with Darius in the hall is not like me. It’s not the kind of person I am. He’s always so friendly and extroverted that I can’t help being friendly back—but I know there are limits to how far it can go.

Well, why not flirt? It doesn’t have to mean anything. And if it makes you feel good, then good.

I doubted it would ever go beyond mild flirting, though. Guys like Darius are too fun to tie down with baggage like mine.



Mimi was in an absolutely foul mood when she got up, and it was absolutely delicious. We pretended to ignore each other as we each got dressed on our respective sides of the room, but she made her stress obvious: shutting drawers a little too loudly, dropping her hairbrush, cursing under her breath. I allowed myself a few moments of schadenfreude—thanks to Intro to Psych for expanding my vocabulary—when she called her parents to report the news, packing my bookbag with the speed of a sloth as I eavesdropped on her sniffing and stuttering. But I left before she finished. I could admit that despite their evidently terrible parenting skills, her mom and dad’s response at least deserved some privacy.

I had an Econ paper to work on, so I headed to the campus library. I really love that place. It's the oldest building on campus, and although it's had a couple of extensions built on over the years, the core of it remains a majestic three-story construction of wood and stone and plaster dating back to the 1800s. The floorboards creak, the glass of the windows is warped, and the dusty smell of old books permeates the shelves. The ground floor's main area holds the circulation desk, a couple of rows of computers, and study tables. The upper floors have mezzanines overlooking the central space, with comfy sofas and chairs which are favored places to hang out.

As usual, though, I bypassed those and went to one of the private study nooks on the third floor, tucked away in a corner overlooking the bell tower. I unloaded my books on the desk and got my laptop running, but for a few minutes I found myself lost in the view. Had it really been just last night that I met Colin there?

Again, I wondered how he'd act if we ran into each other. Would he still be nice? Or would he show the true colors of a stereotypical guy congratulating himself on nailing a girl for the price of dinner?

I thought of how Mimi had accused me of slut-shaming her, a notion she'd pulled entirely out of her ass. When it comes to enthusiastically consenting adults where everyone involved is properly informed, I've never had a problem with anyone having sex. But last night was a first for me in a lot of ways. First one-night stand. First time initiating.

My mother comes from a conservative Cantonese family, and she'd tried halfheartedly to teach me all the old nuggets about purity and chastity that had been instilled in her. My dad's Vietnamese background made him even stricter, but he also never once broached the subject of sex. Neither of them were very happy about how serious I got about Matt, although ultimately we fell into an unofficial *don't ask, don't tell* kind of arrangement.

I was responsible—or at least, I thought I was. I didn't sleep with Matt until he said he loved me. We always used condoms.

We didn't even do it that often.

Then my dad got sick. And then last summer happened.

Until last night, I'd basically locked up my sex life. But even though I truly didn't care what other people did, maybe it had gotten to me a little, watching Mimi be so free, getting ass every Friday from a *friend* while I knocked forlornly on the door.

Going for Colin had shown me that maybe I could be on the other side of the door for once. He was only the second guy I've ever been with, and that alone ought to change everything. I'd thought Matt and I were forever, that I'd never want another guy. But apparently our love wasn't strong enough for forever. Now it had turned out that I was completely capable of having sex without being in love.

Not only that, it was better than anything Matt and I *ever* did.

It felt like maybe it was time to reevaluate my sex life. Maybe I could actually *have* a sex life. And if it could be that good without love, then maybe there was no need to bother with love. Love in all its drama and pain and ending.

I could be free, too.



I got half of my Econ paper done; it went okay. I have less than zero interest in being an economist, but it counts for course requirements. At least I'd chosen a good location for a study nook. In the next stack over I found a collection of scholarly papers on price discrimination and was able to mine some good quotes to cite.

When I started getting hungry for lunch, I packed up my stuff, then went to put the book back on the shelf. Standing there returning books from a cart was a tall guy with sandy, wavy hair. He looked up as I stepped into the row, and I found myself temporarily struck dumb. His eyes were amazing, a sparkling greenish-blue like a tropical sea straight out of a

travel Instagram. Even Barbie dolls would be jealous of such beautiful eyes.

Surprisingly, those eyes widened in recognition as soon as he saw me. “Well, hey there,” he said. “I guess us meeting again was just meant to be.”

I knew that voice. He was Colin and Darius’s friend from last night. I hadn’t gotten a good look at his face in the dark, but his accent was unmistakable. “Hi,” I breathed.

“Ava, right? I’m Seth. Let’s get properly introduced.”

He sauntered forward with a long-limbed lanky grace and extended a hand. I took it, and either he drew me in close or I drifted into his gravity, because suddenly I was right in his space, looking up at him with my head tilted back. He smelled like green grass. Then he smiled, and oh my God, Ken dolls had *nothing* on this guy. Like, he was far from picture perfect. His hair was probably too long, not to mention the stubble sparkling on his jaw, and I’d spotted some wear and tear on his jeans and sneakers. What he had instead was an outdoorsy, active kind of hotness. I could easily picture him covered in a sheen of sweat, squinting against the sun, probably after trekking miles on a mountain hike. Or wrangling horses. Or climbing out of a tent with a sexed-up woman tumbled in the sleeping bag behind him. Or—

“Well, it’s nice seeing you again,” Seth said, interrupting my reverie. His voice had a husky tint, burning through my body like dark liquor. “How’s your day going?”

“Um, I’ve just been working on a paper. How are you here? I mean, why are you here? I mean, *how* are you...?” Summoning all my strength of will, I forced myself to stop babbling.

He kindly ignored my floundering. “I’m working, actually. Doing some re-shelving, organizing, chasing away kids trying to use the reading rooms for hookup spots.”

“People really do that? In the *library*?”

“It’s the number one public fun spot on campus. I think it’s the challenge of trying to keep quiet that makes it hot.” He

smiled.

My mind immediately sent me back to Colin's truck and all the enthusiastic vocalizations we'd made. I wondered if it was possible to burn up in flames due to a combination of arousal and embarrassment.

And then I thought, *Why be embarrassed?* I had a good time with a hot guy last night. I'd just been thinking I was free to do that. So why not let myself actually feel free?

Because it's weird to chat up two of his friends the very next day, I argued with myself.

Well, we didn't make any commitments, I argued back. *And talking is harmless.*

But the way Seth was looking at me, clearly assessing and appreciating what he was seeing, sparked a risky buzz low in my belly. My ability to stay in the realm of harmless flirtation was suddenly an open question.

I realized I still hadn't replied to him. "Thanks for the insight," I said. "I'll have to remember to knock on doors before barging in anywhere here."

"You can slow down anyone else barging in by wedging a chair under the doorknob." Seth winked at me. "In case you ever find yourself needing privacy."

"I'll try and remember that, too." Although I hadn't given a shit about privacy last night. And maybe the possibility of getting caught, the idea that I was transgressing that particular standard of behavior, *had* added to the excitement.

I was learning new things about myself by the minute, apparently.

"So you leaving or staying?" Seth asked, nodding at my bookbag.

"Oh, uh, just leaving actually."

"That's a shame. I'm working here another few hours."

Impulsively, I said, "It's lunchtime though. Don't you have to eat?"

“I just started my shift. I ate right before. But hey, I get out at three. Still plenty of daylight then. Maybe you’ll be looking for a break from that paper?”

Was he asking to meet up? God, what was with all the hot guys flirting their way out of the woodwork lately? What celestial being had I pleased recently? I hoped my facial expression was cool, as I tried to say invitingly, “That does sound like a good deadline to aim for...”

“Well, how about I give you a call when I get off work and we’ll figure out something to do? Maybe even sync our dinnertimes by working up an appetite somehow?”

“I’m down.” *In fact, I’d be down for any method of working up an appetite you want to try.*

Just like that, I was giving him my number. He plugged it into his phone, then called me so that I’d have his. “All right, Ava. See you soon.”

“Okay, see you. Oh, um. I was using this book.” I made a show of putting the economics collection back where I’d found it. I didn’t want him to think I was one of those messy students making more work for him.

“Thank you.” He looked amused, but in a way that made me feel included in the joke.

I damn near floated all the way out of the library.



Seth sent a text around two in the afternoon: **Interested in walking a 2 mile trail? Mostly level ground.**

So I’d had the right impression of him as an outdoorsy type. All I had for proper athletic gear was a pair of old running shoes. Hopefully they’d be able to manage whatever the Maryland terrain had to offer.

When it comes to going anywhere, even for a few hours, I always over-prepare. You never know how long you’ll be away or what kind of situations you could get into. It was

pretty warm out but was forecast to cool off during the evening, so I opted for a pair of dark blue chinos made of a linen/cotton blend which would hopefully be breathable and also fine for wherever we decided on dinner afterward. I layered on top, choosing a purple sleeveless shirt under a smoky cardigan. And for a purse, I went with my usual: a burgundy faux leather bag big enough to hold a water bottle, with a strap I could sling diagonally over my torso for extra security.

I pulled my hair back into a low ponytail, in case the wind picked up. For makeup, I went minimal. I usually do, mostly because everything I know about makeup is what Jodie and I learned—or rather attempted to learn—from YouTube. But I particularly didn't like the possibility of getting hot and sweaty with a lot of products on my face. I went for a light dusting of mineral powder with SPF, just to even out my skin tone, and blush rose lip gloss that wouldn't be noticeably dramatic if it faded and needed retouching.

I had the room to myself as I was getting ready, but at quarter to three, Mimi came back in looking thunderous. We didn't make eye contact, which was more than fine with me. Seth had texted that he'd walk over to Milner to meet up after his shift ended, so I let Mimi have the room and waited for him outside.

The dorm's shadow had fallen over its paved front entrance area as the sun moved through the day, but the concrete steps leading up to it were still comfortably warm. I sat right down on them and opened my bag to double-check that I had everything I needed: water, wallet, dorm swipe card and room key, phone, USB battery and charging cable, pocket tissues, hand sanitizer, and lip gloss tube. I glanced up at the sky, wondering if I should have packed an umbrella. It looked perfectly clear, but just in case I thumbed my phone awake to check the weather.

And there, in my notifications, was a text from my old bestie Jodie.

Been thinking about you. How are you?

I couldn't see anything else without opening the message itself. Just those seven words. Seven words tossed my way to reopen seven years of history and friendship and, I'd sometimes thought, actual sisterhood. After she'd completely destroyed everything, at the worst possible time of my life. Like all she had to do was text me and all would be forgiven.

For a good long minute I just stared at the notification bubble. If she'd written more besides those seven words, the little preview couldn't show it. But if I opened the message, she'd be able to see that I'd read it.

Her round profile icon smiled up at me. I had no idea where it had come from, but she looked good in it. Happy. My phone or her phone had conducted some mysterious algorithmic analysis and chosen a picture where she looked *good* and *happy*, smiling like she didn't have a care in the world. Maybe that was true. Maybe she loved her life and her choices.

I should have blocked her number. Matt's, too. I'd finally deleted them from all my social media after arriving at Lockridge, but not from my contacts for some reason.

The last time I saw Matt and Jodie, I'd screamed my throat raw. Cursing them out, calling them every name under the moon and sun. I still heard the echo of my voice in my head sometimes. I hadn't even sounded like a person. I was just a heart cracking wide open. And the whole time, she just stood there and took it, sobbing, her face a mess, her hair wild.

That was three months ago, the night of the Fourth of July potluck. Matt's family hosts it every year on the shore of Lake Wylie, at the bottom of their property, and practically all of Juniper comes out for it. People would bring their own fireworks and aim them to explode over the water. Some people would even row up by kayak, canoe, or boat, and just watch the fireworks from where they floated. For those of us on land, Matt and his dad usually built a bonfire so we could roast hot dogs or marshmallows or whatever else anyone had thought to contribute.

This year, all the fireworks were used up by ten p.m. and by midnight, the party was basically over. Small town. The only

ones left hanging out by the lake were a handful of us kids, trying to stay up into the wee hours like we always did. A bottle of Jack got passed around, smuggled past the grown-ups.

And then I overheard Matt's friend Leland say—

“Ava?”

I looked up at the sound of my voice and saw Seth at the foot of the Milner steps.

Jodie's seven words disappeared as I thumbed my phone to sleep and stuffed it into my bag. I descended toward Seth, and he took my hand. He looked like a tall drink of cool water, and damn, was I thirsty. His eyes seemed even more brilliant now that we were outside—and I really hadn't thought it was possible for them to be *more* anything.

“You good?” he asked. “You *look* good.” His tone told me he meant that a couple different ways.

“Um, thank you,” I said, pasting on a smile. “So what's the plan? I'm down for anything, and daylight's wasting.”

SETH

My favorite thing about Lockridge is that the campus includes a few hundred acres of woodland. It's part of some deal dating back to the school's original founding and land grant that a certain percentage has to be maintained as a nature preserve. They do a damn good job with it. Cutting through the woodland are a handful of unpaved but sturdy trails that are great to run on. I can get in a decent few miles without repeating any part of my route, and it's all peaceful quiet and dappled shade and sweet forest smells, along with a rocky creek bubbling with crystal clear water.

Ava stopped and stared when we reached my usual trailhead. "Wow. I had no idea this existed."

A couple of large rocks, big enough to climb on, marked the entrance. From where we stood we could see young birch trees on either side of the dirt-and-mulch path, which sloped gently down toward the deeper woods. I felt my soul expand at the sight—at least, that's what it always feels like when I know I'm about to get away from all the people and buildings and pressures of college life for a while.

"Beautiful, right?" I said. "Wait till we get further in. If that's all right with you?"

"Definitely." She paused. "Will my shoes be okay?"

"Yeah, perfect. People go jogging in sneakers here all the time, and we won't wander off the trail or do anything too strenuous."

Although that could also depend on what we're calling strenuous, and whether you'd be interested in doing it.

My groin tightened just thinking about possible activities, but I told myself to chill. I'd brought Ava here to get to know her, not to maul her.

We started walking, and I matched my pace to hers. She'd surprised me, riding in Colin's truck last night. I wondered if they were seeing each other. The last I'd heard, he was aiming to hit the books hard this year, to get his shit together for the MCAT in spring and med school applications in the summer. He didn't plan to get into any social situation that would cut into his study time.

He's got a lot more discipline than me that way.

"So what year are you, Ava?" I asked.

"First."

Well, damn. Colin couldn't be too serious about her yet. She hadn't even been here a couple months. Not that this should have any bearing on me asking her out. Colin isn't territorial like that—which I know very well.

I learned that she was from Juniper and wondered again why Darius had never mentioned her, since he isn't territorial like that either. I learned that she'd taken a year off before coming to Lockridge. And then I learned that she was on a full scholarship.

"Holy shit," I said. "Are you a genius? Am I actually in the presence of a genius?"

She pulled a face. "Nooo. I think I just tick some good boxes. Minority female from the South, first generation to go to a four-year college, all that stuff that looks good on the brochures."

"Hey now, Lockridge wouldn't give that kind of money just for statistics. They think you, Ava Le, are a good investment."

"I guess."

"It's gotta be nice, not feeling like a walking mortgage by age twenty. Freeing, right?"

"I mean, kind of but not really? The scholarship ends once I graduate, you know? And then I'll have to figure out what to do with myself just like everyone else."

I could tell she felt uncomfortable talking about it, so I changed the subject. I told her about my major—Education—

and the student teaching I'll be doing in DC over the summer.

"Wow, you already have a summer job lined up?" she said. "Now who's the genius?"

"Nooo." I echoed her earlier denial with a friendly grin. "I've been tutoring every week at this community center in Chinatown for a couple years now, so they've basically already vetted me."

"But teaching is a bigger deal than tutoring, right?"

"Yeah. It's gonna be middle schoolers, too, which is the worst." I laughed. "Bunch of smartasses."

"What subject?"

"History. I'm planning to bring an air horn to keep 'em all awake."

"Yeah, sorry to say, but I think you're gonna need it." She smiled up at me.

"At least this is an enrichment class rather than a remedial one. Half the kids're probably only going cuz their parents're making 'em, but hopefully I get some nerds who actually want to learn something."

"What's your favorite period in history?"

"I don't have one single period, but I'm into revolutions. Any time there's an uprising of the people that results in a regime change. And specifically the buildup and the reasons for revolution compared to the actual fallout and the new state that rises in place of the old one. Like what happens when the revolutionaries get what they wanted, but now they have to govern?"

"My dad came to the States as a refugee from the Vietnam War, when he was a kid," Ava said softly.

"Mmm, that's a major one. Bet he's got some stories to tell."

"Yeah, I've heard a few." But instead of recounting any of those stories, she asked, "So what do you like about teaching?"

“The opportunity to warp and control impressionable young minds, of course.” The corners of her mouth lifted again. Encouraged, I continued, “Actually, my mom’s the school superintendent back home, and she was a teacher for over twenty years. So I guess she inspired me.”

“Wow. What’s your district? You’re from Georgia, right?”

“Sure am. You stalking me or you just know your accents?”

“The latter. Well, I know a Georgia accent, anyway.”

“Shame, I wouldn’t mind a little stalking from you.” Ava laughed lightly, shaking her head with an incredulous look. I decided to dial back on the charm offensive for a second. “But yeah, I’m from just north of Atlanta.”

“Cool. My favorite teacher was from Savannah. That’s how I got my accent knowledge.”

“So how’re you liking life on this side of the Mason Dixon line?”

We talked about how we missed the native friendliness and openness of the South, and we laughed at all the wilting northerners and West Coasters who think Lockridge in October is still too hot and humid. We talked about how we both miss sweet iced tea, and from there we got onto one of my favorite subjects—barbecue.

“I just don’t truck with that vinegar-based shit y’all do in NC,” I told Ava, figuring I’d better declare my loyalties upfront. “Some places in Atlanta started bringing that in a while back and no, ma’am, not for me.”

“Trust me, I’m not about it either. We usually drive over the border to South Carolina to get the mustard stuff.”

“Good taste.”

We reached a part of the trail that hits the creek. I’d brought a bottle of water which I offered to share with Ava, but she produced her own from her massive bag. A drop caught on her lip and she licked it off, which I knew I’d be picturing in my mind for some time. Then Ava knelt down and cupped her hands in the water of the creek.

“Oh, that’s colder than I expected,” she said. “How deep is it?”

“No more than knee deep on me. There’s a little wooden bridge about five minutes from here, but we can also step across on these rocks.”

I pointed, about a meter away, at the half dozen rocks zigzagging to the other side of the creek. The rocks are natural, which is why this particular trail leads here, and as such they’re unevenly sized and placed.

“Wanna try?” I asked her.

“Sure. If you don’t mind me going slow.”

“No problem. I can go first if you think that’ll help. I’ve crossed this countless times.”

She nodded. “Yes, please.”

The first couple of rocks are easy enough, but the third is dramatically higher. It’s big enough for two people to stand on, though, so when I got up there I turned around to wait as Ava studied the approach.

“Curse my short legs,” she said.

“You can make it.”

“Not without the loss of some of my dignity.”

“Here.” I held out my hand.

She looked at it for a second, and I thought maybe she’d decline. Maybe she didn’t need help after all? But then she took my hand in a firm grip and stepped up. I steadied her balance with my other hand on her elbow.

“See? You got this.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Three more to go.”

“That was the hardest one.”

“Then we have to come back across.”

“Nah, we can take the bridge route.”

All around us, the creek babbled as it ran on its crooked way. Meanwhile, Ava still held onto my hand, and the surface area of the rock forced us to stand relatively close. Sunlight slanted down over her face and I could see freckles on her cheeks beneath a bit of shimmer from her makeup, the illuminated depths of her eyes, the sheen of her hair.

Beautiful.

“So what’s next?” she asked softly.

I cleared my throat. “We keep going.”



Strictly speaking, she probably didn’t need me to help her across the rest of the way, but since she didn’t let go of my hand, I didn’t let go of hers. We only separated once we found ourselves on the solid ground on the other side of the creek, although I wouldn’t have minded going on like that indefinitely.

In the depths of the nature preserve is a huge meadow, a shallow bowl of grass somehow carved out of the woods. At one point in Lockridge’s history, a circle of flat roughhewn boulders got set up in the meadow’s center, in loose disorderly rows. They make excellent benches, and students hold gatherings here all the time, both formal and informal. The approximate middle of the circle holds the ashy remnants of countless bonfires.

Ava headed for the boulders, and I followed. Maybe she was still thinking about crossing the creek on the rocks, because she stepped up onto one, then walked along it to the next nearest boulder, then walked along that. We drew closer to the fire pit, and finally she sat down on the boulder closest to it. She looked up at me, smiling slightly, and I sat next to her. Wordlessly, we opened our water bottles and took simultaneous sips.

It was good to be in the full sun, although it was definitely sinking toward the tree line. We’d been walking for about an

hour now. I wondered if she'd ever be interested in running the trails with me.

"Thanks for bringing me here," Ava said finally. "I was thinking last night how I've been feeling kind of trapped on campus. I didn't know all of this existed."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. If I didn't have this place and my tutoring in DC, I'd go apeshit. It's not natural being stuck at school all the time."

"Plus my routine has been kind of rigid. Which is my fault, because I opted for this crazy schedule. But also, like, I haven't really tried to get any relief from it either."

"You mean relief from classes? What do you do for fun?"

She took a moment to answer. "Well, I've gone to meetings run by some of the student groups. Like the Asian organization—they meet once a week. But they just commandeer an empty classroom. So it's not exactly escaping school."

"But are they *fun*?"

"No," she admitted. "I mean, they could be. The group members are friendly, but I guess I haven't made actual friends with them. Not yet." She rubbed her knees with her hands. "To be honest, I haven't made any friends at all at Lockridge."

"With Darius Johnson as your neighbor?"

"Darius is everybody's friend. I haven't made a friend for *me*." Ava's eyes flicked up to meet mine, then away. "Sorry, I have no idea why I'm telling you all this. What a loser, huh?"

"No way," I said gently. "I don't bring losers out here."

Her shoulder bumped mine in answer.

"So what *do* you consider fun?" I asked. "Are you a party girl? Bookworm girl? Somewhere in between girl?"

"I like walking," she said after a moment. "Going on long walks. This has been kind of perfect, actually."

"Hopefully the company and the conversation contributed, too."

“Definitely.”

A surprising warmth swelled in my chest. It wasn't surprising that my initial interest was tipping over into attraction the longer I spent with her, but I felt it was more than a physical connection. I liked that she'd been so open with me about her loneliness. She didn't strike me as someone comfortable with vulnerability normally. But maybe I'd caught her in a moment. And that, like any kind of intimacy, was a precious thing, a gift of trust. Now it was up to me to be worthy of it.

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8

AVA

I wished we could have sat there until sunset, but neither of us had brought a flashlight and Seth said our phone lights definitely wouldn't be up to the task of navigating a dark trail. So we headed back to campus.

I wondered if the mood would be awkward after my impromptu confession, but Seth kept the conversation light, talking about the woods near his house back home and how his dad and brothers had a devil of a time keeping them snake-free. I loved listening to his soft, silky accent, and I could just picture him traipsing around his family's land, competent and coolheaded even in hair-raising situations.

I'd only just met him, but I was glad to have met him. He flirted, but not as much as Darius, and he wasn't as intensely sexual as Colin or as crushable as Arun. Maybe I felt so natural around Seth because he was the closest of any of them to the type of guys I grew up with: a goodhearted Southern boy who liked to play as hard as he worked, a guy who always had a joke in his holster but was also as reliable as an oak tree.

That was why I nearly stumbled and fell when he said, "One time in high school, my boyfriend found a raccoon trapped in his truck engine. Damn thing tried to make a nest or something up there and got stuck."

Boyfriend? But he's...

I tried to act casual, like the revelation was no revelation at all. "How'd he get it out?"

"Oh, he dropped some food scraps in the driveway and it eventually climbed out and went for 'em. Luckily he was trying to change the oil when he found the raccoon. Could have been messy if he was driving."

"So...are y'all still together?" My voice was doing that nervous thing again, pitching higher.

“Me and Kyle? Nah, he’s at Georgia Tech. We tried the long-distance thing when we were first-years, but it got too hard. Eventually we agreed to cut each other loose.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Was it a bad breakup?”

Matt and I had planned to be long distance. Matt, who I’d thought was the *best* hearted Southern boy—*my* boy. He was going to college in North Carolina, and I was going to Maryland. Then Dad got diagnosed, and Matt and I both deferred admission and stayed in Juniper. We worked at my parents’ café, trading shifts so I could help at home as well. And I thought it was so wonderful, that he’d decided to delay his own future to support me during the hardest thing I’d ever experienced. So of course I wasn’t going to break up with him just because our colleges were a few hours apart. Of course not.

Seth spoke, pulling my thoughts away from Matt. “All breakups are bad in their own ways. I actually had a terrible one last year.”

“Someone at Lockridge?”

“Yeah, a senior. She’s graduated now, so at least I don’t see her around.”

My mind whirled. He’d had a boyfriend in high school and a girlfriend in college? Now his flirtation with me made sense again. “Did you break up because she graduated? Sorry if I’m being nosy—you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want.”

“Nah, not a problem. And no, Jenn’s working in DC right now. So we could have made it work. But she just decided she was done with us.”

“That sucks. Going from an *us*—or what you thought was an *us*—to two separate people. You share so much and then you’re basically strangers.”

“Yeah,” Seth said slowly. “It was a little more complicated than that. Mostly it just wasn’t how I expected things to end. Like, it didn’t match what I thought of her. There are so many ways to break up and still respect what you had together, if you know what I mean.”

“Were you in love?”

“Hmm. Honestly, I don’t think so. At least, *I* wasn’t.”

Even though Seth had said it was fine, I was self-conscious about asking too many questions, so I let the subject rest. But I thought about what he’d said, trying to read between the lines. It seemed like his ex Jenn had been the one to break things off, and she’d done it in a shitty way. If he wasn’t in love, and she was, maybe that explained it. I completely understood the motivation, when you know your love isn’t reciprocated, to distance yourself from the person who can’t give you what you want. Because it hurts too much when they don’t feel the same as you.

Once we got back to campus proper, Seth invited me to the dining hall for dinner. We opted for burgers and he carried both of our trays through the crowd of students, bypassing the shadowy corner where I usually ate alone, to seat us by a window overlooking both the bell tower and the library. The visible pairing of these two places where I’d met Colin and Seth gave me a delicious little thrill.

Seth and I chatted about whether I should take an Education class as part of my distribution requirements next semester. He had particular professors to rec and anti-rec, as well as thoughts on some of the big-name professors in other disciplines who everyone tried to take classes with. Colin had given me recs for science professors last night, based on his pre-med track.

Then Seth walked me all the way back to Milner, just like a Southern gentleman. I wasn’t sure if he’d just drop me off at the downstairs door, and then when he came upstairs with me I wasn’t sure if he’d try for something like a kiss. But when we got to the second floor he just smiled down at me and said, “I had a good time today, Ava. Let’s do it again soon.”

“I’d love to,” I said, and meant it.

“I’m just gonna say hi to Darius.”

“Sure.” Suddenly shy, I made a beeline for my door, digging through my bag for my key in the hopes of making a quick and

graceful disappearance. Unfortunately, I was thwarted by my over-preparation. *Why is it buried at the bottom of all this shit? Why did I pack all this shit?*

Just as my fingers closed around the key, Colin stepped out of Darius's room. He saw me at once, and then Seth right behind me. His eyes widened in surprise.

"He-ey, how's it going?" Before either of us could answer, he said, "Ava, I was actually looking for you. Can we talk?" He glanced at Seth again. "Privately?"



It seemed Mimi had stepped out again, so Colin and I had our conversation in my room. Night had fallen already, but instead of turning on the harsh overhead light, I went for the small paper-shaded lamp perched on top of my bookcase. It cast a warm glow over the room, softening edges and muting colors.

I sat on my bed and Colin took my desk chair, turning it around to straddle it backward, bracing his forearms on top. He looked as big and handsome as he had last night. It occurred to me that outside of my fellow Milner 2nd residents, I'd never had a visitor in the room before. Not one who was all my own, anyway.

He spoke first. "So...how are you?"

"Me?" *Ugh, who else would he be talking to?* "Um, I'm fine. You?"

"I'm all right. I've been thinking about you all day. I realized I never got your number or anything, and I didn't want you to think I was the kind of guy who wouldn't call the day after."

"Oh. No, I wouldn't think that about you."

"Good, because I'm not that kind of guy. And I definitely wouldn't be that kind of guy with you. I had an awesome time with you yesterday. Even before we got back to campus."

My heart sped up at the intent look in his eyes. “I had a great time, too. I appreciate that you stopped by.”

He gave me a wry smile. “Sounds like there’s a *but* coming.”

I ducked my head in acknowledgement. “I just...I’m not really looking for anything beyond that.”

“You’re not looking or you actively don’t want?”

“I guess somewhere in the middle?”

“Is it just me, or is it dating in general?”

Dating, huh. I’d only just met Colin, but I could sense he would be an amazing and perfect boyfriend. He’d be sensitive, and generous, and his girlfriend would never want him to leave her bed. In fact, my mind was helpfully conjuring a picture of him in *my* bed, braced over me on those muscular arms, sliding downward with a glint in his eye...

Ruthlessly, I pushed it away. “It’s definitely not you. I don’t even know you well enough to say something like that.” He winced, but I continued. “If this were any other time in my life...you know? But right now, I feel like things are simpler on my own.”

“Okay. I get it.” He nodded, accepting my explanation easily enough. Then he said, “But does *on your own* mean you want to be completely alone? Because there are degrees.”

I honestly wasn’t sure how to answer him. On the one hand, here was this absolute prize of a guy who apparently wanted to keep seeing me. Was I a complete idiot to close the door on that? On the other hand, I knew deep down that if I went for it—for whatever *degree* he might have in mind—it would only be a matter of time before one of us got hurt. And I was done with being hurt.

With his usual sensitivity, Colin seemed to glimpse my internal struggle. “Look,” he said, leaning forward. “All I’m saying is, we were great together. I think you’re beautiful, and sexy, and I want to get to know you and for you to know me. I mean, who wouldn’t want to get to know you? But if you don’t want anything serious, I can live with that. To be honest,

it's probably better for *me* to keep things light. But I'd rather keep things light with you than without you."

I was having a hard time wrapping my head around what he could possibly be saying. "What does that mean? Like, practically."

"It means...I'd like to have a lot more days with you like yesterday. Only we don't have to end our nights in my truck. Unless you want to, obviously." He grinned.

Momentarily blasted by the beauty of his face, I took a second to regroup and concentrate. "That sounds exactly like dating."

"From one perspective. It can also be casual and easy and totally without pressure. You don't even have to be exclusive with me. You can see other people."

I bit my lip. "So you're saying, an open relationship friends with benefits kind of thing?"

"It doesn't even need all those labels. Most of all, like I said, I just want us to know each other better. Even if you took truck time or its equivalent totally off the table, I'd be okay with that. It would be torture, but I'd be okay."

It sounded too good to be true. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask *Why*, as in why would he offer me what was essentially carte blanche? Sex, no sex, even sex with other people? Could he really be okay with that?

And then I thought, *Why not?* From his perspective, he'd get to see other people as well, and neither of us would have any expectations of or claims on each other.

That flowed into asking myself other questions. Why would I say no to hot sex without all the relationship drama? Hadn't I just been thinking that I could do this kind of thing? If Colin was on board with it, wasn't that actually ideal?

My heart beat even faster. I felt like I was about to take a flying leap into the unknown. But the fact was, I liked Colin. Sure, we'd only met yesterday, but we'd shared something major. And I just had a good feeling about him.

Anyway, I wasn't risking serious emotions. So again, why not?

"I wouldn't take truck time off the table," I said finally. "But I also wouldn't be opposed to trying other locations."

Colin's eyes lit up. "No time like the present?"

I hesitated, thinking of Seth and Darius just across the hall. Especially Seth, who I'd just had a lovely time with as well. What would he think about this arrangement with Colin? And what would Darius think about me sleeping with one of his good friends? Guys have codes about that kind of thing, right? Just like girls.

Well, some girls.

And then I thought of Arun, so serious and upright. The truth was, neither Arun nor Darius had ever shown me anywhere near the pointed interest that Seth and Colin had. Yet I couldn't help thinking that this might close a door with them—albeit some remote, far-fetched, future possibility that one of them might, just *might*, consider me in that kind of light.

When I looked at Colin, though, sitting there waiting patiently for me to find the courage to make a decision, I thought, *He's worth the risk.*

Actually, any of them would be worth the risk.

But the real truth was this: I had a secret hope, buried so deep I could barely admit it to myself, that there would be no risk at all. That they'd all be as easygoing as Colin, so if I ever had to choose between any of them, I'd somehow be allowed to choose *all* of them.

Have you no shame?

Maybe I just didn't.

Slowly, I stood up. Colin stood as well, maybe thinking I was refusing him, clearly trying to mask disappointment.

But I said, "I'm not sure when my roommate will be back. I don't know how much time we have."

Even so, I went to the door and locked it—and barred it as well. The heavy clunk of the metal was deeply satisfying.

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9

DARIUS

Colin had told me he just wanted to “talk” to Ava, but my Grandma Evelyn never tolerated any fools in the family. When Seth arrived, I handed him the game controller that Colin had been using and said, “He ain’t coming back. Go ahead and settle in.”

“So are they *together*?” Seth draped himself over the armchair I’d commandeered from the Milner 2nd common room. Arun and I have been in a war of attrition over me borrowing the public area dorm furniture since move-in day. But damn, how’s a person supposed to live with just a single wooden desk chair?

I shrugged. “I don’t get the feeling she’s in the market for *together*. But are they smashing? I’m gonna say Colin’s giving it the old college try. Whether she takes him up on the offer is anyone’s guess.”

“Colin could tempt anyone,” Seth said, with the air of personal experience. He was speaking facts. I haven’t tried it on myself, because A, I don’t fuck friends, and B, as far as I know Colin’s straight as a ruler, and finally C, I’m also pretty straight. But on occasion I’ve been known to wiggle, and I do have eyes.

I fired up the next round of *Halo*. “So you went out with Ava today?”

“I wouldn’t say we went out. I mean I guess technically we did seeing as how we went *outside*, but—” Seth glowered as his character got blown to hell. “Dude. You know I suck at shooters. Can we switch it up?”

“After Colin and I spent two hours storming this base? Concentrate and do your best. What did you and Ava get up to outside?”

“You want me to concentrate and play or stop to kiss and tell? Pick one cuz I’m shit at multitasking.”

“There was kissing?!”

He gave me a look. “Nah, man, figure of speech. I just took her to the trails. All very platonic. I’m not trying to spook her.”

“Well, me neither.”

Seth shot me a sideways glance. “Be honest, D. You got designs? Because you never told me or Colin about her, and I find that interesting.”

“I don’t have to mention every girl I meet,” I retorted. “They’re not all like Jenn, you know.” Then, more softly, “Just...as I said, I could tell she wouldn’t be up for a relationship right now. With me or anyone. Like in general she’s kind of a loner.”

“Yeah, that’s more than clear.”

“Except now she’s hanging out with you *and* Colin in the space of twenty-four hours.”

“What can I say? We’ve got charms.”

This time Seth’s character got hit by a grenade. He scowled.

As we played, I found myself wondering what *was* going on across the hall. My door was open, per Milner 2nd culture, but I’d heard what I thought was the deadbolt locking *and* the security bar being latched. Good for Ava. And good for Colin, too. But at the same time, I couldn’t help feeling envious. I had no idea whether Colin was just in the right place at the right time—or whether he was just the right person—but Ava seemed to be opening up to him in a way she hadn’t with anyone, as far as I knew.

Not that he’d shared any gory details, exactly, but it was clear something had happened between them already. Something that had shaken his equilibrium—and his vow to take the year off from dating.

Inevitably, my thoughts strayed to the reason for Colin’s intended celibacy. And, if I had to be brutally honest, my own—although I certainly meant to get back in the game soon.

Jenn Silviana. Our ex. Seth's as well, although he hadn't fallen nearly as hard for her as Colin and I had. She was—still is—the complete dream girl package. Outwardly, at least. Her body would be right at home selling high fashion or underwear. Her face could sell cosmetics. And her mane of silky dark hair...million-dollar commodity.

Best of all, she loved sex. She couldn't get enough of the three of us.

The feeling was mutual. Last year we were sophomores sharing a triple room, and Jenn was the alluring senior down the hall. Neither I nor Colin or Seth had ever been in a polyamorous relationship before, but that was the only way Jenn rolled. After some initial turbulence, we went with it. Surprisingly, it worked for months. She laid down the rules from the beginning and was in total control of who, what, when, and where, and there just wasn't room for personal jealousy in any of it.

Maybe that's overstating a bit. At the *very* beginning of things, she wasn't quite clear that she wanted to be involved with *all* of us, so there was some jostling and bewilderment when it dawned on us what was happening. But we talked it through, confirmed we were okay with Jenn's rules and with each other, and that was that.

I don't know if I consciously thought about love or long-term happiness or whatever you're supposed to think when you're regularly fucking a beautiful woman. I knew she was graduating and looking forward to leaving school, to starting life in the "real world." But I guess I just always had this confidence that we'd found a one-of-a-kind situation, and that we'd all do our best to protect it.

"Maybe we were too complacent," Colin told me at one point. "For me, I never really experienced anything world shattering before Jenn. Never managed a serious relationship in high school, never had any tragedies with friends or family. I just didn't have any instinct to be careful with my heart."

Sounded about right to me. That was why the breakup fucked us up so badly.

These days I've gotten enough distance to understand that it was Jenn who fucked up the actual breaking up process. Apparently she hadn't cared about any of us beyond the sex. I suspect now she didn't think we were in a relationship at all, much less a poly one. So in her mind, we didn't even merit the respect of letting us down easy. Only when we asked her about the plan after graduation did she bother addressing it: *Guys, we had some fun, right? But you know I won't have time to play around with you anymore. Live good lives!*

In a group chat message, no less.

And then, when we tried to get her to actually talk to us: *Come on, did you really think you were the only ones?*

For me, the emotional fallout took all summer to settle. I had a few one-night stands and finally concluded that, with Jenn out of my system, I was ready for a clean start. Just in time to step into Arun's Milner 2nd orientation meeting and meet a first-year named Ava Le. I took one look into those alluring eyes of hers and realized that was dangerous territory. And then, after twenty minutes of shouting questions into her ear at a Lockridge party, breathing in the light floral scent of her hair, I was a goner.

Under normal circumstances, first-years would be off-limits. Especially after I turned twenty-one a couple weeks ago, the kids coming in straight from high school just feel like...kids. Admittedly, this gives me a somewhat better insight into how Jenn must have seen us—and looked down on us. But Ava's a bit older, not just physically but more importantly in life experience. I've gathered that much in the time I've been getting to know her, as slow and careful as that's been.

So even though I feel miles older than, say, her roommate Mimi, it's a bit more level with Ava. She still gives off the impression of being somewhat sheltered, which would be normal for anyone coming from a tiny town like Juniper, but it's obvious she's here to open her world up. Knowing how Juniper is, I like that about her, that she got out of there to try something different. She's someone I could actually have a conversation with.

Problem is, I'm not sure *she* thinks of me like that.

“People think all you care about is having a good time.”
Another nugget of insight Colin had shared with me once.
“They're wrong, obviously, but they just don't take a party guy seriously.”

I've said time and again I've got hidden depths, but he and Seth roll their eyes and tell me it would help if I actually acted like it once in a while.

And now they're the ones Ava wants to hang out with, have dinner with, go for long hikes with, go behind closed doors with... So I feel envious, but then do I really want to risk the same shit happening all over again? Maybe Ava wouldn't be cruel like Jenn, but when it comes to all that intimacy stuff, she's just as gun-shy.

To be honest, maybe I am, too. But the part of me that's so drawn to Ava, that's still a glutton for all that romantic stuff—that part of me keeps thinking, *Even if it falls apart, won't you regret it more if you don't try?*



Seth had gone home and I was just getting ready for bed when I heard shouting in the hall.

I recognized Mimi's voice. She sounded drunk, which I also recognized because it happens fairly often, and she's never quiet about it.

“Fucking bitch! Lemme in!”

There was the unmistakable sound of a fist pounding on a door, and then the entire door slamming up against the security bar.

“Whadderyou tryna get revenge? You can't do this to me you *bitch!*”

Sighing, I pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of sweats and yanked my door open. Mimi whirled around, her eyes

widening then narrowing as her drunk brain figured out who she was seeing.

“Oh, good, it’s the defense coming in hot,” she warbled.

You owe me, Colin. You owe me big. “Hey, Meems, why don’t you quit making a ruckus and just chill out in here?”

“Yeah, right,” she spat. “We all know I’m not the roommate you want in there.”

Interesting. I wouldn’t have thought Mimi ever noticed anything beyond her own face. “Well, you seem like you could do with a place to sit, maybe a glass of water?”

“Nah, fuck ya.” She flapped her hand at me, turned back around, and banged the side of her fist on the door.

Through the gap, I could see that a light was on in the room. I debated whether to try to call out to Ava—or Colin—and quickly decided that would add a flavor of awkwardness no one would enjoy. But unless they opened the door, it probably fell on me to deescalate the situation. And I couldn’t think how to do that without putting hands on Mimi and dragging her away—bad idea, given what a mean drunk she was being.

Mimi took the decision out of my hands by lifting her leg and kicking the door with the entire bottom of her foot. As the door was still held in place by the security bar, it didn’t budge, but Mimi fell off balance and I had to catch her by the shoulders.

“Slick moves, killer.”

She shrugged me off and righted herself again. The stench of booze surrounded her like the dust cloud on that Charlie Brown cartoon kid. “Who asked you?”

Luckily, relief arrived. Arun came striding down the hall, clearly roused from sleep by the noise.

“Nice to see you, Eagle Scout,” I greeted him. “Finally.”

He gave me a harassed look but addressed himself to Mimi. “Have you been drinking?”

She grinned up at him, bleary-eyed. “Whaddoyou think?”

“I think that wasn’t the best choice after yesterday.” Arun gently grasped her elbow. “Come with me.”

“Huh? Where?”

He gestured down the hall where the lounge and bathrooms were. “You need to get some water and food in you.”

Mimi pulled back. “I don’ wanna. Don’ wanna!”

“Come on, my dear,” I tried. “It’ll make you feel a lot better.”

“I feel fine! Better when that bitch lets me into my room!”

Arun’s eyebrows rose as he took in the door and realized fully what was going on. “Ava’s in there?”

I nodded.

“Alone?”

I hesitated. “Don’t think so.”

It almost made me laugh to watch Arun register what that meant—not because I was laughing at him, but because I wanted to say, *Welcome to the club, bro*. He schooled his expression almost immediately, but it was like looking in a mirror to see the wistfulness flit across his face. *Ava nabs another.*

Unfortunately for Arun, he probably isn’t into sharing.

Mimi, apparently a bit slow in registering what I’d said, swung back to the door. “What! Who’s in there! Who’s she got in there? Don’t believe it! Who?”

“Mimi, *girl*,” I said in what I hoped was a quelling tone. “Find your dignity and dial it down.”

“Oh, like she did?” she scoffed, still at top volume. “Why don’t I just blab to Arun like she did, too? Hey, Arun, I think we got ourselves a move-out situation! My slut-shaming roomie’s trying to outslut me!”

The security bar thwacked open and out stepped Ava. My breath caught. She was wearing a tank top and a pair of boxer

shorts. Her hair was messy, her lips thoroughly kissed. And her eyes blazed with fury.

“Mimi, what the fuck?”

“Bout time!” Mimi declared, and wrenched free of Arun.

Not liking the look in her eye, I stepped between them. Ava wasn't intimidated, though. She braced herself against the doorframe, her small body somehow filling the rectangle, and thrust her chin out. “You're out of control.”

“Fuck you, bitch, lemme in!”

“Hmm, what is it you always say to me? Come back in half an hour.”

Mimi lunged one way, quick as a cat despite her drunk ass. I tried to grab her, but she did a spin move like a goddamn NBA player and went around me. She charged toward Ava, fingers hooked like claws—damn, girls can fight dirty—but luckily the dodging maneuver had given Ava time to react. She reared back, and instead of making contact with Ava's face, Mimi's hands smacked against the doorframe.

Finally, I got Mimi in a subduing hold, pinning her arms to her sides.

Arun looked grim. “Mimi, attempting to physically assault another student is grounds for serious disciplinary action. You need to settle down right now.”

“Bitch won't let me in!”

Ava looked more pissed than anything, but her eyes were wide; I think she truly hadn't expected Mimi to be so aggressive. In a disgusted tone, she said, “You know what? Let her have the room so she can sleep it off. Then in the morning I want to file a complaint or do whatever's necessary to get her ass out of here.”

Tell it! I cheered her on silently.

Arun shook his head. “We can take her to the student clinic to sleep it off.”

“No, no one should have to haul her all the way out there. Just dump her in here. I’ll go crash in the lounge.”

“Damn right!” Mimi slurred. Unhappily for me, she seemed to be losing her legs, so I was basically holding her upright.

“No, you won’t,” I heard Colin say. He appeared in the doorway, wrapping a protective hand over Ava’s shoulder. “You can stay in my room.”

He looked a little more put together than Ava, fully dressed, but his hair was messy as well. He met my eyes before giving Mimi a onceover, and I could see him thinking, *Whatever this is, let’s deescalate and move on.*

But Ava shook her head. “No, I’m fine. You should head back anyway. It’s late.”

Arun studied him, his gaze a little too intense. “Colin, right?”

“Right. Arun?”

Arun nodded shortly. “Ava, take all the time you need to decide, but if you’re sure about letting Mimi stay here...?”

“I’m sure.” She stepped aside to clear the doorway.

“Okay,” Arun said. “Darius, would you mind?”

“Got it, chief.” I hauled Mimi up and crossed the threshold, then unceremoniously deposited her on the edge of her bed, rolling her to her side. “Be a good girl and don’t throw up in the middle of the night.”

“She’s not that far gone,” Ava said, with a quality of long-suffering experience.

“Would it even be safe for you to sleep out in the lounge?” Colin said. “I know it won’t be comfortable.”

“I’ll be okay. There won’t be much traffic on the hall the rest of the night. And I’m in there a lot anyway. It’s nothing new.”

Colin shot me a pleading look, but I knew Ava wouldn’t budge. And if she wasn’t going to give in, that meant somebody else had to.

“Take my room,” I said. “Spare key’s in my desk drawer. I’ll go crash at Colin’s. We used to be roommates, so that’s nothing new either.”

Colin, Ava *and* Arun seemed to have something to say about the idea, but I just let the protests wash over me as I pulled on my kicks and grabbed a hoodie and my bookbag.

“I’m leaving the door open,” I said implacably, “so it’s up to you. If you’re not gonna use it, just lock it. But you should use it, because otherwise I’m wasting this Good Samaritan move. Feel me?” I gave her my best smile, the one that always coaxes Grandma Evelyn to make a batch of her famous chocolate and pecan cookies.

Then I slung my arm around Colin’s neck and pulled him out of the hall, leaving Ava staring after us.

10

AVA

Mimi's drunken meltdown was a textbook case of *coitus interruptus*. Colin and I had both been naked, panting against each other's mouths while he pumped into me, literally seconds away from what I just knew was going to be a delicious simultaneous climax—when she started banging on the door.

I think I was angrier about her timing than anything she'd said or tried physically. I'd *really* been ready to go.

But instead of what I'd expected to be doing right now—namely, regaining my breath for a round two dicking down—I found myself avoiding Arun's gaze as I went back into the room. Mimi was already sprawled on her bed asleep, shirt off, bra fortunately still in place. Her usual end to drinking nights.

Arun hovered in the hallway, just out of the line of sight.

Since I didn't plan to ever sleep in the same room as Mimi again, I started packing my suitcase. I threw in enough clothes and underwear for a week, as well as all my makeup, my books, and my laptop. It took a whole ten minutes to gather up my life. Then, rolling the suitcase with one hand and carrying my shower caddy in the other, I left.

Arun was clearly surprised to see me so soon, but all he said was, "You sure you got everything you need?"

I shrugged, stepping into Darius's room. "Even if I didn't, I can always stop by."

"I don't think you'll have to be away for long," he said, apparently reading my mind. He leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms. "In a situation like this, it's your safety that'll be the school's priority, and they'll want to act fast. I texted the Dean just now, and I'll call him personally first thing tomorrow. And I'll ask Darius and Colin if they'd be willing to speak to him on Monday morning when he gets into

the office, but that would be more for disciplinary matters. My word as the RA should be enough for Mimi to be removed from the room just as a safety measure.”

“I mean, I guess you have to talk to him as the RA, but no one else needs to be bothered. I’m already putting Darius out.”

“I doubt anyone would see it as a burden. Are you sure you’ll be okay in here? You won’t try to sleep in the lounge, right? Because I’ll take a page out of Darius’s book and leave *my* room open for you. And we can all play room roulette forever.”

I tried to smile, but it felt like a grimace. I leaned against Darius’s desk in a reflection of Arun’s posture, arms folded across my chest. “Yeah, I’ll stay here. Thank you. And—I’m really sorry about all this.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Why are *you* apologizing?”

“Because this is all so...so stupid. Why can’t Mimi and I just deal with each other instead of acting like spoiled brats?”

“Hey, you know Lockridge actually pays me to help with roommate issues, right? They’re never considered stupid. And you guys aren’t the only roommates to ever be separated. Happens all the time.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t seem like you were too sweet on the idea yesterday.”

“The situation is completely different now. Like I said, my priority is your safety.”

This time I couldn’t help but really smile. “I thought you said it was the school’s priority.”

“No.” Arun shook his head seriously. His lean shifted so that only one shoulder rested on the doorframe, while his body faced me full on. “It’s my priority, too.”

He said it in such a way, with such a look in his eyes, that I had no idea how to reply. Actually, I wanted to hug him, but I was acutely aware of the dream I’d had of him last night, getting ready to fuck me from behind at his desk. And with Darius participating as well! I’ve never had much in the way

of sexy dreams before, which meant until now, I've had no experience seeing the subjects of such dreams in the flesh the very next day. Turns out it's excruciatingly awkward.

But I was also aware of the context from Arun's perspective, how *he* must be aware of what Colin and I had been doing, and how that made me worry what he thought of it. Which was weird, because why should he think anything? I didn't know if I just didn't want him to disapprove of me or what, but it seemed important somehow that I step carefully.

"Well, thank you," I said again. "Even if it's your job, I appreciate it."

"It's not just my—" Arun paused. "I'd want to help anyway."

He seemed on the point of continuing, so I waited, but then he just...didn't. And with neither of us speaking, the silence between us began to swell, almost taking on a weight and sound of its own—at least, it seemed so to my ears, like a rushing sound where the silence had been. Arun's eyes were dark and alert, studying me. But for some reason I couldn't say anything. It felt like if either of us spoke, whatever was happening here between us would dissipate, and some lizard-brain instinct made me want to hold on as long as possible.

The pressure built and built until I thought I couldn't bear it much longer. I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff, looking down and fighting the urge to jump.

Then Arun stood straight, arms falling to his sides. My breath caught.

"You should get some rest," he said quietly. "You've been through a lot."

"I've been through worse." Finally I could speak, although my voice came out low and husky.

Arun blinked. "Even so. Don't feel rushed to clear out of here tomorrow. I'll tell Darius to give you some time. And I'll email you right after I talk to the Dean, so look for that in your inbox whenever you're ready."

"Okay," I said.

Arun scrubbed a hand at the back of his neck. “Good night, Ava. Sleep well.”

“Good night,” I managed.

He reached out, grasped the doorknob, and gently pulled the door shut, leaving me alone in Darius’s room.

God. What just happened?



I half-expected I wouldn’t be able to sleep at all, especially since it was super strange to be in Darius’s room by myself. I didn’t want to mess up his bed too much, so I laid one of my T-shirts over his pillowcase and stretched out on top of the comforter. For a few minutes I checked my phone messages.

There was already one from Colin. **Everything okay? You know you’re amazing, right?**

And one from Darius. **Make yourself at home. If you decide to stay I’d definitely consider it a roommate upgrade. And you can tell Colin and Seth I said that. :)**

So all three of them had been roommates? They did seem like good friends. If only Mimi and I could have had a fraction of that.

I texted both of them back to say thanks and that I’d be fine. I said the same thing in each message, knowing that they were probably reading them at the same time, in the same room.

Nothing from Arun, but then, I’d just spoken to him. Or rather, not spoken to him. And nothing from Seth, either, but he probably had no idea about all the drama that had gone down.

I put my phone on Darius’s desk and turned onto my side, facing the window. He’d left the blinds up, so I thought I’d try to count stars until I fell asleep.

I made it to twenty-something.

Arun hadn't exaggerated when he said I'd been through a lot, although he didn't know even a percentage of it. My subconscious had tons of content to churn through, so my dreams were full of craziness. Last night it was sex with Arun and Darius. This time there was no sex, sadly, but my Psych professor could have given an entire lecture simply on what I remembered in the morning.

In the strongest dream memory, I was walking with Seth in the creek in the woods—not crossing it, but wading up the center of it, pushing upstream against the current. He was carrying a hunting rifle, the kind Matt and his dad used to take on their camping trips. They'd loaned one to my dad once, when they invited him to come along. *Never again*, my dad had vowed when he got back. *I didn't leave Vietnam so I could go sleep in the woods.*

In the dream I held out my hands for the rifle. *I can hold it*, I told Seth. But he shook his head, smiling, and kept walking.

We came to a bonfire, burning merrily in the middle of the creek, and Jodie and Matt were standing in front of it holding hands. My crib from when I was a baby was between them, recognizable from old pictures of me, and from the bright cloth letters tied to the bars, spelling out my name: *A V A*.

Then the crib became a hospital bed, and my mother was pushing it down the corridor of Milner 2nd, past where I stood anchored in the doorway of my room. My father lay in the bed, crisscrossed with tubes and needles. I tried to call after them, only when I opened my mouth, no sound came out. They went on without noticing me.

Still want this? Seth asked. He held out the hunting rifle. *Better hurry.*

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make my arms lift to take it from him.



It was pretty early when that dream woke me, not even seven in the morning. The room I opened my eyes to was too quiet, and I realized it was because for the first time in a long while, I couldn't hear Mimi breathing three feet away. Hurriedly, I got dressed, making sure my suitcase and shower caddy occupied as small a corner as possible. I hesitated before taking Darius's spare key, but I didn't know what might happen today, so I pocketed it.

After a lonely breakfast in the mostly empty dining hall, I went to my favorite nook in the library and got to work finishing my Econ paper.

Around eight-thirty, my phone began buzzing with notifications. First came a calendar invite for a meeting with Dean Hoffman tomorrow morning at eleven. Then a text message from Colin: **I'm free all day if you want to meet up. Happy just to hang out.** A reply from Darius saying simply: **You're welcome.** And finally an email from Arun, with the subject **Next steps.**

Nervously, I opened the email.

Ava,

I stopped by Darius's room but I think you were asleep or out already. Hope you're doing okay this morning. I've made an official statement to Harold Hoffman, the Assistant Dean in charge of student life, recommending that Mimi be transferred to another room as soon as possible, and also recommending appropriate disciplinary action. Just FYI, the student code will dictate most of this process, but Dean Hoffman will want to speak to both of you (separately) and get your statements tomorrow. In the meantime, as your RA I have some authority to guide matters until then, so please let me know if you need anything from me.

Arun

It was all so formal, like that weird intense moment between us had never happened. I didn't know what I actually wanted

him to say, or how I wanted him to say it, but as it was, I felt strangely bereft. Like we'd backed away from the cliff edge, only instead of feeling sensible and safe, I felt deflated and cowardly.

But that was stupid, because how many guys was I trying to have "moments" with? Despite agreeing to keep things casual and open with Colin, part of me still couldn't quite believe either of us had truly meant *open*.

Even if we had, though, the point was moot, because Arun didn't strike me as the type to be cool with an arrangement like that. That made him off-limits, not to mention, of course, the simple and objective fact of him being way beyond my level.

So is Colin, and Seth for that matter, but they still seem to be into you.

I scrolled through my phone to see if any other messages had come in, and caught sight of the unopened text from Jodie, the one she'd sent yesterday afternoon before I went out with Seth. **Been thinking about you. How are you?** Those innocent seven words accompanied by her smiling face.

No wonder she and Matt had appeared in my dream.

Still leaving the message unread, I went to my contacts list and tapped on that smiling picture of her, then scrolled down to the option to block. Why, of all things, had I left her number on my phone? Wouldn't it have been healthier to make a clean break? Cut the poison from my life, scorch the earth, shut the door, turn over a new leaf? But no, I'd tried to pretend that mere silence was enough. Clearly it wasn't.

My thumb hovered over the words *Block this contact*.

And yet I couldn't do it. It wasn't even an irreversible decision. I'd be able to unblock her in the next second. But I saw her red, weepy face in my mind, superimposed on that annoying happy picture. I saw Mimi lunging at me, her hands outstretched, not to hug me like a friend, but to hurt me. And I thought, *I've done enough. I've lost enough.*

No matter how angry I was at Jodie, no matter how many damn good reasons I had to be angry at her, I couldn't make myself cut that tie. Not even for a second.



I finished a complete rough draft of my Econ paper in time for lunch. My mind felt drained, but in a good way. For several hours my thoughts had been entirely about school stuff instead of personal stuff, and that was the way it should be. Peaceful and responsible.

But as I was coming out of the library onto the wide portico, I saw Darius and Seth climbing the steps together. My heart immediately started pounding fast. They looked so gorgeous, both of them tall and muscled and handsome, one a gleaming brown and the other in golden tones. They honestly took my breath away.

Seth saw me first. His eyes lit up, and he took the next two steps at once, pulling ahead of Darius. "Hey, darlin'," he said, smiling down at me.

I melted. "How are you?"

"About to start a shift. Don't tell me you're leaving."

I nodded. "I was in there all morning."

Darius reached us then, eyebrows raised. "I was looking for you. You okay?"

Again, I nodded. "Yeah, I'm all right. Thanks again for letting me use your room."

Seth looked at both of us in turn with a curious expression. "What's up?"

Darius inclined his head at me, evidently letting me decide how much of my business I wanted to disclose. I was glad that, even though he must have been hanging out with Seth, he hadn't gossiped.

“Um, my roommate was kind of a rowdy mess last night. Darius let me borrow his room to sleep.”

“Where were you?” Seth asked Darius.

“Colin’s.”

“Well, shit, Ava,” Seth said. “Next time you need a place to crash and you want a room that doesn’t smell like somebody spilled a barrel of CK One, give me a call.”

Darius thwacked Seth’s ass with the textbook he was carrying. “I haven’t worn that shit since first year.”

“Good. Cuz Colin and I got tired of pouring it down the sink.”

“Fuck outta here! I know y’all dipped into it every time y’all were looking to get lucky.”

“I think Darius’s room smells lovely,” I said in his defense. And it does—warm and rich with hints of spice, like the season of fall.

“Thanks, Ava,” Darius said, as Seth chortled. “Quality recognizes quality. You sleep okay?”

“Perfect. Um, have you...you know, been back on the hall today?” *I was looking for you*, Darius had said. Did that mean he’d talked to Arun?

“Just popped in to change and knock on your door. I’m supposed to see Dean Hoffman tomorrow and I figure you are too, right? So you can have the room tonight as well. Or as long as you need it.”

“Whoa,” Seth said. “Talking to the Dean? Sounds serious.”

Again, Darius let me speak. “Yes, but...hopefully quick,” I said with a shrug.

“I hope so, too, whatever’s happening.” Seth checked his phone. “I should get inside for my shift. Want to grab dinner later, Ava?”

“Um, sure.” Seth’s smooth way of asking me to hang out still got me dumbstruck. “Love to.”

He gave me a wink and a wave, clasped hands and patted shoulders with Darius, and headed inside the library, his long stride eating up the distance easily.

Darius stayed on the portico, watching me in concern. It was the most serious I'd ever seen him. "So Seth's got you for dinner. But if you're headed to lunch now, mind if I join you?"

God, he made it sound like they were taking turns with me or something. The idea of *that* gave my heartbeat another jolt. "Okay. But how about we grab something we can eat outside? After hours of paper writing, I miss the sun."

"A woman after my own heart." With a gentlemanly gesture, he stood back and extended a hand. I took it, and together we stepped out from the shadow of the portico and into the sunshine.

11

AVA

“So look,” Darius said, after he’d swallowed the last bite of his sandwich. “I feel like I need to apologize to you.”

I was still in the middle of mine—chicken salad on whole grain—and chewing besides, so I took a moment before I said, “Apologize? Why?”

We were sitting on the grassy slope of the big hill in the middle of campus, with sandwiches we’d bought from the small coffee bar in the central admin building. The whole campus was getting mowed for the coming week, and the lush green scent rose up all around us, reminding me of afternoons playing in the yard as a kid.

“Because,” Darius said, “I totally downplayed all the shit Mimi was doing. I didn’t realize it was bad enough she’d try and put hands on you, but I should have. I live right there.”

“Wait, are you psychic?”

He gave me a confused look.

“No?” I went on. “Then there’s no way you could have known. Hell, I lived *with* her and didn’t expect that.”

“Still.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry for trying to act like it was just some normal college shit. You needed a friend on your side, and I was just like, NBD.”

“Darius. There’s no need to be sorry for anything. You know you’ve basically been one of my only friends here? I’m sure you’ve noticed I don’t have the most active social life.”

“You seem to be building one up now,” he teased.

Feeling full, I wrapped the rest of my sandwich back up, avoiding his gaze. “*Anyway*, even though I didn’t expect that from Mimi either, I’ve learned not to be surprised when people turn out to be the worst.”

“The *worst*?” he said.

“I mean, I’m exaggerating, obviously,” I replied. But then I had to reflect, because hadn’t I sort of meant it exactly like that?

His eyes seemed to evaluate me, weighing me. “I just think I should have looked out for you better.”

“It’s not like my innocence was ruined or something. I’m not a little flower you needed to handle with kid gloves, and you don’t have to apologize because of how someone else treated me.”

My mind paused on the possible double *entendre* of Darius “handling me” any kind of way he wanted, but he seemed to be in a serious mood. Which was strange in itself, and set my nerves tingling in a not unpleasant way.

“I don’t think you’re delicate if that’s where you’re aiming,” he replied. “I was just apologizing for not being a better friend. And now I’m asking a legit question because it sounds like you’ve got this whole philosophy about folks, and I’m curious. You really think people are gonna turn out to be the worst?”

Well, if I didn’t want to be considered delicate, I shouldn’t act delicate. It was evident that Darius wanted a talk—a heavy one—and I supposed I owed him that in return for using his room. “I guess…” I tried to put the words together. “What I feel is that most people have the potential to let you down. Or to be assholes, or selfish, or just plain shitty. And most people end up fulfilling that potential eventually, because otherwise they have to be on their best behavior literally all the time. And usually it’s the asshole approach that’s easier.”

“Well, damn, that’s bleak.” He balled up the wrapper of his sandwich and stuffed it into the little paper bag we’d carried them in. Then he stretched out on the grass and stared up at the sky. “You want to share how you arrived at such grim conclusions about humanity?”

Not really, I thought, then sighed. It was true about Darius being one of my only friends at Lockridge. Hell, one of my only friends currently in my life. Even so, it was a shallow friendship, easy and untroubled. I never would have thought I’d open up to him like this. But things had changed the past

couple days. He was *asking*, and for once he seemed to be giving me his focused and undivided attention.

At the bottom of the big hill, where the campus flattens out, there's a big empty field. I could see the small figures of people running around with a soccer ball, enjoying their Sunday afternoon before the grind of classes started up again. A breeze carried the faint sounds of them shouting at each other.

Up here, with Darius, my voice was small and quiet, but so very loud at the same time. "My high school boyfriend was the star of the soccer team," I said. "And the football team. And the basketball team. Smart, too. Good grades and test scores. Plus his family is rich as hell and they can trace their ancestors back to the Mayflower."

"Sounds like some prime American beef."

"Completely. Out of our graduating class he was the best Juniper had to offer. Your grandma might even know of him. He was planning on going to Duke but he could have gone to Stanford or an Ivy. He just figured his mom would appreciate him staying closer to home."

When I didn't continue right away, Darius said, "So where did he actually end up?"

"Still in Juniper. Turns out he's not going to college."

"Why not, with all that promise?"

"Well, at first he deferred a year, like I did. *Because I did.*"

"Y'all were that serious?"

"Yes," I said simply. "I was as surprised as anyone when we first got together, because I always thought he saw me as just a friend. But we stayed together for two years. His parents weren't happy about him deferring for me, but they understood."

Darius rose up on his elbows, studying me again. "Why'd you defer?"

My dream from last night swirled through my mind, all those distorted memories that had been disturbed out of the

box I'd shoved them into. Probably I'd hoped they would stay in the box forever, but here they were, pushing to be shared.

"Because my dad was sick," I said. "And I didn't want to leave him."

I stared down at the grass in front of my crossed legs, the tops of the blades squared off by the mower. I could see the tiny vertical lines running down each blade, the place where you could fold them in half and tear them in two.

"What was it?" Darius asked softly.

"Stomach cancer. He found out right when college acceptances were coming in my senior year. By the time they caught it, it was way too late. But still, he fought it for a year. I was starting to think the doctors were wrong when—" Abruptly, the grass blurred, all those sharp lines smearing into a watery green.

I felt Darius's warm hand on mine, and repressed the urge to clutch his fingers. "I'm sorry, Ava. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. But I'm here if you do."

I turned my head, avoiding his gaze, and waited until landmarks sharpened back into focus: the bell tower, the library, the dining hall. "It's not like I stayed home because I thought he needed me to get better. I just wanted to be around. Which was, ironically, more than my mother was doing." I cut myself off. "Anyway. Matt—my boyfriend—stayed in Juniper to keep me company."

"Sounds like the right thing. I would have done the same."

I huffed out a bitterly amused breath. "I hope not. Not the way he did it."

"So what happened between you and Prince Charming, then?"

Now my eyes were as dry as a brush fire. "He got my best friend pregnant. She's keeping it. That's why he's still in Juniper instead of going to college."

Darius's long fingers slid up my arm to my shoulder and gently rubbed. "He was cheating on you? When your dad

was...?”

“Yes. My dad passed in the middle of May. And she’s due in December. So, do the math.”

I remembered walking blindly out of the church at Dad’s funeral, leaving behind all the people who were lining up to talk to Mom and me. Matt and Jodie chased me to the parking lot, then drove me home even though their own families were still inside the church. How I thought I was so lucky to at least have my best friend and my perfect boyfriend when my mother had failed me so badly.

And the whole time they were hiding their betrayal. They would have already known, by then, that they were in trouble.

“Jodie was going to community college,” I explained. “Still living with her folks. I thought it was amazing that I could have both of them with me during the worst time of my life.” My laugh rustled out, like dry leaves scraping the sidewalk in fall. “He stayed because he didn’t want to leave me, and now he’s staying because he doesn’t want to leave her.”

“That’s terrible,” Darius said simply. “They did you so wrong. I can see why a person would have trust issues after a year like that.”

And he still didn’t know the half of it. I drew up my legs, knees to chest, and wrapped my arms around them.

“How’d you find out?” Darius asked.

“We were at a party. Fourth of July. Everybody was drinking except Jodie.” The memory washed over me. Matt’s buddy Leland saying, *You’re seriously off the sauce? What are you, pregnant?* And Jodie’s stricken face, and the damning silence as her eyes went straight to Matt’s.

Maybe I’d suspected something all along. Because why had that been enough for me to convict them on the spot? Both of them had been weirdly scarce all summer, and whenever I did see Jodie she would dodge my hugs, her baggy clothes revealing nothing.

“We had a huge fight,” I went on. “I was screaming so hard I wanted to throw up. Everything they said just made it worse.

Like, how could I not have known what they were up to, for *months*? They had this whole relationship and they lied to my face every minute of every day. My best friends were suddenly strangers.” I shivered. “I cut all contact with them that night. Haven’t spoken to either of them since.”

Darius was shaking his head. “Way I see it, they were both shitty people and you’re lucky to have them out of your life. But. That doesn’t mean all or even the majority of your relationships and friendships will turn out like that.”

“You sound like an optimist. You should know you’re talking to a lifelong pessimist.”

“Maybe, but what’s the alternative? To keep your distance and be alone for the rest of your life?”

I thought of Colin. “I don’t plan to live like a nun.”

“You mean sex? I’m talking about more than that. People need love and intimacy and all that gushy stuff. Hell, that’s probably what brought your friend and your boyfriend together.” He held up a quick hand. “*Not* that I’m saying they *should* have gotten that stuff from each other. Just that those desires are incredibly powerful.”

“And yet people deny them all the time when they’re with other people.”

“Of course. But it’s about context, right? When you risk hurting others, that’s the time to hold back, I agree. But also, people are selfish about what they believe makes them happy.” He sat up fully, hunching over his knees as well. “I actually went through a bad breakup myself last May. Like, the kind that really fucks with your head and your sense of self-worth. And it wasn’t just me. My friends were involved, too, and it was a fuckin’ mess.”

I heard the pain in Darius’s voice, thick and almost tangible in the air. I hadn’t considered that I’d ever open myself up to him, but I hadn’t considered him opening up to me, either. He always seemed so carefree and fun-loving. How could he have any bad stories to tell?

“She was selfish about what she believed would make her happy,” Darius continued. “The thing is, I could have let that relationship turn me bitter or gun-shy about future relationships. But I know in my bones that I’m meant to have more. I know there’s a person out there who’ll be that much more amazing—who I’ll be truly and freely happy to share my life with. But if I close myself off, I could miss that chance.”

“What if that relationship ends, too? What if it ends even worse *because* it was supposedly so much better?”

“What if it did? Every relationship is a learning experience. Every person you’re with is an opportunity to learn something, about yourself or them or the world. So you can still gain even when you lose.” He winked. “But maybe that’s the optimist in me talking.”

“Maybe.”

I felt so small and unpleasant, curled up in a ball behind all my spiky defenses. Meanwhile Darius was camped outside the fort singing romantic songs, trying to serenade me into lowering the drawbridge. Not that he was singing to me, personally—he was just doing that mentoring older student thing—but I couldn’t help the fluttery, shaky feeling in my chest, like a bird wanting out.

“You don’t have to believe me right now,” Darius said. He sent me a soft smile that stirred the fluttering sensation even more. “It took me a minute to get to this mindset, and I still think it’s scary as hell, the idea of putting myself out there again. But with the right person, it’s worth trying. I honestly believe that.”

“Well, I’m glad you got to this place. And I honestly believe *that*. I’m just not sure it’s for me. Or maybe I’m just a much slower learner.”

“I’ve got faith in you, Ava. When I look at you, I see only good things from here on out.”

He bumped his shoulder lightly against mine, and then for a while we watched the soccer players down below, an optimist and a pessimist sitting side by side.

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12

COLIN

Although I got called to give a statement to Dean Hoffman on Monday, I was definitely cool keeping my distance if Ava preferred me to mind my own business. Besides, I had plenty of shit on my plate already. Sunday evenings are always full-on as I try to do as much work as possible to prep for the week.

But I ran into Seth in the stairwell of our dorm, Hanson, and he mentioned he was on his way to dinner with Ava.

“So she’s doing okay with everything?” I asked.

He raised his eyebrows. “Far as I can tell. But what this *everything* is, I don’t know exactly. At least, not like you and Darius seem to know.”

Awkward. “I’m sorry, man. If she hasn’t already told you herself, I don’t think it would be right for me to say anything.”

“She did mention something about her roommate. And I know she stayed in Darius’s room. I was hoping she’d tell me more over dinner.”

“Yeah, hopefully. I think she could use more people who’ve got her back.”

Seth studied me. “Hey, why don’t you come to dinner with us?”

“Nah, dude, I don’t want to crash your vibe or whatever.”

“You wouldn’t be.” He leaned toward me, his startling sea-blue eyes intent on mine. “I’m not trying to be exclusive. Are you?” Before I could respond, he said, “Think about it. Really think about it.”

I did. I’d been thinking about it ever since we first hooked up in my truck. When Seth and Darius and I shared Jenn last year, I’d wondered if that arrangement only worked because it was *her*, because it was what she wanted and we were just

young and horny enough to give her anything. Now that we've all been getting to know Ava, I wonder if that experience with Jenn maybe shifted something fundamental in how I see relationships. Because as special as Ava is, I would never deny Seth or Darius the chance to be with her—if she was into it. They're my best friends, the best guys I know. They deserve to be with someone special, too. And just as important, I know they could make Ava happy— if she let them. She deserves that, too.

“I don't want to be exclusive,” I said honestly. “I've already told her she can see other people.” I grinned. “I haven't yet specified that *other people* includes you. But I'm sure she can work that out for herself.”

“Maybe it would help her work it out if we actually told her it's okay—together.”

“Or we freak her out completely. She's not like...you know.”

“Yeah, I know. That's exactly why I think it makes sense for us to be upfront about it. We know what we're doing this time around. We know what works and doesn't work for us. So we talk everything out, get everybody on the same page, and... shit, I dunno, love life and whatnot.”

“Easy as that,” I said wryly. “And you think dinner, right now, is the time to do this?”

“Well, yeah. It's Tex Mex at the dining hall tonight.”



Luckily, Ava looked pleased to see me, despite her evident surprise. “Hi,” she said, with what I hoped was a hint of breathlessness in her voice. “I was going to call you tonight. But it's good to talk to you in person instead.”

Seth shot me an *I told you so* look as we followed her to the entry point where our ID cards got scanned. Still, I thought he was overconfident about Ava being receptive to the idea of dating both of us, much less three of us if Darius got involved.

People date casually and date multiple people all the time, of course, but it's riskier when it's friends. And when not everyone is sure about *keeping* things casual.

This was something I hadn't been quite truthful about with Ava. Sure, I'd said I wasn't sure if I wanted to be serious either, that I'd even be okay if we never had sex. But after we hooked up again last night, I already had a strong and growing suspicion that my feelings weren't as lowkey as all that.

The three of us got our food and settled down at a table, chatting easily while we ate. Amusingly, Seth and Ava's accents seemed to get stronger from talking to each other, all Southern drawl and dripping honey, dropped g's and lots of *y'all* this and *y'all* that. Maybe it was a magnetic echo effect or something.

Most of the talk was about the 10K which Seth was training for. He's been after Darius and me to enter as well, but I absolutely hate running with those two since they always leave my ass in the dust after the first mile.

"Colin's a great sprinter," Seth confirmed, "but I gotta constantly remind him to work on his endurance."

"Nah, I'm not built for that shit. I'm a cheetah."

"You just need to pace yourself. Keep it slow and steady."

"I'm slow and steady where it counts." I let my lips spread in a knowing smile, and Seth guffawed.

"Maybe it'll help to train with me," Ava offered, adorably trying to stay above the innuendo. "I won't be able to run as fast as you, so if you try not to leave *me* in the dust, that would automatically slow you down."

"Great idea," Seth said. "So you'll do the 10K?"

"No way," she laughed. "I'm pretty sure that's about seven more Ks than I can actually do."

"But if we all train together, you'll start stacking the distances in no time. Company keeps you motivated."

"Don't listen to him," I told her. "He's going to be evangelizing you into marathon running before you've even

hit the finish line on *this* race.”

“I ran cross country in high school,” Seth explained. “I tried it with the Lockridge team my first year, but they’re hardcore. I still want to have working knees when I’m forty so I’m keeping it to two marathons and one triathlon a year.”

“The fact that you consider that taking it easy.” I shook my head.

“Is your reduced schedule on Doctor Colin’s orders?” Ava winked at me, and my jeans suddenly felt too tight.

“If he listened to me it would be *one* marathon every *other* year.”

“I’ll be fine,” Seth insisted. “I come from good old redneck stock. Only thing kills us is booze or bullets.”

I rolled my eyes, and Ava laughed again.



Seth got up to refill drinks for us, leaving Ava and me alone at the table. She pushed her tray to the side. “Thanks for all your messages. I’m sorry I didn’t reply about hanging out today. I really was going to call you tonight and ask if you’d be free later in the week.”

“No worries. I figured you had a lot going on. I just wanted you to know I’m here for anything you need. And also, if no one’s told you yet, I’m giving a statement to the Dean tomorrow.”

“Um, wow, thank you. Yeah, I’m talking to him, too, tomorrow morning. I’m sorry about all the trouble.”

“Hey,” I said, sitting forward. “It’s not *trouble*. Not for me.”

She bobbed her head in acknowledgement. “Either way, I’m just hoping everything will settle down soon.”

Seth was on his way back with the drinks. I tilted my head in his direction, and Ava followed my gaze. “Do you want to talk about it later?”

“No, I don’t mind if Seth knows.”

“If Seth knows what?” he asked, sitting down again.

Ava explained what had happened last night and for weeks running. The details of her whole situation were pretty grimy. Since last night I’d been wondering what the hell was up with the roommate, but even with Ava’s explanation, I was still wondering.

Seth whistled. “I can’t believe Arun *and* Darius let that shit slide for so long.”

“Don’t blame them,” Ava said. “Everyone has roommate issues, right?”

I glanced at Seth. We’d certainly had issues around Jenn, but those were far from typical. Our remedy hadn’t been typical either. “Nah, I agree with Seth. Upper-level students are supposed to look out for first-years. You should yell at those guys for dropping the ball.”

“We’re all good with each other,” Ava insisted. “Darius even apologized this afternoon, but I told him there was no need.”

“Damn right he apologized,” Seth muttered.

Ava gave him a quelling look. “And Arun’s honestly been amazing. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

The corner of Seth’s mouth crooked in amusement. “Good to hear Amazing Arun lives up to his reputation.”

“Do y’all think I could end up having the room all to myself? Will they move someone else in? Or will I have to leave Milner 2nd and move in with someone else?”

“They shouldn’t make you leave since you weren’t at fault,” I said. “As for being allowed to stay on your own or get a new roommate, I’ve seen it happen both ways. They do prefer for first-years *not* to have singles. They think it socializes you better to live with someone.”

Ava winced. “Backfired.”

“But if they don’t have another student to pair you up with, you could get lucky. Assuming you want to be on your own?”

She seemed to think about that. “Honestly, I don’t know. I was excited to have a roommate. I thought if we could be friends, how cool would that be, living with a buddy. We’d be able to hang out all the time, share our stuff, help each other...”

Her tone turned wistful. I remembered how stiffly she spoke the first time we met, like she was out of practice. She gave off loneliness in waves. It made me want to wrap her in my arms and hold her until neither of us knew where one ended and the other began.

Damn, you’re getting it bad.

“That all’s nice to have,” Seth was saying. “But when it comes to makin’ friends with a stranger maybe it’s better to think of it as a happy surprise if and when it does happen, rather than gettin’ all your hopes up.”

“It worked out for y’all two and Darius, right?”

“Not right away. Hell, we almost straight-up punched each other out once.”

Ava’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

“No need to rehash,” I interjected. “It’s a long story, and the water under that bridge is ancient.”

“Ain’t that long,” Seth said, his crooked smile daring me. “Or that ancient.”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be nosy.” Ava gave her iced tea a swirl. “We can change the subject.”

“No big,” Seth said. “I actually think you’d find it particularly interesting.”

“*Seth*,” I said warningly. Telling Ava it was okay to date both of us was one thing. But telling her about Jenn was not what we’d discussed. We also hadn’t cleared it with Darius.

Still, if you’re interested in her like that, she probably has a right to know some details.

“Hey, it’s all good,” Ava said. She gave me a reassuring smile. “Anyway, I should get going. I haven’t been back to my room since last night and I want to make sure Mimi hasn’t like, torched all my stuff.”

“I was thinking of heading in that direction myself. Colin, too. Can we walk you there?” As usual, Seth got the inside track like an expert.

“Where are you staying tonight?” I asked. “Darius’s room again?”

Ava bit her lip. “I’m not sure. Two nights making y’all bunk up just so I can avoid Mimi is really above and beyond.”

“Well, I haven’t had the pleasure of sharing with anyone yet,” Seth said. “Why don’t you stay with me? I’ve even got a futon I can pull out.”

Like a *motherfucking* expert.

“Are you serious?” Ava said.

“Yeah, it sets up in under a minute. So there won’t be any awkward dancing around who gets the bed or the floor, or if I should just sleep on top of the sheets with a pillow between us.” He winked at her.

“But isn’t it more convenient for you to just stay across the hall in Darius’s room?” I reasoned. “Lugging all your stuff to Hanson just for one night doesn’t seem practical.”

“Well, if it’s just one night, all’s you’d need is a change of clothes and a toothbrush,” Seth said, equally reasonable.

“You know, it’s honestly tempting,” Ava said. “I just felt so guilty when Darius left his room for me.”

“Nothing to feel guilty about,” I said. “You were in a situation. We all just want to help.”

I wondered who she’d choose for the night. I had the sense that we shouldn’t push too hard. We weren’t trying to fight over Ava like a dog with a bone, just make it clear that she had options. But maybe it did make sense for her to go with Seth. It would give them the time and space to figure out their

feelings—or rather, for Ava to figure out *her* feelings, because Seth's were more than clear.

I'd just have to be patient and grab the next opportunity for the two of us to pick up where we left off.

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13

AVA

Fortunately, Mimi wasn't in the room, and all the stuff I'd left behind seemed okay, everything in place and untouched. Unfortunately, Darius wasn't in his room either. As I packed my bookbag, I registered a sense of disappointment. We'd had such an intense talk earlier that I actually missed him a little. In fact, if he'd been there and insisted we share his room this time, I would have jumped on it.

And maybe jumped on him as well...

But I had to admit that when Seth had offered his place, part of me had leapt in happiness at the idea. Same with Colin last night. And if Arun offered, I'd never be able to decide.

So the ideal solution would be to stay with all of them together, clearly.

The things my brain came up with sometimes!

I left a note for Darius on his door, and also sent him a text. He replied immediately: **Tell S to take the futon. He bought it from a senior with questionable dating history and I'm pretty sure he never washed the upholstery.**

I sent him a cry-laugh emoji.

As we left Milner, I asked Seth again if he was really okay with me crashing at his place, and in answer, he took my bookbag and slung it over his own shoulder. "Don't worry about me," he said, "If I end up with regrets I got no problem kicking you out to Colin's room. It's only a couple floors up." He grinned.

"All I've got is the one bed, though," Colin teased. "No fancy futon."

"My futon ain't fancy. That's by design. Cuz whoever stays on it usually comes crawling into my bed eventually."

“So you’ve had a lot of traffic through there?” I said, trying to play along.

“Not at all. My guest list is extremely small and exclusive. You lucked out, sweetheart.”

I made a show of pretending to think about it. “Was it luck or am I just that awesome?”

“I like a woman who knows her worth!” Seth slung a friendly arm around my waist, drawing me into his tall muscular warmth, then let me go.

I was glad we were walking through a more dimly lit part of campus, because my face would have no doubt exhibited an embarrassing level of delight. Still, I surreptitiously checked for Colin’s reaction, but he only snorted and said, “That just means you’re going to have to work a lot harder to deserve her.”

“It ain’t really work if I enjoy it.”

Maybe I should have been alarmed that they were talking like this in front of me, flirting so easily as if it truly didn’t matter that I’d slept with Colin and gone on a sort-of date with Seth, *and* that they were good friends. Colin didn’t seem to have the slightest bit of territorial or jealous feeling about how strongly Seth was coming onto me. In fact, he seemed to be encouraging it.

But could I actually take them at their word? What if they were just joking around? What if I did get involved with Seth and it fell apart and spoiled something between the two of them?

As the Hanson dorm came into view, the air in my lungs seemed to thin. Suddenly, there was tension in the air. It wasn’t anything negative, more like what I’d felt with Darius right before I started telling him about Jodie and Matt. It was a feeling of anticipation, of a bend in the road ahead which I couldn’t see beyond.

The three of us climbed the steps to the second floor, and Seth paused where the stairwell opened onto the hall. “My

room's 205, third one on the left. On the number plate there's a photo of me looking hot like fire, can't miss it."

He gave me and Colin both a meaningful look, and I realized he was going to leave us to say goodnight to each other. The two of them slapped hands in that way guys do, and then Seth headed toward his room, my bookbag still on his shoulder.

I waited for Colin to speak first, not sure of the tone this was supposed to take. He stood gazing down at me for a moment, a small smile playing about his lips. "I won't keep you out past your bedtime."

"I don't know, I can stay up pretty late," I said lightly, thinking of my old rambles around Juniper in the dead of night.

"Seth'll appreciate that."

I shook my head. "So I'm not imagining things. Did y'all arrange this? Passing me off between you like a package or something?"

"Not at all. If anything, I would have wanted you to come back to my room and finish what we couldn't last night." His dark eyes burned into me, snatching my breath. "But you're in control of all this. Remember that. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. And you don't have to worry that we'll try to prevent you from doing what you want. As long as we're all clear with each other about what's going on, this'll work."

"I still don't really understand what *this* is. Or maybe what I mean is, I don't understand how it's going to work like you seem to think it will, without blowing up in our faces."

"Because honestly..." He seemed to steel himself. "It won't be the first time we've dated the same woman."

That took me aback. "Oh." Maybe it was naïve to find that surprising. How else could they be so comfortable and confident about me? Obviously they had experience. "And that was...okay? No issues?"

“Once we started talking to each other, yeah, no issues.” He exhaled a sigh. “Between us guys, anyway. Problem was, we didn’t realize *she* wasn’t talking to *us* about certain things.”

Suddenly, it all clicked. “I think Seth told me something about her. She graduated, right?”

Colin nodded. “Jenn. She didn’t want to keep seeing us. Which would have been hard enough, but the way she broke up with us was pretty messy.”

And it wasn’t just me, I remembered Darius saying. My friends were involved, too, and it was a fuckin’ mess.

The pieces of the puzzle snapped into place. “Darius was with her as well, wasn’t he? He’s said some things, but I didn’t... All three of you were in a relationship with her?”

“Yes.” Colin’s broad shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. “It surprised us, too. But it worked, and it was pretty great. Until it wasn’t.”

“So why would you want to try again with me if it ended so badly?”

“The problem was never the logistics. The problem was the person at the center. She didn’t treat us right, so she wasn’t right for us. You’re different. I think all of us can tell that about you.”

Did that mean they’d talked about it with Darius? We’d had such an amazing afternoon together, but I’d truly believed that any feelings on my end were returned with only friendship. Was he thinking about sharing me as well?

“Hey,” Colin said softly. “Don’t stress about this. We’re not trying to push anything on you. We just want you to know we’d be happy to go for it. If it’s not something you’re into, or if you’re not into one of us, no hard feelings.”

My heartbeat seemed to thump so loudly in my head that I could barely hear myself say, “Lack of interest isn’t a problem. I think I just haven’t wrapped my mind around it.”

“Well, you never know until you try. No risk, no reward, right?”

He stroked my cheek with gentle fingers, then leaned down and captured my mouth in a sweet kiss. There was just enough heat in it to leave me breathless.

“I think I’ll let Seth take over from here,” he murmured against my lips. “From what I know, he can be pretty persuasive. But how about tomorrow night you hang out with me?”

“Okay,” I said, still hardly believing this could be happening.

“Night, Ava.” He grasped my shoulders, turned me around, and nudged me toward Seth’s room.



I spotted the number plate for 205 a few yards down the hall, and heard music playing through the open doorway as I drew closer. *Wouldn’t have thought he’d be into Ariana Grande*, I thought in amusement. Then I rounded the doorframe, stepped into the room, and stopped cold.

I’d caught Seth in the middle of changing his clothes. He’d been wearing a faded gray button-down with the sleeves rolled up, tucked into dark jeans. Now he was shrugging off the shirt, and the top button of his jeans was undone.

With the room’s layout, he hadn’t been visible from the hall outside, and I’d just come barging in, and now I could see... everything.

His wide shoulders and crisply muscled arms. The strong, smooth slope of his torso, interrupted only by a tantalizing trail of golden hair disappearing into the open waistband of his jeans. So, so much skin.

I couldn’t even meet his eyes. “Um, God, I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I should have knocked.”

“No worries,” he said in that easy honey accent. “*I’m* sorry. Thought you’d be a while yet.”

“No, um, we just, you know, said good night.” I turned back to the hall. “I’ll just, um...going to use the bathroom.”

I went the wrong way at first, then had to backtrack in full view of Seth’s door. At least he didn’t seem to notice me; he was bent over his desk looking at something on his laptop, thankfully wearing a T-shirt. But he’d also replaced his jeans with basketball shorts, and I could see the well-defined curve of his ass above the lean lines of his legs.

As I scurried down the hall, my treacherous mind couldn’t help but compare him to Colin, who I’d been able to see—and feel—a lot more of last night before Mimi interrupted us. Colin was more thickly muscled overall, with the look of a disciplined guy who worked hard at the gym, sculpting himself toward perfection. Seth’s form, on the other hand, seemed to be a natural product of all the time he spent outdoors running, biking, and swimming. Both were equally gorgeous for different reasons.

Then, of course, my mind went to Darius, whose muscles I’d appreciated plenty of times in shorts and cutoffs whenever he came back to the dorm after a gym session, but had sadly never seen with less clothing than that. I bet he had abs for days, and that they’d feel amazing under my hands.

And *then* I started thinking about Arun, who was always frustratingly covered up, but who I just knew would have a kind of slim, long-limbed beauty similar to Seth’s. I wondered if Arun would be just as calm and controlled in bed as he was out of it, or if he was one of those guys who had a secret wild streak.

You seriously need to chill, Ava. I shook my head at myself. *You are out of control!*



In the bathroom, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Normally, I’m not away from my room and my stuff for long periods of time. Today was different. After being out and about since early this morning, my makeup had definitely

suffered. I had those annoying creases in my eyeshadow, smudging from my eyeliner, and my lip gloss had worn off well before any kissing with Colin—which had then puffed my lips in an obvious way. Was it worth touching up? It was only eight p.m. now, so I'd probably be awake for a few more hours depending on Seth's schedule. The makeup situation would only continue to degrade, *and* we'd be in close quarters.

But he'd seen me looking like this all through dinner, and also just now, so the damage was done. On top of that, if I did want to fix things, I'd have to go back into his room, get my makeup kit out of my bookbag, and then come back to the bathroom. Wouldn't that look totally weird and conspicuous?

Sighing, I settled for swiping the creases out of my eyeshadow with my fingers, tapping my lips with cold water in hopes it would reduce the puffiness, and running my fingers through my hair to comb out the tangles. Maybe I could pull the same trick I had with Colin in my room, and convince Seth to turn off the ceiling light in favor of something smaller and dimmer.

Except when I returned to his room, he'd already done that. He had a couple of small paper-shaded lamps hanging from the ceiling on opposing sides, casting everything in a faint pink light. The music volume had been lowered as well, turning Ariana's vocal runs velvety soft. Seth was lying on his side on his bed, taking notes from a textbook, and across from him was the legendary futon, upholstered in pale blue with darker blue throw pillows.

"Hey," he said, smiling as I entered. "Want anything to drink? Snacks? I've got some stuff in the fridge there—help yourself." He pointed to a small refrigerator next to his desk.

"I'm okay," I said. "Are you doing homework?"

"Just taking notes for a possible lesson plan. One of my Education classes makes us teach a sample lesson every other week." He sat up and hauled my bookbag toward the futon, gesturing for me to sit. "Make yourself at home. By the way, what time do you usually go to sleep?"

I settled on the futon, which was a little firm, but the pillows helped. “I try to be asleep by midnight when I’ve got classes the next day. But if that’s too late for you...”

“Nah, I don’t have class until eleven tomorrow. So don’t mind me, just do what you’d normally do on a Sunday night.”

“I’ve got some reading,” I said hesitantly. I rummaged through my bookbag for my Intro to Psych textbook.

Seth glanced at the cover, then nodded in recognition. “Do you have Lancer or Evans for that?”

“Evans.”

“Mmm, that’s too bad. He’s kind of a droner, huh?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I can’t say I’m too bummed about missing half of class tomorrow to meet with the Dean. Since Evans never looks up from his notes, I doubt he’ll notice me leaving.”

“He wouldn’t notice if you walked out on your hands instead of your feet.” Seth tilted his head, studying me. “You nervous about tomorrow?”

“A little bit. I just don’t really know what’ll happen.”

“Well, to me it sounds pretty clear-cut. You were wronged. And with three witnesses backing you up, I can’t see your roommate being allowed to continue with the shenanigans.”

“I don’t know...” I trailed off. “The thing is, she was drunk. Probably stressed out. Probably drunk *because* she was stressed. And it’s true I haven’t been the greatest roommate—”

“I know I’m not hearing you imply any of this was down to you,” Seth interrupted. “Right? Come on, regardless how she perceived you as a roommate, trying to throw hands is *objectively* shit. Toss her to the curb.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Well, you might empathize with her after sharing your room with me tonight.”

“Nope. I’m already wondering why anyone *wouldn’t* want you as a roommate.” His bright blue eyes sparkled with

warmth and that inviting flirtatiousness which was his specialty.

I inhaled a somewhat anxious breath. “So, um, Colin told me about Jenn and...and all of you.”

“Yeah?”

“And...he also told me...” God, why was I having such a hard time talking? I gathered up my courage and forced myself to say the words. “He basically told me he’d be happy if you and he and I—and Darius, maybe—could have the same kind of relationship.”

Seth slid closer, perching on the edge of his bed. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I feel the same. How do you feel?”

The words were out there, hanging between us like heavy fruit on a branch, ready to be plucked. I looked at his handsome, sun-kissed face and thought, *How many girls get an opportunity like this? Not just one amazing guy, but two, or even three? If they say they’re okay with it, why not believe them?*

Because of Matt? Because I knew what it was like to get cheated on, and I didn’t want to be like him, unable to commit to one person?

Screw Matt. This has nothing to do with him. Nothing!

I got up off the futon, abandoning my book, and crossed the room on trembling legs. Seth gazed up at me, his expression full of heat. He was ready when I crawled onto his lap, his hands immediately coming up to cup my face and gently pull my head down into a kiss.

I’d never kissed two boys in one day, much less in one hour. Comparisons to Colin came immediately to mind. Seth kissed like an explorer who’s just discovered a precious treasure—careful, gradually intensifying, but with evident excitement. Colin, by contrast, kissed with single-minded purpose—to increase our mutual pleasure. Both lit me instantly on fire.

Seth broke the kiss, dragging his lips down my neck, and I gasped as a wave of arousal rippled down my body. He pulled back a bit, smiling up at me. “Now how do you feel?”

“I feel good,” I told him softly. “You?”

“Feelin’ pretty damn fine.”

Impulsively, I leaned forward to taste the corner of his jaw, gratified to hear him grunt as my tongue made contact with his skin. He was warm and slightly salty, and when his throat clicked from a swallow I felt as much as heard it.

He pulled me up for another heated kiss, tasting himself, his tongue teasing mine. I’d started by straddling his lap, and now I found myself thrusting my hips forward, finding his hardening cock through the thin material of his shorts. My clit pulsed at the delicious friction. I supposed I was still frustrated from being unable to finish with Colin, and worked up from kissing both of them. I clasped Seth’s shoulders like a life raft, holding him close as I rocked.

“God, you’re hot as hell,” Seth murmured into my mouth. His thighs felt rock solid, and his upper body was densely compacted with muscle. His big hands made their way to my ass, caressing and squeezing and guiding the rhythm of my hips.

My knee knocked into the notebook he’d been writing in. The bedframe squeaked. I shut my eyes, focusing on the feel of Seth’s lips and tongue traveling toward my neckline.

“Ava,” he whispered into the swell of my breasts. His hot breath seared through the fabric of my shirt. “How far do you want to take this?”

It was hard to think straight with all the fire we were generating. “Um,” I managed to say, in a voice that came out like a moan. “I think...I’m not sure...”

He looked up at me, his hands rising to the safer area at the small of my back. “There’s no pressure here, darlin’. Okay? You make all the calls.”

I bit my lip, dazzled by those eyes of his, and searched my heart. “Honestly, I want to do everything with you. I probably want to do things I don’t even know I want. But this is all so much, so fast.”

“Hey, we can take it as slow as you want. All I care about is that you have a good time with me, whatever we do or don’t do.”

“I’m having a good time.” I leaned my weight back a little, trailing my fingers down his chest and stomach, marveling at what I could feel beneath his thin T-shirt. “The problem is that it’s almost too good. I just don’t want to get carried away. I want to feel like...like I know what I’m doing.”

“I get you. I don’t want you to have any regrets either.” He smiled, sunny and reassuring. “Do you want to stop? Keep going? Take it down a notch or keep it at this level?”

My cheeks burned and I fought the urge to hide my face against his shoulder. “I want to keep going, but not...not all the way. We could level it up some, though.”

“You okay giving me specific guidelines? Like are we at least gonna make you come, cuz I’ve been thinking about doing that since I first met you.”

Oh, God. I almost threw away my vague idea of limiting how far we went. “I think if we just keep checking in with each other, we can see what feels right.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Seth captured my mouth in another sweeping kiss. His arms wrapped around me, one hand going to the back of my neck, the other circling my hips. He stroked his tongue against mine and I heard myself whimper.

His cock, now full and heavy, prodded between my legs. I squirmed closer, gratified by the sound of his breath catching. Suddenly, the layers of clothing between us were a barrier I wanted gone. I wanted us to be skin to skin, hotly pressed together. My hands scrabbled at the back of his T-shirt, pulling it up, and he broke the kiss to take over. I wasted no time pulling my own shirt off.

“Are you good leveling up to this?” I asked. I sounded like I was begging. Maybe I was.

“Yeah,” he breathed. He took a moment to look at me, and the way his hungry gaze seemed to pull at everything in his

sight made my blood buzz. His fingers caught on my bra strap. “Do you want this on or off?”

“Off,” I said urgently. “Please, off.”

Quickly, he unsnapped the clasp and pulled the bra away. My nipples were already puckered, and he thumbed them as he cupped my breasts. “Ava, can I kiss these?”

I nodded, afraid my voice would break if I tried to speak.

He immediately tasted the tip of my left breast, prompting a gasp from me. The hot wet lapping of his tongue all around the circle of my nipple was so unbearably good that I tipped my head back, pushing my chest toward him.

“Tell me what you’re feeling,” Seth said, then licked toward my right breast.

I drew in a shaky breath. How could he expect me to form words at a time like this?

He pressed a hot kiss to my breastbone. “Ava...is this all right for you?” The exhalation of his words washed over my damp skin. “Ava?”

“Y-yes,” I was finally able to say.

“Good, because this is so fucking good for me. *You’re* so good.”

He started suckling me while his fingers strummed my other breast, and God, he was hot about it. It was all I could do to hold still as pure pleasure rolled down toward my cunt.

And yet it wasn’t quite enough. I kept rubbing myself against the tantalizing hardness of his cock, but I needed more.

Seth seemed to sense my frantic energy. His free hand, splayed across my spine, slid toward my front. “Can I touch your pussy? It’s okay to say no. I just want to make you feel good.”

How could I want anything else right now? “Yes, yes,” I moaned.

I unfastened my jeans, giving Seth the space to slip his hand inside my panties. His long fingers hit home just as his mouth

latched onto my breast again.

“Fuck,” I gasped.

“Jesus, you’re so wet,” he whispered. “I’d love to taste you one day, right from the source.”

All I could do was moan again, I was so far gone. His fingers played over my clit expertly, his strong wrist making room in the tightness of my jeans. Then he nudged me up a bit so he could push one finger into me. Immediately, I clenched around him.

“There it is,” Seth sighed. “Just relax and let me take care of you.”

He set up a rhythm, dipping into my wetness before gently circling and pressing my clit. Meanwhile his mouth roamed over my breasts, licking and sucking and kissing, driving my arousal higher and higher. My hands tangled in his golden hair.

“I’m close,” I whispered, breath hitching.

“I got you. Just let it happen. Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

His lips wrapped around my nipple and then, finally, he got two fingers on either side of my clit, massaging me just right—like he was already an expert in me. I literally shook as waves of orgasm plunged through my body.

Seth kept up the stimulation until I had to pull away. I pressed my face into his neck, breathing in the scents of grass and greenery and fresh air which he somehow carried even at this time of night. He smoothed his hands up and down my naked back, and somehow those caresses seemed to spread the remnants of pleasure even further.

At last, I raised my head and kissed him again. “Thank you,” I said against his lips. “That was amazing.”

“I aim to please.”

“Is it okay if I do the same for you?” I traced the line of his waistband, dragging my fingers temptingly close to the hard ridge below it.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t say no, but you should know this wasn’t about me. I meant it when I said I want *you* to feel good.”

“This *would* make me feel good.” I let my knuckles graze his erection and he hissed between his teeth. “So can I?”

He nodded. “Happy to oblige.”

Turned out his cock was as sexy as the rest of him, long and straight and perfectly proportioned. His hips bucked as I wrapped my hand around the shaft. Despite the past few days, I still felt relatively inexperienced at this, so I said, “Tell me what feels good?”

“Anything you do,” he groaned, staring into my eyes. “*Anything*. You’re so goddamn sexy, Ava.”

I leaned forward and kissed him, lashing his tongue with mine as my hand kept working. I felt the pre-come leaking from his cockhead and I wondered, as he had about me, what he tasted like. Hopefully Colin—and Darius—really would be cool with this, and I’d find that out about all of them.

He thrust up into my hand, meeting my downward strokes, and I admired the sight of his abs, how they carved in a V toward his groin, how he had one visible vein that I just wanted to lick.

“Faster,” Seth panted. “Please, honey.”

I obliged, and bent to drop wet open-mouthed kisses on his jawline, his neck, his pecs and nipples, lapping up the fine layer of perspiration on his skin; I couldn’t get enough of it. He seemed to like that. His rough breathing sounded like a train, and he was practically writhing now. I loved that I could make him feel this way.

What put him over the edge was my hand slipping over the crown of his cock. Three strokes and he said, “Fuck, I’m gonna...*Jesus Christ*.”

I felt his cock pulse against my palm, and sat back to watch him spurt over his belly. He laid back on the bed, exposing the beautiful arch of his throat and torso. The sight of him like that got me hot and throbbing all over again. I laid down next to

him, on my side, squeezing my thighs together to coax out a series of mini convulsions. I shut my eyes to concentrate on the feeling.

When I opened them, Seth was watching me. “Incredible,” he said. “You’re absolutely beyond.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” I smiled.

“Any regrets?”

“Not a one.”

He pulled me toward him for a long, lazy kiss before getting up to clean himself off. I watched from my position on the bed. “Guess you’ve graduated off the futon,” he teased. “Hope you don’t mind spooning. Ain’t a lot of room on these twin mattresses.”

“As long as you’re the little spoon.”

“We’ll see about that. How about we wrestle for it?” He crawled back into bed on top of me.

“Bring it on,” I said breathlessly.

14
ARUN

“Well, I think we covered it,” Dean Hoffman said. He scanned the printout of my statement, which he’d scrawled over with his own notes during our meeting. “Unless there’s anything further you want to add?”

“No, sir. Just thanks for letting me discuss this with you in person.”

“Thank *you*, Arun. It’s a shame something like this had to happen on your watch. But from what I can see, you’ve handled everything properly.”

“Hopefully it can be resolved expediently.”

“Yes, my meeting with Ms. Le is in the next few minutes. Then I’ll speak to her roommate, although between you and me, that’ll be more of a formality.”

“So you already have a course of action?”

Hoffman spread his hands. “These things aren’t really up to my discretion. As you know, college policy dictates, particularly when it’s a matter of student safety. However, since no actual physical contact or harm occurred, it’s my judgment that we can keep this out of formal judiciary proceedings. Separating them is, I think, in everyone’s best interests.”

I was relieved he seemed to want to avoid a formal process, which had the potential to be stressful and intense for everyone involved, but I wasn’t sure whether Ava would see it the same way. At least Hoffman agreed they shouldn’t live together anymore.

I stood and we shook hands, then I let myself out.

Ava was just entering the reception area outside the Dean’s office, no doubt on the way to her appointment. She looked ravishing as usual. She’d apparently decided to dress up a bit, wearing a dusty rose short-sleeved blouse over a tan skirt

which clung to her legs as she walked. Her hair had a teased look to it, and her face glowed.

I was about to head in her direction to say hello when I saw who had accompanied her. Seth Gallant, one of Darius's friends. Seth was often on the hall visiting Darius, and he seemed like a good guy. But I wasn't aware that he and Ava knew each other well enough for him to accompany her to something like this. He towered over her, and as I watched them draw closer, he bent his head to say something to her, inaudible from this distance.

The sight of that got me. There was something protective about the angle of his head and the way his body turned toward her, and something intimate about the way Ava looked up at him and replied.

Were they together? It was surprising, given that when I'd arrived at the Dean's office earlier I'd run into Colin Kim coming out of his appointment. And the only reason for Colin's presence was that he'd witnessed the incident with Mimi from inside the dorm room. While half-naked, in fact.

I didn't have time to unpack any reactions to this development, because Ava spotted me. Her eyes lit up and she hurried over, Seth hanging back and giving me a short nod of greeting.

"Arun! How are you?" she asked.

Seeing Ava up close never fails to knock me for a loop. She's so incredibly attractive, her dark eyes capturing me in her orbit as easily as the earth with the moon. I drank her in, then realized I needed to verbally respond. "I'm all right. But how are *you*? I stopped by Darius's room last night but couldn't find you."

Actually, I'd stopped by a couple times. Then this morning, on the way to his own appointment with Dean Hoffman, Darius had told me she was staying somewhere else.

"No, I..." She seemed to hesitate, then lifted her chin. "I thought invading Darius's space two nights in a row was too much. Seth was nice enough to let me crash with him."

A constricting sensation shot through my chest, the same feeling I'd had seeing her with Colin. I knew, with stark clarity, that she and Seth hadn't *just* shared a room.

Really not your business, though, is it?

"That's good," I managed to say. "Hopefully after today's meetings, you can get back to normal. Speaking of..." I gestured at Dean Hoffman's door.

"Right." She squared her shoulders. "Wish me luck."

"You got this," Seth said. He lifted a hand to her face, gently brushing her jawline with his knuckle. She looked up at him with a small, private smile, then headed over to check in with the Dean's assistant.

Seth and I stepped out to the corridor. "Lotta ruckus in your building lately," he said, so mildly it half-sounded like a question.

"Unfortunately. Where are you, by the way?"

"Hanson. It's practically comatose in comparison."

Hanson's a junior/senior dorm only. All the rooms are singles. It's a prime assignment for senior RAs who just want to chill during their last year.

"Well," I said diplomatically, "it's only the second month."

Seth grinned, his remarkable blue eyes creasing at the corners. "Hell, I was a basket case my whole first *semester*. It's wild trying to cram a bunch of kids into these shoebox-sized rooms. Suddenly they have to share their whole life with a total stranger. You can't guarantee alone time to hook up or even take a shit."

Crude, but accurate. "Some handle it better than others."

"True. Anyway, I've got class. You walkin' out?"

I hesitated. "I thought I'd wait, in case... As their RA."

He nodded. "I'm sure she'd appreciate that. Talk later, bro." Surprisingly, he held out a hand to shake. It wasn't anything too formal, but as he walked off, I had the impression the gesture had been a sign of *approval*. Weird.



Small tables and upholstered benches sat at various intervals along the wide corridor of the admin building. I settled on one of the benches with my laptop, ostensibly to catch up on emails but really to stare at the screen, lost in thought.

Of course it wasn't my business who Ava spent time with. But part of me *wanted* it to be my business. If I weren't her RA, and we were just two people who happened to live on the same hall, maybe it would be an option for us to have a different kind of relationship—if she was into that.

But things can get messy when an RA crosses that professional line, sometimes even with friendship. It's impressed upon us during our training that, although intimacy with a fellow resident is not a fireable offense, an RA's aura of authority can be confusing for both partners, and also for the other hall residents. We were strongly encouraged to keep things platonic and professional. I had no problem with that as a sophomore RA, and I intended to do the same this year. If I needed to be with someone, I had the whole of Lockridge College outside of Milner 2nd to choose from.

But that was only one of the reasons I should keep my distance with Ava. The other reason it wouldn't be right to cross any boundaries was because of Ava herself.

She was someone I'd been worried about not being able to handle the crucible of college. It's my job to keep an eye on everyone on Milner 2nd, but with Ava it was more difficult because she was so much less *visible*. Most of the time she was either in class or the confines of her room. If we ran into each other she seemed happy to chat for a bit, but even in the middle of the crowded dining hall she gave off the impression that she was still inside that room, furtively peeking out through the cracked-open door. She was that way with everyone—ready to bolt back into hiding as soon as possible.

So I'd been worried about her, and honestly, I wasn't too surprised to find out she and Mimi couldn't get along. They

seemed to have very different personalities, and Mimi's continuing rudeness about the whole sexile situation would have gotten on anyone's nerves.

But what did surprise me was how the big blowup seemed to pop Ava's self-protective bubble. Evidently she had other people to turn to—Darius and Colin and Seth—people who could openly take her side. Unlike me.

The part of me that was content to just be Ava's friend felt happy for her. I could recognize it as a good thing that these guys had somehow drawn Ava out, that they'd gotten past her guards in whatever way.

But I had to recognize that another part of me felt a little envious of their position in her life. Nothing I wanted to dwell on, but undeniable nevertheless.

Because let's be real, you can make a strong guess about how exactly they got past her guards...

Still, aside from all that, they're juniors, and Ava's only a first-year. Of course casual dating is a thing, and maybe it was their thing, but it was a bit unconventional that two friends would be down with seeing the same girl. I considered all three of them decent guys, although I only really knew Darius well, but the most important consideration was Ava's—how she saw them and how they treated her.

So I resolved to keep an eye on the situation just in case.

As her RA, and as a friend.



Ava's meeting with the Dean ran half an hour. She looked surprised to see me waiting for her, but then a smile brightened her face. Still, I didn't miss the slight redness around her eyes and nose.

I stood as she drew close. "Everything okay?"

She nodded. "He basically just wanted to hear my side of things. He asked a couple questions to clarify when exactly

certain things happened, but he didn't question *me*, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, he should have heard plenty from me and Colin and Darius already. Did he give you an idea of his timing for what happens next?"

"He said he'd be in touch before the end of the day."

That was gratifyingly fast. Ava had been essentially drifting between safe harbors for days now, and for weeks before that she'd felt uneasy around Mimi in the very room she was supposed to call home. She deserved to feel safe in her own space.

Speak of the devil. Mimi appeared at the end of the corridor, likely on the way to her own appointment.

She looked pale and haggard, but sober. She'd mostly kept to the room all day Sunday. I'd checked on her at various points. She seemed to understand the gravity of the shit she'd gotten herself into, but she hadn't opened up to me when I asked if she wanted to talk about it.

The long corridor framed Mimi like a figure at the end of a telescope. I couldn't help feeling I'd failed her in a way. No matter what I felt for Ava, I'd resolved to keep it professional. Mimi, by extension, deserved the same. She was an eighteen-year-old away from home for the first time. She wanted to have sex with her boyfriend but for whatever reason, had some kind of hang-up about admitting to it. She'd had access to alcohol, which she clearly didn't know how to handle. Combined, it was a recipe for trouble.

If Mimi had actually managed to hurt Ava physically, Lockridge policy dictated that she face severe punishment. But luckily she hadn't made contact. Obviously she and Ava needed to be separated, but what other consequences did Mimi's actions deserve?

I honestly didn't know how I felt about that question, but as their one source of authority and support in close proximity, I should have been more proactive in looking out for *both* of them.

Mimi's face fell as she saw us, but then she lifted her chin and walked right over, hardly pausing. "Ava, I'm sorry," she said, without preamble or prevarication. "I was a complete asshole. You didn't deserve what I did."

"Which part?" Ava replied coolly.

Good for you, I thought.

"Literally anything and everything I did," Mimi said. She scrubbed a hand through her fiery hair. "Trying to attack you. Locking you out. Calling you a prude. Hell, talking shit about you behind your back. I don't expect forgiveness or whatever. But when I fuck up, I own up to it."

As apologies went, I had to admit Mimi's was hard to discount. She'd listed a full docket of wrongs and taken responsibility for them, and she hadn't tried to make excuses. Mimi had always struck me as a typical "tough girl," the kind who likes to think they've taken a few trips around the proverbial block. It was good to see she wasn't the type to view apologizing as weakness.

"If you think I'm going to ask the Dean to go easy on you," Ava began, "I already talked to him and—"

Mimi shook her head. "That's not it. I was shitty and I'm sorry. I just wanted you to know that." She looked at me. "Thanks for trying with all the RA stuff and sorry I didn't listen. I've gotta get in there now. See you around."

Ava's lips thinned as she watched Mimi head into the Dean's reception area. "So we're supposed to be all good after a half-assed apology that didn't even last thirty seconds?"

"I don't think she expects you to be all good," I said slowly. What had Ava considered *half-assed* about that? "But she seemed sincerely sorry. To me, anyway."

"I'm sure she wants *you* to think that, after you reported her and all. But if you hadn't, she'd still be acting the same."

"Maybe."

"You don't agree?"

Ava seemed to be expecting an argument. I chose my words carefully. “I don’t think it’s automatically suspect that she apologized now. Sometimes, a person doesn’t see that they have anything to be sorry for until something snaps them out of it. What matters then is how they act after that point.”

Ava shrugged, unconvinced. “What matters is that they shouldn’t have let it get that bad in the first place.”

“People aren’t perfect. Far from it.”

“I didn’t say they should be. It’s not like it was one instance. When you do something hurtful over and over again, you can’t just say *I’m sorry* and think that’s enough or even remotely believable.”

“No, I get that,” I said. Time to dial back the lecturing. “You heard what you heard, and your feelings are valid. Obviously you were the one living with Mimi and dealing with that situation. You have the right not to accept her apology if you don’t want to.”

“I know that.” Ava shifted, not meeting my eyes. “Anyway. Thanks for...you know. Everything.”

“No need to thank me.” The conversation felt unfinished, but it had also escalated weirdly into something tense. And it seemed like she was done with it, and I had to respect that. “Hopefully I’ll see you back on the hall tonight?”

“Yeah, hopefully.” She gave me a little goodbye wave, still not quite looking at me.



That afternoon, Dean Hoffman sent out two emails, one to Mimi and one to Ava. I was copied on both. Mimi’s email informed her she was on probation for the rest of the semester, effective immediately, and that she was being reassigned to another dorm, with twenty-four hours to complete the move. Because she’d been caught drinking, she had to complete weekly volunteer hours with the housekeeping department. Hoffman also warned her that the college could require her to

submit to random substance abuse tests or room searches, and if she failed any, she'd be suspended and possibly even expelled.

Ava's email informed her that Mimi was leaving, and since first-year students were not entitled to single rooms she could be assigned a new roommate at any time. Hoffman also formally extended her the option to stay in off-campus housing, normally reserved for speakers and official visitors, until the situation had been "resolved." The offer came entirely too late, of course, but college policy plus the weekend had dictated the timing on that.

I hit reply, dropping the Dean, and wrote to Ava: **What are your plans? If you want to wait to return until Mimi's fully moved out, I'll give you the all-clear. If you want to come back to the hall but not actually be in your room, you're welcome to mine. I can crash elsewhere.**

I sent the email before I could second guess myself on the last part. It didn't have to mean anything beyond friendly, professional generosity. I just wanted Ava to feel safe and supported.

But maybe she didn't need me for that.

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15
AVA

Thanks again for everything, I wrote to Arun. I'll be okay. Back on the hall tomorrow night.

Normally I'm the person who writes three paragraphs to express a single thought—and I had quite a lot of thoughts swirling around about everything—but I felt weird about our last conversation. Like I'd disappointed him, or let him down, all because I couldn't be the bigger person and forgive Mimi.

Did he think I was being childish? He'd tried to be nice about it, I could tell, but that was just Arun being Arun. Perfect and considerate and kind and *grown-up*. How could a messy kid like me, with all my issues, measure up?

Even asking a question like that felt...presumptuous or something. Because no one was asking or expecting me to measure up to anything about Arun. He's two years above me, he's my RA, and he probably sees me as just another of his many responsibilities on Milner 2nd. Now that Mimi was getting kicked out of the room, I wouldn't be making anymore waves and he wouldn't have to act concerned about me. Or have any reason to think either less or more of me.

I got through my Monday classes and checked in with Seth at the library. "Awesome," he said when I told him the Dean's conclusion. "Hope you're planning to take advantage of having a room all to yourself."

"Could be." His smile got my heart speeding up. "Got any ideas?"

He pressed me gently against the stacks, cradling the back of my head with his hand, and gave me a thorough kiss. I was gasping by the end of it, turned on and shamelessly arching into him despite the fact that he was still technically working, and also anyone could interrupt us.

"How long until your shift's over?" I asked.

His hands clasped my hips. “Here ‘til closing, unfortunately.”

“When’s that, ten p.m.? You’re going to miss dinner?”

“I always get something from the coffee bar before I start my shift. But you can bring something from the dining hall to my room later.” He dipped his head and caught my lips in another kiss. “If you want to stay over again. Or even if you don’t.”

“Actually, um, Colin asked if I could stay with him. Would that be okay with you?” I hadn’t known how to bring it up before now. It was weird enough wanting to hook up with both of them, much less saying it out loud. But Seth deserved the truth.

God, how did you suddenly get to a place where you have the option of sleeping in not just one but possibly four different guys’ rooms? After barely talking to another human being for weeks!

“Wherever you want to be is okay with me,” Seth said. “My door’s open to you no matter what.”

I went up on my tiptoes for a third kiss, long and lingering. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” He threaded our fingers together, then brushed his lips against my knuckles. “Give me a call whenever you’re free.”

I hadn’t realized how much I missed the feeling of having someone to kiss and hug and just *be* with. I’d gone from sharing all of that with Matt on a near-daily basis for two years straight, to nothing. And I’d tried to pretend it didn’t matter, but the truth was, it felt good to be touched. It felt especially good to be touched by someone who cared. I could easily get used to it again.



Maybe all the recent human contact made me feel newly self-conscious about eating alone in the dining hall, even though that had become situation-normal by my second week on campus. But as I settled in my usual shadowy corner, with nothing to keep me company but my phone, I couldn't help sneaking looks at the dinner crowd. None of them seemed to be looking at me, but that made it worse, in a way. There really is nothing more isolating than eating a meal alone when all around you are other people eating *together*, oblivious to your own solitude. I felt like I was sitting behind a one-way mirror, invisible.

It sucked. I'd been able to ignore my loneliness at dinnertime before, or at least not dwell on it. But now I knew how much nicer companionship could be.

Feeling clingy already? Because that worked so well with Matt.

I decided to bolt down my food and escape to Colin's room. It was early, but if I had to sit behind a wall, at least it would be of my own choosing.

Then the clatter of a tray hitting the table made me jerk my head up. Darius grinned down at me, his dimples already deployed. "Lotta noise and busyness coming out of your room today."

If only that one-way mirror had kept Darius from seeing me like this. I tried to play it cool. "Mimi?"

"Yeah, she spent the afternoon packing up. Seems like she wants to get her head straight, so she's going ahead and leaving for fall break once all her stuff's in her new room. How are you feeling?"

I actually felt surprised that she'd talked to Darius at all. If it had been me, I might well have snuck out with all my stuff in the middle of the night and hoped to never run into anyone from Milner 2nd again. But then, Mimi and I are very different people, as we've established.

"Relieved, I guess," I said. "Kind of glad. Hoping I don't have to get another roommate any time soon."

“Hey, you never know. The next one might end up the godmother to your kids one day.”

Of course Darius the optimistic social butterfly would only see the potential good. I forced a smile. “Not in a rush to see that day either.”

“Now, you seem way too down for a woman who’s about to have fifty percent more living space.” And of course Darius would see right through me. “You finished eating? Let’s go be irresponsible.”

“I’ve got reading to do—” I began reluctantly.

“I said *irresponsible*, did I not?”

My fake smile turned real as he kept coaxing me along. Easily half a dozen people greeted him on our way out of the dining hall, slapping hands or shoulders or inviting him to pull up a chair. Darius took care to introduce me to all of them. It reminded me, in a small way, of my early days getting to know Matt, when I felt like the unexpected shadow trailing a prince through the halls of our high school. But unlike Matt’s sometimes clumsy efforts to bring me inside his halo, Darius just had an effortless inclusivity about him. Instead of a shadow, he made me feel like we walked side by side, his arm comfortingly around me—even though we weren’t touching at all.

Yeah, I really could get used to this.



“Are we breaking and entering?” I clutched Darius’s arm as he led me down the corridor.

We were back in the admin building, in a wing on the opposite end of where Dean Hoffman’s office was located. Through the glass doors on either side of the corridor I could see that all the other rooms and offices were dark, since everyone in the administration had gone home.

“The doors weren’t locked,” Darius replied breezily. “No breaking involved.”

“Downstairs they weren’t,” I pointed out. Students have 24/7 access to all the common areas on the main floor for club meetings and hanging out, as well as the mailboxes and bulletin boards. “But all the doors on this floor *are*.”

“We’re not going into any of those,” he said. “The room we want is down there.”

“But—”

He tucked my hand into the bend of his elbow and picked up the pace, laughing. “Ava, I promise if we get in trouble, I’ll take the fall for you.”

We ducked through a pair of glass doors at the very end of the corridor. As Darius had indicated, the doors weren’t locked—but the lights were out. Instead of turning them on, Darius pulled out his phone to use its flashlight.

“Okay, now it’s starting to feel criminal,” I protested.

“Nothing to worry about. Just maintaining the ambiance.”

He moved forward through the darkness, the phone light illuminating his way. I saw the backs of chairs arranged at a huge table. We were in a conference room. Darius paused near the head of the table, where there was a podium and some kind of metal cart with a stack of technical A/V stuff all wired up together. Beyond them, on the wall, was a massive TV screen.

“Here, hold this?” Darius handed me the phone. “Aim here?” He pointed at the media cart.

I did as directed, trying to suppress my misgivings. If we weren’t allowed in here, the door would have been locked, right? Sure, the student club rooms were all downstairs, but this was a conference room after all, and maybe students were allowed to have meetings here as well.

Darius slid his bookbag off his shoulders and dug through it, coming up with a few bits and pieces of something I recognized right away as the components for his Nintendo Switch.

“Wait, we broke in to play video games?” I crossed my arms in consternation.

“Yo, keep the light steady?” Darius chided me lightly. I redirected the phone for him; at least he couldn’t see my smirk in the dimness. “One, like I said, we didn’t break in. And two, we’re not playing any old video game. This is *Breath of the Wild*.”

“You say that like I should know something about it.”

He looked affronted. “You don’t know *Legend of Zelda*?”

“Is that a movie? Anyway, don’t you have a TV in your room? Not to mention like two different computer monitors?”

“Ava, Ava, Ava. You haven’t *lived*. This game is Triple-A, five-star, 100% Darius-approved. And those screens of mine are postage stamps compared to this big boy right here. But don’t worry, you lucked out. You finally get to play one of the best games ever made, on one of the best screens and sound systems on campus, all with me right next to you.”

“Oh, can’t wait,” I said dryly.

But as I watched Darius hook up wires and power on the huge TV, a sort of wistful curiosity unfurled in my chest. He clearly thought this would be fun. And after today—after the past few days—fun was something I sorely needed. What would be wrong with trying, at least for his sake?

The screen came to life with some game graphics, which consisted of a small menu over a slideshow of artwork that I had to admit looked very well done. Soothing music floated from various speakers hanging from the ceiling at intervals around the room.

Darius adjusted a few settings on the TV before handing me a small controller studded with buttons. “This is called a joycon. Once we get into things, I’ll show you what does what.”

“I hope you’re not expecting much. When it comes to gaming, all I know how to do is swipe puzzle pieces on my phone.” I paused. “Although my...my old friend Jodie was really into *The Sims*. Sometimes we’d do that together.” We

used to play for hours at a time, her doing the controls and me giving directions, putting our virtual doll families through all kinds of drama where husbands and wives cheated on each other and produced ten children with ten different partners. Little did I know how painful real life would be.

Jodie, on the other hand, was no doubt having a great time building a brand-new real-life family. Her and Matt and baby.

“This’ll be different,” Darius said, pulling two chairs together so we could sit side by side. “But I think you’ll be into it. Okay, we’re up.”

He chose to start a new game, and it sparkled to life on the screen. It ran just like a movie, with credits and a whole animated story that looked like it could have been drawn by Studio Ghibli or something. Darius interjected with a few explanations of context, like how the original game came out years ago, then walked me through some of the menus and movements.

We sat in the dark, illuminated only by the screen, which seemed to enclose us in a hazy cocoon. The light washed over Darius’s high cheekbones and strong nose, emphasizing the handsome structure of his face. Twice he reached over to position my finger, point to a particular button. Every time he leaned close, every time our hands touched, I felt a tiny thrill low in my belly.

“You ready?” Darius asked. “You’ll get little missions popping up in addition to the big one, but just explore wherever you want. The world is huge.”

It really was, and the massive screen was crystal clear. The music and sound effects, all soft and ambient, trickled down to us from the surround sound speakers. The movie experience from the game’s intro smoothly expanded into a cool interactive situation where I could control my character. I ran him through underground tunnels, collecting loot, until finally emerging into daylight.

“This is so beautiful,” I marveled, as I maneuvered the game camera in a wide circle, taking in the sunlit landscape. “I had no idea video games could look like this.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” Darius quipped.

For a good ten minutes the game had me fully immersed. Darius, for all his usual chatty demeanor, seemed content to just sit next to me and watch my character run and climb all over things.

Then I had my first “kill,” using a bow and arrow to knock out some creatures so I could steal their stuff. A delighted laugh escaped me as I bulls-eyed. “Sorry!” I told the creatures. “I need this more than you!”

“You’re a natural,” Darius said. “Kinda bloodthirsty though.”

“This is a lot more fun than the kind of games where you just mow down Stormtroopers with laser guns or whatever I see you playing.”

“Well, you might need to be in the right mood for those,” he joked. “But if you ever want a more intense kind of one-to-one mayhem where you can still have fun exploring shit, you could always try *GTA*.”

“What’s that?”

“*Grand Theft Auto*. Kind of like *Fast and the Furious* but like, dirtier and funnier. You steal cars, steal money, occasionally do some real B&E, and also visit strippers.”

I gaped at him. “Shit, that sounds awesome. Let’s play *that*.”

“It’s not a Switch game, but once you’re back in your room you’ve got a standing invitation to come over and play whenever.”

“You might regret that,” I teased. “I can already tell how addictive this stuff is. How do you not just waste all your time playing?”

“Well, this is what I want to do. Make video games, I mean. I’m majoring in comp sci with a concentration in game design.”

“I didn’t even know that was something you could study for.”

“For sure it is. In fact, some schools offer a game design major straight-up. But that would have been a hard sell for my folks. Computer science is easier to explain to the relatives during the holidays. It’s got some prestige and the money’s better known.”

“Makes sense.”

“Even though the video game industry is worth billions,” Darius said dryly. “But to be honest, I don’t mind having a more general degree to fall back on for job searching just in case game design doesn’t work out.”

“Job searching seems a little far away for me,” I confessed. “But I should probably get some kind of summer internship, right?”

“Two months into your first year?” A corner of Darius’s mouth hitched up in amusement. “I’d say you don’t need to start stressin’ until next semester. If you haven’t found something by spring break, though, that’s when you’ll need to get underhanded and take all your competition out. Only use methods that can’t be traced back to you. By May, if you still haven’t been hired somewhere, consider bribery or blackmail. Blackmail’s cheaper, but could be more time-consuming. Bribery’s low effort.”

“Haha. I’m serious.”

“All right...seriously? First year is supposed to be your fun time. This is the time for you to do all the wild and crazy shit you had to go behind your parents’ backs to do when you still lived under their roof. Yeah, you gotta pass your classes and stay out of trouble, but you’ve got years to worry about employment.”

He leaned toward me as he spoke, his white teeth flashing in his smile, and I found myself smiling back. “Fine, I believe you. I guess playing video games in a dark room is your idea of wild and crazy?”

Darius let out an amused snort. “You burning me for giving friendly advice, I see how it is. But *I* don’t have any deficit in

my wild and crazy account. How about *you* come up with something now?"

My pulse sped up to double-time. He was still tilted toward me, and like a leaf caught in a whirlpool I drew closer, rational thought spinning away. Or was it him moving closer to me? Either way, it was movement that seemed inevitable. I felt his breath on my lips, stirring my nerves awake. I felt the heated urgency of the moment, how the flirtatious energy between us had ramped up to lightning bolt level.

I made a choice. "Challenge accepted," I whispered, then closed the distance and pressed my mouth to his.

Darius's reaction was immediate. He cupped my jawline with his hand, stroking my cheekbone with his thumb. I half-braced myself for him to speed it up from 0 to 60, but he simply opened my lips with his tongue, dipped inside, and withdrew—a teasing taste.

I wanted to dial it up then. I grasped the back of his neck, and suddenly we were full-on kissing, exploring each other without hesitation. His lips were plush and lovely, and he knew damn well how to use them. All of his confidence and charisma were present in this moment, concentrated solely on me. If I weren't sitting down, I might have swooned in his arms like some old Hollywood movie my namesake had probably starred in. Even still, I could swear the world got knocked askew.

We kissed for who knew how long, and surprisingly that was *all* we did. Darius kept his hands above my shoulders, and even though I would have been happy to guide them lower, he got me so hot with only his mouth on mine that I just luxuriated in it. There was something to be said for *anticipation*, for building up to the final event. I hadn't known Colin or Seth very well before hooking up with them, but Darius had been my friend since my first day at Lockridge. There'd always been an attraction simmering between us, and now that we were giving into it, the growing pressure felt delicious.

Finally, we slowed down by mutual accord. Darius was breathing heavily—so was I, for that matter—but when I drew back a bit I could see he was smiling.

“How was that for trying something wild and crazy?” I murmured.

“I thoroughly approve.” He kissed me again, grazing the side of my neck with his fingers. “It’ll be damn good to have you back across the hall.”

I felt the same. But... “Can I ask you something?”

He nodded knowingly. “You want to ask about Colin and Seth?”

“I mean, have you talked to them about me? About, you know, all of us?”

“Yeah, a little. Is that okay with you? We weren’t talking behind your back or anything. It’s just that all of us know how important communication is in a situation like this.”

“Sure. I mean, y’all are the ones with experience.”

“But we’re all in this as equals. If there’s anything you’re not comfortable with, just tell us.”

“No, I—I’m fine with everything. At least, I think I am. Like you said, communication is important, and as long as we’re all doing that with each other, and everyone’s truly okay with, um...”

Darius chuckled. “Sharing you?”

“Well, I just want to make sure.”

“Don’t worry.” He whispered that in my ear, his hot breath making me tremble. “We’re all more than good with it. Speaking of which, whose room are you crashing in tonight?”

God, he said it so naturally. My heart, which had been pounding so hard as we kissed, now seemed to unfurl like a flower. “Colin’s. I didn’t want to inconvenience Seth two nights in a row. Unless...are there supposed to be turns? Is there like a rotation?”

“That’s up to you,” Darius said, chuckling again. “The only thing that’s *supposed* to happen is whatever we all *want* to happen. The three of us want you to be happy. So whoever you want to be with at any given time is fine.”

I exhaled slowly. “This is going to take some getting used to. I mean, honestly, I want to be with all of you.”

“At the same time?” he said wickedly.

Holy shit. My mind immediately pictured a tangle of bodies, muscular limbs wrapped around me, hands and mouths creating pleasure from all of my erogenous zones... “Oh, God,” I sputtered. “I just meant—I want all of you *equally*.”

But to have them all together... My imagination sparked a heated throb between my legs.

“We’ve never done it as a group before,” Darius said, sounding thoughtful. “I’m thinking Seth would love every second of it, but Colin and I would probably be a little more focused on you. Still, you never know what could happen.”

Immediately my mind pictured them kissing *each other*. Those hands and mouths which I’d been imagining on myself were now exploring rigid abs, muscular thighs, sliding toward proudly erect cocks while I watched—

Maybe even directed.

I forced myself to focus before I jumped Darius right here in the conference room. “I honestly don’t think I could choose between any of you,” I said. My voice sounded embarrassingly uneven. “But I already agreed to stay with Colin tonight. I wouldn’t want to cancel on him, you know?”

“I don’t want you to cancel on him either. In fact, I’ll walk you over there.”

“Really?”

“Really. Way I see it is, the sooner you get used to all of us wanting to be with you, the sooner we can make that happen.” He grinned. “Let’s go.”



Maybe it wouldn't take that long to get used to it, I thought, as I watched Darius and Colin debate which video game I might want to try next. Darius seemed convinced that I'd want to play *Breath of the Wild* to the very end. Colin thought I might enjoy something with more of a structured story. They chatted so easily about it, Colin doing sit-ups and planks on the floor of his room while Darius perched on his desk, his arm casually thrown over my shoulders as I leaned against the desk next to him.

Colin was wearing a cutoff shirt, leaving his arms bare. The way he bent them during his sit-ups, so that his fingers touched either side of his head, made his muscles pop. My own fingers remembered very clearly what it felt like to trace those firm curves, and itched to do it again.

Darius stroked the side of my neck lightly, drawing delighted goosebumps. "All I'm saying is, it could literally take weeks if not months to finish the game, and even then she could keep her levels and restart."

"*Breath of the Wild* is addicting, I know," Colin said. He was probably on his hundredth rep but he barely seemed to feel it. "All I'm saying is, sometimes a change of pace is good. Maybe even necessary."

"I did suggest GTA."

Colin laughed. "That could work, too. Seth's got some crazy new mods."

Seth would love every second of it, but Colin and I would probably be a little more focused on you. Still, you never know what could happen.

My palms suddenly felt sweaty, and my pulse was doing that double-time thing again. I wondered if it would be too weird and obvious to ask Colin to turn on the A/C.

Oblivious to my distress, Darius stood, his arm dropping to my waist. "Man, it's eleven already? I'm gonna bounce. You good, Ava?"

I nodded, finding my voice. “Thanks for showing me the game. See you tomorrow?”

“Count on it.” And then, right in front of Colin, he kissed me. His other arm slid around my waist as well, so that he was fully embracing me. I had to stand on my tiptoes to make up for our height difference. *Had to*. More like I couldn’t help myself.

Darius only released me after a good and lengthy and *thorough* time, grinning wide. He reached out for a fist bump with Colin, just as if nothing of note had happened, just as if the sheen I’d left on his lips wasn’t fully visible—not to mention how I probably looked.

The door shut behind him. I turned to Colin, who still sat on the floor, resting his arms on his knees. He was smiling at me. “Looks like you guys had a good day.”

“You’re really, truly okay with this,” I said wonderingly.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Colin said.

I pushed off the desk, sank down to the floor myself, and straddled his lap. His thighs felt solid as boulders, and his body was radiant from exercise. “You know how we were so rudely interrupted the other night?” I asked.

“I remember,” he replied, his voice husky, his eyes on my lips.

“If we restarted right now...” My fingers traveled over his arm muscles. “Do you think we’d be able to hit the same levels?”

He didn’t answer with words.

16

SETH

I overslept and left the dorm a little late the next morning, which pushed my whole schedule out of whack. Tuesdays I have a full slate of classes and then I take the Metro into Chinatown for tutoring, followed by a library shift. Normally I like to kick all that off with a morning run around campus—I save the trails for weekends—and a big breakfast in the dining hall. But today I had no time.

Without my morning dose of exercise endorphins, I felt off-kilter all day. It's not like me to oversleep, either. But I had a sleep deficit to catch up on, after Ava and I had kept each other up Sunday night.

It's been a minute since I pulled an all-nighter with someone. I've hooked up a fair few times since Jenn, but there was never any sleeping over. To be honest, I probably wouldn't have moved so fast with Ava either if circumstances hadn't been what they were. I had no regrets about it—other than the oversleeping. I just recognized that we'd quickly stepped into that heady, exciting early stage of a relationship in the making. I wanted to spend *all* the time possible with her, getting to know her, letting her get to know me, both of us getting in deeper with each other.

But I recognized the need to keep a steady, measured pace. Firstly because Ava clearly had a lot going on and I didn't want to spook her; secondly because if we burned too hotly too quickly, there was a risk we'd *both* flame out; and finally—maybe most importantly—because I wasn't the only one trying to build a relationship with her.

So when I saw her and Colin sitting in the dining hall together having breakfast, all I did was wave at them from afar. I was rushing to grab as much food as I could carry out anyway, but I also wanted to give them that space to be together, just the two of them.

It was a struggle to concentrate on classes the rest of the day. I missed a good amount of notetaking in my Education seminar because I was trying to slurp down my oatmeal under the professor's affronted glares. Luckily the girl next to me took pity and offered to take a picture of her notes for me.

"How about I text it to you?" she said with a smile. "What's your number?"

Smooth. I tried to keep it on the correct side of friendly as I gave her my number, waited for her to send the photo, and confirmed I'd received it.

She made a show of adding me to her contacts. "In case I need to call in a similar favor."

"Sure, that's fair," I acknowledged.

"I'm Cori, by the way. That's with an *i*." She clearly expected me to save her to contacts as well.

I didn't. "Nice to meet you. Thanks again." *Maybe in another life.*

At three in the afternoon I got on the Metro to Chinatown with the half-dozen other Lockridge students in the tutoring program. Our sessions take place in a community center right near the Friendship Archway, and it's open to pretty much any public school student with the time and ability to get there. Four other local colleges and universities send volunteer tutors on the other days of the week to help with the load, since it's free for the kids and the attendance can get overwhelming.

I've got a core group of three middle school boys who always show up, and sometimes an extra friend or two if there's a big test or project due. I've been tutoring the same three since they were in sixth grade. Next year they'll start high school, and I'll be a senior. Hopefully we can keep the tutoring going until I graduate, and I can help them build a strong foundation for the rest of high school.

Tutoring lasts until six p.m., after which all of us Lockridge volunteers go out for dinner. According to the ones from big cities, DC's Chinatown is pretty corporatized and not at all authentic, but there are still a couple places where we can get

tasty stuff. It's always a welcome break from the dining hall, anyway.

"How about noodles?" I suggested, and everyone agreed.

During dinner, I overheard the group leader Jerome trying to sell passes to a music festival the first weekend of fall break, apparently near school. My ears perked up.

"Is it new?" I asked.

"Kinda. This is only the second year," Jerome said. "So it's still small but hopefully the people in charge have some experience."

"Who's playing?"

He rattled off a few names I vaguely knew.

"Weird mix."

"Yeah, but there's more than just those. It's supposed to be three whole nights, Friday-Saturday-Sunday, since it's a long holiday weekend. My buddy went to the first one and he said it was a good time. It's on like a thousand-acre farm in Virginia and there's woods and hills and shit."

"Sounds awesome."

"Yeah, I'd totally go but my girlfriend just invited me to go home with her and meet her folks. You interested? I can transfer the passes to your name. I've only got the two but they're still selling on the website if you need more."

"Send me the details and I'll let you know tomorrow?"

"Sure thing."

I've only been to two festivals, but I loved both of them. At the first one, the lineup wasn't so great, but the crowd and the camping experience more than made up for it. I went to that one with Kyle, when I visited him at Georgia Tech. We'd planned to go to the second festival together as well, but broke up before then. So instead I went alone, and spent the whole weekend actually grateful to be single.

This time, maybe I could convince Colin and Darius to come with me. I knew they usually drove home for any school

breaks, so their travel plans would be flexible. Colin's been without live music for way too long, and Darius always loves a good time. Between the three of us, maybe we could convince Ava, if she happened to be free. The four of us in a tent together for three nights, road tripping there and back—I couldn't wait to ask them.



My messed-up day continued. As we got ready to leave the restaurant I realized I'd forgotten a couple of books at the community center, books I needed for a presentation tomorrow. Luckily, as the official Lockridge representative, Jerome had been entrusted with a set of keys. He let me take them while he and the rest of the group went on back to campus, since the community center was a ten-minute walk in the opposite direction of the Metro.

I made it a five-minute run, just to get in *some* kind of cardio for the day.

Naturally, when I finally got to the Metro station, the next train was scheduled to arrive in eighteen whole-ass minutes. "Shit," I breathed. It was going to be a late night working on my presentation, which of course meant more sleep deficit.

"DC's Metro system makes me miss New York more than anything," someone said next to me.

I spun around and saw Arun Deshmukh standing there. "Hey, man. Small world."

"How's it going? Other than being stranded here?"

I sniffed. "Gotta admit this is the cherry on top of a crap sundae of a day. What're you in DC for?"

"I was doing an interview for *The Lockridge Rundown*. Working on a story about alums and their first few years after graduating."

"Sweet. Didn't know you were into journalism."

“I just started as a contributing writer this year. I’m a Lit major but I thought I should try out a more practical kind of writing before I go down the MFA path, which from what I hear rarely has a happy and successful ending.”

“I hear that. So how are you liking the more earthbound kind of writing?”

“Well, it’s only my first article, so we’ll see once it’s published. *If* they publish it.” There was a wry twist to Arun’s smile. “Anyway, what are you here for?”

I explained about the tutoring.

“That must be fun. I’m a WA for the Lit department so I help first-years with their papers and whatnot. Sometimes it’s like I’m trying to train them out of twelve years of terrible education. I’m definitely in support of setting them right while they’re young.”

WAs, or writing assistants, are prestigious positions at Lockridge, because they’re supposed to be trusted resources for improving other students’ academic performance. Every department hires just four for the year, but you can’t even apply unless a professor recommends you first.

“Damn, you’re an RA *and* a WA *and* you’re on the *Rundown*?” I marveled. “I was about to ask you to join the tutoring program, but when do you get to just chill, dude?”

Arun chuckled. “I was thinking about taking a nap on the train?”

I cocked my head, studying him. A guy this busy and driven and talented would forever be my kryptonite, but on top of that Arun possessed a *serious* edge in the looks department. I highly doubted he swung my way, but I could see why he’d acquired a golden boy reputation.

And also why Ava’s clearly crushing on him.

I decided to try and get to know him better. “So you’re from New York? As in, New York City?”

“Born and raised. You?”

“Atlanta area. I’ve actually never been to New York. Always wanted to.”

“It’s an easy train ride from DC. Lots of cheap buses, too. That’s what I always take.”

“Yeah, I just haven’t gotten around to it. I guess it’s like, New York is on my list of places to go one day, but more for the curiosity. Same with Chicago—that’s where Darius is from. I’m just not really a big city person, you know?”

“Me neither, honestly.”

My eyebrows shot up. “How’s that?”

“Well, to be fair I’ve never lived anywhere else but New York and Lockridge. But whenever I leave the city for school, it’s like...the world opens up. I can see the sky. The air smells better. I’m not constantly surrounded by people or traffic. I’m not either rushing to get ahead of someone or stuck in a crowd.”

“You do get stuck waiting for the Metro,” I pointed out.

“Sometimes the subway bites it, too.” Arun shrugged. “I guess I just like the change of pace.”

“Well, but are you planning on going back to New York after you graduate?”

“That’ll probably depend on which grad schools I get into more than my own preference.”

“Yeah, I can relate. I’ll do grad school eventually, but I’m thinking of trying Teach for America first.”

“I’ve looked into that. It’s two years, right?”

“Yep, plus a summer of training. They’re supposed to work with your placement preferences, but there’s no guarantees. And it’s on me to actually get hired at a school. So I could end up anywhere, you know?”

Arun nodded in understanding. “But that’s where the adventure is, right? It sounds tempting, getting real experience like that. This guy I was interviewing tonight said people who take time to work between college and grad school usually do

better, because they've actually been on their own in a professional setting. So when they go back to school, they have some appreciation of what's at stake, and also more perspectives to offer."

"I've been told that, too. I was thinking if Teach for America doesn't work out, maybe I'll just go teach English in another country."

"Now *that* would be awesome. Did you do a semester abroad? Or were you planning to?"

Lots of Lockridge students study abroad, usually their first semester junior year. Darius was thinking of it, but decided to postpone the decision for second semester. Colin can't; being pre-med, he just doesn't have the time.

"I'd love to," I told Arun. "But I need to keep going with my Education classes here. Plus I'd feel guilty leaving these kids I'm tutoring. I want to see them into high school at least."

"You sound like a real teacher already. I admire that level of dedication."

Praise from Arun legit felt like the sun shining down on my head. Golden boy, indeed.

Too bad he seems as hetero as they come.

"I wish I could be so sure about what *I* want," he said. "I'll have to figure it all out by next year. Whether to apply for jobs, or grad school, and also which jobs and which grad schools. I guess that's why I want to try as many things as I can this year."

"Well, what gets you up in the morning? What do you actually love doing? What do you think you'll still love ten years from now? Or twenty or thirty years?"

He took a moment to visibly think about it. "Talking to people about books, honestly."

"Like a professor?"

"Probably not." He shook his head. "Both of my parents are professors. They're constantly complaining about all the politics in their departments and never having enough time to

do their own research and publish their own stuff, which they have to do to stay competitive.”

“Maybe you just hear the bad parts because home is where they get to vent.”

With a grin, Arun shrugged. “You may well have a point there.”

“What about...what’s that thing? Kids do book reports, but adults do...book reviews. Right? Why not do book reviews? It’s kind of like journalism.”

“I’ve had that thought. It’s pretty competitive, too. Especially when anyone with a blog can call themselves a reviewer.”

“With an attitude like that, you’ll definitely make it.” I smiled to show I was joking. “I feel you, man. I love teaching and I know I want to do it for real. But the right path to the right kind of teaching career is still a mystery.”

“How’d you figure out that you love it?”

I told him about being an Eagle Scout, and how my service project involved designing and launching a mentoring program for local kids to learn first aid and wilderness survival skills from professional first responders. I explained how my grandpa’s a big outdoor enthusiast who still likes to organize camping trips for all the grandkids during the summer.

“He taught me everything I know,” I said. “Some of my favorite memories come from those trips with him and all my brothers and cousins. Hiking, rafting, cooking everything over a fire, then sitting around playing Mafia under the stars. Part of the mentoring program involves taking the kids along with the adult volunteers on a camping trip during their spring breaks, where they get to work on their skills.”

“That’s amazing,” Arun said. “I can see why you wouldn’t be too impressed by New York. Do you still keep up with the program since you’ve been here?”

“All the time. Still go on the camping trips, too.” I thought again about Ava and Colin and Darius and me sharing a tent at the festival.

The Metro arrived then, and we grabbed seats next to each other. The train left the station noisily but quieted to a subdued hum once we got into the tunnel.

“So,” I said, “is Ava moved back into her room yet?”

“I’m not sure.” Arun shifted the messenger bag on his lap. “Wouldn’t you know better than me?”

“Haven’t had a chance to speak to her since yesterday.”

“She didn’t stay with you?” His brows furrowed.

“Nah, she stayed with Colin. I was planning to check in with her later but today’s just been crazy for me.”

“So...you’re okay with that? I mean—” Arun paused. “Not trying to be nosy. Just...I’m her RA and after this whole situation with her roommate, I’m trying to be more aware of what’s going on with Ava. Because she doesn’t seem to be the type to ask for help directly, so I—I mean, I’m not saying she *needs* help. And obviously, I want to respect everyone’s privacy...”

He was normally so smoothly articulate; I couldn’t help grinning at his bumbling speech. “Well, I don’t want to air all her business either, but for me—and I’m pretty sure for Colin and Darius also—there’s no problem. None of us want to tie her down or anything like that.”

That seemed to confuse him even more. “You sound like my cousin telling his parents he isn’t ready for marriage yet. But he’s thirty years old and they want grandchildren. Dating someone exclusively, especially for a first-year, isn’t exactly being *tied down*.”

I snorted. “Isn’t it? College is supposed to be about meeting new people, trying new things, thinking new thoughts. We’re not trying to be barriers between her and any experience she wants to explore. Or *anyone*.”

“I get the idea of casual dating,” Arun said diplomatically. “But what happens if one or more of you wants to get serious?”

“I think all of us *are* serious about her, in our own ways. But if you mean what happens if one of us wants to get exclusive, I guess we’d talk about it together and let Ava decide.”

Arun nodded, clearly thinking hard. “It’s an interesting way to look at relationships. I don’t think it’s for everyone.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Nah, definitely not.”

But could it be for you?

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17
AVA

Mimi herself gave me the all-clear to come back to the room, in an email where she basically repeated her earlier apology and then closed with **Best of luck**. I stared suspiciously at that line, trying to measure the level of sincerity versus sarcasm in three whole words, then rolled my eyes and headed over to Milner.

The sight of Mimi's half of the room, stripped bare, had me exhaling in relief. She was gone and I was finally, blessedly alone. I could come and go—and stay—as I pleased, with no one watching me or judging me or crowding me.

The emptiness reminded me of move-in day. I'd been the first to arrive. To save money I'd taken public transportation from the airport, which meant figuring out the Metro system, which meant a lot of walking, not to mention maneuvering my huge suitcase, a carry-on bag strapped to the suitcase's handle, and a duffle bag slung diagonally across my torso. I was dripping with sweat by the time I got to Milner, where the RAs had set up tables downstairs for check-in. Cassidy, the RA who processed me, took one look at my face and said, "The showers will be just a few doors down the hall from you."

Mimi hadn't shown up until early evening. I used the time before then to clean up and unpack, choosing the bed closest to the window. Despite feeling like I'd lugged my entire life all over the DC metro area, it didn't take long, and with most of my stuff in drawers or my closet, it didn't seem like I'd made any impact at all on the depressingly bare room.

I sat and chilled, thinking how I'd been in Juniper only hours before, about Mom's blank face as I walked out the front door, the house and car keys clattering as I dropped them on the entry table, the glimpse of Jodie's truck sitting against the curb down the block. How I pretended not to see her as I put all my stuff in Leland's car trunk and got in beside him.

Leland, Matt's best friend and the least toxic person I could think of to ask for a ride to the airport.

And suddenly I was out of Juniper, free of Juniper, in a completely new world with strangers all around me, with no plans to ever go back. I'd committed myself to a single direction: forward.

Then Mimi arrived. A girl who loved to have a good time, whose friends beamed cheerfully—and constantly—at me from their many pictures, who was getting dick on the regular. She'd accused me of slut-shaming her during the mediation with Arun, of not wanting to have fun, but it was never about that. It was because she *could* have fun, because she didn't seem to have a care in the world. Mimi's first weeks of college were golden and beautiful, while mine had started under a storm cloud, and I couldn't seem to find my way out.

Well, I thought as I unpacked my stuff for the second time, *let this be a new beginning*. Maybe it would be easier to live alone, without someone to subconsciously compare my own life to. And at least I had a good thing going with Colin and Seth, and the beginning of what would hopefully be a good thing with Darius.

Speaking of the devils, my phone chimed with a message notification. I spotted all three guys' names in the preview bubble and hurried to open it.

It was a group chat message from Seth, addressed to the rest of us. **Anyone interested in a festival to kick off fall break?**

I opened the link he'd included and studied the website. I'd never heard of any of the performers in the lineup, but the pictures from the year before were straight-up Instagram goals. I felt a familiar tug of envy as I swiped through them, crowds of carefree girls—and guys—dancing, partying, day and night. Mimi and her friends would fit right in, but I couldn't imagine myself there at all.

Not to mention going away for a weekend with all *three* of them... My cheeks went hot and flushed as I remembered Darius talking about all of us being with each other, together, at the same time.

Do you really think you could handle something like that? I scolded myself. Don't even consider it.

As I finished unpacking, I kept checking the group chat, waiting for Colin and Darius to reply first. Maybe they'd already made travel plans. Maybe festivals weren't their thing. If even one of them said no, that would be a perfect out for me, too. I could come up with a half dozen plausible excuses, but I'd feel less awkward if I weren't the only one declining.

Unfortunately, they replied right on top of each other with enthusiastic yeses.

Perfect way to start the break, Colin replied. **Count me in.**

And then Darius. **Looks lit, as the olds say. When do we hit the road?**

Seth immediately wrote, **Awesome! Ava, if yr not going anywhere for break, when are you done with classes Fri**

My heart started pounding. For the past few weeks, I'd trudged back to my room on Friday evenings to find the door barred because of Mimi. Now I had the chance to do something different, *and* it meant I wouldn't have to be completely alone for the first few days of break. But how would it even work? Would we all stay in a hotel somewhere? Separate rooms or a single room? I didn't have the money to indulge in either option.

But more than that, I didn't think I had the nerve.

With clumsy fingers, I typed out a response, wrestling with my inner editor. **Sorry guys, budget's kind of tight right now. Have fun without me!**

"Casual but firm," I muttered. "You might look stingy, but at least you're not a loser."

Not even an issue, Seth wrote back. **Passes on me. How bout we leave at noon? It's a 2 hr drive**

Heart sinking guiltily, I deployed reason number two. **I have Bio lab until 4:30. Def too late. Anyway I can't let you spot me like that. I'll just save up for the next one.** I added

a smiling emoji to make it extra non-loser, and then cringed. What if one of the guys thought emojis were the worst?

Heightening my anxiety, no one replied right away. I stared at my phone for longer than I cared to admit before deciding they'd probably accepted my weak excuses at face value. Regretfully, I closed the festival website and turned to my Mandarin assignment.



Instead of going to the dining hall for dinner, I grabbed a sandwich and chips at the coffee bar. I figured I could have the luxury of being a hermit again on my first night with the room all to myself. I ate at my desk, picking up crumbs with my fingers, and got through three classes' worth of homework.

Around eight, someone knocked on my door. "Come in," I called.

It was Darius. He propped his muscular arm against the doorframe, giving me a winning smile that jolted my heartbeat faster. "So you're officially a solo act."

As always, his smile was infectious. I turned in my desk chair and grinned back. "Yep. Feels good."

He gestured to Mimi's side. "Are you gonna spread your stuff out?"

"I'm not sure how much I should. Dean Hoffman said there's a chance another roommate gets assigned here, so I don't want to get too comfortable."

"Sensible and practical. But comfort's important too." He cocked an eyebrow at the stripped mattress, fraying at one corner. "Not to mention aesthetics."

I nodded. "Maybe I'll get some blankets and extra pillows for the bed. Make it feel more like a couch or something."

"There you go." He rapped his fist on the doorframe. "So about this festival...don't even worry about the money. We've all owed each other multiple times and no one's keeping track,

especially Seth. And there'll be plenty of opportunities for you to make it even if you really care."

I stood up before I realized was going to. "It's just not a good time—"

"We can leave after your class, no problem." He grinned again. "Unless we can convince you it's fine to skip, but I know you'd worry about it."

"No—I mean, I don't want to skip the class, but it's not about that. I just don't think this is a good time for *me*."

Darius's brow furrowed in concern, and he came off the doorframe. "Okay, I get it. You've got a lot going on, and it's a lot to ask for you to go away with a bunch of guys you're still getting to know. But we're not expecting anything other than your company. We can sleep in separate tents, whatever you want."

Tents? "It's not that either. I trust you. And it does look like it would be fun. Except for how I've never been camping in my life." Darius huffed an amused breath. "But I just...I don't know."

He spread his hands. "If it doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel right. No pressure. But maybe ask yourself *why* it doesn't feel right. Like, let's say we take all the relationship stuff off the table and just spend the weekend chilling and listening to music. Would you still say no?"

"I would," I said automatically.

"Why? What's the harm in it?"

"No harm at all. The opposite, in fact." I paused. "Honestly, I can't explain it. Not even to myself."

"How about I try?" Darius stepped into the room fully, propping his hip against my desk. He could easily reach out to touch me where I still stood, my hands self-consciously cupping my elbows. But he gave me space. "Maybe it's like how you don't want to get comfortable in your own room. Maybe it's you feeling like you don't deserve to have a good time."

“I know I deserve it,” I said softly. “It’s more like...I feel like I don’t *fit* it. Like it’s just not for me.”

Darius shook his head. “I thought you had trouble trusting other people. Now it kinda sounds like you don’t even trust yourself. Your ex and your friend really messed with your head, huh? And believe me, I know how that can go. But you can’t let what they did stop you from living your life.”

“It’s not just them,” I whispered.

Darius reached for me then, taking my hand as easily as if he did it every day. “Do you mean your father? Look, I don’t have much experience with that. I’ve never lost a parent. And obviously I never knew your father. But if he loved you, he wouldn’t want you to be stuck inside your room all the time. He’d want you to be having fun, spending time with friends, soaking up the whole college *thing*. Right?”

My throat tightened, so I just nodded. For the first time in months, I let myself think about Dad. About the rare smile he let slip when I got the letter from Lockridge. About his hand on my cheek, patting gently. He always held his emotions close, but I knew I’d made him proud.

Carefully, I folded the memory away. I wasn’t quite ready to go down that rabbit hole. But I squeezed Darius’s hand. “Yeah,” I said, my voice hoarse. “He would want that.”

“Okay, well, how about we start small? I can take you shopping for those blankets and pillows you mentioned. And maybe you can think about the weekend? We’ll hold your spot.”

“I can do that,” I said. “Did you...did you want to go shopping right now?”

“Yeah, why not? I need to buy a sleeping bag anyway.”

A pang of want shot through me as I pictured him and Colin and Seth in a tent, half-naked and sprawled on a pile of sleeping bags. I swallowed. “Let me just grab my purse.”



Darius flirted shamelessly during the whole excursion, inviting me to “try out the merchandise” with him and stealing kisses whenever we came across an empty aisle. I loved being off-campus again, that sense of escape back into the world which I’d also felt the night I met Colin. It made me feel lighter, my limbs buzzing with enough energy to run one of Seth’s marathons.

We piled our purchases in the back of Darius’s car, a big black Honda Crosstour which he temporarily stopped outside Milner. “You okay waiting here while I go park?” he asked as we unloaded. “I’ll be a few minutes, but then I can help you carry everything upstairs.”

“I can do it all myself by the time you get back,” I protested. “It’ll just take me a couple trips.” There were four bulky shopping bags’ worth of stuff, but nothing like move-in day.

“You don’t realize what a shady bunch of vultures live here,” Darius said implacably. “You leave brand new blankets and pillows sitting unattended, you’ll never see ‘em again.”

“All right, all right. I’ll guard everything with my life.”

He dropped me a wink and peeled off.

I settled the shopping bags around my feet and checked my phone. Neither Seth nor Colin had replied to the group chat after my last message. I wondered if they were talking to Darius separately. I didn’t think Darius would have told them about my dad or Matt or Jodie, but I also didn’t think I would mind if they knew. Keeping that stuff secret had given it a sort of power over me, forcing me to stay distant from people. I wanted to take that power back.

“Ava?”

I looked up. Arun was walking toward me, clearly coming back to the dorm for the night. “Hi,” I said breathlessly, and immediately wanted to scuttle under a rock.

He gestured toward the bags. “What’s all this?”

“Oh, um, just some stuff I got for the room. Thought I should try to make it a little cozier.”

“Great idea. Mimi’s all moved out?”

“Yeah. Thanks again for...you know.”

“Just doing my job.” He gave me a gentle smile that knocked my knees wobbly. “Need help with these?” He bent gracefully and grabbed three of the bags.

“Oh, you don’t have to—” I stopped myself. “Thanks.”

Since I had a hand free, I swiped the door with my keycard and held it open for Arun. He headed up the stairs, giving me an excellent view of his trim ass and long legs in slim-fitting jeans. I sighed inwardly. *Down, girl. Don’t you have enough boys on your plate?*

Arun waited patiently while I got my room door open, then brought the bags in and deposited them on Mimi’s bed. He noticed I was still holding onto mine and inclined his head. “What’s in there?”

“Um, a sleeping bag. It’s Darius’s. We went to the store together.”

“Ah.” An odd expression crossed Arun’s face, but then he gave me another small smile, warm and sweet and spine-melting. “So how is everything?”

He’s your RA, I told myself. He’d act this nice with anyone on the hall.

“Everything’s good,” I said. “I mean, it is now.”

“Glad to hear it. But feel free to come talk to me about, well, anything. I said it before but I’ll say it again—I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks.” I cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

“I mean it.” His dark eyes went suddenly serious. “I dropped the ball with you and Mimi. If I’d done better at checking in on you, maybe it wouldn’t have escalated to this point. Or if I’d been more welcoming, made you feel like you could rely on me—”

“No, don’t think that. I *should* have reached out for help. I thought I could deal with things by myself, but I was wrong.”

“You guys are first-years. I should have been especially careful with you.”

“I really don’t think there was anything else you could have done. We weren’t little kids fighting over toys behind our parents’ backs. We both knew we could have brought it to you, or just handled it better ourselves.”

“How about we split the blame?” Arun’s eyes were twinkling now. “But I won’t acknowledge less than eighty percent on my part.”

“Well, if you want it *that* badly...” I grinned. “For the future, if I’m having a problem, I promise I won’t try and deal with it alone.”

He took a breath, and if I didn’t know better I would have thought it was a nervous one. “Not just dorm-related problems, okay? If it’s about classes, or professors, the quality of the dining hall, other students—friends, dating, whatever—my door’s always open. Only if you’re comfortable, obviously.”

He sounded like Darius, and as if my thoughts had summoned him, Darius appeared in the open doorway, car keys still in hand. “Hey, I didn’t know if some pillow pirate kidnapped you.” He noticed Arun and lifted his chin in a friendly greeting. “Hey, man, how’s it going?”

“Sorry,” I said, “Arun just helped me carry everything up.” Awkward as ever, I hefted the sleeping bag at Darius. “Here’s your, um...”

“Thanks.” Darius took it, stepping casually into my space as he did so.

“Going camping or something?” Arun asked.

Darius explained about going to the music festival with Colin and Seth, but didn’t mention that I’d been invited. Still, Arun’s gaze flicked over to me a couple times. I guessed he’d pieced together that I’ve been seeing Colin, maybe Seth as well. But how did he feel about it, and how would he feel if he

knew about Darius? It bothered me to think he might disapprove.

The guys chatted while I worked on setting up Mimi's bed. I'd bought two woven blankets, one in a pale salmon color and another in light gold. I tucked those securely around the sides and corners of the long twin mattress, so that they hid it completely. I'd also bought three good size square pillows in complementary shades of light pink and dusty rose, which I leaned against the wall to approximate sofa cushions.

I'd wanted warm colors, something to brighten up the room and, hopefully, my mood. The wall above Mimi's bed was still bare, but maybe I could pick up a cheap poster at the campus bookstore. My scholarship gives me a small discretionary stipend each semester, which I'd definitely stretched with tonight's purchases, but I'd been thinking of getting a campus job like Seth.

"That looks good." Arun's voice interrupted my internal budget planning.

"Thanks. Any design tips?" I asked. "Your room's so gorgeous it doesn't even *look* like a dorm room."

"Honestly? More stuff. Normally I prefer a minimalist aesthetic, but when you're dealing with dorm rooms, you just have to do your best to cover up the ugly. Get some art, another lamp or two, and plants. Definitely plants."

"And a TV," Darius added.

"Slow down," I laughed. "Y'all are giving me champagne taste when I'm on a beer budget. And by beer I definitely mean bottom shelf domestic."

"I'm going to pretend I never heard anything about you having familiarity with bottom shelf beer or top shelf champagne or any kind of alcohol at all," Arun said.

Darius snorted. "Which is actually official Lockridge policy about underage drinking. Deny until you can't."

Arun tapped two fingers to his brow. "Got a paper to finish. Have a good night, guys."

“Night,” I called to his retreating back.

Darius was watching me, a smile playing on his lips.

“What?” I said.

“You like him.”

“Arun? He’s great. Don’t you like him?”

“Sure. But not quite how *you* like him.”

My ears burned. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“It’s not that surprising. Lockridge’s most eligible bachelor, right? Even Seth’s got a mad thirst for the dude.”

My mind spun, imagining Seth and Arun locked in an embrace. Seth was getting to be like oil for the flame of my imagination; my fantasies just burned hotter whenever I thought about him with another guy.

I realized Darius was still staring at me, his nostrils flared a bit. “Would it bother you if I did like Arun?” I asked shyly. “Would it bother Colin or Seth?”

“As long as he treats you right and makes you happy, we’d be more than good with it.”

“Hey, I’m just talking about *liking* him. I’m not thinking about actually *being* with him.”

“Sweetie, I’m pretty sure if he knew how you felt, he wouldn’t be an eligible bachelor anymore.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest at the frankly admiring look in Darius’s eyes. My lips spread in a delighted smile and I wrapped my arms around his neck to draw him close. His hard body pressed hotly into mine. “I think you’re a little biased in my favor.”

“A little?” Darius sounded breathless, just the way I had saying hi to Arun, and I loved hearing him like that. He came off like such a cocky, confident guy normally. I liked seeing some vulnerability beneath all that swagger.

I put my lips close to the rim of his ear and whispered, “I appreciate it.” Then I took the lobe between my teeth and

gently bit down.

“Mmm,” Darius grunted. “I, uh, was gonna say good night, too. Let you enjoy having your room all to yourself.”

Even though I’d had the same plans originally, I wanted the opposite of alone time right now. “Or,” I murmured, flicking my tongue out to taste his neck, “I could enjoy another benefit of having my own room. But I’d need your company for that...”

“Happy to help,” he groaned, before his mouth finally met mine.



I hadn’t expected the sheer emotions of sleeping with Darius. Maybe it was because, unlike with Colin and Seth, we were already friends. We’d gotten to know each other, exposed ourselves emotionally before exposing anything physical. So when I stood naked in front of him for the first time, I wasn’t nervous at all. I felt he’d already seen the most private parts of me.

Not that Darius seemed to find any flaw. “Goddamn, you’re perfect,” he murmured, his dark gaze running up and down my body.

“I want to see you, too,” I told him. I stepped forward, out of the pile of my clothes, drawing closer to where he was sitting on Mimi’s bed.

“I’m right here.”

He’d already lost his shirt, and my hungry eyes took in his broad shoulders, his muscular chest, his toned abs, the sheen of his skin in the lamplight. The shadow cast between his legs, still clad in dark jeans, presented an enticing mystery I wanted to solve.

His strong hands caught my hips and drew me into his body. He was so much bigger than me that with him sitting and me standing, he could easily press a kiss to my neck, his full lips

sucking lightly. I sighed as fire licked down into my belly, down into my sex. I bent my head slightly and captured his lips with mine, darting my tongue into his mouth. He tasted like sugar and cinnamon, sweet and spicy.

His fingers traveled up my spine, then down again, following the curves of my ass and cupping into the crease at the top of my thighs. He pushed his palms over my buttocks, dipping between my legs, finding and brushing the place where I was already slick with want. I moaned into his kiss, thrusting my tongue to show how I wanted him to move his fingers into me.

But Darius kept teasing, laughing lightly whenever I tried to shift my stance to get his hands where I wanted them. And he kept *not* taking the rest of his clothes off. So finally I reached down between us to unbutton his jeans.

“I want you naked,” I said boldly. “Right now.”

“All you had to do was say so.”

“My fifty million hints weren’t enough?”

“I’ve been known to do better with direct orders.” He smirked up at me, his eyes full of filthy promises.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I breathed.

Gently, I pulled his cock free of his jeans. He was bigger than I’d expected, curving up thick and proud, his cockhead already leaking. Another rush of wetness flooded between my legs at the idea of taking him inside me, at how I’d have to stretch to fit him. In fact, I realized as I stroked his hot length, first with one hand and then two, I might not even be able to fit all of him.

My mouth watered. I knelt on the floor, eye level with the tip of Darius’s cock, and looked up at him. “Let me go down on you,” I said, amazed at my own boldness.

“*Fuck,*” he muttered, his mouth dropping open. “You got my eternal permission for that.”

I’d never really felt that enthused about blowjobs before. It seemed fair to return the favor if I got oral, and I liked the idea

that I could turn a guy incoherent. But they tended to get that way during any kind of sex. I just had never gotten turned on by the act alone—although I hadn't tried yet with Colin or Seth.

With Darius, I couldn't wait to get my lips on him. I kissed the leaky tip, letting the salty pre-come hit my tongue, and heard him curse. Then I licked down to his ball sack, tonguing the weight lightly before dragging all the way back up to the top. I wrapped my mouth around the fleshy ridge of his cockhead and slipped slowly down. Then up, still slow and deliberate, tasting every bit of him. Down again.

His breath huffed out shakily, and I looked at his face. He was staring at me, wide-eyed, his jaw slackened. "Damn, you're so fucking hot," he whispered. "The way my dick looks in your mouth, Jesus."

I wrapped my hand around the thick base of him, squeezing. "Tell me what feels good."

"Everything." He swallowed. "That. Your hand and your mouth working together."

"Like this?" I pushed down as far as I could on his cock, until he hit the back of my throat, and as I lifted off with my lips I stroked with my hand in the opposite direction, downward.

"Yes, fuck, yes." His thighs flexed apart.

"Or this?" I suckled the underside of his cockhead and stroked upward with my hand.

"Yeah, yeah."

Darius touched my hair, and I threaded his fingers through until he was cradling the side of my head. "You can direct me," I said. "Just...I don't know if I can take all of you."

"Sweetie, whatever you can take or want to take is more than enough. Fuuuck," he moaned, as I licked all around his tip.

"Then I'll just try a few things out," I offered.

He definitely seemed to like the eye contact, so I did my best to channel my inner porn star and keep that going. I used to feel shy about that kind of thing, but as with getting naked, it felt both comforting *and* thrilling to do this with Darius.

I loved how intensely he searched my face, like he couldn't quite believe the sight of me; the way he looked deep into my eyes, like he wanted to see inside my mind. I loved his vocalizations, the way he praised, or begged, or simply reacted. I loved how he got both of his hands in my hair, but still held my head gently, not pushing me or making me move in any particular way. He just wanted to touch me, to be that much more connected.

I sucked him down, using both of my hands to make up for the length I couldn't cover. I tried bobbing my head, coordinating my hands to meet my mouth every time I slipped down. When my jaw began to ache I pulled back to focus on the tip of him, flicking his slit with my tongue. I cupped his balls, running my fingers behind them as well.

His hips shifted, and I could tell he was fighting the urge to buck, to thrust into my mouth. The idea that he was about to lose control got me revved up even higher. I slid my right hand down between my legs, dipped into my own slick, and spread it around my clit.

"Fuck yes," Darius groaned. "Sexy as *fuck*." His cock pulsed in my hand. "I'm so close, Ava. Jesus."

"I want to finish you off," I whispered. "But I also want you to fuck me."

"*Anything* you want. I've got all night for you. Got so much I want to do for you."

I wondered how long it would take him to get hard again. I decided to take a chance and keep going. "You can fuck my mouth if you want," I offered. "Just be gentle?"

"Oh, God."

I broke eye contact and leaned over him, sucking with renewed energy, moving my hands faster on his cock. Darius started losing his words, and all I could hear from him were

strained grunts, his breath panting harder and harder. And finally it seemed he couldn't help himself: he tightened his grip on my head and held me in place as he fucked his cock into my mouth, his thrusts shallow but firm.

I wanted to taste him coming, but he pulled away at the last minute. I watched the gorgeous sight of him spurting all over his body, thick ropes striping his belly and chest. My gaze traveled up to his face and I saw that he'd been watching *me* as he came.

We stayed still for a moment, smiling at each other kind of goofily. Darius traced the line of my jaw, my chin, then thumbed my lips. He shook his head. "You are *amazing* at that."

"So are you," I said.

"Oh, it's about to get a hell of a lot better," he promised.

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I gathered up what was left of my mind and wiped myself clean with my discarded shirt. Luckily I'd be able to duck right across the hall with it—the shortest possible walk of shame. Before that, though, I had other priorities to fulfill.

My body was still buzzing, but it would be a minute before I could fuck properly, so I focused on keeping Ava going. She'd settled back on her heels, looking up at me with her luminous dark eyes. Her lips looked redder and fuller than normal, rubbed raw from everything we'd been doing. Her hair had swung over her shoulders, ending right above her tantalizingly perfect nipples. I decided I needed to taste them.

I picked her up and laid her back against the pillows she'd just bought. She was light in my arms, smelling of something floral and sunshiny. I kissed my way from her fingers—those incredibly gifted fingers—down her arm, into the crook of her elbow, then her shoulder, her collarbone, and finally between her breasts. I scraped my teeth over the bottom curve of one, making her giggle, then got my mouth around her nipple, making her suck in a breath.

She tasted sweet and succulent, like the ripe fruit of the flowers in her scent. I licked each nipple in turn, lavishing attention on both. Her breasts didn't quite fill my hands, but the weight and shape of them—the way they pushed into my palms as her back arched in arousal—were everything I'd dreamed of.

Because I *had* dreamed about her, daydreamed at least. The more I'd gotten to know Ava, the more I'd wanted her. She'd attracted me from day one, but each day it had grown. Her willingness to be with Colin and Seth had only added fuel to the flame, and the fire I felt for her now could bring down buildings.

I trailed one hand down her smooth stomach, admiring the delicate S-lines of her waist and hips. “Can I touch you between your legs?” I whispered into her ear, and she shivered and nodded.

I thanked my entire religion for the fact that she was still completely wet, for the soft yearning sound that escaped her throat when my fingers slipped through her folds. I slid my middle finger inside her, testing her tightness, while my thumb worked her clit. She clutched my wrist helplessly, writhing beneath me.

“D-Darius,” she gasped.

She was already so worked up that she came in less than half a minute, her body bowing, clenching around my finger. Fucking hell, I couldn’t wait to feel that sensation on my cock.

She let go of my wrist to stroke my arm. “Mmm, thank you.”

“That was just to take the edge off,” I told her. “How about now I give you back what you gave me?” To illustrate my point, I sucked off the finger that had been inside of her, tasting her sweet musk.

Her eyes widened. “I don’t know if I can come again for a while—”

“Sounds perfect.” And I dove down between her legs.

First I licked her clean, getting to know all the shades and scents of her. I spread her labia open, lapped directly from the source, slipped my tongue on either side of her clit—she whimpered at that—and then circled it, teasing her mercilessly.

“Darius, please,” she moaned.

“Please what? You don’t like what I’m doing?”

“You know I do. But I want...” She swallowed. “I need more.”

“Thought you said you can’t come again? I’m just having fun.”

She looked down the length of her body at me, then brushed her finger along the seam of my lips. “I didn’t think I could. But your mouth.” She glanced off to the side, adorably awkward. “I should have known from the way you kiss that you’d be an expert at this.”

“You should have known from the way I kiss *you* that I’d be all over this.” I hiked her knee up, opening her further, and pushed my face right into her. I loved rubbing all that wet heat onto my nose and mouth and chin. “Damn, girl, you taste so fucking good,” I groaned into her. “I could stay down here forever. I want *every* part of you.” And I caressed the cleft of her ass, just to make it clear.

“Oh God.” Her voice pitched high.

I turned her over, pulled her up onto her hands and knees, got her ass in the air. Her hips from this angle made her waist look even more beautifully curved, and her luscious skin gleamed like burnished gold. Her delicious little pussy peeked at me from between her thighs, practically begging for more of my kisses. So I leaned in and obliged: open-mouthed, sloppy, fully enjoying myself.

Ava made a keening sound and backed into my face, trying to maneuver her hips to get me where she wanted, like she’d done earlier when I first explored her with my fingers. I loved her little mewl of frustration when I kept playing, refusing to give in. I just kept licking her up and down, lightly teasing her clit before flitting away again.

“You’re killing me,” Ava sighed.

“I think it’s vice versa, actually. Do you even know how hot you look?” I reared up and put my hands on her hips, squeezing the flare of her fine ass. Then I thumbed the top of her cleft. “Has anyone ever played with you back here?”

She turned her head to look at me over her shoulder, eyes wide. “No, never.”

“What do you think of it?”

“I...I’m not sure...”

“How about this—I’ll keep it to fingers only, and I’ll go slow and careful. You let me know right away if you’re not okay with anything and I’ll stop that second, no questions asked.”

She hesitated, biting her lip, then nodded. “Okay. I trust you.”

Oh, she was sweet. I pulled her hips up even further and went to town. I spent a good few minutes on her clit first, wanting to get her as close to the edge as possible. She fucking loved it, loved the way I tongued her, tossed her head when I wrapped my lips fully around the bud and suckled her. She dripped all down my chin and I was in fucking heaven licking her clean.

I kept note of her reactions and when I thought she was getting ready to come, I dipped a thumb into her cunt for some lubrication before easing it between her ass cheeks. Ava let out a small cry but didn’t stop me. Carefully, I massaged around her hole while my mouth kept her clit busy. I wanted her to get used to the sensation of being touched there while she was so fired up.

After a few more minutes, I slipped my thumb just past the tight puckered opening. She let out a small sob and sank down onto her elbows. Still no stopping me, though.

I went slow, as promised, pushing in a millimeter at a time. She felt hot in a different way back there, squeezing down around my thumb with impossible tightness. And as I thought of getting to one day fuck her ass properly, my dick immediately went hard.

“Fuck, baby, I’m ready for you again,” I blurted out.

Ava’s back rippled as she trembled. “Me, too, God, *please*.” Her thighs quivered, and I found gratitude again for the extra flood of wetness that hit my mouth.

Incredible, that I could make her hot for me like that. But I knew from experience that even as wet as she was, I couldn’t just thrust into her. I needed to make sure she was plenty

relaxed first, and I also needed to give it to her slow, see how much she could take to begin with before I let myself go.

Luckily she'd been close to coming for a while already. I renewed my attention on her clit, flicking her rapidly, circling, lightly sucking on her. And I pushed two fingers into her pussy, giving her that good-good feeling of getting fucked while making sure to spread her juices as high up as possible.

It didn't take long before I felt her fluttering around my fingers, and then she started bucking as her climax took her. I grabbed onto her hips with both hands to hold her still, taking long swipes of her clit with the flat of my tongue to give her extra stimulation.

"Fuuuck," Ava breathed out finally. "I don't know if I've ever come that hard."

I stroked her back, then turned her over. She gave me a dreamy smile and I just had to kiss her for a few seconds. "So you didn't mind the ass stuff?"

She shook her head. "It was hot. But I think I'd want to prepare ahead of time if you wanted to do any more than that."

"Absolutely. Speaking of, uh.... I'm hoping you have condoms so I don't have to try and scuttle my naked ass across the hall for some."

She laughed, which made her breasts jiggle invitingly. "In my bottom desk drawer."

As I crossed the room, she leaned up on one elbow to ogle me. "I wouldn't mind getting my hands on *your* ass a little more."

I grinned at her. "You can put your hands anywhere you want on me. Hands, mouth, whatever."

I gave her a good show, bending over to root through the drawer. Then I rolled on the condom as I walked back toward her. The way she licked her lips, her eyes narrowing, made my cock jump.

"Next time I'll make sure we're also prepped with lube," I said.

Her brow furrowed. “Is it going to be a problem?”

“Usually it’s fine if I take my time at first. And I will do that. But you feel pretty tight and lube would probably help—and we’d definitely need it for ass stuff. For now we’ll just talk each other through this, all right?”

She nodded.

“Okay to start with you on top? That way you can control the speed.”

I laid back against the pillows, partly propped up, which gave Ava plenty of room to straddle me. My cock pointed so stiffly toward my chest that she had to lean forward and use her hand to maneuver everything into place.

I felt the heat of her pussy through the condom, just surrounding the tip for a few seconds as she gauged our proportions. Then she started easing down slowly. Already I could feel our size difference was going to be a bit of an issue. I felt like I was dying in her tight grip.

“Take all the time you need,” I told her, but my voice came out strained.

Ava gave me a concerned look. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Not possible. We’re just trying not to hurt *you*.”

“I think I’ll be okay. But yeah, I have to go slow. I’m sorry.”

“Sweetie, you don’t need to be sorry for anything. This right here already feels plenty goddamn good.”

She sank down another agonizing centimeter. “But is this better?”

I nodded helplessly. “Uh huh.” Thank God I’d made her come already. Thank God she’d made *me* come already.

Using gentle hip-rocking motions, Ava worked herself down as far as she could. My fingers flexed on her waist, not quite holding onto her, but providing support if she needed it. I wanted to make sure she was fully in control. Mostly my focus was on dealing with the exquisitely hot clench of her as she

took more and more of my cock. I knew I'd barely need much actual fucking to come a second time.

In the end, she couldn't bottom out. "I don't know if I can finish like this," she whispered. "It feels amazing, but I need a little more."

"I got you." I put an arm around her and flipped us so she was on her back, with me kneeling upright so I could access her clit with my fingers. It also happened to give me a sexy ass view of my cock sinking into her, and of her sweet bare breasts, and of her beautiful face, her teeth biting her luscious lower lip. My daydreams would never be the same again.

With small, careful thrusts, I fucked in and out of her, using my fingers on her clit to help her along. Ava's eyelids fluttered shut and her chin pointed up toward the ceiling as her body arched. "Yesss," she hissed.

I was so ready to come I deserved a goddamn Olympic medal for holding out. But by some miracle I managed. Her hands clutched at the mattress and the sound of her moans reached a frantic, feverish pitch. "Come on, honey," I pleaded. "Give it to me and I'll give it to you."

"Oh, *God*," she gasped, and started to pulsate around my cock.

That was it. That was all I could take. I threw my head back and let the wave rush through me.



"Never thought you'd be a snorer," I teased.

Ava blinked sleepily up at me in the gray early light, then her eyes widened as she registered what I'd said. "What!" Her hand flew to her mouth.

I shook my head. "No wonder Mimi kept trying to kick you out."

"Are you serious? You should've woken me up!"

“Nah, you needed the rest. Well, to be honest I did try, but you kicked me in retaliation.”

Her face crumpled. “I’m so sorry.”

I just grinned. “Seth and Colin must sleep like the dead. Me, I’mma need to double up on coffee to make it through the morning.”

“This is so embarrassing. Do I *really* snore?”

“Yeah. But it’s fine. It’s adorable. Rethinking the urge to share a tent with you, but I can always pick up some earplugs.”

“Omigood,” she groaned, pulling her pillow over her face.

“Hey, now.” I took the pillow away and kissed her. She tasted warm and soft, like a fresh pastry just out of the oven. “Some sacrifices are worth it.” I lifted my head. “Seriously, though. Get that checked out. You might be a good candidate for medical science, too. I mean, *damn*.”

She swatted my shoulder, indignant. “Are you trolling me?”

Snickering, I loomed over her, stealing another kiss before nuzzling her jaw. “Maybe just a little bit.”

“Darius! For real?”

“Yeah, one coffee’ll probably do me fine.”

“Argh!” Ava gave me another swat, but I caught her hand and pulled it to my waist.

“How you feeling this morning?” I murmured. I’d woken up with wood, like usual, and kissing her had only gotten me harder. “Sore at all?”

“Mmm, a little,” she confessed. “How are you?”

“I’m good.” I smiled down at her. “I’m glad. Not that you’re sore. But that we got together. You know?”

She nodded, looking thoughtful. “How do we break the news to Colin and Seth?”

“Just tell ‘em straight-up. It won’t be a surprise.”

“Okay.” She tapped her fingers on my waist. “This has been the craziest week ever. Like I never would have imagined *any* of this happening to me or me doing half the stuff I’ve done. But I’m actually feeling...” She seemed to be searching for the right word.

“Happy?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? I just feel like I’ve forgotten what happiness even is.”

My heart clenched. Honestly, I *had* had a more restless sleep than normal, but it wasn’t because of snoring. It was because it had been a while since I’d shared a bed all night, and having a second person there took some getting used to. I suspected Colin and Seth could say the same—and Ava, too. But I’d realized, waking up to feel her pressed full-length against me, her thigh slung over mine, that I’d missed that kind of intimacy. And I’d felt a swell of happiness in my chest that she was willing to share it with me.

It wasn’t a foreign feeling, though. Happiness, for me, is never really far away. I’m basically a dude who’s on good terms with life. I’ve experienced some heartbreak and loss like anyone, but I’ve always been able to get through it.

I hadn’t really thought about how happiness would feel to Ava in comparison. I knew, intellectually, that she’d been through a ton of emotional upheaval the past year. And I felt the responsibility of earning and keeping her trust, so I did my best to listen and understand. But now, hearing her speak so openly about not recognizing happiness just really brought it home to me.

“Well,” I said carefully, “I hope I can be part of helping you remember what it feels like.”

“I hope so, too,” she whispered. “Thank you, Darius.”

She reached up and hugged me. And suddenly it was more than just happiness making my heart swell. It was the beginning of something stronger.

19

AVA

I floated through most of Wednesday, barely paying attention to classes, distracted by thoughts of Darius and Colin and Seth. Every time one of them came to mind, I felt hot all over. Some of it was sheer arousal—which was a little embarrassing to feel while surrounded by classmates—but mostly it came from a sort of self-conscious amazement. I'd come to Lockridge with nothing but small-town-girl experiences with a single terrible boyfriend. I'd never thought of myself as someone who could be sexually free, confident, and satisfied—much less with multiple people.

This new version of me was definitely superior to the old version. Now I felt capable of anything.

So why not go to the festival with them? my inner critic asked.

Even though it seemed like the guys had accepted my decision, the question kept weighing on me. I heard Darius telling me last night that I should be living it up instead of stuck in my room. I imagined the long fall break, eating alone in the dining hall, coming back to an empty dorm, days of not speaking to another human being.

You'd have that anyway. The festival ends on Monday, remember?

Which was, in a twisted way, an argument against going. It would be such a hard crash landing to go from fun sexy times in a tent to utter loneliness.

Still, even though I *felt* like I'd made my decision, I went back and forth on it all day, and the inner critic still hadn't quieted by evening.

Darius sent me a lovely message around lunchtime: **Hope you're having a gorgeous day, gorgeous girl. Can't stop thinking about you.**

Seth messaged the group to ask if anyone wanted to grab dinner. It turned out everyone was free at the same time. If he and Colin hadn't already heard from Darius about getting together with me last night, I supposed that would be the opportunity to tell them.



I had a free hour beforehand, so I used the time to change my clothes and put on some makeup. I decided to keep it light and simple, knowing that with my jumping nerves I'd mess up any attempt at a complicated look. Since it was a little chilly outside, I opted for a dark gray sweater, skinny jeans, and ankle boots.

As I was contemplating eyeshadow, my traitorous mind wandered again. The palette had been a gift from Jodie on my birthday—I turned nineteen this past April. I thought of how we learned to do makeup together, watching YouTube tutorials and practicing on each other. I remembered our senior prom and how we tried to match everything from our dresses to our hair to our contouring. We're practically the same size with similar dark coloring, similar tastes in design. It was down to the wire which dresses we were even going to wear on the big night. We liked both of the ones we chose, so she could have easily taken mine and vice versa.

She won't be your size now.

My best friend. Seven months pregnant with my boyfriend's baby. We used to share everything. Had she secretly wanted to share that part of my life too?

It isn't sharing if it's cheating.

And on the other hand, it isn't cheating if it's sharing.

That, I guessed, was another difference between our lives now. I hadn't been looking for this particular difference, had never even thought about relationships being anything but two people exclusively together. But here I was, learning a new way to be.

Before I could discern my intentions, I reached out and thumbed my phone awake. Then I swiped into my messages and opened the one from Jodie, the one I'd been keeping unread.

Been thinking about you. How are you?

Those were the first seven words, visible from the preview screen. But now that I'd actually opened it, I could see she'd written a lot more.

I know I suck for doing this in a message. But I figured you wouldn't pick up if I called.

I just wanted to say again that I'm so sorry. Please believe that. I have been sorry since the very beginning. I should never have hurt you like I did.

It wasn't really about Matt. I know that probably doesn't make sense and you probably don't believe me. But it was just this mistake that snowballed. I will regret what I did for the rest of my life.

I miss you. I hope you've been doing okay at Lockridge. If you're coming home for the holidays, I would love to get together and talk. Please?

Suddenly I fully understood why I hadn't wanted to open the message. How fucking dare she? After all this time of complete radio silence, *now* she wanted to reach out and try another round of feeling sorry for herself? She wanted us to *get together and talk* over the holidays? As if I would ever willingly breathe the same air as her? Much less spend fucking Thanksgiving or Christmas cooing over her sweet little love child with Matt.

Not that I planned on going back home any time soon. Home meant my mother, and I didn't want to share air with her either.

I swiped Jodie's message to delete it. But the confirmation request popped up, and instead of tapping that last red *Delete* button, I just...didn't. My thumb hovered over it.

And then my entire phone screen blurred as my eyes began to water.

"Fuck you, Jodie," I muttered. I blinked rapidly. I had makeup on, dammit! I was about to go meet three hot and above all good guys. She was *not* going to ruin that for me.

Heaving a sigh, I thumbed my phone to sleep, shoved it into my back pocket, and went to the mirror to assess the damage.



Fixing my makeup got me running a bit late to dinner. As I approached the dining hall, I spotted all three guys already waiting in front. I slowed down, my breath catching at the sight.

They were, in a word, beautiful. There was a raised garden bed in front of the dining hall, edged in a thick barrier of stone and wood, and the guys were draped on it in various positions looking like a straight-up photoshoot. Colin had one foot propped on the edging, chatting with Seth, who was lying along the top with his arms folded behind his head. Darius was sitting next to Seth, leaning back on his hands, grinning at them. They were all tall, masculine grace, easy and carefree, with that intangible rowdy chemistry of a group of guys who share history and friendship and some kind of love.

All thoughts of my problems back home evaporated as my eyes drank them in. It suddenly struck me that I'd never seen them hanging out together. In pairs, yes, several times, but this was the first time I'd actually been in the same place with all three.

Colin saw me first, his handsome face breaking into a perfect smile. "Hey, you."

Seth sat up, also smiling, and Darius held out a hand.

I took a fortifying breath and stepped into their space. “Hi guys. Sorry I’m late.” I took Darius’s hand and he drew me closer.

“We were just chillin’,” Seth said. “How’s your day been, sweetheart?”

I was really starting to love that endearment from him. “Not bad.”

“You’ve got your room to yourself now?” Colin asked.

“I do, although I’m not sure for how long.” I paused. “Um. I wanted to say thanks for inviting me to the festival. I’m sorry I can’t come.”

Can’t? You mean won’t.

Seth just nodded calmly, oblivious to my inner struggle. “If you change your mind, just let me know. I’ll keep your pass on reserve.”

“Oh, no—you don’t have to do that. Let someone else take it.”

“I only invited the folks I want to be there.” He winked at me.

“Hungry?” Darius ran his thumb over the back of my hand.

In more ways than one. I gave them all another long look before we started into the dining hall. I wondered if Darius had already told the other two about last night. No one seemed to be thinking much of us holding hands. Maybe it really wasn’t that dramatic.

We separated to grab trays and choose our food from the various stations. After swiping my meal card, I glanced around nervously, realizing I was the first one out and would therefore have to choose a table. As I scanned the big space, already half full of students, I saw that the one which Seth and I had shared before was free, by the window with the view of the bell tower.

I stared at my phone, letting my tray sit untouched, until all three guys grabbed their seats, Colin and Seth across from me and Darius beside. They tucked into their food without

ceremony, reminding me of Matt and Leland and evidencing the huge appetites of guys everywhere. I sort of flinched inside, waiting for the usual bitter pang whenever a thought of Matt surfaced, but strangely nothing came. All I felt was a welling affection for Colin and Seth and Darius. These three guys who'd stepped straight out of some fantasy land and into my life...they were just so *normal*.

Fortunately, eating didn't hold up conversation. It seemed Colin and Seth had been in the middle of a high-stakes discussion about the best guitar soloists of all time, which they merrily resumed.

"We've narrowed it down to the two Jimmys," Seth explained to me, pointing at Colin with one of his French fries. "But this dude won't budge on his top pick."

I raised my eyebrows. "Let me guess, Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page?"

"Yep," Colin confirmed. "You into classic rock?"

"Kind of—my dad had a thing for the era. It was hard to stay ignorant when he was always blasting the music."

And there it was, a bitter pinch in my chest as I thought of Dad's Wailing Wednesdays, the weekly happy hour he'd tried to institute at the café. They were dedicated to bands with famous vocalists like Queen and Journey and Zeppelin. Mom had indulged him for a while, but business never really changed in a tiny town like Juniper no matter what kind of special gimmick you tried. In the end she declared any space *she* was in had to be wail-free, and those happy hours stopped.

I noticed Colin's eyes had lit up with curiosity, so I quickly pivoted the conversation. "I didn't think an Ariana Grande fan would care much about guitar gods from fifty years ago," I directed at Seth.

He held up his hands. "I like anything I can get down to."

"Same. It just depends what mood I'm in."

"The only way to be," Seth agreed. "Colin's a big ol' music snob though."

“No!” I mock-gasped. “Music snobs are the lowest lifeform.”

“All right, all right, settle down,” Colin said. “Which one’s your guitar GOAT, then?”

I thought about it. “I’m gonna have to say Hendrix.”

Colin groaned while Seth gave me a long-armed high five over the table. “Hendrix doesn’t even have half the body of work though.”

“I mean, ask me next week and I might change my mind. Page could definitely get down. But Hendrix made that guitar *sing*.”

Darius laughed as Colin just shook his head. “You’re breaking his heart, Ava.”

“The chosen life of a music snob,” I said. “You’re basically asking for people to weaponize their opposing views.”

“I can take it,” Colin pronounced, leaning back in his chair. “I’m secure in my rightness.”

Seth grabbed the chair to pull him off balance. Colin’s arms and legs flailed before he settled on a mock punch to Seth’s shoulder. Darius cackled.

I leaned toward him, pitching my voice low. “Have you told them yet?”

“No, I wanted to see how you were feeling about it.”

Honestly, the way I felt about it was worried. Was I being presumptuous? The problem was, the guys had reassured me multiple times that they were cool with anything and everything, and *that* had the effect of making me think nothing about this arrangement should be remarkable. They’d gone so far to treat our network of relationships as a perfectly natural series of events that I’d tilted over into feeling off balance again. Like, did I really have to make some big announcement about sleeping with Darius? Who was I to think it would even be important? Maybe drawing attention to it would make it totally awkward and they’d see it as a sign of off-putting unsexy immaturity.

Why do you constantly create these minefields of anxiety for yourself?

Because, I argued with myself. Because of what happened with the last guy I dated.

“Ava?” Darius’s brow furrowed.

Suddenly I remembered something. I wasn’t the only one with a bad relationship history here. They’d shared a girl before, and it had ended badly. Even if they seemed to have gotten over it now, all three of them had clearly been hurt by her. Colin had told me, *She didn’t treat us right, so she wasn’t right for us.*

What did I consider treating them “right”? What had the last guy taught me? What did I want to be different this time?

I wanted honesty, for one thing. Transparency. No secrets.

And if that meant awkward announcements in the middle of dinner, then so be it.

“Darius and I are together now,” I blurted out. “I mean, as of last night. I mean, we *got* together. In, you know, that way.”

Okay, you didn’t have to get that awkward, though.

After a second that stretched like an eon, Seth laughed. My heart clenched, but he brought his hands together in a huge clap and beamed at me across the table like a sunny day.

“Awesome. So we’re doing this? Officially?”

“You’re definitely okay with it?” Colin asked.

I looked at him, and all I saw was caring concern. “Yeah,” I said. “I think I am. And so yeah, I think we really are.”

Darius’s big hand cupped my jaw and he leaned in for a kiss, in full view of Seth and Colin and the entire dining hall. When he pulled away, I had to catch my breath. “Any rules you want to set?” he asked.

“Um.” My thoughts flew wildly around my head, escaping capture. “I honestly hadn’t thought about it. Except...I guess I just want us always to be truthful with each other.” I nodded firmly. “Yeah. Truth above all. What about y’all?”

“Agreed on that,” Colin said. “Truth, especially about how we’re feeling. And for me, this is kind of related, but just making sure we communicate proactively. If one of us ever starts to feel uncomfortable or starts to want different things, then we shouldn’t wait on expressing that.”

“Damn straight,” Seth said. “And that goes for if we’re feeling good, too. Don’t skimp on the positivity. Which gets to my main thing—trust. Or maybe what I mean is more like good will, cuz I know trust has to be earned and all that. I’m just sayin’ we gotta assume the best of each other. When we’re communicating our truths and all that, remember we’re coming from a place of friendship, you know?”

Darius squeezed my hand. “We *are* friends first and foremost. And I think support is how we earn trust and keep it. We can disagree on stuff, obviously, but we don’t judge and we have each other’s backs when shit gets real.”

“So,” I said after a moment. “Truth, communication, trust, and support. I have to say that’s so much softer than I was picturing when Darius said *rules*. I thought we were going to hammer out schedules and whatnot, like who gets to be with who on what days of the week and what our cancellation policies are.”

“I think we can leave those kinda logistics up to you,” Seth said with a wink. “But if it helps with scheduling, like if you get real busy and you feel like there aren’t enough days in the week...I’m always up for group work.”

Colin snorted, but Darius just winked back at him. “Keep trying with that. One day you might get somewhere with somebody.”

“So you’re saying you and I might have a chance?” Seth shot back. “Cuz you gimme an inch and I’m gonna take a whole ass mile.”

“Oh, I got a lot more than an *inch*.”

They went on teasing each other, while I just sat there trying to keep my wild imagination under control. I definitely could not control the smile plastered all over my face, though.

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20

AVA

Seth had a night shift at the library. On the way out of the dining hall, I asked him if there were any more student jobs available.

“I think we’re full-up now,” he said, “but people come and go. Have you tried flagging categories on the campus jobs database? It’ll email you every time something’s posted that matches your interests.” He winked. “Big benefit of dating three juniors: you’ll get three times the inside info.”

Colin had to check on a lab experiment, so he and Seth kissed me goodbye—full lip kisses one after the other, right in front of the dining hall with students streaming past. I must have looked shocked, because Seth winked at me. “Want to get breakfast with us tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I breathed.

Colin brushed his fingers along my jaw before they loped off. Darius had something to get to as well, a group meeting, but he had a few minutes to linger.

“You want me to walk you back to Milner first?” he offered.

“No, I don’t want you to be late.”

“Okay. I don’t know how long this meeting’s gonna run, so I’ll see you at breakfast?”

I cupped my elbows. “Did y’all plan to give me a night off or something?”

“It’s honestly just timing. But maybe good timing. We’ve been coming at you pretty strong, right?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

He rubbed the tops of my arms gently. “It *is* actually important to think about scheduling. People get distracted by relationships when they’re just dating one person. Now you’ve

got three of us, and we *all* want to lean into that honeymoon period with you. But...”

“But we’ve also got our own lives to live,” I finished. When I first got together with Matt, it had been all about him and being with him and thinking about him and talking about him. Jodie eventually had to sit me down and say, *Girl, what the hell?* I’d vowed never to be that kind of girlfriend again.

“I was also going to say we’ve got plenty of time,” Darius said. “We’re still getting to know each other, you know?”

I nodded. “I get it. I agree.”

“You could come to the festival with us. Really max out on the togetherness.” He deployed some impressively high caliber puppy eyes, with a mischievous twinkle that made me laugh.

“We’ll see.”

His eyebrows shot up. “*We’ll see?* That’s some improvement over *No.*”

“Hmm. We’ll see.”

“If all it takes is one group meal to move the needle, we’ll have you convinced by the end of breakfast tomorrow.”

I started walking. “Night, Darius.”

He caught me by the hand, twirled me up against him, and kissed me. His arms encircled my waist, pulling me into his warmth and scent and presence. From somewhere in the crowd of students, I heard a wolf whistle and a “Damn, bruh, killin’ the game!”

Darius let me end the kiss, and I found myself sliding down his body—apparently because I’d been trying to climb him like a tree. “Night,” he murmured against my mouth.

“Night,” I breathed back.

As Darius and I headed off in different directions, I smiled sheepishly at the people who’d stopped to watch us. I normally find PDA so unnecessary, but I had to admit it felt different with the right partners. Maybe it made me That Girl, but if being That Girl felt this nice, I could roll with it.



I did manage to mitigate some of my That Girl leanings by having a productive evening and thereby, hopefully, keeping my scholarship on lock until finals. Around nine p.m. I decided I deserved to close shop on homework and use my laptop for fun. I opened my email, intending to write something to the guys.

Dean Hoffman's name leaped out from my inbox and my heart sank. The subject line read **New roommate**.

It was short and to the point, addressed both to me and someone named Kaya Lopez. Dean Hoffman informed us that Kaya would be moving into my room by Friday. One of us should reach out to the other directly to work out the timing, and Kaya should reach out to Arun to get her key. Arun had been copied on the email.

I scanned through the rest of my inbox, but Kaya hadn't sent anything. I glanced at Mimi's old bed, looking so cozy and inviting with all the stuff I'd only just bought, and sighed. *Too good to be true.*

My feet felt heavy as they carried me down the hall to Arun's room. As usual, his door was open. I knocked to announce myself and poked my head in.

He was perched on the edge of his desk, feet up on his chair seat and laptop on his knees, his phone wedged between his ear and shoulder as he typed. His eyebrows rose at the sight of me in his doorway.

"Oh, sorry!" I whispered, and flailed my hands. I backed up to leave, but he beckoned me forward. Not sure what to do, I opted to hover in the doorway awkwardly.

Arun seemed to be dressed down for nighttime already. He was wearing a faded T-shirt and low-slung pajama pants. His long slender feet were bare. And he had glasses on, thick black frames. I was secretly thrilled about the glasses. They accentuated the fine bones of his face and brought out a

sensual curve to his lips. But I'd only seen them a few times, late at night.

"So I'll just work on condensing those paragraphs we talked about, and get that last quote from Doctor Dennehy," Arun said into the phone. "No problem." He paused, listening. "Absolutely. Thank you so much again for this opportunity. I really appreciate it. Yeah, looking forward to it. Okay, bye."

He thumbed the phone off, typed a couple more things, then shut the laptop and stood. His eyes, now fully on me, were lit up with a glow of excitement. "Ava, hey."

"Um, hi. That sounded like a good news kind of phone call."

"Yeah, actually, it was." He ran a hand through his dark hair, mussing it in a way that made me want to run *my* fingers through it. "I found out the campus paper is going to run an article I wrote."

"That's awesome! When's it coming out? What's it about?"

"Hopefully not too long after fall break. It's about young Lockridge alums and what they do right after graduating. Or that's how I originally pitched it, but now I want to turn it into a series, with each article focusing on just one or two alums."

"Congratulations," I said. "I'm excited to read all of them."

"Well, it'll depend on the response to the first article."

"Are you kidding? It's such a great topic. I'm only in my first year and I'm already freaking out about what I'll do after Lockridge. Everyone is."

"Thanks. I hope I can get the right balance of human interest and information into it. It's the first piece of journalism I've ever tried."

"This is your *first* try and you still got accepted? Why am I not surprised?" I grinned at him.

Arun's answering smile was adorably proud and, I thought, surprisingly relieved. Normally his image was so calm and self-possessed. I marveled at the idea that this might have been

something he was unsure about—like there could be any chance of him getting rejected for anything.

He clapped his hands together. “Enough about me. I’ve been meaning to come find you. You got the Dean’s email?”

“Yeah.” My mood immediately deflated. “Sorry. I just realized I was probably coming here to complain. But I don’t want to do that.”

Arun gestured to the throw pillows on his comfy rug. “Want to sit and talk about it?”

I hesitated.

“No pressure. I’m here for whatever’s on your mind.”

The smallest sigh escaping my lips, I settled on the rug. Arun sat across from me. It made me feel, simultaneously, like we’d slipped into a pocket of space that was more intimate and also more casual. He filled my line of sight, pulled all the air in the room. I almost wanted to get right back to my feet and run out through the open doorway. Almost.

Arun seemed to sense that. “Have you heard from Kaya yet?” he asked gently, like he was trying not to spook me.

“No. You?”

“Yes. She’s actually coming from Wheaton right next door, so she asked if she could move in sometime tomorrow evening.”

“Oh.” That took me by surprise. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing that she hasn’t asked *me* that.”

“I wouldn’t read too much into it. She might be leaving her old room under stressful terms. You’ll have the rest of the year to talk to each other.”

I grimaced. “Or not.”

“You have some worries?”

“It’s just...” I said slowly. “I don’t want to sound selfish or something. But maybe I’m not someone who can live with other people.”

Arun's expressive eyes, focused in the frame of his glasses, seemed to drink in my words. "Are you talking in the context of roommates or...?"

"Definitely roommates. But if you're asking, I think—possibly—more than that as well? I don't know." I shook my head. "I'm not trying to get out of having another roommate. I understand that it's mandatory. I just feel like I'll probably mess it up all over again. And then everyone would know the problem is me, not them. And since literally half of Lockridge has to have a roommate and they all deal with it fine, what would that say about me?"

"First of all, they *don't* all deal with it fine. Roommate incompatibility is a real thing. It's not a question of messing up or people being problems—just different living styles."

I shrugged a little bit, not quite believing him.

"Second, you don't have to just let a roommate happen to you. You can set expectations and rules ahead of time and try to head off surprises and conflicts."

"True," I replied, thinking of the rules I'd just set with the guys.

"And finally—and I promise I'll stop lecturing after this one—first-year roommate situations are wild and really shouldn't be seen as an indicator of how other living situations will be for you."

He'd gradually leaned closer to me as he spoke, his elbows propped on his knees, occasionally tapping his fingers on the rug for emphasis. The intensity of being one-on-one with him was so overwhelming. I had a scary urge to grab his hand—scary because I was this close to actually doing it.

But the feeling of intimacy was all in my head. As my RA, he was just doing his job.

I realized he was waiting for me to respond. I nodded. "I get it. I'm being a pessimist."

"No, I think you're having completely understandable concerns, and you're doing the right thing talking about them.

But think of this as an opportunity. You can have a better experience this time around.”

I nodded again. “Okay, so...rules and expectations. Like when one of us is allowed to lock the other one out.”

“Or you could reframe it as, when you decide to give each other time and space for necessary moments of privacy.”

“Hah. That’s...definitely a nicer way to think of it.”

“It’s not really about *nice*, though. It’s remembering that you have some input when it comes to your living situation, not just in what happens, but in your perspective of it.”

“As in, I don’t have to be so negative?”

“As in, recognize the things that are in your control, versus the things that aren’t. If you have an equal share in creating rules and expectations with a roommate, then if something breaks the rules that you set together, you won’t have to feel powerless about possible recourses. Or like the problem is exclusively yours.”

Nodding, I said, thinking out loud, “I can only control so much, but what I can control, that’s on me. And *only* that is on me. Right?”

“You got it. But also, establishing these things ahead of time with Kaya can start you off with a feeling of fairness and teamwork, which I think you’ll both find valuable when it comes to owning your particular share of the roommate dynamic.”

“Makes a lot of sense. Did they teach you this stuff in RA training?”

“My parents are psychology professors. Relationship issues are basically dinner conversation.”

“Sounds like that could be good and bad.”

“Ye-ah. Let’s just say they worked out a lot of their theories with practice at home.”

I drew my knees up to my chest. It didn’t surprise me to learn that Arun’s parents were intellectuals. No wonder he

seemed to live on a totally different plane from everyone else. “You make it sound like they used you for research.”

“Pretty much. They were great about letting me express myself and taking me seriously whenever I did. But they had different ideas about discipline compared to my friends’ parents. Whenever I acted out, we’d go into what they called the *alignment room*.”

I giggled. “Oh, God, that doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“I mean, it wasn’t like we had a room only for that purpose. But they really believe in physical space paralleling mental space. So if I was being a brat, they’d literally take me through a doorway to somewhere else, then sit me down and make me answer a bunch of questions about the motivations for my bratty behavior, and what I’d expected the outcome of my bratty behavior to be, and how I’d feel if my expectations weren’t met, and how I felt about other people having different motivations and expectations....” He shook his head. “I think it was kind of full-on for, you know, anyone under age ten.”

“I can’t imagine you being bratty *or* under age ten.”

“Well, I’ve got incredibly embarrassing pictures to prove both.”

We laughed together, and holy shit, I really needed to get away from his gorgeous eyes and face and voice before I did something stupid. I pushed up to my feet, awkwardly brushing non-existent lint from my legs. “Um, thanks. This really helped.”

He stood too, gracefully unfolding himself until he towered over me. “Any time. And if you want me to help with any discussions with Kaya, let me know.”

“I will.”

Then, suddenly, my hand was on his shoulder and I was leaning up to kiss his cheek. He smelled like mint toothpaste and his faint stubble scraped my lips.

What the fuck are you doing? Just because you’re kissing a lot of people lately does not mean Arun is one of those people!

I yanked myself backward, not daring to look up at him.
“Uh, see you.”

And then I scuttled out of there.

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21

COLIN

I pretty much rocked my Biochem mid-term, which made the past two months of near constant drudgery seem almost worth it. I'd still have to do well on the final, of course, but a good grade on the mid-term would give me solid footing to approach the professor for a recommendation for med school applications. I didn't have to do the applications until summer, but all the advice is unanimous that you've got to start lining up the recommendations early in junior year.

A good mid-term also meant I didn't have to feel guilty for the times I put the books down to be with Ava. In fact, as soon as I left the Science Center, the late afternoon sun shining on my face, I gave her a call.

"Hey, beautiful, want to go for a run?"

"Hmm," she mused. "I think I vaguely remember someone talking about something like that. Couldn't be me, though. Unless I was drunk or high?"

"Is it more or less tempting if I invite Seth too?"

"That depends. Do y'all actually expect me to keep up with you in either speed or distance? Because I've seen both of y'all naked and I don't even have ten percent of those muscles."

"You'll be fine. Promise."

She sighed. "I'm only agreeing because I'm going crazy waiting for my new roommate and I need to get out of here. Where should I meet you?"

"Whoa, new roommate?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you about it while we run. If I can breathe."

"I'll call Seth and ask which trail. Sound good?"

"Not really." But there was humor in her voice.

Seth, fortunately, had already done his big daily distance run that morning, so he was happy to hit the trail for a shorter run with us. We decided to swing by Milner to get Ava so we could all walk to the trailhead together.

On the way, she brought us up to speed with her roommate situation.

“So she’s moving in sometime tonight, but you don’t know exactly when?” Seth asked. “Why not just ask her to nail down a time?”

“I know, I know,” Ava said. “I guess because that would make it real? I mean, it *is* real. I’ve accepted it. I’m just not in a hurry to put a face on it.”

“Understood,” I said. “But hey, anyone’s probably gonna be an upgrade on the last one.”

“True,” she admitted.

We reached the trailhead and started the run, letting Ava set the pace. It was a warm day. Seth and I were wearing loose shorts and cutoffs; Ava had gone sleeveless as well, but opted for knee-length yoga pants that hugged her form temptingly. She’d tied her hair back, and her ponytail bounced and swung against her shoulders.

“So what’s the secret to distance running?” she asked Seth. She sounded a little breathless already, a sexy reminder of how she sounded in bed.

“Honestly? Just zoning out. Thinking of something other than running. I usually listen to podcasts, music, anything to keep my mind off it.”

“I do the same when I work out,” I offered.

“If you have to distract yourself to enjoy exercising,” she panted, “what’s good about it?”

“How you feel after,” Seth and I said in unison.

She gave us a sort of glare.

“Seriously,” I explained. “Nobody really likes exercising. But you always like the feeling of *having done* exercise.”

“Like runner’s high?”

“Sometimes. It doesn’t always happen. I just like that it makes me feel productive, like I accomplished something. And I like keeping a disciplined routine.”

“Colin’s all about discipline,” Seth teased. “If it weren’t for you, Ava, I think we’d barely ever see him having fun.”

“Oh, right,” she wheezed. “How’d your midterm go?”

Seth groaned.

“Fine. More than fine.” I explained about the professor recommendation.

“Crazy that you have to...start worrying about that stuff...so early,” Ava huffed.

“He’s been worrying since before he even applied to college,” Seth said. “When did your parents start talking about you being a doctor?”

“Kindergarten,” I admitted. “Mostly because that was when I told them I didn’t want to be a lawyer.”

Ava laughed. “Asians.”

“Yours did the same?” Seth asked.

“They weren’t...high pressure about it or anything.” Ava spoke between gulps of breath. “But they just...constantly talked about...how doctors and lawyers...make the most money. They were really...into me being...financially successful.”

“Were?” I noticed.

Ava slowed down, then stopped. She bent over a bit, breathing hard. Seth passed her a water bottle and she took some big sips. “Yeah,” she said, and stood straight up again. “Past tense. My dad died last year. And I don’t talk to my mom. So there isn’t as much worrying about my future career anymore.”

Seth and I exchanged a look, and I could tell he was just as shocked as me.

Being away from home is why I came here. One of the first things Ava ever said to me. We'd all thought she seemed unhappy, but I never imagined the reason why.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Ava bit her lip. "I don't mind. Actually, no." She squared her shoulders. "I think I *should* talk about it. I want you both to know me. And, obviously, this is at the root of, well, everything."

"We passed a bench a little ways back," Seth said. "Let's go sit."



We sat on either side of her, angled toward her. She faced forward, her voice directed at the trees and undergrowth. She told us about her dad's cancer, and why it was the reason she took a year off before coming to Lockridge. She told us about her mother, halting, hesitating, zigzagging between points like she was still finding her way.

"I couldn't understand how she dealt with Dad being sick. It was just—I never understood what her deal was. Like for one thing, she didn't want me to defer. We got into a *huge* argument about that. But then who would have taken care of him? She never wanted to come to his appointments. I was the one who drove him, every time. She didn't care about his prescriptions. I put those together every week. We got him a hospital bed and she basically kicked him out to the guest room because that was the only place it fit. I'm not even sure how much she talked to him. I remember so many meals where we'd all just sit around the table silently."

Ava's voice was soft and almost monotone. I was perched on the edge of the bench at her left, ready to spring into action if she burst into tears or started up some cathartic shouting. But it was like she was recounting a stranger's story—like she'd heard some shit happened to someone else and it seemed interesting enough to share.

“When we were down to the final days,” she went on, “and Dad had to be in the hospital, she barely came to see him. She said she had to work—which, okay, they owned this café and they couldn’t just close it down—but like...he was *dying*.”

“Did you ever try to confront her about it?” Seth asked.

“Honestly, not until it was too late.” She scrubbed her hands on her thighs. “At the beginning, when we first got the diagnosis, I was so focused on justifying the year off. I wanted to prove that I’d made the right decision, which meant showing how useful I was, how much they needed me. So that meant I had to be the one doing everything, taking charge, staying busy. I didn’t even think about how involved she was, because *I* wanted to be the *most* involved.”

“So she used you as an excuse to bounce,” I said.

“I don’t know.” Ava shook her head. “I’ve thought about it a lot and I just don’t know. Maybe she thinks I was too bossy? Like I pushed her out?”

“Nah, that’s bullshit,” Seth said. “You don’t just go missing in a situation like that. And *if* she thought you were pushing her out, she should have pushed back.”

“He never pushed her on anything either. Never asked her for anything. But still, she should have...” Ava shrugged glumly. “Both of them were really shitty at expressing their emotions.”

I nodded in recognition. My own family has a narrow emotional spectrum as well.

“Anyway, those last days were when I finally realized how fucked up we all were. I was helping my dad in the bathroom, which was always so embarrassing for him.” Her voice cracked, but she didn’t break. I rubbed her shoulder and Seth put a hand on her knee. “I remember thinking, why was that *my* job when it should be *her* job. Where *was* she? Even the day he died, she went right into making all the arrangements like...like she was counting the day’s receipts or something. I *never* felt like she was affected by it emotionally. But at the funeral everyone acted like she was this devoted, heartbroken

wife. I couldn't stand it. I ran out of the church. After that we were like strangers forced to live together. I spent a lot of time sleeping over at my best friend's house. Or my boyfriend's."

My eyebrows shot up. *Boyfriend?*

Then Ava huffed out a breath. "Which just goes to show how truly out of it I was, running to the two of them."

And then she told us about her ex, and her ex-best friend.

I met Seth's eyes again, over her head, and thought, *If we ever meet those assholes*. I knew he was thinking the same thing.

"I haven't talked to either of them since the night I found out," she finished. "I basically just ran away to Lockridge. I didn't even say goodbye to Mom."

I had to take a moment to try and collect some cogent thoughts. Failing that, I finally offered, "Okay, so...that was a lot."

Ava huffed out a soft laugh.

"Sweetheart." Seth sighed. "You're telling us you lost all the most important people in your life right before you left home for the first time. You've really been going through it, huh?"

"Is that you saying no wonder I'm so fucked up?"

"Not at all." He took her right hand between the two of his. "Ava, I'm so sorry you've been having to deal with all that."

A sort of grimace crossed her face. "You feel sorry for me."

"No, I feel sorry for the situation."

"I *am* the situation. But I don't need pity. I'm not crying myself to sleep over it. I'm fine." Her voice had some heat to it now, more emotion than she'd showed while recounting all the wrongs she'd been dealt. I remembered how confident she seemed the first night we hooked up, how it knocked me back that she knew what she wanted and went for it. Maybe it made sense that she didn't like anyone seeing beyond that image.

"Ava," I said gently, "it's not pity to feel bad for you. It's empathy."

She looked at me, her dark eyes flashing. “I guess I don’t see the difference. I’m *fine*. Sure, they were important to me. But after what they did—after they showed the kind of people they are—no great loss, right?”

I grasped her other hand. “Of course it was a loss. And it’s okay to not be fine about it. We’ve been through it too, believe us. Just because someone treated you shitty, it doesn’t mean they’re not also worth the hurt.”

“Why do they get to be worth anything to me?” she snapped. “I’m not letting them hurt me anymore. Why’s that wrong?”

“They have no idea you’re letting them do anything. It’s not about them, not really. But it’s okay to recognize that who they were—and how they left you—had a big effect on you. It’s even okay to miss them.”

“Miss them, seriously?” She tried to yank her hand away, but I held on.

“Absolutely. Look, if you’re really over them, why are you mad about it?”

Her eyes widened, and I knew I’d hit the mark. *Damn, Jenn. Still passing on your lessons after all this time.*

“He’s right,” Seth said. “But look, aside from your ex and your friend, your mom worked you over real bad. And it’s a whole ‘nother kind of hurt when it comes from your parents. That kind of shit pops up years down the line.”

Which we’d also learned from Jenn. From a few hints she’d dropped, it was clear she didn’t have the best childhood. It didn’t take a psychology major to think that might have had some negative effects on her relationships as an adult.

I didn’t want that for Ava.

She sat tensely, clearly thinking, but she wasn’t trying to pull away, at least. The air seemed to swell as we waited to hear what she had to say. Then she slumped back. “Fine, I’m angry. I wish I weren’t. I wish I never had to think about any of them ever again.”

“I’m not saying you’ll never move on.” I squeezed her hand. “I’m saying I think it might be easier if you didn’t try so hard to act like you already have.”

“I’m not sure I know what the alternative looks like,” Ava admitted.

“Well, it doesn’t have to mean crying yourself to sleep,” Seth offered. “But whenever you need to process some feelings, you’ve got our shoulders to lean on.”

She tilted her head to rest on his shoulder. “Like this?” Then she tugged me over until my head rested on her shoulder, like we were three dominoes. “Or like this?”

“Exactly,” I confirmed. “Any time.”

I dropped a kiss on her collarbone, exposed by the low neckline of her shirt. She lifted our linked hands and kissed my knuckles, then did the same to Seth. And we sat there for a few soft, silent moments.

Seth broke it first. “We’re running the trail back out of here, though. No slackin’ just cuz things got deep.”

Ava groaned. “You know, I was going to ask if I could stay with you tonight, but if I have to *run* back to campus, I’m thinking...nah.” She popped to her feet, clearly smothering a smile. “Oh, well. Shall we?”

“Hey, now,” Seth protested. “Let a man know when terms like that are on the table!”

She danced away from his long arms, starting down the trail and picking up speed—for values of Ava, anyway. Seth closed the distance easily, scooped her up, and slung her over his shoulder. Her delighted screech echoed off the trees. “Se-eth!”

“Now you don’t have to run!” he pointed out. “Save the energy for later.” He turned around, jogging backwards gracefully even with Ava bouncing on his shoulder. “Let’s go, Doctor Kim!”

I hauled myself up from the bench and went to join them.

I opted to go back to Milner for a shower. Seth and Colin came upstairs with me, wanting to see if Darius was around, but his door was closed and the scribble on his whiteboard read, **@library**

“It’s after four already,” I pointed out. “Do y’all want to just hang in here until dinner?” I gestured at my room.

I realized belatedly, as they stepped over the threshold, that if I went for a shower I’d just be leaving them alone in my room, which would be weird. I gave myself a surreptitious sniff. No crazy sweat, at least. It hadn’t been too hot outside, and we really hadn’t gone fast. I figured I could wait until after dinner.

I’d already cleared out Kaya’s side of the room, but had just thrown the extra pillows on top of my bed. Hurriedly, I went to shove them aside so the guys would have somewhere to sit.

Seth went to inspect the standard shelf bolted to the wall beside my desk, where all my books lived. “This is your first time here,” I realized out loud.

“Finally I get to see the inner sanctum,” he teased.

Colin, meanwhile, had closed the door. I raised my eyebrows at him, but he just said innocently, “Want to do some stretching? It’s good for a cool down after a run.”

The three of us crowded into the narrow space on the floor between the two beds, with me in the middle again. Colin and Seth argued good-naturedly over who was taking up more room and who had the better workout routine.

“Start with hip flexors,” Colin said, ending the banter with his usual dominance. “You just want to kneel on one knee, with your other leg propped up at a right angle. Then lean forward a bit to stretch your hip.” He demonstrated, his raised thigh bulging with muscle.

I followed along but almost toppled over.

“Shoulders,” Seth murmured. He brought my hand up to his for balance.

“Hamstrings next,” Colin instructed. “Lie down on your back. Put one leg straight up in the air. Can you reach your toes? Pull your foot gently down toward your body, so the back of your leg gets to stretch.”

I managed that at least. It did feel good.

Colin’s arm touched mine, shoulder to elbow. “Other leg now.”

He took us through a few more stretches, thankfully all of them lying down. Then the three of us just laid there, our heels propped on my mattress.

A butterfly had been flapping in my belly ever since Colin shut the door. I felt like the aftereffects of our talk on the trail were still reverberating through me, rattling my thin defenses. At the same time, I felt a yearning to push past those defenses, to leave loneliness behind and be wrapped in warmth and affection.

I wondered how brave I could be.

I sat up and turned around. Colin and Seth got up on their elbows, their faces curious when I pressed gentle hands on their chests. “Wait,” I said.

Then I leaned down and kissed Colin. He opened his mouth immediately, accepting the swipe of my tongue, returning it with one of his own. His lips tugged on my bottom one as I pulled away.

The fluttering sensation in my belly melted into a swirl of heat. Seth was watching us, an answering heat in his gaze. I glanced between him and Colin, asking silently. They both nodded quickly.

Seth’s lips were gentler, but his fingers stroked the back of my neck, tangling in my hair to keep me close. I wondered if he could taste Colin on me, and if that made it hotter for him.

When we separated, he had a wicked twinkle in his eyes, which maybe meant yes to both questions.

Colin had been watching us as well, of course. There was faint surprise on his face.

“Is this okay?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” he said. “I just didn’t expect to like the sight of that so much.”

“Did you ever...with Jenn?”

“Jenn never liked being outnumbered,” Seth said wryly. “One-on-one encounters only.”

“Oh. I thought—” I paused. “I don’t know what I thought. But if this is too weird—”

“It’s perfect,” Colin said. “You just let us know if it’s too much for you.”

“Um, the problem is that I don’t know what would be too much. But I think if we keep it slow, I’ll be okay.”

“It’s not a problem,” he promised. “You just set the speed and we’ll follow. You say stop and we’ll stop.”

Feeling more assured, I kept it light to begin with, simply kissing them each in turn. Even though they gave as good as they got, they stayed on the receiving end, never initiating anything beyond what I was doing. In the end I was the one who gradually ramped it up, letting my hands wander over their arms, their chests, teasing the waistbands of their thin shorts.

The feeling of being in control made those first moments intoxicating, but I decided I wouldn’t mind a little bit of push and pull. I climbed on top of Colin, nudging him by his broad shoulders into sitting up, then guiding his arms around me.

“Damn, y’all look so fucking good,” Seth said.

“Come over and be part of it,” I invited.

Colin started kissing my neck, and I felt Seth come up behind me, tilting my head around so he could capture my mouth with his. His free hand slid over my stomach, anchoring

my body to his. At the same time, Colin grabbed my hips, subtly encouraging me to rock against his cock.

Sandwiched between the two of them, I felt enveloped in their embrace. We were more than the sum of our parts, way more intense than I'd expected—and we were definitely going too slow. I pushed Seth's hand downward, directing him into my shorts and underwear.

His fingers found my slickness right away, slipping along my cunt at the same time he thrust his tongue into my mouth. I brought my other hand up to cup the back of his neck.

"Colin, she's wet as hell," Seth sighed against my lips.

"Yeah?" Colin breathed. "*Fuck.*" His hands left my hips and slid under my shirt, up my sides, his thumbs flicking my nipples through my sports bra.

And that was when the door opened, and my new roommate walked in with Arun.



They actually almost stumbled right over us, because they were carrying a long plastic tub between them, and she apparently was concentrating on walking backward while carrying her end. Only when Arun said, "Kaya, watch out—" did she glance around.

"Oh, my God!" In the sudden icy panic crashing over my head, all I could see was her dark brown eyes, wide with shock.

Three things happened at the same time. Kaya dropped her end of the crate, making the lid pop off and erupt a few books. Colin and Seth and I all scrambled to our feet. And Arun cleared his throat.

An excruciating length of time followed, during which no one spoke. It might have only been a few seconds, but I could have cheerfully fallen straight through the floor, all the way down to Milner's basement. No, lower.

Bless Arun for finally interrupting the silence and distracting everyone from my utter mortification. “Kaya, I’m going to go grab the rest of your stuff. Colin? Seth? I could use a hand.”

Both of them jumped to attention, and then all three boys hustled out before I could say anything. Not that I had the faintest fucking idea what to say.

“...whoa,” was Kaya’s best effort, apparently.

I dragged my eyes up to her face. She had dark eyes, and dark curly hair, and golden-brown skin dotted with cute freckles. She was a couple inches shorter than me, but with a fuller figure. “Um,” I tried. *Shit shit what the fuck!* Then I just stuck out my hand like a dumbass. “I’m Ava. You’re Kaya?”

She looked at my hand with a fascinated expression. “I don’t wanna be rude, but are you trying to shake my hand? Cuz I don’t know where you might have put that recently.”

Oh, my God. I can’t believe they ran off and left me on my own here.

Absolute nonsense came babbling out of me. “I swear I didn’t, um. We didn’t. That wasn’t—”

“Hey, I don’t judge. You do you. Or two, whatever. I’m just saying I’ll shake your hand later.”

“Look,” I said, desperately scraping some words together. “I’m sorry. I thought you weren’t moving in until later but still, I shouldn’t have.... It won’t happen again.”

She stared at me. “What are you apologizing for?”

“Because—like, I knew you were moving in but I assumed...wrongly, I guess. I mean, I...I wasn’t thinking straight and—anyway. You don’t have to worry, this is your room too, I get that—”

Kaya flapped her hand in a calming gesture, of all things. “Girl. *Girl*. Chill, all right? I should’ve knocked. Next time, yeah, a heads-up would be nice. But as long as you’re not doing the nasty in my bed, I really don’t care what goes on.” She paused. “No, that’s a lie. I want to know *all* the good-ass

details on how you got those fine motherfuckers to do a threesome. But I'm okay to wait until we know each other better."

Now it was my turn to stare. "Heads-up. Right."

"So yeah," she went on, smooth as cream. "I'm Kaya. Nice to meet you. I also probably should've given you a more precise ETA, so you would've known it wasn't safe to get down like that. But to be honest it was a whole drama extricating myself from my old room and I didn't even really know myself when I'd have my shit together. Luckily I ran into Arun downstairs and he helped me out."

I realized then that Arun had the right idea, springing into action. "Do you have a lot of stuff? We should go help the guys."

"Not as much stuff as I brought to Lockridge," Kaya said, following me out the door. "My old roommate threw half of it out our window."

I whipped around to look at her. "Wow, seriously?"

"Yup. She was real special. Walking in on a threesome is *nothing* compared to life with her."



Kaya's old dorm was only steps away. Between the five of us, it didn't take long at all to get her moved. I very carefully avoided anything but casual interactions with Colin and Seth—mostly because every time our paths crossed, either Arun or Kaya seemed to be nearby. It was just the natural consequence of us all taking the same back and forth journeys, but it meant there was no opportunity to talk privately. And I was definitely taking a pause on anything *more* than talking.

Seth dropped me a wink the first time I bit off an opportunity to speak; Arun was coming upstairs toward us, a minifridge in his arms. Colin gave me a nod and the barest brush of my arm, but arrested the motion when Kaya stepped into the hall with a duffel bag slung over her shoulder.

She really hadn't brought much, although I'd arrived with even less. Still, it seemed like she'd have to spend the rest of the evening unpacking it all. In a spirit of starting our roommate relationship on the right foot, I invited her to dinner and offered to help with everything afterward. I figured Seth and Colin would understand.

"Actually," Kaya said, shoving one of her boxes under her bed, "I've got a paper to finish up tonight. I was planning to use the break to unpack and settle in."

"The break? As in fall break?"

"Yeah. I'm staying on campus through Tuesday. I'm a tour guide for the Admissions department and we're supposed to be getting an influx of campus visits cuz it's a holiday weekend. Hope that's not too weird, having a stranger here alone suddenly."

Alone. She was assuming I'd be leaving for fall break. She didn't know I planned to stay as well.

"Anyway, Arun already asked if I wanted to go to the dining hall together," Kaya chattered on, oblivious to my sudden silence. "He also offered to help us work out some rules of the room. Maybe the three of us can just go ahead and do that over dinner. I don't think it has to be a whole big discussion. As long as you're not dropping my laptop out the window, I think we're good."

"Right," I said faintly.

Seth and Colin chose that moment to come in with the last of the boxes, followed by Arun with an armful of clothes on hangers.

"Thank you so much, guys!" Kaya said, doing a tiny clap with her hands. "I'm so glad I didn't have to do all this on my own. Arun, Ava and I were wondering if you wanted to do new roommate orientation over dinner with us."

Arun, who'd been carefully laying the clothes on top of Kaya's bed, straightened. He glanced at me, his expression friendly and neutral, just as it had been when he asked Seth

and Colin for help. Oddly, it sent a pang through my heart. “Sure,” he said to Kaya. “That makes sense.”

I’d planned to tell Seth and Colin about the change in plans separately, but so much for that. “Um, I’ll walk y’all out,” I mumbled to them. “I’ll just be a minute, Kaya.”

I waited until we got outside before starting an apology, but Seth interrupted me right away. “Hey, don’t worry about it,” he said. “You *should* spend time with her on her first night in the room.”

“I just don’t want you to think I’m flaking on you or something.”

“Not at all,” Colin said. “*We’re* sorry about putting you in an awkward position. Was she okay about it?”

“I think so. Not that we talked about it in depth or anything. But I’m sure it’ll come up again at some point in the next few days. She’s not leaving until Tuesday,” I explained.

Seth furrowed his brow. “And?”

Too late, I realized that in all my careful refusals of his invitation to the music festival, I’d never specified what my actual plans were. Or rather, the fact that I didn’t have any plans.

Colin seemed to read the truth on my face. “You mean you’re staying too? You’re not traveling?”

I cupped my elbows. “Don’t really want to go home. You can probably guess why.”

“Come with us,” Seth said, his eyes intent. “Kaya seems great and all, but spend some time with people who care about you.”

And suddenly, all my reasons for not going were exposed as flimsy and ridiculous in the light of Seth’s statement. *People who care about you*. But was I brave enough to let them care about me?

“Can I think about it a little more?” I asked. “I know you want to leave tomorrow. Can you wait until noon maybe?”

“Of course,” Colin said. “We’ll wait as long as you need.”

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To be honest, I really had no idea what the hell to say or how to act. It was one thing to be aware of Ava dating multiple people. It was a whole other thing to actually witness her in mid-embrace with multiple people.

You're just friends, I kept telling myself. That's all. More importantly, you're her RA and you have no business saying or acting or even feeling any kind of way about this.

But I couldn't get rid of the images. They'd probably be forever burned into my mind. The arch of her back and the graceful line of her neck as she tipped her head for kissing. Hands on her body. Hands that weren't mine. The expression on her face: bliss warring with urgent arousal.

And the knowledge that if she hadn't been interrupted, she might still be chasing that bliss at this very moment.

Are you jealous?

I tried to push the thought away, but it persisted. The problem was, it felt like the kind of question you'd ask of anyone attracted to someone in a relationship, only I didn't have a typical answer. Most people would probably think, *Yes, I want her to be with me instead of them.* But with Ava, and my feelings for her, the question seemed to miss the mark. It felt too simple. This wasn't a situation that could be boiled down to a yes/no, either/or response.

So how did I really feel? If I weren't her RA, would I want her to be with me instead of Seth and Colin? Or Darius? Or would I be comfortable having the same place in her life as them—sharing her, the way they seemed to be? Not just sharing spots in her schedule, but sharing all of her, her focus and her heart and maybe even her future.

And the most important question of all: would *she* want that?



Needless to say, it wasn't the chattiest walk over to the dining hall. Kaya actually seemed like the kind of person who would bust right through an awkward silence, and she was gamely trying to keep a conversation running. But a palpable tension surrounded Ava which stole all my words.

Kaya managed to establish that I was from New York and Ava was from North Carolina. She told us about being from San Jose and the campus drama club she'd joined and her job as a tour guide. I turned to Ava in surprise when I heard Kaya wasn't leaving until Tuesday, remembering that she was also staying, but Ava was concentrating on fishing her student ID card out of her pocket to swipe into the dining hall.

Since it appeared our meal was going to be strained enough as it was, I opted to launch into RA mode as soon as we all sat down with our trays.

"So without getting too into specifics," I said, "both of you have had pretty contentious dynamics with your previous roommates. I think it would be good to try and put those experiences behind you, in the sense of embracing your new situation as a fresh start. But it would also be good to try and learn from those experiences, to hopefully prevent potential conflicts in the future." I paused to give them a chance to speak.

Kaya shrugged. "My roommate was cray cray. Not much to learn there."

"Honestly same," Ava said. "Only I didn't realize mine was cray until she tried to throw hands."

Kaya's eyes rounded. "Holy fuck, what happened?"

"She was constantly sexiling me, then got pissed when I did it back to her."

"Damn, that's some shit. Hypocritical bitch."

“Right? She actually tried to jump me—in front of witnesses and everything.”

“Did she make contact?”

“Luckily for her, no. The Dean let her off with a slap on the wrist. What about your old roommate?”

“Let’s save that discussion for another time,” I interjected gently. “We’re trying to look forward, right? Now, a lot of what roommate conflict boils down to is respect. Or what I mean is, a lack of respect. A lack of respect for boundaries, for property, for personal time and space in the room. I’m not saying either of you had an issue being respectful, but maybe you felt your previous roommate did. Does that sound like a fair assessment?”

They both nodded with similar amounts of vehemence.

“But what makes things blurry is that everyone has their own unique point of view. Maybe your roommates didn’t see how they were being disrespectful. Maybe they didn’t hear what you were trying to say when you asked them for respect. Maybe in the heat of the moment, they had their own interpretation and it was a negative one. So what we can try to do, before perspectives get blurry, is define our principles at the outset. That way, even if you’re feeling heated later, you can refer to agreements you made when you had a calmer and more objective point of view. Does that make sense?”

Kaya took a sip of her drink. “I wish my old RA was even half as serious about his job as you.”

Ava saved me from having to respond to that—I knew the RA in question, and honestly couldn’t disagree—by saying, “Arun’s the best.”

I sent her a grateful smile. “So, right now, in this moment, what are some things you want to be respected in the room?”

In the end, the conversation went pretty smoothly. Roommate rules usually boil down to communication and compromise. Both of them valued alone time, so they compared their class schedules and decided on a couple of afternoons a week when they could trade exclusive room

rights. Kaya had trouble sleeping with any lights on, so Ava agreed to a strict lights-out hour for school nights in exchange for freedom on the weekends. Ava didn't like overhearing personal phone calls, so Kaya agreed to have them when Ava wasn't in the room.

Kaya was the one to bring up the one subject we'd avoided so far. "No sexiling, can we just go ahead and agree on that? Because honestly, I don't care what I walk in on. You can pretend I'm not even there. It's just if I need something from the room, I want to be able to come in and get it."

Ava bit her lip. "Um, I was going to ask if we should just, you know, put a moratorium on anything like that happening in the room."

"I mean, it's been dry as a desert for me so far but I'm always hopeful for some action, so no need to go that far. And obvi I'd totally respect any hours we agreed on—but on the flipside, I understand if things get outta control sometimes. I won't hold it against you and I hope you don't hold it against me."

"Okay," Ava said cautiously. "So we try to keep hookups to exclusive room time. But if something happens outside of those hours, we at least won't use the deadbolt."

"Exactly. And we try and give each other a heads-up if clothes are comin' off. Text message, email, whatever. I wanna know if I need to go crash in my friend's room the whole night or if I can come back in an hour."

"That works for me," Ava confirmed. "But I'll try to aim for an hour at a time rather than overnights. I mean, if you will." She let a tiny grin escape.

I wanted to look *anywhere* but at that grin.

"Sorry to be all TMI, Arun," Kaya said, highlighting my discomfort. "Thanks for helping us work through everything."

"Yeah, thank you," Ava said.

Kaya waved to someone over my shoulder. "Don't mean to be rude, but I want to stop by the Arabic table to brush up

before my mid-term tomorrow. See you at the room later, Ava.”

A lot of Lockridge students learning foreign languages use the dining hall as an opportunity to practice. Informal groups commandeer a table with the understanding that everyone who sits down will only speak their particular language of study—no English allowed. Usually on any given night you can count on tables dedicated to Spanish, French, Russian, Hindi, Korean, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, and of course Arabic.

Ava watched Kaya go. “She must be really good. I’m nowhere near ready for the Chinese table.”

“I feel that. When I was a first-year I thought I’d try the Hindi table just for fun. Unfortunately it’s not my parents’ main dialect, so I have the fluency of a five-year-old. Never did feel brave enough to crawl back.”

She snorted. “I’m the same with Mandarin. My mother’s actually a Cantonese speaker but she did try to teach me both. The problem was my dad kept trying to teach me Vietnamese at the same time. It all got jumbled in my head and like typical Asian parents, they’d just laugh at my mistakes instead of helping me.”

“Oh, I got that, too,” I assured her. “Mostly from my grandparents.”

“When I was ten I totally rebelled and refused to speak anything but English. Now I regret it because I’m no good at any of them.”

“Also that. Well, the good thing is you’re now getting thousands of dollars’ worth of lessons from professionals.”

“Because learning from strangers is so much easier than learning from our families.”

“Sometimes it’s all about preserving the peace.” I noticed that our trays were empty. “Are you heading back to the dorm?”

Even as the words left my mouth, it occurred to me that maybe she’d planned to see Seth or Colin after dinner—or both. But she said, “Yep, want to walk back together?”

Difficult to deny the swell of happiness I felt even with an innocent invitation like that. But if Ava had no idea how I felt, then what harm was there really? I could just be a guy enjoying a walk with an attractive girl. So I decided to give in and ride the wave.



“I think I like Kaya,” Ava said as we climbed the hill toward Milner. Late evening shrouded the campus in dimness, and we stepped in and out of pools of light thrown by the occasional lampposts. “She’s just...really normal.”

“I know what you mean. How do you like the rules?”

“I think it worked out pretty well. I mean, anything can happen, but I like that we basically agreed on everything. And I’m glad you were able to help us. Kaya’s super chill while I’m the complete opposite. Not what I’d call a recipe for success.”

“I’m not saying your characterizations of her versus you are right, but sometimes opposites can balance each other out.”

“Well-spoken as always.” She sounded amused.

“So Kaya’s staying for a good chunk of fall break, right? You’ll get a crash course in being roommates with just the two of you on the hall.”

“Yeah,” Ava said slowly. “As much as I like her, I’m actually thinking that diving into the deep end with our roommate relationship might not be the best idea. I do have the option to leave during most of the time she’s here. But would that really be okay?”

“Are you asking me? You don’t need my permission.”

“No, I know. I’m thinking out loud like a weirdo, sorry. It’s just...kind of a big decision.”

“Are you looking for advice?”

She shrugged. “Maybe validation? I have the option to go and do something fun. It’s taken me a while to come around to the idea that I could do that. That I could be, I don’t know, happy.”

“That sounds like a no-brainer kind of decision,” I offered. “Is there a downside to happiness?”

“I mean, the fact that it doesn’t last?”

“Ouch.” In the deepening night her face was hard to see. “While that is true, it’s also true of basically everything in life. Why should any of that have a bearing on what you do over break?”

She seemed to steel herself. “No, you’re right. I guess even temporary happiness is still happiness.”

“Ava.” We’d reached Milner now, and the front of the building was lit up much better than the path we’d taken through campus. Gently, I grasped her elbow and steered her around to face me so I could see her expression better. She looked resolute, like a soldier marching into battle rather than a first-year talking about a *fun* vacation from school. “You’re talking like happiness is in limited supply. Take it from the son of two psychologists. It’s not a finite resource at all. It’s renewable energy. You just have to figure out how to create it yourself.”

She stared up at me, her eyes cast in shadow. “That sounds like something straight out of inspirational Instagram. Do you really believe it?”

“Definitely. The opposite of happiness is temporary, too, remember.”

“I’m not so sure what I believe anymore,” she said, with an air of confession. “But maybe taking a chance on this trip will help me figure it out.”

A half-formed thought dawned on me—*what kind of trip?*—and right on cue, Darius came out of the building. His eyes lit up at the sight of Ava, and I suddenly remembered him talking about sleeping bags and camping with Seth and Colin.

“I was just heading to the dining hall,” he said. “Did y’all already eat?”

Ava nodded. “We’re just coming back. How were your exams?”

“Not bad. Long, though. I’m so ready to be done with school for a spell. By the way, I saw a new name over Mimi’s whiteboard on your door. What did I miss?”

“I’ll let Ava explain,” I said, with a lightness I tried hard to truly feel. “I’m on a deadline with my article. If I don’t see you guys before you leave tomorrow, have a good break.”

“You, too,” they said, almost simultaneously.

I could see their attention was already turning to each other, so I headed upstairs.

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24
AVA

I hadn't expected the process of trying to be happy would move so fast.

So does anyone have a sleeping bag I can borrow? I sent to the group chat once I got up to my room.

Immediately a flurry of replies came through.

Does that mean you're coming with? Colin wrote.

ABSOLUTELY what's mine is yrs, Seth wrote. Then, a few seconds later, **No really I do have a spare**

Make sure you wash and disinfect that shit tho, sent Darius.

I laughed, huddled over my phone. **Is it definitely okay for us to leave after lab gets out? Maybe 5:45?**

Yeh yeh np, Seth replied.

Now I just had to pack. What the hell did people wear to music festivals, anyway? I opened the website again to look at last year's pictures, then searched Instagram for good measure. Luckily it seemed like the weather would be clear and not too cold. I opted for a dark blue and white plaid shirt, a long black sweater, a fluffy hoodie, and a few sleeveless tops which I could layer underneath. I decided to wear one pair of jeans to travel and pack another. And just in case I felt like mixing it up, a pair of forest green shorts and thick black tights.

The real question was shoes. I've never been camping before. I had no idea if I'd even have an opportunity to shower or what the toilets would be like. But I always wear flipflops to the dorm bathroom, so I packed those as well. For the rest of the time I figured I couldn't go wrong with my favorite pair of ankle boots. They're kind of scuffed from age, but they're waterproof and most importantly, flat.

Kaya got back to the room around eight and started working on her paper. I just had to put finishing touches on my papers for Econ and Intro to the Novel, then email them to the respective professors. I had midterms in Psych and Mandarin, but since I was taking Psych pass/fail, I wasn't stressing about it. I spent the rest of the night cramming Mandarin.

Or trying to. My conversation with Arun about languages kept wandering through my mind. I remembered my mother lamenting about the fact that my cousins, who live in Seattle, were going to actual Chinese school on the weekends, while she had to teach me all by herself because there was nothing like that around Juniper. And my dad grumbling about how at least in Juniper we could afford a decent house while her sister's family in Seattle would never be able to stop renting.

I remembered him teaching me lullabies in Vietnamese, and how I would sing them to my grandmother on the phone, my voice falling childishly out of tune with the sliding notes of the melodies. She lived in Florida, and I only met her a few times before she died when I was six. My grandparents on my mom's side moved back to Hong Kong a while ago; I've met them just once.

My dad's sisters live in Florida still, but their kids are a lot younger than me. When they all came to Juniper for the funeral, those cousins stuck close to their parents and barely spoke to me. My aunts—on both sides—are nice enough, but they're still mostly strangers. They gave me money for my high school graduation and we exchange happy birthdays on Facebook every year, but I don't talk to them.

I wondered if any of my relatives were aware of the state of things with my mom. My parents had always been the odd ones out, living in a tiny town far away from their extended families. Was Mom pretending everything was fine whenever she spoke to them? If she and I never spoke again, what would that mean for my relationship with them? Was I totally alone in the world?

Distracted by the downward spiral of my thoughts, I was glad when Darius knocked on the door.

“Hey, back from dinner,” he said. “You busy?”

“Nope, this is a wash.” I shut my workbook with prejudice. “Kaya, this is Darius. He lives across the hall.”

I’d told him about her before he went to dinner, and he’d promised to stop by and meet her. “How’s it going?” he said, flashing that dazzling Darius smile.

I could tell she was floored by him, as any human with working senses would be. They chatted about where they were from and what they were studying, and Darius gave her the usual veteran student tips about getting through first year.

Then he turned to me. “So for tomorrow, you all set?”

“Yeah, I’m packed. Um, what should I do for toiletries?” I asked delicately.

“Well, that depends. Definitely won’t be any showers there. But we’ll have wipes and Dr. Bronner’s and bottled water. Not to mention extra TP.” He grinned at the disgust I couldn’t keep off my face. “You’ve really never been camping.”

“I’m planning to tell Seth and Colin no one’s going for a run or doing sweaty exercise of any kind.”

Kaya’s head whipped around at that.

“People get plenty sweaty from dancing. But don’t worry, we’re bringing two tents so you can be on your own and not have to worry about shit getting ripe.”

“Should I try and get like, additional supplies or anything? Flashlights? Matches?”

Darius chuckled. “Nah, we got it locked down. Speaking of supplies though, I was gonna say we’ll be taking my car, so if you were planning to come back here after, then I can drop you off. Another option is, Colin’s invited us all to his house. His parents are loaded and they’re just a quick drive into Philly, so it could be a nice vacation. Or I was thinking about counter-inviting everyone to see my grandma. I did try to sell you on her cooking, remember?”

He was inviting me to his grandmother’s house? *He was inviting me to his grandmother’s house.* I was honestly too

stunned to speak.

“Both destinations will have showers and bathtubs and all that civilized stuff,” he prodded. “So what I’m saying is, go ahead and bring all your products and whatnot if you want to come with us.”

“Um.” I searched for what to say. “What if I change my mind? Or what if I want to come back early—”

Kaya made some kind of hand gesture, which I ignored.

“Then we’ll drive you back,” Darius said. “No problem.”

“Even if it means going out of your way?”

“If we’re dropping you off at school, we’ll just go up to Colin’s.”

“And miss seeing your grandma?”

“That won’t be a hardship. Man’s *wealthy*, I’m telling you. Besides, I’ll see her at Thanksgiving.”

“Okay. I mean, I’m not saying yes, exactly, but—”

“I get it. You can think about it over the weekend. As for tomorrow, just come back to the dorm after your lab gets out, and we can drive over to pick up Seth and Colin. Sound good?”

“Yes,” I said. All my nerves and doubts were awake and clamoring to be heard again, but I tried to shut them up.

“Good luck on exams. You too, Kaya.”

“Thanks!” she called, as he headed across the hall to his room. Then she got up and shut our door firmly, her eyes wide. “I have *so many* questions.”



Friday seemed to both drag and hurtle toward the finish line at different times. I barely paid any attention to my lectures, and then had to rein myself in during my exams so I didn’t space out and leave every answer blank. By the time I got to

Bio lab, I was about to bounce off the walls with anxious worry. At five p.m. I finished up probably the fastest lab report in history and got the hell out of there.

In front of Milner, Darius was already carrying stuff out to his car, a backpack slung over his shoulder and his sleeping bag under his arm. He leaned in for a kiss, which I gave enthusiastically. “I’ll be up in a second to help you.”

“I was going to say I’d be down in a second to help *you*.”

“Mmm, maybe we’ll meet in the middle.”

This late on Friday afternoon, the whole dorm seemed to echo with emptiness already. Most of the doors on the hall were shut and locked. I didn’t see Kaya, but she’d left a note on my desk. Her handwriting was round and bubbly: **Have the sexiest time, lady! Do NOT come back before next weekend!**

I hadn’t exactly confirmed to her that Darius and I were also in a relationship, but she didn’t need confirmation to be convinced. She’d just told me to “live it up for the less fortunate” and bring back some good stories.

Darius had a lot more stuff to put in the car—a tent, a cooler, grocery bags of food, packs of TP. “You should probably grab the chance for a shower now,” he advised. I decided to take his advice.

When we finally got into his car, he tweaked a lock of my hair, which he’s done before, but this time it was still wet. He sat and looked at me for a moment.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. You smell fresh and beautiful, and you look fresh and beautiful.”

I made a business of putting on my seatbelt. “They’re probably wondering where we are.”

He winked at me like he knew exactly what I was thinking, and then we were off.



Seth and Colin also brought supplies including dry shampoo and wipes, so it seemed we'd be well-provisioned. Seth sat in the backseat behind me and leaned forward to nuzzle my cheek. "Glad you're here," he murmured.

"Did Darius tell you about coming to my house?" Colin asked.

"Yes, but I'm not sure yet."

"No worries. Just know that we've got an indoor pool."

I swiveled in the seat to stare at him, jaw dropping. "You *what*?"

"The Kims are pretty swank," Seth affirmed.

"What are you, a chaebol or something?"

Colin laughed. "No, but uh...my grandfather is the personal lawyer for a chaebol. My parents are lawyers, too."

I cringed inside, remembering how I'd made a fuss about the cost of a sushi dinner.

"Anyway, we've got plenty of space for guests," Colin went on. "Between me and my sisters, we've always got people over."

"Tell me about your sisters," I said, changing the subject. "I know Seth has three brothers, and Darius is an only child like me, but I didn't know you're the only boy in your family."

"I always wondered if that explains the whole macho muscle man thing," Seth joked, and Colin thwacked his leg.

"I've got two sisters. They're fraternal twins, sixteen years old. Complete menaces. The less attention they get, the better."

"Are you saying that as a loving and protective oppa or as an eldest child with all the burdens of responsibility and parental expectations?"

"Come through, Psych student!" Darius said, snapping his fingers.

“Probably a little of both,” Colin said seriously. “But they really do run wild. My parents spoil them too much.”

“And they did the opposite with you?” I already knew Colin was planning to be a doctor largely because of his parents, but that could represent a lot of things.

“Nothing bad,” he clarified. “It’s just super clear that the twins are their own team, and my parents are their own team, and I’m my own team. So I’m usually outnumbered.”

“Gotcha.”

It made me think of Jodie, who’s a middle child of three girls. She’d never gotten along with either of her sisters, always complaining that they ganged up on her because their personalities were a lot more alike, leaving her the odd one out. She often claimed she must have been switched at birth, and that I was the sister she wished she had.

“Passenger’s seat privilege is to choose the tunes,” Darius told me. “Rumor has it you’re a music aficionado?”

“Hmm. Big responsibility. Do y’all have anything we might be hearing over the weekend?”

“I made a playlist on my phone,” Colin offered.

“Naturally.” I took his phone and plugged it into the USB connection. “Why ask a music aficionado when we’ve got a whole music snob?”

“Hook us up with some snacks while you’re at it,” Darius said, and Colin passed me a bag of potato chips.

We spent the rest of the ride munching and bopping. I’d never heard even one of the songs, so it was apparently going to be some real indie stuff. But there was a good mix of genres and sounds, with a few that legit slapped.

I’ve only ever been to one concert, when BTS finally came to Charlotte my junior year. Jodie and I made her mom take us, and our seats were close enough that I could see my beautiful bias wrecker Taehyung mouth *I purple you* at our section. Suffice to say it was an absolutely epic night. We even stayed in a hotel afterward and got room service.

I figured this would be a very different experience on multiple levels.

Colin's playlist eventually ended, and Darius checked his GPS. "The place is thirty minutes out. Do we try and stop for dinner somewhere?"

"It's getting dark," Seth noted. "I think we should go on ahead and stake out a place for the tents. They'll have food vendors anyway."

"You got it."

Thirty more minutes, and this weekend of happiness I'd chosen would truly begin.

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25

SETH

My arms and shoulders got quite the workout as we carried our gear to the campsite, but then, as the self-proclaimed camping expert, I had to take charge of setting up the two tents. Lucky for me, Ava kindly offered to help while Darius and Colin went off to find food.

All around us, people were either settling into their own spots, making dinner, or just chilling. I could smell grilled meat, woodsmoke, lush grass. Weed, too. Someone nearby was strumming a guitar and singing his own thing, while off in the distance, music pounded like a thunderstorm as the first night's performances kicked off.

The tents didn't take too long. Ava and I were a good team. We set them up to be kind of catty-corner to each other, with a rugged canvas blanket spread in front. Ava's tent was smaller, so she angled two camp chairs in front to frame it. In the middle of the blanket, we had a low rectangular table for eating and hanging out. I put a couple of lanterns on either side of it, casting a soft glow.

When everything was finished, I slung an arm around Ava's neck and nuzzled her temple. "Cozy, huh?"

She leaned up and kissed my jaw. "Very. Are y'all definitely okay splitting the tents like this?"

"Yeah, of course. I love cuddling those boys."

She shook her head in amusement and moved to wrap her arms around my waist, looking up at me with eyes that looked liquid in the shallow light of the lanterns. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Thank you for accepting." She'd removed her hoodie to cool off from our hard work, leaving her arms bare. I trailed my fingers up and down, from her shoulders to her elbows, and she shivered a bit. "Cold?"

“Not at all.”

She tilted her face up for a kiss, so I obliged. Damn, I loved the softness of Ava’s lips, the stroke of her hands along my spine, the way she seemed to put her whole self into every embrace without any shying away. My mind couldn’t help running with the idea of a camping trip for two, just us on our own little retreat in the woods, fucking in the tent, or out in the open next to the fire. One day, maybe.

For now, I was glad to be here with her and my best friends. I did wonder how much she’d be up for this weekend. Darius and Colin and I hadn’t actually had time to discuss it, but I knew we were all on the same page: hopeful, yet expecting nothing.

As if my thoughts had summoned them, they arrived with bags of food. Ava and I separated and helped them unpack. We all sat cross-legged around the table, digging into veggie burgers and fries, washing the food down with cold beer. I initiated a toast to the weekend, and we clinked our bottles together.

Ava scrolled through the festival’s app on her phone. “Looks like we’re here, and the main concert stage is there. Maybe a five-minute walk?” She showed us the map on her screen.

“Longer, probably,” Darius said. “This place is packed. That’s why the food took so long.”

“Well, I’m ready to go check out what’s playing if y’all are,” I said.

Darius shook his head. “I’mma sit and digest for a bit. Watch the tents. Meet our neighbors.”

“Okay, give us a shout if you want to come out later.”

We fist-bumped, and then Ava, Colin, and I set off in search of the music.



On the main stage, the current act was a five-piece. For lead singers plus rhythm guitars, they had a male/female duo—both of them already going hoarse—then a floppy-haired woman on lead guitar, another one on drums, and a sweaty guy with a belly playing bass. Their music sounded loud and funky, and I was already dancing by the time we dove into the crowd. Colin and his wide shoulders opened a path for us, until we found a spot about twenty feet from the stage.

Still kind of turned on by the abbreviated makeout session with Ava, I stood behind her with my arms looped around her waist. Thankfully, she wasn't shy about dancing either. Her body undulated against mine, hips twisting in serpentine circles. Occasionally her ass brushed my cock, and she'd glance up at me with a small, secretive smile. Maybe she was still turned on, too.

After a couple of songs, the band switched to something with a slower tempo, real laidback and sexy. I twirled Ava around, spinning her into Colin's arms. He wrapped her up and gave her a long, lingering kiss, the two of them as fucking hot together as they'd been that afternoon with the three of us in her room. Then he spun her back to me. We did that through the whole song, sending her back and forth, trading kisses, guided by the lingering feelings from our interrupted moment. Since we'd already crossed that barrier, it felt incredibly natural now to share her like this, but still exciting because of how we'd left things unfinished.

Hell, it'd still be exciting even if we'd been able to go all night.

Damn straight.

When the song ended and the band thumped into another energetic beat, Ava happened to be in my arms. A girl next to us leaned over and said something into her ear. Ava sort of shrugged and smiled at her.

I leaned down and whispered, "What'd she say?" then put my ear close to her mouth to listen for the answer.

"She said I'm lucky." Ava's warm breath washed over my jaw and neck. "I think she's right."

“Nah, we’re the lucky ones.”

And we were. I loved how generous she was with us, how open and brave. Whether or not she opted to sleep alone for the rest of the weekend, the sharing we were doing now felt precious, tender and important.

The band finished their set, and Colin asked, “Should we stay for the next one?”

“I feel bad leaving Darius alone,” Ava said. “He did the driving and everything.”

“Knowing Darius, he’s already in the middle of a party with the neighbors. But I’m happy to head back and chill for a bit.”

“Me, too,” I said.



Colin was right about Darius, but wrong about us getting to chill. Not only had Darius befriended what seemed like a busload of people already, he’d also somehow conjured up a stack of pizzas *and* convinced someone to tap a keg. Since it was all going down within spitting distance of our tents, I could see we were in for a late night.

“How does he do it?” Ava marveled.

“The man is extremely gifted,” I explained.

Darius appeared out of the masses, striding over with a cup for Ava. “How was the music?”

“Thank you. It was good. Who are your new friends?”

“Lemme introduce you before I start forgetting names. That, by the way, is the secret to memorizing them. Just keep bringing in new people for introductions.” He escorted her off toward his latest crew of buddies.

Colin gestured at the keg. “I guess we’re on our own. Let’s get lit.”

Ava found me about an hour later, sitting by a metal firepit someone had brought over. There was a circle of us passing around a joint. I offered it to her, but before she took a hit I warned, “Have you been drinking much? This one ain’t messing around.”

She went for it, then nodded. “Yeah, I can feel that. No worries. Darius challenged me to play beer pong but it was over pretty quick.”

“Oh, *no*, he’s a pro. How bad was the damage?”

She grinned. “Who says his team won?”

I sat up straight. “Huh, really? Hidden depths, sweetheart.”

“I grew up in Juniper. We literally had nothing else to do but play drinking games.”

“Relatable. So your head’s okay? No sign of cross-fade?”

“Yeah, I’m all right. I just glad for a break. I don’t get off on people like Darius does, you know?” She gestured at the fire. “This is more my speed.”

“I got you.”

I reached over and tangled our fingers together, and by some unspoken mutual decision we laid back and looked up at the stars. Since we were on a big-ass farm out in the middle of nowhere, Virginia, they were incredibly bright, even better than on the Lockridge campus. I looked for Orion and the Big Dipper, and raised our joined hands to point them out to Ava. The weed and the beer made them shine like a divine being had polished them up special.

Ava scooted closer, until our shoulders touched. “What are some of your favorite places to go camping?”

I told her about the campsites I’ve stayed at along the Appalachian Trail, and about the other two festivals I’d been to. I thought fleetingly of Kyle, but there was no pain there anymore—a glad realization.

My mind went to Colin, as it had been doing a lot over the past couple days. Specifically, the new heat in his eyes every time they met mine. I’d never seen that kind of look before

that day in Ava's room, but I knew it wasn't *just* because of Ava. I also knew that I couldn't push him on it. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to. Friends to lovers is a whole different kind of scary.

The fire was dying down, probably because people were too out of it to tend to it, and a cool breeze had picked up. Ava turned onto her side and cuddled right up against me, her hand on my chest. "Are you cold now?" I asked.

"Not at all," she said again.

We started making out, her hair falling down around my face, her leg hiked over mine. I kept my hands on her waist, mindful that we were in full view of all of Darius's new friends. But waves of lust rolled through me as powerfully as if we were alone on a bed.

It seemed to be the same for Ava. Her hips started rocking, and little whimpers escaped her mouth between kisses. Her thigh found my hard cock through my jeans and rubbed against it, making me see constellations behind my eyelids.

"Sweetheart," I murmured. "We need to slow down or change venues."

She was panting. "I don't wanna slow down."

"We can go to one of the tents. Is that private enough for you?"

"Yeah. Let's go to mine."

I got to my feet, pulling her up with me. As we wove our way back, I spotted Darius in the middle of a loud and busy game of flip cup. Colin was part of the audience watching the group, but he noticed us and came over.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

I looked to Ava.

"Um," she said. "Seth and I—we thought we'd...um..."

Colin nodded. "Just Seth and you?"

It was almost tangible, the feel of her weighing the decision, the thickening of the air between us, until the tension made me

want to tear off my clothes and run into the night.

“Hey,” Colin said softly. “Remember, no pressure. Ever.”

Then Ava shivered. “I think we should go to the bigger tent. We’ll need the room.”



The three sleeping bags took up the whole floorspace. Underneath each of them were sleeping mats, but the padding was thin and the ground was hard. There was no light, so we used touch to find and connect with each other. That probably made it easier for Ava, less overwhelming.

Actually, not just for her either.

I sat on my haunches, listening to the rustle of clothes, reveling in the sheer mystery of who was getting undressed when. I thought at first it was only Colin, but a spike of excitement jolted me when I realized Ava was undressing him. Then her hands were on me, unbuttoning my shirt and unfastening my jeans. I helped her, slithering out of everything and lying back on the cool tops of the sleeping bags.

I heard the wet flesh sounds of kissing, heard Ava gasp and Colin groan. Then the heat of her body draped over me, her mouth slanting over mine, her tongue sliding past my lips. The fall of her hair again, brushing my cheek, smelling of flowers.

She broke the kiss abruptly, sucking in air. “Colin, oh God.”

I peered through the darkness, but all I could see were tantalizing silhouettes. “What’s he doing?” I whispered. I could feel him moving, but I didn’t *know* and I needed to know.

“He’s...oh my God...” She moaned. “He’s licking me. My cunt.”

She was kneeling over me. I pictured him licking her from behind, and the image made my mind fucking blank out for a moment. “Fuck, tell me how it feels.”

“Amazing,” she breathed. “I...I can’t...”

Carefully, I guided her up a bit, bending my head to find her breasts and sip at her nipples. A cry broke from her throat, filling the quiet bubble of our tent. I kept suckling her, running my fingers along her sides, tracing a path down her ribcage to the dip of her waist and then her hips, where I found Colin’s hands clutching her. She felt it when our hands met on her body and suddenly she started to tremble.

“Seth, you gotta taste her,” I heard Colin say. “Taste her right when she comes.”

“Oh, fuck,” she gasped. “Hurry.”

“Just move up, babe,” Colin told her. “Sit on his face.”

“Help her, Colin.” I could hear the desperation in my own voice.

He walked Ava up my body, his own strong thighs on either side of me, until she straddled my head. Then I lowered her to my mouth.

Goddamn, she tasted like smoky honey and the smoothest liquor rolled into one. She was soaking wet, maybe some of it from Colin, and I was rock hard as I lapped all of it up. She thrust lightly, riding my tongue, urging me with soft whimpers to get her where she was straining to be.

“Tastes fucking hot, right?” Colin whispered.

“Mm-hmm,” I moaned. I got her ass in my hands, squeezing and massaging. Then I heard the soft rasp of Colin’s hands sliding up Ava’s belly, and I realized he was cupping her breasts, flicking the tips which were still wet from me. The ways we’d both claimed her body, retracing each other’s paths, giving her pleasure in the same places—it was all so incredibly arousing.

“Seth, please,” Ava groaned.

“Give it to her,” Colin ordered me.

I wrapped my lips around her clit, suckling lightly, and probed her slick heat with my thumb. She gave another broken cry and I heard Colin whispering to her.

“Yes, beautiful, come on, Ava, come for us—”

Her body began to shake, and I helped her rock against my face as her orgasm took her. Colin was right—the taste of her coming was better than I could have ever conjured in my wildest imagination. I licked all of her up with long lashes of my tongue.

Ava pulled away finally and curled over me, still trembling. “I want to fuck you,” she said distinctly. “Both of you. Right now.”

“Seth, where are your condoms?” Colin asked, his voice intent.

“Side pocket of my bag.”

The zipper, then more rustling, and finally the feel of the packet in my fingers as Colin passed it to me. I tore it open and rolled it onto my cock. Christ, it ached just feeling that sensation.

“Are you ready?” Ava demanded.

“Seth first,” Colin said.

Ava and I had never actually done this. I waited breathlessly as she slid down my body, grasped my cock in her hand, and guided me to her entrance. “Oh, fuuuck,” she sighed, easing down.

My hips bucked. I couldn’t help it. She was so unexpectedly tight, and she’d already gotten me so hot coming all over my face. My skin felt sensitive to the very air inside the tent. I was about to shoot like a high school kid.

“Easy dude,” Colin said. “Make it last.”

“Fuck, Colin. Your voice.” I swallowed. “Your voice when I’m fucking her.”

“I know, man.” He sounded hoarse. “I know.”

Seth sat up, wrapping one arm around my waist, his other arm propped on the ground for leverage. I clasped his shoulders, holding on tight as his hips pistoned in powerful thrusts. Behind me, Colin left hot, open-mouthed kisses on my neck and back whenever he could catch contact.

I was still reeling from my orgasm. Hell, I was still reeling from the idea that I'd brought both of them inside this tent, that everything we'd been flirting around had actually built to this.

And I fucking loved it.

I loved being in the middle of them. Surprisingly, I even loved being passed between them, because I understood it was their way of taking care of me *and* each other. I loved that they had started out ultra-focused on me, but now they were clearly pushing each other to greater heights. I wondered if I'd ever be able to witness them one-on-one, if they'd ever decide they could touch and kiss and fuck without me as a bridge.

The darkness of the tent gave me a reckless courage.

"Seth," I whispered. "Colin's going to fuck me right after you."

He groaned, his cock pumping into me faster. "Yeah. I want him to."

"He's going to take me on all fours."

"Oh, Jesus."

"So you have a choice. You can come inside me right now."

He bucked wildly, his breath harsh.

"Or you can pull out," I continued. "And let Colin take your place. I'll blow you while Colin fucks me. And you can come in my mouth."

“Yeah. That.”

And yet, he kept me on his lap for a few more thrusts. I loved that, too, how torn he was between the two options. “Don’t worry,” I assured him. “We have plenty of time to try both ways.”

“Fuck.” He pulled out of me. “Colin.”

I pushed Seth horizontal again and knelt over him, removing the condom so I could have him unfiltered. I felt Colin come up behind me, pulling my hips up and backward onto his cock. We knew from past experiences that in this position he had to work himself into me gradually, thrusting forward bit by bit until he bottomed out.

“Is he—” Seth asked. “Tell me.”

“Yes. He’s fucking me. He’s almost all the way.”

“What’s it feel like, Colin?”

Colin thrust deeper, groaning. “So fucking good.” His big hands smoothed up my back, gently pressing my shoulders down. “Ava, suck him like you promised.”

Seth was stroking his cock already, mindlessly easing his ache. I nudged his hand out of the way with mine and wrapped my lips around his cockhead. Breath hissed out of him, choked off when I squeezed my fingers.

“What’s it feel like, Seth?” Colin parroted.

“So. Fucking. Good.”

I thought I wouldn’t come again, happy to just be the conduit for now after all the pleasure they’d propelled me toward. But I was still in that shivery place post-orgasm where any touch felt ten times more intense. When Colin slipped a hand around my front, flicking his fingers over my clit, the feel of it ripped a raw cry from my throat.

“Gonna make her come again,” he told Seth. “Think we can all go at the same time?”

“Fuck, I dunno man, I’m so fucking close.”

“Me, too,” Colin muttered. “Any second now.”

His thrusts picked up speed, his fingers rubbing me in circles. I moved my hand faster on Seth, my cheeks hollowing out with the force of my suction. Seth's hands wound into my hair, neither pushing nor pulling—just staying connected.

In the dark, without sight, certain other sensations felt heightened: Seth and Colin vocalizing urgently, incoherently, their mingled sounds pushing me toward that peak again. The sweet friction of Colin's cock and the relentless press of his fingers on my clit. Seth's cock filling my mouth and throbbing with his need to finish. It all coalesced into a storm that carried me over the top.

As I clenched around Colin, I heard his voice break. "Seth, now. She's coming, *fuck*." Then his cock pulsed and he snapped my hips back against him once, twice.

Seth came a second later, pulling out of my mouth and spilling over my fingers, onto his belly. "Ava," he sighed. "My God, sweetheart."

For a long few moments the three of us just laid there in a heaving, sweaty pile. I couldn't tell where I ended and they began. My thoughts were scattered all over the tent, and my mind was completely unable to collect them.

But eventually I felt someone gently stroking my back. Two someones, actually, their hands joined.

"That was..." I found a word somewhere in the wreckage. "Unbelievable."

"Unbelievable good or unbelievable bad?" Seth's voice floated up from around my shoulder.

"Good. All the way good." I let out a kind of giggle. "I'm glad we tried again."

"And we can try *again* any time you want," Colin said. He kissed my hip. "Any time."



We cuddled for a bit longer, but soon I needed to pee. Clumsily, the guys helped me find clothes: jeans and boots, but no socks, no underwear, and no idea whose shirt I was wearing. As far as walks of shame went, this would rank pretty high if we were still at Lockridge. But luckily I just had to scuttle over to my tent. I found my toiletries bag and towel and set off toward the bathrooms.

I ran into Darius just as I left our area. The flip cup game had apparently ended and now he was watching a guy and a girl use the table to arm wrestle, of all things.

“Hey, you.” His face lit up as he saw me. “What’s going on?”

I wondered if he could tell. Then I saw the twinkle in his eyes. Of course he could tell. Something, anyway, if not the exact details. But I figured I might as well be honest, because that was one of the things we’d all promised to do for each other.

“I was with Seth and Colin just now,” I said. “Um...*with* them, I mean.”

His lips pursed in a whistle. I braced myself for whatever he was going to say. But instead he took my hand and kissed my palm. “Tell me they took good care of you and weren’t just there for each other.”

A laugh bubbled out of me. “You know what’s up. But I can say one hundred percent, they took *very* good care of me.”

He beamed. “All righty then. Hope I get a chance to take care of you myself later.”

Amazing how I’d literally minutes ago experienced the most mind-blowing sex of my life, and now my pulse was quickening all over again at the teasing rumble in Darius’s voice. “Hmm,” I said, “it’s possible I’m rethinking how lonely my little tent’s going to be. But if you’re not ready to leave the party yet...”

So completely and totally shameless!

Darius glanced around. “Are you seriously asking me if I want to choose between squeezing in with them versus you?”

Not even a contest.”

“Well, I need to go wash up and all that.” I hefted the small zipper bag which held my toothbrush and other travel toiletries. “So you work it out with Seth and Colin. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Busy girl.” Darius shook his head. “If there were only one dude in your life, I think you’d run him ragged. Three of us might not even be enough.”

“Thankfully y’all helped me see the light. And who knows?” I winked. “Maybe I’m just getting started with the three of you.”



It turned out I really had run Seth and Colin ragged; by the time I got back they’d already “passed right the fuck out,” as Darius told me laughingly.

I hadn’t packed any condoms in my own bags, wrongly assuming I wouldn’t need them. And Darius opted to leave his in the big tent, not wanting to disturb Seth and Colin’s sleep with too much rummaging around. But he was perfectly happy to go down on me until I was seeing stars again, his strong hands pushing my thighs open for his ravenous mouth. And I was perfectly happy to turn the other way down his body so I could suck him off at the same time.

Coasting off of my third climax in one night, I laid in Darius’s arms marveling at my life.

“What are you thinking?” he murmured into my hair.

“I’m thinking...” My words came out slow and soft and sleepy. “I always have these worries. I go back and forth, wondering what the right path is, questioning if something’s the right choice. But sometimes it feels good to just let go, you know? Follow my instincts. Be in the moment. Because I usually end up seeing there was nothing to worry about in the first place.”

“That’s a good realization to have,” Darius said. “Very freeing.”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I could do that for everything, obviously. But you and Seth and Colin, you make me feel safe. Like I’ve got a net to catch me if I fall.”

“I’m glad. That’s what we want to be for you.”

I fell asleep to the feel of him pulling the sleeping bag up over my shoulders, and his big body curling around me in that pocket of warmth.

I dreamed that I was on the field of the Charlotte stadium, the night sky tilting overhead. The stadium was dressed up for a concert, with flooring installed over the grass and a massive stage at one end. The stage was the only source of light, although all around me I was aware of people standing and waiting, and in the seats there were even more of them, thousands of nameless faceless shadows. I elbowed my way through, trying to get closer to the stage. I wanted to sweep my arms like wings to push all the people aside. But I could only move slowly, impeded by dream mechanics.

As I got closer to the stage, I felt someone tugging on my sleeve. I turned around and saw my mother. Instead of her usual skirt and blouse ensemble she was dressed like me: jeans and plaid shirt and boots. I shook free of her and turned back to the stage. But suddenly Jodie stood in my path, and instead of *her* usual outfit, she was wearing my mother’s clothes. She put her arms around me, trying to hug me, and I struggled to break free.

I woke up in the tent. Darius was breathing softly next to me, and it seemed a little bit lighter, but still clearly nighttime. I couldn’t hear anything outside the tent. The dream was already evaporating, and eventually I fell asleep again.



The next time I woke up, I could feel Darius spooned behind me, his arm slung over my waist. It was a solid weight,

but I was holding his hand, keeping him close. His morning wood prodded my ass. We were both naked, and I felt warm and loose, with a slight buzz in my nerves. I shifted my hips experimentally.

“Mmm,” Darius grunted.

“Are you awake?” I whispered. The light coming through the tent’s screened window was definitely brighter now. The material of the tent was a faded blue, cupped over us in a close half-dome. I heard voices outside, what seemed like a couple of girls passing by. The day was already starting for some.

“Mmm,” Darius grunted again. “Too early. Back to sleep.”

“Or...” I said, circling my hips so my ass touched his cock with clearer purpose.

His laugh was creaky and tired. “Or what?”

I pushed back against him in answer.

“You want this?” He nudged forward, fitting the hard rod of his cock between my cheeks. He still sounded drowsy, but there was nothing asleep about that part of him. “What do you want to do with it?”

Slickness gathered at my sex, hearing the invitation roughened by his just-awakened voice. “What do you think?”

“Think I want you to tell me.”

“Darius,” I whined. “Please.” I squirmed against his cock, and a strangled sound escaped his throat.

“Can’t fuck you,” he said raggedly, nosing my hair, breathing a furnace against my neck. “No condom.”

I brought his hand between my legs, pushing his fingers into my wetness. I heard him hiss. “Just put it here. Between my legs.”

He rubbed his fingers on either side of my clit, which spiked my arousal several levels higher. He dipped them into my cunt, spreading the slick around, then lifted my top leg just enough to slot his cock between my thighs. “Like that? That what you want?”

“Yes,” I half-sighed, half-sobbed. He was so thick and hot, and his fingers were still working me. I rocked my hips back and forth on him.

“Ah, God,” Darius breathed. His fingers circled my clit over and over, pressing just right.

I clung to his arm, but he didn’t need encouragement anymore. His mouth tasted my neck and shoulder with hot urgent kisses, and in between he praised my body, the slippery feel of my pussy grinding on his cock, how good a girl I was for waking him up to do this, how he wished he hadn’t left the fucking condoms because he wanted in me so bad—

“Tonight,” I promised. “As long as you want. Just make me come now, *please*.”

“Fuck.” Abruptly he withdrew his hand and his cock, then shoved the sleeping bag down. He flipped me onto my back and pushed my knees apart.

I lifted my hips eagerly for his mouth. He gave my cunt such a full and filthy kiss I could feel it down to my toes. Then his lips fastened onto my clit and his fingers plunged into me. His other hand groped beneath my ass, probing between my cheeks until he grazed my hole.

All it took was a few more moments and I was flying.

“Gonna be thinking about this all day,” Darius muttered into my thigh. He reared up to sit back on his heels, jerking his cock roughly. His dark eyes locked onto my face. “I want to come on you.”

“Mmm, do it. I want you to. Please, Darius.”

My eyes drank in his expression, the way his jaw went slack as his cock began to spurt onto my belly. He bent his face to mine as he climaxed, staring down into my soul. A deep moan of relief sighed out of him, a sound I knew would live in my fantasies for a while.

“Was that worth waking up for?” I teased, when his moan collapsed into breathy sighs. His hand had dropped to the floor of the tent to hold himself up.

He snorted and kissed the side of my throat. “You are trouble, Ava Le. And I’mma hold you to that promise about tonight.”

I looped my arms around his neck. “You’d better.”

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DARIUS

Seth and Colin stumbled out of their tent about an hour later. Ava had gone off to what passed for the festival's bathrooms to wash up—with a swat at me for smirking about it—and I was rummaging through our cooler for water. I took one look at their bleary faces and tossed them each a bottle.

“Why do you never have morning-after problems when you party?” Seth griped as they sprawled around the camp table with me. “I’m so over your supermodel lookin’ ass.”

I snickered. “Born this way, baby.”

“I mean for me it’s more sleep deprivation but you always drink like a fish and it’s no problem.”

“It’ll catch up to him one day,” Colin pronounced. “Once he turns thirty it’s just a long slow slide to old age.”

I pointed at him. “Are you familiar with the phrase *black don’t crack?*”

“Sure, just like I hear *Asians don’t raisin*. But then there’s this thing called science.”

I squeezed my water bottle to splash some of it onto Colin’s shirt. Naturally, he returned fire.

“All right, settle down,” Seth said. “Let’s work out what we’re doing today.”

He tossed out some suggestions from the festival app, and Colin and I gave our thoughts. Not surprisingly, our interests diverged, but we were fine with doing our separate things and just meeting up whenever.

“Are we okay leaving the campsite unsupervised?” I asked.

“You tell us,” Colin said. “You met more of the neighbors last night.”

I nodded. “They all seemed like good people. But anything we’d hate to lose should get locked in the car. I’ve got an app that’ll ping me if anyone touches it.” I waved my phone.

“Yeah, it’s a sweet crowd,” Seth said. “That makes all the difference for a festival, who you meet and hang with.”

Colin shrugged. “I’m here for the music.”

“You’re enjoying a little more than that,” I couldn’t help saying. “Y’all had a good ole time last night, hmm?”

“Speak for yourself. You were in and out of our tent before I could even blink my eyes open to say hi.”

“Well, for one thing—Ava. But for another thing, y’all just seemed a little...naked. I didn’t want to make a fuss about rousing you to put clothes on when things seemed so comfy.”

Colin’s eyes shifted sideways.

“Look.” I set the water bottle down on the table. “I’m not trying to be nosy in an invasive way. I’m being nosy in a friendly way.”

Seth chuckled. “There’s nothing to report. Hot threesome, yeah, but no hot gay action.”

I could tell, though, that his humor wasn’t all lightness and brightness. I caught Colin’s gaze and nocked an eyebrow at him. *Truth, communication, trust, and support. Remember?*

He knew exactly what I was telling him. With a sigh, he said, “It’s just...something I need to think about for a bit.”

Seth spread his hands. “I’d never want to push for anything.”

“I know that. And I don’t feel pushed. I guess that’s what I’m trying to say. I want to *stay* unpushed, and if that means taking it super slow, or maybe never even taking it anywhere...then I hope that’s okay with you.”

After a moment, Seth nodded. “I get it. So—did I do anything last night to weird you out?”

I very carefully kept my attention on the label of my water bottle. Collected from mountain springs with a 100% carbon

offset methodology. All recyclable plastic. Nice to have your thirst quenched guilt-free.

“Last night was...last night was hot, yeah. I have no regrets. But we were totally running on what felt good in the moment, you know? We weren’t exactly thinking about our friendship. *Not* that I’m saying our friendship’s in danger. Just that I want to make sure it isn’t. I’m trying not to get...carried away, I guess.”

I remembered Ava confiding in me last night about how it felt good to let go and be in the moment. *Because I usually end up seeing there was nothing to worry about in the first place*, she’d said. It struck me that she wasn’t the only one exploring a new side of herself with this relationship. She’d been looking at the three of us as the experienced ones who’ve shared a girl before and learned all the lessons. But maybe she was helping us learn some new lessons, too.

“I’m happy to keep it where it’s at,” Seth said. “Truly. I want you as my friend more than my boyfriend.”

Colin cracked a smile. “I don’t know if that’s shade or love, but I’m going to accept it and say we’re on the same page.”

“We are. And it’s shady love, to be clear.”

“Y’all are too adorable,” I declared. I spotted Ava rounding the tents, her lovely face lighting up at the sight of us. Bless her, it looked like she was bringing breakfast too, four coffee cups in a holder and a plastic box filled with doughnuts. The day was kicking off to a great start.



Ava and Colin opted to check out a smaller stage, while Seth and I headed to the main public area to see what kind of activities were happening. It seemed like the festival population had doubled overnight. The amount of hustle and bustle for pre-noon was impressive. Besides the usual long lines at the food vendors, we passed two groups doing yoga—

mixed gender and women-only—some kind of guitar class, a table offering tarot card readings, and a trading post.

Seth detoured to the latter, because he loves that kind of shit. It was a square carnival-style booth with an awning for shade. Random items cluttered the tables, lots of it vintage or handmade. I saw jewelry, stones, buttons, a basket of pipes and bongos, woven blankets, knitted clothing, wood carvings, artwork. A hand-lettered sign on one of the booth's columns read, *No money accepted here*. Another one read, *We don't take plastic in goods or in payment*.

“Did you bring anything to trade?” I asked Seth.

“I forgot to make up anything special, but I don't mind unloading clothes or whatever. See anything Ava would like?”

I inspected the jewelry. She didn't seem to wear much, but she did go for earrings occasionally. “Maybe. We should do this with Colin later.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

At the far end of the public area was an entrance to what looked like an RV park. Seth squinted at them, then his eyes widened. “Oh, man, this is my dream.”

Besides the RVs there were also tiny houses, vans, and school buses. Seth was most interested in the vans and buses. We talked our way into a couple impromptu tours, which got him all hyped. People seemed to really get into custom converting these things, adding stuff like bathrooms and kitchens, solar panels and propane tanks. Couldn't be me—I need space and flushable toilets. But Seth was full-on geeking out, asking the owners about their specs and cost breakdowns and recommendations.

“I was talking to my brother about helping me put one of these together,” he explained as we walked back to the public area. “Maybe get it ready for after graduation. I've always wanted to drive across the country, like really take my time with it. And if I go into teaching, I'm for sure spending those summer breaks road tripping. A van would be way nicer than

camping out for sleeping and cooking every day. Plus the benefits of a real mattress.”

“Cheers to that. Tent fucking is hard on the joints.”

“*Dude*, right? Not that I’m complaining about having the opportunity.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t even sure it would be on the table.”

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Seth said. “I’ve never had it as good as her.”

My mind flashed back to the sight of Ava this morning, looking up at me with hooded eyes, her lips parted as I emptied myself onto her belly. Hotter than fire, and just remembering it got me feeling like we couldn’t get to tonight soon enough.

“Same,” I agreed.

Then I wondered what she looked like sandwiched between Colin and Seth. Their conversation that morning had taken up residence in the back of my mind, and every time my thoughts touched on Ava, they passed by. I’d never experienced a strong pull toward other men on their own, but I’d also never discounted the possibility that I could get off *around* other men—and that it might be a whole different kind of something. The idea of being one in a group, all of us focused on Ava.... The dynamics would be complicated, though. Seth and Colin were right to be thoughtful about it.



We ran into Colin and Ava in line for food. They were chatting with the people in front of them, and Ava introduced me and Seth. She was definitely coming out of her self-imposed isolation, and I was happier to see that than anything we might do sexually. I could tell she was never an introvert by nature. Otherwise she wouldn’t have been so gloomy about cutting herself off from people.

I hoped she'd choose to come with us to Colin's after the weekend.

The four of us stuck together for the rest of the afternoon. The acts hitting the main stage were legit, and the crowd was totally feeling it. The day warmed up quite a bit, and we all got sweaty from dancing. Ava had tied her hair up, but little wisps escaped and stuck to her neck. Her graceful collarbone and sweet shoulders, bare to the sun, glowed a golden brown. Dewy perspiration trickled down her chest, disappearing into the tempting low neck of her tank top. I wanted to chase it with my tongue and lick her all over.

She seemed to know what I was thinking whenever I looked at her. Her lips were pursed in a half-smile, half-kiss. Her eyes were heavy-lidded like this morning, her gaze traveling up and down my body every time we made eye contact.

She did the same to the other guys as well. Seth responded by getting super handsy, swaying behind her and steering her hips in time with his, nipping her ear. She playfully escaped his grasp to dance up on Colin, who took the more romantic boyfriend route and boosted her up on his shoulders. Damn muscles.

Toward sunset we grabbed dinner and climbed a small rise to sit and eat. It overlooked the stage area from a distance—probably why that site was chosen for the stage, since the land sloped gently toward it like a natural stadium. In the distance was a thick line of trees, and we watched the sun sink into them, a cradle of orange and purple and pink.

“There's supposed to be some kind of fireworks show tonight,” Colin said. “This is probably a good spot to stake out for the view. Unless you want go back down and be closer to the stage?”

“I'm good here if y'all are,” Ava said. “It was so packed down there I think I accidentally kicked a guy in the back when you were holding me.”

“Yeah, let's stay,” I said. “I don't know any of these acts so I don't need to be in their faces.”

“You got a little tan,” Seth told Ava, fingering the strap of her shirt.

“I forgot to reapply sunblock,” she admitted.

“You’re not burned, are you?” Colin asked. “I’ve got aloe back at the tent.”

She tapped her shoulders lightly, testing them. “I think it’s fine. Doesn’t sting or anything.”

Seth kissed her shoulder. “Good.”

I saw her face change. She’d been giving Seth another one of those flirty looks, but then she glanced down the slope and suddenly it was like a veil dropped over her. I turned my head to follow her gaze and saw a young white dude standing on the grass, staring up at her like she was a ghost.

“Ava?” he said.

Ava slowly got to her feet. “Matt.”

Matt? As in...?

Another guy was climbing the slope behind the first one, and he drew up short when he saw us, Ava towering over everyone. “Oh, hell. Ava...hey.”

“Leland.” Her voice was frosty. “Is Jodie here, too? I wouldn’t have thought this was the place to bring a pregnant girl.”

I met Colin’s eyes. He looked thunderous. I’m sure I looked the same. Here was the infamous ex, in the flesh.

The guy, Matt, would probably be a good-looking dude normally, tall and strapping and all that fine stuff. But at the moment he was flushed red, and all kinds of emotions were chasing each other across his face. “Jodie’s home,” he said. “In Juniper.”

Ava folded her arms in front of her chest. “So you’re just having a boys’ weekend or something?”

The Leland dude pushed air through his lips, looking sideways.

“Jodie and I aren’t together,” Matt said, his words dragging like feet through mud. “She’s still having the baby, but we’re not, like, a *couple*.”

“Wait, you’re making her do this alone?!” Ava’s voice snapped from frosty to fiery.

“Ava,” he said, and he didn’t sound too calm either. “Jodie and I were never together. Not like that.” He glanced past her, apparently noticing how Seth and Colin and I were following the conversation avidly. “Look, can we go somewhere, talk in private?”

“Bruh,” Seth drawled. “Not a good idea.”

“No, it’s fine.” Ava’s hand slashed the air. “I can handle it. Let’s go, Matt.”

She charged down the slope, and Matt pivoted and followed her, his shoulders hunched.

The three of us turned our attention to Leland, who’d apparently been abandoned. He rubbed the back of his neck, grimacing. “She’s still mad, huh?”

For real? I shook my head. “Yo, she’s big mad. Hope your boy brought some of that aloe shit, cuz he’s about to get burned.”

I took Matt to our tents, because my mind literally couldn't process anything but that one now-familiar spot. I walked ahead of him, feeling his gaze crawling all over my back. Matt! Actually here, just a few feet away. After he'd exploded my life, after months of no contact, after bitter anger and resentment and—pain, yes, a shitload of pain, which I had to acknowledge because it was flaring to life again now like a fist clenching my heart—after all of that he'd just turned up right in front of me like a cockroach scuttling out from the furniture.

We reached the tents and I whirled around to face him again, studying him with eyes that had become discerning and critical now that the scales of first love had fallen away. He'd let his hair grow out; it was shaggy and unkempt. A pimple stained his chin. He was wearing the *Adventure Time* T-shirt I'd gotten him for Christmas, the logo faded from many laundry cycles; it stretched across his belly and shoulders because he'd gained a few pounds. He looked miserable, which was fucking good. He was also still holding a red cup of beer, which was fucking typical.

“So?” I jabbed. “You said you wanted to talk. Talk.”

“How are you?” he said quietly.

“I'm great. We're not here to talk about me. If you thought that was what we were gonna do, then you walked a long way for nothing.”

Matt had the nerve to sigh. “Okay. For what it's worth, I'll say it again. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve what I did to you.”

“I don't need you to tell me that. I *know* that.”

“I was a fucking idiot. I look back and I don't even—” He stopped. “I'm not trying to make excuses. I'm just trying to explain.”

He fell silent again. I waited him out. After a long beat he seemed to realize I wasn't going to alleviate either the silence or his discomfort, and cleared his throat.

“When I look back on it,” he repeated, “I don't know what was going through my head. I mean, I know what I told myself, which is that everything with you was about your dad and your mom and nothing else. I felt like whenever you and I were together, like if we were hanging out, you weren't all the way *there* with me. Like you wouldn't even notice if I got up and left.” He shook his head. “But it was bullshit.”

“What was bullshit?”

“What I told myself. I mean how selfish could I be? Your dad was dying and your mom was a total fuckup and I was focused on *me*? But that's...that's how it felt.”

“So you went and impregnated my best friend. Because you thought I wasn't paying enough attention to you.”

“No! I just—” He stopped again, his face struggling through a mix of expressions. “First of all, I never meant for any of that to happen. I only wanted to help you. I know how that sounds!” he said quickly, when I sucked in a breath. “What I mean is, I told myself I needed to do better at supporting you because you were going through such a hard time and all. So I started talking to Jodie because she was your best friend, you know? She knew you better than anyone. But then it was like...it was like she understood where *I* was coming from. I wanted her to tell me what I could do for you, but it turned out she was having the exact same problems.”

“Oh, my God!” I exploded. “You're seriously trying to tell me that you stuck your dick in my friend because both of you felt *neglected*?”

Matt cringed. “It wasn't like that!”

“Oh, I'm sorry, was it Jodie who hopped on your dick, then?”

“You make it sound so disgusting!” he snapped. “I know it was wrong, okay? I knew it then, too! But we didn't do it to screw you over. We loved you! But we were fucking *hurting*.”

We were hurting for *you*, all right? And we fucked it all up because we were stupid dumb kids who made a mistake.”

“How many mistakes did you make?” I asked coldly.

“What?”

“I refuse to believe you were so unlucky that she got pregnant from a single time. I remember the night I found out. The way Jodie was talking, you were in a full-on relationship behind my back for months!”

He blinked. “There is no possible way I could say anything to make this better—”

“How many fucking times, Matt?” I screamed. “How many times did you fuck her?”

“Why does it matter? It was *not* a relationship!”

I wanted to punch him. I wanted to shove his face into a pile of mud and then stomp on the back of his head. “How in the fuck was it not a relationship when she’s having *your baby*?”

He was actually crying, the asshole. Tears leaked out of his eyes like pus from a wound. “Because it was never about us! It was always about you.”

“Right.” I hoped he could see, on my face, everything I wanted to do to him. “Well, guess what, Matt? You’re still telling yourself bullshit.”

“I didn’t want this baby and I don’t know why she’s doing this,” Matt choked out. “She decided to have it on her own. I don’t know what she’s going to do after it’s born. We’re not talking to each other. I have no idea what’s going on.”

“You never did, Matt.”

Suddenly, it felt like he’d stuck a needle in me. All of that angry air rushed out of my body, and what got left behind was a dry, tired husk. No wonder I’d never tried to have this conversation before. He was exhausting. I used to think he’d hung the moon, as Jodie would say. The golden boy of Juniper High School swooping down from his throne to give me undeserved love and validation. Now I saw him for what he was: a stupid dumb kid, just like he’d said.

Matt was my first love. We had some good times together. I hated that he'd ruined those memories for me, that I'd probably never be a person who had fond recollections of high school. But it seemed I'd had a lucky escape.

"If Jodie isn't talking to you," I said, "then I guess there's hope for her yet. She probably realized what a terrible piece of shit parent you'd be."

He blanched. "I agree. But this wasn't my choice. I wish she hadn't let it get to this point."

"Well, you've very clearly made it not your problem anymore, so your opinions are automatically trash. You should get used to keeping them buttoned. And you know what? I'm glad she kept it. Because if I hadn't found out the kind of guy you are, I might have taken a lot longer to wise up and kick your ass to the curb." I lifted my chin. "Goodbye, Matt."

And I walked away.



I wandered around the festival for a good hour. Dusk came and went, and night fell, and people milled around me, busy with their own personal concerns. Music was playing everywhere, always in the background, sometimes up close. Finally I looked at the sky and saw the constellations peeking over the trees.

I made my way back to where I'd left the boys.

"Ava, sweetheart." Seth caught my hand and pulled me gently down beside them. "You okay? We were about to come find you."

"We messaged you," Colin said. "But we didn't want to interrupt."

"Sorry, I didn't check my phone. But I'm all right." I wasn't completely all right, of course. But at least all of that anger and resentment and pain had dissipated—for now.

"You got back in time for the fireworks," Darius said.

“Great.”

And just like that, with perfect timing, a sparkling pink and green flower boomed overhead, followed by smaller blooms in yellow. Cheers erupted all over the slope.

I knew the three of them were full of questions, full of concerns. But I just wanted to lie back and let the noise and dazzle chase all my thoughts away. So I did.



We walked back to the tents in silence. Darius handed around beers when we arrived, and by mutual agreement we all just sat around the camp table sipping them, not talking.

Then a thought floated up and I said, “I never thought of him as a festival kind of guy. But I guess there was a lot I didn’t know about him.”

“It kinda seemed like that, yeah,” Seth said, and I burst into giggles.

I could feel their relief at that, at the fact that I was laughing. But in the darkness, they probably couldn’t tell I was also on the edge of crying. “I know I put him on a pedestal,” I said. “But when people fall off the pedestal it’s supposed to be for shit like losing their temper or not liking dogs. It’s wild to think I was *that* blind.”

“You had other stuff going on,” Colin said. “And you believed the best of people who were supposed to care about you.”

I took another swig of my beer. “Turns out I was wrong in other ways, too. I always thought they fell in love with each other. I pictured them having this baby and being like, a family. It didn’t make sense otherwise. But he told me it’s not like that.”

“How do you mean?” Darius asked.

“If I heard him right, they’re not even speaking to each other, and she’s having this baby all by herself.”

Someone whistled—I thought it was Seth.

“He doesn’t know why,” I went on. “And I don’t know why. Because I never talked to her about it.”

“Do you want to?” Darius again. “Or maybe you need to?”

“Do I?” The beer had left a bitter, acrid taste at the back of my throat. “What would I get out of that?”

“Closure,” Seth said. “You cut them off because they hurt you so bad you couldn’t deal with it. But wounds like that don’t heal properly without help and attention.”

“Talking to her could reopen wounds, too,” I pointed out.

“Well,” he said carefully, “I kinda think there’s a good chance talking to Matt already did that. Now you’ve got a chance to see it through, maybe get some healing finally.”

I sighed. “That metaphor makes it sound so easy.”

“Trust me, I know it ain’t. But making peace with the past is worth it. I’ve talked things over with all my exes.” He paused. “Jenn, too.”

“You talked to Jenn?” Colin asked. “After the breakup?”

“Yeah,” Seth said. “I knew I needed closure. She didn’t really want to at first, but I told her I wasn’t trying to be mad at her or anything. I just wanted to get her perspective. So we met up in DC when the semester started.”

“And?”

“And I got it. I had some things to get off my chest, so I said ‘em. Then I told her thanks anyway for being part of my life.”

“Bruh, you actually *thanked* her?” Darius scoffed.

“Not like whatever you’re thinking. I just felt no matter what, being with her taught me some stuff about myself and how I do relationships. And if I acknowledged that, then I could give it some meaning in a positive way.”

“So did it work?” I asked him. “Did your wounds heal?”

“I like to think so, yeah.”

“Well, for the record, Ava,” Colin said, “whatever you want to do is obviously up to you and only you. We’re here for you always.”

“Thank you,” I said, hoping everyone could kindly ignore the wavering in my voice. “I think right now, I’m tired and I want to sleep. Um. Maybe not alone, though.”

“Okay,” Darius said. “Who do you want?”

Just like that. As if I could pick one of them out, deliberately, like a piece of fruit. Impossible. “Is there room in the big tent for all of us?”

“We’ll make it work.”

It was snug, but we did fit. Seth left the outer flaps of the tent open so that a cross-breeze could flow through. In the middle of the night there would probably be elbows and knees to navigate around. Probably a bit of snoring as well—hopefully not mine, despite Darius’s teasing.

I loved their warmth and their closeness, their familiar scents mingled and concentrated together. They were shirtless, to help with the heat, but they seemed to understand without saying that I just wanted comfort. I kissed each of them lightly, keeping the tingle of arousal under control. Then Colin laid back and propped his arm behind his head. I fitted myself against his side, reaching across him to rest my fingers on Darius’s arm. Seth spooned up behind me. Bare flesh against bare flesh, nothing more.

Still, it was everything.



Been thinking about you. How are you?

I read Jodie’s message over again the next morning, around eight o’clock. I’d woken up to use the bathroom, but when I got back to the tent the guys looked so relaxed, like such a sleepy pile of beautiful humans, that I didn’t want to disturb

them. So I sat outside on one of the camp chairs, cross-legged, my knees propped on the chair arms.

How much had Jodie really thought about me since that night? I had to guess probably a lot. She was growing a whole baby inside of her, after all, an inescapable reminder of Matt and therefore me.

I will regret what I did for the rest of my life.

Was she actually planning to raise the baby? My silly friend who made me watch romcoms with her even when we'd already seen them five times, who spent hours perfecting the *Sims* version of Hobi for me, who always wanted to sleep over at my house when we were kids because she liked me better than her sisters. That Jodie was going to be a single teen mom?

She once busted the tire of her truck because she mistook a piece of metal in the road for a paper bag and decided to drive right over it. We sat in the hot sun for over an hour, waiting for her dad to come help us, and finally she said, "Fuck this. We can do it ourselves." Even though I moaned and groaned about it, she searched for tutorials on her phone and made me get down on the dusty shoulder with her. So two seventeen-year-old girls, piecing together a few YouTube videos, figured out how to change a tire on an old country road.

Maybe she'd be an okay mom, actually.

I miss you. I would love to get together and talk.

I knew I wouldn't be thanking her for shit. I'm not Seth and never could be. But still, her message hit different this morning. Because I also remembered how she'd said, *The worst part of this is that I really need my best friend right now. And I bet you do, too.*

The sound of rustling in the tent broke the quiet. Darius crawled out.

"Hey," he croaked. "How long you been up?" He turned back into the tent. "Yo, Ava's awake."

"It's still early," I whispered. "Go back to sleep."

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m up now.” He came toward me, slinging himself into the other camp chair.

Behind him, Colin poked his head out of the tent entrance, his hair ruffled. “Morning. Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah, surprisingly good. How about y’all?”

“Not bad.”

“So...” I picked at the label of my water bottle. “I would love to see your fancy indoor pool one day, Colin. But Darius invited me to meet his grandmother in Juniper.”

Darius’s eyes lit up. “You want to go to Juniper?”

“I mean, I don’t want to sound ungrateful. I’m so glad y’all asked me to come with you. But there’s some stuff I need to do back home.”

“Ava,” Colin said seriously, “of course. Don’t even worry about that. In fact—” He swatted Seth. “I’m pretty sure Grandma Evelyn misses her honorary grandsons.”

“Now hold up,” Darius began. “Just because she *says* y’all need to come back and visit doesn’t actually mean—”

Seth shoved his way out past Colin. “When do we wanna leave?”

We decided to stay at the festival until Monday morning, which meant tonight would be our last night. I didn't want the guys to cut their fun weekend short, and honestly, I needed it, too. I needed to shake off the residue of Matt. I needed a positivity booster to carry me through this crazy idea of going back to Juniper. But mostly I felt I owed it to myself to follow through on my commitment to being happy.

All day Sunday we kept busy. I tried out yoga and nearly fell over three times. I persuaded Darius and Seth to get tarot card readings with me—Colin flatly refused—and was told the stunning plot twist that I had a big choice to make soon. We went from stage to stage and I danced until my feet hurt.

That evening, Darius borrowed a small grill from one of our neighbors. The guys bickered about how to properly light the charcoal and whether to flip the burgers once or often. They stared at me when I grabbed the tongs and shooed them away.

“Matt's family hosts Fourth of July every year for the whole town,” I told them. “They conscript all his friends for cooking and cleaning duties.”

“Okay, but—” Seth started to point at the grill and I snapped the tongs in his direction.

“Don't backseat drive. Beer, please.”

He rolled his eyes, dropped a kiss on my head, and went to grab me a bottle. My burgers tasted pretty damn good in the end, too.

We stayed up until midnight, sprawled around the table, finishing off as much of the food and beer as we could so we didn't have to haul it out in the morning. All of that feasting got me feeling drowsy like post-turkey Thanksgiving, so I got to my feet and stretched my arms over my head.

“Ready for bed?” Colin asked. I saw his eyes taking in the way my shirt pulled against my breasts and exposed the skin of my stomach.

“Yeah,” I said softly, my hands falling to my sides. “But not for sleeping.”

“What do you want to do?”

What felt right with Colin and Seth together didn’t necessarily expand to Darius—not without talking about it first. “I’m okay to keep it PG like we did last night. But I’m also okay to do more.”

“How much more?” Darius said, pitched low and intimate.

Their faces were illumined by the lanterns at either end of the table. So handsome in their different ways. I truly loved being with each of them and all of them.

But I felt strange being the only one standing, with them staring up at me. I needed to be closer to them to have this conversation. Seth was on my side of the table, leaning back on his hands, so I sat between his legs, turned sideways with my legs draped over his left knee.

“I don’t think I’m up for anything crazy,” I said. “And by crazy I mean the stuff you see in porn where the girl’s getting wildly fucked in every hole at the same time. I don’t think I’ll ever be that girl.”

Seth’s chest shook with laughter. “Ava, I for one *do not* want you to ever be that girl.”

“Same,” Darius agreed, also sounding amused.

“No way.” Colin was more serious. “And I hope we never gave you that impression.”

“Not at all. But...the thing is...I do like the idea of all of you being there, of all of us being together. I want to fuck the three of you, one after the other, and I want the two who aren’t getting fucked to stay close and...help me along. I like that idea a lot.” My breath went thin as I spoke my fantasy out loud.

“Holy fuck,” Seth muttered into the stunned silence.

“I know it’s a lot to ask. Y’all are friends and there are lines that friends don’t cross. Just because you agreed to date me doesn’t necessarily mean you agreed to something like *that*.”

“And what happens if we do agree, and we go into that tent and one of us changes our mind in the middle of it?” Colin asked, a touch of breathiness to his voice. “Wants to get out?”

“Of course that would be fine with me. I’d want it to be fine with you if I was the one changing my mind.”

Seth’s legs shifted minutely. “Ava,” he said, “I’d love to do this for you. I don’t think you’d need to worry about me changing my mind. But for Colin and Darius, it’s a bigger deal. It’s a big deal for me, too, cuz they’re my friends. But I also know what I’m attracted to and what I’m not attracted to when it comes to multiple genders and orientations. It wouldn’t be brand-new territory for me.”

“I know. It’s just a fantasy. It’s not something we have to do now or ever. But it’s on my mind and...well, I guess I just wanted to be open and honest with you.”

My nerves jangled with worry. Were they disgusted? If so, did they resent me for putting out this idea they felt was disgusting? What if they went through with it to make me feel better, and the experience ruined their friendship? I’d just laid to rest similar anxieties about dating the three of them. Now here we were again, only I was the one pushing boundaries.

Darius cleared his throat, jerking me out of my spiraling thoughts. “My thinking is this. I feel like we gotta trust ourselves. We gotta trust our own reactions, and we gotta trust each other’s reactions.”

“How do you mean?” Colin said.

“Okay, so, I’ll just throw it out there, since Ava already had the balls to do it. My own reaction is that I think it could be a good fucking sexy time. I feel comfortable with my limits and how far to push ‘em. And I’m not afraid of discovering something new about myself.”

My breath caught, my heart hopping hopefully. But I didn’t interrupt.

“I want to trust that I’m having this positive reaction because I think it’s gonna be great,” Darius went on. “But if you or anyone else isn’t so sure, or if you hit your limit in the middle of it or whatever, then I shouldn’t take that personally. I gotta believe all our instincts come from a genuine place and that at the end of the day, we only want the best for us. Whether that means saying no or yes, now or later. Does that make sense?”

Colin was quiet for a moment. “Yeah, I get you.”

“So what *is* your instinct, Colin?” Seth asked.

I was glad one of them pushed for an answer, because obviously, they were the ones with the history and the friendship. They were the ones with something real at stake.

“Colin,” I said, “it’s okay. You don’t have to say anything. If you need ten years or twenty or a century, then I’ll wait.”

He snorted out a laugh. “We might have some logistical problems if we wait a century. But no, I don’t need to wait. Not even a minute. I want to try this.”

Now my heart practically leaped. “Really? Are you sure?”

“Really. Get in the tent, Ava.”



We started out kneeling on top of the sleeping bags, Colin in front of me, and Darius and Seth at my sides. My nerves were a wild electric tangle of sensation in the pitch-dark tent, but the familiar feel of kissing them calmed me down. They let me be in control, and I loved that. I felt secure with them. I kissed them each in turn, over and over, long slow thorough kisses that they let me take the lead on, gradually growing in intensity.

Seth responded in his usual playful way, more lips than tongue, only occasionally slipping into my mouth to taste me. But the soft, urgent sounds he made told me how seriously aroused he was, how much of an effort it took for him to hold

back. I put his hands on my waist and melted against him, letting him know he could escalate. Immediately he pulled my hips into his. The hot length of his cock pressed between us; he was more than ready.

Colin kissed me without hesitation, slanting his mouth over mine. I rubbed against him shamelessly until I finally had to break the kiss to breathe. He promptly dragged his lips down my jawline, igniting a trail of fire. I gripped his muscular shoulders, tilting backward to give him better access. He dropped kisses on my chest, his mouth open and wet, and I pushed the straps of my tank top and bra down, sliding fabric out of the way, exposing my breasts for him. He licked a hot stripe up my cleavage, swirled his tongue around one nipple, then the other. I whimpered at the feel of it, and heard Darius curse.

Darius was the one who finally got me horizontal, easing back in the middle of our kiss until I was lying on top of him. I ground down against his thick cock and he groaned low in his throat. I chased the sound, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, and he sucked me deeper. His big hands cupped my ass, rocking me harder on his cock. My panties were completely soaked now, and I sat up and started taking off the rest of my clothes.

“Everyone naked,” I panted. “Now.”

“Already there,” Seth said. He hooked his fingers in the waistband of my jeans, helping me pull them down my legs. “It’s hard waiting for turns.”

“Y’all don’t have to take turns on the foreplay,” I said, throwing every last bit of reserve out the window. “Just, you know, on the fucking.”

“Thank God,” Colin said. He pushed me onto my back and started kissing my left nipple.

I felt a hand wander down my torso and lightly caress my mound. “Is this okay?” It was Seth.

“I wish you would,” I whispered. “Darius, where are you?”

“Right here,” he breathed against my mouth, before claiming another kiss.

It was madness, all those sensations together. Colin’s talented mouth suckling me while his thumb rubbed circles around my other nipple. Seth slipping his fingers through my wetness, teasing lightly past my clit. Darius’s dominating kiss, his thumb nudging my jaw to open wider. The darkness of the tent meant I could focus on that overwhelming symphony of touch, but I also wished I could see them clearly, that I could see everything they were doing to me.

One day.

Darius stroked his tongue along mine and my back arched, pushing my breasts higher for Colin’s eager lavishing. Seth massaged between my legs and I circled my hips, seeking greater pressure.

“Tell us what you want, sweetheart,” he urged.

Darius broke the kiss, his breath gusting over my cheek. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I gasped. Colin had just flicked his tongue. “I—I love this. How about you? Do you...do you want to stop?”

“It’s a little strange, gotta admit,” Darius said. “But I’m focusing on you. You get me so fucking hot no matter what’s going on.”

Seth chuckled. “Meanwhile it gets me fucking hot hearing you say *that*. But I agree, focus on Ava if it’s easier.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Seriously, if it gets too weird, we’ll stop.”

Colin pulled off my nipple with a wet smack. “I don’t want to fucking stop.”

“Great,” Seth said. “So Ava, tell us what you want.”

I bit my lip. “Um. I want you to go down on me.”

“Yes, ma’am. That sounds fucking good.”

“And Colin and Darius, I want you to...to suck on my nipples.”

“Jesus, I love it when you do that,” Darius said.

“What?”

“When you just go for it. When you tell us exactly how to get you off. It’s sexy as fuck.”

I stretched my arms above my head, willing myself to immerse fully into this new role of Girl Who’s Sexy As Fuck. “All right, then. What’s taking you so long?”

Seth laughed into my thigh, stealing my sanity as his mouth slid down to find my sex. His tongue pushed into my folds, not playful or teasing at all but single-minded, seeking out my clit to flutter against it mercilessly. My knees fell open for him. My hips undulated, until he anchored me with one hand on my thigh and two fingers thrust inside my cunt, stroking a specific spot along my inner wall. Sweet sinful torture.

Colin, meanwhile, gripped the side of my waist, flexing lightly. He tongued the crease at the bottom of my breast, followed the curve up to the tip, flicked my nipple. Darius wrapped a hand around my other breast, encapsulating the tip in soft suckling kisses, over and over.

The three of them made a feast of my body, and I was in complete ecstasy. Moans broke from my throat and all I could do was writhe helplessly as the sheer stimulation ramped ever higher.

“Please,” I sobbed. “Fuck me. Hurry. I only want to come once I’m on someone’s cock.”

“Who first?” Seth groaned into my pussy.

“You. *Please*, now.”

“Seth, hurry the fuck up,” Darius muttered. “Give it to her.”

“Fuck, fuck,” Seth gasped. “I’m putting the condom on.” I felt him sit up, kneeling over me and propping my legs on his thighs. I heard the wrapper, felt his shaking hands knock into my thigh as he rolled the condom on. “Ready?”

“Seth, I swear if you don’t fuck—”

The blunt head of his cock nudged at my entrance and he sank in the rest of the way. My voice pitched into the stratosphere.

“Ohhh, God,” he sighed. “Always so fucking tight, Ava. Always want to be fucking you, never want to stop.”

He pumped into me again and again, his thumb circling my clit, fingers splayed on my belly. I was so close already, so crazy high on arousal, that I peaked within minutes. I felt someone grab my hands, holding them over my head as I keened and writhed—Colin, my body realized belatedly.

Seth picked up the pace, grabbing my hips and slamming me down to meet each thrust. He went faster and faster, his harsh breaths filling the tent, until finally he reached his climax with a throaty cry.

He stayed inside me for a few moments, and I squeezed down around him. His cock throbbed in response. I sat up to kiss him, tasting myself on his lips. “Mmm, thank you.”

“Lord almighty, girl,” he laughed shakily. “Who’s up next?”

“Colin,” I said. He was still holding my hands, and as he moved down my body I laced our fingers together.

Surprisingly, we ended up in missionary position. It wasn’t what we normally did; he usually got climbed like an apparatus because I just loved being on top of him, or maybe he’d try some athletic move on me. But this time he tipped me onto my back and I wrapped my legs around his waist, cradling his hips as he rocked into me. Maybe he wanted it this way now—more intimate—because he’d pushed through his earlier hesitation and needed a balance. I loved it. I loved the feel of his arms sheltering my shoulders, the warmth of his solid body blanketing mine.

I reached down his back to cup his firm ass and lifted my hips to receive his thrusts. He cursed at the changed angle, pistoning in harder. I was so sensitive that all it took for me to come again was that insistent rub of his pelvis against my clit. I pulled his head down so he could kiss me through it, and I tasted his pleasure as he tipped over the edge himself.

“How are you doing?” he whispered, after his shivers subsided and he’d gently withdrawn.

“Fabulous.” I nipped his jaw lightly. “Thank you.” I reached my hand to where I could sense Darius waiting.

“Where do you want me?” he asked.

“I decided the order. You decide how you want it.”

“Then get on your knees,” he said immediately, and I knew from his tone he had something very specific in mind. “Not on all fours. Upright.”

Darius came up behind me, kneeling upright as well, and circled my waist with one arm to pull me back against him. “You ready for me, honey?”

“Yes, *please*.”

With his other hand he steered his cock between my legs and pushed inside me. I cried out. In that position he couldn’t get anywhere near bottomed out, but I felt so completely filled.

“Been waiting on you,” he huffed into my ear. “Waiting for my turn. Listening to these two dudes get you off and thinking about what I wanted to do when you finally got to me.” For a few moments he just fucked me like that, holding me in the cage of his arms while each powerful thrust lifted me higher. Then he said, “Seth, come here.” And his thrusts stilled. He leaned back a bit, taking me with him so that we were now tilted, my breasts offered up to the ceiling of the tent.

Seth crouched over us, pressing a kiss to my belly, my ribcage. “What should I do?”

“You were eating her out before, right?” Darius said. “But she made you stop and fuck her because she was too cock-starved. You didn’t actually get to make her come with your mouth. Now you can.”

“Oh, my God,” I moaned.

“With you still inside her?” Seth sound half-excited, half-wary.

“Yeah,” Darius said roughly. And Colin made a strangled sound.

“What if I make contact with you?”

“It’s okay. But try not to. This is about Ava. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Darius leaned back another crucial inch, propped up on one hand. I felt Seth’s hot breath descend lower on my belly. His fingers traced up and down my thighs, dipping into the sensitive joins where they met my hips. I squirmed, trying to reach him, but I was trapped by the steely strength of Darius’s arm beneath my breasts and the thick rod of his cock buried inside my cunt.

“Ahhh fuck, babe, you smell like all of us, did you know that?” Seth groaned. “You’ve been so well-fucked, huh?”

“Just like I wanted. Y’all are so amazing.” I bit my lip. “But if this is too much now…”

“I’m good,” Darius said. “I’m so fucking good with it.”

“Me, too,” Seth whispered. “Darius, just hold her still as you can.” And he slithered the rest of the way down and fastened his lips on my clit.

A sob of pure pleasure burst from my throat. I couldn’t move. I could only quiver and tremble and receive the onslaught: Seth so carefully mouthing my pussy in the tiny space Darius had allowed him, the filthy whispers Darius breathed into my ear and the way his cock kept trying to nudge higher, deeper. And just when I thought I couldn’t take anymore, Colin lifted my arm to lick fiery trails at my inner elbow, my wrist, my palm, before finally slipping my fingers into the heated cavern of his mouth.

“How do you like that, Ava?” Darius rasped. “You like the three of us being all about you, huh?”

“Yes, yes!”

“But then you let us be in control. Now you gotta come the way we want you to come.”

“I’m so close already.”

“I don’t think Seth’s ready, though. I think he wants to keep licking that clit, right, Seth?”

“Mm-hmm,” Seth replied, his hot breath washing over me.

“And I think Colin wants to lick these tits of yours, huh? Seems like you really like when he does that.”

“She really does,” Colin confirmed. He loomed over us, his mouth finding my breasts immediately.

“And me,” Darius went on, “I’m just gonna keep you right here on my dick. I can hold you forever. We’re in no rush at all.”

His cock twitched as he spoke. I really thought I couldn’t fit anymore of him, but that proved me exquisitely wrong. He nosed my jaw and my head fell back against his shoulder, pushing my breasts even higher for Colin’s explorations. Meanwhile, Seth had begun tonguing my clit in deep massaging strokes, driving me frantic. I was so desperate to reach the peak again, so very nearly there, but he knew exactly what he was doing, changing up his techniques, easing off just in time, completely in control.

“Goddamn, my dick is so hard for you,” Darius muttered. “Can you feel how hard you make me? I bet Seth and Colin could go again, too, you make us so fuckin’ hot for you.”

God, the thought of it. Getting fucked by each of them in a constant train, all night long. My body would probably implode from the over-pleasuring. Every time Seth brought me close and then took me away again, Colin and Darius would continue stoking my arousal with their attentions. There was no relief, no respite. They had me completely under their spell.

“How you doing now?” Darius asked. His naked chest, pressed to my back, had gone slippery with sweat.

“I want to come,” I pleaded. “Let me come.”

“You think you deserve that? You think you’re a good enough girl?”

My mind blanked out. “Yes, yes!”

“I might want to feel that. Might want to feel this tight little pussy coming all over my cock. Colin and Seth got to feel it already tonight. Not me.”

“I’ll make it so good for you. I swear. Please. Let me come.”

“You promise?” he panted. “Don’t hold back. I want it all.”

“Oh, God, *please*. I promise. I promise.”

I barely had any idea what I was saying, what Darius was demanding. I only knew I needed the torture to end. But he let the moments swell after my begging, for so long I had the mad thought that he might actually deny my orgasm and I’d officially go crazy. The tent filled with the sounds of my moans, of the guys’ heavy breathing.

And then finally, *finally*, Darius said, “God, I can’t take it anymore either. Let her finish.”

Even the words were almost enough by themselves. Seth pursed his lips around my clit, tugging with the perfect amount of pressure. The climax rolled through my body like a tidal wave, my mind blanking with the force of it. Seth kept right on suckling, never letting up, and I heard Darius curse as my cunt convulsed around his cock.

Then the world tilted as Darius collapsed on his back, his cock fucking furiously in and out of me. He’d finally lost his own control. It didn’t take long before he groaned and shuddered, his arms clasp me hard. “Good girl,” he sighed. “Best girl.”

“Ah, fuck,” Seth said, and I heard the unmistakable sound of him jerking his cock.

My head was still spinning, but I rolled off of Darius—he groaned again—then crawled over to Seth and engulfed his cock with my mouth. He came within seconds.

I was on my hands and knees, trying to catch my breath. “Colin,” I gasped. “I know you want to—here—”

I felt him come up behind me, like he had the last time we were with Seth. His cock pushed into my cunt, rough and hard. I laid out on my front, too fucked out to hold my body up to

meet his thrusts. He followed me down, riding his orgasm out with his pelvis slapping against my ass.

We were all gasping for air, sprawled on top of the sleeping bags, too exhausted to move.

“Thank you,” I gulped. “God, y’all, that was amazing.”

“You were amazing,” Colin murmured. “We just did our best to keep up.”

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30
COLIN

I'd been afraid of things feeling different with Seth and Darius if we crossed that last step. And in the morning, it did feel like something had changed over. But not in a bad way. We sat eating breakfast and I still saw my good friends. But there was a palpable energy between us, a layered feeling of a tension newly relaxed and yet simultaneously heightened. We'd pushed ourselves outside of our comfort zones and while the unknown had been scary beforehand, it had turned out to be one of the most incredible nights of my life. So now I found myself wondering when we could try it again. Whether I'd be capable of *more*.

It seemed the other guys were feeling similar things. I caught Darius contemplating me over the rim of his coffee cup, and he didn't look away when I studied him right back, just let the seconds tick on until finally nodding. A half-smile lingered on Seth's face as he brought out paper plates and napkins for the table. His fingers grazed mine when he passed me a set, and he placed his other hand on my knuckles, pressing firmly.

This weekend had gone way beyond dating the same girl. It was like we were all acutely aware that we'd had an experience so special it would always occupy a sacred space in our memories. I felt that new awareness, in itself, was something precious. Honestly, it felt like maybe we'd grown up a bit.

After breakfast, it took about an hour to break down the campsite, and then we had to load everything in Darius's car. Ava glanced at the sleeping bags with a skeptical expression. "Um, I guess we'll need to wash these."

"Wash 'em?" Seth teased. "I was gonna have 'em framed."

She sent him a look of fond exasperation.

“Wet wipes should be fine for now,” I said, loving the self-conscious blush on her cheeks. “I’ll do it. Future doctors aren’t squeamish.”

She looked adorable this morning, her hair sex-tousled, a sensual gleam in her eyes. She’d slept naked with us all night, waking up under sleepy protest after we trailed kisses up and down her back, her skin glowing in the soft morning light that wafted into the tent. Unfortunately, we’d all slept late, so the area around us was already busy with people packing up to leave the festival. Not much privacy. Reluctantly, we opted to get dressed and start the day.

I doubted we could expect much opportunity for privacy at Darius’s grandmother’s house. Even if the old wood floors didn’t creak at every step, Darius would never disrespect her that way. Neither would Seth or I, for that matter. But I couldn’t help daydreaming about taking the tents and sleeping bags somewhere on the farm, out of earshot...

“How are you?” Ava slipped under my arm as we walked to Darius’s truck with our first haul. “After last night?”

“Fine.” I squeezed her softly. “I mean, I’m thinking about everything obviously. But it’s all good thoughts. How are you? We got a little, uh...”

She smirked. “I’m good. Moving kinda carefully, but good.”

“Are you hurt anywhere? We should really think about using lube next time—”

“Interesting, already planning a *next* time, huh?” Her eyebrows lifted. “Before we’ve even had a morning debrief?”

I paused. “You’re right. Shit, we should really talk. That was a huge thing we did and if anyone has regrets we can’t just act like—”

“Colin.” Ava placed her palm on my chest. “I was teasing. I think we’re okay. I think it’s a good idea to keep checking in with each other. But I feel like...like we know we’re on solid ground now. Don’t you?”

I gave her a relieved smile. “Absolutely.”

Ava wanted to walk around the main area of the festival one last time before we left. Although the musical acts had stopped, there were still community activities going on, including an impromptu farmer's market which was more like people selling food and supplies they hadn't been able to use during the weekend. Seth pulled me and Darius aside while Ava started wandering the stalls.

"This reminds me we need to hit the trading post and get something for Ava," he said.

"Think we can find something before she comes looking for us?" Darius asked. "If you want it to be a surprise, I mean."

"I already had my eye on something so it should be a quick exchange. But I figured y'all would want input."

"Okay," I agreed. "Let's see it."



Seth's gift idea was a bracelet, fashioned from light copper strands braided together. "There's four of 'em in the design," he said. "So you know, seemed appropriate."

"Yeah, that's perfect." Darius clapped him on the shoulder. "Boyfriend material right here."

I couldn't disagree. "So what do we trade?"

The woman managing the trading post looked over what we had to offer, which wasn't much and really not in keeping with the spirit of handmade goods. But she must have seen some kind of urgency in us, so she finally said, "Well, it probably doesn't make sense for me to take on big inventory at this point." She gestured around her at the tables. "I already got a lot to pack up once the festival officially ends. Do any of you have a special talent like drawing, maybe? People have been bartering artwork, and paper's easy."

As she said it, I caught sight of a guitar on the table next to her. "Uh, would you take a song?"

She looked me over, her lips spreading in a toothy grin. “From you? Baby, if *you* sing me a song I’ll give you as many bracelets as you can handle.”

Seth and Darius snickered. Ignoring them, I picked up the guitar and checked the strings. It seemed to be in good shape, and only needed a little tightening to get in tune. I propped myself on the table with the guitar on my knee and contemplated what I could deliver. It would have to be something short and sweet. I reached back in my memory to one of the first tunes I ever learned to fingerpick, Nick Drake’s “Which Will.” Thankfully I remembered the lyrics well enough, but I had to transpose to a lower key to fit my baritone voice.

It was an odd song to choose, given last night with Ava, as it asked a girl which person she would love the best. But that was the way my musical tastes went sometimes—contrary and opposite to what I was living. Seth once said that was probably how I expressed my frustrations about not pursuing music “for real.” I let his observation pass without comment.

At the song’s finish, I looked around to see the trader’s reaction. She was beaming and clapping, her hands lifted in appreciation. So were a number of people who’d apparently paused to listen. Someone even yelled, “Encore, dude!”

I just sent an embarrassed wave in their direction and laid the guitar back down on the table.

“Very nice.” The trader handed me the bracelet, wrapped in a wax paper bag decorated in what seemed to be hand-drawn stars. “Were you a performer here?”

“Hah, no.”

“Too bad. Maybe next year.” She winked at me, then turned to help someone who’d just stepped up to trade.

Darius gave me a fist bump. “Killed it as usual.”

Seth was shaking his head. “Those hands need to keep playing music, not studying for the MCAT.”

“Sure.” I wriggled my shoulders; sometimes hunching over a guitar got me tensed up. “My folks would only disown me

and never speak to me again. You know they're waiting for the day they can present the next doctor at the family reunion."

"Yeah, but are *you* waiting for that day?" Seth asked pointedly.

Again, I let it slide. I'd just caught sight of something else. Or rather, *someone* else. "Hey, isn't that Ava's ex?"

It was definitely Matt. He was hovering on the edge of the small crowd, him and his little lizard friend Leland, and they'd seen us, too. I veered toward him with Seth and Darius in tow.

"Hey, man," Matt said. "That sounded awesome. Really good."

He had the fucking nerve to stick his hand out to shake. I just looked at it, stone-faced, until it drifted back down to his side. "You're still here, asshole?"

Clearly he'd been expecting some hostility, but had hoped otherwise. He gave a short, resigned nod. "I'm assuming you're here with Ava? I just wanted to ask if she's okay."

"Man, if you don't get the fuck," Darius began.

"I don't want trouble." Matt raised his hands in a disarming gesture. "I care about Ava. Truly. I just want to know she's all right."

"If you care about her, why'd you mess around on her?" Seth demanded.

"It's complicated. And..." Matt took a steeling breath. "It's also between me and her."

"You and her and her *friend*," I snapped.

"I'm not going to defend what I did." Matt shook his head. "I made a huge mistake. But I love Ava. I never stopped. Please just...tell her again that I'm sorry. And that I wish her the best."

"I'm sure the sentiment's very much not returned," I said, making no promises because fuck this dude. "Maybe you should try going home to support the girl who's having your *baby*."

His friend, Leland, tried to pull him away. “Let’s go, man.”

But Matt paused. “You care about Ava, too, right?” He looked straight into my eyes, trying to read me. “Yeah, you do. Well, for her sake I hope you don’t end up like me one day. Appreciate what you’ve got and don’t ruin it.”

“No chance of that,” Seth piped up. “We’re not dumbasses.”

Matt glanced at him in confusion, but his buddy had a good handle on him now and succeeded in dragging him off.

The three of us exchanged looks. “Can’t imagine what Ava ever saw in that guy,” I said.

“I mean...” Seth studied the retreating figures. “He’s straight-up Homecoming King vibes. I wouldn’t say no.”

I rolled my eyes. Darius whistled. “Really? He’s the dude who’s gonna spend the next forty years knocking on doors using those vibes to scam old ladies into pyramid schemes. That’s what he’ll be bragging about at all the Juniper High School reunions. Mark it.”

“I’m not saying I’d want *conversation*,” Seth said.

“Speaking of Juniper,” I interrupted, before Seth could elaborate further, “we should probably find Ava and get going.”



It wasn’t that the Homecoming King got to me, exactly, but I found myself brooding on the road. By some unspoken agreement, the three of us had *not* told Ava about running into him. I had misgivings about that. I reasoned with myself that we could tell her at some point, but maybe now wasn’t the best time. The whole car had fallen quiet as soon as we left the festival grounds, a stark difference compared to our drive from Lockridge. For Ava this was going to be an upsetting visit, and we instinctively understood the silence that came over her.

For me it was more than that. *I love Ava. I never stopped.* Homecoming King’s words looped through my mind, and I

started thinking about how the last time I saw Jenn, I told her I loved her. It was the first time I'd ever said that to anyone outside my family. And she basically said in response, *You're cute. But I don't want, need, or care to hear any more about it.*

Seth had last seen her just a couple months ago. Probably Darius had his own Last Time I Saw Jenn story. Not to mention whoever else she'd strung along. But I wondered if anyone else's had been as painful and humiliating as mine.

Thinking about it now, I'm not sure I *did* love Jenn. I certainly didn't say the words with the absolute conviction Homecoming King had about Ava. And even then I could recognize I'd said them as a last resort, as a Hail Mary pass for Jenn to finally give me her undivided attention. If she would only listen to me, I felt, I could convince her we had something special enough to stay together.

But did we? Because every single minute I've spent with Ava, even in the short time I've known her, has completely eclipsed the entire relationship I had with Jenn. There's something about happiness, and confidence, and growing up, that makes feelings of desperation and inferiority and immaturity just...not that romantic.

The problem is, I *am* a romantic. I'm the guy who taught himself love songs on the guitar when I was still an awkward kid dreaming of whoever would give me my first kiss. When I finally did start getting dates, I'd make them sit down and listen to my cheesy renditions while I stared deeply into their eyes—and it would be a whole-ass playlist, carefully calibrated for maximum sap. When I lost my virginity to Sarah Lowden, I literally sent her flowers, not just the next day, but every day for the next *week*.

Basically, going OTT has always been my MO. Seth once joked it's because I didn't get enough love and attention at home. Who knows the real reason? And who knows whether going OTT comes out of true feeling to begin with, or whether I hype my feelings up by going OTT. It's a chicken and egg situation and I rarely seem to have much control over it. So I get into these situations where I'm all but pleading for simple appreciation from a person who doesn't see the relationship

the way I do, and because I'm stuck in my own head it takes a figurative smack *upside* the head to bring me back down to earth.

With Jenn, I'd consciously tried *not* to follow that routine, mostly because she squashed any such notions early on. But somehow I got myself to that same sad endpoint anyway...and it pretty much blew up in my face.

I looked at Ava, sitting shotgun at a diagonal from me in the backseat. She seemed to sense my gaze and glanced over her shoulder at me. I could tell from her expression that she was apprehensive, deep in her thoughts as well, although for different reasons than mine. But then her soft smile lit up her face, like the sun breaking out of the clouds.

We'd both been burned so badly by our last loves—whether real or not. I could now see that with her, I'd made even more of an effort to try to be chill, to just see where the road took us, so to speak. And no one in this car had spoken yet about having truly serious feelings, not out loud.

But it felt so good to be with her. It felt right, even when I tested my boundaries and blew right past them. It felt safe and...well, loving. Loving in an active kind of way, like loving *through* action. Not the flowers and ballads kind of action, but the kind that's about communicating, trusting, sharing, and learning.

So even if we didn't say the words, it felt like maybe we could someday. That was scary, I had to admit, because history hadn't been kind. But if things with Ava kept going like this, maybe I could be a sun breaking from the clouds, too. I'm a romantic, and romantics always have hope.

31
AVA

Before I knew it, we were in Juniper. Not the town itself, since Darius's grandmother lives a couple miles out from the official welcome sign on the main route in. But that route becomes Juniper Street, our equivalent of Main Street. Outside of town it's a long, mostly straight highway, one lane going in each direction, tree-lined on either side. It's the road everyone takes to get anywhere. Leland drove it when he gave me a ride to the airport. Jodie's mom drove it when we saw BTS in Charlotte. I drove it twice a day for weeks, after my dad went into hospice care.

Darius drove from memory, not needing directions to remember to turn off at an unmarked entrance to an unmarked lane. We went on for another five minutes as the lane curved through more trees, which gradually thinned until I could see rolling farm fields through the foliage.

"There are a few properties back here," Darius explained. "Grandma's at the end of the lane."

"She lives by herself, right? Do you ever worry about her?"

"Nah, she's pretty healthy still. She'd fight anyone who tried to tell her to change her living situation. But yeah, the family tries to check on her regularly. It's harder for my dad since they're in Chicago, but I don't mind driving down from Lockridge for holidays and whatnot."

"What kind of stuff does the farm produce?"

"These days, she doesn't raise anything more than a few chickens and vegetables for herself. But she rents her fields out to the neighbors. So they check on her too."

I had a lot of questions about Darius's grandmother, but I figured I'd wait and meet her for myself. I had questions about Seth and Colin's families, too. I wondered if I'd ever get to meet them.

Finally Darius took yet another unmarked turn. Gravel crunched under the Crosstour's tires, but this time we didn't have to drive as far. The house was just a couple hundred feet away, a two-story white clapboard building with a wraparound porch and a chimney on either end. The driveway forked, with the left fork going toward the house and the right fork going toward a weathered wood barn that was nearly as big as the house. Darius took the left fork and pulled right up next to the high edge of the porch.

He hopped out and bounded up to the door immediately. Seth and Colin and I took a second to stretch in the afternoon sun, giving Darius that time to greet his grandmother. They were still hugging when we climbed the steps, rocking from side to side in that way old folks like to do when they're super happy to see you.

When they pulled apart, Darius said, "Grandma Evelyn, this is Ava. Ava, meet my grandma."

She definitely didn't seem elderly—at least not the way I'd been wondering about. Her short natural hair was mostly free of gray, and her eyes were alert behind the same kind of black frame glasses Arun wore late at night. She was wearing loose jeans, Crocs, and a light fleece jacket, and carried a pair of gardening gloves in one hand.

"Ava, hello." Grandma Evelyn reached out to hug me as well, and while it was a warm embrace I didn't get any of the fun sideways rocking. "Welcome to my home. Darius tells me you're actually from Juniper?"

Awkward. She would clearly want to know why I was staying at her house and not my own family's. Or a friend's, even. I pasted on what I hoped was a perfectly pleasant, unreadable smile. "Yes, Mrs. Johnson, I grew up here."

"Call me Grandma Evelyn, honey. All of Darius's friends do."

"Thank you so much for letting me stay, Grandma Evelyn. Hopefully I won't be crowding you too long." That would be the right way to do it, I thought. Maybe Darius would be

willing to take me to Charlotte, where I could catch a Greyhound to DC. I could even go as soon as tomorrow.

“Oh, you can stay as long as you like,” Grandma Evelyn said, but what else was she supposed to say? She was already turning to Colin and Seth, holding her arms out eagerly.

Darius drew me aside. “I hope you’re not planning on running back to Lockridge.”

“Honestly? I am. Once I talk to Jodie there’s no reason to stick around.”

He tilted his head. “*No* reason?”

“I can’t just drop in on your grandma and be like, feed and shelter me for seven days! Especially not when she’s probably asking herself why I’m not staying with my family literally five miles down the road.”

“Grandma loves hosting. It’s not a problem. Anyway, you’ve got three big reasons to stay.”

“I know. If we were at Colin’s house this would be a completely different discussion. But this is Juniper,” I said simply. “Whatever reasons I have to stay, I don’t want to.”

Grandma Evelyn finished saying hello to Seth and Colin—she rocked *them* when she hugged them—and turned back to us. Surprisingly, she took my hand.

“Have y’all had lunch already? I’ve had some bean and sausage stew slow cookin’ since early mornin’. Come on and settle down.” She patted my knuckles and took me into the house with the guys following behind.



Grandma Evelyn wasn’t like other grandmothers I’d met (Jodie’s, Matt’s, and what I remembered of the few times I visited mine). She didn’t make us all sit around in the living room having polite conversation after lunch—which was delicious. She had a full schedule of things to do around the

farm and asked if we minded helping, which of course was fine with us.

The guys went into the barn to do some heavy lifting, and Grandma Evelyn took me around the back of the house to work with her in the massive vegetable garden. Some of the beds had been harvested and emptied, but she explained that in North Carolina it's still warm enough in October that she can plant different types of vegetables. So that's what we did. I hauled and scooped big bags of potting soil, helped her sprinkle plant food, then lugged water from her rain barrel.

Meanwhile, we chatted.

"So how are you liking school?" she asked. "Darius said you're on a full scholarship. That must take some of the pressure off."

How much had Darius been telling his grandmother about me? "In some ways. But to keep the scholarship, my grades have to be at a certain level every semester. And I have the usual worries about what to major in, what summer jobs I should try to get, what on-campus jobs I should try to get, what I want to do for the rest of my life..."

Grandma Evelyn made a *tsk*-ing noise. "It's only your first year. You got to pace out all that worrying."

"You're right." I smiled ruefully. "I just always have to remind myself I can't afford to coast even if I have this privilege."

She pointed her trowel at me. "A scholarship isn't a privilege. You worked hard in high school, right?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Then it's something you earned," Grandma Evelyn said. "And it sounds like you're the kind of person who'll keep earning things because you got a sensible, hard-working head on your shoulders."

"I hope that's true."

"So like I said, pace out the worrying and don't let yourself get overwhelmed. Now, Darius, I wish he'd do a little more

worrying. That boy really thinks he can make a living with video games.”

“From what I understand it’s a hundred billion dollar industry,” I said respectfully. “Growing every year.”

“That’s what he tells me. Says even the little crossword puzzle on my phone makes millions of dollars. I don’t know about all that but even so there’s no guarantee what piece of that pie he’ll get. The family just wants the best for him.”

“Of course.”

“I’m sure you hear the same from your parents. They must be so proud of you, though.”

Which meant Darius hadn’t told her. I ducked my head, focusing on opening another bag of potting soil. “Yeah, they were. Um, I mean, my dad actually passed away before I left for school. But yeah, he was happy for me.”

Grandma Evelyn put down her trowel. “I’m so sorry, honey. That’s awful. He must have been so young.”

“Forty-six.” My throat tightened. “He had stomach cancer.”

She peered into my eyes, which I wished she wouldn’t do because now they were pricking. “Wait a second. I think I read about him in the paper. Did your folks own the café on Juniper Street?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, I loved stopping in there whenever I went into town. I’d always get that iced Vietnamese coffee. Oh, your mom and dad were so lovely to me. Even though I didn’t go a lot they remembered me every single time.”

“Yeah, they always remember their customers.”

Her brow furrowed in concern. “How’s your mom doing?”

“Fine,” I said. Which as far as I knew was the honest truth. “It was harder for everyone when he was still sick.”

“I understand. My husband went suddenly. Heart attack. But I’ve known people with cancer, too. Long illnesses take it out of the caregivers, too, just in a different way.”

“Yeah.” I swallowed and made a grab for the new topic.
“I’m sorry about your husband. How long were you married?”

“Just over forty years. Darius was thirteen when he passed.”

“Were they as close as you and Darius are?”

“It was different. He liked to teach Darius about the farm, back when we still ran it for dairy and produce, but Darius probably would have preferred to stay inside. City boy, you know.” She beamed, her voice relaxing into more of a drawl. “There was one time Harris asked him to go out and survey the cows to make sure they’d all come in, and Darius just kept gettin’ ‘em confused and losin’ count. It took an hour longer than Harris expected and both of ‘em were steamin’ mad at each other by the time it was done.”

We laughed. I’d successfully distracted her into talking more about Darius’s childhood, so I just kept asking questions. I liked hearing about Darius back then, trying to map the pictures Grandma Evelyn drew onto the person I knew now. But most importantly, we didn’t go back to the topic of my family.



We finished the gardening around four and I went inside for a shower—long overdue after an afternoon of shoveling dirt, on top of three straight days of camping. The guys had wrapped up their work already and were taking turns in the bathroom, but Darius said I could go ahead of him.

He smiled down at me in the hallway, his skin slick with sweat. Seth was getting dressed and Colin was in the shower, so we were alone for the moment. “You got dirt on your nose.” His voice pitched low and intimate. “Been hard at work?”

“I’ve been helping your grandma in the garden. She’s so lovely.”

“Yeah, she is. I’m glad you’re getting to know her.”

“Mostly she’s been helping me get to know *you* better.”

Darius leaned closer. “Oh, yeah? What’ve you been talking about?”

“Hmm, lots of things. Like the time you climbed that tree over there?” I pointed down the hall, where a window gave a view of a gnarled oak with spreading branches. “How long were you stuck hollering for help?”

His eyes widened. “Hey, now. That shit was scary.”

“Absolutely,” I said in sympathy. “Getting stuck up a tree at age fourteen. I don’t know how you cope with the lingering trauma.”

“I was ten—barely! Dang, why’d Grandma have to do me dirty like that?”

“So I shouldn’t mention the pictures she showed me from when you *were* fourteen?”

“Oh, hell no. Some shit’s better left in the past.” But he was smiling.

“It’s funny to think how whenever you visited, you were so close by.”

“And how we ended up getting together hundreds of miles away. All I can say is, I’m glad the world’s so small.” Darius reached out and twirled a lock of my hair. “Is your room gonna be okay? Got everything you need?”

“Yeah, of course. Definite upgrade from a tent.”

“I dunno. Tent had *some* positives.”

“Very true.”

His eyes were incredibly magnetic. I edged up on the balls of my feet, bringing my face closer, but it was all instinctual, unthinking. He knew exactly what reaction I was having, though. His gaze flickered over my lips and back up to meet mine. “The hell was I thinking, bringing you to my grandma’s house?”

“Well, if you wanted to take me back to Lockridge...”

“Tempting.” Darius drew up straight. “So you really want to go back soon, huh?”

Mood over before it had really begun. “Yeah. I’m sorry. You don’t have to drive me, though. It’s like six hours. I was going to look at prices for flights or buses out of Charlotte—”

“Let’s talk about it after you see your friend,” Darius said gently.

“My *ex*-friend.”

“Yeah,” he said, even more gently. “Your ex-friend. When did you want to do that?”

I looked down the hall at the window again. “Still plenty of daylight left,” I said, with more resolution than I truly felt. “Why wait?”

After I got dressed, Darius let me borrow the Crosstour to drive to Jodie's house. I'd been fully prepared to walk or even ask Grandma Evelyn to borrow a bicycle. But he just handed me the key fob and said, "Gas her up if you have time."

I met his eyes and I knew we understood each other. Filling up the car was the least I could do and the most he wanted me to do. Letting me use the car was the least he could do and the most I wanted him to do. Neither of us wanted or needed to have a whole discussion about it.

"Good luck," Seth said. And Colin grasped my hand briefly.

Driving into the residential area of Juniper proper, my chest felt tender, my stomach uneasy. My hands were overly careful on the steering wheel, even though I'd known these few quiet streets all my life. I'd learned to drive on them, walked and played on them. I could have navigated them blindfolded.

Jodie was home. Her truck sat in front of her house, parked on the curb because her dad was always commandeering their big driveway to work on some project or other. I parked the Crosstour behind the truck and climbed the path through her front yard. Saw my hand reach out and ring the doorbell. Heard the barking of her dog, Minxy. Heard her sister Jeanette tell Minxy to hush. The door opened and there stood Jeanette, staring at me like she'd seen a ghost.

"Hi," I heard myself say. "Is Jodie around?"

Jeanette is Jodie's younger sister. She's fifteen and drama is her life. "Jo-deeee!" she screeched, her eyes never leaving my face. "You got a visitor."

"Who is it?" Jodie called from upstairs.

Suddenly I was back in my body. My heart started to pound. My armpits prickled with sweat.

"Just get down here!" Jeanette yelled.

Jodie thumped down the stairs—I used to think her house was so cool for having stairs, because my house didn’t—and came into view. She glanced around her sister to see who was at the door and froze. “Ava. You’re...here.”

She was pregnant. She was really fucking pregnant. Her massive belly stretched the front of her T-shirt, distorting the *JHS Seniors* logo; we’d helped design it for Spirit Week. Her shorts rode low on her hips because there was nowhere else for the waistline to go. Her legs were thicker. Her breasts had gotten bigger as well. And her face was swollen, framed by hair that had grown longer and darker, I guessed because she hadn’t been highlighting it.

“I’m on fall break,” I said.

“Oh.” Jodie’s cheeks flushed under her freckles, like they always did when she was nervous. “Your mom didn’t mention that.”

I blinked. “You’re talking to my *mom*?”

Jodie finally noticed Jeanette still holding onto the door, her head swiveling back and forth between us. “Get lost, Jeanette. Ava, come in.”

“No, I...” The last thing I wanted to do was enter her house. It was full of both memory and speculation, so many hours I’d spent being happy here, and so much that had happened behind my back. “If you don’t mind, let’s talk outside. More privacy.”

Jeanette pouted, but Jodie just nodded and stuffed her feet into a pair of Uggs.

In the driveway, their dad was bringing out two-by-fours and some kind of power tool. He squinted at me and lifted a hand, but didn’t call out as jovially as he normally would. I guessed everybody in Jodie’s family must have an idea of how things stood.

It felt weird to have this confrontation while standing in the yard with her dad right there, so I went to the Crosstour. Jodie climbed into the passenger seat, awkwardly hefting her body

up. “Nice car,” she said, looking around it. “Did it come with the scholarship?”

“It’s not mine. Why are you talking to my mom?”

“She’s my boss. I’ve been working at the café part-time. Did you not know?”

Of all the fucking things! “Are you serious?”

“Pregnancy isn’t cheap. And I still haven’t decided what to do when she’s born. I need an income stream and I guess your mom felt sorry for me.”

I’d expected that seeing Jodie again would be a lot, but this was... *a lot*. “My mom is funding your baby? Does she even know whose baby it is? Don’t tell me *Matt* still works there.”

“No, she doesn’t know, and no, I haven’t spoken to Matt in months.”

“Yeah, that’s what he said.”

Now it was Jodie’s turn to blink. “You talked to him?”

“Not on purpose.” I kept it vague. “Just ran into him the other day.”

“In town? How long have you been here?”

I shrugged one shoulder indifferently, feeling petty vindication in avoiding answers. I faced forward indifferently, stared out the windshield indifferently, concentrated on Jodie’s license plate indifferently. “Why aren’t you speaking to Matt?”

Jodie sighed. “It’s like I told you in my message. This was never really about him.”

“Yeah, he told me that, too. But still, he didn’t want to help you at all?”

“I guess he doesn’t really want to be involved. He said I should get an abortion back when I first told him.”

“And why didn’t you? You were always pro-choice.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her fingers flexing on her knee. “Honestly? I don’t know. It just...didn’t feel like

something I could go through with. I don't know why I felt that—I just know that I did.”

“So, what, you're gonna be a teen mom? You're gonna raise Matt's kid all by yourself, right here in Juniper like a Nicholas Sparks movie?”

“I don't know!” Jodie didn't quite shout, but her voice rose and broke, and I quickly glanced at her. She wasn't looking at me, but at her hands, wringing in her lap. “Like I said, I haven't decided. My parents want me to give her up for adoption, but I...I don't know!”

Her. And earlier Jodie had said, *when she's born.* She was going to have a girl. She was going to bring a whole human being into the world who'd one day be nineteen years old just like us. Maybe even as confused and clueless as us.

“This whole time I've been wishing I could talk to you,” Jodie continued, her voice warbling. “And I know that's ridiculous. But it's how I feel. I've been alone with this huge, scary thing. I've been so fucking scared. And I wish my best friend could have been here with me.”

“Then you shouldn't have slept with your best friend's boyfriend!” I exploded.

My shout reverberated through the car, and Jodie flinched. Stupidly, a horrified thought crossed my mind: *Don't hurt the baby!* Like my voice was a weapon capable of physical harm.

I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes. “God, this is so fucked up. Jodie, why the fuck? Why the *fuck* did you do it? And don't say you don't know.”

She sniffed a few times, the way she does when she's silently crying. “Because...maybe because I felt useless. Because you didn't need me, or because I couldn't do anything to help. I'm not trying to make excuses,” she said quickly, when I drew in a breath. “You asked why. I'm just trying to tell you what I can. It's not like I was actively thinking this stuff at the time. I *wasn't* thinking. That was the problem.”

Matt had said some of the same shit. “So you felt neglected and you decided nothing but Matt's dick could fill the

emptiness.”

“No, it wasn’t like I made a decision ahead of—”

“So you *accidentally* fucked him. Every single time it happened.”

Jodie burst into outright tears now, and I’d never felt so cold and distant from the sight of her crying. It was a new sensation, this chilly insulation from my best friend’s suffering. I’d cried in her arms when my dad was first diagnosed. I’d held her when her parents were going through rough times and she thought they might divorce. But now I kept myself so still and just let her jagged sobs wash over me.

It wasn’t pleasant.

No, it was fucking awful.

“I don’t know anymore why I came here,” I said finally. “Somebody told me maybe I could get closure. But I don’t think I can ever forgive you. Not just because of what you did. But because it turned me into this person who’s...hateful and bitter and angry. And it’s like I can’t even trust happiness anymore and I’m constantly struggling against being that person and I *hate* that.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” Jodie’s breath hitched, ugly and raw. “I’m so sorry. I’ll be sorry forever. I’m not asking you to forgive me, though. I can’t even forgive myself.”

You shouldn’t, I thought venomously.

“I think maybe that’s why I can’t decide what to do,” Jodie sobbed. “I made a horrible mistake. The worst thing I’ve ever done. I couldn’t just erase it and act like it didn’t happen. I don’t deserve that.”

And then, as I sat there watching her cry, feeling nothing, I actually did begin to feel something. I’d unloaded a whole torrent of words I’d never said out loud, and now that they were out, it felt like I could breathe again—when I hadn’t even realized I was choking.

I remembered something Arun had said to me, after Mimi apologized outside Dean Hoffman’s office. I thought she was

insincere, and Arun said, *Sometimes, a person doesn't see that they have anything to be sorry for until something snaps them out of it. What matters then is how they act after that point.*

I didn't have to forgive Jodie if I wasn't ready. But maybe I could take a look at how she was apologizing.

"The *baby* doesn't deserve to be your punishment," I said quietly. "Jodie. You didn't have to go through with this just because you felt *guilty*. My God."

She looked at me through teary eyelashes. "Then what was I supposed to do?"

"I mean, not this! Like, I can't tell you what to do with your guilt. But I know you shouldn't bring an innocent kid into it. Kids totally realize when their parents are fucked up, and it fucks them up, too. Pretty sure you already know that. But take it as a special reminder from someone whose mother turned out to be the goddamn worst."

That gave me pause. The thing was, Jodie wasn't the only reason for my unhappiness. Not even the biggest reason.

"Should I give her up for adoption?"

"How should I know? All I'm saying is..." I took a breath, trying to figure that out. "If you don't want to give her up, then don't. But make sure it's because you actually do want her, and not because you think you deserve to be miserable. Like, be miserable for the rest of your life, I don't care," I said quickly. "But don't make yourself more miserable because of a kid who didn't even ask to be born."

Jodie kept sniffing, but she seemed to have calmed. When she finally spoke, her voice was sad and resigned. "I basically ruined my life. Ruined yours, too, sounds like."

"You didn't ruin my life. I refuse to give you that much credit. Ruined my summer, more like." I rolled my eyes. "As for your life, you can still do a course correction. Or you can find a silver lining and commit to being a happy mom or whatever. Either way, do whatever's best for the kid, not whatever's the worst for you."

Jodie shook her head, swiping at her eyes. “God.” She gave a watery laugh. “Me as a mom. Do I even have the balls?”

I shrugged uncomfortably. It was kind of difficult to be in the mood for jokes.

She studied me for a moment. “Are you not talking to *your* mom? You should, you know. She’s dealing with a lot, too.”

“Really. I never blocked her number.”

“I know you’re mad at her for being shitty with your dad. I think deep down, she knows it, too. All I can say is it’s hard to have this kind of conversation. Hard to even start it. I think she’s hoping for the right moment.”

“Or she’s enjoying the single life she apparently always wanted.”

“No, Ava. It’s not like that. She misses you a lot. You and your dad.”

“Again, I’m not hard to find.”

“But you took your time seeing me,” Jodie pointed out.

I huffed out a breath. “I think *you* should talk to Matt. Why do you have to be guilty all by yourself while he’s fucking around free of everything? He doesn’t get to decide shit for you obviously. But he shouldn’t be straight chilling either.”

“I don’t think he is. Leland says he’s been pretty depressed this whole time.”

“Wow. My heart bleeds.”

“So you really talked to him?” Jodie sounded mystified. “I haven’t laid eyes on him in months. My dad told him if he came around here again he’d call the sheriff, didn’t care who his family was.”

“That sounds like he *was* trying to be involved.”

“Truth’s somewhere in the middle, I guess. We weren’t ever going to be a happy couple getting ultrasounds and crying about fingers and toes. It was just...weird talking to him about the future and all that.”

“So none of us were talking to each other. I never thought that would happen in my life. You know I was so thankful that you both were with me while my dad was sick? I would have gone crazy if it weren’t for you.”

Jodie’s lips trembled, but she didn’t break into tears again. Maybe she felt as dried up and tired as I did. “We really let you down. I’m so sorry, Ava. And...I hope you figure out how to be happy again.”

You, too. The words floated across my mind, but I didn’t say them. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. “Do you have a due date?”

“Late November. Might even be Thanksgiving.”

Just over a month left now, which explained why she was so massive already. “I still can’t believe you were already that pregnant on July 4th. You did a damn good job hiding it.”

“I was freaking out every single day. Matt, too. I was in stupid levels of denial, but at the same time it was like watching a train coming at me and I couldn’t get out of the way. And then the train finally did hit, and it took everything from me.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Well, believe me—you can start over. I know that from experience.”

“I’d like to believe you.” Jodie heaved a watery sigh. “Do you think you’ll be back home for Thanksgiving?”

Home. I didn’t know if Juniper was still that for me. “I’m not sure. But you can call me or message me about how it goes. I hope it goes...you know. I hope it goes okay.”

“Thank you, Ava,” she whispered, her eyes wide. “It was good to see you. Really.”

I shrugged one shoulder. She got out of the car, and I watched her waddle up the yard toward the driveway, where her dad was still working and pretending not to pay attention to us. He reached out an arm and circled her shoulders, drawing her in for a quick side hug. His hand came up to pat her hair.

The sight of them blurred. I blinked rapidly, then started the car and pulled away.



I felt absolutely depleted. I'd planned to confront Jodie with cold, clear, tactical precision. Instead I was a war-torn battlefield, my emotions dragged out of my grip and strewn all over the dirt. What a fool I'd been to think I could just turn the page on Juniper and live like a whole new person, just because I'd hopped on a plane. This place was still very much part of me, and so were the people in it. And as such, they could still make all kinds of wreckage.

On my way to see Jodie, I'd purposely avoided passing by one particular section of Juniper Street. Driving on autopilot now, I realized too late that I'd turned in the exact direction I didn't want to go.

The sign for my parents' café loomed ahead. *Le Café*, gold letters on a brown awning, and I remembered Dad washing the awning every spring, how the gold shone in the sunlight and seemed to promise the warmth of the new season. I had an image of my mother standing inside the big display window, craning her neck to catch sight of him on the ladder and yelling at him to be careful. Behind her would be the long wooden counter—the place used to be a bar before my parents took it over—with the vintage cash register and the coffee machines and the mirrored shelves holding all the mugs, glasses, and plates. On the walls were black and white photographs of Hong Kong and Saigon, a floating village in Ha Long Bay, a traditional wooden sailing junk in Kowloon Bay.

Even though both of my parents had spent most of their childhoods in America, they still talked a lot about going on a big family trip to China and Vietnam. But it would have to be a trip of several weeks, they said, in order to visit all the relatives we were obligated to see. Every year they brought it

up, and every year it didn't happen. They just couldn't ever find the right time to close the café for that long.

Now we'd never be able to do it. Not as a family.

I couldn't help turning my head to look at the café as the Crosstour glided past. A couple of the tables on the sidewalk were occupied, so it was definitely still open and running—just as it had been the whole time my father was sick. The late afternoon sun was in the wrong direction for seeing through the display window, though. All I got was a glare.

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I ended up not leaving for fall break right away. The editor at *The Lockridge Rundown* emailed on Friday morning to say that based on my first article, my concept for a series about recent graduates had been approved. She asked if I could have another article ready for the first issue after break, and this time she wanted it to profile two subjects working in federal government positions, since a lot of Lockridge students end up in DC. And, since the paper has a podcast, she proposed an audio component as well, to be included in an episode and embedded in the website version of the article.

I figured I'd need most of fall break to actually write the article, which meant I needed to scramble for interviews quickly. My old RA from first year had landed a job working for the senator from his home state, and he was happy to talk with me on Saturday. But I didn't have anyone else like him in my personal contacts.

"You know who you should try?" Nate said when I mentioned this after his interview. "Jenn Silviana. She's interning for the White House Communications Director."

I whistled. "Wow, I'm sure she's got some stories. What year was she?"

"Just graduated in May, actually."

"She must be brilliant, getting into the White House fresh out of undergrad."

"Yeah," Nate laughed. "Jenn's a superstar. Even if all she's doing is making coffee, it'll be the best coffee anyone ever had."

He gave me her email, at the White House as well as her personal. My editor at the *Rundown* thought it would be a super impressive get. I decided to hang around campus with

fingers crossed for Jenn Silviana to agree to an interview as soon as possible.

Luckily, she emailed back that night: **I can't answer any questions of a sensitive nature but I should be free Monday after work. If you need somewhere quiet, how about my apartment?**

I reassured her that it would all be very general and high level, so at six-thirty on Monday evening we found each other outside the Cleveland Park Metro station where we'd arranged to meet. I'd never met her before, but I recognized her on sight. Hard to forget a woman that beautiful walking around Lockridge during the years we'd overlapped.

"Arun?" she said in musical tones, and extended her hand. "Jenn Silviana." She had a firm shake and an extremely direct way of making eye contact, what my mother would describe as someone establishing initial dominance.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "Thanks again for doing this."

"No problem. Thanks for agreeing on my place. Usually I can't wait to get home after work so you're doing me a favor." She tilted her head and I fell into step beside her, walking up the busy sidewalk of Connecticut Avenue.

"I'm surprised you're working on a federal holiday," I remarked.

"God, tell me about it. It's been a hundred miles an hour since the moment I walked into the West Wing. No one's even heard of hitting the brakes."

"Well, I'm looking forward to hearing whatever you can tell our readers."

"So you're a junior? What are you majoring in?"

We made small talk over the ten-minute walk—or at least, my talk was small. Jenn sliced through the happy hour crowd with long, confident strides, totally at ease in high heels and sharp business suit. She reminded me of a shark cutting through ocean water, and her conversation had an edge to it, as well. She wanted to know more than just the surface details of

what I was studying and where I was from, and wasn't shy about giving her opinions.

About journalism: "What programs are you looking into? Columbia, right? But these days a lot of publications look for people with non-traditional backgrounds. I hear the usual programs aren't worth the financial burden anymore."

And about New York: "Are you one of those who think it's the center of everything or are you the self-loathing coastal elite type? Don't take it as me being a dick—I've got the West Coast version of the latter."

And about dating: "Are you seeing anyone seriously? I've found that real world dating is a completely different animal to school dating. Especially as a cis het woman."

I wasn't intimidated by her, exactly, but it was odd being the subject of such laser focus. At the same time, I had the distinct impression that her focus was actually divided. She came off as super intense and maybe just a notch below aggressive. But it also had an undertone of almost scientific distance, like *she* was the interviewer, gathering data and ready to move on once she'd finished wringing anything interesting out of me.

Her apartment turned out to be a studio in a massive brick building. "My internship's unpaid," she explained as she unlocked the door and waved me in. "This is what I can afford on a combination of grant money and parental generosity."

"It should be fine for the interview," I assured her.

Despite being a studio, it felt spacious, helped by light-colored floors and a pair of glass doors leading to a balcony on the far wall. The corner to the right of the entrance was devoted to a kitchenette, and the opposite corner had a bed behind a decorative folding screen. A counter-height table served as an all-purpose island for the kitchenette as well as a desk, with a cutting board on one end and a laptop and papers at the other. There were artsy posters in black frames on the walls, but no TV or bookcases, and only a low-slung futon against the wall opposite the bed. The lack of furniture came off as intentionally minimalist, though, rather than financially constrained.

Jenn dropped her bag next to the door and toed off her heels. “Can I get you a drink? I’ve got wine, beer, water.”

“Water’s fine.”

Even though it was a Monday, she poured herself a generous glass of rosé. “The Supreme Court’s hearing a big case this week that the President’s interested in,” she explained. “My brain is *fried* after spending all day going back and forth preparing a statement.” She put the glass on the table, then cleared off the rest of it, stacking the papers and laptop and cutting board and putting them on the granite counter next to her refrigerator. “Set your stuff up anywhere.”

I got my own laptop out, mostly so I could have my list of questions to hand. I’d be using my phone and a small mic to record everything, and I planned to transcribe it all later.

Jenn sat on one of the two counter stools and took a sip of her wine. “All right, what do you want to ask me?”

I maneuvered the other counter stool to sit across from her. “Why don’t we start with how you got the internship?”

The interview took about an hour, and I knew *The Lockridge Rundown* would get some good clips for the podcast. Jenn had a charismatic and incisive way of talking, and her descriptions of day-to-day life in the West Wing, on top of the sheer prestige of the position, cast it in an even cooler light.

I packed up my stuff while Jenn poured herself another glass. She offered me one, and I figured why not; we’d finished the interview and all I’d done with my fall break so far was work. The wine tasted full-bodied and lush. I don’t know much about wine generally, but I liked it. I liked being in the city, doing a job that felt professional rather than academic, meeting an attractive woman and sharing a grown-up drink instead of keg beer in a plastic cup.

Then she said, “You mentioned you’re an RA in Milner? Do you know Darius Johnson?”

“Yeah, he’s on my hall, actually. Are you friends?”

“Mmm.” She took a leisurely sip. “We haven’t kept in touch. He was a hallmate of mine, though. Along with Colin Kim and Seth Gallant.”

“Right, they were all roommates last year.”

“I heard from Seth that Darius was in Milner this year, so I was just curious. How’s he doing?”

Something about the way Jenn studied the rim of her glass gave me pause. She wasn’t just asking out of curiosity. “Fine, as far as I can tell,” I said. “You know Darius. Happy anywhere there are people.”

“Do Colin and Seth come over much? I’m surprised they’re in separate dorms now. They were always so close.”

Naturally, my mind went to the image of Colin and Seth with Ava sandwiched between them. I pushed it aside with some effort. “Yeah, I see both of them on the hall a fair amount.”

“That’s good. I’m glad they’re still friends. I always thought the Lockridge triple rooms were practically prison accommodations, but those three never had the usual roommate problems.”

“Yeah, it can get hairy being an RA,” I admitted. “Too many people weren’t raised to share and it shows.”

Her eyes shifted to me, dark and magnetic. “I confess I’m actually one of those people,” she said, sounding amused. “I’m the youngest child of each of my parents and I’m pretty sure that gave me a warped set of expectations when it comes to sharing.”

“How so?”

“You’re not going to make my sordid background part of your story, are you?”

“Strictly off the record.”

She took another sip. “My parents each had their own families before I came along. I’ve got a barrel full of half-brothers and half-sisters. But I never really got to know them, and I always resented them for taking focus away from me.”

“That sounds like an unusual way to grow up,” I said, trying to be delicate. “Were they much older than you?”

Jenn nodded. “Let me put it this way. I was the product of an affair. My parents had a relationship full of drama and sound and fury. It took a long time for their previous marriages to break up and for them to figure out how to raise me together.”

She described it all so candidly and broadly. My parents would have found it a psychological minefield. “I’m sorry,” I offered. “That sounds incredibly rough.”

“Well, it certainly shaped how I related to living with other people. I’ve really never been roommate material.” She shrugged.

“Everyone needs some amount of space and alone time,” I said diplomatically. “I’m more on the introverted end of the spectrum myself. A career as a writer would probably be perfect for me.”

Her full mouth parted and her tongue darted out to touch her top lip. “More wine?”

My glass was low, but I shook my head. “I should actually get going. I have a lot of transcribing to do.” It felt awkward to start making tracks after she’d just shared something so personal—but then again, she hadn’t exactly shared it in a personal way. “Thank you again for making the time for this.”

I stood up to sling my bag over my shoulder, and Jenn stood as well. With a sinuous smoothness, she rounded the table and came to stand right in front of me, just on the edge of invading my personal space. “You’re welcome. I certainly didn’t mind being the center of your attention for a bit.”

She was tall, almost able to look me in the eye when she wore her heels. But now that she was barefoot, she peered up through long dark lashes. Her eyes were a startling shade of green, very light compared to the deep brown of her hair. And momentarily... I was caught.

It seemed that she took my pause as an invitation. With one dark purple fingernail, she traced the strap of my bag where it

crossed my chest. “Are you sure you don’t want that second glass?” Her voice had gone husky.

For a split second, the scent of her perfume seemed to surround me, dense as flowers in full bloom. The last person I’d slept with was a fellow RA during our pre-semester orientation, months ago. Suddenly the time since then felt like an eternity.

But the face that flashed through my mind wasn’t that woman’s, but rather Ava’s, the night she came to my room to talk about Kaya. Ava had stood as close to me as Jenn stood now, and she’d leaned up to kiss my cheek, and it had seemed to go on for an aching epoch and also was over far too soon.

I stepped back, giving Jenn what I hoped was a politely regretful smile—rejection hurt, after all. “I’m sorry. I think we’d better keep things professional.”

She blinked those long lashes in clear surprise, but covered it up quickly. “Of course. I’m looking forward to seeing the story when it’s published.”

I stepped out of her apartment, and as the door closed behind me I had to shake my head at myself. It wasn’t like beautiful women offered to hook up with me on the regular. I wondered if using the pretense of professionalism for a school paper, of all things, had made me seem foolish.

But strangely enough, I didn’t think I’d regret my choice.

Although I'd braced myself for a big discussion about going back to Lockridge, the guys immediately said they understood, and agreed to take me to the Charlotte airport as soon as I booked a flight.

I started searching on my phone while I packed, but it didn't take long to see that everything last minute was crazy expensive. I'd end up wiping out my whole year's stipend just to escape Juniper. I looked up bus tickets, and while it was a lot cheaper, it would take almost eleven hours. And I'd already missed today's bus, so I'd have to go tomorrow.

Darkness closed over my vision. *I'm stuck here. She's right down the road and I can't leave and she's right THERE and what if—*

I collapsed onto the bed, drowning on nothing but air, gasping through lungs that didn't want to work anymore. My heart fluttered so wildly, so rapidly, I thought it might fling itself out of my chest.

Stop this! You're fine. You're okay.

But I was in Juniper. Ground zero for the wreckage of my life. And I was finally being honest with myself: the wreckage went all the way down to the foundation.

Someone knocked lightly on the door. I sucked in a breath to answer, but found that it just got lost inside me—I didn't have enough left to speak. The door pushed open hesitantly and Colin poked his head around it.

"How's the packing going?"

I shook my head. He took one look at my face and came right in, kneeling on the floor in front of me, cupping both of my hands in his. The room was so dark and all I could see was Colin.

"Can't...breathe..." I wheezed.

He squeezed my hands. “What else do you feel?”

“Heart. Beating too fast.”

“Did something happen? Did you eat or drink something new to you?”

I shook my head again. I was having trouble focusing on him, my eyes darting all over the wall behind him. “Just...out of nowhere.”

“Okay. I think you might be having a panic attack. Look at me, Ava.”

I wrenched my gaze away from Grandma Evelyn’s framed cross-stitched flowers and forced myself to focus on Colin’s face. He seemed calm. How could he be so calm? Didn’t he feel like all the air had left the room? Like dying?

“We’re gonna breathe in slow, and breathe out slow,” Colin said. “I’ll count.”

“Can’t,” I gasped.

“You can,” he said firmly. “We’re gonna breathe in for two, then out for two. Over and over. Ready? Breathe in. One, two.”

I opened my mouth and sucked in a shaky, reedy breath.

“Now exhale. One, two.”

I huffed out.

“Again, slowly,” Colin said. “Push your stomach out every time you breathe in. Get the air as low down in your body as possible. Ready? Breathe in. One, two.”

I did like he said, making my belly expand, and that reminded me of Jodie, and I had to start all over again. I was clutching Colin’s hands now, frantic, like we were two skydivers who just jumped out of a plane.

He kept breathing with me over the next ten minutes or so, continuing to count in that calm voice, his dark eyes fixed on mine. At some point he increased the count to three, then to four. And finally I was able to do it on my own, long steady breaths that I could easily control.

We sat in silence for another few minutes, just breathing with each other. At last I dropped Colin's hands and looked away. "I think I'm okay now," I said. "Sorry. Thank you."

"No need for apologies or gratitude." He got up from the kneeling position and sat next to me on the edge of the bed. "Has this ever happened before?"

"No. You said it was a panic attack?"

"I mean, I can't claim to be able to diagnose more than a cold. But from what I've studied compared to your symptoms, it seems likely."

"Fuck. It felt so bad, Colin. I don't even have the words." And even now, on the other side of it, I felt like a wet towel wrung out and stuck on a line.

"It looked bad. I guess things didn't go well with Jodie? But wait, you seemed okay when you first got back."

"I can't afford a flight back to school." I glanced away, not wanting to see his reaction to that. "I was looking at bus tickets and then it just hit me."

Colin pulled out his phone. "Don't take the bus. It's super sketchy." He tapped the screen, did some scrolling, and then said, "How about a nine o'clock flight tomorrow morning? You'll get to DC by noon, Lockridge by one o'clock."

I crowded into him to look at his phone. "You found something? How much is it?"

"Don't worry about the cost."

"Colin, no, I can't let you—"

"Ava, it's fine. Honestly, it's a drop in the bucket."

A four-figure ticket was a drop in the bucket? I covered the phone screen with my hand. "Seriously, I'll just take the bus."

But he pulled the phone away and tapped the screen before I could stop him. "It's done. Non-refundable, non-transferable. You might as well make use of it because it's in your name."

"Colin!"

“Don’t worry about it,” he repeated. “Think of it as my contribution to the weekend. Seth got the festival passes, Darius did the driving, and I’m helping you get back to school. I mean, we’d all rather you stayed the whole week, but...”

I wrapped my arms around myself. I didn’t have the energy to keep protesting. “I don’t think I can stay,” I admitted. “I’m not even sure coming here was worth it. Not if it triggered what just happened.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” I sighed. “I might have gotten some closure with Jodie. Not like Saint Seth, thanking her for teaching me what it’s like to be cheated on and betrayed.” Colin snorted. “But I think being here just...it reminded me of my parents.”

“Understandable.” Colin rubbed my back, between my shoulder blades. “A panic attack is no joke, Ava. You might want to talk to someone about it for real. Someone professional.”

“You mean like a mental health professional?”

“Well, yes. Again, can’t diagnose. But I’m pretty sure if you’ve had one panic attack, you’re prone to having another unless you deal with the underlying causes. They can be really debilitating. But they’re not untreatable.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “Thank you. For helping me through it, and for the flight.”

He kissed my temple. “Thank you for letting me help you.”



I felt like I’d run a marathon. Colin explained that it made sense from a physiological perspective—that my body had been through an ordeal and needed to recover. But that evening, Grandma Evelyn planned a hearty dinner and I felt obligated to pitch in like everyone else. I had to reach deep to put on my best face so I didn’t spoil the lively atmosphere in

the kitchen. When I was finally able to collapse at the table, I could have wept.

Our efforts had conjured up a feast: fried catfish breaded in delicate cornmeal, a macaroni casserole full of melty cheese topped with crispy golden breadcrumbs, and savory collard greens with bits of salty sausage. Two homecooked meals in one day. It was honestly restorative.

Later, clean and full of good grub, I felt somewhat human again. The guys stopped in to say good night, and we all sprawled on the bed, Darius across the foot, Colin and Seth lying back against the pillows. And me in the middle surrounded by my boys.

It felt so lovely to think of them that way—privately, like my own small secret—and to see their faces looking up at me fondly. Since Grandma Evelyn’s room was on the other side of mine, Darius had warned they couldn’t stay long and would need to keep the volume down. Despite that, his hand grasped my ankle, thumb rubbing lightly, sending up fiery signals from the point of contact. I wanted to remind him about his own warning, but he’d probably take it as an invitation to tease.

Being in the middle of the three of them was a mild form of torture, because it naturally reminded me of last night in the tent. My nipples had hardened the moment they came in and shut the door behind them, and they’d all visibly taken notice, their eyes drawn to the thin stretch of my tank top.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t indulge in our alone time. So I tried to keep the conversation serious, letting them know I was going back to Lockridge in the morning.

Seth offered to come with me and tried to enlist Colin as well.

“No, obviously y’all should stay,” I said. “Grandma Evelyn doesn’t really know me, but she was super happy to see you and Colin, and obviously Darius. It would be rude of y’all to just turn around and leave.”

“Well, before you go—” Colin sat up and placed a small packet of paper, decorated with hand-drawn stars, in front of

me. “This is from us. To remind you of this weekend.”

I opened the packet gingerly. Inside was a bracelet, made of delicate copper strands that had been braided together. Four copper strands. Seeing that, my heart immediately expanded in warmth. “Oh, my God, it’s beautiful. I love it. Thank you.”

The copper, being malleable, meant I could bend the bracelet a little tighter around my wrist. I chose the left, since I’m righthanded, and when the bracelet was secure I held up my arm for them to see. They each extended a finger to touch it, tracing the intricate braiding.

“You’re so special to us, Ava,” Seth said. “Hopefully this’ll keep us close to your heart.”

Damn the rules. I just had to kiss him, and Colin, and Darius. Impossible not to. We didn’t escalate, but the wanting was still there in the middle of us, sparks of electric energy we couldn’t help creating together.

“You’re special to me, too,” I said. “Each of you. I’m so glad for you.”

Alone later, I fell asleep with my arms crossed on my chest, clutching the bracelet around my wrist. They did feel close to my heart.



Getting back to Lockridge was pretty simple. I hated that I’d be separated from the guys, but I told myself I wasn’t leaving *them*—I was just making the right and healthy choice to leave Juniper. And they told me they’d decided to drive back to campus on Friday, so we would only be apart for a few days anyway. That time was nothing compared to the weekend we’d just shared.

Darius drove us to the Charlotte airport. At the departures curb, they all got out of the car and I hugged and kissed each of them in turn. Seth wrapped his long arms around me and lifted me off my feet, making me squeal as he kissed my neck. Colin cupped my face tenderly, looking deep into my eyes like

he was telling me all over again to breathe. Darius gave my mouth a thorough and possessive tonguing, then whispered in my ear, “Time’s gonna fly and we’re gonna see you real soon.”

A few hours later, I opened the door to my room on Milner 2nd. To my relief, it was empty of people, although it looked like Kaya had done a lot of unpacking. I dropped my bag on the floor and collapsed on my bed, looking around at the changes.

Kaya’s side was pretty neat and tidy, which I hadn’t really expected of her but was happy to see. Then again, maybe the lack of clutter was because of her weirdo ex-roommate having no respect for personal property.

My stomach growled. It was almost two p.m. and I hadn’t eaten lunch yet. Grandma Evelyn had kindly packed me a plastic container of leftovers, but I hadn’t felt hungry while traveling. Now I was ravenous.

I took the container into the common room to heat up in the microwave. There was a generous helping of bean and sausage stew, an even more generous helping of the mac and cheese, and a thick piece of buttery, perfectly crumbly cornbread. Some stew had soaked into the cornbread, melding the flavors in that perfect way only soul food can achieve.

I started forking it down, instantly in heaven—although it would have been even better sitting at Grandma Evelyn’s table surrounded by the guys. I messaged them as I ate, letting them know I’d arrived safely. All three spammed the thread with replies right away, as if they’d been waiting to hear from me. Was it pathetic that I already missed them?

A knock sounded on the open common room door. “Hey, that smells amazing—Ava?”

It was Arun. Tall and handsome and framed in the doorway like a painting. His face lit up in a surprised smile, and I pretty much beamed it right back like he’d brought the sun inside after a long dark winter. I couldn’t even feel self-conscious about it.

And why should I? I thought. He's here when I thought I'd be on my own.

“You’re back already?” he asked.

“Yeah, long story. What about you? I thought you were leaving for break.”

“I had to do some last-minute interviews in DC for my next article. I was planning to leave this afternoon, though. Glad I caught you.”

I tried not to examine my sinking disappointment that we were basically ships passing in the night. I sort of felt that way with Arun all the time, like I could never see him enough, like he was always just out of reach.

Only now we were unexpectedly together. I decided to seize the opportunity to spend a few more minutes with him. “Yeah, I’m glad, too. So you haven’t eaten yet? I’ve got so much food here. Have lunch with me.”

“I was actually on my way to the dining hall now. If you really don’t mind sharing...”

“Seriously, I couldn’t even finish half of this.”

“Okay, then. Thank you.” He grabbed a couple of plastic utensils from the tray next to the microwave and sat across from me. “What have we got?”

I explained what each thing was. “Darius’s grandmother made it all.”

Arun didn’t seem surprised. “You mentioned you were going on a fun trip. Was that it? Visiting Darius’s family?” He took a bite of the mac and cheese and groaned. “My God, this is good.”

“Isn’t it? But no, that wasn’t the fun part—although Darius’s grandmother is pretty great. The fun part was going to this music festival in Virginia. Um, Darius and Colin and Seth and me—we all went together.”

He concentrated on cutting a corner of cornbread. “Sounds cool. Did they come back to school as well?”

“No, I left them with Darius’s grandmother in Juniper. I just flew back this morning.”

Now he looked up at me. “Juniper’s where you’re from, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a small world, huh, that she and I are both from the same tiny little town.”

“Even New York or DC can feel small. I run into people just walking around. I ran into Seth once taking the Metro. Sometimes I think, what are the chances, and then I think there’s no big mystery, it’s because we both had business in the same area and then needed to get back to campus the same night.”

“There’s probably a whole philosophy about it. How people are drawn together because of similarities we don’t even realize we have.”

“So what makes the two of us similar, I wonder?”

I almost choked on my food. Was he saying—but no. He was just talking about us running into each other here. Right? “I guess I came back to Lockridge because I feel better here than I do in Juniper.”

“And I stayed because I feel more productive here than I do in New York.” Arun tapped his fork lightly on the side of the container. “Were things not okay in Juniper, then?”

“Um. Some things were good. But I actually never intended to go there during break. Like, I planned to stay on campus at first specifically because I *didn’t* want to go home.”

“I gathered that. But you ended up there anyway?”

“I mean, I chose to go. I had some...unfinished business.”

He put the fork down, giving me his full attention. I knew he was going to ask if I wanted to talk about it. And I did want to. Jodie and Matt cheating on me was sordid, and kind of crazy, but I was learning that the best way to deal with poison is to get it out of your system. I’d confronted both of them and vented my feelings. Telling Arun about it so he could put his

usual calm and comforting spin on the matter sounded so appealing, like he could help me finally sanitize the mess.

And then my phone rang.

I'd left it face up on the table. The caller ID said *Mom*, her face prominent in the icon.

“Go ahead and take it,” Arun said. He smiled, blissfully unaware of the landslide now barreling toward my heart.

I panicked. I picked up the phone.

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“Ava,” she said. “Jodie just told me you’re in town. Where are you exactly?”

Her familiar lilting, articulated voice washed over me, leaving numbness in its wake. She grew up in America and speaks English perfectly, and as a small business owner constantly dealing with customers she’s a smooth talker. But she’s always had traces of an accent. Sometimes she and Dad would poke fun at each other for pronouncing a word in a weird way. *Say it right or they’ll ship you back to Hong Kong!*

“I’m not in Juniper anymore,” I said calmly. How could I be so calm? “I came back to school.”

“You’re at Lockridge? Why didn’t you come home?”

“Why would I?”

“What do you mean? You’re on fall break, right?”

“Why are you only calling me now?”

“What are you talking about?” She actually sounded confused. Like I hadn’t spent all summer giving her the silent treatment. Like I hadn’t pointedly left my keys behind when I finally walked out of her house.

My voice was so level it might as well be lying down. “I’m asking you why you haven’t called me once since I left for school.”

Arun stiffened. He was carefully not looking at me, pretending to read something on his own phone. I stood up and let my feet take me wherever.

“I am your mother. You are my daughter. It is not *my* job to call *you*.”

The door to my room was open. I saw Kaya inside, dancing obliviously to music on her earphones. I walked past. “If you

didn't care about talking to me all this time, why do you care where I am?"

"What do you mean I didn't care! Ava, what is going on with you?"

She really wanted to act like she didn't see it. Amazing. For so long I'd tried to reconcile her almost complete lack of interest in Dad's health with the mother who'd raised me. She always tried to help me with homework, no matter what the subject was, no matter how late we had to stay up. Whenever she went shopping for herself, she'd come home with something for me. She closed the café for an afternoon just so she could take me to get my driver's license. She was so encouraging when Matt first asked me out. Fiercely proud of me for getting into Lockridge on scholarship.

We weren't the cuddliest mother-daughter pair, but I always thought her love for me was clear. And I thought she and Dad would be married forever.

"Why didn't you ever help with Dad?"

My feet had carried me down the hall, all the way to the far atrium which housed one of the Milner stairwells. I stepped up onto one step.

"Of course I helped. I took care of him until the end."

"No, you didn't!" Okay, so maybe I wasn't calm. I came off the step. "You didn't take him to appointments. You didn't clean him up when he was sick. You didn't give him his meds. You didn't spend any time with him." I stepped up again.

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Really. I lived in that house, too, you know."

"I am not going to argue with you. But if this is what you truly believe, you're simply wrong. We both took care of him in our own ways."

Step down. "Name one thing you did for him, then. And I don't mean burying him."

"How can you be so disrespectful! To your own mother! Of course you're grieving and you probably want to be angry at

someone, blame someone, but remember, we only have each other now—”

Step up. Two steps this time, my thigh muscles flexing. “No, we don’t have each other. We never did, not the whole time he was sick.”

“This is ridiculous. You are being ridiculous.”

“You’re seriously surprised to hear this from me? What the hell did you think was going on when we basically stopped talking to each other? Because that came from you just as much as me. I wanted you to *be there*. And *he* wanted you to be there. You’re my mother and you were his wife and you shouldn’t have checked out on us when he was fucking dying!”

My voice, the complete opposite of calm, boomed up and down the stairwell.

There was a long silence from her end. “Well, Ava, I’m sorry you feel this way.”

I almost laughed. Such a textbook bullshit apology.

“You think you know so much, hmm?” she continued. “You made up a story inside your head and you refuse to listen to anything else.”

“I’m asking you right now! Tell me one thing you did for him.”

“That is a childish attempt to make me say something wrong. It is not your business what happened between me and your father. You can mourn him without being angry at me.”

I turned around and stomped down the steps again, swinging around the stairwell bend to take a couple steps toward Milner 1st for good measure. “Oh, I was angry way before he died. And I’ll be angry at you for the rest of my life.”

“Do you think your father would want that? The two of us are all that’s left of our family.”

The fact that she used his memory like that. It slipped into me, deep, like a knife wound you don’t even realize happened

at first because the blade's so sharp, the move so underhanded. I crumpled down onto the top step. "Do you even miss him?"

"What do you think?"

Jodie had told me that Mom did miss Dad. That she missed me, too. "I don't know," I whispered. "I really have no idea how you feel."

"I feel very sad that my daughter has such a mistaken image of me. We should support each other, not become angry over a misunderstanding."

"I wish I *could* understand you."

"Well, I think all of this conflict could have been avoided if you had just come home. To hear from Jodie of all people that you were in town without seeing me! How could I show my face if that got around?"

"I'm sure you'd survive the shame somehow, since you don't even feel any shame about Dad."

"Ava, I will not tolerate you speaking to me this way. Maybe you think because you're at school and it's all paid for that you can do whatever you want now. That is not the case. I'll be here when you're ready to apologize for your behavior."

She hung up. And I burst into tears.



I don't know how long I sat there on the steps, hunched over my knees and weeping like a rainstorm. It was worse than Jodie's breakdown in the car yesterday. It was worse than my panic attack afterward. I couldn't gulp down air fast enough compared to the broken sobs gusting out of me. The world seemed dim at the edges.

Distantly, I felt my phone slide out of my lap and clatter onto the steps. I didn't care. I just kept crying.

But someone brushed past and picked up the phone, then sat next to me. Arun.

I scrubbed my tear-strewn face with my hands, trying to clean myself up, trying to get under control.

“Ava, it’s okay,” he said softly. “Cry it out.”

That brought on a fresh wave. He put his arm around me and drew me into his shoulder. I grabbed the front of his shirt, seeking some kind of lifeline. His hand came up and stroked my arm, soft and soothing.

“I...” I gasped. “I miss my dad. I miss him so much.”

“Of course you do,” he murmured.

“Why—why’d it have to be him? What did he do to deserve that? He was a good person. And he was way too young.” Another sob broke from me. “He should have lived to be a hundred.”

Arun sighed. “I don’t know. No one knows why these things happen. It’s not fair.”

“He was in so much pain.” My breath hitched. My body hurt all over from crying so hard, from fighting for every breath. “I did my best but what the fuck did I know about how to take care of him?”

“You loved him, right? That was what he needed.”

“But why couldn’t I do *more*?”

“You can’t think that way. The important thing is you tried. And he must have known you were trying. He must have been so happy to have a daughter who cared about him so much.”

“How—” I hitched in a breath. “How do you know?”

“I didn’t eavesdrop if that’s what you’re wondering.” I shook my head—even if he had I wouldn’t have minded. But he continued, “I just put the pieces together. You’ve been sad since the moment I met you. You were clearly carrying something heavy. I don’t need to know all the details to see the truth. You cared, Ava. And if I could see it—someone who hasn’t even known you that long—then of course your dad could see it, too. You *did* do your best. That’s all anyone could have asked of you.”

“Then why couldn’t she? Her husband had *cancer*, for fuck’s sake. Why was I the only one who cared?”

“You’re talking about your mother?” I nodded, my hair sliding against his shoulder, and he sighed again. “Some people just aren’t made to be caregivers. Or some people show it in a different way. That makes it really hard on the ones who are doing that kind of work. I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry. He said those two little words in such a simple, unadorned way, not as a prelude to a long argumentative defense or because he had some burden of guilt to unload. But because he was genuinely sorrowful, for me and, I guess, for my father.

“What if I can’t forgive her?” I said. “What if that was the last time we ever spoke to each other?”

“Then it’s something heavy you’ll keep carrying, like you already are. And it’ll probably be painful and awful. There may be times you’ll feel guilty and you’ll want to reach out to her. There may be times she reaches out to you and you’ll want to answer. It’s okay to keep asking yourself if it’s the right thing. You’re allowed to change your mind.”

“I’m glad I told her how I feel, finally. But...I don’t know if I *want* to be angry at her forever. She was right when she said that the two of us are all we have left of him.”

“That may be true in a way, yeah. But she’s not some gatekeeper for remembering your dad. You’ve got yourself. You’re the daughter he raised.”

So many emotions swelled inside me, feelings I couldn’t name, probably because I hadn’t let myself feel them until now. I’d never wanted to be an object of sympathy. I wanted to pretend that I’d moved forward and left the pain behind, that if I was strong enough to cut out the poison all by myself then I didn’t need anyone’s help with the aftermath. But the truth was, I hadn’t managed to cut anything out, and instead I’d made myself suffer alone.

At least I wasn’t alone now. So I let the emotions come, and I held onto Arun as they washed over me.

It took a while for the storm to subside, for my breathing to slow and for my tears to dry up. I practiced the method Colin had used to talk me down from the panic attack, breathing in and out in the same rhythm, gradually lengthening the cycles. Arun held me the whole time, patient and quiet. His fingers traced light patterns on my upper arm, like mysterious symbols.

Finally I scrubbed the moisture from my cheeks and sat up. “Thank you,” I said.

“Of course.” His arm fell away from me, leaving a chill without his touch, but he tilted his head down to peer at me with warm brown eyes. “How do you feel?”

“Like...like I had a lot of stuff dammed up that I finally just let go. I feel...” I searched myself. “Lighter?”

Arun nodded. “Good.”

“I was dreading having to talk to my mother. I think I’d built her up in my mind as this untouchable menace I couldn’t let myself acknowledge. Like how the monster in the closet can’t hurt you if you pull the sheet up over your head.”

“It seemed like it was difficult, though,” Arun said. “It’s okay to acknowledge that.”

“Yeah.” I sniffled.

“And by acknowledging the difficulty, you can also acknowledge how brave you were for taking her call. How strong you were in standing up for yourself.”

Fuck, he was going to set me off crying all over again. My smile trembled as I said again, “Brave and strong? I don’t know about all that. But thank you, I guess? For saying so.”

He squeezed my hand. “I didn’t just say so. I believe so.”

I let that roll over me as the silence between us turned warm and comfortable, like being cradled in bed under a sunlit window. Then I remembered. “God, how long have we been sitting here? We were eating lunch!”

“The food should be fine. I packed the leftovers away in the common room fridge.”

“But you were planning to leave for home.”

“Don’t worry about it. My priority is making sure you’re okay.”

I shook my head. “You’re supposed to be on break and you’re dealing with my problems. You should get time off from being an RA for once. You especially.”

“Well, luckily for me, I’m not here as your RA. I’m here as your friend.”

I blinked up at him through still-damp eyelashes. “I feel like you’ve always been more of a friend than anything else. Even when you’ve had to be a mediator and stay professional and impartial. I don’t know, I just feel like you have my back.”

He chuckled. “If you think I’ve stayed professional and impartial, I must be a better actor than I realize. It’s honestly difficult *not* to take your side in everything.”

Surprised, I swiped at the last of the tears. “Why?”

Arun did something then. He inhaled, like he was preparing to say something but had instead stopped to hold his breath. He glanced away, then back at me. His eyes spoke volumes, epics. And what he said was, “I think answering that question could potentially complicate my job.”

It was my turn to catch my breath. “Are you saying—”

“No. Yes. I mean, I shouldn’t have said anything at all.” Arun huffed out a sigh. “Ava, look. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I know you’re...with people. And even if you weren’t, it’s not right for someone in my position to put personal feelings on you. It’s just that I—no, actually. Let’s quit while we’re ahead, Arun.” He shook his head and made a movement like he was going to stand up.

“Wait.” I caught his hand again. “I’m not uncomfortable. Please don’t take it back.”

He went still, but he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I don’t want to take it back, not really. But I still should have stayed quiet.”

My heart fluttered in my chest, a hopeful hatchling yearning to fly. The stairwell around us seemed to echo every sound we

made, or maybe it was just that I was hyperaware of him and my reactions to him. He was telling me everything I'd secretly wanted to hear, but he was also holding back. I understood why he wanted to keep his distance, and yet I knew if I didn't seize this moment, this chance to lay all our cards on the table, living so close to him would be almost impossibly painful.

"Arun," I murmured. "Would you get in trouble if I kissed you?"

He seemed to shiver. His hand clenched around my fingers. "We can't."

"Because you'd get in trouble? Or because you don't want to?"

"Of course I want to," he said hoarsely. "I want to kiss you every second I'm around you. But if we got involved, it could mess with the dynamics on hall. If it fell apart, it could be even worse."

"Why would it fall apart?" I leaned into him, close enough to smell the subtle notes of his skin. I'd been too busy crying earlier to appreciate this closeness. "Why would I ever mess up something so amazing?"

"Ava..." He didn't pull away. In fact, he leaned closer as well.

"Since I got to Lockridge, I've had so many people telling me I deserve to be happy. Now that I finally believe that advice, I'm passing it on."

"If by *so many people* you mean Darius and Seth and Colin, what would they actually think about me? The three of them are friends. I'm not part of that."

"Yes, I *am* talking about them. And yes, they want me to be happy. So I'm pretty sure they'd be thrilled about you. They might even say they told me so."

At last, he turned to look at me. "What if I asked you to wait?"

My fluttering heart dipped a little. "If it's what you need to feel comfortable, then okay. I know how important this job is

to you. I don't want to ruin it.”

We were still holding hands. He raised my hand to his mouth, pressing his lips to my fingers. The touch was so sheer and delicate, like silk dragging across my skin. “I don't know what the right decision is. I don't want to lose you.”

“I don't want to lose *you*. But I trust you. If you want to wait, we'll wait. Just—” I lifted my other hand to touch his cheek. “*Would* you get in trouble if I kissed you?”

Arun smiled against my knuckles. “I think we can risk it. I'm technically on break, after all.”

We both leaned in, meeting in the middle. His lips on mine were light years beyond his lips on my hand. He kissed me so softly at first, small sips and explorations that sent heat thumping wildly in my veins. His hands cupped my jaw, thumbs stroking my cheeks, tilting my face up to his.

My mouth opened in a sigh of longing and his tongue slipped inside. A soft sound escaped his throat as I touched my tongue to his. The heat between us exploded like a supernova. His arms came around me and I pressed into him, arching my body against his. I loved the feel of him wrapped around me, strong and lean, clasping me like I was the most precious thing he'd ever held. I could have kissed him for the rest of my life.

But eventually we pulled apart—just a little, foreheads touching, mouths sharing air. “My God,” I panted, “you really want to wait?”

Arun laughed softly. “I never said it would be easy. Or that I wouldn't regret the decision. But Ava, honey, it'll be so good when it finally happens.”

“You promise?”

He kissed me again, teasing my senses with everything and anything I could dream of. “I promise.”



I hugged Arun goodbye in his room, after we spent the bulk of an hour stealing smiles and occasional kisses from each other while he finished packing—the both of us absolutely loathsome in our sappiness. Then I walked him down the hall, holding hands as he wheeled his suitcase behind. We stopped at the atrium, back at the stairwell where everything between us had changed.

“Call me tonight?” I murmured as Arun circled my waist with his arm to pull me close. “Even if it’s late, it won’t be too late.”

“Definitely,” he said. “I wish I didn’t have to go. It’s just that I promised my folks...”

“No, of course, I get it.” I couldn’t help a small pang, though, seeing the stark contrast between what he had—parents he missed and who wanted to see him—compared to what I had—which was nothing.

“But also because,” Arun went on, “when I get back, it’ll be a while before I can do this again.” He stole another kiss, and this time there was a clear sense of finality to it.

“I can already tell the wait’s gonna be more than worth it.” I shook my head. “But just so you know, this whole year’s gonna be a real test of my strength and character.”

He grinned and blew me a kiss before disappearing down the stairwell.

I turned around, toward my room, and stopped short. Kaya was leaning out of the doorway, her eyes wide.

“I thought I heard voices and I—” She peered past me. “Was that seriously *Arun* you were just making out with?”

I gulped. “Um.”

“Like, aren’t you supposed to be sexing it up in a tent with three whole other dudes?”

“I...got back early.”

“To attack our RA’s face with your lips?”

“It just...happened?”

Kaya crossed her arms, one eyebrow raised over a wickedly twinkling eye. “I don’t have to leave for the airport for another two hours. So I’mma need you to spill. And I mean *details*.” She beckoned me into our room with an imperious hand.

Well, I guess this is the price of having a roommate again. I squared my shoulders as I walked into the inquisition, my spine straightened tall. After all, there was nothing to be embarrassed about. *And at least this time you’re on the inside, instead of locked out in the cold.*

Kaya sat cross-legged on her bed, and I mirrored her pose on mine. She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, her eyes ravenous for information. “All right, start from the minute you left school. Don’t leave anything out!”

“You sure?” I teased. “It’s a pretty wild ride.”

She actually clapped. “Girl, I fucking hope so.”

Grinning, I began, “Well, when we got to the festival...”

EPILOGUE

Lockridge got the first snow of the season right before winter break. It was a big one. All night, as I stayed up cramming for my last two finals, huge white flakes sifted down and piled up on tree branches, the grounds and pathways, the tops of cars. A gray sky in the morning threatened to dump even more snow, which probably made the campus maintenance crew reluctant to get started on clearing the overnight fall. So I had to trudge through calf-deep powder for my eight a.m. class, Introduction to the Novel.

“You are *not* doing early classes next semester,” I muttered to myself. “You don’t own a time-turner. You don’t have a forty-eight-hour day. In fact, you’re never doing early classes ever again.”

One prime reason being that early classes really made morning sex difficult. Although finals week had been pretty dry for *any* kind of sex, sadly.

By the time I got out of Mandarin a few hours later, though, the sun had come out. My dreaded Bio lab had been canceled, since it was the last Friday before break. And that meant I was officially done with my first semester. I’d planned to figure out who was also finished with exams so I could end the dry spell with a celebratory romp. But the snow sparkled crisply, pristine and irresistible. So I took a picture and sent it to the guys. **Come out and play!**

Seth arrived first, carrying something under his arm.

“Of course you have a sled,” I laughed at him.

“Sure do. Wanna take her for a spin?”

“I’ve never done it before. We don’t really get snow this heavy in Juniper.”

“Oh, *sweetheart*.” His eyes twinkled as brightly as the snow. “We’re gonna have some fun.”

We went to the top of the big hill, and Seth got on the sled behind me, his legs bracketing mine and his arms around my waist so he could hold the rope. His breath puffed past my face.

“Can you see to steer or do you need me to move?” I asked.

“Steer?” He scooted the sled forward. “Who needs to steer?” And he pushed off.

“Se-eeeeeth!”

Suddenly we were careening down the slope, picking up speed, my gut dropping as we hit a bump and landed with a skid, picking up *more* speed, faster and faster, the wind in my face. Flying. Seth’s laugh in my ear was totally evil. I’d kill him if I weren’t having so much fun.

We slowed down as the slope leveled out into the big field at the bottom where people like to play soccer and ultimate frisbee. Seth helped me get to my feet; the punch of adrenaline made me a little wobbly in the soft snow. “How was that?”

“Loved it.” I grinned up at him, then looked at the path we’d taken down the hill. “Want to go again?”

He looped the sled’s rope over his shoulder and grabbed my hand. “What goes down must climb back up.”

Darius and Colin were at the top of the hill waiting for us, and a whole bunch of other students were converging on the area as well. Some had even bigger sleds than Seth. Some just had food trays clearly pilfered from the dining hall.

“Congrats on finishing your first semester,” Colin said. “How does it feel?”

“Besides the overwhelming relief that I don’t have to do anymore studying for a whole month, plus the nagging worry that I actually fucked up my finals, I think it feels all right.”

Darius snorted. “Come on, genius, you know you did fine.”

“Well, how do y’all feel about being this much closer to senior year?”

We chatted about exams for a bit. Seemed everyone had done okay, but Colin was a little green around the gills thinking about studying for the MCAT hardcore in the spring.

Then Darius said, “So what time are you leaving tomorrow?”

“Around nine, I think. It’s a little early, but I wanted to make sure we have plenty of time to catch our train.”

“Just remember if you hate New York, you can always come to one of ours for Christmas.”

“I know,” I said, hoping they could feel my gratitude. “But I’m looking forward to having this time with him. And...you get why I’d rather do Christmas with a family who doesn’t make a big deal out of it, right? Next year, maybe.”

They nodded in solemn understanding. “Of course,” Colin said. “Anyway, you’ll be in Philly soon enough.”

“Yep. And then Chicago, and then Atlanta.”

We’d planned it all out. Winter break was four weeks long. It seemed only fair to divide it up. I was nervous about being introduced to so many families in such quick succession, but they’d all assured me of warm welcomes and plenty of one-on-one time.

“Just be prepared for some guilt tripping from Grandma Evelyn,” Darius warned. “Thanksgiving wasn’t enough for her.”

I’d gone down to North Carolina again for Thanksgiving, this time staying at Grandma Evelyn’s for all of it—which she’d insisted on to make up for me leaving early over fall break. I didn’t venture into Juniper itself. I ended up having another panic attack, although thankfully none of the guys caught me and I managed to coax myself out of it.

Jodie came over on Black Friday, extremely pregnant and counting down the seconds until D-day. Her older sister Joanne brought her, and the two of them predictably went googly-eyed meeting Darius and Colin and Seth.

Jodie hadn't delivered yet when we all drove back to Lockridge on Sunday, but she started having labor pains on Monday night, and the baby came Tuesday morning.

Honestly, I thought it was indigestion to begin with, she texted me. **And then it became the WORST indigestion EVER.** She sent a selfie of her sweaty, tired face.

She'd decided not to keep the baby. In the picture I could see the sadness in her eyes, but she was also smiling, and she told me she was sure it was the right decision. She was thinking of applying for junior college.

Go for it, I replied with equanimity. **Sky's the limit.**

The guys took turns sledding me down the hill, until my aching legs refused to carry me back up. We headed to the dining hall for dinner, then to Milner.

Kaya was frantically finishing up her packing. "I'm sooo late, fuck!"

"She's taking a redeye to San Jose," I explained to the guys. "Are you okay getting to the airport?"

"Yah, my Lyft's almost here already." She zipped her suitcase, stood it up on its wheels, then flew at me for a goodbye hug. "Merry Christmas, congrats on finals, have a good break!" She made good and sure to give long full-body hugs to Darius, Colin, and Seth, too. "Hmm, four weeks should be long enough to kill off all the germs you're about to throw around with your crazy group sex as soon as I leave this room. *Hopefully* it'll be long enough."

"Kaya!" I cried. But she just cackled, waved at me, and rushed out the door.

I turned to the guys, who all had differing degrees of smirk on their faces. "I mean, you gotta admit she's speaking from eyewitness experience," Seth said.

"God, don't remind me."

"You sure?" Seth twirled me around so I was standing with my back pressed against his front, both of us facing Darius and Colin. I shivered at the heat in their eyes. "Because I think

we'd all like to remind you," he whispered in my ear. "Starting right now."



I fantasized about one day making love to all three of them in broad daylight, where I could see their bodies in full naked glory. But we always kept the lights low. They said they didn't want to be distracted by each other, because they wanted to keep their focus on me. Since they *more* than lived up to that explanation in practice, I couldn't really complain. In fact, the only thing I had to complain about was that we hadn't been able to get together like this as often as I wanted. With everyone's schedules so busy, it was a real indulgence for all four of us to make the time, at the same time.

I also fantasized about Arun joining us one day, but I hadn't brought that up to anyone yet. It was way too early to think about. Arun and I were still faithfully keeping our promise to wait, although we'd kissed a few times when we honestly couldn't help ourselves. It was driving both of us slowly crazy, trying to stay away from each other, and our restraint was probably going to be tested even harder over winter break. But I respected him and his wishes. And I liked that we were establishing a strong friendship first, that we were taking time to get to know each other before fully giving in to attraction.

But, I liked to tease him, all bets were *off* once the school year ended.

For now, anyway, I had a full schedule seeing Seth, Colin, and Darius. It was great for Kaya, because I only spent a couple of nights a week in my own bed. This past week with exams, though, we'd all been locked down and I'd hardly seen any of them, even with Darius just across the hall.

I made it clear how much I'd missed them.

"Oh, fuck, oh, *fuck*," Seth gasped, as his cock spurted into my mouth. I kept sucking him through it, rubbing up and down his thighs with my hands. His fingers tangled in my hair, clutching helplessly. "Ava, babe, my God."

When he finally relaxed back in bliss, I turned to Colin, seated in my desk chair. He'd been watching us and jerking his dick—he was doing that more and more lately—and he looked beyond ready for his turn. I crawled over and swallowed him down.

His legs splayed further apart as his body arched and his head tipped back. I bobbed my head up and down, enjoying his tortured groans above me. Darius, prowling the room, cursed.

Colin's cock was so stiff I had to hold it in my hand to tilt it at the proper angle for my mouth. I stroked him, twisting my hand slightly, and he groaned again. He started shifting his hips, using the chair for leverage so he could rock in and out. The chair creaked rhythmically.

I plunged my lips down his shaft, going as far as I could, and let him fuck my mouth the way he wanted. It didn't take long after that. He came with a grunt, his beautiful abs clenching.

I went down on Darius, too, sucking him so hard my cheeks hollowed out and his moans filled the room. But ultimately I wanted to get fucked, so before he could come I pushed him back until he was lying flat on my bed, then I straddled him. I braced myself on his chest as I slowly eased myself down on his cock. His big hands held my hips for support until I was fully seated on him. Then I just rode him into oblivion, listening to his filthy mouth praise the tightness of my pussy, staring down into his gorgeous face. One of his hands slid up to cup my breast and flick my nipple; the other hand went to my clit, rubbing insistently.

“God, I'm gonna come,” I breathed.

“You fucking better,” Darius panted. “You deserve it.”

“And it's not gonna be the only time tonight,” Seth vowed.

That was all I needed. My orgasm swirled up from where Darius and I were joined. He sat up, holding me close and capturing my cries with his kiss. I felt his cock pulse as he came right along with me.

We took a moment to catch our breaths, the four of us sitting on my bed and leaning against the wall.

“Why is it always so damn good with you?” Colin wondered out loud.

“Because we’re just good together,” I said.

And because of how I feel about you, I thought. All three of you.

I wasn’t quite ready to say exactly how I felt out loud. But I knew I would. Soon.



In the morning, the guys hung out in the room while I got ready. I’d finished most of my packing already—to be honest, I’d *started* packing as soon as all the travel arrangements got finalized, I was so excited. So I didn’t have much left to do. That meant I could spend the last few minutes on kisses and caresses, stocking up memories for the long nights when we’d be apart.

Arun knocked on the door right at nine, bundled up in a fleece-collared jacket and scarf, suitcase rolling neatly next to him. His eyes lit up when he saw me. “Ready to hit the road?”

“Ready,” I said, breathless.

Arun slapped hands with the guys. “Have a good break,” he told them. “Take care of Ava when you see her.”

“You take care of her, too,” Colin said.

“And dude,” Seth said, “remember you’re not actually pulling an RA paycheck over winter break, so *technically* you’re not working. Try not to torture her too much with the whole *rules* thing.”

I was in the middle of pulling on my coat, and paused to swat at him. “We’ve been over the rules and we decided. We’ll be fine.”

“Mm-hmm.” He arched a skeptical eyebrow at me.

Darius just chuckled. “I mean, if you think you can resist each other after a full week cooped up in his apartment...”

“We won’t be inside *all* the time,” I protested. “Not even most of the time. It’s New York!”

“And my parents will be there,” Arun pointed out.

“The *whole* week?” Darius asked.

Arun shifted on his feet, glancing at me, and fire licked low in my belly.

Darius clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s what I thought.”

“Okay, comments on the matter are now closed,” I declared. “We’ve got to get going.”

The five of us hustled out into the hallway of Milner 2nd, Colin helping with my suitcase. I locked the door, then followed them down the stairs. I stepped out into the cold winter morning and found myself caught up in a warm tangle of a threefold embrace.

“I’ll be seeing y’all soon,” I told them. “And then we’ll all be back here together again.”

They let me go, and Arun took my hand, smiling down at me. We headed off to start our journey. This time I wasn’t alone.

*Some happy endings are just jumping off points.
Ava and her gorgeous guys will be back!*

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PREVIEW OF LOVING AVA

LOCKRIDGE LOVES Book 2

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

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

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

Trouble is brewing, though. When Ava's relationships get exposed on the campus gossip site, it puts all of them to the test. Can their love withstand the heat?

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

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

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

His hand came away from my neck to grasp my leg and draw it up over his hip. The heat of his palm seared my bare thigh like a hot iron...

***LOVING AVA (LOCKRIDGE LOVES BOOK 2) is now available
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stay up to date with Mei Dansen at
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Mei Dansen is a graduate of a Lockridge-like college. After many sideways and wayward moves in life, she is currently settled in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. with her loving husband and sometimes-loving feline. In her spare time, she daydreams about romance plots and someday attending a nearby BTS concert.

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