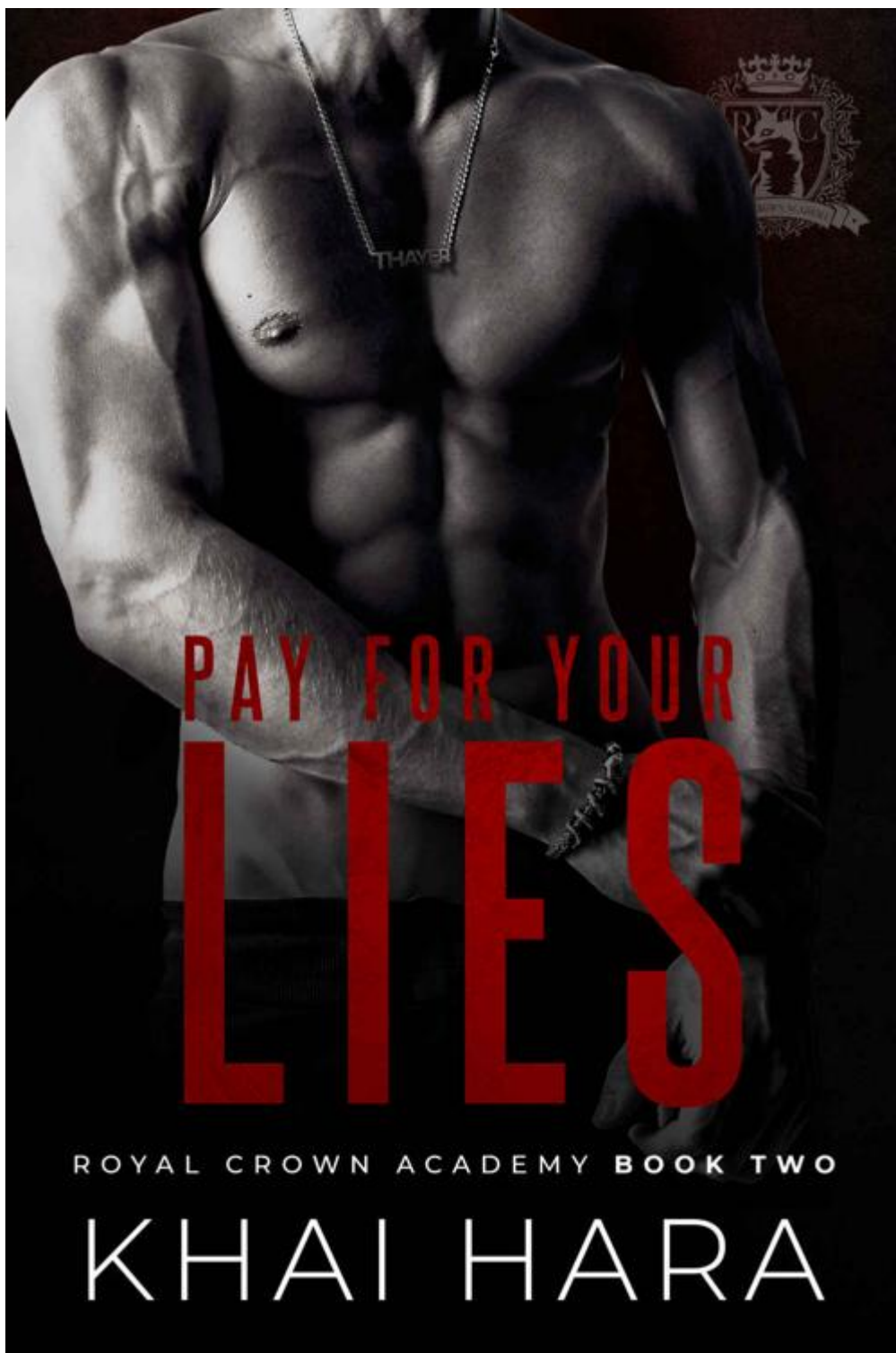


PAY FOR YOUR  
**LIES**

ROYAL CROWN ACADEMY BOOK TWO

KHAI HARA



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Pay For Your Lies  
*Royal Crown Academy Book Two*  
Khai Hara

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## **A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR**

Hello hopefully again friend,

Rhys is probably my favorite of the three boys we know so far. I'm excited to get your thoughts and feedback and see if you guys love him as much as I do.

His story isn't as dark, but he is just as jealous and possessive of Rogue which results in him being rougher with the heroine than some might be used to. There's also a very violent scene towards the end of the book. Please keep those possible trigger warnings in mind before you start reading.

Also, neither main character physically cheats (kissing/sex) in this book, however together they definitely cross the line when it comes to Thayer's previous relationship. Please be aware of this if any type of cheating triggers you.

Happy reading!

To the people who read my first book – you gave me the confidence to write another. Thank you.

## **PLAYLIST**

Call Out My Name — TRØVES

Dream On — Aerosmith

Car's Outside — James Arthur

Extreme Ways — Moby

Trainwreck — James Arthur

Natural Blues — Moby

Bad Girls — M.I.A.

Make Up Your Mind — Florence + The Machine

In This Shirt — The Irrepressibles

In My Veins — Andrew Belle

No Right To Love You — Rhys Lewis

Love Again — Dua Lipa

Traitor — Olivia Rodrigo

What Once Was — Her's



*Thayer*

“*Just* like that, love. Fuck, you’re killing me.”

The voice startles me. I straighten, standing upright from where I’d been bending over, stretching out my sore hamstring.

Even before I turn, those words let me know who I’m about to come face to face with.

I wish I could admit that his voice leaves me unaffected. That it sounds just like every other voice to me and doesn’t stand out in any way, but I can’t.

The first time he spoke to me, his voice slipped into my ear and, carried by the tiny blood vessels in my brain, spread its irresistible, intoxicating poison everywhere it could.

We were arguing, pretty much like we have been every conversation since we met, but it didn’t matter.

He’d dirtied me forever with his voice alone.

It’s not because his voice is special to *me* that it’s made a home in my brain and fucked me from the inside every conversation since.

No, no. He just has an exceptional voice, anyone would agree with me.

It’s the kind of voice that gets an actor hired to record romance audiobooks; its silky, rumbly tenor able to get women

around the world unspeakably horny with just a few carefully delivered words.

But it's also the kind of voice that can silence a room with barely a word uttered. The kind that people listen to.

The kind they obey.

Now, whenever I hear the rich tone, the velvety smooth British accent, and the rough, dry delivery, it lights me up like a battery.

Add to this his quick wit and constant bantering and my poisoned brain powers to life, ready to engage.

And that's the worst idea in the world.

For a few reasons, most notably that I have a boyfriend and Rhys' words are rarely anything but obsessively filthy and, importantly,—

I don't obey.

I turn and get confirmation that it really is him. He's standing fifteen feet away from me, looking irritatingly attractive with his arms crossed over his chest and his hips casually resting against one of the metal dividers that separate the field from the spectator section with its rows of elevated bleachers.

He watches me silently for a beat before unfolding his arms to reveal a hand clasped around a green apple. He brings it to his lips and takes a large bite, the crunching sound ripping the silence like a knife stabbing through a tapestry.

“What?” I ask.

The lazy open mouthed smirk he gives me as he chews his apple draws my gaze to his defined jaw.

Annoying.

“I didn't mean to interrupt.” He says, the smirk morphing into his trademark playful grin. “I quite liked the view before.”

It's the smutty voice.

That's the only reason my body temperature heats ten degrees at his words.

When I know I'm going to speak to him or interact with him in any way, I can usually control my reactions and try to keep a clear head.

But right now I'm unprepared, and that's a problem.

I'd been miles away in my mind thinking about a biology paper I needed to hand in tonight and hadn't braced myself for a potential interaction as my warm up was ending.

I'm always the first on the field, doing extra stretches and warmups before the rest of the girls' team joins me. I'm hoping to be named team captain, so I'm trying to lead by example.

The boys' team practices on the field next to ours, usually at the same time. I should've known I'd run into him as I was finishing up.

Rookie mistake.

Caught off guard like this, he has the upper hand. I need to get my wits about me asap before he senses the tiny opening this fissure leaves.

I think people underestimate Rhys.

Unlike his two best friends, he's easy with a joke, a smile and a good time. While people don't see him as weak, they seem to believe he's more lenient than the others.

I've only known him peripherally for a couple weeks but I've seen enough to know that's a big time miscalculation on their part.

I've yet to see any behavior that confirms what I believe, but I can *feel* the tension radiating off him. His playful demeanor is deceiving. It hides a dormant predator with sharp teeth and wolfish eyes behind a pretty picture.

But fuck with or betray him and I'm pretty sure that predator would jump out of the picture and maul you to death.

He'd be merciless.

I have no interest in being Big Cat dinner, so that's why I aim to be prepared around him at all times.

My sharp tongue is my ultimate weapon in this game of ours, but I'm rattled right now.

He takes another bite.

“What are you talking about, Mackley?”

His smile twitches and his jaw pauses momentarily. It's barely there, but I see it.

He hates when I call him by his last name.

Hates it.

Which is why it's the only thing I call him. It's another way of keeping him at a distance no matter how hard he pushes to come closer.

And he pushes hard.

Ever since the day we met, and pretty routinely over the past couple of weeks, he's made it crystal clear that he wants to sleep with me.

When I catch him looking at me in the halls or the cafeteria, it's always with such confident intensity that a shiver of fear slithers down my spine in response.

He looks at me like he owns me already.

Like he knows it's only a matter of time until I break.

I shake my head slightly, trying to get rid of those intrusive thoughts.

He stands to his full height and walks towards me, his gait indolent as he approaches. At just over five foot eight, I'm pretty tall for a girl. In fact, my long stride and associated speed are two of the strengths that make me a threat on the pitch.

But as Rhys' six foot four body comes to loom over me, it dwarfs my frame.

He's trying to use his size to intimidate me and force me to take a step back. I refuse to submit to his manipulation

tactics, so as a result we're standing almost chest to chest with my chin tilted completely upward in order to keep our eye contact going.

“Your arse, love,” He says, delivering the word “arse” like he’s talking about the holy grail, “I didn’t mean to pause the show.”

I narrow my eyes at him, finally understanding what he’s talking about.

I’d been bent over, working to loosen my hamstrings when he walked by – and eventually made himself at home behind – me. In that position, he’d have had the perfect view of my ass and not much else.

I’m wearing my typical practice attire, a two piece workout set consisting of a long sleeved crop top and biker shorts.

Years of sports and weightlifting have toned and defined my ass, but I’m not afraid to admit one of the reasons I bought the set is it added an extra lift.

And it’s navy blue. I love navy blue.

I can only imagine what that moment looked like from his POV.

“Show’s over.” I tell him, crossing my arms over my chest to erect some type of physical barrier between us.

His eyes come down to trace the movement and look at my breasts, a slow smile stretching over his face as he does so.

Why does it feel like I capitulated just by folding my arms?

I want to wipe that smile right off his face.

“That’s too bad. I preferred the other view.” He purrs, his gaze tracking over my face, taking in every expression, every twitch. “Less mouthy.”

“Why am I not surprised being mouthy is a turn off for you?”

He barks out a laugh. “It’s not. Only when it gets in the way of me looking at your exceptional ass.”

“Maybe you just can’t keep up with my mouth.” I say, taunting him.

I regret the words as soon as they come out. They sounded a lot more suggestive than I intended them to, and of course Rhys jumps on the opening.

He lifts an eyebrow slightly as he takes a step forward and bends his head towards me. “Something tells me that letting you know I want to fuck your mouth just as much as I want to fuck your ass isn’t the answer you’re looking for.”

I scoff and roll my eyes, taking a step back and hoping I’m doing a good job of covering my body’s reaction to his words as goosebumps break out across my skin.

“Your efforts are wasted on me. Go flirt with a member of your fan club.” I tell him, ignoring the tiny clench in my stomach and instead tilting my chin towards the bleachers where a gaggle of girls have taken up residence.

They squeal when he turns around to look at them. He gives them a small wave and a couple of them look like they might expire on the spot from that gesture alone.

“There’s certainly a long waitlist.” I add drolly, although it comes out more snippy than anything.

The smile is back, devastating as ever. “Just say the word, love.” He says, nudging my chin with his finger, “Break up with that wanker you’re pining after back home and you’ll jump to the top of the waitlist.”

He’s talking about Carter, my long distance boyfriend who I went to high school with in Chicago before transferring to RCA for senior year.

“As appealing as that offer sounds,” I reply, sarcasm dripping from every word, “It’s looking like that’ll happen... never.”

“Because of the boyfriend?”

“Because of the boyfriend and frankly because I’m simply not interested.”

He takes another step towards me so that his chest bumps against my crossed arms. Reaching a hand up, he pushes a loose strand of hair off my cheek and puts it behind my ear.

His eyes follow the movement and then move to my neck to track the pace of my heart beat beneath my skin as he speaks inches from my face.

“You’re lying to yourself.” He says, his voice full of derision.

I tilt my chin higher, if even possible, and tighten my crossed arms. “You’re projecting.”

“And you’re evading.”

“I’m not—”

“Rhys!”

His head snaps up to look in the direction of the voice calling his name, ending the tense exchange and abruptly snapping the connection between us.

It feels like my body physically sags in relief as he takes a step back.

An argument with Rhys is like going ten rounds in the ring and the fight being called a draw at the end. There’s adrenaline and exhilaration rushing through me from going toe to toe with him, followed by the inevitable crash and mental play-by-play where I rewind every word spoken, every physical movement as I dissect what just happened.

“Stop distracting my player and get to practice.” Coach Faulkner yells at him, pointing behind her at the field he should be on.

“Yes, Coach.” Is his shouted reply, before he turns back towards me and says, “I’m going to enjoy making you regret every lie you’ve ever told me.”

“Keep dreaming.”

“Keep digging your heels in, it’ll make my victory even sweeter.”

\*\*\*

I let myself fall to the ground next to my sports bag and roll onto my back, completely spent.

Practice was grueling. Coach is focusing September training on team conditioning to ensure we’re competitive the full ninety minutes we’re on the field. That means running.

Lots of running.

Forwards. Backwards. Up the bleachers. Down the bleachers.

Over and over again until I thought I’d faceplant my way down that entire last set of bleacher runs.

I’m in great shape but I’m not used to this level of skill. Sports in the public school system are a bit of a joke, so it was easy to be one of the best in my divisions with some discipline.

I’m learning that soccer in private schools — especially European private schools where soccer is borderline a religion — is a whole different ball game. Pun intended.

Where I’m used to being a star in the States, I know I’m going to have to work hard to keep up with the talent here. Lucky for me I have the competitiveness of Michael Jordan in *The Last Dance* and the work ethic of Oprah during the holiday season.

I know I can and will be a star here. And that hard work starts with showing my passion and dedication to Coach Faulkner so she nominates me as captain.

I’m still lying on my back, eyes closed and trying to catch my breath when a shadow falls over me.

“You alright?”



That voice again.

“Go away.” I tell him. Refusing to open my eyes, I blindly reach for my airpods and press play on my cool down playlist.

Maybe if I ignore him, he’ll go away.

I pull a knee against my chest and stretch, humming along to the song as I do so.

After what feels like a couple minutes, I open one eye to see if he’s still there and find him standing over me, looking down at me.

I groan, letting my leg fall to the ground and grabbing the other in the same stretch.

“You’re like a venereal disease,” I tell him, “You just keep coming back.”

“Got a lot of experience with those, have you?”

“Yes. In fact, I’m riddled with diseases. Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes. You name it, I’ve got it.”

“Is this supposed to make me not want to fuck you?”

“Is it working?”

“No.”

“I have *so* many warts hidden under this outfit.”

“Show me a couple.”

I throw him a disgusted look. “What is wrong with you?” I ask him, finally looking up into his face.

Whereas I’m still on the literal ground, trying to recover from that workout, he looks infuriatingly perfect.

He’s barely ruffled at all, the only sign of exertion a bead of sweat at his temple. But then it rolls perfectly down his temple making him look even more like the main character I know he is.

His wavy hair is longer on top and cut short on the sides and a single lock rests flawlessly on his forehead like it was specifically placed there by a team of hair stylists.

He's got arrogant aristocratic features, from his long nose to his strong jaw, made more rugged by the only imperfection on his face – a small scar that bisects his left eyebrow, leaving a hairless trail in his wake. But it's his eyes that draw me in.

They're endless pools of navy blue, their depth trapping. I know if I was to put one of those high res cameras up to his face, I'd see entire galaxies in his eyes.

Ones filled with twists and turns and milky ways and millions upon millions of shining stars.

“Is this a case of wanting what you can't have?”

“That's not a thing.”

Clearly, I've misheard him. “Excuse me?”

“I will have you eventually, so strictly speaking, it's not about wanting something I can't have.”

“I—”

“And as it happens, I didn't come here to hit on you, you made that leap all by yourself.” He quips with a self-satisfied smile. “Maybe you're not as immune as you like to think you are.”

“What do you want then?”

He waves his hand in the general direction of where I'm still laying. “I looked over and you were splayed out on the ground like a corpse, much like you are now. I wanted to make sure you weren't dead.” He gives me a cheeky half smile as he adds, “Warts I can work with, necrophilia I'd find difficult.”

A laugh bursts out of me before I quickly smother it to death with a cough.

“You can admit you find me funny, I won't tell anyone.” He says with a smirk, his twinkly eyes shining down on me.

All of a sudden my throat is dry and I need to go.

I'm saved from having to answer when Bellamy, the actual love of my life and my best friend with absolutely impeccable timing, walks up to the pitch and waves at me.

Gathering my things, I jump to my feet and run towards her without a backwards glance.

\*\*\*

It's as I'm running towards Bellamy that I realize Rhys and I were the only two people left on the pitch, the rest of our respective teams and coaches long gone.

A fact that doesn't go unnoticed by her.

"You two looked cozy out there." She says with a raised eyebrow.

I put my hand up to her forehead as we walk, a frown pulling at my face.

"Hmm, normal."

"What?"

"I was checking if you had a fever because I swear I just heard you say the craziest thing."

She laughs at me, giving me a look. "Calling it how I see it."

"Maybe I'm the one with the fever." I reply, grabbing her hand and putting it against my forehead. "Do I feel warm?"

She pulls her hand out of my hold and playfully shoves my shoulder. "You know who would react the exact same way you just did? Rhys. You guys are so similar."

"So what?" I ask her, as we approach the golf cart.

"No!" She exclaims as I go towards the left door, startling me. "You've had a long afternoon. Let me drive."

"Subtle, B." I tell her, going around to the other side. "I'm not that bad of a driver, you know."

"Of course you're not." She says with the same voice her mom – Trish, my unofficial adoptive mama – uses when she's trying to mollify me.

“What’s your point, anyway? You remember that I love Carter right?”

Bellamy is not Carter’s biggest fan.

She used to be.

When he first asked me out, we poured over every text message and every romantic gesture until we both fell in love with him for me.

For a long time, I had the best boyfriend and best friend. We did everything together and life was simple. It wasn’t necessarily very exciting, but at least I was content.

Then almost three months ago and out of nowhere, he cheated on me.

With a girl from a rival team, to add insult to injury.

I honestly wasn’t sure why. We were in love, or so I thought, and he was happy. He said it was a drunken mistake and I chose to believe and forgive him.

I guess I wasn’t ready for the devastation of my first heartbreak, especially not as I was about to leave for Switzerland.

Bellamy’s never been anything but supportive of my decision but I can tell the rift is there and quietly pervasive.

With every passing day, I feel the two most important people in my life drifting further and further apart.

This as I watch, my heart bruised and my self-esteem completely shattered. I pieced myself back together enough to make it to Switzerland, but it’s not perfect. The major parts are all accounted for but there’s dozens of tiny shards that haven’t been glued back on yet.

In the meantime, things are back to normal between Carter and I.

Better even.

He’s been a great boyfriend since the incident, buying me flowers and writing me declarations of love. I should be over the moon, and yet...it’s been hard.

Our schedules aren't lining up as well as I was hoping and it's been difficult to talk on the phone. Since I've been here, we've texted and sent voice notes but we've spoken on the phone only a grand total of three times.

It's weird not hearing his voice every day, but it's been manageable.

A few months ago, I don't think I'd have been able to go more than a couple of days without speaking to him.

"Thayer?" Bellamy asks, waving a hand in front of my eyes.

"Yes. Sorry, what?"

"You zoned out on me." She says, turning the golf cart into the parking spot. "Anyway, I was saying I'm not telling you to sleep with Rhys. But you're more hostile with him than you are with literally everyone else we've met here. Maybe you could try being his friend?"

"I'm surprised you're saying that to me. We don't know these people — these *rich* people — but we've already learned they're a whole different breed. I mean look at his psycho best friend." I add, tossing my hands up to emphasize my point.

It's admittedly a low blow.

Bellamy needs no reminder about Rogue, he's made it his mission to make her life hell since she set foot on campus and he's currently manipulating her into living with him.

But aggression hides obsession, I'm sure of it.

"Rhys seems harmless to me." She says with a shrug.

"The most dangerous people usually do."

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

As Thayer jogs past me, I resist the almost physical urge to grab her swinging silver ponytail and use it to yank her back against my chest so we can continue our conversation.

Or our standoff, as she'd probably refer to it.

Instead, I watch her join up with Bellamy and walk off together without a backwards glance.

That's more or less how every interaction goes between us. I approach her, we spar, and she runs away before she gets in too deep.

Tossing the strap of my sports bag over my shoulder, I head over to my car, a smile stretched across my face as I think back on our conversation.

As much as she pretends to dislike me, to dislike the way I talk to her, I can see the blush on her skin when we fight, can feel her pulse racing as she opens her mouth to clap back at me.

The physical signs are there, no matter how much her brain tries to fight and bury those feelings.

The truth of the matter is, I want to fuck her.

Plain and simple.

I have ever since the moment I met her, when she stood furious and ready to defend Bellamy.

My two best friends, Rogue, Phoenix, and I were headed to *Bella's* for lunch when we ran into Thayer and her friends.

In Rogue's case, he'd physically run into Bellamy as she was coming out of the diner. Her milkshake had spilled all over him in an almost comical fashion, detonating his hair trigger temper in the process.

Thayer had been ready to step in when he lashed out at Bellamy and I'd intervened because no matter how angry she was, in a fight between her and Rogue, she'd lose.

Badly.

I didn't know her, but already I'd felt protective enough of her to want to save her from that fate.

She'd immediately caught my attention.

Her anger was a physical thing around her and she was almost incandescent with it. Eyes flashing, lips pulled back, hair silver and standing on end, like lightning was about to strike her.

I'd wanted to wrap that hair around my fist and use it as leverage to bend her to my will.

And she'd barely glanced at me.

Certainly, she hadn't reacted to the flirty smile and comment I'd made.

There's a first time for everything I guess and I'd been intrigued to say the least.

The daily routine of classes, parties, hookups, practice and doing it all over again had bred uninterrupted boredom and I'd been restless, needing new entertainment.

Then she'd landed in my lap with her big eyes and fiery temper and I'd wanted her like I'd never wanted anyone before.

All of a sudden my pulse was beating in my wrists, my breathing was speeding up, and my attention was completely captured by her as I'd raked my eyes over her, exploring every curve of her tight body.

Tall and slender, she had the body of an athlete. It was obvious in the way she held herself, the innate belief only

athletes have in their body's physical abilities clear in her posture, and in her long, strong legs.

Her hair lay halfway down her back and was dyed from its natural blond to a shimmering silver color that shined in the light, making her look almost otherworldly.

Her eyes shot daggers in our direction and promised retribution, but the small crinkles at their corners revealed that under normal circumstances she might spend quite a lot of time laughing.

I'd wanted to take her then and there. To push her against the wall, run my fingers along the curve of where her inner thigh met her pussy and then under the fabric of her underwear, before sliding them into her wet heat.

To force her to her knees and fuck the fire out of her mouth.

Instead, she'd walked off with a disinterested look on her face and revealed the existence of a boyfriend the next day.

Annoyance had seeped deep under my skin and into my bones at the news. Annoyance at the additional hurdle in my way and mild irritation that another man could call her his.

I'd just discovered her and immediately learned she wasn't mine to look at.

Yet.

The fact that she had been and was continuing to make me work for it had single handedly pulled me out of my bored baseline existence, sparking a flame of interest in my blood that I was going to get to the bottom of.

Like I'd told her, victory would taste sweeter when I eventually got her to submit.

\*\*\*



I walk through the front door, past the foyer with the princess staircase and straight into the kitchen where I find Bellamy chopping carrots on a cutting board.

This is technically Rogue's family home, but his mother abandoned the family when he was a kid and his father fucked off to America to avoid his parental duties shortly afterwards, coming back only a couple of times a year to act the part of the doting parent, so Phoenix and I moved in two years ago.

Living with your best mates is generally pretty fucking cool and also has its interesting moments, like witnessing one of said best mates develop a blind obsession for a girl.

"He's having you cook dinner now?"

About a week ago, Rogue and Bellamy made a deal that entailed having her obey his every command for the next six weeks in exchange for having him clear an admonishment from her school records.

He's been using that total power over her to have her perform sometimes humiliating tasks around the house.

And to make her sleep in his bed every night.

"No, he's unfortunately much more creative with his orders." She says, turning to throw carrots into the pot behind her. "I can't let someone else cook for me."

She's referring to Claire, Rogue's longtime housekeeper who also usually cooks dinner for us.

"How come? It's a job like any other."

"My mom's been that person for other people. I'm just not comfortable with it really. Maybe one day." She says with a shrug.

I nod slowly, taking in what she's saying.

I know that Bellamy and Thayer both had a different type of upbringing in Chicago, one that was significantly more challenging than the way the rest of us silver-spooned trust fund babies were raised.

My parents were both very successful philanthropists and investment bankers in their own right.

They'd invested in social media startups in the nineties among other notable positions, resulting in having an impressive combined net worth before they'd died in a car accident.

That money was bequeathed to me in their will and is currently sitting in the bank, collecting dust.

It's not that I don't have expensive tastes, I'm just not sure how to spend their money when they're no longer here.

As stupid as it sounds, touching what's theirs, money I'm sure they had a plan for... it feels like closing the door on our old life.

I've grieved my parents. I've gone to therapy and done grief counseling. I've visited their graves and said my goodbyes.

But no one teaches you how to move on without the most important people in your life, let alone being given things of theirs and claiming them as your own like a thief, as if they were simply never there.

Shaking those thoughts away, I focus on Bellamy. I round the kitchen island and give her a loose side hug.

"Understood." I tell her, "What are you making?"

"Just some chicken noodle soup, nothing fancy."

It may not be fancy, but it smells and looks amazing.

"Hands off."

I turn towards the glacial voice and come face to face with Rogue. He's standing in the doorway, glaring at me.

Or more specifically, at my arm where it rests on Bellamy's shoulder.

"In fact, fuck off."

"Actually, Bellamy promised me some soup. Said I could have the first taste and everything." I tell him innocently.

She lifts a questioning eyebrow in my direction but watches this play out.

“I thought you wanted to play in the Premier League.” He says, his voice matter of fact as he apparently changes the subject.

“I do.”

“No, it looks like you really don’t, Rhys.” He warns, his tone dropping to a level that’s low and vicious.

“Heard you loud and clear on that one, mate.” I say, tossing Bellamy a wink as I head out. “I’ll catch some of those leftovers later.”

I walk past Rogue, successfully avoiding the sharp elbow he throws in my direction on the way out.

\*\*\*

Upstairs, I find Phoenix sitting in the dark library, quietly reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

“Why am I not surprised to find you reading stories of love and betrayal?” I ask him, dropping into a lounge chair in front of him. “Feels almost too on the nose.”

“What do you mean?” He turns the page, not bothering to look up.

“Love. Betrayal.” I say, waving my hand along with the words. “You. Sixtine.” I wave it again.

This time, his eyes snap up to meet mine.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Technically, me neither.” I tell him, because I don’t.

Phoenix has never told us the reason he hates Six, an ex-childhood friend of ours and also potentially the nicest person I’ve ever met.

When he'd announced one day that she was dead to us, we'd blindly agreed and hadn't questioned the order. Mostly because we were immature boys, but also because he'd been absolutely devastated.

This was right after this brother had died and we'd wanted to support him however we could.

"But I know I'm not wrong." I finish.

He slams the book shut, downs the glass of whiskey he had sitting next to him and walks out with a parting "fuck you" thrown my way.

He's getting close to his breaking point when it comes to her, I can feel it.

And I can't wait for the show.

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

Letting myself drop onto my bed, I prop my head on my bent forearm and scroll through my phone.

Leaving the dozens of texts from girls asking what I'm doing unanswered, I open up Instagram. I like a recent post from Phoenix of an open book in our library and keep scrolling aimlessly until I fall on Thayer's latest picture.

It's a game day pic of her on the field. She's facing one direction but her body is half twisted in the opposite direction towards the ball behind her. The movement has her signature braid flying in the wind and loose strands fluttering around her cheeks.

Even though she's about fifteen feet away from the camera, her gaze is the first thing you notice when you look at this picture.

Her eyes are fixated on the ball at her opponent's feet, the look of determination in them so powerful it's almost intimidating.

Almost.

Because I know that look better than anyone. It's the exact same one that's etched on my face when I play. And

while hers might intimidate her opponents, it's no match for mine.

Just like she's no match for me.

As competitive as she is, as far as she would be willing to push herself in order to win, I'd take it another hundred steps further than her.

That's why there's no winning for her.

Only how long it'll take her to accept defeat and how graciously she'll take it.

Part of me hopes she doesn't take it graciously at all.

A dirty smirk lifts my lips at the thought.

She could use learning her place and I'm desperate to make her bow down before me.

I'd wanted to fuck her since the moment I met her, but then finding out that she was a football player — and a good one at that — that was an additional, unexpected turn on.

Previously if you'd told me I'd get hard watching a girl dribble a ball down the field, I'd have laughed in your face.

Yesterday, I'd been jogging into position on the field when I'd heard her calling for the ball and turned towards her.

I'd watched her get the ball, lose a defender and score five seconds later, then laugh happily and jump up and down in celebration.

I'd come to a dead stop to watch the scene unfold, had missed a pass, and the other team had taken possession and scored on the same play.

It was practice, but still.

Coach had my bollocks for that one.

My legs are still screaming today from the sixty bleacher runs he had me do yesterday.

Frankly, that moment irritates the shit out of me.

Me, distracted mid play by a girl I met days previously and have only seen a handful of times since?

Out of character and inexcusable.

It makes no sense either. I've never had a sustained attraction to someone like this before and I'm frankly not interested in starting to now.

The quicker I fuck her and get her out of my system, the better.

Then life can go back to fucking normal. Preferably as it was before when I didn't get distracted by melodic laughter, a brilliant smile, and an ass that jiggles hypnotically when she jumps up and down.

\*\*\*

Classes are predictably boring the next day.

I mostly stare out the window all day, twirling my pencil in my hand as I put together this afternoon's practice in my head.

The coaches are going to announce this year's captains pretty soon, but since I was captain last year Coach has kept my position ongoing to start the season.

Which means I get to lead two practices a week, structuring them how I want and on the areas of focus I think we need.

One of my strengths on the field is being able to identify weaknesses in opposing teams and then exploiting them to get us a win.

Newer offensive strategy? I'm able to read and learn it before their last player and beat him to the ball.

Goalie's hamstring looks tight? I aim high off the ground, into the corners to best him.

Distracted striker? I steal the ball and leave him chocking on my dust.

And that's exactly how I'll break Thayer.

By figuring out what she loves the most – what makes her laugh, what makes her tick – and using that information to infiltrate those walls she keeps built high around herself and taking her down before she can see it coming.

Getting her to her knees and admitting defeat at my feet before she even knows there's a breach in her defenses.

I'm hard at the thought.

But she's no defenseless flower to be underestimated. She's at the very least partly got the same skill I do in identifying soft spots.

That's why she refuses to call me by my name.

She knows she's provoking me every time she calls me Mackley. Every time she keeps me at a distance while beckoning others closer.

It infuriates me to hear other people's names on her lips when she won't say mine. Especially when she's said my friends' names before she's said mine.

I grind my jaw at the thought and my fist closes, snapping the pencil in half.

My eyes drop to stare at the pieces in my hand, reminding me that I was working on a training plan.

Distracted again.

*Fuck.*

\*\*\*

“God damn it, Rhys. Who fucked you off, mate, and why'd you take it out on us?” Ben moans as he jog-limps to catch up with me. “My legs are completely fucked, you wanker.”

When I'd turned my attention from Thayer back to the training plan, I'd taken my frustration out on the team.



Sprints, drills, weights and long runs had sponsored today's workout and the team would be feeling them and cursing me out for a while.

I grunt at him in answer, toweling off my forehead as we head towards the locker room.

I put myself through the same workout as the rest of the team so I'm sweating profusely, my hair sticking to my forehead before I ruffle it and push it back on my head.

"Do you need a shag, is that it?" He asks, clapping my shoulder.

"Fuck off." I say, shrugging him off with a laugh.

"I'm serious. You're not usually this tyrannical on the pitch. It felt like you were exorcizing demons out there."

"Something like that." I reply vaguely, because in many ways I was.

We walk into the locker room as I answer him, joining the rest of the team who'd gone in ahead of us. They're having an animated discussion about something, although I don't pay them any attention.

I shed my dirty clothes, wrap a towel around myself and head towards the showers.

Less than ten minutes later, I'm clean and changed. I grab my shoes and sit down next to Phoenix, joining in on the team conversation.

Most of the crew is still here and unshowered, still shooting the shit.

Phoenix has a small smile lifting the corner of his lips. It's barely there, but for him that's basically a full fledged grin.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing yet." He replies, cryptically.

Devlin claps his hands loudly, pulling my attention away from Phoenix before I can question him further.

“She’s new but the things I’d do to her, mate.” He says, rubbing his hands together. “I’d make a home for myself in her tight cunt.”

And just like that, the conversation penetrates my indifference and has my interest.

I turn away from Phoenix and face Devlin, loosely crossing my arms as I recline against the locker behind me.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Captain,” He acknowledges, turning towards me. Immediately, all eyes in the locker room are on us.

I don’t care for Devlin.

Never have.

I think he’s a sloppy player with lazy habits who’s more interested in the status he gets from being a part of the team than actually playing the sport.

More focused on sitting at our table than being a valued teammate in any way.

Because of that, he’s inconsequential. I neither like him nor dislike him, he simply doesn’t matter.

That changes if he’s talking about who I think he’s talking about.

“New girl, Cap.”

I raise an unimpressed eyebrow at him, feigning indifference.

“I wouldn’t mess with Bellamy. Rogue will have your head.” I tell him, my tone friendly. “He’ll have your head, your hands, and your balls for that matter.”

“That’s alright,” he says, and that better be the end of his fucking sentence, “Thayer’s the one I want.”

My left eyelid twitches.

Twice and barely visibly to the naked eye.

But that’s only because I brace every muscle in my body not to react, my left eyelid apparently the only muscle I can’t

control.

That's the only outward sign of my reaction.

"She's hot as fuck and that hair color." He says making an 'mhm' sound like a fucking creep, "She's got to be a freak."

Internally, I imagine gouging his eyes out and feeding them to him.

Snapping his brain stem so he powers off like a dead doll and never comes near her again.

"She's off limits."

Phoenix tosses me a look out of the corner of his eye and Devlin raises a surprised eyebrow at me.

"You're staking a claim?" He asks.

"I knew he needed a shag." Ben adds unhelpfully, "That practice screamed sexual frustration."

"No." I tell him casually because I don't want anyone mistaking my interest for anything other than what it is – a physical attraction. A one time thing and nothing more. Although there's a pretty significant barrier to keep in mind when it comes to her. "She's got a boyfriend."

He laughs and I want to throttle him because it doesn't sound like the laughter of someone who's going to give up and look elsewhere.

"Even better. I like the chase. Give me six months and I'll have gotten rid of the boyfriend and fucked her, easy."

His words are beginning to grate on me like the sound of a fly buzzing around my head at night.

I'm this close to reaching out and crushing the metaphorical fly in my fist.

The visual of Thayer with him. I–

No, it's better that I don't think about it.

"Anyone want to take that bet?" He asks boisterously in the locker room.

The lads are always bantering and setting wagers like this. They usually cover a wide range of topics from match outcomes, horse races, and sometimes who can fuck a girl or guy first.

I've never participated.

Not out of any higher moral ground, mind you. No, there's never been a good enough wager.

I could do most of the challenges half asleep or at least with my eyes closed, they're so easy.

Or they simply aren't interesting enough.

But Devlin recklessly put Thayer on the metaphorical table and, like I said, she at least intrigues me.

I'm intrigued and beyond that I'm not about to let two other fuckers bet on her. Because if I don't pick this one up, someone else will.

They'll add another layer of complexity to my already intricate operation, and since Thayer's going to make me pay for every move as it is, I can't allow that to happen.

Fuck him and fuck anyone who thinks they can get in my way when I decided she was mine to play with her first.

"One."

"What?" Devlin asks me, confused.

"I can do it in one."

He laughs raucously, clapping my shoulder like we're mates. I give a long side look at his hand where it's placed on my traps and he removes it hastily.

"Your arrogance is going to be your downfall one day, Mackley." He says with a laugh. "And I hope I have a front row seat when it does. You're on — ten K bet, one month hands off policy. If you fuck her in the next month, you win the money. If not, I do. And then she's fair game. Shake on it?" He asks me.

I stand and walk up to his extended hand.

At this angle, I tower over him, my body dwarfing his. I look down at his hand through half lowered lids before looking back at him.

“Start counting out those bills. I’ll be back for my money soon.” I tell him, before walking out with Phoenix in tow.

That fucker is still smiling.

“What?”

“That was as entertaining as I’d hoped it’d be.”

I pause in my tracks at his words.

“Did you orchestrate that?” I ask him, standing on one side of my car while he stands on the other.

“No,” He answers, “Although I did mention how hot Thayer is in passing to Devlin. Seems like that was enough to get him going.” He cuts me a sharp smile, adding, “Bring up Sixtine to me again and I’ll be much less forgiving in my retaliation next time.”

I glare at him, furious. “You crossed a line.”

He shrugs because I’m sure he genuinely doesn’t give a fuck.

“Find your own way home, asshole.” I tell him, opening the driver’s side door and getting in.

He laughs at that.

Fuck him.

I lower the passenger side window and lean towards him. “You better hope I never come across an opportunity to fuck with you like this because I won’t hesitate to use Six as a pawn if it means seeing you twitch, you prick.”

I have enough time to see the smile wipe off his face before I drive off.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

I listen to the ringtone as it sounds repeatedly, hoping that he's going to pick up. After six rings, I lower the phone and hang up.

I called Carter yesterday as well and he didn't pick up either, sending me a quick text instead.

**Carter:** Sorry babe, at practice.

**Carter:** Call u later.

I waited up late, but he never called back.

I woke up to another text from him instead, this time apologizing profusely. Practice had apparently run long and by the time he was done, it was too late to call.

I believe him, at least partially. I follow the rest of the team on IG and they'd all posted stories complaining about a long practice.

But not that long.

Even if Coach kept them another hour, he'd have had plenty of time to call me if he wanted to.

If the Stories are anything to go by, he went to the after practice Popeye's team dinner and just forgot.

Irritation bites at my skin.

I also have friends and sometimes feel more like hanging out with them than talking to him, but I try to keep my time commitments to our relationship as much as possible.

At least, when we plan them in advance.

It's hurtful to see he isn't doing the same. Especially given that I'm the one living this great experience abroad and he should be asking me how I'm adjusting instead of me having to chase him.

Disappointment claws at my chest and I decide not to text him. I put my phone in my back pocket and pick at my greek salad.

"Are you okay?" Nera asks me, an understanding look drawn on her face.

We're having lunch together in the cafeteria. Six and Bellamy are busy elsewhere so we're using the time to catch up just the two of us.

Nera's definitely the more secretive of my roommates. An almost pro fencer, she's also potentially the only person more competitive than I am.

Actually her and Rhys are tied.

Even I can admit that, albeit grudgingly.

His determination is a force to be reckoned with. And physically, he's an incredible mix of speed, strength, and power which makes him a dangerous weapon on the field and one that sends opposing teams cowering.

I've seen it first hand.

A few days ago I watched a game between RCA and a local private school, L'École Internationale d'Aubonne, and saw the entire offense curse when Rhys walked out.

He ran literal circles around the team, scoring two before eventually being subbed to rest him for tougher upcoming games.

He hadn't even broken a sweat while a player on the opposing team tore a ligament in his ankle simply trying to

defend him.

A part of me had fangirled hard as I'd watched him, knowing I was witnessing someone who'd likely sign with a Premier League team.

As much as I want to loathe him in every way, he's undeniably a real talent.

I groan, shaking my head when I realize my thoughts have trailed to him again.

That's been happening more and more often lately, the especially worrisome part being my ability to connect any thought, no matter how mundane and inane, back to him.

I focus back on Nera's question.

"Yeah, we just haven't talked on the phone in almost a week."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I don't think so." I tell her, honestly. "I think it's more so the growing pains of adapting to a long distance relationship. Neither one of us has really done a great job of prioritizing communication."

"Well," She says, hesitating, "Do you miss him?"

"Yeah."

And I do. As much as I love RCA, I do miss home and our life together there. I started dating Carter when I was sixteen so he's been a large part of my life for a long time.

Every birthday, every milestone, every memory of the past two years has involved him in some way. Losing that every day comfort overnight has been hard to adapt to.

"I'm sure we'll talk tonight." I tell her with assumed confidence.

She nods, but she's distracted, her focus fixated on her phone.

I'd noticed her texting someone while we were in line earlier. Must be one of the girls.



I'm relieved either way. I didn't really feel like talking about Carter right now.

"Hello, love." That voice says from behind me, before one long leg swings over the bench right next to me.

I inadvertently jump when he places his hand between my shoulder blades, the unexpected contact sending a startling shiver down my spine. He uses his touch for balance as he lifts his other leg over to join the first and drops beside me.

Instead of immediately removing his hand, he follows the path of the shiver and lets his fingers run down my spine to my lower back, pausing a tenth of a second over the top of my ass before letting it fall away.

To any passing observer, that move probably looked innocuous enough, but sitting here it feels as intimate as if he'd wrapped an arm around me.

I know every move he makes is calculated and intentional.

"Nervous to see me?" He asks with a teasing smile, my reaction to his touch not having gone unnoticed as I'd hoped.

I shift my ass slightly to the left, adding some space between us.

"I'd classify it more as "physically repulsed", actually."

"I'm hurt." He says, playing with the words between his lips so they come out sensually pleading. They slide over my skin like liquid mercury, simultaneously cooling and burning my blood.

He's equally as deadly with a word and a smile as a Basilisk is with fangs and a pair of eyes.

Charisma drips from his pores, even as he does something as trivial as sitting at a cafeteria table, his face resting in his large hand as he stares at me, waiting for my reply.

The energy we create when we come together feels noxious, like we're constantly teetering on the edge, threatening to fall over.

Fall into what, I'm not sure.

“Somehow I think you'll survive.”

He cocks his head to the side, looking at me through lazy, hooded eyes.

“Always the sharp tongue with me.” He says, his eyes falling to my lips and staying there.

I try to breathe normally but my throat bobs as I swallow, drawing his eyes down to my neck.

His gaze leisurely traces over the width of my throat a couple of times before he exhales a heavy breath and looks back up to meet my gaze.

“Is it maybe because if you're nice to me you're afraid you'll get to know me, fall madly in love – which would be understandable you know, few resist – and fuck me?”

“No,” I answer, throwing him a glare, “contrary to male popular belief everywhere, even if I am nice to you it doesn't mean I want to fuck you.”

“Then let's be thankful you aren't nice to me. That's definitely got to mean you want to fuck me.”

Nera chokes out a laugh before smothering it with a cough and throwing me an apologetic look.

I hide the fact that one corner of my lips lifts a fraction. He can be annoyingly quick witted.

“You're impossible. Stop twisting my words.”

“I'll think about it.”

“Gracious of you.” I tell him sarcastically, as I stand from the table. “Mean, nice, it doesn't matter. Neither one means I want to sleep with you.”

I reach for my tray and his arm snakes out, his large hand wrapping around my small wrist. I stare at where he grabs me, the size difference almost comical.

He lifts a leg over the bench so he's sitting with one on either side. My eyes move from his loose hold to meet his

gaze.

It's funny, I'm not used to looking down at him like this. His jaw and cheekbones look even more defined at this angle.

"It doesn't," He acquiesces, "But the way you look at me does."

I'm keenly aware of his touch on my wrist. It's not harsh or bruising, in fact there's barely any pressure it's mostly just *there*.

Burning but not hurting.

I want to pull my arm out of his hold but I'm caught in the unsaid challenge in our standoff. Like if I shake him off, I'll be admitting that he rattles me.

Which he doesn't.

So I stay put, narrowing my eyes at him and locking us in a staredown instead.

"And what way is that?"

Not one to enjoy being physically looked down upon, he releases my wrist and rises to his feet slowly, eventually coming to tower over me.

"With eyes so full of lust and desperation they make a lie of your feigned dislike of me." He whispers, his tone dropping to an octave I haven't heard from him before. "Break up with your boyfriend. Let me make you pay for those lies."

Someone coughs, instantly breaking the spell between us. I'm the first to look away, turning towards Nera.

"As hot as that was to witness – and, trust me, it was – we have to get to class, Thayer." She grabs my arm and tugs me with her, tossing a quick "bye, Rhys" behind her as we walk off.

I clear my throat. "Thanks, I didn't realize it was that late. I lost track of time."

"Yeah, I noticed." She says, giving me a sly side eye and smile. She laughs happily when I roll my eyes, nudging my shoulder as we walk down the hall. "I'm just joking. So is

Rhys, by the way. Ignore him, he'll get bored in a few days and move on to his next prey."

"Let's hope."

"I've heard he and Phoenix like to share, if you know what I mean. You'll be long forgotten very soon."

Her words rankle and I don't know why.

My ego's probably just not reacting well to the thought of being easily replaceable, whether it has to do with Rhys or not.

It has to do with my competitiveness, that's all.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

As my last class of the day ends a few days later, nerves have my heart beating openly in my throat.

Today's our season opener, a rivalry game with another international school near Geneva, and I'm not sure I'm ready.

I've gone to every practice and even added a couple of additional runs to my routine so I'm as prepared as I can be and yet for the first time in a long time, there's a small crack in my confidence.

I'm intimidated by my teammates' skills at practice. If our opponents are anywhere near their level — and I'm certain they will be — then we're about to play a tough and physical ninety minute game.

I've got an athletic scholarship to RCA so my attendance here is dependent on performance.

Doubt and the anxious voice in my head have me questioning if I'm good enough to be here. If maybe they didn't make a mistake sending me along with Bellamy.

"Hey," Bellamy says, falling into step beside me in the hall and cutting off my reverie. "I'm really sorry I won't be able to make the game."

She and Rogue got into a fight that turned physical so every day for the foreseeable future she'll be stuck in detention cataloging books in the library with him.

“That’s alright.” I tell her, before adding, “And don’t worry, you’ll still get the traditional post-game debrief.”

“You know I only really enjoy those when I get the play by play from multiple different POVs.”

“And I always deliver, don’t I? Remember the time Sarah Freeman accidentally hit a bird with the ball and I gave you both her *and* the bird’s point of view?”

She cringes. “Oof. Yeah, that was a vivid description. David Attenborough would have been proud.”

We look at each other for a quiet beat before bursting out laughing.

Laughter has the tension slipping out of my body, the relaxation allowing me to breathe a little better than before.

“Feeling better?” She asks.

“Yeah, a bit.”

“Don’t be nervous. You’re going to be amazing, I know it.” She says, her confidence in me rock steady as always. “Want me to braid your hair?”

“Obviously.”

I always wear my hair in a French braid for games, one usually done by Bellamy or Trish.

It started out just as the sturdiest way to keep the hair out of my face, but over the years it’s become more of a lucky charm. The only time I didn’t braid it and wore a simple ponytail instead was two years ago.

We lost 4-1.

Obviously, I know there’s no connection between the two but like most athletes, I’m superstitious. Braiding my hair is just a part of my pre-game ritual now.

“Good luck out there.”

I turn to find Rhys leaning against the row of lockers, arms crossed and one backpack strap loosely wrapped around his shoulder as he looks at me.

The way his arms are folded has the muscles in his chest and biceps straining mouthwateringly against the fabric of his black shirt.

“Thanks.” I reply curtly, grabbing Bellamy by the hand and starting to walk away.

“Hawley.” He says, stopping me in my tracks. He waits for me to turn around and continues when I don’t. “That’s their center back. She’s lethal in one on ones. Try to pass the ball off before you engage her.”

His words raise my hackles and I finally turn to face him.

Anger is clear in my voice when I speak. “Did I ask for your opinion?”

He simply gives me a small smile, shrugs and pushes off the locker. I think he’s going to walk up to me, but instead he goes off in the opposite direction, leaving me standing in the middle of the half packed hallway.

I look back at Bellamy, now irate. It’s one thing for me to doubt myself and another for someone else to give voice to them, especially *him*.

“I think he was just trying to help.” Bellamy says, giving me an uncertain look.

“Fuck him.”

“No you’re right, fuck him.” She answers with a decisive nod. “Come on, let’s get your hair braided before I have to report to prison.”

\*\*\*

The game is brutal as expected.

We’re down 1-0 with five minutes of stoppage time left and it’s been raining heavily for the past half hour.

My muscles are begging for mercy, my braid has been completely destroyed by the rain, my hair is sticking to the

sides of my face in a way that's triggering every sensory issue I've ever had, and my visibility is low.

We've only got a couple more possessions to make a play before the game is over.

Just as I'm thinking that, one of my teammates makes a phenomenal pass to me through the middle and I pick up the ball before running it up the side of the pitch.

A player comes at me from my left but I make quick work of her, faking one way and going another as I cross the halfway line.

I can feel my stamina dwindling, the combination of general exertion and the weather conditions having exhausted me, but I keep pushing.

I see someone running at speed towards me and I dribble the ball, trying to off-balance her. Maneuvering around her, I kick the ball smoothly between her legs.

It makes it through but she's just as fast to turn around and is on the ball before me.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

She takes possession, easily manipulating it between her feet to avoid my jabs as she turns towards my end of the pitch.

I aim to tackle her with a slide, but miss.

My momentum coupled with the torrential rain have me sliding past her, unable to stop myself. I finally come to a halt with my body almost out of bounds.

All I can do is watch helplessly as she runs past me, the name on her back perfectly legible in spite of the weather and taunting me like a bad dream.

Hawley.

Anger has me back on my feet in an instant and running after her, but I'm too late.



She passes the ball downfield. Her wide open teammate receives it, turns and with a beautiful strike sends the ball soaring past our goalie and into the net.

In the same breath, the ref blows the whistle, calling the game.

Dismay roils in my stomach and I have to look away from their celebration.

I had it.

I was this close to getting us back into the game and in an instant, with one mistake, I messed it up.

It's simple – I got outplayed.

If this game is any indication of how my performance will stack against the competition, then I need to put even more focus towards training.

As much as I want to slump my shoulders, bow my head and let my disappointment lead me off the field, I can hear Trish's voice in my head, clear as a bell.

“Leaders are defined by the way they react to losses, not wins. So chin up and shoulders back!”, she'd tell me.

I roll my shoulders and paint a smile on my face as my teammates approach. I say a quick word and give a hug to all of them as they head to the locker room.

After I thank the ref, I start jogging towards the building and the promise of what is hopefully a very long and very hot shower.

Looking up, my eyes instantly catch on a dark mass hovering in the bleachers.

It's nothing more than a faceless black outline drowned out by the white fog, but it appears before me like a foreboding specter.

As I get a little closer, visibility clears and I see him. The mist parts for his large body, almost like he's bending it to his will.

He's still far enough away from me that I can't make out his expression, but I can see that he's drenched.

Water pours off of him in waves, not rivulets.

He must have been standing out there for a while to be that soaked.

I know he must be miserable, and yet he still has that infuriatingly ever-present smirk on his face.

The one that's somewhere between content and lazily insolent and has no business making my lower abdomen clench the way it does.

Did he just come here to gloat?

He'd been right earlier. Hawley beat me in a one on one, robbed me of a sure goal and buried us with a safety one for them.

He'd known the strengths of a player he'd never go up against when I hadn't.

Irritation with myself manifests itself as anger directed at him. I open my mouth to yell something at him, but he turns on his heels and walks away, leaving me bemused in his wake.

Twice today he's been the one to walk away from a conversation. That's twice more than he ever has before.

I should be thrilled that he's stepping back and losing interest.

And I am, obviously.

Because Nera was right and it looks like he's getting bored and probably looking to move to a more entertaining target.

But a tiny, infinitesimally small section of my stomach twists at that thought.

\*\*\*

Back at The Pen, I walk straight through the door of our apartment and let myself fall face first onto the couch as Nera and Sixtine look on.

“They’re going to take my scholarship.” I say dramatically and instantly get called out for it.

“Okay, drama.” Six says, plopping down in the chair next to me and nudging my shoulder. I look up and at the glass of champagne she’s handing me. I give her a quizzical look. “Drink that. There’s a reason French women look so good, it helps with stress.”

“It’s Monday.”

“It’s Europe.” She answers with a *je ne sais quoi* shrug.

I groan, flipping onto my back and grabbing a pillow.

“I’m going to smother myself to death.” I say, bringing it down against my face.

“It’s your first game in a foreign country playing what’s probably a totally different style of football than you’re used to.” Nera chimes in, “Give yourself a break. You can’t be perfect overnight.”

“I can’t?”

She throws another pillow at me, one that I catch easily before it hits me.

Sitting up, I grab the champagne glass that Six has extended towards me again, having correctly anticipated that I’d want to slam it back.

She gives me a cute disgusted look. “You’re really supposed to savor that, it’s not a shot of tequila.”

I shrug carelessly.

“Nera’s right,” She adds, “Maybe you could also ask your coach if she’d do a couple one-on-one training sessions with you?”

I nod, my expression pensive. I’m already learning the style of play in practice and if I can couple that with skills-

focused personal training with Coach, then I'll be able to adapt much more quickly.

At least, that's the hope.

"Alright, we've officially run the clock out on the pity party now." Six says. "Time to move on."

"Oh shit, there's a new episode of Love Island – do you guys want to watch?" Nera adds, jumping in.

"B's going to murder us, but it's really on her for making a deal with the devil." I answer, "Let's do it."

\*\*\*

# 6

## *Rhys*

“Did you dream of me last night, love?”

Thayer makes a startled sound and whips around with her hand on her chest and her eyes narrowed.

We’re standing at the edge of the field, getting ready for practice.

I haven’t seen her since I watched her play two days ago and my eyes take her in greedily, hungry for a look at her.

The strain of her warm up combined with the balmy sun on her skin have rosied her cheeks. She’s slightly out of breath and she looks more alive than anyone I’ve ever met, even as she shoots me a venomous glare.

I’ve never wanted to hate fuck anyone more.

I want to watch that glare turn to lust as we verbally spar. To see lust transform into unbearable pleasure as I slowly sink into her. To track every expression on her face as she comes hard on my dick, over and over and over again.

Fuck.

I’m so hard at the thought, it feels like a passing breeze might accidentally chop my dick off.

“Make me a happy man. Tell me you did.”

“I did, actually.”

Surprise has me raising an eyebrow at her. “You did?”

She nods. “Yup, it was my dream threesome – you, me, and a chainsaw.”

I groan low in my throat, the sound intentionally coming out sexual.

“Sounds kinky. Show me later?”

She keeps walking, dropping the drill cones along the border of the pitch. I think she’s going to walk away like she usually does, but she surprises me again.

“You don’t believe me when I say I’m never going to sleep with you?”

“I believe that you believe that.”

She gives me a carefully blank look. “Your arrogance is a turn off.”

I snort. “It’s not.”

“Excuse me?”

I walk up to her with leisurely steps until she’s forced to tilt her head all the way back to keep eye contact. A lazy smile stretches across my face as I see her throat bob when she swallows.

“I know for a fact if I were to put my hand in your trousers and run my fingers through your sweet cunt right now, they’d come back soaked.”

My voice sounds throaty even to my ears, lust distorting it from its usual tenor.

“You’re wrong.” She says, and there’s a slight shake in her voice as she responds.

Dipping my head so it’s inches from her face, I whisper a challenge.

“Prove it.”

My breath hits the skin of her cheek and jolts her. Something shuts down inside her as reality comes barreling

through the haze of lust.

She shakes her head repeatedly, vigorously, and takes a few steps back.

“You’re out of your mind, Mackley.”

My jaw tenses and my eyes narrow to slits at that name, my mood turning deathly black in an instant. I pull back, straightening every vertebrae in my spine until I stand at my tallest, giving her a cruel smile.

“When I finally get my hands on you, I’ll make you regret every untruth.” I growl through clenched teeth, “And I won’t stop until you scream my name.”

“That’ll never happen.”

“Don’t provoke me, love,” I tell her darkly.

She tuts, her tongue clicking against her teeth. “Why are you so stubbornly after me?”

“I fancy the challenge.”

“You’ll lose.”

“Maybe. We’ll see.” I answer, my deceptively carefree smile back in place. “But I never have.”

We stay in a silent standoff for the next couple of seconds, having no clear path of where to go next when Cass, one of Thayer’s teammates, runs up to us.

“Hey, Coach asked that you go to the office.”

I flick my gaze over to her, not missing the way her eyelashes flutter as she speaks to me. If Thayer’s irritated expression is anything to go by, she doesn’t miss it either.

“Which one of us?”

“Um, both of you.”

It’s Thayer’s turn to look at her now.

“Both of us? Why?”

“I’m not sure, but you should go. I saw you arguing and didn’t want to interrupt so they’ve been waiting for a bit.”

“That wasn’t an argument.” I tell her, looking back at Thayer. She avoids my gaze, tightening her ponytail instead.

“Oh. Right.” Cass says, her tone unsure as she laughs nervously. “What was it then?”

“Foreplay.”

As expected, that response has Thayer’s eyes snapping to meet mine. “Ignore him, Cass.” She says before walking off between the two of us, flipping me the bird as she does so, and heading towards the building.

I throw Cass a quick wink and watch her cheeks redden at my attention before I jog after Thayer. We walk silently next to each other for a few beats before she speaks again.

“I thought you were going to gloat.”

“What about?”

“Yesterday,” She says, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. “The game. Hawley. You were right.” She adds with a haughty sniff.

I smile internally, knowing it cost her to say those words.

I won’t make her pay for them.

“Nothing to gloat about. It was a close match.”

She gives me an unimpressed look as we get into the elevator, before replying, “You must have been watching a different game. She smoked me.”

“You made one bad play in terrible weather conditions after holding up against her the entire game. I’d hardly say that was a bad match up.”

She steps out of the elevator and stops in the hall, looking at me thoughtfully for a moment before adding, “Thanks for saying that.”

“No problem,” I reply, “Anyway, I’ll save the gloating for when you finally submit to me.”

She rolls her eyes. “You never stop do you?”



“No. I’ve got endless amounts of stamina. In every way.”  
I tell her suggestively.

That elicits a small laugh from her before she starts walking again. “How’d you even know about Hawley?” She asks me, “Do you know all the players’ stats in the region?”

“No.”

When I don’t keep going, she presses me. “How did you know hers then?”

“I looked the team up the day before the match.”

That stops her in her tracks again, this time right outside of Coach’s office. “Why?”

I shrug, unsure how to answer.

The truth is I hadn’t meant to do it. I’d been working on a paper for my History course and my mind had wandered to Thayer.

My fingers had moved of their own volition on the keyboard, entering the other school’s name into Google and hitting enter before I could second guess what I was doing.

I chalked it up to my love of anything football related and my support of the overall program.

Of course I’d want any RCA player to know what they were walking into.

That’s why I’d gone to her game and stood in the unrelenting rain until my skin was ice and my bones themselves were frozen.

To support the team.

“I wanted you to be prepared.”

Bewilderment flares in her eyes at my response but I don’t stay to watch how it evolves. I walk past her and open the door to the office Coach Matthews shares with Coach Faulkner.

Thayer follows after me as they turn towards us.

“Rhys. Thayer. Come in please.” Matthews says as he points to the chairs in front of the desk he’s standing behind. Faulkner is sitting in the chair next to him.

“Coach.” Thayer says, nodding at her.

“We’ll cut to the chase, guys.” Matthews starts, not one to mince words. “Congratulations, we’ve selected you as team captains this year.”

I’m impassive at the news. It was a foregone conclusion that I’d be captain again this year. I’d have been surprised if he’d told me anything different.

But I watch every positive emotion ever observed and recorded in the English dictionary flit across Thayer’s face as she takes in the news.

Everything from shock to disbelief to elation comes through in her smile, the blush in her cheeks, and the twinkle in her eyes.

For the first time since I’ve known her, I witness her at a loss for words.

“I– Thank you. I won’t let you down.” She says to Faulkner, her hands clutched to her chest.

“I know you won’t.” She says, a real smile ghosting the corner of her lips before the stern expression is back in her brow. “I also know you two have been bickering. That stops now.”

“Fine by me.” I say, putting my palms up and grinning at Thayer.

“Coach–” She tries.

“No, it’s non-negotiable. We can’t have our captains at each other’s throats.” She says in her strict American accent. “You don’t have to be best friends or braid each other’s hair, but you will at least keep up the appearance of civility in public.”

“Yes, Coach.” Thayer answers, nodding her acquiescence.

“Thayer, I chose you because you’re a born leader. You’ve already made an impact on the team in your short time here and the girls respect and trust you.”

“Thank you, Coach.” Thayer says, trying to remain stoic, but I can tell she’s beaming on the inside.

“You’re highly skilled but like every player, you’ve got room to grow, especially when it comes to adapting to this style of play and the stamina required. Rhys has been a leader on this team for a while now – you could stand to learn from him.”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Alright, you can go back to practice.”

“Congratulations again.” Matthews adds in closing, “Rhys, I’ll see you out there.”

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

The boys decide to do a quick scrimmage after their practice ends which gives me a chance to watch them play.

To watch Rhys play.

Coach Faulkner's words have been rattling in my brain all practice long. They were all I could think about as the girls congratulated me and as we started running drills.

*You could stand to learn from Rhys.*

Putting our personal whatever-you'd-call it aside, I can see her point. Especially as I watch him play again.

He moves with such speed and agility for someone his size that it catches his opponents by surprise, destabilizing them.

He's able to zip past them, dribbling the ball impressively around various defenders. His football IQ is clearly off the charts; with every play, he's able to anticipate people's next moves before they happen, almost like he can predict them.

He's the kind of player your eyes are drawn to as a viewer. My personal feelings on the matter aside...he could teach me.

Coach voiced every thought I've had about my areas of improvement since we lost, but she also voiced her confidence in me by still making me captain of the team.

For that, I want to make her proud.

I want to improve and perform and show her that she was right to believe in me.

If that means working with the wolf in sheep's clothing I know Rhys to be, something apparently only I see, then I'll do it.

As the scrimmage comes to an end, I slink off into the building and wait for Rhys outside of the locker room.

The team comes streaming in noisily in small groups, some of the guys giving me chin tips and flirty smiles as they walk past me.

One of them – Devlin I think his name was – gives me a megawatt smile and wave.

“Hey, Thayer.” He says, pausing in front of me.

He's barely come to a stop in front of me before a hand comes into my field of vision and shoves his shoulder from behind, forcing him to continue walking.

“Move the fuck on, Devlin.” Rhys growls, his stare sharp on his teammate's back.

Devlin doesn't even turn around, simply chuckles and walks into the locker room.

Rhys watches him go with a hot-blooded look on his face, but the joking twinkle is back in his eye when he turns towards me.

“This is a first.” He says acknowledging me and the fact that I've come looking for him with an easy smile, loosely crossing his arms over his chest as he comes up to me.

“Teach me.”

“What?” Is his surprised answer to me blurring that question out.

“I need you to teach me your style of soccer. Or football. Whatever.” I tell him, waving my hand, “You heard Coach, she thinks I have a lot to learn from you.”

“And you agree?”

I nod, slowly. “Now that I’m team captain, I need to step up my game and, as much as it annoys me to say it, I need your help to make that happen.” He doesn’t immediately say anything, so I continue, “I’m determined, I work hard, and more importantly, when I put my mind to something, I always get it done. You can coach me until I’ve improved.”

He stares at me silently, his expression inscrutable. “And how would I do that?”

“If I knew the answer I wouldn’t need you, would I?” I tell him snarkily.

I’m about to say something when my phone vibrates in my jeans. I pull it out and see Carter’s name on screen.

“The only way this works is if we do it my way.”

I look up at Rhys and see his gaze is laser focused on my screen. I silence the call and put my phone back in my pocket.

I’ll call Carter back later.

“Don’t be cryptic.”

The corner of Rhys’ eyes crinkle as levity enters his gaze. “I’ll do it.” He tells me and something inside me sags in relief. “But you have to commit to training with me every day for the next few weeks. You’ll need to be flexible with your schedule to work around when I’m available as well as around our individual team practices.”

“You want to do this every day? That’s too much.”

“It’s up to you,” He tells me, “But if you want to make significant progress quickly, then the best way to do this is to really commit to it. I can get you to that next level if you give me a few weeks.”

She ponders me for a moment, the look on her face dubious. “Is this all an elaborate ploy to get me to spend time

with you?”

“Not an elaborate one, no.” He says with a cheeky smile, one that makes me feel weightless and like I’m floating through a cloudless sky.

I snort at that. “Never mind, this is a bad idea,” I say, shaking my head, “You’re just going to use the time to hit on me. I need to take this seriously.”

“Look,” He answers, this time with a sigh, “I take football very seriously. This isn’t a game for me, it’s my future career. When I say I’m going to play in the Premier League one day, that’s not a dream, it’s an inevitability. So, while I can seem like all I care about is having a laugh and while, yes, I do want to fuck the absolute daylights out of you,” He pauses to emphasize his next words, “I don’t make a joke out of football.”

He continues. “You’re good, really good even, but you need to work on your stamina, your power, your agility, especially when it comes to dribbling, and you need to learn to play like a European. I can get you there.”

“And yes, I want to fuck you. I think I’ll especially want to fuck you when we train together and I see you up close playing the sport we’re both insanely passionate about with your hot fucking legs on display but as long as you know that and that the second you’re ready to dump that gutless fucker that I’ll give you the ride of your life, I’ll try to keep the flirting to a minimum.”

“Unless you take your kit off and play in your bra, in which case I will have to objectify you, sorry.” He says, finishing his diatribe.

It’s all I can do to keep my mouth from hitting the floor at his words. Instead, I say, “Somehow, you talked me into this and right back out of it in one rant.”

He walks up to me, forcing me to lean back against the lockers.

I fake nonchalance, my arms folded over my chest as he rests a forearm on the wall above my head and looks down at

me.

“Let me remind you that this was your idea.”

I hum in response, pensively chewing my lip. His eyes snap down to follow the movement, his gaze darkening as he takes in how my teeth dig into my plump lower lip.

I release it with an inaudible ‘pop’ and watch his eyes cloud over even further. I clear my throat and his gaze moves lazily back up to meet mine before he speaks.

“Come on, you heard Faulkner. We’re mates now. Mates who want to fuck — although only one of us is currently ready to admit that right now — but mates, nonetheless.” He tells me, one finger wrapping around a loose strand of hair. “What do you say, Silver? I’m a soon-to-be pro football player offering daily private sessions, this should be the easiest decision in the world for you.

He brings the strand up to his nose and inhales deeply, his eyes closing as he does.

Even though the gesture is innocent enough, it feels pornographic to me. Rhys moans low in his throat and opens his eyes, spearing me with his black gaze.

“Unless you’re afraid you won’t be able to resist me?”

I ignore the shiver on my skin at the nickname and focus on the gauntlet he’s just thrown.

He’s got to know that challenging me like that is the quickest way to melt away the few reservations I have about this.

“That won’t be a problem.” I promise him.

His approving hum rumbles deep in his throat as he extends his hand out to me. “Truce then?”

I slip my hand into his much larger one and watch it wrap around mine, trapping me. Something jolts through my fingers at our contact, the most we’ve ever touched before.

It’s like an electrical current running up my arm and dispersing through the rest of my body with a shot of energy.



One touch is enough to trigger every internal alarm in my body.

He shakes my hand once, squeezing it tightly and possessively in his grip.

I swallow thickly as I look up at the charmingly evil smile on his face and hope I didn't agree to a deal that'll end up being as disastrous as the one Ariel made with Ursula.

One thing I do know is I need to fortify my defenses around me as much as possible if I'm going to survive spending this much time around him.

“Truce, Mackley.”

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

Training with Rhys starts the next morning with an excruciating workout at an ungodly hour.

It's not yet six am when Rhys jogs to join me in the center of the pitch. He looks like the human personification of laundry freshly out the dryer.

His eyes still have the remnants of sleep in them, his hair is wild and tousled, there's part of his pillow imprinted on his cheek and his clothes are adorably wrinkled.

His large body moves towards me with ease regardless, but he looks like a man who just recently got out of bed.

I wonder if he slept in it alone.

I push that unhelpful thought aside as he reaches me and starts rattling off the plan for today.

"You're trying to kill me." I tell him with a groan.

"I never said this was going to be easy."

Clearly not. The next hour consists of suicide drills, burpees, agility skills, push ups, one-on-one battles where he dispatches me with little to no effort, and about a dozen other exercises.

I'm drained but my heart's pumping and adrenaline is flying through me. As painful as this is, I love it. It makes me feel strong.

Like I can do anything.

When we're done, I drop to the ground, exhausted.

"What are you doing?" Rhys asks, standing over me, "You're not finished."

"What?"

"Fifteen bleacher runs, then you're done."

"You're joking." I say, but pick myself up and stand as I speak.

"We're working on power, stamina, and agility, all three of which require strong legs. I'd get comfortable with the idea of bleacher runs if I were you."

"I already have strong legs." I say with a small pout, but only because my legs feel like they might simply fall off if I try to move at a pace faster than .5 miles per hour right now.

"I'm fucking aware." He says, tension clear in his voice. "I've stared at them, imagining them wrapped around my face while I ate you out more times than I can count." He tells me as I blush. "But they're not strong enough."

"You said you wouldn't flirt." I say, my tone accusatory.

"I said I'd keep it to a minimum. Plus, I wasn't flirting."

"What do you call it then?"

"What do I call what?"

"What you just said, Mackley." I say, irritation bleeding into my voice.

"I can't remember what I said. Can you remind me?" He says, with a look that's both taunting and lustful.

Another challenge from him.

I swallow thickly, trying to hide the reaction before I answer him. Finally, I decide to just blurt it out.

“What do you call basically telling me you want me to sit on your face?”

His groan is pained and so low in his throat it rumbles through his chest and into the air around us.

“The truth.” He grunts.

“Lie then.”

“There’s only room for one liar in this relationship.”

“Friendship. If that.”

“Soon-to-be situationship.” He counters.

We’d progressively gotten closer as we volleyed back and forth bantering with each other, until I realize only a few inches separate us.

There’s a tension between us that’s electric, one that brings energy back into my legs and robs them of all function at the same time.

“Run for the bleachers before I spread you out on one of them and have you for breakfast.” He threatens me, his tone edging with violence.

Not for the first time, I find myself running away from him. I get to work and start counting down the sets as my lungs burn and my legs beg for mercy.

With six bleacher runs left, I hear my phone ring as I round the bottom and stop to see who it is.

It’s Carter.

Shit, I just realized I never called him back the other day.

With the time difference, it’s just after midnight his time. It’s late, but about the usual time he prefers to call.

Not me.

I’ve told him a couple times now that I wished he would call in the afternoon instead of oftentimes waking me up in the mornings.

It’s especially irritating when I’ve had long days of class and training, and that’s before I add in these extra sessions.

Although, I haven't told him about those yet.

I'm about to pick up when a sharp voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Don't answer that."

I look up and see Rhys looming over me, a tight expression on his face.

"Why not?"

"You don't answer personal calls during my practice."

"Why can't I?"

"Because I said so." He answers, his tone categorical.

I'm about to argue but stop and think about a team practice with Coach Faulkner. I wouldn't pause a drill just to answer a call, especially a personal one, if it was her practice.

He deserves the same level of respect.

He's in his right to ask me that, I guess. It's a professionalism thing.

With a pointed look at him, I silence my phone and put it back in my bag before turning back towards the bleachers and starting my final six runs.

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At the bottom of the bleachers on my fifteenth run, I stumble to the ground, exhausted.

I'm out of breath and gasping for air. I'm not sure I'll be able to walk tomorrow.

"Well done." Rhys says, dropping down on the grass and laying next to me.

I flip him off.

His answering chuckle tickles my insides and wraps itself around the muscles of my lower belly.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“I might not make it through the next ten minutes, let alone tonight.”

“You’ll be fine. Just take an ice bath.”

“Yes, sir.” Is my sarcastic reply to his authoritative tone, but I speak without thinking.

He groans, bringing his hand down to palm his dick and readjusting it.

“Think twice before you say that to me again.”

“Sorry.” I mumble.

I’m not sure why I’m apologizing. It’s not my fault I can make him hard with a couple words. Although I am happy to see that I at least have the same physical effect on him as he does on me.

It’s the voice. I’m sure there’s some Darwinistic theory that can explain my reaction to him. Bellamy would know about it.

I mean, Rhys is a study in perfection and the very definition of an alpha male physically. Being attracted to him really just means I’m a normal, perfectly well adjusted, red-blooded female.

It can’t be helped.

It’s evolutionary, I’m sure of it.

“We’re having a party tonight. You should come.” He turns his face towards me, “I assume Bellamy will need to be there for Rogue.”

Of course she’ll need to be there. That psycho has been abusing his power since day one.

“I’ll think about it.” I answer, but I’m being intentionally difficult.

I’ll likely be there. The only thing I love more than soccer is a good party and the last one at Rhys’ house was wild.

I sit up, my muscles cursing me out as I do, and stand to pack my things up.

“Alright, I’m heading home.”

“Let me give you a lift.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“I’ll see you tonight then.”

I throw my bag over my shoulder and turn to face him. He’s still lying on the ground, his head resting on his bent right elbow, his other hand splayed on his stomach.

He’s lifted the bottom of his shirt slightly so his hand can rest on bare skin, his finger absentmindedly circling his belly button. His shorts hang low revealing the smooth expanse of a tanned and toned stomach with deep V lines down his sides that disappear past the waistband.

He seems so large and imposing, even horizontal, it’s unfair. Anyone in bed next to him would be dwarfed by his size.

He’s got to be an excellent cuddler.

No.

*No, Thayer.*

“I didn’t say I was coming.”

He sits up, rests backwards on his forearms and smiles at me. “Can’t wait to see what you wear.”

“You—,” I start and stop, “Your brain should be studied by scientists.”

“Thank you.”

“My point exactly.” I grab my water bottle and give him an awkward little wave. “See you tomorrow. What time?”

“We’ll talk about it tonight.”

I stalk off with a huff. “Goodbye, Mackley.”

“Bye, Silver.”



Infuriatingly but unsurprisingly, Rhys is right.

I do end up going to the party at his house.

I'm wearing a flowy graphic black & white crop top with a visible black Calvin Klein bra peeking out underneath, a pair of high waisted baggy boyfriend jeans, and white air force ones.

As much as I love to dress up sometimes, I love streetwear. You can put together a look that's the perfect combination of comfy, trendy, and sexy.

Plus, I know Rhys will have expected me to show up in something short and tight so the idea of disappointing him makes this outfit a double win.

I'm dancing in the middle of one of the home's several living rooms, now turned into a makeshift dance floor. My body is sore, but there's something about dancing to good music that has my muscles relaxing as I just give in.

I was dancing with Bellamy, but she's distracted. Rogue's decided to play a game of hot and cold tonight and she looks miserable, even as she tries to grin and bear it. I try to pull her back next to me, but it's a lost cause.

Instead, I twirl to the beat of the music and when I come back to where we were standing, she's gone. I turn, looking around the room to see if she's still here but stop when my gaze clashes with Rhys'.

He's leaning against the wall, head tilted back slightly as his gaze pierces me. It stops me in my tracks as I return his stare.

His eyes beckon to me.

Through a crowded room, over the music and all the noise of the people around us, his eyes tell me to come here.

My legs obey.



I push through the mass towards him. We're... friends now. We can talk and be nice at parties.

I'm a couple of steps away from him when a guy comes barreling into the room from my left, almost colliding into me.

With lightning fast reflexes and yet barely any effort at all, Rhys grabs him by the collar and shoves him back, avoiding a collision. He seems so aware of his surroundings at all times.

And just like that, I'm standing before him. He's wearing a dark blue, flowy, short sleeved button down that matches the color of his eyes and a pair of baggy black pants.

Several rings shine on both his hands as he brings his thumb up to trace the corner of his lips.

He looks illegally attractive and so fucking smug.

"You came."

I don't know if he means to the party or right now, to him. Either way, he needs to be disabused of the notion that I came for him.

"Bellamy needed me."

"Lie." He chirps casually.

I roll my eyes at him.

"Were you watching me dance?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you join?" I ask him, trying to make casual conversation.

"Why didn't I join you?"

"No, why didn't you join in general? You don't like dancing?"

He tilts his head to the side slightly, considering me before he speaks. "Why do you care?"

"We're friends now, remember?" I tell him, "I'm trying to get to know you."

“I love dancing.” He tells me, his expression carefully neutral.

“So?”

“It was safer for everyone involved if I watched.” The look in his eye and the casual sensuality in his voice challenge me to ask him what he means by that.

I know I shouldn’t ask the question but I’m only human. And listen, curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back.

“Why?”

“You really want me to answer that question?”

I’m playing with fire but I’m four tequila shots and a beer in and the fire is starting to feel so good.

“Yes.”

“You look fucking stunning. If I’d danced with you and you’d shaken your ass anywhere near me, I’d have taken you upstairs and fucked it over and over again until you begged me to stop.” He says, “Even then I would have kept going. I wouldn’t have stopped until I’d gotten my fill of you. Until *I* was satisfied.”

My throat dries up at his words.

I’ve never been pursued with such blind dedication and my whole brain and body are in chaos trying to find a way to respond, but he continues.

“You’re not ready for that yet, so I stayed here.” He runs a hand across his mouth and over his jaw. “Plus, this was the better vantage point to make sure the men around you were keeping their hands to themselves. If I’m not allowed to touch you, no one else is either.”

My blood heats at his words but I work to control my internal temperature.

“Your possessiveness is misplaced.”

“I’m not possessive,” He says, his eyes boring into mine, “I’m covetous. I’m downright envious. I desperately want

something that belongs to someone else, at least for now.”

I snort in fake wonder. “You really think you’ll always get your way, don’t you?”

“Yes.” He says matter-of-factly.

“You’re not going to deny it?”

“Why should I?”

He pushes off the wall and heads for the kitchen, cutting off our conversation. But he walks away at a leisurely pace, like he wants me to follow him.

So I do.

“You want something to drink?” He asks nonchalantly, like we weren’t just in the middle of another conversation.

But I’m thirsty.

“Vodka soda with lime, please.”

He moves around the kitchen making my drink, grabbing a cutting board and chopping some limes while I jump up and sit on the counter opposite the island where he’s stationed.

I watch him work, silently. He’s doing this meticulously, looking at his phone and using jiggers to measure out exact amounts instead of tossing all the ingredients together.

All the while, countless people from the party seek him out. Whether it’s just to say hi, tell him a story or a joke, it doesn’t matter. They come up to him constantly, their golden boy.

They want to speak to him, to have him smile at them. And he does, to every single person, acknowledging and listening to them with easy charm.

He’s one note. One happy note, always.

Too polished, too distant.

He’s not like he is around me, happy and annoyed and frustrated and energized.

I could study him all night.

Finally, there's a lull in people intercepting him and he finishes my drink, coming over to hand it to me.

With him standing and me sitting on the tall counter, we're not quite level but we're much closer in height than we usually are.

"What were we talking about?" He asks, his fingers lingering on the glass even after I've wrapped my hand around it.

"Your categorical belief that you always get your way."

"Oh, yes." His eyes rake up and back down my body slowly. "You're a perfect example. Not twenty four hours ago, I told you if I saw you in your bra I'd keep flirting with you, much to your dismay apparently, and yet here you are. Sitting on my kitchen counter in a bra." He says, his eyes glazing over with lust as he looks down at the band of my bra peeking out from below my crop top. "Looks like at least your subconscious understands who your rightful owner is."

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

Who knew seeing Thayer at a loss for words would be such a turn on. I thought I liked the fire, but looks like her speechlessness has my cock just as hard.

I'm standing in front of her while she sits on my kitchen counter, her long legs dangling off the edge. It'd be so easy to grab her thighs and wrap her legs around my waist. To tilt my hips upwards so my dick presses against her center as she buries her face in my neck.

To repeat the motion until she's panting and moaning in my ear.

I'm standing close enough to see the defined lines of her abdomen and the beauty marks sprinkled all over her stomach. I want to trace the path of those marks up and down her body until I've licked every inch of her.

The skin of her stomach is calling to me, the swell of her breast visible under her bra and teasing me.

I set my hand on the counter next to her thigh and my throat bobs as I imagine it wrapped around her waist, my fingers digging into her skin to try to leave a permanent imprint of myself on her.

Seeing this much of her skin is driving me crazy, even when it's just her stomach. The thought of my hands on her body, of touching her and reveling at the sight of how small

she is compared to me makes me want to howl delightedly into the night like a predator.

I can't help but lick my lips at the conjured visual of her laid out before me, her silver hair tousled and tangled from how I grab it, her mouth slightly parted as she looks at me with desire and submission in her eyes.

“Hungry?”

I blink that vision away before I do something stupid like grab her throat and tell her I'll kill her boyfriend and make her a young widow if she doesn't break up with him.

My gaze connects with hers and I see she's smirking at me, clearly enjoying watching me be tormented by my arousal for her.

My little liar, pretending she isn't affected herself.

“Famished.” I tell her, before putting my second hand down next to her other thigh and bringing my head level with hers.

I'm definitely pushing the limits with this, my face much too close to hers now.

“Open.”

“What?” She says, her voice a mix of smothered arousal and genuine confusion.

“Open,” I tell her, leaning forward and closing the space between us a bit more, “Your legs.”

She jumps, startled, when I put my hand on her knee. Her eyes widen, her pupils flare and *fuck*, she's so reactive.

A thousand microexpressions flit across her face, every one more telegraphic than the next.

Desire. Excitement. Confusion. Guilt. Interest. Uncertainty. Anticipation.

Every single one painted across her face for me to catch and keep for myself as we stare at each other unblinkingly.

She parts her thighs as commanded, but not enough.

I flick my eyes down to my hand as it moves from her knee to cup part of her inner thigh right above the bend.

I'm still looking down so I don't see her sharp inhale but I hear it.

In fact, I fucking *feel* it in my lower stomach.

I look back up at her as I push on her thigh gently. My voice is barely a whisper when I speak, my tone coaxing.

“Wider.”

Her mouth parts slightly, her tongue visible through the small window. I keep pushing her leg, her mouth opening wider as a set of shuddering breaths fall from her lips at my touch.

If this is how she reacts to a simple touch on her thigh, I might accidentally break her when we finally fuck.

I can't wait to play.

Next time, I'll claim her mouth and those breaths will fall into my waiting lips.

Her legs are wide enough now.

I open the top drawer below her and take out a spoon, then abruptly step back from her, emotionlessly cutting off the moment like it didn't affect me.

I grab a pint of ice cream from the freezer and lean against its closed doors as I turn back to face her.

She's still sitting as I left her, having not moved an inch. Her legs are splayed obscenely wide open, she's leaning back, holding herself up on her flattened palms, and the look on her face is priceless.

One part arousal, one part confusion, one part sexual frustration.

If she were naked, she'd look like someone fucked her and pulled out before she could come, leaving her wanting.

Her mouth snaps shut and arousal makes way for annoyance on her face.

“What was that?”

“You were right,” I tell her, digging my spoon into the chocolate ice cream and sucking it into my mouth, “I am hungry.”

“Stop playing games with me.”

“I needed a spoon.” I tell her innocently.

“That was inappropriate. You know I have a boyfriend.”

My mouth flattens into a straight line at the mention of that asshole, my mood turning sour.

I dig my spoon in and take another bite of ice cream before setting the pint down.

“He’s an idiot.”

She jumps off the counter and marches up to me, clearly incensed by my words. Her finger jabs me in the shoulder as she calls me out.

“Don’t say things like that. You don’t know him or our relationship.”

“I know enough.”

“You know nothing!”

She goes to jab me again but I grab her arm out of mid air and bend it behind her back, using it to pull her against me.

“I know he let you move across an entire ocean without following you.” I sneer in her face, “I know he can survive without seeing you every day even as he claims to love you. I know he chose to live far from you when he had to know that every man in a fifty foot radius of you would be begging to have you. And I know he didn’t care enough to make it clear to all those men that they’d meet a violent, painful death if they ever fucking touched you. I know *enough*.”

Anger colors her cheeks, the juxtaposition of her red skin with her silver white hair making me think of fire and ice.

A pretty succinct summation of her personality, actually.



“It’s not that easy, he couldn’t just come here.” She replies weakly, trying to defend him.

“If you were mine, Thayer, if I loved you,” I tell her, “There’s nothing in this world that could keep me from you, let alone something as inconsequential as an ocean.”

I see red hot desire flash through her eyes before she slams the door closed and hides behind her usual mask of defiance.

She tries to tug her arm from my grasp, but I hold on tightly.

“That’s because you’re obsessive. He’s not like that with me.”

“Like I said,” I reply, releasing her this time. She stumbles back a couple of steps to add physical distance between us. “He’s an idiot.”

“I-,”

I’ll never know what she was going to say because her phone vibrates on the counter and, almost as if we summon him, Carter’s name appears on her screen.

“Don’t answer him.”

She was so compliant last time I asked. The animal inside me purred at her obedience and the fact that she hadn’t answered her boyfriend’s call simply because I’d told her not to.

“No.”

“Tell him you’re busy.”

I know I’m not going to like what she’s about to say just by the way she looks at me.

Any playfulness from before, any of the remaining lust that might have clouded her brain, is gone.

In its place is a blank look that gives nothing away.

“You don’t always get what you want.” She snaps, “It’s about time someone taught you that.”

She starts to walk off, but I grab her forearm and force her to face me.

“Go talk to your boyfriend then,” I tell her, “But don’t come looking for me when you’re done. You won’t like what you find.”

I’m not sure if I imagine that she hesitates but if she does, it’s not for long. She walks out of the kitchen, but not before I hear her whisper “hey, babe” into the phone.

My fists clench, completely destroying the plastic cup in my hand.

Fuck this.

“Hey,” Phoenix says, walking up to me and clapping my shoulder. He takes one look at my face and frowns. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I reply curtly, my gaze locked on Thayer in the entryway of the living room. The need to physically maim someone erupts in my fists when I see her smile.

Phoenix turns, following my gaze over to where she stands.

“Ah.” He says, turning back to me with a knowing smile on his face. “Bet’s not going well then?”

I’ve been so focused on her that I forgot about the stupid fucking bet.

My need to claim her started long before that wager ever came into play and I’m annoyed that I have to answer to it now.

Irritation sings in my blood at the thought that my teammates have eyes on Thayer in any way. Watching her, wondering if I’m going to be able to get her to submit.

“Piss off, Phoenix.”

He chuckles but wisely chooses not to push the subject any further.

“Where’s Rogue?” I ask him.

I haven't seen the man in question since earlier in the evening.

He'd been talking to Lyra which was surprising since we'd all collectively agreed she was a roach and needed her access to these parties restricted.

"Bellamy was absolutely fuming over whatever he was doing with Lyra. Last time I saw him, he was running upstairs after her."

And that explains that.

I look over to where Thayer's still standing in the entryway.

The corner of her lips lifts again and I've officially had it.

I need a distraction.

If she won't play, then someone else will happily take her place.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

I hang up and pocket my phone.

It was nice to talk to Carter, although it was a little awkward. We haven't spoken on the phone for so long that we've lost the natural flow that comes with two people knowing how to talk to one another.

I'd covered up the awkwardness with nervous laughter, hoping it would help dissolve the weird tension between us.

It's moments like these that make me wonder if the distance is causing more damage to our relationship than either one of us realizes.

*"If you were mine, Thayer, if I loved you, there's nothing in this world that could keep me from you, let alone something as inconsequential as an ocean."*

An involuntary shiver runs through my body as I remember his words.

It felt like my heart stopped for a second when he spoke them, as if it was marking the date and time of the event so I'd always have a reminder of him engraved on my core.

How can he effortlessly be so charming?

How can he casually drop the most romantic words I've ever heard, only for them to be hypothetical?

Because he's a ruiner.

The kind of person you need to guard your heart around otherwise he'll take it, play with it, and casually discard it once he's had his fill.

He'd suggested as much earlier.

As is, I shouldn't even be letting him occupy this many of my thoughts.

*Fortify those defenses, Thayer.*

Honestly, it feels like I've been on an emotional rollercoaster tonight and I don't have it in me to get on for another ride, so I decide to avoid Rhys for the rest of the evening.

I go off in search of Bellamy, but she's still MIA. Rogue isn't here either, so I assume he's off somewhere corrupting my best friend.

Nera and Six are playing King's Cup with a few of our other friends, so I join them. We play only a couple of games before I grow bored and restless.

There's a voice inside my head that I've locked in a tiny room, but it's pounding against the door, threatening to break it down if it isn't heard.

It's a voice that carries a stupid, selfish thought that has no business being in my brain, but I grow more agitated with each second I don't let myself acknowledge it. Why didn't he come looking for me?

Even when we bicker like we have tonight, he usually always finds his way back to me.

It's been over an hour since I last saw him and all I can think about, all I'm consumed by, is what did he mean when he said I wouldn't like what I found if I went looking for him?

Now that I've let the thought free, I can't shove it back in its box. Like gravity, he pulls me back into his orbit without even trying.

"Hey, I'm going to get another drink. Do you want something?" I ask the girls.

“I’m good.”

“Same.”

“Alright, I’ll be right back.”

I head back towards the kitchen, also the last place I saw Rhys, and come to an abrupt halt in the doorway as I take in the scene before me.

Rhys’ large frame stands out in the sea of people and my eyes immediately go to him.

He’s leaning against the counter, his arms casually crossed as he brings the drink in his hand to his mouth and takes a sip.

He doesn’t take his eyes off the girl he’s talking to as he does so, not for a second. Her hand is on his arm and his gaze bores into her like she’s telling him the most interesting thing he’s ever heard.

Something tugs at my chest as I watch him watch her.

It downright rips when I see him smile at her.

He bends his head and for a moment I think I’m going to have to watch him kiss her, but she gets on her tiptoes and whispers something in his ear instead.

I’m unsure what to do with myself.

I have no claim over him, nor do I have a clear understanding of why it bothers me to see him talking to someone else. But I do know that she shouldn’t be touching him.

I don’t have time to consider it further because he looks up and our stares connect.

He holds my gaze just long enough to let me know he’s seen me, and then he looks away, back down to the blonde dangling off his arm, dismissing me.

He gives her one of his signature devastating smiles and now I know he’s putting on a show for me.

He wants me to react.

I'd like to say I'm strong enough to resist the obvious provocation, but my legs have me halfway across the room before I can even attempt to talk myself out of it.

My reaction does have the immediate impact of bringing Rhys' attention back to me as he shamelessly watches me walk up to him, an annoyingly smug look on his face.

In this unofficial game of chess we're playing, he just took a center pawn.

Once I'm standing behind the blonde – Tallulah, I think her name is – I tap her on the shoulder.

“I need to talk to Mackley. Get lost, please.” I tell her when she turns around, ignoring the shit-eating grin that appears on Rhys' face at my words.

“What– You can't talk to me that way!” She replies, incensed.

“Get lost.”

This time the words come from Rhys. He doesn't spare her a glance as he says them, his eyes tearing me apart instead.

At least I was nicer.

I said please.

She splutters something unintelligible and eventually walks away, leaving Rhys and I standing in front of each other in a silent stalemate.

When I don't speak, he makes the first move.

“Well?” He asks, cocking a brow.

“We haven't talked about tomorrow's practice.” I blurt out. “You said we would tonight.”

“That's what you want to talk about?”

“Yes.”

He nods slowly, his expression blank, but I can tell he's unimpressed. He's about to walk away, probably to go find Tallulah wherever she's slunk off to.

“Afternoon workout tomorrow. Five pm, same field.” He says indifferently, setting his cup down on the counter and standing to his full height. “I’ll see you then.”

He walks past me but something claws inside me. I’m not ready for this to be over.

My hand shoots out and grabs his arm, keeping him from going too far. His gaze falls to where I’m wrapped around him before slowly moving up to meet my eyes.

I open my mouth a couple of times, searching for the correct words.

“You were laying it on thick back there.”

It’s out of my mouth before I can second guess it.

“I didn’t say a word.”

“You didn’t need to,” I say, “You know what you were doing.”

That has him turning back towards me. “Tell me,” He says, his tone contemplative, “What does jealousy taste like?”

I drop his arm like it burns me.

“Why don’t you tell me?” I reply, taunting him.

His voice drops an entire octave when he grunts out his answer, “Bitter.”

I’m taken aback by his honesty, but a part of me sings at his admission.

‘Bitter’ explains the sharp taste in my mouth and the roiling in my stomach, now also joined by fluttering butterflies.

I’m getting distracted by him again.

Clearing my throat, I tell him, “I wasn’t jealous. I was just... protective. As your friend, I need to protect you.”

“You want to protect me from all the hot blondes that want to fuck me?”

“That’s right.” I say, and because that sounds absolutely ridiculous I add, “You’re the captain of the football team, you



have a reputation to uphold.”

He chuckles and brings his hand up to finger the line of my necklace. It’s an innocent caress and yet it connects.

His touch barely brushes against my skin, yet it leaves a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

“You sure it’s not because you don’t want them touching me? Sure it’s not because you want me for yourself?”

He hooks his finger under my necklace and uses it to pull me gently towards him as his head bows down to speak the words near my ear.

“You’ve made yourself off limits to me. You don’t get to be annoyed when you see me with other girls.”

He breathes them against my skin like he’s telling me all the filthy things he wants to do to me. I can hear my heart pound in my ears and I’m about to lean in slightly further, but he releases me.

“Break up with him. Until then, I’ll continue to fuck whoever I want.”

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*Thayer*

I wake up with a groan and clutch my head.

Gatorade. Gatorade and Alka-Seltzer ASAP, otherwise this hangover's going to see me six feet under.

I stroll into the shared kitchen and find Six drinking a hot tea, looking as amazing as I imagine Gwyneth Paltrow looks first thing in the morning.

I jokingly stop in my tracks halfway to the kitchen. "Why do you look like that and I look like this?"

"I'm excellent at drinking games." She says with a casual shrug, taking another sip of her tea.

I snort because she's not lying. I'd say Sixtine is the most even keeled of the four of us. Bellamy's sensitive, Nera's stubborn and a force to be reckoned with, and I have a legendary temper.

Six is the peacekeeper and the constant good humor in our group, but I've come to learn that when she plays drinking games a totally different side of her comes out.

One that will not lose, no matter the cost. So, I wouldn't be surprised if she's lower on the 'shots taken' list than the rest of us.

"It might also be the emotional toll that's taking it out of you." She adds with a knowing smile on her face.

“What do you mean?”

Nera walks into the kitchen at that exact moment and jumps right in. “Good morning, babes.” She says, before adding “I have a great idea. Why don’t we grab some stuff for brunch and bring it to Bellamy at Rogue’s place?”

“Ooh, I like that idea!” I tell her.

“Right? Because if we just wait for him to let her go, I think we might be waiting a very long time.”

“It does sound like a good idea, but ugh, I really can’t go over there. Phoenix–, he–,” Six says, stumbling over her words. “It’s one thing for me to come to parties, but he might actually kill me if I show up to his house, unannounced and uninvited. And for brunch at that.”

I turn towards Nera. “Do you know what his deal with her is?”

“Nope. She’s never told me the whole story.” She answers, shaking her head.

“Alright, Six,” I tell her, turning back towards her, “Mandatory discussion point over brunch is Phoenix.”

“Only if we open up the floor to the Rhys topic.” She counters, a notable adversary.

“He’s not a topic. There’s nothing to say.”

“Alright,” Nera says, stepping in, “Six, you get the champagne. Thayer, you get the food basket together.” She takes out her phone and starts typing, “Meanwhile, I will put together our agenda items for today. Starting with ‘Why Does Phoenix Hate Sixtine?’, followed by ‘Is Thayer About To Give In To Rhys’ Advances?’–”

“She is not!” I interject.

“–And of course closing with ‘Does Bellamy Need to Be Rescued Via Covert Ops Mission?’” She finishes, locking her phone and setting it down emphatically to cue the task is complete.

Six raises a dubious eyebrow in her direction and crosses her arms. “Don’t think you’re getting out of this unscathed, Ner. You can add ‘Who’s The Guy Nera Texts All The Time?’ to close us out.” She tells her with a sly smile.

“Well played.” Nera says, inclining her head in mock respect.

Six laughs and shoves her shoulder playfully.

“Seriously though, Six. We’ll kick the boys out anyway. It’s not like we wanted Rogue or Rhys there either.” Nera says.

It’s hard not to react to his name in some small way. Even after last night when he told me he’d be fucking anyone he pleased.

Great.

Brilliant.

Awesome for him, don’t mind at all.

Except that it’s been on my mind since. Only because he’d said the words to me like they were a punishment, like I’d care.

Of course that’d make them play in a neverending loop coupled with images of him fucking someone else.

He’d walked away after that and I’d gone home and laid awake in bed well into the night, just staring at my ceiling.

I had a weird taste in my mouth that I refused to acknowledge. It tasted almost... bitter.

“Fine, alright. But if he murders me I need you guys to see to it that he does some real jail time, *d’accord?* I don’t want to peek in from the afterlife and see that he got away with it.”

“Please, I’d kill him with my sword.”

“I’d stomp him to death with my cleats.”

“Is it weird that you guys are turning me on a little bit?” She answers, and the three of us fall over in peals of laughter.



Over at Rogue's house, we successfully convince him to both let us stay over and kick him out of his own kitchen.

It was surprisingly easy to accomplish, most likely because he had sex with Bellamy for the first time last night and was in a resulting good mood.

Or at least his version of one.

The look in his eye is wolfish and so damn pleased as he looks at her. Like a hunter who caught and trapped his prey and now gets to keep it forever.

Once he leaves, we sit at the table and serve ourselves and chat, happy to catch up.

We've finished covering last night's argument and eventual makeup sex between Bellamy and Rogue, and I throw it over to Sixtine.

"Come on Six, I believe you're next on the list."

"About Phoenix?" She asks.

The three of us nod vigorously.

"There's really not much to tell."

"Then why does he hate you?"

"I've known the three of them for more than half my life now. I met Phoenix first, when I was nine. We became friends, close friends." She pauses, looking thoughtfully off into the distance. "He blames me for something that happened when we were younger. His brother—"

"Hello, girls." Rhys' deep voice comes from behind me as he walks into the room.

Sixtine's mouth clamps shut and she blanches a little when she sees him come in. I know that she won't tell us what happened now.

Her story will have to wait for another time.

The girls all say hi to him, but I don't turn around or speak to him in any way, pouring myself a glass of orange juice instead.

I hear him walk up behind me and stop, but I take a sip and set my glass down without acknowledging him.

A sharp tug at my ponytail makes my head jerk backwards until it's parallel with the ground.

Rhys has his hand wrapped around my hair and uses the hold to keep me pinned in this position.

"Ignoring me, love?" He asks me, his face right above mine.

"Let me go."

He wraps my ponytail even more tightly around his hand, pulling me further back so that my feet and chair tilt off the ground. He puts a knee against the back of the chair to keep it steady so I don't fall.

"Is it because of what I said last night?" He asks with a taunting smile.

"You fucking wish." I hiss.

He lets the chair drop back down to the ground and releases me. I sit upright and come face to face with my friends' facial expressions, ranging in tone from enthralled and baffled to fascinated and delighted.

"Good luck keeping this charade up at practice." He says, before looking at the other girls. "Enjoy your lunch."

He walks out and Bellamy turns towards me, questioningly.

"What practice do you have today?"

Ah, fuck. I haven't told them about my daily practices with Rhys yet.

I clear my throat. "Remember I told you guys I needed help developing my skills further? Well, Mackley's helping me. I have private sessions with him every day."

We sit for a couple seconds in bemused – and for some of them, amused – silence before Nera breaks it.

“God damnit.”

She gets up and picks her purse off the counter, before digging around in it for a bit and coming up with her wallet.

She takes out a crisp twenty euro bill and walks back to the table where she slaps it into Bellamy’s waiting open palm.

B cheers with an evil little clap and laugh before pocketing her money.

When she sees me look at her quizzically, she rhetorically asks, “Do you think you’re the only one who can make money off this friendship?”

“What was the bet?”

“I thought he’d find a way to manipulate you into spending time with him.” She points at Nera. “She agreed with me, but she thought you’d categorically refuse. I obviously knew better.”

“It’s not like that. I needed someone to help train me.” I tell her, before adding, “It was my Coach’s advice as well.”

“Sure,” She acquiesces, “And is he the only person on campus who plays soccer?”

Not that our situations have anything in common, but I put Bellamy through a similar interrogation about Rogue.

So, while I’m not surprised she’s cross-examining me regarding Rhys, it feels about five percent as fun being on this side.

“It wasn’t even his idea,” I tell her, “I suggested it.”

I tell them everything that’s happened over the past few days.

“Even better.” She says, throwing her arms up with a laugh.

“Just admit you find him hot, Thayer. We all have eyes.” Nera says.

She laughs loudly when I scowl at her.

“I think that look was confession enough.” Sixtine says.

“Alright, alright. Fine. I think he’s hot. Really hot, illegally hot I’d say even. But that’s it.” I say, making an ‘x’ with my hands, “Like Nera said, I’d have to be blind not to notice. There’s nothing more, I love Carter.”

Bellamy nods. “The first step is admitting you have a problem.” She says with a laugh, before turning serious. “Be careful though. You’re playing with fire, which is one thing, but at this point if you were to get burned I’m not sure you’d hate it, and that’s a whole other set of issues.”

“Don’t worry about me. My friendship with Mackley is under control.”

I catch them giving each other a look, although it’s one that I can’t read.

“What?”

“*Ma chérie*,” Six begins, speaking for all of them I think, “Maybe start by asking yourself why you refuse to call him by his first name.”

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*Rhys*

As usual, Thayer arrives early to practice.

I wonder what mood she'll be in this afternoon – will she still be ignoring me like earlier today or will she pretend to have moved on?

Even though she denied it this morning, I know she's jealous and angry about our exchange yesterday when I'd told her I'd keep fucking other people until she got rid of her boyfriend.

I'd had every intention of following through on that promise.

I'd exited the kitchen looking for Tallulah. Up until I sent her away, she'd been giving me less than subtle signs that she wanted me to take her upstairs and fuck her.

But Thayer had momentarily distracted me.

So I'd gone looking for her although my efforts had been half-hearted at best. I'd looked in a couple of rooms and considered texting her, but my cock wouldn't cooperate.

He'd lost interest the moment my brain had sent him the message we were looking for Tallulah.

He didn't want the clingy blonde.

Like me, he wanted the silver-haired beauty with a sharp tongue, incredible legs and what looked like very perky tits.

I'd wanted to grab her by her ponytail, using it to force her to her knees so I could fuck her mouth.

I imagined how hot and tight her small mouth would be.

How I'd silence her mid-sentence by shoving my dick down her throat until she gagged on it.

She'd look up at me with tears in her eyes, but I'd keep going, pumping in and out of her mouth, viciously punishing her for the weeks of pent up sexual frustration she'd put me through.

Instead, I'd left her downstairs holding the phone she called her boyfriend with in her hand. I'd gone upstairs to my room and used the memory of her sitting on my counter, legs splayed wide open to wank off to.

My cock felt like it was about to fall off. I'd wanked to the thought, sight, and smell of her every day – sometimes multiple times a day – since I'd met her.

Instead of providing the necessary release I needed, it was a pale imitation of the real thing I was craving. I came, but never felt satisfied.

I couldn't fuck her and my dick wouldn't let me fuck anyone else.

It felt like I was approaching breaking point.

"You warmed up?" I ask her once she's standing in front of me.

"Yeah, I ran here from The Pen."

The Pen is the residential area on campus featuring a few apartment buildings, including the one where Thayer lives.

Trust her to show up to practice ready and with her professionalism mask securely in place.

"Alright, here's the plan for today." I tell her, before walking her through today's session.

She nods along, focused and asking questions as I walk her through everything. It's a mix of endurance and skill-based training, weightlifting and some pilates.

We dig in and start going through the exercises. We're pretty quiet, our usual bicker-y, banter-y relationship on hold while we work.

Once again I'm impressed by her work ethic and her focus. Outside of a few understandable moans and groans, she gets to it and gives it her all.

She's the ideal kind of player for a coach – talented, teachable, and a fast learner.

“Nice. Yes, exactly like that!” I tell her during our one-on-one drill, “Eyes on the defendant's feet just as much as the ball. You want to be able to understand which direction they're headed in.”

She jabs her foot out and kicks the ball from between my legs, winning the tackle.

“Well done.”

“Thanks.” She says, a pleased smile on her face.

“Again.”

We do this over and over again, until I think she's ready to fall over from exhaustion.

I'm exhausted myself, so I'm surprised she's even been able to keep up this long.

I'd bet my fortune that her body gave out a while ago and it's her mind, and more specifically her stubborn refusal to give in to me, that have kept her going this far.

When I officially call it, she falls to the ground and rolls onto her back with a pained groan.

I join her, laying next to her at an angle.

“You really are good.” She says.

I smile quietly, satisfied.

“I can feel your smug smile from here.” She tells me without looking at me.

“It is one of my more powerful smiles, so I’m not surprised.”

She laughs softly in return. “How’d you get into soccer anyway?”

My throat dries up, momentarily choking me. I have to clear it loudly to get it rehydrated.

We’re getting into the kind of territory I avoid at all costs, preferring to keep it locked away inside me rather than out in the open where I fear it might destroy me.

“My mum and dad.” I tell her and try to leave it there.

“I assumed,” She says dryly, “Were they fans?”

“Yes.” I reply, not expanding any further.

She slowly flips until she’s lying on her stomach, holding her weight up on her forearms as she looks at me.

“I know what happened to them,” She says, “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to pry, I was just wondering what your soccer story was. We all have one. We don’t have to talk about it if you’re not comfortable though.”

She lays back down and we sit in companionable silence for a couple of minutes, still catching our breaths.

I don’t know if it’s the company or the backdrop of having dusk set in the great big sky above us, but either way it opens a sliver of vulnerability within me.

“They met at a match.”

“Did they?” She asks, clearly ready to adapt to me as I lead the way in this conversation.

“Yeah, an Arsenal match. Both of them were generational fans. They met in the stands and it was love at first sight. They never spent a moment apart after that.”

“After they got married, they were thrilled when they became pregnant with me – these are my mother’s words by

the way, not mine. I'm telling you exactly as she used to tell everyone this story – they knew they'd secured the next generation of Gooners.”

“From the moment I knew how to walk, they put me in football classes and summer camps. And I loved it. It was something we could bond over my entire life, you know? It wasn't a chore or something I dragged my feet to when I was a kid. I loved going to practice and coming back to tell them about every tackle, every pass, every goal. They listened like I was talking about the Premier League and not youth football.”

She stays quiet, listening to me intently.

“And then it so happened that I was good. Really good. I think unexpectedly good. I kept pushing myself and I got even better. The family business definitely isn't football, but it became the most obvious career path for me and they were over the moon about it. Talk about the perfect story – you meet at a game, fall in love, get married, have a son, and your son turns out to be a football star with hopes to play for Arsenal one day.”

“My parents were pretty fucking amazing people and they were at their best, at their happiest when they saw me play. And they always prioritized seeing me play, whether it was practices or matches, because that's also the type of parents they were.”

“They built their entire lives around me, including their holidays. With me away at boarding school, they rarely took a holiday that didn't include visiting me in some way. So, two years ago they decided to do a road trip starting in London, going through France and ending in Switzerland where they'd come to watch one of our big rivalry games.”

“On the border between France and Switzerland and two days before they were due to come see me play, their car spun out of control in the rain and hit a tree. They both died on impact.”

“The last time I talked to them, they FaceTimed me from Dijon. They were doing a mustard tasting of all things, laughing and enjoying themselves. I wish I'd told them how

much I loved them, but I didn't. I wished I'd gotten to tell them goodbye."

She inhales sharply, finally turning her head to look at me. There's moisture in her eyes but I can tell she works to smother it.

"That's my football story. Plus a little more."

She reaches a hand out and squeezes mine once, hard, before releasing it.

"I've already told you how sorry I am so I won't repeat it because I'm sure that's not what you want to hear right now, but I just want to say they sound like they were really amazing parents. You were lucky to have them."

"I was." I answer, appreciating her response.

The burden of grief is heavy enough without having to carry the sorrow and anguish of others.

"Thank you for telling me. I'm here if you ever want to talk more." She says, before hastily adding, "You know, friend to friend."

I'm thankful for the unwitting opening to get this conversation back on familiar, safer territory.

"Relax, we're alone. You don't have to convince anybody that you aren't interested in me."

"You're delusional."

"I'm extremely goal-oriented, actually."

I belly laugh at the eye roll she gives me as she sits up, but my laughter dies out pretty quickly.

I'm not ready for this to be over just yet.

"What about you?"

"Hmm?" She asks, twisting around to look at me.

"What's your football story?"

"You want to hear it?"

"Yeah, I do."

She settles back onto the ground, looking up at the sky as it starts to change colors.

“I think I’ll start at the beginning like you did.” She says, and I can hear in her voice that she’s not used to telling this story.

Or that maybe no one’s ever asked her.

“My father died before I was born. I’ve heard conflicting reports about my parents’ marriage – some say they were madly in love, some say it was a toxic relationship with physical abuse coming from both sides. I think both things can be true at once. I don’t know the truth for sure, but what I do know is that when my dad died, my mom fell apart.”

“She turned to drugs — weed, crack, heroine, you name it — and then she turned to men. That’s how I’d summarize life with her since the time I can remember.”

“She’s an addict. She’ll lie, cheat, and steal to get her way, even with her own daughter. You wouldn’t believe the shit she’s pulled on me just so she could buy an ounce off her dealer. I can’t trust her, have never been able to, and that’s before you throw in her rotating door of boyfriends. She’s the kind of person who needs to be in a relationship at all times, otherwise the downward spiral gets even worse.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that except somehow she always, *always*, picks the worst guys, true scourges of society. Terrible, disgusting men, usually addicts like her, who also lie, cheat, and steal with the added bonus of beating the shit out of her when they feel like it. And they feel like it often because what better way to take out the anger you feel at your place in the world than on the helpless woman who’s desperate enough for attention that she won’t limp away from you even when her lip is bloodied and her eyes are so swollen she can’t see?”

“I’m only telling you for context,” She adds, “Because home wasn’t a home for me. It was something I needed to distance myself from. I love my mom, I understand the pain she’s been through, I can imagine the grief of losing someone you love could easily be insurmountable, so I have a lot of

empathy for her. But we're not close, we don't have a mother-daughter relationship."

"Where your parents were always there for you, she was never there for me. And she never will be because she won't get clean. She won't go to AA and I can't afford a private program, I don't even think she'd go even if I could."

"That's why Trish, Bellamy's mom, is like a second mom to me. She let me and my brother Nolan sleep over as often as we needed to when it was clear we couldn't go home. She fed me, she clothed me, she basically raised me."

"Before Bellamy and Trish came into my life, I turned to soccer so I didn't have to go home. I started playing soccer at the park with some of the kids and kept playing there for years until it was just me and the boys. We didn't have any money for classes – not that it would have gone to them even if we did – so I was mostly self taught for a while. Eventually I was scouted by the father of a boy I played with who happened to have connections to a local club. They gave me a scholarship that allowed me to keep playing and get the coaching I needed through the end of middle school before I joined my high school team."

"So, that's my story. Soccer is everything to me. It made me physically and mentally strong. It taught me sportsmanship, strategy, discipline, and how to be a good teammate. It kept me away from a volatile home situation and gave me a path to a better life and that's why I'm here."

I'm silent, trying to process the information she just gave me.

I knew she'd had a harder life than the rest of us up until this point, but I hadn't realized it was this complex.

That she'd basically single-handedly clawed her way out of what would statistically likely have been a dead-end life to one where her future burned bright with possibilities.

Her eyes widen with what I think is embarrassment when she realizes everything she just revealed to me.



“Sorry, I didn’t mean to tell you all that.” She says, a faint blush on her cheeks, “Bet that cooled your obsession with me, huh?”

Am I imagining things or do I detect a hint of uncertainty and dismay in her voice?

“Was that your intention?” I ask her, “If so, it failed spectacularly. The only thing keeping me from fucking you face down in the grass right now is the fact I want you to be mine and mine only when I do.”

“Are drugs, violence, and poverty your kinks or something?” She says, carefully avoiding the minefield that is my previous response.

“You told me the story of a girl with enough willpower, strength, and grit to power an entire continent. That’s what I heard.”

I watch her cheeks color prettily, pleased at my compliment.

My need for her is throbbing in my cock and my temple and seeing this softer, more vulnerable side to her is not fucking helping.

Standing up, I dust the dirt and grass off my ass as I watch her do the same, dreaming of when I’ll be able to bury my face in it.

I hand her her bag, which she accepts with a whispered ‘thanks’, and pick up mine.

“Let me give you a lift.” I say again, my tone somewhere between a question and a request.

She seems to hesitate for a second before she shakes her head, thinking better of it.

The spell is broken around whatever earlier safe space made us both spill our deepest, darkest secrets to each other. Now she’s withdrawing back safely behind her defenses.

“No.”

“It’s late.”

“I’ll be alright.”

I tip my chin, acknowledging what she said.

We stand awkwardly in front of each other for a moment, unsure how to say goodbye.

It’s not something we usually do.

Finally she seems to decide something, opens her arms slightly, walks up to me and wraps them around me in a hug.

I’m sure a hug seemed like a safe goodbye to her in theory, but now she’s pressed completely against me and I can feel her entire body.

I can feel the shape of her curves as they mold against mine.

The way I completely dwarf her when she’s pressed against me.

How the top of her head doesn’t even reach my chin.

Inexplicably, I’m drunk on the most innocent physical contact I’ve had in my life and I’m about to come in my pants like a nervous virgin.

Thayer shifts slightly so she can press her cheek against my chest and the resulting movement has her brushing against my cock.

My angry, hard cock, tenting against the band of my shorts.

She stills, surprised.

The entire world feels like it comes to a shuddering stop around us as I wait to see what she does next.

Tentatively, she shifts again, rubbing her hips against my dick on a downstroke. He twitches, too happy to finally have her attention, and my eyes flutter close.

My hand falls to her waist, my fingers digging into her jersey-covered skin, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t give to touch her bare.

To leave traces of my time inside her everywhere on her body.

I use my hold to yank and trap her even closer against me.

Her mouth forms a small 'o' as a startled gasp leaves her lips.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I growl. Arousal makes my voice nearly unrecognizable.

“I—I didn't mean to do that.”

“Liar.” I rasp, my other hand wrapping around her neck to pin her in place, so she can't turn her head from me.

My thumb pushes against her pulse point, feeling for her heartbeat.

Her eyelids flutter to half mast at the move, her eyes staring dazedly at me from underneath them. Lust has her so confused right now, I know she'd let me do anything I wanted.

She just...*gives in* to my touch.

With a muttered curse, I release her and step back.

Come leaks from my dick and into my shorts. I groan as I adjust myself to the least uncomfortable position possible, which isn't saying much.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Thayer standing frozen like a deer in headlights as she watches me.

As realization dawns on her face at how far she just pushed that line.

“Go home. ” I bark at her, “If you stay here, you'll be fully responsible for what I do to you next.”

Wisely, she chooses to grab her bag and backtrack off the field.

“Uh, I'll see you tomorrow.” She says, flustered, “I'll text you for the time.”

\*\*\*



*Thayer*

*What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck.*

That's what I chant to myself as I jog off the field. My heart is thrashing in my chest, the adrenaline in my body making me dizzy.

I'm going to claim temporary insanity.

That's the only good reason I have for rubbing up against him like that, barely stopping short of dry humping him.

I drop my face in my hands and groan as I think back on it. I'd been annoyed this morning, but the moment I'd gotten on the pitch that bad mood had evaporated.

We'd then had a really tough, really satisfying workout.

And then he'd complimented me.

He'd lauded a couple of my plays and I'd found newfound energy to keep pushing, hoping to have him commend me again, hoping to bask in his attention just one more time.

*If this is how I discover I have a praise kink, I'm going to be pissed.*

Then he'd been vulnerable, opening up about his parents and why he played soccer. Hearing him talk about it had done

something funny to my stomach.

We speak about its role in our lives the same way, with equal parts respect and reverence.

In that moment, I'd felt like I'd been talking to a version of myself. We'd both opened up and offered a part of ourselves that I'm sure not many people know about. It'd felt weird to leave without saying goodbye.

But how did you say goodbye to someone like Rhys?

Not with a hug it turns out, because the moment I'd brought my arms around his waist and my body against his, my brain had short circuited.

Lust had punched me in the stomach and almost cut me off at the knees as I'd felt the size of his body, the hard planes of his chest and stomach, the warmth of his embrace.

My first mistake had been snuggling in closer instead of cutting it off right there.

Because when I did, I brushed against the length of his hard cock.

His massive, throbbing cock if what I was feeling was anything to go by. It pulsed against my lower stomach, demanding attention, and that's where the temporary insanity had set in.

I rubbed against him before I could think about it rationally and not through the thick fog of mad lust as it raged through me.

Rhys' hands clamping my waist and throat had sent wetness pooling to my core. A couple more brushes against him and I'd have come on the spot.

He'd been stronger than me in that moment.

*Stupid. So fucking stupid.*

I jump into one of the golf carts and tear out of the parking lot towards The Pen, my thoughts still in disarray.

Should I call Carter and tell him what I did?

Is it worth hurting him this way when it was nothing, meant nothing?

If I explain it, it'll make it worse than it sounds. It was just a hug.

A really dirty, inappropriate hug.

When I park and exit the golf cart, I notice Rhys' unmoving car in the distance.

He must have followed me home.

He's far enough away that I can't make him out behind the wheel, but I know it's him. He watches me put my key in the front door and step through it before he drives off.

I check my phone when I get to the apartment and notice I have a few unread texts.

**Rhys:** Stop signs aren't a suggestion you know.

**Rhys:** See you tomorrow. Same time.

I reply with the thumbs up reaction to the message but don't send any other type of response. After a couple of minutes, another text comes through.

**Rhys:** Think of me when you touch yourself tonight.

**Rhys:** Think of my fingers, my tongue, and my dick plowing that sweet pussy.

**Rhys:** I know I will be.

Heat spreads across my face and in my veins as I read his texts. I go straight to my room, close and lock the door and throw myself on the bed.

Guilt and lust war inside me, battling for dominion.

The sexual frustration feels like an unscratchable itch, one that's driving me completely crazy.

Every time I close my eyes all I can see is the way his eyes glazed over when I'd accidentally bumped against him.

How they'd darkened with corrupt intent when I'd intentionally rubbed up against him.

His voice had sounded so tortured when he'd grabbed me, the tone unlike anything I'd ever heard from him. If I'd stayed there, I have no doubt that he'd have fucked me.

It'd have been brutal and angry and messy and I'd have loved every minute of it.

My hand makes its way down my stomach, under the band of my shorts and underwear, and over my swollen pussy.

I'm so wet and dripping with need, I can feel it trickle down between my ass cheeks.

My touch barely ghosts over my clit and I almost jump out of my skin. I'm so aroused and sensitive, it won't take much to send me over the edge.

I run my fingers down my center until they reach my entrance. Sliding one in, I gasp at how my tight walls grip my finger, refusing to let it go.

My palm grinds against my clit as I start pumping my finger in and out. I try thinking about Carter, but I can't.

I can't.

I want to cry in frustration.

My thoughts keep coming back to Rhys. To his evilly charming smile, his seductive voice, his strong hands.

I bring my other hand to rub my clit. I'm anything but gentle as I touch myself, taking my frustration out on my body.

I think about the unhinged look in his eye when he touches me. There's a promise of retribution in them that has my toes curling in pleasure as I crest the wave.

I'm slamming my finger into my pussy now, searching desperately for the orgasm that feels just out of reach.

And then, almost as if he's in the room, I imagine Rhys' voice whispering "hello, love" in my ear and the wave crashes, sudden and powerful.

My legs shake as I ride the aftershocks, my body electrified.



With lust out of the way, shame is quick to hit me as I pull my finger out of my pants. I can't believe I just did that.

I'm mortified that I couldn't control myself.

I dig around for my phone under the pillows where I threw it. I need to talk to Carter.

I need to apologize.

I tap the screen and see a missed text.

**Rhys:** Next time you come it'll be on my tongue.

I look around, frantic, but of course he's not here.

There's no way he can know this.

Can he?

I delete the entire thread as my shaking fingers tap Carter's name and the line starts to ring.

"Hey, babe."

There's immediate relief when he picks up knowing that we won't have to play phone tag for the next couple of days.

"Hey," I answer, "How are you?"

"Good. Chilling at Tony's house right now. You?"

"Same." I croak out, "I mean I'm doing good as well."

"That's great— No, go left. Go left!" He says, abruptly yelling into the phone. "Sorry, babe. I let Tony take over for me in Fortnite and I'm watching him fuck it up. Can we talk later?"

"Oh, uh, sure." I tell him, "I was kind of hoping we could talk now though."

"Sorry, babe. It's just not a great time. We can talk tomorrow, I promise." He says, "Tony, it's like you discovered gaming this morning. What are you *doing*?"

"Wait, Carter, before you hang up," I add hastily, hoping he hasn't hung up already. Not even saying goodbye to me would be a first, but I wouldn't be surprised at this point. "Did you go see my mom?"

I haven't talked to my mom in almost a week, which isn't unusual for us, but I'd wanted to make sure she was okay nonetheless. My brother was basically living at his girlfriend's parents' house and was notoriously unreliable on top of that, so I texted Carter a couple of days ago asking him to stop by if he could and he'd thumbs up the message.

"No, I haven't. Sorry, babe." He tells me and I'm getting really tired of hearing those words. "It's been crazy with school and basketball and all that."

"You're playing video games with Tony right now."

"Yeah, but— Tony, he's going through it, you know. He needs friends around him right now."

Irritation morphs into anger at his words. I'd asked him for a simple favor, one he could have done in half an hour if he'd wanted to.

Drive over, check on my mom, make sure she's doing alright and her current deadbeat boyfriend Mitch isn't around, and leave.

As quick as it was to appear, the anger leaves my body and makes way for an emotion far more deadly.

Disappointment.

I don't understand why it's so hard for him to prioritize anything to do with me, especially when I feel like I don't ask for much.

"I need you too. Remember me, your girlfriend?"

"Of course, babe. But you're far away—" I tune out the rest of his sentence, deaf to whatever excuse he's about to come up with.

"I don't want to argue with you. Please just try and go see my mom, alright?"

"You got it, babe. Promise." He says, clearly relieved that I'm dropping the topic. "I love you, we'll talk later, okay?"

"Sure." I tell him, "Bye."

I hang up the phone and toss it on the bed, frustrated.

All the tension that'd been released when I'd come trickles back into my body.

Why does it feel like I'm talking to a stranger every time I pick up the phone?

\*\*\*

When I meet up with Rhys the next day, I don't acknowledge yesterday and pretend that nothing happened between us.

Surprisingly, he doesn't bring it up either. He jumps into the plan for the workout and we start the drills with our usual focus and single-minded concentration.

Over the next week, my schedule is grueling. Between classes, team practices, and the individual training sessions with Rhys, plus all the socializing I do with my roommates, I'm drained.

But I'm happy.

I'm starting to see improvements in the way I react to plays, the way I read my opponent's movements, and my stamina.

The best change though, is my confidence. I honestly didn't realize how rattled my belief in myself was by the culture shock of joining a new team.

I'm slowly but surely building it back up to one hundred, with Rhys' help.

The time we've spent together has given me the opportunity to observe him. Covertly, of course, because if he caught me staring at him, he'd never let me live it down and his ego is big enough as it is.

He wasn't lying when he said was serious about soccer. There's a different side of him that comes to life on the field.

His smiles are harder to come by, his entire attention is dedicated to being the best.

The best player, the best captain, the best coach.

I'm surprised by how in sync we seem to be. Our bodies move the same way, our brains often reacting similarly to a play.

Part of that is him coaching me, but there's a natural chemistry there that shines through.

I wonder if he notices it.

Probably not with how absorbed he is when we play.

There's a level of intensity to his game play that's at odds with his playful smiles, his carefree personality.

It reminds me of the ferocity with which he pursues me.

That thought has anticipation swirling in my stomach.

Over the past week, he's continued his usual flirty banter with as much gusto as before.

The main difference is we haven't had any more physical encounters. He's been careful not to touch me, almost like he waits for me to come to him.

But I catch him staring at me from across the field during team practices.

When I turn to look at him, I expect him to look away, pretending he wasn't staring.

He never does.

He stands there, unashamed of the way he watches me.

Sometimes he waves cockily.

I have to turn around before he sees the stupid smile that pulls at the corner of my lips.

He looks especially sinful at our session today. He's currently standing with his hands on his hips, breathing heavily as he tries to catch his breath.

My eyes are caught on his hands, veiny and large and adorned with a couple silver rings.

The skin on my neck tingles at the memory of being clasped in his strong grip.

The feeling of swallowing against his hand, of knowing if he squeezed, if he added just a little bit of pressure, that I wouldn't be able to breathe.

His hands move to the end of his jersey where they grab the hem and bring it up to wipe the sweat from his brow.

The movement reveals the expanse of his stomach and chest and has saliva drying in my throat and heat pooling in my lower abdomen.

Sinewy abs ripple along the pane of his abdomen, lean and defined, up to his muscular chest.

His skin shines golden under the cool sun, his whole torso devoid of any hair except for a thin stripe starting at his belly button and disappearing below the waistband of his shorts.

He looks like a man.

One I want to get my mouth on as soon as possible.

Okay. *Okay*. Enough of that.

It's starting to worry me how quickly my thoughts about him move from appropriate to completely demented.

I blink repeatedly to bring me out of those dirty thoughts and find myself looking into Rhys' eyes instead.

He's got a knowing smile on his face like he caught me watching him, so I look away quickly and busy myself putting the equipment back in the bags.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

“No.”

“You were.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Come on, admit it. You were checking me out earlier.” Rhys says, his facial expression like the cat that got the cream. “Tell me how much you liked what you saw.”

We’re in Coach’s office putting away the balls, cones, and weights back that we borrowed.

Rhys didn’t comment on me watching him when I realized he’d noticed me. We finished practice with a few more sprint drills and I thought he wouldn’t mention it and I’d escaped unscathed.

I should have known he wouldn’t let it go that easily, the bastard.

“It’s a wonder you’re able to stand upright what with the weight of that enormous ego you lug around everywhere.”

He snorts as he opens Coach’s door, letting me walk through first into the hall. “If you want to talk about big things that keep me from standing upright, we should talk about another body part.”

I press the call button for the elevator and look at him, my eyebrows raised.

He puts both hands up in front of his chest to indicate a size. I want to say it's roughly nine inches.

I glance at his hands then back at his face where a cocky grin has painted itself on his lips.

"Massive," He mouths, "Sometimes I pitch forward because of it."

I roll my eyes as we walk into the elevator, hoping that reaction will cover the blush of my cheeks, the way my dirty mind immediately thought back to our hug.

Because I felt it, felt *him*.

I know he isn't lying.

"If you don't believe me, I'm more than happy to show you." He says, taking a couple steps towards me and forcing me to back up against the elevator wall. "I can complete the picture for you since you were checking me out earlier."

"I'm good, thank— oh, fuck."

My words are abruptly cut off by the elevator jolting. We're both frozen in shock as it shakes once, twice, and stops between floors, the light flickering ominously on and off a couple times.

Immediately, fear clogs up my throat and steals my breath.

"What the fuck?" Rhys exclaims, turning away from me and towards the panel where he presses the emergency call button.

I slide down the wall until my ass hits the floor, dread turning my legs to jello and making them incapable of holding my weight.

Meanwhile, Rhys makes a frustrated sound and hits the button again. "I don't think this thing's working," He says as he turns towards me, "We'll have to wait— What the—? What's wrong?"

Suddenly, he's on one knee in front of me, grabbing my face in his hands.

"You're white as a sheet. What's wrong?" He repeats, touching my forehead.

Chills roll through my body as I start to shake. I breathe steadily in through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to regulate my heart rate.

"N-nothing." I tell him, ashamed.

I hate this part of me. The part that's weak, not strong.

My claustrophobia isn't a regular problem – case in point, I was able to sit in a flying sardine can for nine hours to come to Switzerland – but when it crops up, it always cuts me off at the knees.

"Thayer." He warns.

"I'm fine. Really." I say, shaking my face out of his hold.

Or at least attempting to because his hand moves down to grip my jaw, pinning me in place.

"Tell me." He commands, then softer, "Tell me what's wrong, love."

He's not helping. The way he calls me 'love' has my heartbeat bursting to life just when I've worked on stabilizing it.

My palms are sweaty and hold the bunched fabric of my shorts in a death grip.

"I had to hide sometimes." I start, "From my mom's boyfriends, I mean. When they'd start screaming, start throwing things, I'd just go hide in my closet and I'd stay there for hours until the noises stopped."

I swallow around the ball in my throat and his thumb starts stroking the line of my jaw, the gesture reassuring.

It has a calming effect on me, muffling the panic from before.



“They never hurt me. I just... don’t like being trapped in confined spaces with no escape because of it.” I finish with a careless shrug. “I’m fine, I really am, I’m just having a very dramatic reaction to this elevator, that’s all.”

If eyes could burn people alive, I think all they’d find of me in this elevator is a burn mark of my ass on the carpet beneath me.

He stares at me unblinkingly, the eye contact so powerful, so enthralling, I feel like he’s looking into the depths of my soul.

He cuts it off abruptly, reaching into the pocket of his shorts and taking out his phone.

He types away for a few moments before bringing the phone up to his ear, watching me as it rings.

Finally, someone picks up and that’s when I discover that Rhys speaks flawless French because he has a minute-long conversation in the language before he hangs up and puts the phone back in his pocket.

“That was Fred, the mayor. He’s going to send firefighters to get us as a matter of priority, we should be out of here in ten minutes.”

“You called the mayor?”

“If I could cut these doors open and get you out myself, I would.” He says, the coldness of his tone at odds with his heated words.

I’m not sure what to say to that, so I settle for something safe.

“Don’t worry, I can wait.”

He scoffs at that and drops backwards from his knees to sit in front of me. His hands come up to wrap around my arms reassuringly.

“I turned around and you were on the floor, shaking, covered in sweat, and pale as a ghost. Worse, you looked so fucking small and terrified. You almost gave me a heart attack.” He says, placing a hand on his chest. “Don’t tell me

that ‘you’re fine’ or ‘you can wait’ after that, because I’m not going to have you sitting in here a second longer than you need to be.”

I blink at him silently, unsure what to say. He speaks with barely controlled ire, like it’s physically costing him to know that being trapped here is my worst nightmare.

His aura is dark and threatening around him and in this moment, I know he would slay my every demon if presented with the opportunity.

He rubs my arms back and forth in a comforting gesture.

“Are you feeling better?” He asks.

“Y-yeah,” I clear my throat, “It helps to talk. Keeps my mind off of where we’re doing the talking.”

“I’ll kill them.”

“Who?” I ask, thrown off by the awkward segue.

“The boyfriends.” He replies, his tone sharp enough to cut. “You better hope I never set foot in Chicago, Silver, because if I ever run into one of those bastards, I’ll cut their heart out and feed it to them.”

“Mackley—”

“Don’t.” He says, throwing me a black look. “That was a promise.”

I can hear in his voice that he’s serious. He’d really kill someone for messing with me.

Good thing he won’t ever come to Chicago then.

“That’s not necessary.” I say, then try to think of ways to change the subject. “What were we talking about before?”

“How big my cock is. I’m happy to go back to that topic of conversation if you prefer.” He says, the teasing and mocking side of him peeking through the darkness.

I laugh at that, the much needed laughter helping to dissipate some of the tension in my chest.

I close my eyes and tilt my head back against the wall.

“Thank you for telling me though.”

I peel them open and look at him. He’s moved backwards so he’s sitting against the opposite wall, his arms resting on his knees.

I nod, before bringing my knees up to my chest as well.

“You’re one of only two other people who know.” I admit to him, before adding half-jokingly, half-seriously, “Guard that secret with your life.”

“Bellamy has to know. That means,” He says, looking at me, “The idiot back home doesn’t know?”

I think he intends for that to be a statement, but it comes out more like a question.

“Not an idiot and no, he doesn’t.”

Possessiveness lights up in his eyes at my confirmation. It’d be impossible to wipe off the smug look on his face even if I tried, I’m sure of it.

“How come?”

I think about how to answer before I decide on the truth. “I work so hard to be strong.” I tell him before pausing thoughtfully. “I guess I don’t like people seeing me be weak.”

“You think your claustrophobia is a weakness?”

“What would you call it?”

He hums pensively, looking up at the ceiling. “You did what you had to do to survive.” He says, before lowering his gaze back down to meet mine. “To me, that’s the very definition of strength.”

A pang jabs at my stomach at his words, trepidation making the blood sing in my veins.

He has a way with words when he wants to.

“You’re not good at being vulnerable either.” I tell him, desperate to move the conversation off of me.

“Is that right?” He asks, his tone lazily questioning.

“Yes.”

“In what way?”

“You have your cocky, hot, funny guy facade. I think that’s a big part of who you actually are, but behind that there’s someone with really deep, complex emotions who you keep carefully protected and away from the outside world.”

His smile expands to a full blown smirk. “Did you just call me hot?”

“See? You’re deflecting.” I chide him. “Tell me something. Like I just told you, tell me something real.”

“Why?”

A loud metallic noise sounds to my left, startling me.

The firefighters must be here, working on a way to get us out. I look back at him and find that he never looked away, his intense gaze still locked on my face.

“We’re trapped in a metal box, completely locked away from the rest of the world. I just told you what’s probably my deepest, darkest secret. There are no repercussions, no judgements in this elevator, just truth.” I tell him. “So leave a secret here with me.”

He considers me for a second, those bottomless navy eyes piercing a hole through me. I watch him explore every inch of my face, as if committing it to memory.

“Alright.”

Anticipation has my stomach in knots as I nod.

“I assume Bellamy told you that I donated money to renovate the library and reopen it in my parent’s names, right?”

“Yes.”

That’s where Bellamy’s been completing her detention, sorting and stacking books ahead of the grand opening.

“I haven’t been able to set foot in there yet.”

That’s definitely surprising. Renovations are done and from what I understand we’re only a couple weeks away from

the grand opening.

My heart aches for him.

I can only imagine the pain of losing both of his parents and of having to honor their memory while simultaneously learning how to live without them.

It's a pretty incredible burden to carry.

“Do you think you'll be able to go to the reopening?”

“Yeah. It's not that I can't. The timing's just never been right.” He says, subconsciously tapping a frenzied rhythm on the floor with his foot.

I know it's not that simple. That it's got to be a hard thing to do, even though it seems an innocuous enough task.

“All your friends will be there. I'll be there. We'll make it a fun night.”

Too lazy to get up, I crawl on my knees over to him and squeeze his hand.

He groans thickly as I sit next to him. “Never crawl towards me like that again.”

I tsk, the sound clicking in my mouth. “I bat my eyelashes and you get hard, that's hardly my fault.”

“Careful.” He warns. “I've been biding my time this past week not asking for it, waiting for you to be ready. But if you keep provoking me, I'll fuck you against the wall and just take it.”

I can't help it.

I lick my lips at the thought.

“Of course you'd like that,” He says, desire darkening his eyes as he catches me moistening my lips. “You're so desperate to fuck me, you fall apart every time I touch you. I bet I could make you come right now just by licking, kissing and biting your neck.”

With the way my body temperature shoots up at his words, I think he could make me come just by narrating how

he'd abuse my neck.

*Carter. Remember Carter.*

Why is it that recently, I've almost had to force myself to think of him?

It's like the thoughts of him, of us together, are getting further and further away from me.

"You're the one that should be careful you don't fall in love with me given the way you're so obsessively after me." I tell him.

"Never going to happen." He grunts out, bluntly.

I shoot him a wounded look, stung.

It doesn't feel great to hear him say that so casually, like it'd be the hardest thing in the world to fall in love with me.

I realize it's a ridiculous thing for me to get my feelings hurt over given that I'm the one in a relationship, but that doesn't do anything to lessen the blow.

I'm being irrational and I don't give a shit.

I abruptly stand up, annoyed at him.

Annoyed at myself for allowing this surreal moment to make me lower my guard around him.

"We're in here!" I yell at the top of my lungs towards the clanging noises on the other side of the elevator doors.

"The fuck's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"You sure? Because you just screamed like a banshee at those firefighters."

"I'm trying to get us out. You should be happy, you'll be far from me and back with the people you love in just a few moments." I say, with added emphasis on the word 'love'.

\*\*\*



*Rhys*

A slow smile spreads across my face as understanding dawns.

“Are you upset because I said falling in love with you was never going to happen?”

Anger electrifies her silver hair, making her look radiant.

“Don’t think for a second that I care about that.” She spits out, crossing her arms over her chest as she stares me down. “It’s the principle. It’s rude as fuck to say that, you make it sound as if I’m unlovable.”

“Thayer.”

She turns back towards the door. “I need to get out of here.”

“Thayer.” I warn.

“Help! *Aidez-moi*, please.” She attempts, in less than mediocre French.

I ignore the warmth that spreads in my belly at the thought that she’s this upset about me theoretically loving her or not.

I may be closer to cracking her than I thought.



“I’ve never been in love and I never plan on being in love.” I tell her, doing her the kindness of not investigating any further why this concept annoys her so much.

That gets her attention.

She turns back towards me, her eyes narrowed as they take me in.

“You don’t believe in love?” Her dubious tone meant to convey how ridiculous she finds that thought.

“No, I believe in it. I’ve seen just how powerful love can be.” I tell her, my tone bordering on reminiscent. “But I think it’s a soft point, a weakness. To hand over your heart to someone who lives in such an easily breakable shell, who’s so easy to kill and walking around in a world this dangerous. You give your everything to that person and they die and you’re left with nothing. Not even the person you were before.” I tell her. “I went through that once with my parents, I don’t want to ever go through it again.”

Her mouth flattens, the look on her face empathetic as she looks at me. “I understand why you’d feel that way, but you can’t go through life avoiding love because you’re afraid of losing it. I imagine there’d be just as much pain in doing that.”

“I can live with that kind of dull pain. Having to live without another person I love might actually kill me.”

I look away, almost embarrassed at having been so vulnerable. Much more so than admitting I hadn’t been able to go to the library.

“Anyway, this is all just hypothetical. Like I said, I’ve never been in love. Never even come close.”

She nods slowly, chewing on her lips thoughtfully. “Why did you say that stuff at the party then?”

I pretend to think and see if I can remember, but I know exactly what she’s talking about. When I’d told her just what I thought about the asshole she had waiting for her back home.

“About your boyfriend being an idiot for letting you leave without him?” I ask.

She nods.

“Because you’re not being loved correctly and you deserve to be.”

“Got it.”

“I can’t help you with that, but I can at least fuck you better.”

Those were probably the wrong words but I couldn’t phrase them more eloquently.

Her spine snaps straight, every vertebrae locking into position as she pierces me with an irked look.

“You want me to break up with my boyfriend who I love... just so I can fuck you with no commitment? Am I getting that right?” She asks, sarcasm dripping from her lips.

I growl at her casual proclamation of love for her boyfriend.

“I want you. The thought of him touching you makes me want to rip his fingernails off one by one before I move on to his toenails, and I think I’ve been very clear about that.” I say before continuing, “And I know you want me too, even if you won’t admit it. Give in to the feelings I know you’ve been fighting since you got here. Break up with him and let me be your rebound.”

At that exact moment, the doors of the elevator open and a firefighter peeks his head inside.

“*Bonjour*,” He says, “*Vous allez bien?*”

“*Oui*.” I answer, telling him that we’re both alright. He exits, probably to get some equipment.

I look back at Thayer who stands there, wordlessly.

“Let me give you a lift.” I tell her.

The firefighter comes back, this time dropping a small two step ladder that we can use to climb out of the elevator. “Alright.” He says, this time in English. “*Mademoiselle* first.”

I’m still waiting for her to answer me.

She shakes her head, avoiding my eyes. “No, thanks. I’ll find my own way.”

Without looking at me, she grabs the firefighter’s outstretched hand and uses it to propel herself up the ladder and out of the elevator.

When I clear the door and stand up straight, brushing dust from my pants, I look around for her.

She’s gone.

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I sprawl across the backseat of the limo, exhausted.

All the training plus the stress of being trapped in that elevator have taken it out of me.

Instead of spending an evening at home like I was hoping, I now have to meet Rogue in Geneva.

He’s wooing his key shareholders, trying to assure a smooth succession between his father and him when it eventually happens, and he needs us there for some board cocktail hour bullshit.

That’s about the last thing I want to be doing right now.

Preferably, I’d be spending the evening drinking beer and replaying the entire elevator exchange with Thayer.

It’s hard to describe the feeling that’d punched me in the gut when I’d turned around expecting to find her standing and fine, and instead found her trembling on the floor.

Her face had been so white, I thought she was about to pass out. My heart had dropped into my ass and my hands had shaken as they’d grabbed her face.

I rub my eyes wearily before looking out the window as we leave Aubonne. I don’t think I took a breath for those ten seconds that stretched to minutes in my chest.

I'm going to take that entire elevator apart – piece by fucking piece – for putting her through that.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I unlock it and open a text to Phil Thornton, RCA's headmaster.

**Rhys:** The south elevator in the athletic building. I want it decommissioned.

**Thornton:** You can't just text this number.

**Thornton:** And what are you talking about?

**Rhys:** It's faulty. I want it decommissioned today. I'll donate however much is needed to get it replaced with something state of the art.

**Thornton:** Because that's what we need, state of the art elevators.

**Thornton:** I can't just decommission an elevator because you have a problem with it.

**Rhys:** I'll throw in a new swimming pool.

**Thornton:** Go on...

**Rhys:** Funding for a new Olympic-sized pool and the new elevator. But I want it blocked off immediately.

**Thornton:** Alright.

**Thornton:** Quite a price to pay for one elevator.

I lock my screen and put my phone away.

I'd have paid a lot more money to get that elevator destroyed.

We pull into the hotel Rogue's staying at and my driver, Jake, opens my door.

"Thank you."

"Sir." He answers as I saunter through the doors and directly up to the penthouse Rogue's staying in.

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We're two hours into this ass-kissing cocktail hour and I've had enough.

Across from me, Rogue stands in a circle with three shareholders, listening intently to one of them as he energetically recounts what I'm sure is an incredibly dull story of the 'good ole days'.

If the barely concealed look of boredom on Rogue's face is anything to go by, then I'm right.

Phoenix is sitting in an armchair off to the side, sipping a glass of whiskey with a distant look on his face.

"Everything alright, mate?" I ask him.

"Yes." He says. "I've had enough socializing for today." He drains his glass and stands up. "I'm going back to the hotel."

He gives me a chin tip and walks off.

I'd like nothing more than to follow him. The thought of taking off my suit and kicking back with a drink and a game has me almost salivating.

Unfortunately, I know that Rogue needs my support tonight. I'll stay as long as he needs me to, but I'm not doing any more small talk. Phoenix was onto something with this whole sitting off to the side thing.

I wonder what Thayer's doing.

Is she feeling better?

She was annoyed when she left me earlier this afternoon. Whether she was willing to admit it to herself or not, hearing that I wasn't looking for a long term relationship had pissed her off.

Which meant that at least part of her fancied me enough that that news had come as a disappointment to her.

A thrill zings through me at that thought. If I'm being honest, I don't know what my plan is with her.

All I know is I crave her.

I've never felt such dark, possessive desire for someone.

I need to touch her, to bury myself in her, to mark her. Originally, I'd thought this was going to be a one and done thing.

Get her to submit to me, fuck her out of my system and move on.

That was before, when I thought I'd get her under me easily, with barely any effort at all.

Like I usually did.

Now that she'd made this the challenge it's become, one time sure as fuck isn't going to be enough.

I'd fuck her to punish her, to teach her a lesson, repeatedly and until I'd had enough.

And if the avarice with which I thought of her was anything to go by, it'd take some time before I'd sate my appetite.

A hum vibrates in my chest at the thought, almost a purr.

Still, I hope I didn't inadvertently push her back closer to that fucker in Chicago by telling her the truth.

Thunderous clouds obscure my vision at the thought.

I hadn't meant to tell her about not looking for a serious relationship, it'd just come out amidst the 'vulnerable' conversation she'd wanted to have.

It was better for her to know where my head was anyway.

I open the Instagram app on my phone and go to Thayer's profile. No new posts since the last time I creped on her, but there is a new story.

I tap it open and watch.

It's a video of Bellamy dancing in a club. The location is tagged as Baroque.

She's dancing seductively, her hips moving to whatever song is playing. She makes eye contact with the camera and

beckons suggestively in a ‘come hither’ motion.

The video cuts off moments later, but not before showing a couple guys eyeing her with interest.

My brow furrows. This video was posted to Thayer’s story, but she’s not in it. I turn my volume all the way up and watch it again, this time with sound on.

“Oh, *fuck*.” I say, chuckling to myself. “He’s going to lose his shit.”

Rogue’s going to go off on one when he sees this video. I can’t help but smile at the thought.

This is just the type of entertainment that was missing from my Saturday night.

I scope out the room and see that Rogue is still standing in the same group as before. Getting up, I walk over to him and put my hand on his shoulder.

“Excuse us,” I say, turning towards the shareholders with my most charming smile, “I need to steal him away for a minute.”

With that, I use the pressure on Rogue’s shoulder to push him towards the doorway.

“The fuck was that about?” He asks, irritation clear in his tone.

He’s been in a mood since I met up with him. He’d never admit it, but I know he’s missing Bellamy. This is the longest he’s gone without seeing her since whatever this thing they’re doing started.

I’m about to pour oil on that fire and watch it explode.

“I thought you’d want to see this.” I say, clicking on Thayer’s story and handing him my phone.

I watch his face go from carefully blank to furious in a split second. A spark flames in his eyes and his jaw snaps shut so violently I can hear it.

He watches it three times, his eyes flying all over the screen.

Watching her.

Watching her body.

Watching other men ogle her.

Finally, he looks up at me. “Did you watch this?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll carve your eyes out,” He says, thrusting the phone against my chest, “Wipe it from your memory forever.”

I chuckle. “You realize you’ll have to carve a few hundred eyes out, right? She posted it on her public story.” I tell him, before pulling out the *pièce de résistance*. I hand him the phone back. “Watch it with sound.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

He ups the sound and then presses play again. Thayer’s voice can be heard through the mic as she says, “*That’s my best friend! She’s single and up for grabs, gentlemen and gentlemen.*”

Rogue is out of the room before she’s even done with her sentence, the door slamming loudly shut behind him. I follow after him, my delighted laughter bouncing off the walls of the hallway as I do.

It’s abruptly cut off when he slams me against the wall, his forearm against my throat. He presses once, violently, and then releases me.

“Bothered are you?” I say, coughing and still laughing. This is an even better reaction than I was hoping.

“I don’t know why you’re smiling,” He says, his smile cruel and downright terrifying. “Did you forget Thayer’s in that club as well? Probably also dressed in a slutty little outfit on the dance floor being dry humped to Drake as we speak.”

It’s his turn to laugh when the smile wipes off my face. And I understand why he threw me up against the wall because I want to murder him for laughing.



I was already planning on going with him to Baroque but now it feels like I can't waste another second before getting there.

I hook him around the ankle with my foot and yank, tripping him to the floor.

"Take your own fucking car." I spit at him, as he looks up at me from his back.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

I down my glass of water and slam another shot before turning back towards the dancefloor where Bellamy's still dancing.

The adrenaline from dancing coupled with the alcohol in my veins loosen me up and have me feeling so good as hell to quote Lizzo.

Baroque plays all the best club hits and we've been dancing for a while, together and apart, our minds and bodies completely given over to dancing.

But I need a moment to clear my head.

Because no matter how loud the music is and no matter how hard I try to think of something else, my thoughts keep going back to what Rhys told me.

How cliché of a man like him not to believe in love.

Or, sorry, believe in it but not *want* to be in love. Ever.

*Not that it matters to me either way. I just think it's a completely unrealistic approach to life and if that's truly how he felt then he shouldn't have pursued me so blindly.*

No.

It's not about me. It has *nothing* to do with me.

And yet.

I want to scream in frustration. My head's fucked and it's all his fault. Why does it feel like he personally hurt me when

I already have someone I love?

I'm not getting anywhere, the mess in my head getting more complicated the more I think about it.

The alcohol isn't helping either.

It should be simple – it doesn't have anything to do with me.

Instead, I'm finding out that maybe as much as I've been pretending otherwise, as much as I've been trying to hide behind those defenses, *maybe*... I do feel something for him.

Did feel something for him.

And hearing that that 'something' could never be anything more bruised that part of me.

I wish it'd killed it entirely. I wish hearing he would never have feelings for me put my own out like pouring the entire Niagara Falls on a campfire, but it didn't.

The campfire is smaller. It's deeper into the forest and harder to find.

But it still roars mercilessly nonetheless.

It doesn't help that Carter and I haven't really spoken since our semi-argument. He's called, but I haven't answered.

Or called back.

Honestly, I don't know what I'm doing. Carter and I are fine now but I wish we could get back to what we had before.

Before he cheated.

Maybe I haven't truly forgiven him, maybe that's the problem. I'm not sure.

It just feels like we're in this sort of purgatory and I don't know how to get us out.

I don't even know if I want to get us out.

He did break a part of me when he slept with someone else instead of me. Before me.

When we'd started dating, I wasn't ready to have sex with him. I'd seen the terrible, sex-first relationships my mom was having and I was cautious and scared of repeating the same cycle.

So we'd waited and he'd been so patient. Attentive and reassuring, he didn't pressure me. At least not at the beginning.

We'd done other things and we'd grown together as a couple and I thought we were happy. I was ready and was planning a special night for us when he told me he'd cheated.

That'd been a record scratch moment in the relationship and I'd left for Switzerland two months later.

Unfortunately, we hadn't really taken the time to put the relationship back on the right course before I left.

That's why we're hovering in this in between now, distance making it impossible to go one way or the other.

With a bone deep sigh, I look back at where Bellamy is. My eyes widen when I see who she's talking to.

Rogue.

His hands are wrapped around her and I can tell even from where I stand that jealousy pours off him in waves.

He came for her.

I thought he might come or at least reach out to her when he saw the story I posted.

She'd been missing him and he'd needed a kick up the ass to remember he had a literal queen pining after him back home.

I'm happy for Bellamy and only a little bit jealous he tracked her down. Say what you will about their relationship but that's a pretty romantic gesture.

"Hello, love."

It's very noisy in the club and he doesn't speak particularly loudly, but somehow his words float over to me and singe into every pore of my exposed skin.

My eyes close slowly as a tremor slides down the length of my spine.

It's awareness that he's suddenly, unexpectedly here.

Apprehension at what I'm going to see when I turn around.

Adrenaline at the thought of what verbal sparring is about to happen.

I turn around and my eyes are rewarded with the gift of Rhys standing before me clad in an expensive navy suit. It's tailored to within an inch of his life around his large body, paired with black shoes and a white pocket square.

More importantly, more destructively, it matches the color of his eyes.

No, 'matches' is too boring a way to describe it. It reflects them, making them shine with the dark intent I see in them.

With the lust that burns bright and murderous as he takes in my strappy heels.

My smoky eyes.

My little black dress.

"Mackley."

His jaw ticks at that.

"Silver." He says with a nod.

"You came with Rogue?" I ask.

A smile lifts the corner of his lips. "I did. I goaded him into coming here by showing him your story."

"It served its intended purpose then." I reply, matching his smile with one of my own.

His smile morphs into a grin. "Evil."

"Only as evil as the person who showed it to him."

"Touché." He says with a deep laugh this time.

His eyes rake down my body, the look of arousal in them proving he likes what he sees. He inhales deeply, sharply, the move making his nostrils flare as he takes me in appreciatively.

He continues staring at me and I grow uncomfortable under his gaze. It's like he's picking apart much more than just what I'm wearing, like he's hoping to dig below the surface and see what he can find.

"I know why Rogue came," I tell him, clearing my throat, "But why did you?"

"I came for you."

My legs quiver and my pussy throbs at those words. How he so casually reflects the thoughts I'd had about Rogue showing up, how a part of me had wanted that same attention for myself.

Now that I have it though, I'm not sure. Not sure what to do with it, not sure if I want it.

My voice is slightly breathless when I speak. "What do you mean?"

He takes a step towards me and I have to resist taking one back in response.

He continues his advance and then circles me, taking his time and shamelessly picking me apart with his penetrating gaze as he does so.

"I'm not him." He declares, his jaw set.

"Who?"

"Your soon to be ex. He leaves you unprotected, not laying claim to you. I don't have that problem." He snaps, "I'll murder anyone who touches you. Think about that the next time you decide to go dancing in a bar."

My breath catches in my throat. My words come out husky when I speak.

"He trusts me." I say, ignoring the twinge in my stomach that says maybe he shouldn't.

Because unbeknownst to him, I've let my head get turned by someone else.

Not all the way, but as much as it pains me to admit, I'm no longer completely locked in, singularly looking ahead to my future with Carter.

There's a little wobble.

And it's not about Rhys. Or at least, not entirely about him. For the first time, I'm starting to question my relationship in a real way.

"He shouldn't trust *them*." He answers gruffly, his voice hoarse. "Not when you look stunning enough to take my fucking breath away." His hand lands featherlight on my hip and drags across my lower back as he keeps circling me. His fingers brush the top curve of my ass. "Not when your legs are on display like this, begging to be spread and your pussy eaten." His hand reaches out surreptitiously to grab my right wrist. "He's a fool for leaving you alone and simply hoping that no one would steal you away." His smile is predatory as he looks at me. "Because I won't stop until you belong to me."

"Stop." I ask, "Please."

"Why? Does it make you uncomfortable to know the lengths I would go to to have you?"

"To have me temporarily." I correct him, and I want to take the words back as soon as I say them.

They reveal too much.

"Is that the problem?" He says, so close that I feel his breath on my hair. "Can you tell me honestly that you're looking for another relationship? To fall in love with someone else?"

When I stay silent, he continues.

"You're not. What you want is to be fucked." He says, whispering close to my ear. "Fucked by me that is."

"You're being inappropriate again."

“Am I?” He asks before raising the hand that holds my wrist up between us. “Because I’ve had my thumb on your pulse for the past two minutes and your heartbeat jumps every time I talk about fucking you. Your body wants me even when your brain denies it.”

I scoff.

“I say we ignore our brains and just let our bodies fight it out. Preferably naked and with me on top, but I’ll take it any way you’ll give it.” He says with a sly smirk.

“No.” I’m impressed at how firmly my words come out. I was afraid my voice would shake and reveal something I wasn’t ready to reveal.

He looks at me languidly, his eyes saying everything and nothing all at once. For a few beats we stand unmoving, letting the music around us sweep away any awkwardness that a silence would have brought. He looks into my eyes like he thinks he might find the answer to me in them.

How to convince me, how to seduce me, how to decode me.

I can’t bear the silence any longer.

“Dance with me.”

“No.”

I frown. “Because I won’t do what you want?”

“Because if I touch you right now Thayer, in that dress, in this club and to this song,” He says, licking his lips hungrily, the move sending a shot straight to my clit, “I won’t be able to stop myself. I’ll eat you out on this bar before I bend you over that couch and fuck you until you scream my name.” He takes a step towards me, grabbing the back of my neck and using it to bring my face up to his. “*My name. My real name. And you’ll do it so loudly and so vehemently people will think you discovered a new deity.*”

“You’d do that in front of all these people?”

“No. I’d buy the bar first and kick everyone out.”



“Really?” I ask, breathily.

His eyes darken and the casual smile on his lips wipes off his face. “Don’t play with me.”

“I’m not.”

“I told you once that you’d pay for the lies you told me. The bill is racking up and I’m not sure you’re ready to pay the price.” He says, releasing me and taking a step back.

I swallow thickly, looking away from him and back towards the dance floor.

“I’m going dancing.” I say, because what else can I say to him. I start walking off but he grabs my wrist, holding me in place.

“Remember what I said,” He tells me, “No one touches you.”

He releases my arm and drops onto one of the lounge couches facing the dance floor. He’ll be able to keep watching me from that vantage point.

Me and apparently whoever’s dumb enough to come near me.

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

I end up giving Thayer and Nera a ride home after the night out at Baroque.

Bellamy left earlier in the night with Rogue and Sixtine ended up basically getting kidnapped by Phoenix.

He showed up, kicked off and started chaos, before eventually disappearing with her.

Thayer tried to run after them but I restrained her, one of my arms wrapping around her waist and pulling her back against my chest.

Fuck, that hold had felt good.

She fit perfectly against me, as if her shape was designed and carved to fit against mine like a puzzle piece.

She shoved me off and ripped me a new one for not letting her run after them, but Phoenix had business to take care of and it wasn't her place to intervene.

Plus, the more he focused on Six, the more he'd leave Thayer alone.

I haven't forgotten the way he previously inserted himself, ultimately leading to the bet between Devlin and I.

That fucking bet.

For the first time in my life, it's not losing that I'm afraid of.

It's the cost of losing.

Because there's no way I'm letting Devlin near Thayer. If I so much as see him turn his head in her direction, I'll have to blind him.

Permanently.

I shake my head. I sound just as fucking psychotic as Rogue. And I feel it too.

A week passes after Baroque and I know I'm running out of time. Some days, I feel like I'm so close to convincing her. Like if I was just to grab her and kiss her, she'd let me.

It takes everything in me not to because I know the decision needs to come from her.

But fuck, do I want to.

Other days, she gives me a cold shoulder chilly enough to freeze the entire Pacific ocean. On those days I want to fuck the stubbornness right out of her.

Then I'd fuck it back in, because it's one of the things I like the most about her.

Today's one of those days.

I'm putting away equipment while she completes her favorite drill – bleacher runs – when I hear a loud noise behind me, followed by a pained cry.

When I whip around, I find her sprawled halfway up the bleachers, hands clutching her ankle.

I'm across the field and clearing the steps three at a time before I can even process that I've moved.

“Let me see.” I say, and the worry that I'd been trying to conceal rips through my voice.

“I tripped over one of the steps,” She says with a grimace as she releases her ankle, “I was distracted.”

I gingerly take hold of her foot, making sure not to move it in the process. Grabbing the end of one of the laces, I pull it slowly and undo the knot.

I cup the back of her ankle and gently remove the shoe before working her ankle left and then right to see how much she's able to move it.

"How's the pain?" I ask, looking back at her. She winces as I push it a little too far out of range.

"It's okay. I'm more annoyed it happened than anything."

"I think it's a sprained ankle, you should be fine in a couple of days. Just ice and elevate it."

"Are you a doctor?" She asks grumpily.

I chuckle at her tone. "No, but I've had enough of these injuries to know. Now come on." I say, leaning down to wrap my arms around her.

"What are you— Mackley, no!"

"Too late." I tell her once she's in my arms and we're going down the stairs.

"Put me down."

"No."

"Mackley." She warns.

"Silver." I reply, my tone teasing.

She tries wriggling in my arms to free herself. I strengthen my hold on her, forcing her tighter against my chest and she freezes.

Her chin rubs against my pecs as she looks up at me. I'm carrying her with ease across the pitch and towards the parking lot.

She's quiet for a second and I think she's accepted her situation.

"I can walk." She tells me, deciding on another tactic.

"No you can't."

“I can.”

“Don’t be stubborn.”

“You like my stubbornness.” Surprised at her boldness, I look down at her and we share a small, covert smile. “Seriously though, I can walk.”

“Do you want to be able to play Friday?” I ask, bluntly.

RCA’s next football match is in a couple of days and if she doesn’t take care of her ankle, she’ll be benched.

As a fierce competitor, that’s likely her worst nightmare. And that’s without taking into account the fact that we’ve been training rigorously together for weeks now and she’s got a chance to show off her progress.

That shuts her up.

“Fine.” She says, petulantly. “But I’m not happy about it.”

“Noted.” I say, drolly.

She looks up at me, her gaze tracing the lines of my Adam’s apple, raking over the smooth angles of my jaw and coming to rest on my eyes.

“You really don’t give up, do you?”

“My father always told me to go after what I want, no matter how hard the challenge. I don’t think he’d imagined quite this type of challenge though,” I say with a deep laugh, thinking about what my dad would say, “But he’d like you.”

“Really?” She asks, and I can hear the pleased inclination of her voice and imagine the crinkle of her eyes, even without looking at her.

“Yeah. He’d say I could use being put in my place.” I say, chuckling again.

My dad was my greatest supporter, always. That didn’t mean he didn’t continuously rib me about every little thing growing up, from my Justin Bieber haircut phase to my IG thirst traps and, eventually, to the disproportionate size of my ego.

“They’d be proud of that ‘place’ today.” She says.

I flick a glance down at her as we approach the parking lot. “You think?”

“I mean, look at you. Selflessly carrying your injured friend to safety.”

“That’s what you think,” I tell her, “But I have a vested interest in having you think highly of me.”

“So I’ll sleep with you?”

“So you’ll fuck me, yes. There’ll be no sleep involved.” I say, lust thickening my voice, “Your only out the first time we fuck is passing out, otherwise you’re getting fucked without a break until I’ve deemed it punishment enough for making me wait as long as I have. And even then, I might just keep going and see if I can wake you up with my cock.”

A shiver passes over her skin and I purr at the sight. “I know, love. You’re so desperate for it.” I say and drop my lips to the top of her head. I kiss her deeply, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her fruity shampoo, and then lift my lips.

If you’d told me the first time I’d kiss Thayer it’d be on the top of her head, I’d have laughed in your face.

But at this point, I’m taking what I can get.

She looks up at me through her eyelashes, her gaze soft and open and fucking inviting.

“Don’t look at me like that.” I growl at her.

“Why not?”

“Girls that ask me to fuck them with their eyes get what they want and get fucked on the hood of my car in the school parking lot.”

Sparks fly in her eyes and her tone is flinty when she speaks. “That happens a lot, does it?”

“Surprisingly, more than you’d think.” I answer, giving her a sly smile.

“Screw you.”

She thrashes in my arms and tries to break free of my hold again, this time with more aggression than before.

“Put me down, Mackley.”

I know she’s trying to piss me off by calling me that and it works. My jaw tics violently as I resist the urge to shake her.

“Why does that bother you?” I grunt at her, my voice gravelly low.

“It doesn’t.” She snaps at me, still trying to wrangle out of my hold.

I drop her upright, careful to avoid putting pressure on her ankle, and back her up against my car. My arms come out on either side of her to trap her against the door.

“It does. You’re so mad, your muscles are vibrating with anger. Look at yourself.”

She doesn’t, turning her head away instead.

My hand snaps out and grips her jaw, forcing her to look back at me.

“At least look at me when you lie to me.” I tell her, looking down at her through heavy lidded eyes.

My hold on her jaw has her lips all puffy and in my face. I want to bite into them and suck on them, capturing and smothering her cries with my tongue as I devour her.

I lick my lips at the thought and she sees it.

Her eyes reveal the secret her mouth is still desperate to keep.

She wants me.

It’s painted clear as day in her blown pupils as she stares at my mouth. Starving children don’t look at Thanksgiving meals with as much hunger as she looks at me.

I plaster my body against her, forcing her completely against the door with nowhere to go. Her legs are partially spread and I use the slight opening to slide my knee up

between them, not stopping until I reach the apex of her thighs.

A soft inhale whistles through her lips and I almost come in my kit at the sound.

“That’s a good girl.” I whisper, my face close enough to hers that she can feel my words on her lips.

She moans.

It’s a pitchy, desperate sound. Not much more than a small whimper and it’s the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever heard.

I press my knee against her pussy, making more definitive contact with her clit, and her hand shoots out, her fingers splaying on my chest.

Her eyes flutter close as she lets herself go momentarily.

She just gives in to the sensations, to the way I’m touching her and will soon be owning her.

My face comes down to her ear, my voice a desperate whisper, “If you won’t let me fuck you, at least let me kiss you.”

Her eyes fly open, even as I start to circle my knee roughly against her clit, the feeling sending sparks shooting through her like a match against a striker.

“One taste,” I say, tilting my face towards hers as I whisper, “It feels like if I don’t taste you, I’ll die.”

She licks her lips as I get within millimeters of her mouth.

“Thayer!”

My neck snaps in the direction of the voice.

Nera’s standing there with her fencing bag and a shocked look on her face. I can only imagine the picture we must be painting for her – Thayer splayed against my car with my knee between her legs, panting and seconds away from being defiled by me.



I'm about to verbally incinerate our interruptor when Thayer pushes me off.

"Oh my God," She says, shoving me back as hard as she can.

I let myself fall back this time.

The moment's lost.

She stumbles when she tries to walk.

"Here, let me give you a lift." I say, taking a step towards her.

She puts her hand up, stopping me in my tracks. "No, that's alright. Nera will drive." She says, hopping over to her friend on one leg. "I'll ice and elevate like you said."

She hooks an arm over Nera's shoulders and rests her weight on her as they head to the golf carts.

"Silver." I bark out, and she turns around. "Watching your back as you walk away is starting to piss me off. One day soon, I'm going to lock you in a room and you won't have anywhere to run off to." I warn her darkly.

She swallows thickly, a look on her face that's part anticipation, part fear and hobbles off.

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After Thayer drives away, I climb into my car, unzip my pants and pull my dick out.

I spit in my hand and start stroking my cock up and down, picturing the 'fuck me' look in her eye and the puffiness of her lips as I'd grabbed her face.

I pick up the pace as I imagine her lips wrapped around my dick, her throat struggling to take all of me and being forced to anyway.

I'm shunting my hips into my hand, palming my cock like a madman. Finally, I imagine my dick popping out of her mouth as she looks up at me from beneath her eyelashes and says my name.

My actual fucking name.

My balls tighten and my muscles lock before I come, spurts of cum landing all over my shorts.

The release is only temporary, tension and need tightening my balls again just minutes later.

I'm out of fucking control.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

He was so close to my mouth I'd felt his breath on my tongue.

Smelled the cold mintiness of his gum as he'd spoken almost up against my lips.

It takes me long minutes to calm the mad racing of my heartbeat as Nera drives us home. Surprisingly, she hasn't said a word about what she witnessed, rambling on instead about her practice.

Thank God she interrupted when she did.

Part of me is ashamed to admit I wouldn't have been able to stop this. That I'd been the one arching my hips towards him and bearing down on his knee where it pressed against my center.

I'd been as wantonly desperate for him as he had for me.

The other part of me isn't ashamed.

She's horny as fuck.

One touch and he had me writhing against him, blubbering unintelligently and bending to his orders. I can't imagine what giving in completely would be like.

I feel wetness pool in my stomach as I think back to how he'd so easily manhandled me, forcing me with his hands to

do what he wanted.

His dominating touch inflames me and leaves me begging for more.

“You’re in deep shit, babe.” Nera says, finally acknowledging what she saw as she turns into the parking lot.

I don’t pretend to not know what she’s talking about.

“Because I almost cheated on Carter?”

“No, because you like Rhys.” She says, matter-of-factly.

“I don’t *like him* like him. I’ll admit I got a little carried away, I... I just need to find a way to physically distance myself from him.”

“You definitely have a massive hard-on for him, that’s for sure. And why wouldn’t you? The little I just witnessed was hotter than half the pornos I’ve seen.” She says, and I laugh at that. “But you also like him. I’ve seen you enough times around him to know that it’s not just sexual chemistry.”

“I can’t like him.” I tell her, “I have a boyfriend.”

She turns the ignition off and twists in her seat to face me, considering me silently for a moment before she eventually speaks. “Well maybe you shouldn’t.”

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It’s game day and I’m officially freaking out.

I went to bed in a good headspace yesterday. I’d spent the last few days icing and elevating my ankle as directed and it felt healthy. I’d been mentally locked in, feeling both excitement and anticipation at finally playing another game.

Everything was pointing towards a good day today.

But I’d woken up and felt... off.

I had this nagging feeling in my stomach that I couldn’t shake. I knew it to be anxiety, but I couldn’t seem to convert it

into motivation.

I'd also ripped one of my favorite headbands as I was putting it on and, as a superstitious person, that bad omen had rattled me.

Now I'm sitting on the floor of my bedroom in front of my mirror, trying desperately to French braid my hair myself. My hands shake so badly, I can't get it tight enough.

Bellamy is with Rogue and Nera and Six went to the stadium early to get good seats.

I'm alone and struggling to do my braid and, even though it probably seems dumb and inconsequential, that's enough to unnerve me and throw me completely off kilter.

I realize that my confidence isn't as rock solid as I try to pretend it is. Even though I'm a competitor and always give my best, deep down I'm afraid it's not enough.

Not in Switzerland.

I'm afraid that the first match of the season is indicative not just of how I stack up against my more skilled opponents but also what I can expect my performance to be for the rest of the season.

I define myself in large part by how good I am at soccer so the thought of being average at best is one that's hard to swallow.

I want to go out there and have an amazing game, but all the doubt and uncertainty are screaming in my head, drowning out every positive thought I have.

It's even more disappointing to feel this way because I've spent the last few weeks building up my confidence and I hate that even after all that work I can still make myself feel this way.

I'm spiraling.

I rub my hands over my face repeatedly, trying desperately to scrub those thoughts from my brain.

"What are you doing?"

I let out a startled cry before dropping my hands. Rhys is standing in the doorway of my room, looking down at me impassively.

My heart thunders against my ribcage as I take him in.

“What are you doing here? And how’d you get in?” I ask him.

He holds up a set of keys between his thumb and index. “Bellamy sent me. She thought you might need me.” He steps into the room towards me. “I told her that obviously you’d never admit such a thing.” He says, his lips quirking upwards.

I give him a small smile, some of the tension easing out of my shoulders. He must see something in the way I smile though, because he sits on the floor next to me.

“What’s wrong, love?”

Rather than telling him nothing is wrong, I choose honesty for once.

Or partial honesty at least.

“It’s going to seem stupid to you, but I can’t braid my hair and it’s about to give me a nervous breakdown.”

His eyes move from my face to my hair and back.

“It’s a part of your ritual before games?”

I nod almost imperceptibly and he makes the same movement back at me more decidedly.

“Alright, get me a hair tie and let’s see what I can do.” He says.

Before I can process his words, he stands and bends over to pick me up, pulling me back until I’m sitting in front of the bed. He lifts one leg over me and sits down on my bed so that I’m nestled between his legs.

The whole thing took less than two seconds.

I turn towards him, confused. “You want to braid my hair?”

“Put up a tutorial or something so I can try to replicate it.”

“You’re serious?” I ask again, still dubious.

“Look, I’m not promising a legendary outcome here or even success at this point, but I’ll do my best.”

I swallow thickly, touched by his effort. “Okay, thank you.”

“Plus, it’s not like you’ll let my hands do anything else to you. If this is the only way I get to touch you, I’ll take it. Now give me a hair tie.” He commands.

I have a couple wrapped around my wrist, a fluffy pink one and a black one. I pull them both off and hand them over my shoulder to him.

Grabbing my phone, I put a tutorial on for him and for a couple of minutes we just sit silently while he works. I hear frustrated groans and mumblings of “the fuck does that mean?” behind me and I can’t help but giggle.

He looks up and makes eye contact with me in the mirror.

“Something funny?”

I stifle my giggle as best I can. “Sorry, you just have such a concentrated look on your face. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this focused, not even during practice.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I braided my mum’s hair a few times before so I was hoping muscle memory would kick in, but no. Nothing. Zilch. I’m going on instinct alone and honestly I have no idea how you girls do this. I have a million strands of hair in my hands and no clue where I’m supposed to put them. I feel like diffusing a bomb would be easier.” He says, a frown furrowing his brow as he turns back to my hair.

“It’s okay, really. I can—”

“No.”

“No?”

“We’re not going anywhere until I figure this out.” He releases my hair and starts the video again. “And until you tell

me what's really bothering you.”

“What do you mean?” I ask him, playing dumb.

“I can tell something's upsetting you and it's not just hair related.” He says, smoothly twisting the strands together. He looks up into the mirror, his eyes piercing through me. “Tell me what it is.”

I look away, severing the contact. I'm not sure I want to tell him about my fears and anxieties, not when it seems like those emotions would be foreign to him.

“You're ready.”

My eyes snap back to meet his in the mirror, my heart stuck in my throat at his words.

“If that's what you're concerned about, you're ready. You've put in the hard work and today you finally get to show it off.”

He says it so matter-of-factly, like he has absolutely no doubt about what I'm capable of and how I'm going to perform today.

It's so at odds with my internal monologue, I'm not even sure how to respond to him.

“What if you're wrong?” I ask him, the slight wobble in my voice revealing the vulnerability I'd meant to hide.

He uses his hold on my hair to tug my head back so that it rests on his knee as I look up at him.

“Do you believe you're as good as them?”

His gaze travels down the column of my neck to where my throat bobs as I swallow. He pulls my hair again when I don't answer.

“I'm afraid – anxious, really – that it still won't be enough. That even with the extra training, I'm still going to fall short. That maybe they gave the scholarship and the captain title to the wrong person.” I tell him, finally admitting my worst fears.



He considers me for a moment, his eyes hooding over with interest as he watches my lips move.

“To lead your team, you need confidence. You need to believe you’re ready and you need to believe that you’re the best, otherwise you’ll sabotage yourself before you even set foot on the field. You might as well not play at all.” He says, his fingers threading through my hair and causing goosebumps to erupt on my skin. “I know what you’re capable of, I’ve seen it. I wouldn’t lie to you and give you false hope if I thought you weren’t as good, if not better, as the team you’re going to face today. But now, you need to believe it. Tell me you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.” I tell him, working to inject assurance in my voice.

“I can’t hear you, love. Tell me you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.” I say, more firmly. A smile spreads across my face as I look at him.

“Tell me you’re the best.”

“I’m the best!”

“Tell me you’re going to fucking win.”

“I’m going to fucking win!” I say, closing my eyes and yelling the words this time.

When I open them, he’s staring down at me with a pleased smile and a look so heated it peels back every defense I have and peers directly into my soul.

“Good girl.”

A laugh explodes out of me and it’s like the bubble of stress inside me bursts, freeing me from the prison of my spiraling mind.

“Thank you.”

I straighten and we sit in companionable silence for a few minutes as he finishes doing my hair.

“Look at us,” I tell him, “Literally braiding each other’s hair. Coach Faulkner would be proud.”

His amused laugh hits my ear like fresh spring water on a hot day. A proud smile crosses my face and a feeling akin to excitement fills my stomach at the sound.

Something vibrates quietly between my legs and I look at my phone screen. It's Carter.

I don't need to think about it for long.

I send the call straight to voicemail.

"When's your next game?" I ask him.

"In a week. I think we might be able to go undefeated this season." He says, pride clear in his tone.

"That'd be amazing, especially if you have scouts there."

"The Arsenal scout should be coming to one of the matches at the end of December, that's the only one I care about."

I hum in my throat, acknowledging what he said.

"Was it hard for you to play after your parents passed away?"

I feel his hands pause in my hair for a beat before they move again and embarrassment shoots through me.

"Sorry," I mumble, "I didn't mean to pry."

He finishes the end of the braid and ties it off before replying. "You aren't." He tells me, "And no, not really. Football is how I honor them, it's when I play that I feel closest to them. It's more of a struggle to find ways to keep their memory alive off the field."

"Like the library?" I ask, remembering that the grand opening is this Saturday.

"Yeah, they were both avid readers and my family has been coming to RCA for generations, so it made a lot of sense. I'm struggling to find other ways though."

"Be patient. You don't have to have it all figured out right now, you know. You have a whole life ahead of you to honor them."

“You’re right.” He says, thoughtfully. “What about you? Are you hoping to go pro?”

I scoff at that. “It’s a much more limited field for women, both in terms of opportunity and pay. I love soccer and I want it to be a part of my future, but after college it’ll likely take a backseat to whatever career I choose.”

“What would you want to do?”

“I’m not sure, honestly. Definitely some youth coaching on the side to help train the next generation of girls. I also love animals, so maybe training to be a vet?” My eyes shine with excitement as I continue talking, “Ooh, or open a cat cafe! That’d be so fun.”

He laughs raucously as he stands, the sound tickling my ears. “I didn’t take you for a crazy cat lady.”

I grab the hand he has outstretched towards me and let myself be brought to my feet. “Crazy? Yes. Cat lady? One day.”

His answering smile is so wide, it turns his eyes to mere slits and sends butterflies swarming in my stomach.

He has a thousand different smiles and every one of them has a unique use, a unique meaning. I find myself picking them apart, analyzing what he’s trying to convey with each one.

Right now, he smiles at me with such affection it takes my breath away. His hand reaches out as the back of his fingers trace up my jaw and curl around a loose strand of hair.

“I missed a piece.” He muses.

He brings it up to his nose and sniffs, the inhale coming from deep within him. His eyes close softly as he takes in the smell.

I’m transfixed in front of him.

Finally, his eyes open up. They’ve darkened to such a shade they appear almost black.

“Fuck, you smell so fucking good. It was torture having my hands on you and not being able to do anything about it.”

“It’s— it’s a perfume I bought here actually.”

“It’s not the perfume,” He grunts, “It’s you.”

I blush furiously, both caught off guard and pleased by his compliment. “Don’t worry about the hair,” I tell him, reaching into my dresser for another headband, “You did a great job. I have a headband to keep the inevitable loose strands tucked.” I put it on and pretend to pose for him. “How do I look?”

He takes his time before he answers, his eyes picking my face, my hair, my body apart. It’s excruciating to stand there and not move when the tension pulls between us.

When my body begs me to just take a step towards him.

I know that’s all the sign he’d need to pounce.

“You look perfect.” He eventually says.

I smile at him before looking away, shy all of a sudden. “Thank you.”

He closes the gap between us and reaches out to tip my chin so I meet his eyes.

“Let me give you a lift.”

And I want to say yes. Desperately so.

Because he came here when I needed him, he did my hair and calmed me down, restored my confidence in myself and encouraged me more than any coach ever has, all in the span of twenty minutes.

Oh, and fuck it.

“Alright.”

Victory explodes in his gaze, the triumph spreading like molten lava across his face.

“You’re lucky you have a match to captain, otherwise I’d fuck you on this bedroom floor.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

He grins at me, his pointy canines on display like the most dangerous of predators. “Not at all. This is the beginning of the end of your futile resistance and I can’t wait to finally see you beg.” He says, his smile downright diabolical. “But later. First, you’ve got a game to win.”

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

They're headed to sudden-death overtime.

Even though RCA is dominating on possession, they haven't been able to capitalize on it with a game winning goal.

Thayer's flying out there though.

She's been all over the pitch, winning tackles, stealing passes, and she assisted on RCA's lone goal.

I'm standing on the sidelines next to Faulkner, watching her move across the field with eagle-eyed attention as the game starts again.

"Are you behind this transformation?"

I turn towards Faulkner with a blank expression on my face. "What?"

She tips her chin towards Thayer. "The way she's playing. She's taken it up a notch."

I look back towards the field and watch her dribble and fake out a defender. "That's all her. She put in the work."

She gives me a rare smile. "You guys make a good team."

*Yeah, I'm aware.*

Thayer jogs along the sideline, eyes on the ball across the pitch as she waits to see how the play evolves. I cup my hands around my mouth and yell, “Come on, Thayer. Hustle!”

She hears me over the noise of the crowd and turns in my direction, her eyes searching for me. When she finally sees me, she comes to a stop and a slow smile spreads across her face before she gives me a small wave.

Well, fuck. I didn't mean to distract her.

“Go.” I mouth at her, pointing towards the opposing goal. That jolts her out of her reverie and has her dashing in that direction. As she runs by me, I tell her, “Come on, show them what you're made of.”

And she fucking does.

She gets a beautiful pass from her midfielder and speeds off towards the goal. She evades a defender and gets within twenty feet of the goal before passing the ball to the winger.

I see what's going to happen before it does and it's so well played and orchestrated that I'm fucking impressed. In a series of touch passes that showcase the team's chemistry, the winger sends the ball back to the attacking midfielder who then passes it back down to Thayer.

And she scores.

The ball goes soaring above the goalie's left hand and into the net behind her as the crowd erupts.

Her teammates jump on her, screaming their congratulations as they hug her.

She frees herself and all of a sudden she's running towards me, a giant, beaming smile stretching across her face. She jumps into my waiting arms and wraps hers tightly around my neck.

“We did it!”

“You did it.” I purr, burying my face in her neck as I crush her against me. “Proud of you.” I gruffly say against her ear.

I hold her like that for what feels like minutes but I'm sure is only a few seconds. She whispers 'thank you' repeatedly like a mantra.

Finally, I release her, letting her slide down the length of my body. Her wide eyes tell me she feels my hard cock against her stomach, but she doesn't comment as Faulkner comes up to her.

"Well done. That was an effort deserving of the 'Captain' title." She tells her before hugging her.

"Thank you." I don't think I've ever seen Thayer look so happy and I suddenly have the urge to do everything in my power to make her feel like that again.

Her friends are the next ones to jump on her and congratulate her.

"That was a highlight reel goal!" Six says.

"You played so well!" Nera adds, "We were FaceTiming with Bellamy so she saw everything."

"Why don't you guys come over tonight? That way you can celebrate with her as well." I tell them.

The girls look over at Thayer expectantly, waiting to see what she'll decide.

"Can the rest of the team come?"

"Of course. Invite whoever you want."

"Let's do it." She says, before looking at me and adding. "It's only fair that I memorialize this win with my coach."

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"What are you doing?"

I turn around and find Bellamy standing on the other side of the kitchen island. She leans forward onto her forearms as she watches me, waiting for a reply.



I came home a few hours ago and just finished a quick workout in the gym. I'm shirtless, foraging for food in the kitchen, desperate for a snack.

"Getting a glass of water. You?" I answer, filling my glass up at the sink.

"Not much. I'm about to go get ready for this party we're having tonight."

I grin at her. "It's going to be a fun one."

She gives me a discerning look, staring at me silently.

"What?" I ask.

"I haven't seen her this happy in a while." She says, and I don't have to ask her who she's talking about.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. She called me ecstatic after the game, it was awesome to see." She says, before adding. "I wish I'd been there."

"You'll make the next one. I'm glad she's happy with the results of the match." I say, putting my glass in the dishwasher. "Alright, I'm going to go shower."

"Wait." She says, walking around the counter. She gets on her tiptoes and gives me a short but sturdy hug. "Seriously, thank you for helping her. I know your motivations are far from selfless, but still. I haven't seen her this happy since before Carter cheated." She says, before quickly adding. "And I'm talking in general, not just because of today's game."

"Hold up." I tell her, pulling her off me. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, I just meant she's seemed happier over the pas—"

"No." I cut in. "Carter cheated on her?"

Anger unfurls in my chest and clouds my vision as my eyes narrow on Bellamy. There's a guilty look on her face, one that tells me she didn't mean to reveal that information.

“I– fuck. I thought you knew.” She puts her hands together and pleads. “Please don’t bring it up to her unless she mentions it.”

“When?”

“That’s really not your busine–”

“Tell me when, Bellamy.” I snap.

“Right before Switzerland.”

I slam my fist down on the counter next to me, fury coiling around my muscles and suffocating me from the inside. I knew that motherfucker wasn’t worth shit when he didn’t follow her here and now I have actual confirmation. I just don’t understand what she sees in the asshole.

I know she’s attracted to me, I’ve seen it with my eyes and felt it with my body and yet she won’t give in. Her resistance was understandable, although frustrating, when I thought he was a loving boyfriend back home.

Knowing she’s remained blindly loyal to a man who’s treated her like she’s disposable is infuriating beyond measure.

Will she ever leave him?

“Why did she stay with him?”

“No.” She says, her voice definitive. “I’m not telling you anything else.”

“Bellamy–” I warn, but this time she’s the one who cuts me off.

“No, don’t say my name at me like that. It doesn’t matter. She’s loyal to him and as long as they’re together, she’ll never cross a line with you.”

I huff out an annoyed breath, turning to rest both my palms on the counter.

“Just leave before Rogue sees me shirtless around you and throws a tantrum.”

“Too late.”

I look up to find Rogue leaning against the doorway, a dark smile lifting the corner of his lips.

“We’re just chatting, babe.” She tells him.

“That’s alright.” He answers with a casual shrug.

Bellamy and I exchange a quick look, surprised by his nonchalance. He’s typically a psycho when it comes to her.

I don’t buy it for a second. “That’s surprisingly rational of you.”

“I’ll make her pay for it once we’re upstairs.”

And there it is.

Bellamy blushes to the roots of her hair as she steps away from me and towards him. She stops on the other side of the counter and gives me one final piece of insight.

“She’s a smart girl, Rhys,” She says, giving me a pointed look. “If you’re who she wants, she’ll realize it soon enough.” She runs up to Rogue and smacks a kiss on his lips. His hand comes out to wrap around her waist as they walk out, leaving me alone in the kitchen with my anger, jealousy, and need to strangle Thayer’s soon to be ex-boyfriend.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

Thayer walked into the house thirty minutes ago and has been looking for me since.

She's not doing it overtly, no she's much more subtle about it, but I can tell she's wondering where I am.

She turns her head away mid-conversations, pretending to just look out across the room when in fact she's discreetly scoping out where I could be.

I'm folding into the crowd and shadows, watching her from afar. The need I have for her is converting to violence in my body with every time I have to hold back from touching her and it's better I stay away and limit our interactions before I do something stupid.

I don't know why the need to mark her is so strong, but I'm so drunk with the thought that it makes my head spin.

Being able to touch her is no longer enough, I need to be able to brand her. This ceaseless push and pull between us makes every interaction feel like we're at extremes. Like we're stretching the boundaries past breaking point and we're both waiting for the inevitable explosion, hovering between deciding to duck for cover and watching everything burn.

Except Thayer is ducking for cover every time, no matter how much I've tried to push her towards the fire.

Fuck this.

I need a break to clear my head.

This party seemed like a good idea a few hours ago, now I want to send everyone home so I can hit the bag until my knuckles are bloody.

There's so much anger and violence in my body and I'm itching for a fight, any fight, to purge myself of these feelings.

Better to stay away and avoid that Armageddon.

I head towards the stairs, stealthily maneuvering between people so she doesn't see me as I exit. Taking them two at a time, I avoid a few people's attempts at conversation and head into the gaming room, slamming the door shut behind me.

Except it doesn't slam shut or even make a noise as it closes.

I turn and see Thayer standing in the doorway.

"Are you hiding from me?" She jokes, but I can tell there's a measure of seriousness in her tone.

I turn towards the TV, grabbing the remote as I keep my back to her. "Leave."

She comes around to stand in front of me, a frown furrowing her brow as she looks at me, confused. "What's wrong?"

"I told you to leave." I say, pointing the remote at the TV.

She grabs it out of my hand and throws it on the couch next to us, her face red as she does so.

"What the hell's wrong with you? What happened in the last few hours that turned you into an asshole?"

"Leave." I repeat, baring my teeth. "We both know your boyfriend wouldn't like you being alone in this room with me."

She looks even more confused now. “Since when do you care about that?”

I snap.

My hand flies out and grips her throat, using it to pull her closer to me. “You think I give a fuck what you have with him?”

“Mackley—” She says, hesitantly, her hands coming to rest on mine where it clutches her throat.

I yank her against me this time, cutting off her words.

“My name,” I say, biting her ear cruelly and making her yelp. “is Rhys. Fucking say it.”

She shakes her head, at least as much as she can without being able to move her neck.

“No?” I hum, the anger vibrating clear as a bell in my chest. “That’s why you shouldn’t be here. You’re a coward. You want your safe little life spent FaceTiming your comfortable, cheating boyfriend so go back to it and get the fuck out.” I say, finally losing my cool.

It’s felt like I’ve been on the verge of losing my temper for days, if not weeks now, and it’s coming out of me venomous and angry.

She momentarily looks like I slapped her.

There’s a shocked expression painted on her face, her mouth open in an almost comical looking ‘o’ before she quickly recovers and shoves against my chest.

I release her and she steps back, giving me a wounded look.

“Why would you say that to me?” She cries out, clearly hurt.

“Why would I say that to you? Do you really need to ask me that?” I thunder, eating the space between us with a step. “Because I’m fucking jealous, Thayer, that’s why. Some guy who I’m sure has never earned you gets to say that you belong to him. He gets to kiss you and touch you and fuck you and

he's not even worthy. Nowhere near fucking worthy if he's touched someone else while he's had you. And you," I say, exhaling a harsh breath, "You forgave him."

She scoffs at that, defensively crossing her arms to keep some distance between us. "You were very clear you were going to keep sleeping with other girls so I don't know why you're continuing to pretend you care that much."

"I haven't fucked anyone since I met you, Silver." Her face softens momentarily before I continue, "But believe me, that's about to change. You're not a cheater and I'm just getting clued in that you're never going to leave him so I'm done playing the celibate monk waiting for you. You change your mind, you know where to find me. In the meantime, see yourself out. If you pass a hot, single girl on your way out, you can send her in to take your place."

She gives me a withering look, one that'd destroy a weaker man, but I just quirk an eyebrow back at her.

"I don't know what you want me to say."

I laugh humorlessly. "Nothing. You've made it abundantly clear that you aren't interested in fucking me and I'm finally listening to you. There's nothing left to say."

She stomps her foot angrily on the floor. "You're pissing me off."

"What is it about what I'm saying that's pissing you off? The thought of me fucking someone else, is that it?" I taunt her. "Well join the fucking club. At least I can admit it."

"I'm going home." She says, brushing past me and grabbing the door handle before I speak again.

"You do that." I say, turning towards her. "Run away like you always do."

"Don't be a hypocrite, Mackley." She hisses, looking over her shoulder at me. "Don't accuse me of running away from anything when you're the one who won't even consider falling in love because you're afraid of getting hurt. There's two of us running from something in this room."

I give her a triumphant look. “So you admit you’re running away from this?”

“I– That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I don’t know.” She says, shaking her head repeatedly.

“Liar.” I say.

She turns towards me. “I’m not lying.”

“You are. To yourself more than me.” I take a cautious step towards her. “Tell me you’re mine.” I command quietly, my tone meant to persuade. “That’s all you have to do.”

She hesitates, I see her hesitate, but she doesn’t break when she finally speaks. “I’m not.”

I scoff, unsurprised. “Why not?”

“I have a boyfriend. I’m his.”

“You’re not.” I growl.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not his. You haven’t been his since he cheated on you, not since you moved here without him.” I snarl, taking another step towards her. “You’re mine. You’ve been mine for a long time. I know it. My friends know it. Your friends know it. I think even you know it, but you just won’t admit it to yourself.” I say with an emotionless laugh. “I’ve been waiting for you to figure it out, but I’m starting to think you’re never going to get there.”

“Maybe–,” She starts and stops, looking away from me. Her eyes drop to the floor before she continues, “Maybe you should sleep with someone else.”

I nod slowly, my mouth flattening into a straight line. Disappointment claws at my chest that we’re at an impasse we can’t seem to move past.

“Alright.”

Her head snaps up and her eyes come up to meet mine, a whole world of emotions swirling in them. She opens her



mouth again to say something, what I don't know, but seems to think better of it.

Instead of adding anything else, she opens the door and darts out, leaving me with a scrambled mind and an itch to run after her.

I run my hands through my hair, exhaling a deeply frustrated breath.

She infuriates me.

Even when she infuriates me, I want nothing more than to grab her and shut her up with my mouth.

We're just going around in circles.

I really should find someone else to fuck so I can get her off my mind and ease the daily tension that seems to have made a home for itself in my chest.

"I just saw Thayer run out of here."

I turn at the sound of Devlin's voice. He's standing in the room, his arms crossed against his chest and a smug look on his face.

"Looks like you might lose that bet after all," He says, pointing at a watch on his wrist that isn't there, "By my calculations, you're running out of time. Only a week left."

I don't think before I punch him in the jaw, my hand connecting with his face before he finishes his sentence.

His head snaps to the side with a brutal cracking noise.

"What the f—" He says, holding his jaw and turning his face back towards me.

I punch him again, cutting him off. He falls to the ground this time, the force of the blow dropping him onto his back.

"Never," I say, bending over him, "Say her name again. I don't want you think about it and I sure as fuck don't want to hear it come out of your mouth."

I step over him and walk out.



*Thayer*

I don't feel well.

My stomach is queasy and I have a nauseous feeling in my belly that I can't shake. Maybe I drank too much tonight or maybe it's the start of some type of stomach bug I'm coming down with.

Maybe not.

No, if I want to be honest with myself for once, the truth is I've felt sick to my stomach ever since I told Rhys he should fuck someone else.

As if he was even fucking me to begin with.

Which I guess he was, because he's been head fucking me since I got to Switzerland. Charming, seducing, smiling at me every day, using his wit, his personality, his athleticism to create an intoxicating offensive meant to corrupt me.

I want to run back in there and tell him I was just kidding, that he can't touch anyone else, ever.

I stop in my tracks outside his house.

Should I?

*No, I can't.*

I start walking again, distancing myself from his house, his smell, him.

I'm so selfish for even having those thoughts, let alone thinking of actioning them. It's not like I want to be consumed by thoughts of him to such a point where I only cared about celebrating our team's victory today if I got to do it with him, I just am.

Contrary to what he believes, I can admit to myself that I'm conflicted. I'm very aware of it and I've tried, I've *tried*, to suffocate those thoughts but I can't.

I don't know what to do.

Carter has been a part of my life for three years and we've been dating for two.

Although he may not be the most reliable person, he's been part of my support system for a long time.

I can't just break up with him for a guy I've known a month who's made it pretty clear he's only interested in fucking me.

That'd be completely foolish.

But the thought of Rhys touching someone else, of another girl getting to laugh with him, of him calling her 'love' instead of me?

That thought makes me near homicidal.

Bellamy had texted me earlier letting me know she'd accidentally revealed Carter's infidelity to Rhys, so I'd expected him to make a jabbing comment.

I hadn't expected such raw anger.

I'd wanted to spend time with him, to celebrate the win he'd helped me, and thus the team, achieve but it'd been overshadowed by our argument.

It didn't matter in that moment when it felt like our friendship, our relationship, whatever fragile thing we were doing, was breaking.

He'd said the thing about hooking up with other girls out of that same anger, but I have no doubt he'll follow through on his threat now.

I don't feel nearly the same heated anger when I think of how Carter cheated, but maybe that's because of the physical distance between us.

How can I choose when one is standing in front of me and the other is far away, only being judged based on fond memories and one very painful one?

I just need to go home and get some sleep, that'll help me clear my head.

Hopefully.

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I haven't seen Rhys in over twenty four hours, the longest we've gone without seeing each other since I came to RCA.

I know it sounds ridiculous, but I've felt every one of those twenty four hours. They've stretched by, bleak and empty, the contrast with what our usual days are like haunting me.

I had a rest day with no team or individual practice yesterday and Rhys didn't come to class so I didn't see him.

I miss him.

Like I said, I'm being ridiculous.

I want to talk to him. Tonight's the grand opening of the library and I want to know how he's feeling about it.

The bell rings, signaling the end of class and pulling me out of my reverie. As I exit my classroom, I see Rhys walk out the main doors at the end of the hall.

"Mackley!" I yell, shouldering past a few people to get to him. He doesn't hear me over the throng, so I yell his name again as I fly through the door and jog down the outside stairs. "Mackley!"

This time, he hears me. He stops where he stands about twenty feet away from me and turns to watch me run towards

him, his face impassive.

“Hi.” I say, slightly out of breath.

“Hey.” He says, his tone and face still giving nothing away.

“I, um, I wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?” He asks, his voice devoid of emotion.

I hate this.

This isn't how I want us to be. I want him to smile at me like he always does, to give me a cheeky grin when he makes a sexual innuendo, or in his case, a very explicit sexual request.

I hate this barrier between us.

There's a tightness in my chest creating a very strong and stupid urge to go home, get in bed and cry, which I absolutely won't give in to, but is there nonetheless.

“Practice this afternoon. Are we still on for 4pm? And also, the library opening tonight.” I add, lamely. “I wanted to make sure you were ready.”

His eyes flash with some nameless emotion before they soften marginally. “Yes, practice at four.” He says, “And I am ready, thanks for asking. I think it's going to be tough but... it's just a building. I have to remember that.”

The rest of the students filter off to class, leaving Rhys and I standing in the middle of the quad.

“I think they'd be so proud of you for helping to make this happen. For using the money they left you to commemorate them, not just to buy expensive things.”

“Don't get me wrong, I like expensive things.” He says with a short laugh and my heart lurches at the sound.

This is what I want. It feels like the longer I can keep him talking, the more I can chip away at the ice wall he's put up between us.

“But you’re right,” He says, the corner of his lips lifting a hair. Another chip in the wall. “They would be proud of me.”

“Well,” I pause, awkwardness freezing my tongue. I’m not sure what the right thing to say is in our circumstance. I want to spend time with him tonight, so I just decide on the truth. “I’d love to spend time with you tonight—”

My words are cut off as long arms wrap around me from behind me, lifting me off the ground and twirling me around as the person exclaims, “Babe!”

No.

It can’t be.

The arms set me down and release me. I turn and come face to face with Carter.

He really is here.

He’s in Switzerland.

Why was my initial gut reaction to exclaim ‘no’ internally?

He grabs me in a bear hug, pulling me off the ground again.

“Hey, Carter,” I say, returning the hug weakly. “What are you doing here?”

He lets me go and steps back with an annoyed look on his face. “That’s what you have to say to me after I came all the way here just to see you? You realize how much that trip fucking sucks?”

It’s a direct flight from Chicago, so not that terrible of a trip, but I don’t say anything.

I look over my shoulder at Rhys, but he’s gone.

He must have walked away once he realized who the man hugging me was.

The pit in my stomach is back.

I wish I could go after him and say... something.

“No, sorry, it’s just I’m surprised. Thanks for coming.”

“You don’t seem happy to see me.” He says, his tone accusatory.

I paint on a smile and hug him again, hoping it’ll diffuse the tension. “I am, I am.”

Truthfully, I’m completely frazzled by his appearance. To say I hadn’t been expecting it is the understatement of the century. His timing also couldn’t have been worse.

“Who were you talking to?”

“What?” I ask, but I heard him.

“That guy.” Carter says, tipping his chin behind me as if Rhys is still there. “Who is he?”

“Just a friend. He’s Bellamy’s boyfriend’s best friend.”

He nods but says nothing, his eyes searching as they look at me. I feel like he’s going to see something in my soul that I’m not ready to admit, let alone have him see for himself, so I deflect.

“It’s so nice of you to come.” I hate how stiff and awkward I sound. “Why the surprise?”

He lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “Feels like we haven’t been connecting lately. Or talking much for that matter.”

He’s not wrong. We haven’t talked on the phone and we’ve barely texted since our fight. It’s not that I’ve been holding onto a grudge, I just... don’t care.

I don’t care that my boyfriend and I aren’t speaking.

That realization, when it hits me, is jarring.

I should want to talk to him every day, I should look forward to our texts, but I don’t.

I haven’t in a while.

His words remind me of the argument that instigated our mini Cold War.

“You never told me if you stopped by to see my mom?”

He grabs the back of his head and gives an ‘aw, shucks’ smile that’s designed to make me forgive him. I’ve talked to



my brother so I already know the answer to my question, I just want to see how he's going to react.

"Nah, babe. I was really busy." He says, gritting his teeth as if in agony. "But I texted Nolan and he went. She's totally fine." He says, as if his solution makes it all okay.

Of course Nolan went to check on my mom. He went the day Carter failed to go, but that's not the point.

It's about me asking my boyfriend for a simple favor he should have been happy to do for his girlfriend.

It's about him once again failing to put me first yet again.

About not taking my feelings into consideration at all.

"And, I came here!"

That's not what I'd needed from him though. The gesture would have meant a lot more if he'd listened to me and what I told him I'd actually needed.

It seems like such a small thing for me to be so upset about, but it's another stumble in what's been a pretty rocky road of our relationship recently.

It's not mean spirited, Carter isn't a malicious person, he's just probably not the person for me. I think I'm finally starting to consider that.

"Yeah, that's great." I say, attempting a smile but making a face closer to a grimace instead.

The awkwardness is there, tangible between us and I can't stand it. I want to rewind the time to ten minutes prior, when I was talking to Rhys, and just pause it.

I clear my throat, hoping it'll erase part of the anxiety. "Come on, let's go to The Pen. I'll show you our place and you can meet my friends."

He nods and falls in lock step beside me as we walk towards the parking lot where the golf carts are.

We don't hold hands or touch.



After Carter meets a surprised Nera and Sixtine and hugs a blanked face Bellamy, he and I hang out in the living room for a couple of hours until it's time for me to go to my practice with Rhys.

I change into my workout set and pick one with biker shorts. Selfishly, I know Rhys can't keep his eye off my ass when I wear them. I come back into the living room just as Bellamy is about to head out.

"I'm going to see Rogue for a little bit before we need to get ready, I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Wait, let me come with you." Carter says, getting up from the couch.

Bellamy and I throw each other alarmed looks, before I speak. "You want to go with her to her boyfriend's house?"

"I want to meet him, yeah. If he's her boyfriend, I'm probably going to spend a lot of time with him while you girls are doing girly shit tonight."

My hackles rise at him calling it 'girly shit'. Have I always found everything he's said irritating?

"You sure?" Bellamy asks.

"Yeah, Thayer's going to be at practice and I'll be bored out of my mind without either of you around. Come on, it'll be fun." He says, walking past her and into the hall.

"Sure, I guess." She calls after him, before tossing me a look that says she thinks this is a bad idea.

I'm not sure why I do, but I agree with her. Letting Carter get closer to Rhys' entourage feels like it spells disaster, but I don't really have a good excuse for intervening.

"Alright, I'll see you guys later then." I say, closing the door behind them with a deep sigh and parking that apprehension for later.

Right now, I need to focus on my upcoming practice and what I'll say to Rhys when I see him.

I wonder what he'll be like. If he'll be his typical charming self or if he'll be angry like he was at his house.

Like he still seemed to be this morning.

I'm at the pitch ten minutes later and right on time.

I park the golf cart and walk up to the bleachers where we typically set our things when we train.

Rhys isn't here yet, so I sit on the grass and wait for him.

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Thirty minutes later, Rhys still isn't here and I'm half pissed off, half concerned.

I texted him ten minutes ago asking him where he was and he never answered. What if something happened to him and he's injured somewhere?

That thought tugs at my stomach and makes me almost light-headed.

Or maybe he's purposely standing me up to make a point.

I don't know, but I can't just wait around, I have to go find out.

I text Six that I need her to come pick me up and I need to borrow her car and she's at the field less than ten minutes later, driving her car like she stole it.

"Everything alright?" She says as she jumps out and walks over to hug me.

I don't know what I did in a past life to deserve a friend like her, but I know it was real good.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, I just need to go find Mackley."

"Okay," She says, and I'm so thankful she's not questioning me right now, "I'll grab your things and take a

golf cart home.”

“Thank you so much.” I say, kissing her cheek.

“No problem. Text me when you find me. And don’t forget we’re getting ready together at the apartment tonight.”

“I haven’t!” I yell back at her, running around to the driver’s side. “See you later!”

I drive the route Rhys would take to get to the field from his house, but there’s no sign of him.

Finally, I turn into the long alley that leads up to his mansion and as I get closer to the front door, I notice his car in the driveway.

So he did purposely stand me up.

Unbelievable.

I park but keep the engine running, sitting quietly for a second and thinking about what to do now.

I want to go confront him but I don’t want to have to deal with explaining to Carter why I’m not at practice but at Rhys’ place instead.

*Although this house is so massive, I could probably just sneak in without anyone seeing me,* I say to myself as I look up at the large facade and consider it.

The need to see him wins out in the end.

“Fuck it,” I say out loud, turning off the engine and jumping out of the car.

I jog up the front staircase and carefully open the front door, knowing it’s going to be unlocked. Who’d dare break into this place?

I push the door quietly, careful not to let the massive wood creak as it opens. I slither through the opening and into the foyer with the large princess staircase.

I immediately hear noises coming from the kitchen, so I stick to the wall as I head towards the right side of the staircase.

Once I reach the bottom step, I jog up the stairs, thankful that the velvet carpet muffles any noises I might be making.

I turn left and stop in front of the fourth door on the left.

One of the times I came here for a party, I snuck upstairs and tried a few doors until I found his bedroom.

I was curious what it would look like.

If it would reflect the jovial, untroubled outer facade he wears or if it'd be more in line with how he is at his core.

Nuanced, complicated, and darkly possessive.

I'd gone in and discovered it was a mix of both. He had a priceless collection of signed soccer balls and jerseys displayed against navy walls with metallic, industrial art pieces.

Moody photography conflicted with colorful, fun Roy Lichtenstein prints.

I'd physically felt him in that room. A sensual shiver had rippled down my spine, and I'd left after just a quick perusal.

Now, I place my hand on the door handle, press down and walk in.

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

I'm sitting at my desk fucking around on my computer when Thayer walks into my bedroom and slams the door shut behind her.

Anger radiates off her as she levels a venomous glare at me. It makes her chest pump up and down dramatically with every breath.

I turn my chair towards her and her gaze drops down over my naked torso and continues on to the gray tracksuit bottoms I'm wearing.

Seeing her has fresh jealousy and rage blooming in my chest.

I wonder if he's kissed her since he got here.

He's had to. It's the first thing I'd do.

My hand grips the pencil in my hand so tightly that it shatters in my hold.

The feeling in my stomach crosses the line into painful at the thought that he's going to kiss her and probably fuck her tonight.

I toss the two pencil pieces on the desk.

"What are you doing here?" I ask her.

Her eyes jolt from where they'd been transfixed on my body and snap back up to meet mine.

"I could ask you the same thing." She jabs. "I waited for you at practice but you stood me up."

I rise and casually put my hands in my pockets as I approach her.

"So you came to my house?"

"I was worried about you!" She exclaims. "I thought you might have gotten into a car accident or something."

"As you can see, I'm fine. You didn't have to come all this way." I say.

I start to turn back towards the chair, but she stops me by grabbing my forearm, forcing me to look back at her.

"Don't do that." She says, "Don't dismiss me when we're talking, we're not done."

"Why are you here?" I ask her. "Your boyfriend of however many years is in town and you should be with him, but instead you're with me. Going to practice with me. Texting me. Coming to my house to look for me. Why the fuck is that?"

"Well, if we're being strictly technical, my boyfriend is downstairs so—"

"Hold up." I cut in. Stepping up to Thayer smoothly, I force her to lift her chin and look me in the eye. "What are you saying? You brought him to my house?" I ask, my voice vibrating with anger.

She takes in my looming body and the electricity crackling between us with widened eyes, her mouth slightly parted and her tongue peeking out between her lips.

"I would never do that. He invited himself." She says defensively. "Just... leave him alone please."

"Does he know you're here?" I thunder. "Does he know you're alone in my bedroom with me?"

I watch her throat work as she swallows, lust keeping my eyelids at half mast.

“No.”

I hum low in my throat, the sound one of a pleased predator that's backed its prey into a corner.

I continue advancing towards her, forcing her to step back against the wall before I trap her against it with one hand.

“I love that I could fuck you right now.” I taunt as she stares up at me defiantly. “That I could take you on that bed or on the floor or up against this door, that I could make you scream like I'm sure you never have while he sips a beer in my kitchen. And he'd have no idea what a good little slut his girlfriend is being for me upstairs.”

Her hand shoots out to slap me but I grab it out of mid air.

I make a tutting noise as I pin it down against her body. “If you want me to be rough with you, all you have to do is say the word.”

“Don't talk to me that way.” She hisses.

“I'll talk to you however I want when you let your boyfriend come to my house. When you sneak in here like a thief and demand things from me. What did you think was going to happen when you came here, hmm?”

“Why didn't you come to practice?” She counters.

“To prove a point.” I purr as I rub a finger along her jaw and brush it slightly over her lips.

She partially turns her head, evading my finger but never breaking eye contact.

“What point is that?”

“That you'd choose me.” I tell her, with a slow, Cheshire Cat grin as I step back and break off our contact. “That even with him here and you seeing each other for the first time after being separated for weeks, you'd leave him to come find me. I didn't expect you to literally have to walk past him to get to



me, that turned out to be an unexpected added bonus. It's almost poetic, if you ask me."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Is this a joke to you?"

Her words rankle as they remind me of the idiotic bet I made weeks ago. The smile ghosting my lips wipes off my face as I cut her a glare.

"There's nothing remotely fucking funny about that asshole being here. About imagining him touching you or more when you're alone." I tell her, darkness flooding my vision and my every rational thought at that visual. "I told you once before that you were mine and I wasn't joking. I won't let him touch you, Thayer. I won't stand for it. You better find a way to end this relationship once and for all, otherwise I'll do it myself. And I promise you, you're not going to like how I choose to handle it."

"That's... that's..." She attempts, but doesn't finish.

I grab her hands and press them against my chest.

Her eyes flare with desire as her fingers splay along the hard panes of my pecs.

"Feel how fast my heart is beating for you right now." I whisper.

I keep her hands pressed against me as I walk closer to her, forcing her arms to bend almost completely at the elbow between us.

"Is he who you want or am I?" I hum, barely an audible murmur. She has to lean in imperceptibly to hear me. "It's me. You dream of me. You touch yourself to me. You want *me*."

She moves her hands of her own accord, caressing the ridges of my chest before moving them down to my abdomen.

"So hard." She mumbles, almost to herself. She continues absentmindedly caressing me before opening her mouth to speak. "I—"

"Thayer!" I hear Bellamy whisper-hiss in the hallway.

Thayer's spine snaps to rigid attention at the voice and her hands fall away off me.

"I have to go. Don't come out right away." She says, her tone almost pleading.

"Wait." I command, keeping the door closed with one hand.

Her eyes fly up to mine as she waits expectantly to see what I'm going to say.

"At least admit you want me too." I ask her. "Like before, in the elevator. Leave one truth here with me before you go."

I swear I can hear her heart beating out of her chest from where I'm standing. My own is slamming against my rib cage so mercilessly, I think if I looked down I might see my skin move with its rhythm.

She thinks about it, hesitating on the same razor's edge of a cliff we've been on for weeks, unsure which way to go.

Finally, she asks, "You'll let me leave?"

My eyes gleam and my nostrils flare at her question. "Yes."

She nods and swallows thickly, acquiescing my answer. When she speaks, the words are said so softly I almost miss them.

"Then yes," She says, yanking the door open and pausing before looking back at me. "I want you too."

She leaves as soon as the words are out, closing the door with a soft *click* behind her.

*Rhys*

I wait ten minutes then put on a shirt and go downstairs to the kitchen. It's a full house with Rogue and Phoenix facing down Thayer and that asshole she calls her boyfriend.

Rogue has his finger casually curled around Bellamy's jean loop as she stands just off to the side from him.

"Ah, there you are."

I don't acknowledge Carter as I walk in, not even when he says those words directed at me.

I go to the kitchen, grab some freshly squeezed orange juice and drink a few gulps straight from the bottle.

"Good of you to join us." Rogue drawls, throwing me a brooding look. "We were just getting to know Carter, Thayer's boyfriend."

"I see that."

"It's nice to meet you, dude." Carter says, throwing me a chin tip from across the room.

I notice that Thayer stands a few feet away from him, making sure not to touch him.

Good girl.

"Likewise." I bite out through a clenched jaw.

Thayer stares at me from across the room, an agitated look on her face.

But she doesn't look away from me, boldly staring me down while she stands less than five feet from her boyfriend.

That look reveals both the hunger she has for me and also her deep indecision. Her eyes slowly pivot to Carter's back as he continues chatting to an aloof looking Phoenix.

An expression that I can't read, that I wish I knew how to read, crosses her face. I can't tell if it's a good sign for me or not.

If it were up to me, I'd throw her over my shoulder, take her to the next room and fuck her within earshot of her ex so he knows exactly who she belongs to.

Instead, I'm gnashing my teeth together so hard I'm grinding the top layer of enamel off of them, my fists are clenched beneath my crossed arms, and I'm standing so tensely, rigid cords are forming in my neck from the pressure it's taking to restrain myself.

Bellamy throws me a 'get your shit together' look before clearing her throat.

"Thayer." She calls, when the throat clearing doesn't get her attention. "I think it's time for us to go and get ready, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah." Thayer answers, snapping out of whatever thoughts were swirling around her brain. "Yeah, it's getting late."

Bellamy turns towards Rogue and kisses him before grabbing her things.

"Carter, are you ready?" She asks.

"Yeah," He says, dapping Rogue and Phoenix up before coming over to me. "See you boys later."

The sound of his hand clapping mine rings loud in the room as I see Thayer standing behind him, almost visibly holding her breath.

I squeeze his hand in my grip, holding myself back from crushing it completely.

“Woah, dude. Strong grip.” He says.

I release him with some difficulty.

The thought of him going back to Thayer’s apartment with her, of staying in her room while she showers and gets dressed... let’s just say eviscerating him with a grapefruit spoon is the kindest thing I’m considering doing to him right now.

“Why don’t you stay here?”

For a moment, I think I’m the one who speaks, but that emotionless question comes from Rogue. He gives me an almost imperceptible nod, one that’s meant to communicate that he has my back, before he continues.

“The girls are going to get ready, you’d probably be more suited here. We can pre-game separately and meet up there.”

Phoenix jumps down from the counter where he was sitting and joins in. “You’ll need to borrow a tux anyway.”

“Tonight’s black tie.” Rogue adds, helpfully.

Say what you will about those two, they always have my back when I need them.

“Good fucking idea, boys.” My fist itches to connect with his face every time he calls us ‘boys’, but I resist the urge.

He throws a glance back at Thayer and adds, “Babe, I’m going to stay back with the guys. I’ll meet you there.”

“Are you sure?” She asks, wringing her hands, an anxious look on her face. Then softer, “I wanted to hang out.”

“Yeah, no offense babe but watching you get ready isn’t exactly the SuperBowl for me. I’d much rather stay here. We can hang out later.” He adds, dismissively.

She looks away with an accepting look on her face.

“Don’t be disrespectful.”

My voice cracks like a whip in that room.

All eyes snap to me, an ‘oh, shit’ smile painting itself on the corners of Phoenix’s mouth as he looks at me.

“What?”

“Don’t talk to her like that.” I grind out, cutting him a glance.

I meet his eyes with an unflinching look of my own, my stare boring into him, asking him to say something.

Anything.

I’m not afraid to put my fists where my mouth is.

He must recognize the volatility in my eyes because he hesitates only a second before he looks away and puts his hand up apologetically.

“You’re right. It’s the jetlag, sorry babe. We’ll meet up later, alright?”

Thayer nods, careful to avoid my eyes as Bellamy hooks her arm in the crook of her elbow and walks them both out.

Phoenix hands me a beer, but I don’t take it.

There’s no way in fuck that I’m letting Carter spend the night with Thayer. At least not in any shape to touch her or perform in any way.

“Should we maybe move on to something stronger?” I ask them. “Whiskey, maybe?”

This time, it’s Rogue that gives me a proud smile.

If someone can appreciate an evil, fucked up plan, it’s him.

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Two hours later, Carter is having trouble standing upright.

The man can barely handle his liquor. Switching to whiskey almost did him in after the first drink. Now, four

drinks after that, he's sprawled out on a couch, his gaze unfocused.

Great start, but I'm not leaving anything to chance. I grab a new bottle and reach for his glass. "Another one, Carter?"

Phoenix places a hand on my shoulder, using it to angle me towards him instead.

"Slow down," he says, "We're not trying to kill him."

"Aren't we?" I ask, dryly.

He shakes his head and chuckles at that, a rare sound from him. "I've never seen you like this before. You're obsessed with her."

I dismiss him with a laugh. "Hardly. I like her, I really fucking want her, yes, but it's hardly an obsession. I'm not like Rogue."

"No, you're not." He agrees and I start to smile before he adds, "You're still in the denial phase so you're actually a couple of steps behind him still, but I'd say you're right on track to hit the same milestones."

I roll my eyes at his obvious provocation. "I'm not going to waste my time arguing with you, but you're wrong."

Rogue's in love with Bellamy, he just won't admit it to himself or her yet.

I'm not the same. I'm captivated by Thayer, I'll admit it, but I'm not interested in a long term thing.

But it'll be more than one time, that's for fucking sure.

As it stands now, I don't know how long I'll need to satisfy my need for her, likely a fucking while, but inevitably there'll come a day where we'll call it and cut it off.

I know that, she knows that.

It's just looking like that date might be a little further into the future than I initially anticipated all those weeks ago.

I can't contemplate letting her go when I don't even have her yet, when my every waking moment is consumed with

thoughts of when she'll finally admit she belongs to me.

“Fine, so you're not obsessed with her,” he says, “Then you won't mind sharing with your mate, will you? It's been a while since the last time we shared a toy and I've got to say, I've been dreaming of having Thayer's legs wrapped around me for a while now.”

He smacks his lips appreciatively and snaps my temper all at once.

I snarl and grab him by the collar, using it to throw him up against the wall. He's got a self-satisfied smile painted on his face, the fucker.

Before I can do anything, Rogue is in between us, pulling me back and away from Phoenix.

“The fuck is going on?”

“Nothing,” he says, adjusting his collar with that same pleased look on his face, “Rhys was just proving my point.”

“Don't be a dick, Phoenix.” I snap, trying to push against Rogue's hold, but he doesn't budge. “Stay the fuck away from her.”

Carter mumbles something from his position on the couch, pulling our attention over to him and making Rogue let me go.

“You all right, mate?” Phoenix asks, walking up to him.

“Never better.” Is Carter's muttered response.

“Alright, let's try to sober him up a bit before tonight.” Rogue says, crossing his arm as he watches him. “Thayer's going to have all our asses if we actually kill this fucker.”

\*\*\*



*Thayer*

Carter was black out drunk when I met up with him at the grand opening.

Truthfully, I wasn't even sure how he was still conscious. He wobbled in alongside the others and made a conspicuous ass of himself by being loud and obnoxious in his greeting of me.

Wanting to dance with me, he'd dragged me onto the dance floor where we'd attempted to spin around the room. He'd tripped over his feet, then my dress, and that'd put an end to the dancing.

Now he's supporting his weight on my shoulder as he fights unconsciousness and I just need to find somewhere to put him.

"There's that professor's lounge just down the hall. Why don't we bring him there?" Nera asks.

"Yeah, good idea, let's do that."

I hook one of his arms over my shoulders and Nera takes the other. Within minutes, we have him in the room and he's passed out on one of the couches, his limbs hanging off haphazardly.

“Well, they certainly did a number on him.” Nera says as she straightens, looking down at him with her hands on her hips.

“He does this to himself.” I correct, frustration tainting my words, “He can’t hold his liquor.”

This isn’t the first time we’ve been in these exact same roles, Carter and I.

She puts a comforting hand on my shoulder. “What are you going to do?” She asks, “Are you going to stay with him?”

I hesitate, but not for long.

I didn’t ask him to come. Didn’t ask him to get blind drunk the first night he’s here and ruin any chances of us spending time together.

And the truth is I haven’t been able to stop thinking about my conversation with Bellamy earlier.

When I’d left Rhys’ room and found her standing bewildered in the hallway.

*“What are you doing here? Were you with Rhys in there?” She asks me, as her eyebrows hit her hairline.*

*“Yeah, it’s a long story. How did you know I was here?”*

*“I saw Six’s car parked outside when I was going to the bathroom. I had a feeling it was you so I came to check.”*

*I don’t pretend to be surprised that she thought it was me. I can’t deny that, in her shoes, I’d have thought the same thing. Plus, she was obviously right.*

*“What are you doing here?” She asks again, not one to be distracted.*

*“Mackley didn’t show up to practice so I came to make sure he was okay.”*

*Alright, so maybe it isn’t that long of a story.*

*“So, naturally, you snuck in here past your boyfriend to do so?” She asks, the sarcasm thick in her voice.*

*I wish people would stop saying it like that.*

*I shrug. "I didn't sneak, I just...avoided. I didn't want to deal with the questions."*

*She looks at me with softness in her eyes. "Thayer..." she says, her voice trailing off suggestively.*

*"What?" I ask, my voice going up an octave.*

*"What are you doing? And don't," She adds quickly, before I can feign ignorance again, "pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."*

*"We can't talk about this here." I whisper hiss.*

*I don't want anyone to accidentally overhear our conversation. I open the door to a nearby room and motion for her to join me.*

*Truth is, I'd hoped that when I saw Carter, it'd close the distance between us. That all the feelings I felt when we first started dating, the ones that'd been amplified when we'd said "I love you", would come back.*

*Instead, the short time he's been here has only highlighted how large the distance between us has actually gotten.*

*"Did anything happen with Rhys?" She asks.*

*"No!" I say, "No. But I'm... B, I have no idea what to do. Carter he's comfortable and he's—he's familiar—"*

*She cuts in. "Just say it. He's safe."*

*"He's not safe." I disagree, a frown pulling at my brows. "That's a weird thing to say about someone who cheated on me." I say, my teeth grinding together around the word I haven't said out loud since he betrayed me.*

*"Yes, he cheated." She agrees, nodding, "And since then you've used the fact that he cheated as a reason to distance yourself from him and your relationship. I'm not saying you shouldn't protect yourself, you absolutely should, but now you're staying with him in this shell of a relationship where you've bubble wrapped your heart, and that's a safe choice."*

*"What's wrong with picking the safe choice?"*

*“Nothing.” She takes my hand in hers and squeezes them. “Except you’re not safe. You’re the girl who takes us across the world for senior year because you read a pamphlet, you’re the fearless captain who’ll go toe to toe with anyone who messes with you. Your bucket list includes paragliding and hiking an active volcano. I’ve seen you willingly bite into a ghost pepper and I’ve seen you fleece a bunch of rich boys in an underground poker game. You’re not safe and you don’t want safe, so I don’t know why you’re settling for it. I don’t think you should.”*

*Trust your best friend to tell you the brutally honest truth the way she sees it when you need it.*

*“So you’re telling me to run towards danger?” I ask, conjuring Rhys’ face to mind.*

*“I’m telling you I don’t think you’re happy with Carter. You weren’t when it was long distance and you’re even less so now that he’s here visiting you, I can see it. You’re not someone who’s ever shied away from risks so why start now?” she asks, before adding, “Don’t hold on just because it’s scary to take a leap, that’s not you.”*

*“What if I don’t know who I am without Carter?” I say, finally voicing one of the anxieties that’s been holding me back.*

*Carter’s been by my side for the last two years of my life, it’s terrifying to think about not having that safety net around me anymore, especially when I’m far away from home.*

*“Sorry for the tough love, but I’m calling bullshit on that one.” She tells me, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “You got us here through sheer willpower alone, you know who you are more than anyone I know. And technically you’ve been without him for weeks and look how well you’ve been doing. You’re thriving.”*

*She’s right. I have so much strength and belief in myself in every other area of my life, I don’t know why it’s so hard for me to let go of something that seems to already have half withered away.*

*“Not that you asked me, but I’m going to tell you anyway,” she continues, making me snort, “My two cents is that you love Carter, but you’re not in love with him anymore. It’s hard for you to realize that it’s over because you’re conflating the two.”*

*“Mackley–”*

*“This isn’t about him.” she cuts in, “It’s about you. And try as you might to salvage this relationship with Carter, and you have, you’re not in love with him anymore. And there’s nothing wrong with that.” She adds the last part quietly, comfortingly, squeezing my hands one more time.*

*I look at her and I wish I could disagree. I wish I could tell her she’s wrong, that I’m in love with Carter and see my future with him but I can’t.*

*And there’s a deep sadness inside me at that loss, at knowing I’m about to make a decision that means leaving a very significant part of my short life behind and moving on.*

*“I know.” I whisper.*

*Finally, the words are out.*

*Finally, I’m no longer lying to myself.*

*“Then why aren’t you doing anything about it?” She asks, quirking an eyebrow.*

*“I’m scared.”*

*She hears the unsaid in my words and a conspiratorial smile crosses her face.*

*“Now we’re talking about him, right?” She asks.*

*I nod.*

*“Listen, all you need to figure out right now is what you want to do about Carter. Rhys is... you’ll cross that bridge once you get there.”*

*“That bridge is much closer than you think.” I say and then catch her up on what’s happened over the last week.*

*We haven't had a chance to really talk lately since she's been all loved up with Rogue.*

*"Holy shit." She says, when I finish telling her everything.*

*"Yup."*

*"Wow." She continues, but stops, at a loss for words.*

*"Yup."*

*"I don't know how you haven't folded yet. I'd have gone like a cheap lawn chair if he said half those things to me."*

*"Hey." I say, my tone half joking, half warning. I don't want to think about him saying those same things to her or anyone else.*

*The truth is I've folded more than she knows. I've touched myself to him so often, his face is starting to leave a permanent imprint on my eyelids.*

*But I don't want to hear about anyone else folding for him.*

*She laughs. "So you're just as possessive of him as he is of you. It's going to be fireworks when you guys eventually hook up."*

*"I don't know if I can do the casual thing." I tell her honestly.*

*"It's tough. I mean, I obviously got my feelings involved in my own situationship so I can't exactly give you unhypocritical advice. I guess what I'd say is, treat this like a rebound. A way to have a little fun and get back out there. You don't really want to go right into another relationship, do you?" She asks, almost echoing Rhys word for word.*

*She's not wrong, but unwittingly, Rhys already occupies a chunk of my waking thoughts as is.*

*If I hook up with him, I'm not sure if I'll be able to do it without getting my feelings involved.*

*"No, you're right." I say, before adding. "You know what, I actually don't want to talk about this anymore until I*

*Speak to Carter.”*

*It feels wrong to talk about someone else when I haven't officially ended my current relationship and he's just downstairs.*

*“Excuse me, you can't stop now that we're getting to the juicy part.” She says, but it's too late.*

*“No, let's chat about it later, after I've talked to him. It feels weird to talk about it now.”*

*She pouts and says, “Sad. But I get it. Are you going to talk to him today, do you think?”*

*I can't imagine putting this off, pretending and just going through the motions with him when he has no clue how I feel.*

*I just can't do it.*

*“Yeah, I think so.” I say, heading towards the door with her in tow. I turn back towards her as I go to open it. “By the way, I never thanked you for sending Mackley to come help me before the game. That was a life saving move.”*

*She stops where she stands and tilts her head to the side, looking at me quizzically. “I didn't send him to you.”*

*“What do you mean?” I ask.*

*“I crossed paths with him that morning, yeah, but he's the one who told me he was going to see you. He thought you might need someone there with you in the morning.” She says, “Did he tell you I sent him?”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“I wonder why he said that. It was his idea.” She tells me with an ‘I don't know’ lift of her shoulders.*

*We'd gone back downstairs and met up with Rogue, Phoenix, and Carter before Rhys eventually made an appearance.*

*I held my breath the entire time they were in the same room together, a breath I almost choked on when Carter agreed to stay and get ready with them.*

I'd desperately wanted him to come home with me so that we could talk, so that I could tell him how I felt.

So I could finally get these words that I hadn't realized were weighing me down off my chest.

But, unsurprisingly, he'd chosen new friends over me and had been a showboating asshole in doing so.

Rhys was the one who'd defended me.

You could have heard a pin drop in that room, but all I was aware of was the anger coming off of Rhys in waves.

I thought it was going to come to blows, but thankfully Carter apologized.

So, in the context of all of that, no, I don't particularly want to stay in this room babysitting a passed out Carter.

"No. He can just sleep it off here alone until I'm ready to go. I'm not letting him get in the way of me having a good time tonight."

"Yes, girl." She says encouragingly, her accent curling around every letter.

I look down at him sprawled out on the couch, limbs going every which way. He's going to wake up in a world of pain if I let him sleep like that.

With a sigh, I bend over him and start repositioning him. "I'm just going to try to get him a little more comfortable. Can you see if you can find a water bottle? I'm sure he's going to need it when he wakes up."

"Sure thing." She says, and leaves.

I grab Carter by his shoulders and tug as hard as I can to get his entire body on the couch. I'm tucking his left arm under him when I hear the door open and close with a soft click behind me.

"Did you find some?" I ask her, not turning around.

Instead of getting an answer, a large hand grabs my hip from behind. I open my mouth to scream, but another hand covers my lips and muffles the sound completely.



I'm twisted away from Carter and yanked against a hard body, the hand on my mouth angling my face to the right as a hot breath hits my cheek and a growl thunders in my ear.

"What are you doing in here with him?"

I internally sag with relief when I recognize Rhys' voice. Externally, I hum against his hand, trying to signal to him that I can't speak with his palm on my mouth like that.

He releases me, but his hand slides down my mouth and over my neck to grab my throat. I'm sure he can feel the frantic beat of my heart as it jumps against my skin.

"Why did you get him that drunk?" I counter, my voice a whisper because Carter is asleep right there.

He twists me around and buries his face in my hair, groaning as he takes a deep inhale.

"You know why."

"You don't want him to touch me?"

"Never. Again." He grunts angrily against my ear.

His right hand slides across my stomach to curl me closer against him while his left grabs a fistful of my hair and uses it to completely angle back my face so that I have no choice but to look at him.

The movement makes my hair sweep off my shoulder and reveals the column of my neck.

The oxygen feels like it's sucked out of the room as Rhys' gaze connects with my neck and I watch all the color in his eyes get swallowed up by the black pools of rage they become.

"Did he give you a fucking hickey?" He snarls.

His voice is furious, the words powerful enough it feels like his rib cage rattles against my back.

"No."

"You let him touch you?" He grits out, rage distorting his voice. He tugs at my hair again sending a sharp pain through

the base of my skull, but it only excites me further.

“No, it’s a burn not a hickey. It’s from my hair straightener.” I add quickly.

He briefly releases my hip to rub his thumb over the red burn on my neck, his eyes caressing my face as I wince at the contact and look away.

He grabs my hip again and uses the hold on my hair to bring my attention to him. His own eyes are hooded with desire as they fixate on my mouth.

“What about your mouth?” He asks, darkly, “Has he kissed you? Have you given him my lips?”

Him calling them “his lips” shouldn’t send a pang of pleasure shooting to my pussy, but it does.

I shake my head no and he moans low in his throat in satisfaction. The sound alone makes my pussy throb and sends liquid heat pooling to my lower belly.

He bends his neck and licks the middle of my lips once in an upward flick and I almost come on the spot.

It’s barely a touch, but I’m starving.

“I can’t wait to claim these lips. To suck them and bite them like I’ve been imagining. To have them stretched tight around my cock as you suck me off.” He says, the gleam in his eye almost sadistic as he stares at me. “You know what, I’m not sure I can wait.”

He turns me back around so that I face Carter, who’s still passed out on the couch.

Oh, fuck.

I completely forgot he was here.

I thrash against Rhys’ chest, but he holds me with very little effort.

“Let me go,” I hiss, “We can’t do this here.” I say, desperately, before rectifying. “We can’t do this at all.”

“I think I should fuck you right here while he’s in the same room.” He threatens venomously against my ear. “Show him what a fucking idiot he is for leaving you unguarded around me when everyone can see how much I want you.”

With the way he’s talking to me right now, he could do whatever he wanted to me and with very little convincing I’d say yes.

It’s dangerous for me to be anywhere near him right now, let alone in his arms.

“N-no.” I say and squeal when I feel Rhys’ mouth close over my neck, just below the burn.

He sucks the flesh into his mouth and a broken moan leaves my mouth as I feel his warm tongue caress the tender skin.

“No? Are you sure?” He asks, releasing my neck with a *pop*, “The way you’re moaning, you sound like you might die if I don’t fuck you right now.”

I shake my head. “Don’t.”

“I don’t think I can stop.” He groans against my ear before biting my earlobe. “You have no idea how much I want to fuck you.”

“Tell me,” I say, my voice coming out pleading, “Just tell me what you want.”

“You want me to tell you how I’m going to fuck you?” His hand goes back to my throat as his other splays over my flat lower stomach, his fingers brushing against the top of my pussy.

“Y-yes.”

His pleased growl thunders in his chest and he presses down on my stomach so my ass grinds against his hips behind me.

I can feel the smooth fabric of his pants, the rough metal of his zipper, and the hard imprint of his cock. He angles his hips up and down, rubbing himself slowly against my ass.

“I’ll start by grabbing your hip like I am now. My grip will probably bruise and it’ll definitely be too rough, but that’ll be your fault. You’ve teased and tormented me but you haven’t let me touch you. When you finally break up with this asshole, you’ll unleash an animal you won’t be able to hide from. You’ll take it like the good girl I know you can be, and you’ll enjoy it.”

My legs start to shake and I find myself rocking into him.

“Next, I’ll trace my hand up your waist to just under the swell of your tits. I’ll feel how hard your heart beats for me. How it goes wild for me even though I’ll have barely touched you yet. I’ll cup your tits, pinch your nipples and bite them hard enough to break your skin to punish you for the hell you’ve put me through.”

“I’ll continue up until I wrap my fist around this delicate throat like I am now.” He taps his fingers against the top of my pussy. “My other hand will have snuck down to the hem of your shorts or jeans, playing with the button to get them open and then yanking them down in one rough go.”

He continues rubbing his massive length against my ass, between the grooves of my cheeks, clutching me desperately against him. My breaths come out in short little puffs as I fight the blinding lust that comes with his thrusts.

I avert my gaze, trying not to look at Carter, but Rhys grabs my jaw and turns me back towards him.

“Don’t look away when I tell you how I’m going to take you from him.” He pants against my ear, picking up the rhythm of his thrusts against me.

“I just know your sweet little pussy is going to kill me. I’ll drop to my knees in front of it, still covered in your panties. I’ll rip those off and smell them, my first smell of you after all this time. Then I’ll throw your leg over my shoulder, squeeze your throat and lick your pussy until you come on my face. But not before I play with you a bit, making you suffer like you’ve made me for weeks.”

“I’ll trace every contour of your dripping cunt with my tongue again and just when you’re about to tumble over the edge a second time, I’ll bite your swollen clit and shove two fingers in your pussy. You’ll mewl and squeal and try to fight me off, to escape the pleasure that’s so intense it’s almost painful, but I’ll keep you pinned to the spot with my hold on your throat.”

“Fuck, I’m going to make myself come just thinking about it.” He says, pausing as he digs his fingers deeper into my flesh to help restrain himself.

I roll my ass tentatively back against him and he curses savagely behind me.

His hand leaves my stomach and comes down to slap the side of my ass. I jump forward with a startled cry but Rhys’ hand keeps me in place.

“Bad girl.” He says, spanking me again.

Fuck, the things those words do to me.

Carter moans and turns his head towards us and I freeze on the spot. I can’t imagine how he’ll react if he wakes up right now to find his girlfriend getting dry humped by another man as he squeezes her throat and slaps her ass.

The shame burns hot but is no match for the raging lust that snuffs it out.

I can’t stop myself.

Thankfully, he doesn’t wake up, much to Rhys’ dismay.

“Looks like he’s still asleep. Too bad,” He purrs against my ear, “If it was up to me, he’d open his eyes and see you with the man you actually belong to.”

His hand snakes down and smacks my clit over my evening gown, making me cry out sharply. It’s so swollen and sensitive, one more touch will likely break me.

He buries his face in my hair and speaks through gritted teeth against the strands. “Once you’ve come all over my face and my fingers, I’ll push you to your knees and shove my cock so far down your throat, you’ll feel me for days. I’ll fuck that

mouth and that pussy until you have no choice but to finally scream my name.”

His pace is frantic against my ass as he says the words “my name” repeatedly against my hair, almost like a chant.

I can feel him on the verge of coming and I want to be the one to make him lose control.

I reach a hand back and grip his ass, digging my manicured nails into his flesh and pressing his hips further against me until his cock is splitting my cheeks.

He stills with a hissed “fuck” and his every muscle tenses as his climax hits him and he comes. His hips continue moving in tandem with his orgasm as he rides the intense wave, angling my face towards him as he does so.

“Now, you look at me. You look only at me when I come for you.”

I do as he says, staring into his eyes as they devour me ravenously. I can feel his breath on my lips and I think he’s going to kiss me, but he doesn’t.

When he’s done, he sags against me, his chest heaving and his mouth closing around that same spot on my neck as earlier.

I shudder as he sucks at my skin long and hard enough to leave a mark, like an animal branding his mate.

I stand shell shocked, trying to catch my breath. He’s the one who got off on me, but I feel like I just ran a half-marathon.

He drops to his knees behind me. His hands reach up and clasp my hips, using them to make me face him.

His gaze starts at my heeled foot and roams up my slim ankle and strong leg framed in the slit of my long, my black evening gown, up my waist and breasts, over my neck and mouth and to my eyes.

He looks at me the way a thirsty man might an oasis that appears in the desert, his gaze delighted, appreciative, possessive and ready to jump in.

“The need to defile you was so strong I forgot to tell you how beautiful you look tonight, love.” He says, his tone apologetic as he stares at me hungrily. “I don’t think I’d seen true beauty until I met you.” He whispers, placing a soft kiss on my ankle.

His praise lights me on fire from the inside. Those words are definitely the best compliment I’ve ever received and have me desperate to kiss him. Especially as he looks up at me from his knees, the position not doing anything to quell his dominance over me.

“I can’t believe you made me come in my tux like a virgin, love.” He says, “If you’re going to dirty my things, I get to dirty yours.” And then the hand holding my ankle moves up the back of my calf, over my knee and to my thigh.

His fingers pause at the curve of my ass as I hold my breath and stare down at him through pupils blown with lust.

His hand inches upward and over the bare flesh of my ass before a terrifying growl rumbles in his chest.

“You better be wearing underwear Thayer, or I swear to—” He warns before his fingers connect with the top band of my thong. “Thank fuck.”

He smiles at me arrogantly as they hook under the band and start pulling the panties down my thigh.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice coming out with a squeak from lack of use.

He loops my underwear over one foot and then the other, then bunches it in his hand and brings it up to his nose.

It’s high-inducing to watch his gaze turn animalistic with desire as he smells me.

“Sweet, just like I thought.” He declares throatily.

“Oh, God,” I mumble, squeezing my thighs together to keep them from shaking.

He stuffs my underwear into his pocket and stands to his full height, his hand cupping my face to make me look at him.

“I need to go home and clean up the mess you made in my trousers. Let me give you a lift.” He says.

He grabs my hand and pulls me towards the door but I tug myself out of his hold.

“No, I need to take him home with me when I go. I can’t just leave him here overnight.” I say, tipping my head behind me in Carter’s direction.

He’s been my boyfriend for two years and my friend for longer, I can’t just leave him passed out in a place he doesn’t know.

“You can and you will.” Rhys says as he tries to grab my hand again. I evade his hold and take a step back towards Carter.

His nostrils flare and his jaw snaps shut as he watches me do so.

“This is a strange place that he doesn’t know, I can’t just leave him here. I’m taking him back to The Pen with me.”

He turns his head away and the muscle in his cheek jumps so violently as he moves his jaw back and forth, I’m afraid it’ll snap.

“That’s your choice?” He asks through clenched teeth.

“No, I’m not choosing.” I say, putting my hands up towards him. “That’s... It’s not about that. I’m looking out for him like I would anyone else.”

“But he’s not just anyone else to you, is he?”

I can’t have this conversation with him right now, not when I haven’t talked to Carter, not when the man in question is passed out in the room with us, it’s just not the time.

“That’s not what this is about.” I tell him, before adding, “You’re having a party tomorrow right? We can talk then.”

Rhys stands tall, his hands in his pockets as he watches me intently. There’s a disappointed look on his face as he shakes his head.

“I told you I wouldn’t watch you with him.”



He turns on his heel and walks out, closing the door behind him silently, leaving me to wonder if those words meant what I think they meant.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

When I wake up the next morning, I have a terrible feeling of dread in my stomach. I peel myself out of bed, careful not to wake up Bellamy who's asleep next to me.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes as I look down at her tear stained face. I'd come home and found her in bed, absolutely devastated.

She'd caught Rogue cheating on her and they'd broken up.

I'd gotten into bed with her and she'd cried in my arms for half the night. My heart had almost shattered to pieces listening to her cry and feeling the sobs as they wracked through her body.

It was hard to believe that he'd do something like that to her, not with the way he couldn't even seem to go two hours without seeing her.

But Bellamy had seen it with her own eyes so I'd shut up and held her until we'd both fallen into fitful sleep.

Now, she rolls onto her side, her eyes opening slowly, red rimmed and puffy from crying. She looks up at me with a depleted look on her face.

"Tell me it was a bad dream."

I sit on the bed and place my hand comfortingly on her arm.

“I’m sorry, I wish I could.”

She groans and buries her face in her pillow.

“You going to be alright?” I ask her.

“Yeah.” She says, her voice muffled by the pillow. She turns her head to look at me. “Are you going to practice with Rhys?”

“No.” I texted him this morning and canceled, but he hasn’t texted back yet. “I’m going to see if Carter wants to go for a walk.” I tell her, my tone suggestive when I say the word ‘walk’.

“Oh, shit.” She says, her eyes widening. “Are we both about to be single?”

I shrug my shoulders and look away.

She reaches out to grab my hand and squeezes it, bringing my gaze back to her as she gives me a supportive smile.

“It’s a hard decision to make, but you’ve got this.”

There’s a knock at the door and then it opens slowly, Nera and Six poking their heads in from behind it.

“How are you doing, B?” Six asks, coming into the room with a cup of tea and cookies and setting them on Bellamy’s bedside table. “I can also get you something much stronger if you prefer.”

“I’m alright.” She says, before sitting up. “Well no, I’m devastated, but I’ll be alright soon. Hopefully.” She adds with a broken smile.

I stand and Nera takes my spot, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

“Whatever you need, we’re here for you.”

Bellamy sets her head on her shoulder. “Thanks, pals.”

“Can you guys take care of her while I’m gone?” I ask.

“Yeah, for sure. Where are you going?”

“I’m... going to talk to Carter. Assuming he’s still alive.” When we got home last night, I dumped him in my bed and came to sleep with Bellamy. I haven’t seen him since.

“Oh, shit.” Nera and Six say in unison, echoing Bellamy’s previous words.

“My thoughts exactly.” She confirms.

“Is this... *the* conversation?” Nera asks.

“I think so.”

Six stands up and hugs me. “Good luck.”

Nera whistles at my back as I head for the door. “Never a dull day in this apartment.”

I knock on the door to my bedroom and open it when I hear Carter tell me to come in. He’s standing in front of the closet, buckling his jeans closed as I walk in.

“Good morning.”

“Morning.” He says, giving me a sheepish smile and bending his head to kiss me. I turn my face at the last second and his lips land on my cheek instead.

He pulls back slowly, giving me a confused look.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” I ask him, unsure what else to say.

“Sure.” He answers, his face closing off completely, making it impossible for me to know what he’s thinking.

We head out of The Pen and I walk him towards a path I know well that leads down to the pond in the middle of campus. It’s a scenic walk, especially on a crisp late October morning when the leaves are turning the beautiful colors of fall around us.

We walk wordlessly for a bit and I can’t help but feel like we’re closer to being two strangers than anything.

It’s crazy how much has changed, how much *we’ve* changed over the last few months.

“How did you sleep?” I finally ask.

“Not great. I’m sorry I got so drunk.”

We come up to a bench and I point at it. “Want to sit there for a bit?”

“Sure.”

We sit in awkward silence for a couple of minutes while I try to find both the words and the courage to say them to him. I wish I’d rehearsed this before, but it didn’t cross my mind that I’d need to.

“Listen, I don’t know how to say this—” I start, but he interrupts.

“You’re breaking up with me.”

“I—, um, I...yes.” I say, tripping over the mass in my throat created by his unexpected interruption. “How did you know?”

“You haven’t let me touch you since I got here and we’ve barely talked over the past couple of months. Doesn’t take a genius.”

I look out at the beautiful trees, the open grass, the pond in the distance, the students milling about campus, enjoying their weekend and the gorgeous fall day, and I relish in the feeling of how happy I am here.

I didn’t know that I’d be putting the final nail in the coffin of my relationship when I came to Switzerland, and now that the moment is upon me, that I see my relationship in the context of my new life, I don’t regret the decisions I’ve made that have brought us here.

“I’m sorry.” I tell him, truthfully. “I feel like we’ve been over for a long time and that we’ve been holding on to something that’s in the past. It took you coming here for me to realize that, I really didn’t mean to stretch this out further.”

“Is it because of what I did?” He asks, not looking at me. His shoulders are tense and his tone is biting.

“No. Well, not really.” I say, “I think I was already falling out of love with you before that. It was likely the same for you since you could cheat on me.”

He stays quiet so I continue. “I moved to another continent and I haven’t missed you as much as I think I should have if you really were the love of my life. Can you honestly say you’ve missed me?”

“No.” He answers, his tone downright rude now. This is a new side to him. He’s always been a little thoughtless, a bit careless maybe, but never mean. “I was coming here to tell you I fucked someone else, anyway.” He hisses, his voice venomous as he watches me to see how the blow lands.

I inhale sharply as I wait for the inevitable pain, but... nothing.

I feel nothing.

Not rage, despair, or heartbreak, just a deep sense that I made the right decision. Selfishly, I can’t help but compare myself to Bellamy.

She’s a complete wreck because of what Rogue did and I just want to put as much distance between me and Carter as possible.

If anything, I feel anger and frustration that I dragged this out for so long. That I agonized over the decision and the guilt of my feelings for Rhys when all along he was fucking someone else.

I regret crossing that line with Rhys yesterday, not that the moment itself happened, but that I let it happen before I spoke to Carter.

At this moment, I feel absolved of all that guilt.

If he wants this to end bitterly, with jabs and blows thrown at one another with the intent to wound, I simply won’t entertain him.

“Well, then I think we’ve said all we have to say to each other.” I say, standing up and dusting my backside.

I have zero interest in who he slept with or any of the sordid details.

I’d wanted this to be an amicable breakup, but his actions make that impossible. The faster he gets away from me, the

better.

He grabs my forearm and keeps me in place.

“Is there someone else?”

I yank my arm out of his hold, rubbing my wrist as I flash him a glare. “You don’t get to ask me that.”

“It’s Rhys, isn’t it?”

My heart skips a beat at the mention of his name, my body always attuned to anything to do with him.

“What? No. Why would you think that?”

He stands and walks up to me. “Because you barely batted an eye when I just told you I fucked someone else.”

“I’m sorry my reaction to your betrayal isn’t dramatic enough for you. Do you want me to break down in tears and beg? Is that it?” I counter mockingly, irate now.

His narcissism now that I see it is downright frightening. I don’t recognize the man I used to have feelings for.

“I want you to care.”

“Well I don’t. In fact I think you should date her, whoever she is. Best wishes to you both.”

I turn to walk away but he grabs my arm again.

“I know you have something going with him. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, like he’s trying to commit you to memory. Like he’d kill me if I touched you when you’re not even his.”

*Maybe I am.*

My feelings flare to life as I think of the way Rhys looks at me. Like he’s trying to engrave me in his brain with all the intensity and focus of a man possessed. I’m not surprised it didn’t escape Carter’s notice.

The man isn’t exactly subtle when it comes to me.

But, finally, he doesn’t have to be.

I pull my arm out of Carter's hold once more and put my hands in my coat pockets.

"That's no longer any of your concern, just like I'm no longer any of your concern. Get your stuff out of my apartment by the end of the day, I don't want to see you again. You got yourself here, I trust you can get yourself home." I say, and start walking off.

I pause a few steps away and turn back towards him. He's still standing in front of the bench, watching me leave, a frown on his face.

This isn't how I wanted it to end.

I'd wanted closure for the both of us, to be able to move on as friends. Maybe that's not meant to be, but I don't want to leave him with any anger or bitterness in my heart.

"Take care of yourself, Carter. Good luck with everything, I really mean that." I say with a small smile.

I turn back towards the path and walk, feeling a weight lifted off my shoulders from having decisively closed that chapter of my life.

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I walk into Rhys' house alone.

Leaving Bellamy at home to go to her ex-boyfriend's house was a dick move, but I'd needed to come.

Rhys never answered my text canceling practice and didn't acknowledge the subsequent one I'd sent him asking what he was up to.

I'm pretty sure he's angry with me for 'choosing' to take Carter home with me last night and if he would just answer me, I could explain that he misconstrued this whole thing.

But since he won't, I'm forced to go to him.



And unaccompanied at that, since the girls are staying with Bellamy to try to cheer her up.

There's easily hundreds of students here from RCA and other schools, all people desperate to attend one of these legendary parties.

The throng of people makes it impossible to move easily, let alone find him. I make my way through the crowd towards the kitchen when I hear several voices yell his name.

"Let's go, Rhys!"

It's coming from outside. I push through the people to a pair of glass doors in the kitchen and out through to the back of the house.

People are crowded tightly around the pool, glasses and beer bottles strewn everywhere as the party rages on.

They're all looking at something above them.

I follow their line of sight up towards the house and my breath catches in my throat when I see Rhys standing on the railing of a second floor balcony, shirtless and his arms outstretched like a God as he urges people to cheer him on.

His head is bent backwards so I can't make out his facial expression, but the muscles of his stomach ripple in the moonlight.

He looks superhuman.

Before I can process another thought, he does a jumping flip off the balcony, landing in a cannonball in the pool below him.

I push through the crowd to the edge of the pool and scour the top of the water for him, not breathing the long seconds that he's underwater as I wait for him to emerge.

He's insane for doing that from such a high distance into what I'm sure is a pretty shallow pool. What if he broke his neck?

My heart is in my throat at the thought.

Finally, after what feels like hours but I'm sure is actually more like fifteen seconds, he emerges to massive cheers from the crowd and shakes his head to remove the excess water.

He's got an easy grin on his face as he runs his hand through his hair and pushes it off his forehead, before swimming up to the edge of the pool.

He places both hands on the ledge and uses the leverage to lift his body out of the pool, his powerful form slicing through the water with barely any effort at all as he propels himself out.

There's a girl waiting for him as he stands. She flings a warm towel around his shoulders and wraps her arms around his middle, snuggling close to him.

He gives her a surprised look before his mouth stretches into a slow grin.

There's a painful knot forming in my throat as I watch him with her.

I'm an idiot. He told me he was done waiting, that he was going to hook up with the other people.

I'd thought he wasn't texting me back because he was angry, but maybe he was just fucking this random girl.

Almost as if he can feel me watching him, his gaze snaps up to meet mine. Even separated by a pool and about a hundred people, he finds me in the crowd.

His eyes bore into mine and the world around us fades away, leaving only him and me standing outside.

His gaze narrows with an indecipherable emotion as he stares at me.

The moment is broken when a hand reaches up to cup his face. It's the girl who's still hugging him and she's trying to get his attention back on her.

I turn my head away from him, refusing to watch them for a second longer. He didn't promise me anything so I shouldn't be angry, let alone disappointed, but those feelings pull at me.

I go through the crowd of people, unsure of what to do with myself or where to go. I wasn't expecting to go home so soon and I don't have a ride.

I head for the guest house, hoping I'll be able to hide away from the crowd there until I can get Six to pick me up. I text her and beg her to come get me, letting her know where I am and promising her mountains of chocolate, her kryptonite, if she comes.

The door is unlocked, so I walk into the foyer and find a beautiful library to my left.

It's not as large as the one in the main house, but it's got rows of antique shelving and historical books along the walls, a pool table in the middle of the room, and plush, velvet couches laid out to create a comfortable reading area.

I walk further into the room and run my finger along the spines of a row of books, marveling at all the first edition classics they have.

I know Six would love this place.

I feel him enter before he even says a word.

It's in the way the energy changes in the room, becoming charged and electric now that he's here. It's in the way my body involuntarily reacts to his closeness.

"What do you want?" I ask without turning around, my tone short.

He chuckles, the sound low and seductive as I feel him approach, but he doesn't say anything.

"Shouldn't you be out there fucking that girl?" I ask, turning around when he remains silent still.

He's standing a few feet away from me, his wet hair dripping onto a long sleeved flannel shirt and jeans he must have just put on, looking handsome as sin.

"I find it funny that you'd demand that I not let my boyfriend touch me, get angry with me and then ignore me when I say I need to bring him home safely, and yet you let a nobody rub her body all over you." I snap at him.

“Does it hurt? Seeing me with her?” He asks, walking up to me with slow, predatory steps.

“Is that what you want?” I cry out, confused.

I try to shoulder past him, but he traps me against the wall as his hands come slamming down on either side of me.

“Yes, that’s what I want,” he snarls, “I want you to hurt. I want you to feel everything I feel when I think about you in your room calling your boyfriend and lying, telling him you miss him. I want you to feel the same anger that consumes me when I watch him touch you as you dance, the rage that strangles the air out of my lungs when I imagine him alone with you, kissing you.”

“I hate seeing you touch her.” I bite out, my eyes moving over his angry face.

He looks so beautiful looming over me like a dark omen, trapping me against the wall of books behind me.

His eyes gleam with sadistic satisfaction. “Then you understand a fraction of what I’ve been going through since I met you. All the time spent thinking of you with him and now having to watch it happen in front of m—”

“So you didn’t touch her?”

“No, I didn’t fucking touch h—”

I get on my tiptoes, cup his face and silence him by bringing my lips to his.

He freezes and I stay pressed against him for a couple of seconds before I drop down to my feet and lean back against the wall, looking up at him.

Surprise gives way to lust as desire darkens his eyes until they’re depthless pools of black.

“Holy fuck.”

He cups the back of my head and yanks my mouth back against his with such force that it leaves me breathless and struggling for air before we’ve even started.

He flattens me against the wall as his mouth devours me.

Part of me had hoped that this kiss would be disappointing, that I could sate my curiosity and then move on.

But no.

Devastating.

That's what this kiss is.

Life changing, world ending, fate redefining.

His tongue licks my parted lips with the appetite of a lion digging into a zebra it's just caught and killed, his hands desperately roaming over my body, gripping and digging into my flesh to bring me flush against him.

I run my hands through his hair, grabbing handfuls of thick strands and using them to try to pull him closer still as I return the kiss with equal fervor.

He moans into my open mouth and grabs my ass, hoisting me up against his erect cock as he wraps my legs around him.

One of his hands moves back up to my nape and crushes me against him as he attacks my mouth, licking and biting me without mercy, like he can't get enough.

I'm the one rubbing myself against him this time, desperate to get any contact, desperate to get myself off, the arousal making me almost dizzy. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and use them as leverage to rub faster against him.

His answering groan makes me feral. I rip my lips off of his, burying my face in his neck and digging my teeth into the flesh there instead as I suck his skin like he sucked mine, leaving a mark that matches the one he gave me in its place.

He pants in my ear as he presses his face to the side of mine, his fingers digging into my waist in a deadly grip as he keeps me plastered against him.

He fists my hair and uses it to pull me back and off his neck. Arousal makes his face almost unrecognizable as his gaze locks in on the heated sounds falling from my lips.

"You have no idea what you've just done." He growls, his voice distorted by lust.

“I think I do.” I reply, coyly, bringing my lips back against his.

He slams me back against the wall hard enough to make my bones rattle but it only serves to get me hotter and more desperate for him.

His hand palms my breast and a throaty groan leaves his lips. He’s rough with me, almost mad with desire as he roams my body, desperately touching every part of me.

“Thayer, are you her— *Oh putain*, sorry.”

I rip my mouth off of Rhys’ just in time to see Six walk out of the guest house.

He leans his forehead down against mine as labored breaths are ripped from his chest.

“Your friends are the biggest cock blocks I know, Silver.”

“Fuck.” I say, remembering I texted her to come get me. “Put me down.”

“No.” He purrs, but his tone brooks no arguments.

“Put me down, Mackley.” I repeat, more authoritatively this time.

He narrows his eyes at me, heat flaring in them at my words. “Calling me that has the opposite effect of convincing me, love.”

I wiggle down his body and he lets me go, but keeps me trapped between his strong arms extended against the wall behind me.

I duck beneath his arm and jog towards the door, calling over my shoulder. “I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thayer.” His voice booms after me and stops me in my tracks. “Stop running away from me. There’s no more escaping me now that I’ve had a taste of you.” He says darkly, his words somewhere between a threat and a promise.

I bring my hand up to my swollen lips as I give him a small smile. “I had the first taste.” I say and don’t wait for a response.

I'm outside in a couple steps and running to the car once I spot it. I jump in and lock the door behind me.

"Go before he comes after me." I tell her. I don't know why, but I feel like Rhys is the type of man who'd run after my car to try and stop me from leaving.

She laughs giddily, turning her disbelieving stare towards me as she peels out of the driveway. "I can't believe what I just witnessed."

"I know."

"That was so hot."

I touch my lips again. They're still buzzing from our frantic kisses, as is the blood in my veins. "You have no idea."

She shrieks excitedly at that. "I can't believe you left him like that."

I look out the window. I didn't want to leave but he was unhinged for me and we were so uncontrollable together. I had no doubt that if I'd stayed, he'd have fucked me on one of the couches.

It's not that I'm against losing my virginity on a couch, in fact the thought alone has me horny and excited, but it feels wrong to break up with my boyfriend and hook up with someone else the same day.

I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight, but I imagine it'll be fitful and plagued by visions of us writhing against each other, desperate for a touch, a taste of the other.

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

She saunters out of the guest library and leaves me with a galloping heartbeat and the most painful hard on I've ever had in my life.

Kissing her, finally being able to touch her the way I'd wanted to had felt like taking that first hit of heroin.

My breaths rip out of my chest as I try to calm my racing heart. I lick my lips, searching for any remaining taste of her, desperate to extend the high.

Already, I can feel the addiction slicing through my veins. Can feel the way my body craves its next fix with single minded focus as if she wasn't in my arms less than five minutes ago.

The shock when she'd slammed her lips against mine had short circuited the electrical wiring in my brain, momentarily freezing me in place before the animalistic need had kicked in and taken over.

I'd have fucked her then and there if she hadn't cut it off abruptly. I don't know if it's guilt related to Carter that made her stop or something else, but I'm itching to find out.

My fists clench as his name crosses my mind. Whether they're still officially together or not doesn't matter anymore. It never fucking did because she was always mine, but now that she's crossed that line, there's no going back for her.



No amount of faith or prayer will save him if he lays a finger on her now.

I quell the furious need to run after her, kidnap her, and lock her up in my room away from prying eyes. Instead, I pull out my phone.

**Rhys:** Practice at eight pm tomorrow.

**Rhys:** Wear something you don't mind having shredded.

**Thayer:** Awfully presumptuous of you. What if I told you what happened between us was a mistake?

My blood boils at her text. She better not be backtracking from tonight.

**Rhys:** I'd remind you that I promised to punish you for every lie you told me.

**Thayer:** Hmm. And I wouldn't like it?

**Rhys:** You'd hate it.

**Thayer:** And you? Would you enjoy it?

She's playing a dangerous game, teasing me like this. I don't think she knows how close I am to making my previous urges come true.

**Rhys:** The punishment I have in mind?

**Rhys:** I'd fucking love it.

There's no immediate reply. When she still hasn't answered a few minutes later, I assume she's simply going to ignore my last texts, but then my phone dings.

**Thayer:** That kiss was a mistake then.

I'm about to answer when a second text comes through, this time an image. It's a photo of the bottom half of her face, specifically of her puffy lips swollen from our frantic kissing, her fingers gently grazing the cut on the corner of her bottom lip where I bit her.

It's an unstaged, simple selfie and it has my cock even harder than before. Satisfaction courses through me at the fact

that everyone will see it tomorrow and know she's been claimed.

**Rhys:** You asked for it.

**Rhys:** Remember that.

\*\*\*

The next morning, I walk out of my last class before lunch with my bag slung casually over one shoulder.

Students explode into the hallways from all different directions and head for the dining hall. I tower over everyone as I scope out the crowd looking for Thayer's magnetic silver hair.

I spot her walking against the mass of people, heading for her locker. I stay out of the way hidden in a classroom alcove, the crowd thinning out as I watch her swap a couple books in her backpack for ones in her locker.

She's wearing a pleated mini skirt, an oversized white jumper and her AF1s. Her skirt rises dangerously high when she bends further into her locker, throttling my blood pressure in the process.

She has tights on but they don't do anything to cover her. I can see a hint of the swell of her cheek from where I stand.

Anyone could lift a hand and easily cup her soft curves.

That thought spurs me forwards and I quietly prowl towards her until I'm right behind her. I don't stop, wrapping my fingers around her arm and dragging her beside me towards the adjoining janitorial closet.

She doesn't have time to react before I open the door, throw her in there and walk in after her, locking it behind me with a foreboding click.

She whips around and looks at me, her chest already pumping madly up and down and her eyes shining with excitement.

I don't give her a moment to adjust. I'm across the tiny room in two steps, chaining her throat in my grip as I push her up against the wall.

I bite the other corner of her lower lip, giving her a matching cut to the one she already has. She yelps and I swallow the sound with my lips as I slam my mouth down on hers.

"Kissing me was a mistake?" I whisper harshly against her mouth.

She nods, shakily.

"Use your voice, love. I want to hear you when you fight me."

She swallows almost imperceptibly. I would have missed it if I hadn't felt her throat move against my palm, reminding me that I have total control over her right now.

"Yes."

I crash my lips against hers. My tongue darts out and flicks her upper lip as a rumble starts in my chest and rolls up through my mouth, into hers.

A powerful shiver surfs from the top of her head to her toes in response, making her inadvertently mold against my chest as a small answering moan leaves her lips.

It's like we both just took a hit of something potent.

"Liar."

I release her, grab her hips and flip her so she's face first against the wall. A shocked gasp tumbles from her mouth as I keep her pressed against it and use my other hand to flip over her skirt, yank her tights down, and rip her thong clean off before I stuff it in my pocket.

"Mackley—"

“That’s not my name, love.” I say, before lifting my hand and bringing it down on her ass.

I feel her freeze in astonished surprise, her breathing itself seeming to come to a momentary halt.

In the next heartbeat, my hand is back down on her ass in another hard smack.

“I’ve been thinking of this ass for weeks. You’ve been taunting me with your little workout sets, flaunting this magnificent ass in those shorts, denying you wanted me. It’s been fucking torture.” I grind out between clenched teeth. “And it was all a lie. The whole time, you were desperate for it.”

I part her cheeks with one hand and run my finger from the top of her ass, down her crack and to her clit. A loud moan comes from her and reverberates against my chest.

I have one hand on her clit and the other intertwined with hers against the wall she’s gripping for support, my chest plastered over hers. When I speak, my mouth is right against her ear.

“It’s time for your punishment.” I growl.

She shudders below me and I realize I may have been wrong. She might enjoy this just as much as I do.

I pull my finger back and run it between her folds a few times until they’re completely sopping.

“You’re soaking wet for me, Silver.” I grunt against her hair. “Your lips can lie only as far as your body betrays you.”

I pull back her hips slightly and flick her clit. Her knees almost buckle as a strangled groan leaves her lips, the only thing holding her up my chest against hers.

“Are you ready to admit you’re a liar, Thayer?” I ask, caressing her clit repeatedly with my index, alternating between gentle circles and rougher strokes.

She drops her head and shakes it, almost like she doesn’t have the strength to hold it up. I pick up the pace until she’s

breathing rapidly, quickly approaching the precipice of her climax, and then I pull back.

“No?” I hum, slickening my finger in her juices before bringing it up to rim her back hole. Parting her cheeks with one hand, I bend and spit a thin line directly onto her tight rosebud.

I don't give her time to react or fight me. I press forward with my finger, past her opening and through the tight ring of muscle.

She arches off the wall, her back bowing against my chest as her mouth drops on a silent cry. I watch her reaction with predatory eyes, loving seeing her overcome by the way I touch her.

Fuck, her ass is so tight, it's suffocating me.

“Bad girls get their asses finger fucked until they admit the truth.”

I pull out and push back in slowly, my other hand releasing hers and coming to cup the front of her neck.

I nudge her head back so I can stare into her eyes as she processes the sensations tornadoing through her.

“Oh, fuck.” She chokes out.

“That's right, love. It feels so good, doesn't it? It's such a tight fit, it feels unreal.” I grit out, holding back, “But this is a punishment. It isn't about you.”

With that, I pull my finger out and slam it back in.

She jerks to her tiptoes, or at least tries to, but I use my grip on her neck to hold her in place, using my hold to piston inside her at a furious pace now.

I know she's going to feel sore tomorrow, but the friction is driving her insane right now. She writhes and whimpers against me, desperately searching for her release. I'm surprised by how much she seems to be enjoying this.

“Of course you like this, my little liar.” I say, biting her earlobe harshly.

She mewls and makes other desperate, unnamable sounds.

I feel her muscles start to pulse around my finger and I keep going, bringing her higher and higher as we approach the cliff.

“Admit you’re a liar.”

She shakes her head. I lower my hand from her stomach to her pussy and start rubbing her clit in conjunction with the way my finger moves in her ass.

“Admit it.”

She shakes her head again. She’s so close. She grinds her pelvis into my touch, searching for that final touch, but I don’t let her.

“Admit it, Thayer.”

I flick her clit again. A sharp cry leaves her lips.

Her hands are fisted next to her head as it rests against the wall. She’s right there, hummingbird wing flutters away from coming, and I pinch her clit sharply.

She stills, her muscles clamping down around my finger and I pull out before she comes, stepping back and abruptly cutting off her orgasm.

The loss of my body makes her legs fold as she sags partially against the wall.

She looks completely obscene; bent over, skirt flipped over her back, tights around her thighs, panties gone and legs splayed as I stand behind her.

It takes everything inside me not to drop to my knees and stuff my face in her sweet pussy. I can see it dripping from here, calling for me.

She looks over her shoulder at me, lust-addled and confused.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you this was a punishment. Did you really think I’d make you come?”

She turns around, her hand reaching behind her to right her skirt. “You can’t leave me like this.” She says, flustered.

“Like what?” I ask, taking in the flush on her chest and cheeks with a satisfied smile.

I do that to her.

“I need to—, I need...” She starts, before whispering as if it’s not just the two of us in this closet. “I need to get off.”

“You need to come?”

She flushes even redder at that, before lifting her chin and meeting my eye.

“Yes.”

I step up until I’m toe to toe with her, towering over her.

“Then tell me the truth.”

The words are barely out before she grabs the edges of her sweater, lifts her arms and pulls it off, throwing it to the side.

I watch rapaciously as her hands move to the buttons of her shirt next, flicking them open to reveal a white bra.

I feel saliva pool in my mouth as I take in the mounds of her breasts, perfect handfuls for me to play with and suck on, and the smooth expanse of her stomach with those constellations of beauty marks that I want to run my tongue over.

She removes her shirt and tosses it to the side, standing in front of me in nothing but her bra, skirt and lowered tights.

She spreads her arms out wide and drops them to her side in a ‘here I am’ motion before she adds, “I broke up with him.”

My eyes move from the beauty marks up her body slowly, in no rush to stop my perusal.

When my gaze meets her, her words slither into my bloodstream as possessiveness like I've never felt before takes root.

“What did you just say?”

“I'm single,” she says, “I broke up with Carter yesterday. I wanted to do it the day before but you held him hostage at your place and then got him wasted.” She accuses, before adding, ‘He's gone. Well, at least I think he is. He took his stuff and left and I haven't heard from him since.’”

She stands still and watches for my reaction.

I resist the urge to lunge for her and revel in the feeling of seeing that final wall crumble to the ground around us instead.

She stands almost bare in front of me in more ways than one and I want to savor it, to treasure the moment she finally admits she's mine, like a thief would savor the discovery of priceless gems and jewels.

As much as I want to touch her, I lean against the wall opposite her instead. Less than three feet separate us in this small space as I cross my arms over my chest.

“What do you want?”

She knows what I'm asking. I've chased her too long for there to be any ambiguity anymore.

She needs to come to me.

She needs to say the words.

I can see the gleam in her eyes at my question, the desire to defy me warring with the need to submit.

Finally, she looks at me with eyes that are both soft and firm at the same time as she says her next words like they're an incontrovertible truth.

“I want you.”

I nod once, slowly, and the movement is at odds with how quickly my pulse beats against my skin.



I drop my arms to my side as I straighten and give her a grin.

“Come and get me then.”

She obeys without hesitation, crossing the room and jumping into my waiting arms as they wrap greedily around her.

Her mouth presses down on mine and for a couple minutes we feast on each other, caught up in the high of our bodies freely intertwining.

My hands hold her ass in a death grip, my fingers massaging her cheeks as I groan against her mouth.

“Maybe I should start by fucking your ass and taking the one thing that belongs to me.” I growl against her mouth.

She tenses in my arms, I assume because of my threat to fuck her sweet ass, but if the way she reacted earlier is anything to go by, she’ll fucking love it.

“I know you’d fucking love it.” I rasp out between kisses pressed against her throat. “The way you were fucking your ass back against my finger earlier, I just know you’re going to love being painfully stretched around me.”

She pulls her head back to look at me and I give her a Cheshire grin.

“I’m still a virgin.”

I still completely against her, my body unmoving as her words register.

“What?”

Disbelief mixed with savage want and desire flood my brain, rendering me momentarily useless.

There’s no way.

“I never had sex with him.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not,” she says, her tone slightly defensive, “I- I wasn’t ready and then... Well, then he cheated so I definitely

wasn't ready."

I don't want to hear anything else about her past with him. That shit's dead and buried.

"No one's ever had you before?"

She shakes her head, trepidation and anticipation flaring in her eyes as she takes in my reaction.

"I fingered your ass before anyone came in your pussy?" I ask, and when she nods I drop my forehead to rest on her shoulder as I try to control my cock raging in my jeans. "Fuck, that's so hot I'm going to come in my trousers."

She wraps her arms around my neck, pressing her tits more firmly against my chest in the process as she embraces me.

Everything she does is inadvertently teasing, every move a turn on creating a physical urge inside me to stamp my name permanently on her.

"You're in so much trouble."

"Why?" She asks, her tone slightly puzzled.

"You're in trouble because I can't fuck you in this broom closet for your first time, even though I'm fucking desperate to."

She makes a disappointed noise as I let her go.

"You're in trouble because when I do finally fuck you, I'm going to be so rough and hard, I'll probably break you."

I fist her hair and use it to force her to her knees before me. She gives a surprised cry but doesn't fight me.

"But mostly, you're in trouble for lying to me again. For making me believe that you belonged to someone else, that he touched you and made you his, when *I* wanted you." I grunt.

I tilt her head up so she looks into my eyes when I speak.

"I told you I'd make you pay for every lie. Now, open my trousers."

She looks up at me with wide eyes as her small hands reach up and grab my belt buckle. She unfastens it, pulling the band out of the loop, and every move she's making is so erotic, so mesmerizingly alluring that I'm afraid I'll accidentally commit a crime when it comes to her.

That the cute aggression will boil over and I'll actually cross a line.

It's taking everything in me to bring a modicum of control to this situation so I don't fuck her on this dirty floor, but I give no same guarantees about fucking her mouth.

"Pull out my cock." I order and she does as commanded, her hands reaching to grab my length and pulling it out of my trousers.

Surprise and curious apprehension splash across her face as she takes me out and holds me in her hand.

There's wonder in her eyes and arousal on her tongue as it darts out to wet her lips hungrily. She gives me a tentative upstroke, her fingers struggling to close around my hard dick as she does so.

I'm about to direct her when her tongue pokes out and swirls around my head.

Air hisses through my teeth as she closes her lips around my tip and takes me into her mouth. I'm mesmerized by the movement of her head as she bobs back and forth, taking half of my dick before she struggles.

Her hand strokes up the difference, her warm palm squeezing my cock in an up and down motion that's got me cursing loudly.

I grab her hair and yank her head back, her mouth coming off my cock with a loud pop.

"You've done this before."

It's not a question.

I can tell this isn't her first time touching a dick with her hands or her mouth.

She nods slightly, her lips pink from the effort and still parted. She looks at me with wide, anticipatory eyes and the thought that he's seen her like this, hot and ready for him as he stood over her, has fury seeping into my bloodstream.

I push her head forward and shove my dick past her lips and further into her mouth than she was taking me previously until I hit the back of her throat.

She gags around me and the sound partially subdues the beast inside me. I pull out half way and thrust back in viciously, repeating the motion over and over.

“You shouldn't have given him something that belonged to me.”

I know I'm being irrational, that she wasn't mine back then, that I'm not making sense.

And yet I punish her.

I want to fuck him out of her mouth, so that all she can feel when she moves her lips is how they stretched for me.

“Look at me.” I order and she does, “You look at me. I want you to remember who's fucking your mouth. The only person who's ever going to fuck your mouth again.”

She chokes, her mouth completely taut, but I can tell she's doing her best to keep up with me and please me.

Despite the tight fit, her tongue caresses my length, her mouth suctioned tightly around me making my muscles tighten with the strain of holding back from finishing so quickly.

“Fuck, you're going to make me come.” I say, looking down at her with the kind of reverence that borders on fanaticism. “Your mouth is so stretched and hot around me and you look so filthy on your knees for me, taking my dick deep into your throat like a good girl.”

I caress her cheek with my thumb as I move my hips back and forth into her mouth. Her gaze burns with want as she keeps her eyes fixed on mine like I asked.

“I’m going to come down your throat and you’re going to swallow every drop. Understood?”

She hums around my length, her tongue otherwise occupied, and the vibrations she sends down my cock make my balls draw up tight before I spill into her mouth, hot spurts of cum shooting down her throat as she sucks me dry.

I yank her off my cock by her hair and run my thumb along her mouth, playing with her lower lip as I take savage pleasure in seeing her gasp for breath.

The corner of my lips lifts darkly as she stays kneeling, waiting for my next command.

She’s unknowingly submissive and it inflames my blood like gasoline on an already roaring fire.

“My turn.” I declare darkly.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

“My turn.”

I don't have time to react to his words before he uses his grip on my hair to pull me to my feet and slam me against the wall.

Then he places his hands on the outsides of my thighs and rubs them down my flesh as he drops slowly to his knees in front of me.

The move is so fucking attractive. I understand why he watched me with such an all-consuming look earlier.

I can feel my arousal leaking down my thigh.

His eyes flick to my legs as his hands flip up my skirt. He brings my hand up and makes me hold the flap up against my stomach.

“Hold it.” He commands, his gaze riveted on my exposed flesh. “You've got such a pretty pussy. Exactly the way I pictured it in my mind.”

He moves closer, his hand grabbing my thigh and bending my leg at the knee before he throws it over his shoulder.

“You know how many times I've dreamed about licking your pussy, Thayer?”

Blood rushes to my face as the heat in his words makes me redden. He has a way of talking to me with such obsessive passion, it verges on animalistic.

“How many?”

I squeal when he takes the remaining leg I stand on and puts it over his other shoulder, my fingers reaching desperately for his body as it becomes the only thing holding me up.

My back is against the wall, my legs framing his face as it sits inches from my center.

He inhales me and looks up to meet my eyes, pupils blown with lust.

“Every day, multiple times a fucking day.”

His mouth comes down on my pussy, his tongue sweeping up my slit before he sucks my clit between his lips.

He doesn't give me a chance to take in the feeling before he starts furiously flicking his tongue against my clit like he's mad at it.

I'm clawing at his shoulders, his hair, simultaneously pushing him away and bringing him closer as I try to make sense of the unbridled pleasure surging through me.

“Mackley,” I say on a whimpered sigh, “That feels so good.”

I'm tilting my hips against his mouth, desperately searching for closer contact as he devours me hungrily.

“What's my name?”

“W-what?” I ask battling through the haze of lust, confused.

He bites my clit and I almost jolt off his shoulders, but two hands grab my waist and keep me in place.

“What's my name?” He repeats, grunting out the word against my pussy.

He pulls back from my center, reaching instead for my breasts as he rips the cups of my bra down and pinches my

hard nipple between his fingers.

“Please.” I plead, shaking my head as I refuse to say his name.

Bolts of electricity shoot through me with each tweak of my nipples, but he’s no longer touching my pussy.

I need his mouth back on me.

“Please what?”

“Please make me come.”

“No,” he says, coldly, “Begging won’t help you this time, not unless you tell me what I want to hear.”

“Please...” I say, blowing out a frustrated breath. I can’t give in on this. It’s a protective measure calling him that, keeping him at a distance from me. If we’re going to go the casual situation route, I can’t let him worm himself any closer to my heart than he already has. “Mack.”

Anger flares in his eyes, hot like lava at my refusal to submit.

“Not good enough.”

He reaches out into his pants pocket and pulls out my torn panties, fisting them in front of my face.

“If you won’t say my name, you won’t say anything at all.”

I open my mouth to argue and he shoves my underwear between my teeth. The lacy fabric fills my mouth, momentarily choking me with its unexpected presence.

A hand squeezes my throat as his other thumb rubs against my clit violently. The speed and friction of his touch make me keen, the sound muffled by my panties as I come loudly.

He keeps touching me, never letting up the rhythm, riding my first orgasm into my second as he licks my clit once and then blows on it.



The burst of his warm breath against my skin has that second release flaming through me.

“Again.” He orders.

My body is limp over his shoulders and I shake my head repeatedly, telling him wordlessly that I can’t take another orgasm.

I’m drained and barely holding on, I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk if he continues.

“No?” He questions. “You don’t want it?”

I shake my head again and he smirks almost manically at me.

“Too bad. This isn’t about what you want.” He says, his finger running up and down my slit before he pushes through my folds and into me. “This is about what I want. What I’m going to take since you won’t give me my name.”

He’s inside me up to the knuckle as he pushes further into me, making my breath catch in my throat. My hand is entwined in his hair, my other grasping the wall behind me desperately for purchase.

“And what I want is to eat your sweet cunt and make you come over and over again.”

He starts pumping in and out of me and then his tongue comes down on me, making my back bend away from the wall in a contorted arch.

The combination of his tongue and his finger makes my toes curl and I come for a third and eventually a fourth time as he doesn’t give me a moment of rest.

Every muscle is frozen in my body, the air inside my lungs completely evaporated as I struggle to find a breath.

“Breathe, Silver.”

My body obeys immediately, gasping in mouthfuls of air through my ripped panties as my starved lungs come back to life.

By the time I come down from my fourth orgasm, I'm so sensitive and tender that the line between pleasure and pain is blurred.

Rhys carefully helps set my legs on the floor, a hand coming out to cup my hip to make sure I stay standing as he straightens to his full height above me.

He removes the underwear from my mouth as he casually zips up and buttons his pants, closing the buckle over them and leaning in to kiss me.

I taste myself on his lips, sweet and innocent, and it's the filthiest thing I've ever done, even though I had his finger in my ass earlier.

I can't believe he did that, but I can't believe how much I liked it even more.

"Thanks for lunch." He says, cheekily, his hand still possessively on my hip.

"Anytime." I reply, breathlessly.

He grumbles low in his throat. "I'll hold you to that." He says, before adding, "Stay here."

He opens the door and walks out, closing it behind him. A couple of minutes later, he's back in the room and finds me exactly where he left me, still processing everything that just happened.

He's carrying a pair of leggings he must have gotten from my locker.

"Put these on. You're not walking around here in a microscopic skirt with ripped tights and no underwear."

"You say that like I'm the one who ripped them."

He drops down to one knee in front of me and grabs one of my feet, placing it on said knee and starting to undo my laces.

He removes my shoe and sets my foot on the ground, grabbing the other and repeating the same motion silently. When both of my shoes are off, he grabs my tights where

they're haphazardly rolled right above my knee and starts pulling them off.

He hums low in his throat, one of my favorite sounds he makes, as his silky voice speaks seductively.

"I'm practically feral for you, love. I'm going to be ripping a lot more of your clothing in the future."

He rolls up one leg of my legging and motions for me to put one foot through. He does the same with the other and starts moving them up my calves.

My hand moves in his hair, caressing his head gently as I watch him dress me, completely enthralled. He makes sure to tug the fabric up my legs so they don't bunch below my knees.

How is the act of dressing me like this so powerful in seducing me? Is it the danger of doing this on school grounds? Is it the way he treated me filthily when we were hooking up and now shows tenderness in caring for me?

Whatever it is, it's working.

He presses a hot kiss on my pussy before he brings the leggings up, over my ass, and around my waist. Reaching down, he picks up my shirt and helps me put it on, his fingers deftly closing the buttons as he growls.

"Mine."

My heart lurches into my throat but I work to calm that reaction. His claiming words are just a post-orgasm rush of affection and don't mean anything to him.

He's been very clear about that.

"Do you want to go out first?" He asks, and my stomach drops. His words confirm that whatever this is, it's not something he wants to flaunt around school.

"Sure," I say, turning towards the door when he stops me with a hand on my arm.

"You're definitely forgetting something."

I smile at him and turn, wrapping my arms around his neck as I get on tiptoes to reach him.

“You’re very needy.” I say, teasing him.

He burrows his face in my neck and inhales before leaving a warm kiss on my throat. He pulls back and looks at me through heavy-lidded eyes, a pleased smile curling the side of his mouth.

“I’ve needed you for months now.”

I kiss him, sucking his lower lip into my mouth as he grunts against my lips. We’re comfortable with each other in a way that’s surprising for two people who are just discovering the other’s bodies. There’s a familiarity there that ties us together, like we’ve been involved sexually for months now.

I drop, flattening my feet on the ground as he lets out a heavy breath.

“See you later?” I ask.

“Eight pm.”

“Eight pm.” I promise.

With a small wave, I leave him there and rejoin the hallway.

I look at my phone and gape when I realize the lunch hour is almost over.

Our time in the closet felt like it lasted the flash of an instant, not an hour.

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When I walk onto the pitch at ten minutes before five, Rhys is already waiting for me, a protein bar and a banana in his right hand.

He hands them to me as I close the distance between us.

“Eat.” He commands.

I take them and peel the banana before taking a large bite as his eyes don’t leave mine.

“Is this because I didn’t eat lunch?”

“Yes. You need to keep your strength up for practice.” He says, his gaze dropping to look at my mouth as I close it around the banana. “Plus I’m about to add another form of strenuous exercise to your already busy schedule so you need to have energy.” He growls, before smirking, “I’m glad we’ve been working on your stamina.”

I almost choke on the banana at the dark intent clear in his voice. He wasn’t shy before about telling me the things he wanted to do to me, but now that we’ve crossed that line I feel like I’m just learning how deep his obsession runs.

“No dirty talk during practice, Mack. Save it for later.”

“Alright.”

I walk past him to drop my bag near the bench and he grabs my ass as I do. When I turn to face him, he’s got his hands up, his face the picture of affected innocence.

“I just needed one for the road since I have to be professional for the next hour.” He says, cheekily.

“You’ll live.” I say with an eye roll.

“Barely.” He replies, drolly, and I can’t help but laugh.

He brings up the Notes app on his phone and turns it towards me. “Alright, here’s the plan for today...”

An hour and a half later, I fall the ground and lay on my back, exhausted. He grins at me and then joins me like he always does.

We lay in companionable silence as we catch our breath, both of us looking at the stars in the sky above us.

It’s crazy how clear they are over here. They shine bright and so close to us, it feels like I could reach out and touch them if I wanted to.

“What do you think happens when we die?” I ask him.

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it.” I ask, turning my head to look at him. “I want to know what you think.”

And he does. He bends his arm behind his neck and rests his head on it as he looks up at the sky, deep in thought.

“We probably become plants. Unsentient living things with automatic renewal cycles. Maybe we feed the next generations of humans on earth.”

I hum, acknowledging his response. “Very rational.”

“What about you?”

“I think we become stars.”

“I should have guessed that.” He replies, his gaze fixed on the stars above us.

“I think stars are all the people who love us, looking down on us, shining and twinkling when they’re proud.”

“What about all the terrible people? Do they come back as stars too?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head before adding decisively, “They regenerate as manure-based fertilizer.”

He laughs loudly at that, his body shaking with the force of his laughter as he turns his head to look at me.

“You’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this.”

“Just some.” I say, grinning back at him.

He groans as he looks back at the sky. “If we become stars that means I can never fuck you outside. I can’t have my mum and dad seeing that.”

It’s my turn to laugh as I roll onto my stomach.

“That’s too bad.” I say as I crawl towards him.

“What are you doing?”

“Practice is over.” I whisper sensually.

I get on my knees, throw one leg over his body and sit on his lap. He sits up instantly, one hand coming to grab my ass,

the other my hip as air hisses through his teeth at the contact between us.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Silver.”

I know I am.

But I’m done with waiting, done with pretending I don’t want him, or telling myself it’s not the right time.

I don’t give a fuck anymore, I just want him.

He must feel the same because he whispers a muttered curse between his lips.

“Fuck it.”

He drives his hips into me and flips me onto my back so that he’s kneeling between my bent legs as I look up at him.

“As much as I want to fuck you out here, you’ll freeze to death if I do.” He lifts my sweater and the top of my set to the top of my chest and brings his head down to flick his tongue over one of my freed nipples. “I’m going to make you come and then you’re going to run to the locker room, get naked and wait for me on the desk in the office with your legs spread. Do you understand me?”

I nod and he bites the side of my jaw as a pleased sound rumbles in his chest.

“Not so stubborn now, are you?”

I want to talk back, to say something snippy so he doesn’t think he has all the power here, but his lips close over my nipple and suck it into his mouth.

I cry out at the contact, at the way he licks my nipple with his warm tongue, at the way his hands cup and knead my breasts.

He kisses across my chest and over to my other breast as his hand snakes under the band of my leggings and between my legs.

My hands shoot out to grip his wrist as his fingers brush against my clit. He traces down my folds as he caresses me

back and forth, muttered praise falling from his lips as he watches me arch into his touch.

“You’re so wet, love. So fucking ready and excited for me, it makes me want to absolutely destroy you.” He says, running his finger down my slit and to my entrance before pushing it in. “Were you this wet before? Were you dripping for me like you are now everytime we spoke?”

The breath is stolen from my mouth as I take in his sudden intrusion. He pumps into me roughly, eyes locked on my mouth as loud moans fall from my lips.

“Answer me.”

He pushes a second finger into me, the fit so tight it feels on the border between pleasure and pain. His palm scrapes against my clit, creating an unbelievable friction.

“Yes.”

His answering growl is downright animalistic, his fingers picking up the pace as he refuses to show me any mercy. He kisses up my chest and my neck as his mouth finds my face and his hot breath hits my ear.

“Who knew you could be such a good girl?” He whispers, proudly.

“Don’t get too cocky, Mack.” I tell him between choppy exhales as my orgasm builds.

His eyes gleam with anger and the promise of retribution as he pulls back to look at me. Excitement bubbles in my blood at the way he stares me down, like he wants to ruin me.

Without a word he pulls his fingers out, grabs my leggings and yanks them down my legs, revealing my bare pussy since he destroyed my underwear earlier.

The cold air immediately hits my skin. It’s a relatively mild November day but not when the bottom half of you is naked.

“Never mind. Looks like I am fucking you outside.” He grunts, spreading my legs and settling in between them. “Sorry, mum and dad.”



His tongue dives between my folds and pushes into my entrance. I try to sit up but he puts a hand on my stomach to keep me in place.

I've never had anyone fuck me like he is now, tongue diving in and out of me as his thumb furiously rubs my clit.

"Yes, yes....," I chant, drunk on pleasure as I wrap my hand in his hair and hold on for dear life.

His arms wrap around the outside of my thighs, his grip controlling and proprietary as he eats me out. The visual of him between my legs, eating me out like a man possessed as he stares into my eyes, his gaze heated with arousal is what sets me over the edge.

My orgasm rips through me like a breaking dam as I chase the mad waves, my body spasming against the cold ground with every one.

He reaches into his bag for his wallet and takes out a condom. He kneels between my spread legs as he looks down at me, his mouth still glistening with arousal.

He caresses the outside of my thigh with one hand, his tender gesture at odds with the words that leave his mouth.

"I'm not going to go easy on you," he says, lowering his shorts and freeing his hard cock. He's thick and veiny and so hard, I can't look away. "Would I have a few weeks ago? Yes. A couple days even? Maybe," he brings the wrapper to his lips and rips it open, his eyes never leaving mine as he carelessly spits out the corner of the foil. "But not anymore."

He looks demented with lust as he sheathes himself and places his cock at my entrance.

He gives me a dangerous smile and pushes in decisively. He doesn't stop as I gasp loudly and bring my hand up to his chest. My body parts for him as he enters me and robs me of my breath.

When he hits my resistance, he pauses only momentarily and looks down at me with that same smile.

"Take it."

With that, he pushes past my barrier and shatters my virginity with one powerful thrust. His dick spears me, pumping in and out of me as he doesn't leave me time to adjust.

His teeth mark me, his tongue moving over my skin to soothe it in their wake. My ass scrapes against the cold ground with every move of his hips, adding to the friction between us.

It's all too much.

Too many sensations swirling through me at once, ones that I don't know how to process as I ping-pong between dozens of emotions.

"Fuck." He grunts through gritted teeth. "You're so tight. So tight. You're milking my cock so good, love."

If I thought his voice was hot before, I was sorely mistaken. Because this voice, gravelly and sultry, whispering praise into my ear, this voice is liquid gold.

"Oh, god," I tell him, even more turned on by his heated words. "It's too much. Please."

I don't know what I'm asking for, him to keep going or for him to stop, but the word falls pleadingly from my lips.

"We're just getting started." He answers, grabbing my ass and lifting it to get a better angle as he powers into me for real now.

My eyes roll into the back of my head as I try to hold on for dear life.

"I'm going to fuck you for as long I want and you're going to take it and thank me."

My hands grapple with his chest as I search for more contact with him, desperate to bring him closer.

Almost as if he understands, he bends over me and buries his face in my neck, his ragged breaths landing hotly on my skin.

"You feel so good." He praises almost inaudibly, his voice muffled in the crook of my neck.

I run my hands through his hair, digging my nails along his scalp and he shudders against me. I'm high on the power I have over him, to make him so drunk on lust and the feeling of me that he's like this.

I squeeze my muscles around him to see how he'll react and he tenses.

"Fuck, don't do that."

I do it again.

And again.

He pulls out of me and I cry out at the loss, but he flips me over before I can do or say anything else.

I'm face down on the field, my cheek rubbing against the cold grass as he presses a hand on my lower back and pulls back my hips.

"We can play if you want, just remember that you'll lose." He warns me, his tone savage.

He slaps my ass and powers back into me in one hard, almost painful thrust, pulling a scream out of me in the process.

My hands dig into the grass, grasping for purchase as he pounds into me, smacking my ass over and over again as he does so.

My lower stomach clenches, my whole body tensing as my orgasm starts to build. It remains just out of reach, so close I can almost taste it, but far enough that all I feel is brutal frustration.

"Please..." I plead, unashamedly begging now.

"Please what?"

"I'm so close...Please."

He hums approvingly, using his leverage on my hips to pull me against his thrusts so I meet him halfway.

He's pounding into me so furiously, I can feel my teeth rattle.

“You want to come?”

“Y-yes.” I answer between broken exhales.

“Say it.”

“Please make me come.”

He smacks my ass again, this time hard enough to leave a mark.

“Not that.” He answers, his thumb coming around my hip to ghost against my clit. My back arches as I try to chase his evasive touch. “You know what I want.”

He wants me to say his name.

He wants me to scream it as I come around his dick, for him to feel the full breadth of my submission, but I can't.

Not like this.

When I stay silent, he digs his fingers into my skin in a bruising hold, his pace never letting up.

“Say my name, Thayer.”

I shake my head again, the movement hindered by the ground under my cheek.

“No?” He asks, the fury clear in his tone. “Fine.”

He rubs my clit mercilessly, forcing my muscles to clamp down on him as I chase my approaching orgasm.

The moment I do, he removes his fingers and powers into me with one last formidable thrust. He stills, his body motionless as he comes with an almost pained groan.

We stay like that for a moment, him depleted and satiated, me needy and frustrated. Finally he kisses my shoulder blade and rolls off me. Once he's laying on the ground beside me, he takes off the condom and pulls his pants up in one motion.

“Your tight cunt almost killed me, Silver. Fucking unreal.”

I'm on my stomach, head turned towards him, laying with my lower half bare and my legs spread haphazardly exactly the way he left me.

“What was that?” I ask him, breathless and disbelieving.

He took my virginity and fucked me brutally, face down on a public soccer pitch, but didn't let me come.

As fucking hot as it was, as much as I loved it, frustration roars through my veins. I feel unfinished, irritation tugging at my soul and tears stinging my eyes as the need to beg for an orgasm becomes the dominating urge in my body.

“You don't get to come until you tell me who's fucking you.”

I sit up and pull on my leggings, getting to my feet to tug them over my hips.

“All this over a name?” I ask, irritably.

He stands and walks up to me, placing a possessive hand on my waist.

“Not just a name.” He says, “My name.” He grips my jaw when I try to look away “You'd do well to end this charade now if you want to enjoy me fucking you. I'd prefer making you come so many times you forget *your* name, but I'm happy to keep all the pleasure for myself if you want to continue being stubborn.”

He releases me and I cross my arms over my chest, tipping my chin at him in defiance.

“You're not the only one who can get me off.”

“Maybe not,” He answers, throwing me off with his agreement, “But I'm the only one you want.”

I blow out a frustrated breath as I look off to the side.

“You're pissing me off.”

“Me?” He replies on a sarcastic laugh, “Imagine if I refused to say your name even after being deep inside you.”

He doesn't understand why.

Doesn't realize that it's not because I don't care that I won't say it, but because I do.

I care about him so much already, it frightens me.

My feelings, long buried and ignored, are now surfacing at an alarming speed and strength. The more time I spend with him, the more he kisses me tenderly and commands me possessively, the more I fall.

And I know if I fall further, it's not his warm embrace as he catches me that I'll be met with, but the hard ground in the form of rejection of any kind of long term relationship.

I need to protect myself however I can to survive him because long after he stops giving a shit, I have a feeling that I'll be standing where he left me with my bleeding heart clutched in my shaking hands.

"Let me give you a lift."

I nod, reaching to get my bag, but he grabs it before I can and swings it over his left shoulder, taking my hand in his.

I stare wordlessly at where our hands are joined, taken aback by the tender gesture.

"Let's get you home." He says.

Once we're in the car, he peels out of the parking lot and towards The Pen, his hand resting proprietarily on my thigh the entire way home.

When we're outside my apartment, I turn towards him and kiss him, my hand finding its way to his cock, hard again like he always seems to be when I'm near.

"What are you doing?" He hisses through clenched teeth.

"Come upstairs and fuck me. Make me come." I tell him, before adding. "Please."

He groans against my mouth and I can feel his resolve bending. But after a tense moment, he squeezes my hand around his dick once and then removes it.

"As much as I want to fuck you again, as much as I want to stuff my dick in all your holes and make you beg for me," he says, "I'm not going to."

I huff out a furious breath and he grabs my jaw, twisting me towards him as I cry out, surprised.

“Go home, take a warm shower, clean your sore pussy, and touch yourself to memories of me. How I made you come earlier. How I fucked you just now. Ask yourself if this little game you’re playing is worth losing out on the best orgasms of your life.” He slams his mouth down on mine and bites my lip until I taste blood on my tongue. “Now thank me for fucking you.”

I rip my face away and jump out the car. Turning around, I grab the door and give him a sweet smile.

“Thank you,” I say, flipping him off, “and fuck you.”

I slam the door and walk away but not before I see the corner of his mouth lift in a proud, pleased smile.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

I wake up the next day with a soreness between my legs and a general ache in my whole body.

I've got scrapes and bruises all over my skin and on my palms from the way I'd rubbed up against the hard ground.

The memory of his heavy weight over me and the way he'd stilled before he'd pulsed inside me as he came have a shiver moving from the top of my head and down my spine.

Despite the soreness, I want him again.

Or I want him for real this time, coming around his dick like I know I would have if he'd let me.

He's got a game and I have a group project I need to work on after school, so we're not having one of our practices today. I'll see him in Spanish, but that's it.

I don't really know how I'm supposed to act when I see him today. Am I supposed to kiss him? Am I supposed to act like nothing happened?

Which of those do I even want?

My head's fucked and it doesn't help that he hasn't texted since we parted last night.



Maybe I'm naive for assuming this, but I thought he would.

\*\*\*

I walk into class and sit in one of the two seater desks in the middle of the room. I bend to the side, reaching into my backpack and pulling out my Spanish dictionary.

As I turn back towards the table, Rhys drops into the seat next to me.

"Morning, love."

"Morning." I say, throwing him a quick look out of the corner of my eye.

"How'd you sleep?"

Not well.

He'd left me hot and bothered and no amount of touching myself had made that particular ache go away.

"Never better." I say, lying through my teeth. "You?"

"Not great," he laments, "I kept dreaming of your hot mouth and your sweet pussy and thinking I shouldn't have left before I tried out your ass too. Based on the way you strangled my finger, I think it'll be just as tight as your other two holes."

I slap my hand over his mouth and look around me furtively, checking to see if anyone around us heard him.

Thankfully, it looks like everyone else was busy with their own stuff and didn't pay attention to us. I turn back towards him and see his eyes shining at me above my hand.

"Don't say that stuff in public."

"You're right," he hums, "I don't want anyone to hear. That's just for the two of us."

Even though I'm the one who chastised him, I'm not surprised that, once again, he chooses to be cautious of anyone

finding out about us.

I look at him, the way he's casually and almost arrogantly laid back against the chair with his legs spread in a dominant position.

I'm so attracted to this man, even the way he sits is starting to distract me.

"Are you sore?" He whispers.

"A bit."

His tongue clicks against the roof of his mouth in a disappointed sound. "I wasn't rough enough then."

"You want me to be sore?"

He leans in slowly, his abs curling as he sits up and whispers inches from my face. "I don't want you to be able to walk for days." He smirks as our eyes meet. "It's harder to do when I can't fuck you through your orgasms," he deplores, "You ready to say my name yet?"

"Nope."

Ownership and frustration simmer in his gaze as he watches me.

"Pity."

"Are you ready for the game tonight?" I ask him, abruptly changing the subject.

He nods, throwing me an indecipherable look. "Yeah, it's going to be a fun one."

"You think you're going to win?"

"I always win." He replies cockily, an easy smile stretching across his face.

"So arrogant." I point out with an eye roll.

"You like that about me."

"I do." I admit.

He gives me one of his soft smiles, the ones I've only ever seen him keep for me, and I melt.

“We never talked about the grand opening.” I say delicately so no one overhears, “I know you were apprehensive about it.”

“You kept me busy wondering where you were and if you were with him.” He answers grimly, his index ghosting over the skin of my hand and curling around my finger. “It was a good distraction.”

“That aside, how did you feel?” I push him, refusing to let him bury this answer behind our games.

“Good. Better than I thought, honestly.” He answers, “Seeing their names on the entrance and knowing their legacy will always be there makes me feel like I did the right thing. Like they’d be proud of me for making this happen.”

“You should be proud. It’s really beautiful.” I tell him honestly, because it is. I know he played a heavy part in designing the look and layout even if he didn’t oversee the physical build itself, and it’s gorgeous.

“Thank you.” He answers gruffly, his finger moving to trace the hem of my sweater where it meets my jeans. “When can I see you again?”

“Am I invisible?” I ask, playfully.

“No,” he says, looking up to meet my eyes. “Most days, you’re all I see.”

The oxygen dies in my lungs as unconcealed reverence leaks into his gaze. How am I meant to protect myself from him, to guard my fragile heart from his assault, when he says things to me that would have the greatest poets taking notes?

“What are you doing tonight?” I ask him.

“Devlin’s having people over after the game.” He says, “You should come.”

That’s not exactly an enthusiastic invitation.

I start to turn away from him and towards my desk, ready to give him a dismissive answer of some sort, when he places a hand on my arm.

“Let me rephrase.” He says, pulling my attention back to him, “I want you there with me.”

“Better,” I tell him, “What time?”

“The game’s at five, so let’s meet there at eight. I’ll text you the address, he lives off campus.”

Señor De León walks in then, bringing an end to our conversation. We separate after class with a wave and a whispered ‘good luck’ as he’s off to get ready for the game.

\*\*\*

I walk into Devlin’s house with Nera and am immediately overwhelmed by the number of people there. I thought this was going to be a relatively small get together after the game, not a full blown party.

I pull out my phone to text Rhys when I see I already have a message from him.

**Rhys:** Helping Rogue with something quick, will be there soon, sorry.

**Thayer:** All good. Did you guys win?

**Rhys:** What do you think?

**Thayer:** \*smirking emoji\*

**Thayer:** Did you score?

**Rhys:** A hat trick.

**Thayer:** No way!

**Thayer:** Show me the highlights later.

I put my phone away and look at Nera who’s standing next to me in jeans, a black cut-out top, and a high pony, looking as gorgeous as I’ve ever seen her.

“Let’s get a drink?”

“Twist my arm.” She jokes, putting her arm in mine as we walk into Devlin’s mansion.

The place is massive and hideous.

Cold and empty with no personality, it’s the very definition of bad vibes. I don’t really know Devlin so I’m not sure if the house is reflective of its owner, but I hope not.

Nera walks us directly to the kitchen, correctly maneuvering through the space like she knows it.

“You’ve been here before?” I ask.

“Yeah, of course. He’s had plenty of parties here before.”

“Do a lot of the students live in houses like these?” I question, thinking of this house and Rogue’s, both ridiculously large.

“Yup. Absentee parents and colossal bank accounts make for mansions with lonely kids in them.” She says, before adding, “It’s why I moved into The Pen. I got tired of living in my very own echo chamber.”

I reach for two beers in the fridge and hand her one.

“Have you ever regretted it?”

“Not once,” She says, categorically, “I got to live with Six, I met you guys, I discovered *Love Island*, what else could I ask for?”

I wrap an arm around her shoulders as I laugh. “And now you get to listen to all our boy drama!”

She huffs, bringing the beer to her lips and taking a sip. “Don’t worry, I have my own to bring to the mix.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve been waiting for you to spill the tea.” I tell her.

“It’s not that I don’t want to tell you guys, it’s just there’s really nothing much to say right now.”

“Alright, but you have to tell me the moment there is. I’m *this* close to going into investigative mode and trying to figure it out myself.”

She laughs at that. “You got it.”

“Oh also, Professor Novak gave me a print out for you since you missed class, remind me to give it to you later.”

“Sure,” she says.

“Hello, ladies,” I hear Devlin say from over his shoulder as he sidles up to us, “Nera, leave me a moment with Thayer.”

“I’m not going anywhere. And rethink your tone when you speak to me.”

A smile tugs at my lips and I work to hide it as I take another sip of my beer. Nera’s not one to be fucked with and I absolutely love it.

“Of course, sorry,” he says, inclining his head placatingly, “Could I have a moment, please?”

She looks to me to make that decision and I nod, crossing my arms over my chest as I throw him a guarded look.

I really don’t know what he wants to talk to me about and there’s something about him that I don’t like.

“Fine.” She says, “Thayer, text me when you’re done if you can’t find me, okay?”

“Will do.” I tell her and she walks away. Devlin takes her spot in front of me and watches me silently with what I can only classify as a sleazy grin.

I’m the one who speaks first.

“You’re awfully quiet for someone who was so eager to talk to me.”

“Ha,” he says, his British accent coming across snobbish instead of sexy. “I’ve had my eye on you for a while, but you’ve always had your guard dog watching. Since the coast is clear, I wanted to introduce myself officially and make plans to take you out.”

“You’re hitting on me?” I ask, my tone disbelieving.

“I’m making my interest known while I can.”

“You don’t even know me.” I point out.

“I like what I see.” He gives me a slow once over, making me squirm in discomfort. I don’t like the way he looks at me, like I’m something to be stolen away. “The rest I can find out once you’re sitting across from me or writhing under me, far away from him.” He adds with a sickening smile.

He’s delusional if he thinks that’s ever going to happen.

I quirk an eyebrow at him. “Who are you calling my guard dog?”

“Rhys, love. Don’t pretend you don’t know he’s been marking his territory since you got here.”

“Don’t call me that.” I tell him, keeping my voice calm even though having him call me ‘love’ sounded like nails on a chalkboard to my ears.

“Why not?”

“I don’t like the way it sounds when you say it.” I answer with a sharp smile.

He barks out a boisterous laugh and it too grinds on my ears, my previous uncertainty about him turning to annoyance now.

“I can see why he wants you.”

“Is there a purpose to this conversation?” I ask, because I’m truly unsure what he wants from me. He seems to be playing a game, but one I can’t see and it’s starting to frustrate me.

Devlin is classically handsome with blue eyes and blond hair but I’m dryer than the Sahara desert. He does nothing for me. All I can think of, all I can see, is dark blue eyes, dark hair, a slashed eyebrow, and a tall, warm body.

Where is Rhys? He’s the reason I’m here, he’s the one I want to see.

“You keep avoiding my comments,” he says, taking a step closer to me. I resist the urge to step back, his presence making me almost physically uncomfortable, and hold my ground. “About whether there’s something going on between you and Rhys.”

“Then take the hint.”

That doesn't deter him.

“Is there something going on?” He asks, bluntly.

“None of your business.”

He chuckles, his hand drumming a steady beat right next to mine on the kitchen island. He's not touching me but I can feel his presence looming closer and closer to me like a bad omen.

He takes another step towards me and this time, I do step back. If I didn't, we would have been standing close enough that our chests touched.

I'm suddenly happy that at least we're in public. There's something about him that's setting off all my internal alarm bells.

“It is my business if I'm interested—,” he starts.

“Pass.” I cut in.

“You don't even know what I was going to s—“

“You were going to reiterate your earlier attraction to me and, like I said,” I tell him, my upper lip curling as I speak, “pass.”

“Just like that?” His eyes narrow as his fake smile drops off his face.

“Just like that.” I confirm, giving him a bored look and barely resisting throwing a yawn in there.

“You're a bitch.”

And there it is.

“Typical of a man to call me a bitch just because I said I wasn't interested.”

“I wouldn't be too cocky if I was you.” He sneers, his voice angry now. I've seen this same one eighty happen before with my mom's boyfriends — the way they go from normal, nice even, and quickly devolve to completely furious in the bat of an eye when they don't get their way. It's terrifying. “If you



fuck him, you'll come crawling to me or someone else eventually."

"Is that right?" I ask, my tone mocking.

"He'll use you and throw you away. Fuck you a couple of times, maybe once more with Phoenix for fun, and then he'll move on to the next girl like he always does."

"And I'm supposed to believe that what? Threesomes are beneath you, is that it?" I ask him, pretending to be unmoved and ignoring the pinching in my stomach.

It's not the first time Rhys and Phoenix fucking one girl at the same time has been mentioned to me and I assume it won't be the last, so I'll be damned if I let him get a reaction out of me.

"Rhys isn't going to..." He starts to respond, but the words die in his throat as his eyes flick over my shoulder.

A warm presence walks up behind me and stops at my back, not quite touching me but close enough to communicate protection.

"Please don't stop on my account," the low voice says from behind me, menace clear as day in his tone. "I'd love to hear the rest. Rhys isn't going to do what?"

I turn to look at Phoenix as he steps beside me.

He's dressed in all black, slacks and a sweater with a similarly dark shirt peeking out underneath. He looks older than he is, especially as he hits Devlin with a leveling stare cold enough to freeze an open flame.

I breathe an inward sigh of relief at having him by my side. He's a much friendlier face and I know I can trust him.

"Nothing important." He says, clearly recognizing this isn't a battle he can win. Or one he even wants to participate in.

"Are you lost, Devlin?"

"I was just saying hi to her," he lies, his fake smile pasted back on just that quickly, "That's all."

“Find someone else to talk to.” Phoenix tells him, his even tone still managing to be communicative of the threat in his words.

Devlin puts his hands up in a gesture of mock surrender before he inclines his head at me.

“Think about what I said, love.” He says with a wink.

He moves to step away and I want to correct him again but Phoenix’s hand whips out and grabs Devlin by the collar. His movement is so quick that I miss it, but before I know it Devlin’s cowering in his hold.

“If you value your life,” Phoenix warns, “never call her that again.” Devlin nods once in response and Phoenix releases him with a strong shove that sends him stumbling back a step.

Once he’s righted himself, he wisely chooses to turn around and walk away rather than engaging further.

Phoenix watches him leave before he turns back towards me and gives me a quick clinical once over, as if checking to make sure I don’t have a hair out of place.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“What did he say to you?” He asks me, looking at me with searching eyes.

“Nothing I didn’t know.” I say, shrugging it off with a smile. “Why did you tell him not to call me ‘love’?”

“To save his life.” He answers, flatly, “Rhys will kill him if he hears him call you that.”

I snort at that.

He raises a quizzical brow in my direction but doesn’t actually word the question his face asks.

“You don’t need to act like this is more to him than what it is – a hookup.” I clarify, “I know he’s not into long term stuff, I even know you guys like to, um, sleep with the same

girl at the same time, so really, you don't have to do the faux protectiveness bit."

He doesn't immediately say anything, just looks at me intently with his trademark calculating stare, almost as if he's trying to use his eyes to surgically pick me apart and see what's underneath the exterior.

It's during that brief moment where we're standing there assessing each other that a drunken girl trips over her heels and falls into me, her entire glass of wine flying in my direction.

I watch the wine as if in slow mo as it arcs through the air and splashes almost comically on my white crop top. I look down wordlessly at my top, shock rendering me silent as I take in the now purple, sticky fabric.

"I've had about enough of tonight." I mutter unhappily under my breath.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

“I’m so sorry!” The girl cries out apologetically, clumsily trying to dab at the stain.

“You’re totally fine,” I tell her honestly, “It happens.” I say, waving her off with the soaking paper towel in my hand.

“Here, follow me.” Phoenix says, walking off without waiting to see if I do.

I do, half jogging to catch up with him as he goes up the stairs and takes me to a large bathroom.

“You can clean up in here. I’ll wait outside.”

“Thanks.” I tell him, closing the door behind me.

I take my top off and try scrubbing off the stain, but it won’t go away. In fact, I’m making it worse. The stain is spreading and the water is turning the top itself see through, there’s no way I can put this back on.

Fantastic.

It’s taking everything in me to keep the 1.9% of my temper that *23andme* told me was Greek under control so I don’t run out of this bathroom and throw the first piece of fine china I find in this house on the floor.

Instead, I focus on problem solving.

I crack the door open a bit, carefully trying to not let Phoenix see me, but I have nothing to worry about.

He's standing with his back firmly to the door, blocking the view of any people on the second floor.

"I need your sweater."

He turns his head towards me, but keeps his eyes averted as he speaks.

"Right, I think we need to make a couple of things clear here."

"Um, now?" I say, keeping my body hidden behind the door.

He continues as if I hadn't spoken. "Yes, Rhys and I have fucked the same girl in the past. *No*, that won't happen with you. I have zero interest in fucking you and Rhys has even less interest in ever sharing you. He would *actually* kill Devlin for calling you 'love'." He emphasizes the words to make sure I understand. "I wasn't just doing a 'faux protectiveness bit' as I believe you called it. Keep those things in mind and think really hard about whether you actually need my sweater. Because that same fate awaits me if he catches you wearing any of my clothes."

That's by far the most sentences I've ever heard Phoenix say at once and I'm momentarily taken aback by it.

"Look," I hiss, "My white top is completely see through and the only thing I have on under it are nipple pasties, and not expensive ones either. The cheap kind that barely stay on. So either I walk out of here with no shirt and my tits out or you give me your sweater and no one sees anything. Which do you think he'll prefer?"

"He'll hate both, but at least I'll survive one of the two." He grits out through clenched teeth, hesitating on the decision.

"Okay," I say, changing tactics, "If Sixtine was in my shoes, what would you prefer happen here?"

I've got his attention now.

He rips his sweater off by the neck and tosses it at me.

“Thanks.” I chirp happily, closing the door. I knew that would work.

There’s a few moments of silence as I put the sweater on before he speaks again.

“What has she told you about me?” He asks, his voice barely audible through the door.

I open it and point for him to sit on the edge of the bath while I try to salvage my top. It’s not a recent purchase but it’s one of my favorite pieces to go out in so I’ll be really bummed if I have to throw it away.

“Six?” I ask him, closing the door and bending over the shirt to continue scrubbing it.

“Yeah.”

“Nothing. She doesn’t talk about you.” I say, looking back at him and watching as his jaw works, the muscle in his cheek jumping agitatedly. His eyes flash and, try as he might, he can’t hide the frown that pinches his eyebrows. “Do you want her to?”

“No.” He says, rigidly.

“Happy days then, right?” I ask him.

I give up on trying to save my top and throw it in the trash next to the sink with a frustrated breath.

He stands and hesitates. “Why did you bring her up before then?” He finally asks, opening the door and letting me go first.

I walk out and look back at him as I answer. “Because I have eyes, Phoenix.” I tell him, as I bump into something rock hard.

It feels like an actual brick wall and completely stops my momentum as I look up, up, up, until I see Rhys.

“Fuck me.” I hear Phoenix mutter from behind me.

Rhys’ face is black with rage as he looks first at me, then down at my clothes and finally, excruciatingly slowly, over my shoulder at Phoenix who comes out of the bathroom after me.

“Mackley, I—”

He doesn't let me finish.

He sidesteps me in one move, walks up to Phoenix and punches him square in the jaw.

Phoenix's face snaps to the side with a sickening sound and blood immediately flies from his lip, but he doesn't fight back as Rhys punches him again.

“What the *fuck*, Phoenix?” Rhys hisses, grabbing his friend by the collar and slamming him against the wall. The floor has emptied out, with people finding a place to hookup or going downstairs to get booze, so we're alone. “Did you fucking touch her?”

“No.” Phoenix bites out with a resigned look on his face as he takes the hits that Rhys unleashes on him. He bends over with the force of the blow thrown at his abdomen, his breath hissing through his teeth.

I can't watch this anymore.

“Stop!”

Rhys' face snaps towards me as he spears me with a venomous look, his nostrils flaring wildly as he takes me in again.

Gone is any trace of the joviality that's usually present on his features.

He looks ready to maim and kill now.

“Stay out of this.” He grunts, his tone equal parts frigid and intimidating. “I'll deal with you later.”

“No, let him go.” I say, stepping between them, “Phoenix was just helping me.”

“Shut up.” He spits.

His eyes spark with flames of fury, making my heart stutter in my chest. Instead of pacifying him, I think I've just enraged him further.

Without a backwards glance to Phoenix, he grabs my arm in his brutal grip and throws me back into the bathroom, slamming the door in my face.

“Hey, what are you doing? Let me out!” I ask, pounding my fists against the door, my heart racing wildly in my chest.

I try to open it, but can feel the weight of his body pressing it shut from the other side.

I press my ear against the door, but with the noise and the music blaring, I can barely hear a thing. I make out a dull thud, followed by a groan and then I’m shoved back away from the door when it opens.

Rhys looms threateningly in the doorway, his large body blocking almost the entire scene behind him as he walks in.

He stares at me with eyes devoid of any humanity as he closes the door behind him and stalks towards me.

We’re in a mansion-sized bathroom, but a bathroom nonetheless, and I have nowhere to run as he descends on me.

His face is completely closed off, his eyes slashes in his furious face as he reaches out and grabs my throat.

No, grab is too kind of a word.

He squeezes it, immediately extinguishing all the air in my windpipe and making it impossible for me to breathe.

“Do you want me to murder my best friend?” He demands, hissing every cutting, furious word. He shakes me hard enough to make my teeth rattle.

“Is that what you want to see?” He snarls, enraged and out of control. It’s a dangerous combination. “What the fuck were you doing with him, Thayer?”

I open my mouth to try to answer, but I can’t speak with the way he’s crushing me. His eyes follow the movement and drop to my mouth where I watch as desire and rage battle each other for dominance.



I cup his hand to signal that I can't talk, that I can't breathe.

He squeezes harder, punishing me, lording his power over me, his teeth bared as a growl rips from his chest before he relaxes his hold marginally.

"Is your plan to fuck him next?" He asks, his words cruel, "I broke you in and got you warmed up so now you're making your way through my friend group, is that it?"

Anger flames my blood and I try to knee him in the balls. He evades the blow with an infuriatingly easy move of the hips, his eyes narrowing to murderous slits as he grabs my arms and twists them behind my back, keeping them captive with a hand on my wrists.

We're standing chest to chest, and I can feel his heartbeat against mine.

"Let me go." I order, trying to keep the loose hold I have on my anger.

"No," he answers, his face inches from mine.

"If that's really what you think of me, then let me go." I say, thrashing against his hold.

He uses his free hand to cuff my jaw, forcing me to look at him.

"What else am I supposed to think?" He asks, his voice thundering disbelievingly in the closed space. "I've been looking for you, calling and texting you, and I find you with my best friend, wearing his clothes."

He holds his face so close to mine that I can feel his breath on my lips.

"What else am I supposed to think except that you gave him something that belongs to me?" He whispers furiously against my mouth, and I think I detect hurt in his voice.

"Did he kiss these lips?" He demands to know, running his thumb along the seam of my mouth.

His jealousy heats my blood.

I wish I could say it was a turn off, but knowing that he was this heated, this driven to madness at the thought that I'd touched someone else, it just makes me want him more.

But it's also a head fuck.

We've just started hooking up and I've been working to moderate my feelings, to not get too invested in him, all at his insistence that he didn't want anything truly meaningful.

I'd assumed he'd never want exclusivity and yet, here he is. Seeming to not just want it, but demand it from me.

"No, he didn't kiss me." I tell him, and visible relief crosses his face. "But shouldn't you be happy we're getting along? Doesn't that make it easier for you down the road?" I ask him, flippantly.

He's breathing like he just finished a race, his chest visibly pumping up and down. "What are you talking about?"

"You know, for when you ask me to fuck both of you at once. I've been told that's your guys' thing, so shouldn't you be happy Phoenix and I are getting along?"

He grabs the collar of Phoenix's sweater in both fists and rips it with a furious, almost animalistic roar.

The material is thick and doesn't break apart completely in one rip so he pulls again a second, then a third time, hacking at it with raw fury until he's torn it off me.

I bring up my arms to try to cover myself, but he bends me over the sink and turns the tap on.

I scream when cold water hits my bare back.

"What are you doing?" I shriek, trying to stand up straight.

He places a hand between my shoulder blades, forcing me back down and holding me firm under the water as he grabs the hand soap and opens it with his teeth.

I hear him spit out the cap before I feel the viscous liquid drop on my upper back.

"Stop! What are you—"

“Just the thought of his smell on you makes me sick to my stomach.” He snarls, as he starts washing me. He’s not gentle, his hands rough and careless on my curves. “And you think I’d ever share you with anyone else?”

He reaches into the cupboard blindly and brings out a shower brush. Pouring more soap onto it, he uses it to scrub me raw, moving from my shoulders to my arms, and my upper back down to my lower back.

He gets water everywhere, spilling it onto the counter and marble floors and down my skirt as he refuses to stop.

My eyes are stinging with tears from the rough treatment but my body is singing and ready for him.

I’m still covered in soapy water as he slams the tap off and pulls me by my hair to place me face down on the wet counter next to the sink.

He bends and lays the top half of his body over mine as his hand cups my jaw from behind and he forces me to watch us in the mirror.

My pulse beats excitedly as I see the carnal look in his gaze.

“I’ve had enough.” He hisses into my ear, making eye contact with me through the mirror. “Enough of you saying other men’s names when you won’t say mine, enough of you running away, enough of your little games.” He bites my neck, making me scream loudly. He follows it up with equally powerful bites down the entire column of my throat, to my shoulders and wherever he can sink his teeth into. He pauses momentarily to meet my eyes again in the mirror as he delivers an ominous order. “I want you to watch me own you now.”

He switches hands on my throat and bites the other side of my body. He’s merciless, digging his teeth so deeply into me, I know I’ll be covered in marks tomorrow.

He shoves my skirt up over my waist as he shreds my thong in half. Next thing I know, I groan as I feel his teeth bite

the flesh of my ass. He shoves my legs apart and continues licking and sucking my inner thigh down to my calves.

He runs his hands up from my ankles, over my calves and thighs and to my ass as he stands behind me.

“Reach back and spread your ass.”

My cheeks flame with embarrassment at the thought and when I don't immediately obey, he slaps my ass cheeks and then my sit spot.

“I love the way you blush.” He mutters, his eyes fixed on my cheeks. “I used to think you were just playing innocent,” He muses, “but finding out that you actually are, that you're all mine, it makes every blush all that much sweeter.”

He rains down three slaps in quick succession, each blow causing a spark to shoot straight to my center.

“Reach back and spread your ass,” he repeats, his voice deadly, “Show me my cunt.”

I do as he asks and watch with greedy eyes as his gaze moves excruciatingly slowly from my face to my exposed center. There's nothing more vulnerable than opening myself up to him like this for his mercy.

The wolfish look in his eye promises rough but limitless pleasure.

“So pretty and wet for me.” He purrs, running a possessive hand over my ass before adding with a warning, “Don't let go or I'll stop.”

My eyes roll into the back of my head and a shiver runs down my spine as his fingers circle my clit. He slides them up my folds, coating them in my wetness, and pushes two into me.

I gasp as my body works to stretch around the intrusion, but he simply thrusts in.

“Oh, *fuck*.” I mumble, dropping my head back onto the counter and struggling to hold myself open as my legs start to shake violently.

He pumps his fingers in and out of me, his pace ruthless. Strangled, unrecognizable sounds fall from my lips as I try to keep up with the insane pleasure coursing through me.

“I own you. You belong to me and no one else.” He grunts, “The things I would do to any man who touched you would have me first in line on death row, do you understand me? Nobody touches you.”

I shake my head frantically, fighting against the suffocating arousal for some mental clarity. His fingers curl inside me and brush up against a place that has me seeing stars.

I’m panting wantonly, the sounds I’m making loud and mewling in the enclosed space.

“Say you belong to me. Say you won’t fuck anyone else.”

“I– I won’t. I belong to you.” I rattle out, and I find that it’s easier than ever before to be honest.

I want him and no one else.

He wraps his arm around my middle and uses it to pull me up against his chest. He continues to fuck me with his fingers, adding a third and stretching me completely, as his other arm keeps me pinned against him.

I’m building towards an orgasm just out of reach as he brings his lips to my ear.

“This goes both ways, love.” He whispers heatedly, “If you want me to be yours, if you want me to fuck only you, you have to claim me back.”

My teeth bare in a manic smile at the thought that he could fuck someone else.

I bring my arm up behind me to cup his neck and run my fingers through the hair on his nape. I feel my final resistance give way before that ultimate temptation.

I want him to be mine.

I don’t want to fight it anymore, I want to take a blind leap of faith towards him and hope he doesn’t hurt me.

“Say it, Thayer.” He coaxes against my ear.

I turn my head towards him, nudging his nose with mine before I close my lips around his. He grips my throat and angles me more towards him as he returns my kiss with additional aggression.

I have to rip my lips away from him so I can tell him the words he wants to hear. The ones that have been a long time in the making.

“I want you, Rhys.”

I watch in awe as his gaze turns downright feral before his eyes flutter close. I feel him take a large breath behind me as if to make the moment last, to savor it.

His hand comes down to my pussy as he starts to finger my clit.

“Again.”

“You’re the only one that I want, Rhys.” I tell him, and he pinches my clit.

There’s no warning. No preparing my body for the orgasm that tears through it with the force of a category five hurricane. Spasms rack through my body as I ride the waves and fall limply back against him.

He turns me around, picks me up and places me on the wet counter before prying my legs open and standing between them.

He grips my throat as his other hand works to undo his belt and open his pants.

“I’m going to fuck you bare,” he says, his voice gravelly as he frees his cock, “and then I’m going to come inside you.”

He rubs his hard length along my folds a few times, before he brings his head to my entrance and pushes inside in one rough thrust.

My mouth falls open on a silent scream as he fills me to the hilt. It turns vocal when he starts driving inside me with

such power that my back hits the mirror behind me with every one of his thrusts.

Both of us look down at where we're joined, entranced by the sight of his cock pushing viciously through my folds.

"Rhys, Rhys, *Rhys*," I say, chanting his name almost as if in prayer, the pleasure making me feel drunk and disoriented.

He slams a hand down over my mouth, muffling my cries.

"I'm going to come at the sound of my own name if you keep moaning it like that, love," he says through gritted teeth.

He licks one of my nipples and sucks it into my mouth, making me arch into him with a happy cry.

"Never hold my name from me again," he orders around my bud, "Promise."

He removes his hand, making me gasp out a breath and a reply.

"I promise."

He drops his head on my shoulder as he continues spearing into me.

"Good girl." He says, grunting as I run my nails from his nape up into his hair. "I love feeling you like this. So tight and so ready for me."

"Only for you." I pant against his ear.

"That's fucking right, only for me," he says, lifting his head to look at me as his hand plays with my clit. "Squeeze my cock. Squee— fuck, *yes*. Just like that. Again."

He punctuates his words with strong thrusts that make my toes curl and my lower belly melt as I come, desperately clutching his neck to hold him against me.

I shudder and my muscles clamp down around him as wetness pools out of me and down my thigh. The way I tighten around him sets off his own orgasm as he spills his hot cum inside me with gradually softening thrusts.

He slumps on top of me and for long moments we just lay there in silence, the only sound piercing the quiet our harsh exhales as we catch our breaths.

Finally, he rights himself, anchoring his body by grabbing my still spread thighs and watching the cum leak out of me with heated eyes.

“You look obscene.” He purrs.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Mine.” He answers happily, his grin back and the dark cloud lifted as he leans in and presses a kiss to my lips. His eyes darken when he looks at me before he kisses me again. “*Mine.*”

I jump off the counter as he reaches into a cupboard to the right of the sink and brings out a fluffy towel.

“Take off your skirt.” He commands, unraveling the towel and opening it up for me.

I do as he says, shimmying the skirt down and off my legs, and take a step towards him. He eyes me appreciatively, his gaze hungry as he sees me completely naked before him for the first time.

“I already want you again.” He admits, more for himself than me I think.

“Later.” I reply, stepping up to him and putting a palm on his chest.

He fans the towel above me and wraps it around my back, bringing the two sides closed in front of me. His arms curl around me and bring me against him as he uses his hold to dry me off, making me giggle in the process.

He groans loudly. “Don’t laugh like that if you want me to not fuck you again until ‘later’. That giggle just shot straight to my dick.”

“Sorry.” I lie, giggling again and wrapping my arms around his middle as I set my chin on his chest and look up at him.



He smiles earnestly at me and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, but I can see there's something like preoccupation still hiding in his gaze.

"Tell me what you were doing with Phoenix." The anger is gone but I should have known better than to think he'd just let it go.

"He was helping me, that's all." Rhys' eyes narrow, disbelieving, so I recap the night up until the moment he found me. "Devlin came up to me and was saying all kinds of weird things so Phoenix told him to get lost. Then some girl dropped her wine on my white top so I basically browbeat him into giving me his shirt by telling him I'd have no choice but to walk out topless if he didn't." I tell him, before adding, "You need to apologize."

He growls at that, although the sound is nowhere as menacing as it was previously. "I don't need to apologize for anything. He crossed a line."

"What line?"

"He knows. Ask him if I owe him an apology." He says, tipping his chin upwards, "He'll tell you I didn't punch him hard enough."

"Even though he was helping me?"

"It's because he helped you that he's getting off easy. I won't go home and finish the job." He grins sinisterly, baring his teeth. "What did Devlin say to you?"

Based on his reaction with Phoenix, I know if I tell him the truth, he'll march out of this bathroom, track Devlin down and gut him like a fish, so I keep it vague.

"Nothing, he was just introducing himself."

"He's no one you need to bother remembering." He grunts possessively.

"Alright, caveman." I laugh, patting his chest placatingly as I stand on my tip toes and kiss him.

He finishes drying me off, his fingers digging into my sides causing me to giggle again.

With a quiet purr, he wraps his arms around my neck and holds me against him.

“Let’s go to my house.” He says, “Stay with me tonight.” It’s a request, not a question, but he waits to see what I say.

Now that he’s had me and got what he came for, he doesn’t want to stay at this party and spend time together.

He possibly doesn’t even want to be seen together.

“Because you want to fuck me again?” I ask.

*Tell me no. Tell me it’s because you want to spend time with me.*

“Yes.” He replies, his answer earnest.

A momentary pain shoots through me at his words, a reminder that this is just meant to be a hookup.

The sex is hot and dirty and I want him again just as much as he wants me, but he was a friend before we ever hooked up.

The need to spend time with him and have fun and laugh is dangerous. Now that sex is involved, it blurs the lines in my head.

I can’t let it blur them in my heart.

I knew this would be a casual thing when we started, but it hurts my feelings that he seems to want to keep this a secret.

Phoenix obviously knows and I imagine Rogue does as well, but to the rest of the world it seems he’s content to keep me as just his sneaky link.

I pull away from him and quietly pull on my skirt.

“What’s wrong?” He asks, sensing the change in me. His brow is furrowed and he looks truly confused.

Now that the physical moment is over between us, I’m swirling in my mind again, my brain yearning to define what we’re doing.

“Nothing.” I say, looking around for my top, forgetting that it’s in the trash.

He gently grabs my elbow and turns me back towards him.

“Don’t do that.” He says, ripping his black tee off and putting it over my head. He stands shirtless in front of me, his defined chest and abdomen rippling as he crosses his arms. “Talk to me.”

“I don’t like being a secret.” I say, because it’s easier than admitting anything else. I avoid his gaze as I put my arms through the sleeves of the shirt.

He turns my chin gently towards him. “What are you talking about?”

I search for the right words to verbalize what I’m feeling, but can’t find them. Instead, I say, “You didn’t want anyone to hear us talking when we were in class.”

“Hold on.” He says, and I hear a measure of incredulity in his tone. “You think I’m trying to hide this?”

“When we were in that tiny room at school, you made me leave first. You didn’t want people to see us together.” I point out, my tone slightly accusatory. “Are you going to do the same thing now? Am I going to have to sneak out of her and into your house so no one sees me?”

He cups my jaw, keeping me facing him. “I was thinking of *you*.” He says, pressing a hot kiss against my mouth with a pleased smile. “I didn’t think you’d want people seeing you come out that closet looking freshly fucked on school grounds, especially not when you have a scholarship,” he adds.

“Oh.”

“And yeah, you’re absolutely right I didn’t want anyone to hear us in class. That’s not because I don’t want people to know I’m fucking you or that I’m embarrassed, Silver.” he says, his jaw working. “It’s because I don’t want anyone to hear how I fuck you and how you come for me.”

I’m at a loss for words.

I’d immediately assumed the worst when in fact it seemed like he’d just been his usual protective self.

“So you’re not keeping this a secret?” I ask, to make sure I’m understanding.

“Believe me, I have no issue telling people we’re fucking.” He says. “In fact...”

His voice trails off as he bends to grab the shreds of Phoenix’s sweater in one hand and intertwines his fingers in mine with the other.

He throws the door open and pulls me out after him and onto the landing.

“Listen up everyone,” he calls, pulling me to the railing. A few people on our floor hear him and turn around, but the music drowns out his words too much for the vast majority of people downstairs to hear.

“What are you doing?” I hiss at him as I avoid the gaze of the people below us. He squeezes my hand as he brings the fingers of his other hand up to his mouth and lets out a deafening whistle.

That gets everyone’s attention.

He throws his arm over my shoulder and tucks me against his side before slamming his lips down on mine.

Immediately, everything else fades away as his tongue licks into my mouth and battles with mine.

He groans against my lips and sucks my tongue hotly. The kiss is wild and feral and a completely inappropriate PDA.

That realization has me wrenching my lips away from his. He looks down at me with heavy lidded eyes that pulse with lust for me and for a moment I’m ensnared and trapped in his gaze.

I look away and into the shocked and bewildered faces of our classmates, including Nera’s.

She’s standing at the bottom of the stairs with a look that borders on pride as she gives me an ecstatic smile and thumbs up.

I want to crawl into a hole where I can die quietly from this humiliation.

“I wanted to let you guys know that we’re fucking.” Rhys announces with a pleased hum.

“Oh my fucking God.” I mumble quietly.

He turns his head towards me slightly and speaks only so I can hear him, “I told you I wasn’t hiding this and I wasn’t kidding. They’re all going to know.” Then louder, for everyone else to hear, “We’re fucking and she’s mine. Anyone who comes near her or touches her will become intimately familiar with extreme pain at my hands.”

I see Devlin scowling in the distance, the expression on his face mean and jealous.

I’ve seen that look on many faces and I know that it’s not jealousy over Rhys’ announcement, but jealousy of him in general.

He’s angry, bitter and covetous of Rhys’ position.

Devlin is a man whose life will be spent on the sidelines in the shade. He’ll ever feel a ray of sunlight warm his skin.

And Rhys is the sun.

I’m glad I listened to my spidey senses when it came to him. I knew there was something off.

“Now that that’s settled,” Rhys says, nuzzling my neck, “Let’s go to my place.” He leads me down the stairs with my hand still in his.

“You’re crazy. I didn’t need you to do that.” I tell him, before squeezing his hand, “But thanks.”

Instead of heading for the front door at the bottom of the stairs, he turns and takes us deeper into the house. When we get to the kitchen, he stops and pulls me against him.

“I did. Clearly I haven’t been staking my claim well enough if you thought for even a second that I was open to sharing or trying to hide this.” He steps around the island and grabs a bottle of tequila from the counter before coming back

to me. “For as long as we’re doing this, you belong to me. Your spicy little personality, your legs, your braid, that adorable giggle that makes me want to make you laugh again every time, your soft lips and your sharp tongue. Fuck, *especially* your soft lips and your sharp tongue. They belong to me. It *all* belongs to me.” He takes a swig of tequila from the bottle before bringing his lips down on mine.

The fiery liquid passes his lips and through mine, into my ready mouth where it burns my tongue with its heat. Fueled by the sting of the tequila, the kiss feels intoxicating and disorienting.

I wrench myself back to reality and find that my hands are digging into the skin of his chest as I hold onto him like a feral cat trying to climb a tree.

“If you ever doubt that again, come find me. I’ll put myself on a leash and let you walk me around campus for all to see, because I belong to you just as much as you belong to me.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “Understood?”

I nod a couple of times dumbly before I can get out a whispered, “Yes.”

“Good.” He says, with a sharp smack on my ass. He grabs Phoenix’s torn sweater and the bottle of tequila in one hand and my hand in the other and marches us out the front door as I furiously text Nera telling her I’m about to leave.

Once we’re out front, he stops on the front lawn and throws the remnants of the sweater on the grass.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

He doesn’t answer me, instead he uncorks the tequila and turns the bottle over, dousing the shreds of clothing in alcohol. He picks up one of the pieces of the sweater and brings a lighter up to the bottom.

“Bye, Thayer!” Nera says, bouncing out the front door and towards me but slowing down as Rhys lights the piece of fabric on fire. “Woah.” She adds, walking up to me.

Rhys watches the fire for a second, the flame reflected brightly in his dark, captivating eyes, before he drops the scrap

onto the rest of the shreds.

The whole pile takes flame, fueled by the use of alcohol as an accelerant, and the flames reach several feet up into the sky.

I'm glued to the spot, transfixed by it.

When I finally pull my gaze back to look at him, he's already staring at me. He stands there, shirtless, apparently immune to the cool November air and dwarfing the blaze with his massive body, looking downright predatory.

"A lesson." He growls, darkly, "Next time another man touches you, whether it's with his hands or anything else, I'll light his clothes on fire with him still in them."

He gives me an antagonistic smile that guarantees delivery of every one of his threats and promises.

"He's insane." Nera says from right next to me. She says it without judgment, like it's a fact that she's just learned about this particular breed of man.

"I know," I laugh, and out of the corner of my eye I see her turn that same look towards me. "I fucking love it."

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

“Rhys.” I hear Thayer whisper hiss as her voice permeates through the mental fog. When I don’t answer, she pats my chest gently, pulling me out of a dead sleep. “Rhys!”

A soft rumble echoes warmly in my chest as she calls out my name, her voice airy and delicate as she takes care of that one syllable lovingly between her lips.

I’ve heard people say my name for almost nineteen years now and it’s never sounded anywhere near as sweet as when she spoke it last night.

I’d held my breath those long, painful, eternal seconds as I waited to see if she’d say it.

And she did.

She’d finally broken and given in to me.

The effects of her saying my name should be studied by scientists because the result was similar to a bomb detonation to the internal organs.

The blast pressure had radiated through me, generating immense amounts of energy that supercharged the blood pumping in my veins, making me feel like I was on the fringe of passing out.

I’d been effectively factory reset by one word.



Hours later, I can still feel the remnants of that feeling everywhere in my body.

“Mhmm?” I mumble incomprehensibly, curling my arm around her to bring her closer to me.

When we’d gotten back to my place after the party, we’d foraged for snacks in the kitchen. My hunger couldn’t be sated so I’d fucked her in the pantry instead.

We’d gone to bed satiated in more ways than one, and I’d curled my large frame around hers, using my legs and arms to trap her so she couldn’t leave if she tried.

“Are you awake?” She asks, and I finally peel open an eyelid to look down at her.

I can barely make out her face, it’s still so dark out.

“What time is it?” I grunt out.

“Three am.” She answers and I groan loudly.

She laughs softly and both my eyes fly open to find her looking up at me from the crook of my arm.

“What?” I ask, gruffly. Before she can answer, I dip my head and cover her lips with mine in a soft kiss.

“You look so grumpy.”

“That’s because I am grumpy. It’s the crack of dawn, I’ve known Marines to get gentler awakenings than this.”

“Sorry,” she says with another laugh, with zero trace of an apology in her tone.

I kiss her again. I haven’t been able to stop since last night.

Just as I’d been energized by the way she’d said my name, finally laying eyes on her coming out of that bathroom after looking for her had sent a similar jolt through me.

Until I’d realized she’d been wearing Phoenix’s sweater.

And until the man in question had walked out that very same bathroom right behind her.

Venom had spread through my blood like the most aggressive of cancers, taking over and poisoning my mood until it was black.

I knew how strong my attraction was for her; how much I wanted her and was currently greedy to keep her, but even still I'd been shocked by the depth and fervor of the jealous rage that'd seared through me thinking she'd let someone else touch her.

*I thought I'd been clear with her that she was off limits to everyone but me, but obviously I hadn't.*

I growl internally, annoyed at the thought, but dismiss it with a shake of my head.

With her admission that she's mine and the previous ambiguity laid to rest, the possessiveness I feel for her purrs loudly in my chest.

I already know a few weeks with her won't be enough and I can't see myself letting her go anytime soon.

There's a slight pinch in my chest at the thought of giving her up that I won't acknowledge and ignore.

I'm not getting any more emotionally attached than I already am. I can't.

“What's up?”

“We didn't talk about your match tonight,” she says. “I want to see the goals you scored.”

I close my eyes with another groan, hiding my smile behind a grimace. She's even more obsessed than I am.

“This couldn't wait until tomorrow?”

“Come on,” She replies, with a gentle nudge to my ribs, “I can't sleep.” She says, softly.

“And watching game tape is a good alternative to sleep?”

“Of course,” she counters, “I need to make sure you're as good as you claim to be.”

I laugh and reach for my phone on the bedside table. Mathews records all our matches and sends us a link for studying game film so I should have the footage handy.

“I am.” I tell her, clicking into the email at the top of my inbox.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” She replies haughtily, making me laugh again.

I press play on the long highlight reel, about fifteen minutes in length, and we start watching. We’re mostly quiet except every so often when Thayer will comment on a play or I’ll point out something I want her to look at.

Six minutes into the video, I score my first goal, a volley into the top right corner from fifteen feet away.

“Holy shit.” She says, sucking in a breath as she drags her finger on the timeline bar and rewinds the video back fifteen seconds.

She watches it again a couple more times, taking in the preceding play that led to the goal and the goal itself. There’s something about observing her entranced by me that makes my dick hard.

She lets the video play and it’s basically a montage of close up and mid shots of me engaging in the next plays. It looks like my own personal highlight reel.

“Someone stayed close to you.” She says with a sniff. “Was a member of your fan club behind the camera?”

I smirk at the pouty tone of her voice. “Jealous?”

“Hardly.” She scoffs. “There are ten other players on your team, I’m just saying I think they’d appreciate the limelight for a couple frames.”

“I scored all three of our goals.” I point out in defense of the videographer.

“And that’s probably because the rest of your team feels undervalued which affects their performance.” She counters, her hand flying wildly, “Whoever the camerawoman is, maybe

she could point the camera towards them and stop ogling you for a second.”

“I believe my middle aged football coach was behind the camera.”

“Well...”

I laugh as her words freeze on her lips before her mouth slams shut when she can't find an adequate response to my statement.

She looks back towards the screen and watches for a few more seconds before she pauses the video.

“Wait a minute.” She says, rewinding the video back another fifteen seconds.

“What?” I ask.

The clip plays, a close up shot of my face as I head to the sidelines to throw in the ball. As I'm walking, I raise my arm and push my hair off my forehead with a slick move.

She pauses on that frame, my arm half covering my face, my perpetual half smirk partially hidden behind it.

She frowns as she points at the fluffy pink bracelet wrapped around my wrist. “Is that my hair tie?”

“Yeah.”

She turns her startled gaze to meet mine. “Why is it on your wrist?”

“It's mine now.”

I vividly remember the moment she'd handed me both the black and pink hair ties when I'd braided her hair. I'd wrapped the black one around her hair and I'd stared at the pink one as I held it in my hand.

There I was holding something of hers, something she'd given me when she wouldn't give anything else, and my fist had closed around it tightly, refusing to let it go.

I'd shoved the hair tie in my pocket and taken it like a thief.

“Give it back, I’ve been looking for it.”

“Can’t.” I tell her, simply.

“Why not?” She asks, perplexed.

I’d forgotten that I’d put the hair tie in the pocket of my bag and had found it as I was getting ready for the match. Instinctively, I’d picked it up and pulled it over my wrist, the movement feeling organic.

Just like I’d helped her prepare for her game, I’d wanted her there with me in some way.

“I scored three goals wearing it, remember? It’s my good luck charm.”

Her eyes widen and then soften as they wordlessly caress my face.

“As an athlete, you know what taking my good juju away could do, right? It could be devastating to my game play and I know you don’t want that.”

“Right.” She says with a smile, leaning in to kiss me. “I don’t care if the camerawoman is a hot chick anymore.”

She snuggles closer to me and we watch the rest of the game highlights, including my penalty and tap in goals.

“So?” I ask her when we’re done. “What’s the verdict?”

She sighs dramatically before finally admitting, “You’re very good.”

She yelps as I grab her hips and flip her onto her back before I roll my body over hers. Her palms come to lay flat against my chest as she looks up into my hungry eyes.

“It’s not the only thing I’m good at.” I tell her.

“I’m aware,” she purrs, her hand moving to caress my eyebrow. “How did you get this scar?”

“Freak accident.” I tell her, “I fell from a structure in a kids’ park when I was younger and landed on a broken bottle.”

“You’re lucky it didn’t hit your eye.” She says, running her thumb along the arch. “It’s unfair that even your scars

make you more attractive.”

“It bodes well for me that you think that because wait until you see my emotional scars,” I tease.

“Show me,” She answers, wrapping her arms around my neck, “I want to see it all.”

I bury my face into the crook of her neck with a groan. Why did she have to say that? And why do I suddenly want to tell her everything, to carve myself open for her so she can see what really made me?

We’re treading on dangerous territory and I know it.

My tongue darts out and licks up the column of her neck before I suction my mouth around the skin of her pulse point, making her shiver.

I cup her breast and then run my hand down her side, over her hip and between her legs. Pushing aside the fabric of her thong, I dip my fingers between her folds as she arches into me.

“I think your pussy likes me.” I mumble, my words muffled against her skin. “It’s always dripping for me.”

She moans, tightening her hold around my neck as I push a finger inside her. Her walls are still deliciously tight around my digit as I start pumping in and out of her.

Lifting my head, I close my lips around hers, sucking the lower one into my mouth before biting it.

“Did you get turned on by how I played? How I hurt myself? Or maybe by the mention of emotional trauma?” I taunt her, “Which was it?”

I add a second finger, my eyes fixed on her face as pleasure consumes her. Her mouth parts slightly, a pink blush colors her cheeks and her eyes sparkle as they stare back at me, the complete picture of her face so fucking beautiful.

“All of it.” She chokes out, “All of you.”

I know my eyes darken with satisfaction at her words, I can feel the way they change in response to her. “Good

answer.” I say, extracting myself from her hold and sliding down her body.

My fingers never leave her, continuing their rapid motion as I bring my mouth to her pussy and graze my teeth against her clit.

She jumps so violently at the contact she’d have gotten out of reach for me if my arm wasn’t curled around her thigh.

I rub my face against her hot pussy, inhaling deeply to take in the scent of her sweetness. I could die a happy man between these legs if given the chance.

Flattening my tongue, I run it from my fingers at her entrance up to her clit and back down in measured strokes.

“Rhys,” she moans, her fingers tangling desperately in my hair.

“Tell me, love.”

“More.” she demands, brokenly, “I need more.”

“Ask and you shall receive.” I tell her, sucking her clit into my mouth and pounding into her with a third finger.

Her back arches off the bed, her muscles momentarily tensing and locking as her orgasm hits. I don’t stop sucking and biting her clit or the furious pace of my fingers as I push her past the edge.

She tries to twist away from me, her upper half now face down on the mattress while her lower half stays as is, her legs still spread for me, the pleasure bordering to pain as I refuse to let her go.

I add a fourth finger, her tight heat strangling me so much I can barely fit it in, and she screams. She’s grasping desperately at the sheets, the bedframe, anything she can find for physical support as I push her into a second orgasm.

Spasms rack her body, her legs shaking violently as she climaxes, but I show her no mercy. I run my tongue around my fingers, collecting her wetness as it gushes out of her, not missing a single drop.

My fingers move to a lazy rhythm as I blow a breath against her swollen clit.

She tries to slam her legs shut even with me between them, but I pry them open. I smack her pussy, the sound of my palm connecting with her flesh loud and wet, and she cries out, biting into the pillow below her.

“I can’t anymore, Rhys,” she whimpers, “Please.”

“You wanted more,” I remind her, my voice gravelly with lust, “I say when you’re finished.”

With that I pull my fingers out and turn her hips so they match the rest of her body still facedown on the mattress, then slam three fingers back in.

She lays boneless before me, her body completely submitted to me and my will. A pleased growl rumbles in my chest and pulses in my cock at the proof that she belongs to me.

I pick up the pace of my fingers, bending them slightly so they rub against the sensitive spot of her inner walls. I wrap a hand around her front and pitch her hips upwards so they’re lifted a few inches off the mattress towards me, and then I lean in and run my tongue around her entrance, teasing her.

Her toes curl as her thighs squeeze me, trying to suffocate me between her legs. I rub her clit with rough strokes, getting her heated as her muscles start to tighten again.

She’s panting and mewling and making ungodly noises for me, a mix of ‘stop’ and ‘keep going’ falling incoherently from her lips.

Lowering my head towards her folds, my tongue peeks out and licks the skin between her pussy and her asshole teasing her, before eventually circling her tight rim itself.

“Rhys, no.” she calls out, alarmed, trying and failing to sit back on her knees.

I slap her pussy harshly, my hand falling four times on her clit as she slumps back on the mattress.



“I’m going to fuck your ass one day, Silver. You should get used to the idea.”

I continue my three point assault on her, my fingers pistoning inside her, my other hand roughly working her clit, and my tongue lapping at her dark hole before pressing down and penetrating it.

A long, loud keen leaves her throat as I do so, like a wolf howling into the night, and she shatters around me as I dip my tongue in and out of her asshole like a starving man.

I ride out the waves of her orgasm with my greedy tongue and my fingers as the tension leaves her muscles and she lays limply on the mattress.

Getting on my knees between her legs, I wipe my mouth off and stare possessively down at her. She looks over her shoulder at me with hooded eyes, exhaustion clear on every inch of her face.

“We’re not done yet.” I tell her, smacking her thigh, pulling her underwear off, and hiking her hips up so that she’s on her knees with her ass towards me and her upper body down on the mattress.

My cock has never been as hard as it is when I pull it out of my briefs and it feels like it might shatter at the first touch. I pump my fist up and down my length a couple of times before running my head up her folds and slamming home inside her.

She’s so ready for me that I slide in with no resistance. Her walls part for me and then clench around me, welcoming me home in her tight heat.

My eyes roll into the back of my head and sweat beads at my forehead as I hold on to the thin measure of control I still have. I’m already ready to blow inside her, especially when she reaches a hand back and places it against my abs like she can’t get enough of touching me.

“Just like that,” she moans.

“You like how I fuck you?”

“Yes,” she answers, breathily.

I grab her hips with both hands and use the leverage to slam home brutally, the sounds of my pelvis smacking against hers pornographic in the otherwise quiet room.

“Tell me.” I command.

“I love the way you fuck me.” She says, obeying immediately.

I smack the side of her ass. “Louder.”

“I love the way you fuck me!” She repeats, this time almost yelling.

Bending, I put my hand over her mouth when I remember where we are.

“Shh,” I say, changing my mind, “I don’t want anyone hearing the sounds you make for me.”

She licks my palm so I remove it and her hand moves from my abs up to my neck as she sits back onto her knees. The different position has me seated more deeply inside her than ever before and a shudder works through my bones at the feeling.

I grip her hip with one hand and play with her clit with the other as she wraps an arm around my neck and brings my face closer to hers.

“I love the way you fuck me.” She whispers hotly against my lips before kissing me.

She sits back against me, sinking my cock so deep inside her that it feels like I can reach her throat. We kiss through her orgasm as she quivers and then falls apart around me, the clenching of her walls making my balls draw up before I spill inside her.

I come for what feels like long minutes as her pussy sucks me dry, my seed spurting into her endlessly.

We’re both gasping for breath when we break apart and I lean my forehead against the back of her head.

“Fuck, that was amazing,” I tell her. “You smell like me now.” I add with a smirk.

“I can’t move,” she answers, and I know she’s not exaggerating.

Gently, I wrap my arm around her front and guide her back down to the mattress where she rolls onto her back. I jump off the bed and grab my briefs before heading to the bathroom where I clean up.

When I come back into the bedroom, she’s exactly where I left her. Sprawled out on top of the covers, limbs flung about haphazardly, completely unashamed of her nakedness.

Her confidence alone threatens to get me hard again as I take her in. Even when I’ve seen cracks in her facade like when she was anxious before her match, her confidence and self-love still shined bright as the moon to me.

I lean in and kiss her, the move sweet rather than sexual, and she cups my nape and returns it.

Eventually, regretfully, I pull away and clean her up, careful to be gentle with her sore body. When that’s done, I put her underwear back on and get back in bed.

Once I’m lying next to her, she curls instinctually around my body. Her leg wraps around mine and her arm flings out over my chest as her head settles on my shoulder.

She’s asleep in less than a minute, the soft sounds of her breathing soothing the rattling thoughts in my head as I watch her sleep.

I’m insatiable for her in every way and there’s no more dangerous thing to feel than that when you’re actively trying not to fall in love.

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

When I walk into the kitchen the next morning, Phoenix and Rogue are already there. I grunt out an acknowledgement, scowling at the former as I open the fridge.

“Still breathing?” I ask him, flippantly.

“Still pouting?” Phoenix volleys back.

I narrow my eyes at him as I slam the fridge shut.

“Maybe I should finish what I started after all,” I muse.

“Please,” he chides, getting up and pouring himself a glass of orange juice from the bottle I just took out of the fridge, “You should be thanking me. I helped you stake your claim, albeit inadvertently.”

“You locked yourself in a room with her and gave her your clothes. You put your fucking smell all over her.”

“That’s not exactly how it happened,” he defends.

“So you’d be fine if Rogue did the same thing with Six? Since he’s apparently single now?”

“Watch it,” Phoenix snaps, baring his teeth at me, at the same time as Rogue tells me to “shut the fuck up”.

“My point exactly.” I say, resting my case. Pointing at Rogue with my glass, I ask Phoenix, “What’s wrong with him?”

He turns to look back at Rogue where he lies sprawled out on one of the kitchen couches, his arm thrown over his eyes.

He’s disheveled, stinks of whiskey even from where I’m standing, and is wearing the same clothes he’s had on for the past three days.

Rogue is always buttoned up and guarded – seeing him looking this terrible is completely out of the ordinary.

“He’s still pretending he doesn’t care about or miss Bellamy in any way,” Phoenix answers, turning back towards me with a shrug.

“While looking that shite?” I question, semi incredulously.

“Yup.”

“Damn, denial is a river in Egypt.”

“Glad we agree.” Phoenix concurs, reaching out to dap my already extended hand.

“Hey, fuckers,” Rogue bites out, raising his head to look at us, “stop talking about me like I’m not right fucking here.”

“You might as well not be with how fucking stupid you’re being,” Phoenix counters.

“It’s hard to miss the stench though.” I add helpfully.

Simply put, we really like Bellamy.

We’ve all gotten close over the past few weeks that she’s lived here to the point that we now consider her a friend. Seeing her hurting, even at the hands of our best friend, isn’t fun for us to witness.

“You need to go talk to her. Apologize. Beg her forgiveness. Do what you have to do to get her back. It’s getting sad to watch you mope around here.”

“I don’t want her back,” he replies, lying through gritted teeth. I don’t buy for a second that he cheated on her, not with how infatuated he is.

No, there’s something darker going on here and I assume it has to do with his piece of shit father because all roads lead back to him when it comes to bad news.

“Get off me with that shit,” he continues, his voice angry, “Maybe you should focus on telling your girlfriend about your little bet,” he finishes with a sneer.

“Shut the fuck up, she’s right upstairs,” I snap, my heart stopping momentarily at the thought that she might overhear. “And she’s not my girlfriend.”

The truth of the matter is I should never have participated in that bet. The threat of its discovery had loomed over my head for weeks, causing unease and anxiety to brew in my gut.

But it’s won and done now, and the danger is out of the way. We can just move forward like it never happened.

She doesn’t need to know. It’ll just make her think I did this for my standing with the lads and not because I wanted *her* and I can’t afford to have that distraction during our short time together.

I’m unashamed of how selfish my need to spend time with her makes me, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a ball in my stomach at the thought that she might find out.

He snorts. “Look who’s captaining a luxury cruise down the Nile now.”

I open my mouth to answer but Phoenix cuts in ahead of me.

“Be careful with Devlin,” he warns, “he came up to Thayer at his house. She told me he was just introducing himself but I saw the way he looked at her,” he says, his eyes narrowing with mistrust before he adds, “And I think he was seconds away from telling her about the bet.”

“He won’t,” I say, clenching my fist so hard my skin turns white, “I’ll make sure of it.”

“I’m going to bed,” Rogue bites out with a frustrated breath, angry at the world. He jumps to his feet and marches towards the door. “Rhys?”

“Fuck you,” he says, flipping me off on his way out.

“Fuck you too, sweetheart.” I tell him, returning the gesture and blowing him a kiss with my other hand.

He leaves and a couple of minutes later, Thayer walks into the kitchen wearing her practice kit. She jumps up to sit on the counter, her legs kicking out happily as she gets settled.

“Morning, love,” I say, kissing her softly. She presses her lips back against mine and pulls away with a loud smack.

“Morning, Rhys.”

A choking sound comes from my left and I turn around to see Phoenix set his glass down and hit his chest to clear his airway.

“She calls you Rhys now?” He questions before grinning at me, “You should *definitely* be thanking me.”

“Get out,” I say, lobbing a kitchen roll at him.

He does as instructed, exiting the kitchen with a sharp laugh and leaving me to stand between Thayer’s open legs.

“This reminds me of the party we had where I stood between your legs exactly like this,” I muse.

“And tortured me.”

“Tortured you?” I ask, a slow smirk stretching across my face as I look down at her. “My plan worked then.”

“Yeah, it was excruciating,” she says, running her hands from my abs, up my chest and around my shoulders to cup my neck, “I already wanted you back then, I just couldn’t have you.”

She pulls on my nape, bringing me closer to her. I bend with a pleased rumble in my chest; hearing her admit she felt the same intoxication for me as I did – as I do – for her is a well placed stroke to the ego.

“You made me wait so long,” I moan, nuzzling her neck.

She giggles at my touch and I pull back from her with an almost drunken step.

“I’ll fuck you on the counter if we continue like this and we both have to be at practice in twenty minutes.”

She pouts and looks at me. “So? It’s a ten minute drive, that’s just enough time.”

“That’s barely enough time for a quickie,” I growl and she laughs at my correction, “and you need to eat.”

I pull out a pan and ingredients from the fridge and set about making her eggs as she watches me. Her phone dings a couple of times, pulling her attention over to it as she starts biting her nails nervously. Finally, she types back a response, her leg kicking out repeatedly as if to get rid of excess energy.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she answers, before hesitating, “I was on the phone with my brother before I came down. He told me my mom relapsed yesterday.”

“Shit,” I pause mid-stir, “Do you need to go back home?”

“No,” she laughs humorlessly. “It’s the fifth time this year. She makes empty promises to me and Nolan and stops for a couple of days to show she’s changed, but it never lasts. Inevitably, she’s back at it within the week.”

My lips flatten as I look at her. “Does it help that at least she’s trying?”

“Not really. Maybe that’s cynical and mean of me,” she adds, the vulnerability clear in her voice, “Maybe I should believe her when she tells me this time she’s done for good, but I don’t. I’ve seen it happen too many times, have seen her take advantage of the money we’ve given her to ‘buy groceries’ or ‘get her new clothes’ only to find out she used it to buy her next fix,” she pauses, taking a sip from my glass as she thinks about her next words. “That doesn’t mean it doesn’t still hurt a little every time.”



I plate her eggs and set it down next to her before wrapping my arms around her.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her honestly.

“It’s okay,” she replies, her spine straightening, “Sorry for trauma dumping on you, especially first thing in the morning.”

I wrap my hand around her ponytail and tug it, making her head lean back against my arm.

“Don’t apologize.” I grab the plate and push it in her direction. “Now eat.”

I take a step back and lean against the kitchen island as I watch her eat, warmth spreading in my chest at the domesticity of it all.

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Phoenix and I walk out of the locker room to go to practice when Devlin corners me in the hallway.

I’m distracted looking down at where Thayer’s pink hair tie is wrapped around my wrist, so I don’t immediately notice him.

It was at the bottom of my kit bag after I’d taken all my clothing out and I’d felt the need to put it on.

“Quite a stunt you pulled last night,” he states, trying to play the big man.

I walk around him without acknowledging him, uninterested in interacting with him in any way.

“She looks like she’d be a good fuck,” he calls after me.

I whip around before he can finish his sentence and slam him against the wall with my forearm crushing his throat.

He opens his mouth to speak but I push down on his throat, squeezing the breath and life out of him.

“Be very careful with your next words,” I sneer, “they might be your last.”

“I’ve said similar things about other girls before,” he croaks, “you’ve never minded.”

I release him and he falls lamely to the ground before picking himself up.

“I mind now.” I tell him, the threat still clear in my voice. “What the fuck do you want?”

He rubs his sore throat gingerly before reaching into his bag. “To congratulate you on winning the bet,” he tells me, with an insincere smile. He pulls out a roll of cash and extends it towards me. “And to give you your cash. Ten grand, as promised.”

I stare at the bills in his hand for a long moment before grabbing them and stuffing them in the pocket of my shorts.

“Do I need to threaten you or do you understand what’ll happen to you if you don’t stay silent?”

“No, I’m crystal clear.” he answers, miming a zipper closing movement over his lips, “My lips are sealed.”

He walks away and I watch him leave quietly, unease spreading in my gut. I turn towards Phoenix and see that he’s also watching him go with a calculating look on his face.

“Rogue’s right,” he says, “You need to tell her.”

“He won’t say anything. He knows what’ll happen to him if he does.”

“If you want something longterm with her, you can’t hide this from her.”

“Who says I do?” I ask, and the question sounds hollow even to my own ears.

“Rhys,” he says, leveling me with an unimpressed look, “this is going to blow up in your face.”

“I’ll keep a close eye on him and make sure it doesn’t.” I reply, walking off to practice and leaving him to trail after me.

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*Rhys*

Over the next few days, I don't spend much time far from Thayer. We start our mornings with one on one practice, then get breakfast and head straight to class together from there.

When our different schedules do separate us, we inevitably link up in the food hall for lunch. We see each other in the halls or study periods and head to team practice together.

At night we're just as inseparable. Since the party at Devlin's house five days ago, we've spent every night together.

Bellamy's mom Trish is in town spending time with her injured daughter so we've slept at my place in order to let her use Thayer's room.

My inability to be separated from Thayer is the reason I find myself sitting on her couch surrounded by her friends and Trish, participating in what's turning out to be a very competitive and cutthroat game night.

Thayer's standing, gesticulating wildly as Six and Nera try to guess her charade. I was banned from being her partner by the girls who'd claimed I'd spent enough time with her over the past few weeks and it was their turn, so all I can do is watch uselessly and try not to yell out 'Carli Lloyd'.

It's so obvious, I guessed the answer five minutes ago.

Still, my gaze tracks her every move. The way she puts her hair behind her ear, the way her hands move frantically, encouraging Sixtine's every guess.

The way she laughs with abandon, the loud and melodic sound warming my chest, especially on this cold mid-November night.

I can't pull my gaze away from her. Not when she shines so bright that she's all I see.

I lean in to pick up my glass and am raising it to my lips when I catch Trish watching me, a knowing smile on her face.

We were late to game night, delayed by a quickie we'd had in the shower, so when we arrived I was only introduced to her in passing before we were ushered in.

She seems extremely loving and kind which makes her all the more intimidating in my eyes.

She gets up and sits next to me on the couch.

"So you're the infamous Rhys?"

"Yes ma'am," I say, "Although I'm not sure how I feel hearing I'm infamous already."

She laughs and gives me a kind smile. "My daughter's told me a lot about you."

I know the role Trish has played in Thayer's life thus far. Even in the short time I've watched them together tonight, the unbreakable bond between them is evident in the way they hug, communicate, and play off each other.

"Which daughter?" I ask.

Trish and Bellamy are her family as much as her mom and brother are.

Trish's gaze warms instantly at my words, pride shining in her irises as she smiles at me. "Oh, I like you."

I take a drink, hiding the pleased smile that stretches across my face at her approval.

“I’m glad to hear it,” I answer instead, looking back over at Thayer who’s still trying to make the other girls guess her charade. She’s going all out, dropping to the floor to mime one syllable and then jumping to her feet excitedly when they get it right.

“She’s pretty special isn’t she?” I turn back towards Trish as she asks me the question, her eyes moving from Thayer slowly over to me.

“Yes, she is,” I say, agreeing with my chest.

“She’d never admit it, but she finds it hard to trust people, especially men. She seems to trust you though,” she says, before her gaze turns flinty, “Don’t do what your friend did to Bellamy. Don’t hurt her.”

“I know it’s complicated but Rogue... he loves her. He’s going to get her back.” I say, feeling the need to defend my friend’s well-intentioned albeit idiotic decisions.

“You can love someone and still hurt them,” she points out.

“Well, we’re not that serious—”

“Oh, so you’re not exclusive?”

A snarl leaves my lips before I can stop it. “Yes, we are.” I grit out through clenched teeth, my fist clenched so tightly around my glass, I’m afraid it’ll shatter. “Sorry.”

“You’re exclusive and very much so based on your reaction, from what I can see you’ve spent every day of the past week together, and you’re at a game night in her apartment with only her friends and family, but you’re not serious?”

Put that way, it’s hard to argue with.

“Look, Rhys,” Trish says, “you don’t know me and after this week, we may never see each other again since apparently this isn’t a ‘serious relationship’, even though you’ve barely looked away from her since you got here.”

And just like that, I can see where both Bellamy and Thayer get their sass.

“But I’d love to give you some advice, if you’d let me. Thayer told me about your parents and I’m so sorry for your loss. Losing your parents is hard at any age, but it’s downright cruel when you’re as young as you are. You must have endless reserves of strength to not only survive that but thrive,” she pauses, squeezing my hand affectionately in the process, “I understand why you’d be guarded and reticent to let that kind of hurt back into your life, I do, but I’d caution against cutting yourself off completely.”

“I don’t want you to potentially miss out on something life changing simply because you were afraid of getting hurt again. The reality is pain is the price we pay for love sometimes. It’s a hefty price tag, but one I think is worth risking to experience a beautiful love story with someone, especially when we know pain is inevitable.”

“So there you have it, that’s my advice. You can take it or leave it, but I hope you take it for both your sakes because the way you guys look at each other tells me everything I need to know. This could be something really great,” she says, “if you let it.”

I swallow thickly around the ball in my throat, processing her words slowly. The truth is it’s getting harder to deny that I have feelings for Thayer.

She’s burrowed under my skin and I can’t get her out even if I wanted to.

“Thank you,” I say, clearing my throat loudly, “you’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Don’t let her slip through your fingers, Rhys.”

“How do you know this is even something she wants? She just ended her previous relationship, maybe she’s happy to keep this casual.” I say, my mood blackening at the thought of Carter. I’d happily forgotten his existence up until this moment.

Trish looks over my shoulder and I turn around just in time to see a flash of fabric before Thayer drops into my lap.

She wraps her arms around my neck and settles her ass against my hardening cock.

“Hi,” she says, pecking me on the mouth once, then a second time.

I wrap one arm around her waist and the other over her thighs, pulling her closer against me. “Hi, love,” I say with a pleased rumble, happy to have her in my arms again.

I look over at Trish who gives me a conspiratorial smile. “I just know,” she says, picking up her glass, “I’m going to get a refill.”

“What were you guys talking about?” Thayer asks, interest clear in her gaze.

“Nothing important,” I reply.

“I’ll tell you this – she gives the best advice. Whatever she told you, listen to her. She’s always right.”

“Really?” I ask, the corner of my lips lifting with a smile.

“Yup,” she nods, “I didn’t use to listen when I was younger – you know being rebellious and all that – but I learned it’s just putting off the inevitable. She always turns out to be right.”

“I’ll remember that.” I tell her, sitting back against the couch and bringing her with me. “Did Six and Nera end up finding your charade?”

“No,” she says, defeated, “I thought it was obvious that it was—”

“Carli Lloyd.” I finish, cutting in.

Her eyes spark happily at my answer. “Yes!” She says, smacking my chest playfully to emphasize the word, “they were smart to separate us for this game, together we’d have been too powerful for them.”

“Damn right, Silver.” I say, capturing her lips with mine. The kiss turns into a hot and heavy makeout session making my painfully hard cock desperate to be a part of the action.



“Hey, lovebirds!” Nera chimes, interrupting us. “Enough of that. We need you guys for the next game.”

“Yeah, Rhys, come over here. I need your soccer knowledge for this trivia round.” Bellamy says, calling over to me.

“We’re not lovebirds,” Thayer corrects her weakly, as I stand with her in my arms and set her on the ground.

“Even if we are, that’s about to end,” I tell her and she throws me an alarmed look that warms the blood in my veins, “I’m not going to go easy on you just because we’re together. Prepare to be destroyed.”

That’s enough to set her competitiveness ablaze as she walks up to me, tilts her chin and narrows her eyes up at me.

“Game on.”

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

The week of Thanksgiving in Aubonne turns out to be one of my favorites since we moved here.

Rogue and Bellamy are back together and happier than ever. Other than how nice it is to see her beaming again, it's been great to have her there when I sleep over at Rhys'.

When we were growing up, we dreamed about dating brothers so we could have sleepovers like this together. Rogue and Rhys aren't related by blood, but they're brothers in every other way that matters. And we get the sleepovers we'd always wanted.

Not that Rhys and I are dating...technically.

We're careful not to label this, other than as being 'exclusive' which Rhys reminds every man who gets in a five foot radius of me, his friends included, but this is more of a relationship than I even had with Carter.

It surprises me how quickly and smoothly we fell into this rhythm together. There's been no awkwardness between us, no hesitancy, just diving in headfirst into this.

We're together all the time and if we spend any time apart, we text constantly. When we're not practicing together,

we're talking, chilling with our friends, watching movies or having sex.

There's lots of sex.

Like the practices he designs for me, he's very inventive with the ways and places he fucks me. He's greedy and worshipful of my body, sometimes spending hours just kissing and biting his way up and down my curves, going down on me and then fucking me senselessly.

His most attractive quality though, other than his voice, his smile, and the way he calls me 'love' or 'Silver', is his loyalty.

It's been the most surprising thing about him.

When we're in class, I'll notice his study partners batting their eyelashes and giggling more frequently and inanely when they work in duos with him. He seems oblivious to it, his eyes usually on me and throwing me a wink when he notices me watch him.

When we're at a party, girls will flock to him the moment he goes to get a drink alone. He'll answer politely as he pours himself a refill, his eyes finding me on the dancefloor and a conspiratorial smile curling the corners of his lips.

His unwitting reassurances only serve to fan the flames of my feelings for him, which have unfortunately gotten out of control over the past couple of weeks.

I really don't think it's my fault.

In fact, it's definitely his fault.

He's the one who's so considerate and attentive in his actions that of course my heart is getting involved.

He takes hours out of his day, rain or shine, to make me a better athlete. He's come to all of my games and texts me his thoughts on the game so I can read them as I get changed. He'll spend a weekend showing me around Geneva and Aubonne, teaching me what he knows about the history of this place.

He's even had tacos overnighted from my favorite place in Chicago simply because I was craving them. An assistant walked into the kitchen one day carrying a box of carnitas tacos with such care and attention you'd have thought they were the Crown Jewels.

And then there's the permanent reminder of me he keeps on him in the form of my fluffy, pink hair tie. It's been wrapped around his wrist every day without fail since I first noticed he had it.

And I'm supposed to *not* fall in love with him?

Mission failed.

I've lost the ultimate battle against myself. The competitive side of me is absolutely mortified at taking this L but there's nothing I can do about it now.

There being no labels in our relationship means that I don't know where we stand on the 'love' front. Is he still categorically against the idea, our time together having done nothing to soften his resolve at all?

Or is he maybe, hopefully, at least slightly more open to the idea of us being together longer term, so the looming threat of us breaking off soon can be put to rest?

I don't know and it's eating at me now that I have strong feelings involved.

"Are you ready, love?" Rhys asks from behind me, walking into the bedroom as I'm finishing applying mascara in front of his mirror.

He walks up to me, his hands finding my waist as he buries his head in the crook of my neck and sucks in a breath.

"Do you put drugs on your skin or something? Maybe some type of dark magic? If I go too long without a hit of your scent, I start craving it again." He purrs, inhaling a deep breath against my neck and holding it as if to savor the smell. "I've only been downstairs ten minutes, Silver, this is getting embarrassing."

“Do you want to see other people?” I ask bluntly, the need to pull back and protect myself from this situation that could really hurt me kicking in.

I need to know where I stand.

He recoils like I’ve just shot him and twists me around so fast that I lose my footing. For a moment, his strong hands are the only thing that keep me upright.

“What the fuck did you just say?” He asks, his voice vibrating with barely concealed anger.

“I asked if you wanted to see other people.” I repeat, my heartbeat thrashing in my veins.

“I have you wrapped in my arms, telling you I miss you when we spend as little as ten minutes apart, and you ask me if I want to... what exactly? Date someone else? *Fuck* someone else?” he says, using his bruising grip on my upper arm to shake me. I flinch when he mentions fucking another girl, hating even the words on his lips. “Are you trying to piss me off?”

“Yes,” I say, wanting to goad him into having this conversation because I’m too much of a coward to have it any other way.

His eyebrows drop as he frowns at me. “Why?”

“Because maybe we should end this.”

“We’re not ending anything.” He spits, shaking me again, “I asked you a question, Silver.”

“I like you.” I admit, avoiding his gaze.

He loosens his hold, drawing to his full height as his eyebrows drop further. When I don’t continue he says, “Alright? What’s the problem?”

“I *like* you, like you,” I clarify, emphasizing the word ‘like’. “Like, a lot.”

*Jesus, I’m not going to win a prize for my romantic declarations any time soon.*

“Okay? I fucking like you too. I’m still failing to see what the problem is here,” He says, scratching his eyebrow as he looks at me with confusion still etched on his face, “But dating someone else isn’t fucking happening.”

“Wait.” I say, putting my hands up between us. “You have feelings for me?”

“Is that what this is about?” He asks, his hand reaching out to cup my chin. “Of course I have feelings for you.”

“Don’t say ‘of course’ like it’s something that should be obvious to me. It’s not. You’re the one who said love was off the table for you, so I assumed all feelings were. That this was just one sided on my end and you’d never get invested like me. It’s not a fun feeling, I can tell you tha—,”

My words die in my throat as his hand moves from my chin to cup my cheek. His face comes down slowly and he nudges my nose with his before he closes his mouth over mine.

The kiss is slow and sensual, a million unsaid things being communicated in this one dance of our tongues. His fingers dig into my hip and spread across my cheek and neck as he holds on to me like I might float away if he didn’t.

We kiss with abandon for long minutes, completely caught up in one another. Finally, he pulls away with a ragged breath and drops kisses up my jaw and down the column of my neck.

He pulls back, looking at me through hooded eyes, his navy gaze shining with longing.

“You’re not the only one who let your guard down here, Silver,” he whispers, stroking my cheek with his thumb.

I lock my arms around his neck and jump, wrapping my legs around his waist. His hands come around to grip my ass, his fingers digging greedily into my flesh as he holds me up.

He walks us backwards towards the bed as I run my hands up his neck and through his soft hair in a gentle caress. When his legs bump up against the edge of the bed, he sits,

keeping me on his lap as he spreads his legs and positions mine on either side of him.

I take advantage of his distraction to grab hold of a few locks and yank, opening his throat to me.

My mouth closes around a section of skin at the base of his neck and I suck it, laving at it with my tongue. I hear Rhys hiss roughly right above my ear.

I bite him, making sure to mark him like he always marks me.

If I could make it permanent, I would.

“Mine,” I growl against his skin, before crashing my lips down on his.

A pleased growl rumbles in his chest as his hands move from my waist to play with my nipples through my lace bra.

“No,” I gasp, unsuccessfully trying to pull my lips away from his, “We can’t. They’re waiting for us downstairs.”

We were getting ready to go to the Christmas market in Geneva with Rogue and Bellamy. I’m sure they’re already in the foyer as is and let’s just say Rogue’s not the type to be kept waiting.

He keeps me anchored against him, refusing to let me move.

“The market’s not going anywhere.” He says, his expert fingers working to pull my top from the band of my skirt so he can access my bare skin.

He shoves it over my breasts, his lips coming down in the same breath to kiss the expanse of my skin.

“I want some mulled wine though.” I lament, playing with his hair as he kisses around my belly button.

“I’ll get you all the mulled wine you want, love,” He whispers back hotly, his hand reaching under my skirt to rip a hole in my tights right over my pussy, “Just let me come inside you first.”

Wetness pools in my lower abdomen at his dirty words.

He stares into my eyes with an intense look as he wets two fingers in his mouth and brings them to my center. I arch into his touch, my hips seeking more, urging him to push those fingers inside me, but he pulls away, moving them back to rub my clit.

“I’m waiting.”

“Fuck me, Rhys.”

He slams his fingers home the moment the words leave my lips and my mouth falls open on a silent scream. With the way my legs are spread and stretched on either side of his, he has unfettered access to thrust into me roughly, and he does.

My eyes flutter close but a sharp smack on my ass has them opening just as quickly.

“Eyes on me,” he grunts, scissoring his fingers inside me, “You look at me or I stop.”

I nod my head vigorously, madly, desperate to keep his fingers going inside me.

He’s merciless like he so often is, treating me with care and affection one second and like a slut he cares nothing about the next.

I love it. I fucking love that he doesn’t treat me like I’m made of glass and easily breakable. He gives me everything, shows me all of him, and I take it all gluttonously.

It’s thrilling and maddening and makes me feel close to him in a way I’ve never felt with anyone else.

His fingers curl, rubbing against a sensitive spot inside me that has the oxygen leaving my lungs. He fingers me unrestrainedly, and I feel myself getting light headed as I fight to breathe but find myself incapable of doing so.

It’s like my mind is so focused on the assault of his fingers that it no longer knows how to fire synapses to make me breathe.

“Look at you,” he purrs, satisfaction clear in his voice, “you can’t even breathe.”



His other hand closes around my throat and squeezes, my body responding as if recognizing its master as he pulls a sizable breath from my mouth.

“Enough. Breathe when I fuck you.” He orders.

He pulls his fingers out right before making me come and I let out a disappointed whine before he silences me by placing the head of his cock at my entrance. I hadn't even noticed he'd unbuttoned his pants and taken it out.

I expect him to plunge inside me but instead he drops back onto his elbows on the bed and looks down the length of his stomach to where his cock rests against my pussy.

He licks his lips as his eyes glaze over, “Put me inside you.”

I shift my weight into my knees and wrap my hand around his thick, hard length, eliciting a rough grunt from Rhys. I guide him back to my entrance and hold him there as I lower myself onto him.

The head pushes through my folds and breaches my opening. Once he's in, I release him and place my palms down on his chest as I continue lowering myself down on his length with exquisite slowness.

He's halfway inside me and this feels different than any other time.

This angle with me in control has every delicious inch stretching me further than ever before and I know I'm going to feel him for days after we're done.

I relish the power I have over him in this position, controlling the pace, depth, and angles, but of course he doesn't let me keep it that way for long.

His hand comes down to grip my waist as he slams home with a brutal move of the hips, easily retaking dominance.

His hands keep me pressed down on him, my clit rubbing against his pelvis, but he doesn't move.

His eyes are feral with lust and his nostrils flare as he fixates on the place where we're joined. Watching every inch

of his length disappearing inside me and the way I sit on him, making it impossible to tell where he ends and I begin.

“Rhys,” I say, afraid to move because the stretch is so tight, “this feels so good.”

His eyes slink from my pussy up to my face as he issues a two word command.

“Ride me.”

I rock back and forth at first, not raising my pelvis from where it’s pressed against his. Instead, I rotate my hips in slow circles, gyrating on him as I feel his length move inside me, the angle constantly changing as I continue my movements.

The friction of my clit rubbing against his skin only adds to the headiness of the position so I tilt my hips in repetitive movements, grinding even more strongly against him.

He grabs my ass in a harsh grip, his fingers digging in insatiably. “Stop teasing me.” He grunts.

He tries to use his hold to force me to go up his length, but I slam a palm down on his chest and grab his jaw with my other hand.

His eyes flash and a dangerous growl leaves his throat at the way I grip him. I can see in his gaze that he’s mere seconds away from taking over and punishing me.

“You wanted me to ride you, so let me.”

“Ten minutes, Silver,” he warns, “then we’re doing this my way.”

Releasing his jaw with a kiss, I lower my mouth to lick at his nipple and rake my nails from his chest down to his abdomen. I use enough pressure to cause a tinge of pain without breaking skin.

He startles, a desperate groan leaving his lips along with a muttered, “Fuck.”

Straightening, I sit back into my hips, seating him once again completely inside me. I keep my hands in front of me on

his lower abdomen and use the leverage to raise myself up until he's almost completely inside me.

I lower back down onto him slowly, taking my time and savoring every sensation. I repeat the motion a few more times, looking at Rhys the entire time I do so.

He eyes me with such ferocious emotion and raw need that all thoughts leave my brain. The heat in his stare sings my skin and leaves an invisible but indelible mark.

I pick up the pace, moving faster as I pump up and down his cock now. I add circular motions and pivot my pelvis back and forth as I ride him, the combination making him chant the filthiest things.

“Look at your tight pussy swallowing me up whole. Gobbling my dick like the greedy little slut you are.”

“You fucking love this. I can feel you gushing around me, your arousal dripping onto my stomach.”

“How is your pussy still strangling my cock so tightly when I've fucked it so much?”

He pinches my clit in tandem with his last words and my orgasm slams into me from out of nowhere. I come so hard, stars overtake my vision. They start to disappear only as I ride the end of my climax and slump forward onto him.

He doesn't give me a moment's rest before he flips me onto my back and throws my legs over his shoulders.

“My turn.”

He grabs my legs, alternating between kissing and biting both ankles as he thrusts powerfully inside me, extending my orgasm into a second one.

His face is strained, his brows pulled low and his lower lip caught between his teeth as he fights his approaching climax. I know he's close and I want to end this the way we started — my way, on my terms.

I clench my muscles around him.

Hard.

The ripples of my orgasm shake through my muscles and send him over the edge as he stills for a second before coming inside me with a few, rough final thrusts.

He smacks my pussy harshly as he pulls out of me.

“Bad girl.” He says, spanking my clit once more before he drops to his knees between my legs.

“What are you— no, I can’t!” I say as I feel his tongue caress my folds. He slurps up my wetness with loud, obscene sounds of his mouth on my flesh and my eyes roll into the back of my head.

I grab his hair and try to shove him off me, to stop the pleasure that’s now become pain, but he’s relentless.

He keeps eating me like a starving man, his teeth grazing against my clit and then biting it sharply. I cry out, tears gathering in my eyes at the sensations assaulting my body.

This is a punishment as much as it is an orgasm. Every part of me is used and sore, my skin sensitive to even the gentlest of touch.

And he’s not gentle. He makes me pay for forcing him to come and his retribution is swift.

I come against my will, my sore muscles clamping down on nothing except the feeling of his tongue and teeth on my flesh. Spasms rack through my body and my legs shake violently.

“That...was insane...and cruel,” I tell him between irregular breaths.

He stands up and crawls over my body until he’s above my face.

“I say when we’re done, not you.” He says, claiming my lips in a wet kiss. “Can you taste yourself on my tongue?”

I blush rather than answer that I can, and he lets himself drop on top of me. His weight is crushing and comforting all at once as his lips find the side of my face and whisper against my ear, “I can’t believe I get to call you mine.”

Butterflies erupt by the thousands in my stomach at his words and I hook an arm around his neck to keep him against me.

We lay there silently for a couple minutes, simply holding each other before he lifts his head and looks at me.

“Come on,” he says, “I promised you lots of mulled wine.”

He rolls off of me and stands, turning back to help me up. We clean up and I change into a pair of pants so he doesn't get any ideas on the way there.

When we make our way downstairs, we find Rogue and Bellamy still getting ready. He's on his knees in front of her, tying her shoes, and they don't have their coats on yet.

“Were you guys waiting for us long?” I ask Bellamy with a frown.

She flushes and trips over her words in response. “Oh. Um, no. We got— we were sidetracked by something upstairs. Rogue wanted to show me.” She adds, weakly.

I look at Rogue who's staring at her, a knowing and satiated smile on his face, and suddenly I understand.

“Rhys was showing me something upstairs as well,” I tell her with a grin, “Very interesting.”

There's a beat of silence before we both burst out laughing, grabbing each other excitedly as we do so.

“Tell me later?” She asks.

“Obviously.”

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

Thayer and Bellamy watch everything at the Christmas market with huge, rounded eyes. Apparently the markets they have back home aren't as expansive or as big of productions as this one.

We've been here for an hour and Rogue and I have mostly been following after the girls as they bounce from stall to stall, taking everything in.

Thayer walks to another stand as Bellamy turns towards us and Rogue in particular.

"Do you like these earrings? I think I'm going to buy them." She asks him, pulling out her wallet to pay for them.

"Put your wallet away before I burn it," I hear him reply, as I walk past them over to Thayer who's looking at Christmas ornaments.

I get there in time to see the shop owner hand her a bag.

"Thank you," Thayer tells him, turning around and spotting me, "Oh, hi! I got you something."

"Already buying me Christmas presents?" I ask, my lips quirking in amusement.

“No, this is something *for* Christmas,” she says, ruffling in her bag for the gifts, “If we’re still together for the actual holiday, I’ll get you something else.”

“We’ll still be together at Christmas,” I confirm unequivocally.

Clearly, she doesn’t understand that there’s no getting out of this anytime soon for her. It may have taken me a while to admit it to myself, but I’m sure now.

It’s about time I made it crystal clear to her as well.

“Come,” I say, grabbing her hand and taking her to a drink stand, “I owe you some mulled wine.”

“Wait, don’t you want to open your gift?” She asks with a cute little frown.

I ignore her and turn towards the guy manning the checkout.

“*Bonsoir. Vous parlez anglais?*” I ask him. When he nods, I add, “Great. I’ll have a hot cider with whiskey,” I look at Thayer who’s standing right next to me. She meets my gaze and smiles, trying to conceal the hurt on her face. “And a mulled wine for my girlfriend, please.”

I hand him my card as her eyes widen and her lips part slightly in surprise.

“*Now*, I’d like to open my gift.” I tell her with a smirk.

“I don’t understand. I thought—”

“I know what you thought and you’re not wrong,” I cut in, “Part of me still rejects the idea of falling in love. I truly don’t want to open myself back up to that kind of pain again so I can’t say that I know what the future holds.” I tell her, hooking my index in her jacket pocket and using it to pull her closer to me, “But I do know that my present is centered around you. Around spending time with you. Around finding ways to surprise you and make you laugh. And I want to see where we go from here because if anyone can make me open up again, it’s you. It’s been you since the beginning. I want us

to be official,” I add, “So, no, I don’t want to see other people and yes, we will be together at Christmas.”

“What about New Year’s?” She asks, jokingly, her eyes shining with barely concealed joy.

I brush a strand of hair off of her face and behind her ear, as I lean in to kiss her.

“Tell everyone you’re taken for the midnight kiss.”

I can feel her lips stretch into a smile as she melts into me and returns the kiss. The shopkeeper’s pointed cough breaks us apart. He motions at us to take our drinks and go so he can move on to other customers.

“So you’re asking me to be your girlfriend?” She asks, taking a sip of her wine.

“No, Silver. I’d ask if I was willing to accept any other answer except ‘yes’, but I’m not. I’m telling you I’m your boyfriend now.”

“You don’t want to know what my answer is though?” She teases, taking a step backwards as she brings the wine to her lips again.

“Give me thirty seconds and I can have you chanting that one word into next week. I know what your answer is.”

“I guess you’ll never know for *sure* though.” She muses with a shrug and another step backwards. “I thought you’d want to hear me say the words to you, but clearly I was wrong.”

She’s backed up into the space between the abutted backs of two rows of the little wooden chalets. There’s no direct lighting, the bulbs facing towards the stands themselves, so the area is relatively dark amongst the thousands of lights.

I follow her step for step, growling at her joking words. Of course I know her answer is yes, I know that. But now that she’s made it a challenge, made it something she holds back from me, well, I want it.

No, worse.



“I need to hear you say it now.” I growl.

She comes to a stop as her back hits the backside of one of the chalets and I step up to her until we’re standing chest to chest. She looks up at me and gives me another teasing smile as my palms come down on either side of her head.

“Oh no, it’s too late—” She starts, but the words die on her tongue when I clasp her neck with my right hand.

“Don’t play with me.” I warn.

She darts her tongue out and licks my lips and, fuck, if she’s not careful she’s going to get fucked in public again.

“Tell me.” I demand, my voice coming out gravelly.

Her eyes flicker up to meet mine as she counters. “*Ask me.*”

“Go out with me.” I tell her, nudging her nose with mine before kissing the corners of her mouth.

“No,” she says and my whole body freezes, including my lips on her face, before she continues, “that’s not a question.”

I think my body visibly sags in relief as I continue dropping small kisses along her lips.

“Please?” I whisper against the crook of her ear. A shiver curls through her as she bends her face towards mine, seeking more contact.

“Hmm...,” she hums, pretending to think about her answer.

“Careful,” I warn, “I’m not a patient man.”

“But you waited for me.” She points out.

I kiss the hollow curve behind her ear, moving down the line of her neck as I lavish her with attention.

“I’d wait for you for a thousand lifetimes if I had to.” I reply, before biting her ear. “But I’d hate every second of not having you in my arms.”

“You’re depriving the world by being opposed to love, you know.” she whispers back. “You’re such a closeted

romantic. My answer is yes.”

I pull back and cup her face between my hands. “You’ll be my girlfriend?”

She smiles brightly in response. “Yes, I’ll be your girlfriend.”

A pleased rumble echoes in my chest at hearing her say it. “Good girl.”

I lean in to kiss her and she drops the bag and her mug of mulled wine, her arms coming to wrap around me instead. She arches into me, looking for additional contact as I have her jump up and wrap her legs around my waist.

I push her up against the wall of the chalet as we keep kissing in a flurry of mouths and tongues and hands reaching for each other.

I wish she wasn’t wearing jeans so I could make her ride my fingers like she rode my cock earlier.

“Your friend’s going to get us kicked out of the Christmas market, Bell.” I hear Rogue’s droll voice deadpan from behind us.

“*My* friend?” Bellamy’s defensive voice joins his as we break apart. “If anything it’s *your* friend who’s going to get us kicked out. I mean look at him, he’s a foot taller than her, she’s basically a hostage in this situation.”

We look over at them as Rogue turns to Bellamy with a raised eyebrow. “You’ve been looking at him?”

I’ve seen grown men cower at the icy tone he uses, but Bellamy simply rolls her eyes.

“We’re not doing this,” she tells him before looking back at us, “Come on guys, let’s go on the carousel.”

She grabs Rogue’s hand and shoves it in her pocket with hers as they walk off.

I let Thayer slide down my body slowly, taking advantage of the opportunity to grind her against my cock on the way

down. She bends and grabs the bag before handing me two small items wrapped in paper.

I take them from her and unwrap them, revealing two handmade Christmas tree ornaments. One's a palm sized design of a football carved into an oak tree and the other is two outlines of angels holding hands.

"I saw them and thought of you. They're nothing fancy but I thought they could be nice on your tree." She says, watching for my reaction.

"I love them." I tell her, sincerity ringing in my voice. This thoughtful gesture is doing things to my left rib cage area again. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says, a pleased smile on her face. Clearly, she saw something in my reaction that she liked. "Let's go on the carousel."

She grabs my hand and pulls me after her.

There isn't enough room for us both to get on the same horse, so we each get one of our own. We sit on parallel horses and hold hands as we move up and down in opposing motions.

After the carousel, we get another round of drinks since I never picked up my cider and she tossed the wine, and she points out we have no pictures together and takes me to a photo booth.

She sits on my lap and wrapped in my arms as we take our series of four photos. A silly one, a kissing one, a completely unusable one where she's blurry because I'm tickling her so much and she's laughing, and a smiling one.

It's perfect.

I get us two copies and give her one and keep the other in my wallet next to the one of my parents.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

The week after Rhys asks me to be his girlfriend flies by. If I thought things would change once we became official, I was wrong.

And that's mostly because we can't spend more time together than we already were. Now that we are in a relationship though, there's no getting out of it even if I wanted to.

If I do a movie night with the girls, he knocks on the door at midnight and marches straight to where I'm sitting on the chair. He picks me up and sits down, cradling me in his lap as he watches the movie silently.

He doesn't say anything, doesn't participate in the roommate debates we have (who's hotter, Hugh Grant or Colin Firth?), he simply holds me and takes me to bed once we're done.

If he goes to meetings for the trust he inherited, I'm usually waiting in the game room for him playing something with Bellamy, Rogue, and Phoenix.

I feel happy and settled.

“Holy shit, look at him go.” Six says, amazement clear in her voice. Her voice pulls me out of my reverie.

We’re sitting together, watching the boys’ last soccer match of the year. Six came with me to support Rhys. Or so she says, but I know she’s really watching Phoenix.

In fact, her eyes rarely seem to leave him, even when he doesn’t have the ball.

I look up and see that Rhys has possession of the ball and is running it down the field towards the opposing goal. He’s onside but quickly ditches the last defender, outrunning him as he approaches the box.

The goalie comes out but Rhys feigns to the left, then the right and moves the ball between his feet, gathering it back up once he clears him and shooting it into the net as the crowd erupts.

He starts lapping the pitch in victory as he brings his wrist up to his mouth and kisses what appears to be a pink bracelet on his wrist.

It’s my hair tie.

He kisses it and points to it before extending his arms out to the side in triumph. His teammates jump on him and congratulate him loudly, hooting and hollering as they do so.

With only two minutes left, it’s almost certain.

They just won the championship.

The bleachers are going wild, Six and I are jumping and screaming and hugging as we wait for the clock to run out on stoppage time.

They were far and away the best team and heavily favored to win, but you’re never sure if stats are going to hold up on the pitch.

That dream is almost reality now.

How amazing it must feel for him to win this trophy after everything he’s gone through with his parents and everything soccer has meant to him his whole life.

The whistle blows and I absolutely lose it, screaming so loudly my voice gets hoarse. The players and staff are celebrating in the middle of the field, hugging and thanking each other as they wait for the trophy to be brought out.

A student from the newspaper walks up to a scrum of players and calls for Rhys who ducks out of the huddle and over to her and her cameraman.

“Rhys, congratulations on the championship win,” she says, the feed being played on the big screen above the field, “It’s got to feel great.”

“Yeah, you know the lads have been working really hard this season. They’ve been focused and disciplined and single minded on this goal so it’s great we’ve been able to make it happen.”

“That’s right,” she says, nodding vigorously, “Congrats also on the huge goal. The greatest players are the ones that can deliver under pressure and that’s what you did tonight.”

“Thank you. Phoenix made that decisive pass and Theo had a key save at the 85th minute, so it really was a team effort tonight.” He answers, ever the diplomat.

“We saw you doing a new celebration tonight. You kissed a bracelet on your wrist when you scored, can you tell us a bit more about that?”

He runs his hand through his hair and chuckles, the sound echoing loudly through the stands thanks to the mic.

The leftover smile on his face is devastating as he looks directly into the camera for the first time, his eyes happy, “It’s a hair tie of my girlfriend’s that I stole,” he says, rubbing his fingers over it absentmindedly, “It’s brought me a lot of luck on and off the pitch so I never take it off. Plus I have to give credit where credit’s due.” He says, bringing his wrist to his mouth and kissing the hair tie once for the camera.

A collective ‘aww’ rises from the women in the crowd and I think he’s just managed to make the entire female population fall even more in love with him than it already was.

I know that's the effect what he just said is currently having on me.

"It's disgusting how much you guys are into each other." Six teases with a nudge to my ribs.

"She's a lucky girl. Congratulations again!" The reporter says before moving on to interview the Coach.

Off to the side I see Devlin glaring at Rhys. The former's rage makes him stand out amongst the rest of his teammates as they celebrate their win.

I run down the bleachers and jump into his waiting arms as rain starts to come down on us.

He twirls me around in his arms and kiss me as the first raindrops fall on our cheeks.

"Kissing in the rain after a big win? This is starting to feel very *A Cinderella Story*." I joke.

His eyes move from my mouth where they'd been watching my lips move as I spoke to meet my gaze through half lidded eyes. "Never seen it," He says, his voice heavy with lust, "but I wouldn't need a shoe to tell me you were the one for me. I'd know." He puts me down as someone calls for him. "Trophy time."

"Go, go," I say, pushing his chest to urge him in the direction of his team.

"We're going to celebrate in the locker room for a bit but then party at the house. Come a little bit before so we can spend time together?" He asks, cupping my cheek. "I want to celebrate it with you."

"I'll be there, just text me later. Now, go!"

He starts to jog backwards away from me, his signature grin curling his lips as he tells me, "See you later, love."

I wave at him as Six joins me.

If I'd known how things would change after tonight, I'd have at least kissed him one last time.



“What says “as a gift for winning the championship, you get to do anything and everything you want to me”? The black one or the red one?” I ask, walking into the living room holding a dress in each hand.

“Red.” Six says, looking up from her phone.

“And don’t pretend you don’t already let him do whatever he wants to you.” Nera adds with a raised eyebrow.

“Or that you don’t love that he does it.” Six chirps.

“But Six is right,” Nera finishes, helpfully, “That red one will have him begging on his knees for you.”

“Red it is,” I say, turning back towards my room and throwing over my shoulder, “I’m ignoring the other comments.”

“I’m just jealous,” Nera says, slumping further into her chair.

“Yeah, I want someone to be obsessed with me the way Rhys is with you,” Six adds.

“You say that like there isn’t already someone who is,” I tell her with a quirked brow.

She turns the same color as her hair and looks up at me. “You’re mistaking hatred for obsession.”

“You know what they say,” Nera says, “There’s a fine line between love and hate.”

“And it’s threadbare between you two,” I add.

“Alright, enough of that topic. Go get dressed!” Six says, shooing me towards my room. “We should get ready as well,” she adds, turning to Nera.

We’re all going to Rhys’ place for the championship win celebration. I’m meeting up with him a little earlier to give him a preview of my outfit and maybe let him take it off of me one time.



My hair and makeup is already done so I put on the red dress. It's a simple design, form fitting with reflective sparkles and very short. It's not exactly December appropriate from a coverage standpoint, but it is theme wise.

And Nera is right, Rhys is going to love it.

I walk over to Six's room where they're getting ready and twirl to show them the dress.

"Ta da!"

"First, you look unreal. Second, I have the perfect shoes for this dress." Nera says, going to her room and picking out a simple pair of black pumps.

"I have the perfect coat!" Six says, reaching into her closet and handing me a calf length, expensive looking straight black coat.

I put both on and they stare at me with their mouths open.

"You look like a slutty rich heiress in the *best* way." Nera says finally.

"Perfect. That's exactly what I was going for," I exclaim and Six snickers.

"Alright, I have to go. See you guys there in thirty?"

"See you there."

I grab my clutch and head out the door towards the elevator. As I wait for it, I unlock my phone and look at my texts.

**Rhys:** We're going to a bar, should be home by 9.

**Rhys:** I wish I could drink out of this trophy like the Stanley Cup.

**Rhys:** No, actually I wish you were here.

**Rhys:** [sends photo]

**Rhys:** [sends photo]

I open the two photos he's sent. The first is a photo of the team at the bar. It's blurry and looks like it was taken with an iPhone 5 quality wise, but you can still make out the happy

smiles. The second is a selfie of him with the medal around his neck. He's holding it up to show it to the camera as he smiles uninhibitedly.

I download that photo and save it in my Rhys folder in my camera roll. I've started to collect photos of him, usually taken during unposed moments so he doesn't see me do it. Like when I wake up before him and see him sprawled on the bed or when he's drinking water during our practice.

I go back to our thread and read the remaining texts as I get into the elevator.

**Rhys:** I've had enough of the lads now. I want to see you.

**Rhys:** I'm home.

**Rhys:** When are you getting here?

**Rhys:** The minute you get here I'm going to be relieving you of whatever sexy little dress you decided to put on tonight, just FYI.

I exit the elevator and head to the front door with a smile on my face as I text him a response.

**Thayer:** I'm on my way.

**Thayer:** Wearing something very short for easy access.

**Rhys:** Good girl.

Something purrs in my lower stomach at him calling me that and I push open the door and walk outside.

"Shit," I curse as I feel the rain hit my head. I put my head down and start jogging towards Six's car. I look up to make sure I'm going in the right direction and shriek when I see a man standing there. "Shit!"

"Calm down. Stop your screaming." He says, and I finally recognize Devlin.

He's standing ominously before me, drenched by the rain and blocking my path to the car. I try to go around him wordlessly, but he matches my step to the side and blocks my way again.

“Move,” I tell him, “You’re in my way.”

I’m getting extremely irritated by these little talks he’s starting to foist on me, but I’m working to conceal it. There’s something volatile in the air and I feel like if I provoked him, he might make me pay for it.

But I also spent an hour and a half perfecting my hair and makeup so I’m not about to stand in the rain for much longer.

“I will. But first of all you and I are going to have a little chat.”

I grit my teeth in aggravation. “My hair and makeup are getting ruined and I have no desire to speak to you. Goodbye.” I say, trying to sidestep him again.

This time, his hand shoots out and grabs my arm in a bruising hold. I thrash around and push his chest to get him away from me. I think I surprise him because he releases me with a scowl.

I fall back a couple of steps as I gape at him.

“What are you doing, are you insane?” I ask him, bewildered.

“You’re going to want to hear what I have to say to you.” He tells me, his face devoid of emotion. When he grabbed me and pulled me close to him, I could smell the alcohol on him.

He’s drunk.

“Well tell me so I can leave.” I say, wrapping my arms around myself. The moment he’s done, I’m running to my car and driving to Rhys’ to tell him. I don’t care what he does to Devlin, so long as he gets him far away from me.

“It’s about Rhys.”

The blood freezes in my veins as I still.

There’s something about the moment before someone tells you bad news. You can almost feel the chemical makeup in the air change around you as the tightening of your lungs makes you hold your breath while you wait for the hammer to fall.

“What about him?”

“Did you really think he wanted to be with you?” He sneers, his voice cutting.

“What do you mean?” I ask, sounding firm as I successfully hide the wobble in my voice.

“Your relationship isn’t real. He’s been lying to you almost since the day you met him.”

“What are you talking about? Stop speaking in riddles and tell me what you have to say so that I can never speak to you again.” I bite out angrily.

Droplets fall off the ends of my hair and onto the thick material of my coat as I wait for him to speak. The rain is pouring so hard that in another five minutes, my hair will be completely wet.

“It was all a bet.” He says, pausing to watch for my reaction. It takes every ounce of willpower in my body to keep my face blank as his words land because I black out.

A wave of emotion rolls through my body, momentarily blinding and deafening me and blocking everything exterior out.

I clench my fists so hard that my fingers dig into my palms painfully. That pain helps me come back to reality as he continues.

“A very simple one actually. I thought I could get you to break up with your boyfriend and fuck you within six months.” He explains, talking about me like I’m a piece of meat. “He was more ambitious, he bet he could do it in one.”

I can’t help myself, I have to look away. I turn my head to the side and look into the distance at campus as I blink away tears that threaten to spill.

“I couldn’t beat those numbers and, frankly, I didn’t think it was possible in a month so I took that bet.” He says, his teeth baring as he looks at me with violence in his eyes. “You made me lose.”

“I don’t believe you,” I say, ignoring his last remark. He barks out a fake laugh and takes a step towards me, but I back up. “Don’t come near me.”

Miraculously, he listens. He puts his hands up and takes a step back. “You don’t have to believe me, just ask him yourself. He’ll tell you.” He says, before adding, “But didn’t you find it weird how relentless he was in pursuing you? How he refused to give up no matter how many times you told him to?”

My stomach roils and I feel like I’m going to be sick. If this is true, was every word and every moment between us a lie?

“Why are you doing this? What do you get out of destroying us and hurting me?” I ask him.

“This isn’t about you anymore. This is about him. About him getting everything he’s ever wanted in life. Every prize, every trophy, every girl. Every advantage in life. RCA’s golden boy isn’t so golden now, is he?” He sneers.

“He’s had to deal with losing both of his parents, that’s hardly “every advantage”.” I clap back, needing to defend him even in this fucked up situation. “As to what other opportunities he’s had, I’ve seen where you live. You’ve had the same ones. The only difference between you is who you are as men.” I point out. “You’ll never live up to him and that’s the sad truth you’re unwilling to accept.”

I expect him to lunge for me, but he does something far more sinister. He laughs.

“Pathetic.” He spits, disgust coating his words. “Even after everything I’ve just told you, you’re still defending him.”

“Are you done?” I snap, because I’m going to fall apart and I don’t want him to be here to witness it when it happens.

He turns and starts to walk away as I watch him go with eagle eyes.

He takes only three steps before he turns back towards me and adds cruelly, “Oh, I forgot. Do you know how much you were worth to him?” He asks. “Only ten grand.” He adds,

clicking his tongue thoughtfully against the roof of his mouth, “That’s pennies to a man like him.”

He walks away this time.

It’s only once he’s out of sight that my legs finally give out. I drop onto the stairs beneath me and sit there aimlessly for long minutes as I silently watch raindrops hit my bare legs, unable to form a coherent thought.

I have no concept of how long I sit there, except that when I hear Six and Nera talking behind me my hair is drenched like I just came out of the shower.

“Thayer! What are you doing out here? Are you hurt?” Six’s alarmed voice rings in my ear as she crouches next to me and runs her hands over my body as if searching for wounds.

“Yes,” I say, tilting my head back and enjoying the feel of the rain on my face.

Nera crouches down on the other side of me. “What happened, babe?” She asks, her voice concerned.

“Devlin just cornered me out here and told me that apparently Rhys made a bet that he could get me to break up with Carter and have sex with him in one month.”

Shocked silence meets my words. It stretches for what feels like a full minute before Six speaks.

“Alright,” she says kindly, grabbing the car keys from my hand, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and urging me to stand, “Let’s get you upstairs. I’ll make you some tea and we can get you warm.”

“No, let’s go to his house and burn his fucking car.” Nera counters, miraculously pulling a laugh from me.

“Let’s please call that plan B.” Six replies, tugging me towards the door. “Come on, Thayer.”

“No,” I say, finally pulling out of my mental fog as I refuse to move. I grab the keys back and start for the car. “I need to find him. Maybe this isn’t true. Maybe it’s something Devlin made up to mess with us.”

“Maybe.” Nera says, trying for hopeful.

“Look, we’re obviously not going to the party now. Ner and I will stay here and wait for you to come back, okay?” Six adds, understanding that there’s no talking me out of this.

“Call us if you need backup though.” Nera chimes in.

I nod at them and jump into the car.

The drive to Rhys’ house feels interminable as all the permutations of possibilities swirl through my head at once.

I can’t believe that Rhys would do this to me, that he’d have spent all those weeks with me for a bet.

He doesn’t need the money, so why would he even bet on something like this?

Is it just what wealthy people do to entertain themselves?

I don’t see him doing this, but I also don’t see what Devlin gets from making this up.

As I park in the front driveway of his house, I choose to have hope.

To believe in him and what we have together because there’s no way my reality over the past few months has just been an illusion.

I walk into the house and towards the voices I’m hearing come from the kitchen. The three guys are sitting in the lounge area with Bellamy, drinking and chatting as I enter. Rhys’ back is to me so B is the first to notice me, her eyes widening comically as she takes me in.

I’m sure I must look insane drenched as I am from head to toe. Thank God for waterproof mascara at least.

I’m shivering uncontrollably as I stand in the kitchen.

“Are you alright, Thayer?” She asks, concern clear in her voice.

Rhys jumps to his feet when Bellamy says my name and marches towards me in the same stride.

“What the fuck happened to you, Silver?” He growls, rushing towards me, the promise of war for whoever or whatever happened to me clear in his eyes.

Is it a lie too?

I put my hands up, stopping him from advancing further. He stops mid-stride, his eyebrows pulling down into a frown.

“I’m going to ask you a question and I need you to tell me the truth.”

“Alright.” He says. “Tell me what happened to you first. Did someone hurt you?”

I look past him momentarily and see that Bellamy, Rogue, Phoenix have gotten to their feet and are watching our exchange.

I don’t even care. It’s just one question and depending on the answer, either it ends with Rhys and I hugging and us all having fun together tonight, or...

Or.

My eyes move back to his where I find confusion and concern shining in his irises.

“Was I a bet?”

Rhys’s face remains stoic. He doesn’t move a muscle, he doesn’t even blink.

He’s not the one who gives it away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Phoenix flinch and look down and I know.

I know.

Devlin didn’t lie.

He told me the truth.

“Oh my God, Rhys,” I say, bringing my hand up to my mouth in horror. I swallow a painful sob as it tries to break free from my lips and turn away from him.

He made a bet about me with his friends.



Grief and betrayal claw at my chest, desperate to be let out in the form of sobs, but I hold on. I raise my eyebrows and blink desperately to keep the tears at bay.

I hear footsteps as he walks up to me, his large body looming inescapably above me.

“I can explain,” His rough voice sounds from behind me as he touches my elbow, “It’s not what you think.”

“Did you bet Devlin that you could make me break up with my boyfriend and get me fuck you all in a month?” I ask, my voice eerily calm as I add distance between us again.

I hear Bellamy suck in a shocked breath between her teeth.

“*Ex-boyfriend.*” Rhys growls dangerously, taking a warning step towards me.

I cross my arms and tip my chin at him in challenge.

“That’s a label you should start getting comfortable with yourself.”

He snarls as he closes the space between us and grabs my throat. “You are not breaking up with me over this.” He threatens inches from my mouth.

I yank my head to the side, ripping my throat out of his hand and shoving him away from me.

“Get off of me.” I tell him, stepping back. “Answer the question. Did you make that bet?”

“Yes.” he says, crisply.

My heart fractures and hardens in my chest, the cracking sound echoing so loudly I swear they can all hear it.

He was arrogant and callous enough to think he’d be able to break me in a month and the worst part is he was right.

I didn’t resist for a day longer than that.

It only adds to making me feel like I was disposable to him. Simply a means to an end so he could win because he always needs to win, my life and feelings be damned.

“We’re done.” I say, my voice emotionless.

I turn away from him but he’s in front of me with one large step, grabbing my arms this time.

“Stop. Let me expla—,”

“Let you explain what? How you’ve been lying to me for months? How you played me like a fool?” I laugh humorlessly, “I don’t want to hear it.”

“Silver—,”

“Don’t call me that.” I cut him off again. “I can’t believe I fell for your game hook, line, and sinker. That’s one of the most humiliating parts of this, how easy I was for you to peddle your lies to.” I say dejectedly, sadness overtaking my voice now. “And the whole time you were telling me you’d make me pay for lying about my attraction to you. The irony of you accusing me of that when you were lying to me about *everything*.”

I pull on his hold but his grip is unyielding. He yanks me against him and wraps his arms around my writhing body, trying to keep me against him.

“Let me fucking speak,” He snarls, grabbing both my arms and holding them behind me with one hand. His eyes are hard but anguished as they search mine. “I made that bet a long time ago, before I even really knew you. I’m not saying that excuses it, but the context is important because I’d never make a bet like that about you now. I’m sorry, okay? I’m so fucking sorry for hurting you but it was a stupid mistake. That’s it.”

“If it was a stupid mistake, you should have told me! There were so many times you could have told me, especially once we started dating. Maybe then I’d have forgiven you. Instead you kept lying to me for *weeks*. You let Devlin be the one to reveal your secret, you made him so much power over you, over us, that he felt secure putting his hands on me..” I struggle against his chest but he holds on tight.

“Did he hurt you?” He grinds out, his tone terrifying.

“You hurt me! You’re a liar and I’m an idiot with terrible taste in men just like my mother.”

“Don’t say that. I’m nothing like them. I would never intentionally hurt you, you mean everything to me.” He says, his voice raw. “I didn’t tell you not because I was keeping it a secret but because it doesn’t matter! It has no bearing on our relationship right now.”

I turn my head away, averting my gaze. “I can’t even look at you.”

He grips my chin and turns me back towards him, his voice rough with emotion as he desperately tries to look into my eyes.

“It was just a stupid bet, love. I can’t tell you why I did it because I don’t know. All I can say is I wanted you then as much as I want you now and I didn’t know how to process it.” He cups my face, bringing his forehead down against mine, “Devlin talked about going after you and I saw red. I was furious and territorial and I made a stupid decision in the moment. I regret it, but it’s completely aside from the feelings I have for you. It meant nothing, you have to believe me.”

“I don’t.” I cry out, truthfully, “Please let me go.”

“I can’t.”

“Let me *go*, Mackley.” I snap.

Surprise has his grip loosening slightly and I take advantage of his momentary distraction to rip myself out of his grasp.

I knew I’d piss him off by calling him by his last name and that was my intended purpose.

What he’d done was causing me so much pain that I wanted to lash out and hurt him in the little ways I knew how to.

“You promised you’d never call me that again.” He bites out, his voice trembling with anger.

I can see every emotion on his face now as his gaze flits between my eyes. Anger and frustration fight with what looks

like fear for dominance in his eyes. The realization is dawning on him that he's losing me.

"I learned how to lie from the best." I say, clutching my coat closed around me to keep me warm.

Another small cut.

The expression on his face is indescribable in its distress and hurts me to my core.

*Every wound I inflict on him hurts me just as much, I realize.*

His eyes are sad and tormented, sitting below a dismayed pair of eyes. His mouth has flattened into a straight line and a muscle jumps wildly in his cheek.

He looks tortured and grief-stricken, like this is hurting him as much as me when he's the guilty party.

"Did you know about this?" Bellamy hisses at Rogue as Rhys and I stare at each other unflinchingly.

He gives her a carefully blank look and she twists away from him.

"Bell," he calls.

"I don't want to talk to you right now." She tells him, walking to me and grabbing my hand. "Come on, we're going home." She says, and uses my hand to pull me towards the door.

"Don't walk away from me, Thayer. We're not done." Rhys' voice thunders from behind me before I feel his hand close around my free one and he yanks me back against him. "You're not going anywhere until you've forgiven me and we've put this behind us."

"Rhys." Phoenix's voice warns in the background.

"You don't get what you want this time. You don't get to force me to believe you. You don't win. Now it's time that you pay for the lies *you've* told." I hiss, "We're over."

His eyes turn black with anger as he cups my nape and yanks my head backwards. His face comes to within inches of

mine as he grunts, “I’m telling you, you’re going to regret this decision. If you walk out that door right now, I won’t take you back. Not even if you beg for my forgiveness once you realize your mistake.” He threatens and then releases me.

I stumble backwards and Phoenix grabs Rhys’ arm, holding him back when he takes another step towards me as if to stop me from going anywhere.

“You won’t need to.” I tell him and turn on my heel. “I never want to see or speak to you again.”

“Thayer,” He booms, calling my name.

I walk out without looking back but I hear his furious roar followed by the sound of glass shattering on the kitchen floor.

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Outside, I throw the keys at Bellamy who gets in on the driver’s side and jump into the passenger seat, slamming the door shut behind me.

I put my seatbelt on and when I look up Rhys is jogging down the last of the steps and heading towards the car with large, determined strides, his jaw set and his eyes lasered on me through the car window.

“Drive,” I order.

Bellamy slams the accelerator as we peel out of our parking spot and into the long path of the driveway.

I watch him run after the car and then come to a slow, reluctant jog as we gain distance from him. He stops and watches us drive away until he’s nothing to me but a speck in the distance.

It feels weirdly metaphorical and sad and it’s only then that I burst into painful, heart wrenching sobs that rack through my entire body and have me folded in the fetal position in my seat the entire way home.

Bellamy tries desperately to hug and comfort me as best she can while driving, hiding her panic at seeing me fall apart so completely.

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*Rhys*

The second the words are out, I regret them.

I spoke them in panicked anger as I realized I was losing control of the situation.

That I was potentially losing her.

I'd wanted to back her into a corner with an ultimatum, forcing her to forgive me in the process, but she'd called my bluff.

I swept the entire row of decorative vases off the kitchen floor in response and then ran after her.

That one emotional outburst ended up costing me dearly as I'd watched her drive away instead of catching up to her in time.

I don't immediately go after her, reluctantly advised by Rogue and Phoenix to let her cool down overnight and talk to her tomorrow.

So I go straight to my room and to bed, hoping it'll bring tomorrow more quickly.

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I don't sleep a single minute.

Every time I close my eyes I'm tormented by clips of our relationship, every time I open them I see her in my room as if she were really there.

My bed is cold and empty, devoid of Thayer's warmth and laughter. Without her next to me for me to wrap myself around, I'm lost.

I'm not sure how I used to sleep before her; where my arms usually went or how I liked to arrange my legs.

I don't make it to sunrise.

I reach boiling point at around three am when I toss back the covers and jump out of bed. I throw on some clothes, grab my keys, and leave my room.

The party is still raging on towards the back of the mansion so I'm able to walk downstairs without running into anyone who'd distract me or try to get me to celebrate with them.

I open the front and walk outside, only to find Phoenix sitting on the top step, smoking a joint.

He turns when he hears the door and quirks an unsurprised eyebrow when he recognizes me.

"I thought you were going to wait until tomorrow." He says, facing forward and pulling from the joint between his lips.

"It is tomorrow," I say, sitting down next to him. I grab the joint and take a deep hit, hoping it'll mellow me out.

"You know what I mean."

I puff out smoke in perfectly concentric circles and for a few seconds we just watch them float away quietly.

I hand him back the joint and stare at the driveway where I saw her drive away with the heart she'd ripped straight out of my chest.



It took watching her walk away from me and spending hours alone in my empty bed assaulted by thoughts of her to realize that I've been lying to myself about what I feel.

"I can't wait, Phoenix."

I have to find her. I have to fix this.

I have to tell her how I feel.

He turns his head slightly and gives me a rare smile. "Then what are you sitting here talking to me for? Good luck, mate."

I clap his shoulder and jog to the car. I start to pull out of the driveway when I stop and roll the window down. He gets up and walks to me.

"Can you do something for me?"

He nods, blank faced, waiting for me to continue.

The hand that's on the steering wheel turns white as I squeeze it in a death grip.

"Find Devlin." I demand through clenched teeth.

Sadism shines in his eyes as a dark smile distorts his face.

"With pleasure."

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Ten minutes later, I've parked haphazardly in Thayer's parking lot and am striding down the dark hallway of her apartment building towards her place.

It's the middle of the night and there's a floor full of people sleeping but I don't give a fuck. I get to her door and pound on it with my closed fist until the hinges shake.

A light comes on and shines through the crack in the door, but she doesn't answer.

"Thayer!" I call her name, hammering the door again. "Open the door, we need to talk."

The door to my left opens and a disheveled head peeks out to investigate. I recognize one of the first years and shoot her a venomous look that sends her cowering back inside.

“I’m not going anywhere, Silver.” I shout through the door. “I need to talk to you.”

I start pacing back and forth in front of her apartment, the unacknowledged anxiety in my body making it impossible for me to remain static.

“Go away,” she replies, her voice muffled by the thick wood.

Frustration flames my blood at her refusal to talk to me. If I could just speak to her, if I could just explain, I know she’d forgive me.

I’d make her forgive me.

I’m not sure how I’ve lasted six hours separated from her but I know that I can’t take another second of conflict between us.

I pound my fist on the door once more and keep pounding until the pain in my hand is unbearable and I hear something splinter. Whether it’s the wood or one of my bones, I’m not sure.

“Open the door before I break it down with my bare hands.”

“Just leave, Mackley.” She calls out.

My jaw snaps shut and my teeth grind together at her using my last name, but I don’t take the bait. She’s trying to hurt me, to get back at me in any way she can, but I won’t let it distract me.

She can hurt me all she wants. I’ll still be here waiting for her.

“I’m not walking away from you, Silver. I never have, even when you’ve pushed me away before, and I’m not about to start now.”

I take a startled step back as the door flies open, surprising me. Thayer stands in the doorway in tiny volleyball shorts and an oversized t-shirt. My eyes narrow on the shirt when I don't recognize it. It's not one of mine, so whose is it?

The possessive monster inside me tries to rear its ugly head but I smother it.

Not the time.

Her eyes are red-rimmed and angry and the thought that she's been crying has my stomach in knots. She's one of the strongest people I know and seeing the proof of her tears throws me completely off kilter and momentarily silences me.

"The reason you never walked away was because you had a bet to win. Do you think it's a good idea to remind me of that?" She asks, her voice full of hurt.

"No, that had nothing to do with the bet!" I say, raising my voice in frustration.

"Lower your voice, you're going to wake up the whole floor," she hisses, looking to her left and right. "What are you even doing here? Don't you remember the ultimatum you gave me last night?" She asks, her face twisting unhappily.

"I was angry. Alright, love? I was angry." I say, taking a step towards her and cupping her cheek. "I didn't mean it." I whisper, "I was desperate to find a way, any way, to make you stay and I panicked. I'm sorry."

Somehow I've dug myself into a deeper hole than yesterday and I have no idea how to get myself out.

My heart drops into my stomach as she turns her head away, avoiding my touch.

"Another lie then."

"You're twisting my words—"

"No, I'm going off of your actions, not your words!" She shouts, her head whipping back towards me. "Off the man you're showing yourself to be, that's it. We're done, alright? We're not together anymore." She says, taking a step back and starting to close the door, "You made sure of that."

I slam my palm on the door and shove it back before she can close it.

“We’re not done.” I snarl, advancing on her as she retreats into her living room and kicking the door shut behind me. “You want to talk about my actions? Fine.” I grunt, marching right up to her. “Have I not proven myself time and time again to you? Have I not always been there for you, have I not always shown up, even when you claimed you didn’t need me?” I demand, my need to convince her almost a madness now, “I’m begging you not to let one mistake erase all the good memories we’ve made. All the great memories we can still make together.”

“None of it was real!” She screams, her eyes shining with tears now. “Your displays of possessiveness to make sure I never looked at anyone but you. How you brought me to Devlin’s house and conveniently announced that you’d fucked me to seal your win. Everything was part of the game you were playing.” She cries, before her gaze hardens and turns lethal. “Tell me, was fucking me without a condom also part of the bet? Should I get myself tested?”

I run my hand through my hair as I look down at her, trying to control the anger and fear coursing through my body.

“I haven’t fucked anyone — I haven’t even *thought* about anyone else — since I met you, Silver.” I tell her, my voice raw with emotion, “You’re misconstruing everything between us. I told people we were fucking because you thought I was keeping it a secret, not because I was trying to win the bet.” I growl, “You are right about one thing though. I am possessive and I don’t want you to look at other men but that’s only because I can’t bear the thought of you with anyone else.”

“Well you should get used to the idea.”

This time, I do take the bait.

I’m in front of her and grabbing her throat in less than a second.

“You keep calling me a liar, but I want you to hear the truth in these words,” I hiss, almost against her mouth, “You’ll

be sentencing any man who touches you to a death sentence.”

“I’m not yours anymore, Mackley.” She answers, her eyes still shining with tears she’s barely holding back.

“Yes, you are. You can’t discredit everything between us because of one mistake. How do I make you understand that the bet meant nothing?”

“It means something to me,” she cries miserably, and this time the tears do fall. They fall in torrents, pouring from her eyes with no end in sight as heartrending and sorrowful sobs rack her body.

Whether intentional or not, she reveals the scale of the destruction I’ve unleashed on her and the depth of her hurt, leaving me speechless.

I release her throat and watch her head bow, the physical exertion and emotional toll taking over as she pitches forward.

Her hands fist my shirt and her forehead rests on my chest as she lets the grief out. I wrap one hand around her waist and the other around her nape in a comforting gesture and for long moments I just hold her.

She has to be able to feel how painfully hard my heart beats against my ribcage.

My throat is constricted, making it hard for me to breathe. I feel cut off at the knees faced with her desolation. I would climb the tallest mountains and slay the biggest dragons for her, but how do I do that when I’m the enemy in this situation? When I’m the one who’s caused her such hurt?

Her pain is my pain and my heart splits in two as I hold her wordlessly, wishing I could make it all go away.

Wishing I could turn back the clock and punch Devlin in the face instead.

She pulls away and steps back and I reluctantly let her go. Her face is red and wet as she looks away from me. She wipes both her cheeks with her palms as she tries to compose herself.

“Thayer...”

“It means something to me because I love you.” She doesn’t stop to wait for my reaction, “I fell in love with you and I trusted you when I should have known better. It was stupid of me really,” she says with a humorless laugh, “But I couldn’t help it. I tried to resist, but you came into my life and you were my dream man come true. Passionate, supportive, smart, good looking, kind, obsessed with soccer like me, you were everything I could have ever wanted. So I let myself be blinded by you, by your charm and your wit and your smiles, and I missed all the lies you were telling me. I trusted you and I let you lead me right off a cliff I didn’t even see coming.”

“I’m paying for my naivete now. I get to collect the shattered pieces of my heart from where you discarded them and I get to find a way to piece them back together somehow so I can move on and hope to forget you.” She says, her voice thick with emotion as she struggles to get the words out past another wave of tears. But determination shines bright in her eyes. “And I will. I fell in love with you and I’ll fall out of love with you, but not if you keep showing up at my door in the middle of the night. Not if you won’t let me forget you. So, please, just... let me go.”

Is it possible to suffocate from the inside?

To be so overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of your emotions that they become a physical thing in your stomach, pushing aside all of your vital organs and strangling them against your ribs until you feel like you’re going to die?

That’s what I’m feeling right now.

Her confession makes my heart rate skyrocket to new heights, followed immediately by a steep plummet as she speaks of her determination to make herself fall out of love with me.

I’m desperate to make her understand that this isn’t one sided. That I feel what she feels.

“You’re not the only one who feels that way. I l—”

“No!” She shouts, alarmed, putting a hand up between us to stop me. “You don’t get to say that to me now. If you were

about to say what I think you were about to say, you *never* get to say those words to me.”

I eat the space between us in two steps until I tower above her. “That’s not for you to decide. If I want to tell you how I feel, I’ll say it and you’ll listen.”

“Tell me then,” she taunts, “I won’t believe you. It’ll be just another lie to add to the list. You think the bet meant nothing? Your words will mean even less.” She says, cruelly.

I want to fight her. To tell her how wrong she is and then force her to listen anyway.

The desire tears through me and screams to be let out, but I control it.

I’m not getting anywhere by confronting her this way, so I go for the truth.

I show her exactly the agony I feel.

“Don’t do this, Thayer. Please. Be mad at me, curse, throw things at me, I don’t care, but don’t end this.” I plead. “Tell me what you need me to do. I’ll do it.”

She shakes her head wordlessly, refusing to meet my eye.

“Do you need me to give up football? My fortune? Do you want me to be humiliated similarly to what you’ve been through? Or maybe you want to carve me open in some way? I’m already slowly bleeding out on your floor, but I’ll give you a knife and let you finish the job if it means you’ll forgive me. Just tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you.”

“I’m not going to forgive you.” She tells me, her voice carrying all of the sadness in the world.

I cup her face gently and bend my head towards her, bringing my lips down in a featherlight kiss on her cheek.

“I’m not going to give up.”

For a brief moment, she closes her eyes and leans into my touch. She’s seeking the comfort that she subconsciously knows only I give her, even as her head is making her fight her heart.

But then she pulls away and the spell is broken.

“Please don’t make this any harder than it needs to be.”

“I’m not going to make it harder, Thayer. I’m going to make it impossible for you to move on from me, just like it’s impossible for me to move on from you.”

“Mackley...” She says, her voice tired. She looks completely defeated and physically exhausted by our exchange.

“You don’t need to say anything else, I’ll go.” I move towards the door and open it before pausing in the doorway. “I’ll prove to you that you can trust me again, I promise.” I say, resolve hardening my voice. “Whatever you believe now, I’ve always wanted you. Always. From the first moment I laid eyes on you outside Bella’s I knew you were mine. So, no, I’m not letting you go.” I look at her, standing there looking at me with lost eyes and resist the urge to go to her. “Go back to bed and dream of me, love. I’ll come back for you soon.” I say, echoing the words I said to her all those weeks ago.

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*Rhys*

After my conversation with Thayer, I walk into our guest house and head for the lower level with murder on my mind and very little inclination towards mercy.

The basement used to be a second gym but over the years we've converted it into a holding room for dealing with people who interfere in our business.

It's got slanted floors leading to a drain and padded, soundproofed walls.

Not that anyone could be heard screaming from outside even if there weren't, but it's a nice touch.

Devlin is gagged and tied to a chair in the middle of the room, conveniently placed right over the drain. He's bleeding from a cut on his eyebrow, likely from when he was brought here.

Rogue is on his phone and leaning against the wall, probably texting Bellamy, while Phoenix stands over Devlin with a sadistic look in his eye.

Of the three of us, he's the quietest but the most lethal. People often mistake his silence for disinterest, but behind the mask is a twisted mind that works far faster than everyone else's around him.

He revels in this type of blood and gore, partly because of his family's business.

Comparably, I'm more the charmer 'you get more bees with honey' type. I'm not especially violent, unless the situation demands it.

And threatening what's mine well, let's just say that's a capital offense.

Satisfaction burns in my gut when Devlin's eyes widen in fear as he sees me walk in.

"Your reaction tells me you know exactly why you're here."

He shakes his head frantically, screaming against the gag in his mouth and trying to dislodge it with his tongue. I hit him with a right hook to the jaw so powerful that the chair flies backwards and falls to the ground.

I stand over him as I slowly roll the sleeves of my shirt up. I take my time, drawing out the agony of his anticipation as he wriggles, desperately trying to move the chair and himself away from me.

It's a futile effort. There is no escape for him.

Bending over, I fist my hands in his shirt and haul him back up.

"Hold the chair." I motion to Phoenix and Devlin's eyes triple in size before he tries to scream again.

Once he's held down, I continue raining brutal punches to his face and stomach.

I'm merciless, fueled by the rage of the discord he's sown in my relationship, the bitterness and sadness of having hurt Thayer, and the jealousy of knowing she now considers herself single.

It's as if I'm in a trance, completely disconnected from my brain and the rest of my body except my fists as they unleash my fury on him.

When I come back to and look down at Devlin, his head is bowed.

He's unconscious.

I yank him back by his hair. His face is a mangled, bloody mess. His eyes are swollen, his lips are cut, his cheeks bruised and bleeding.

It's not enough.

"Wake him up."

Rogue takes a step forward and tosses a bucket of water at him. He comes alive with a panicked gasp, his wild eyes taking in his surroundings before they settle on me.

I can see in his gaze that he'd hoped this was all a bad dream and not reality.

The psychological torture I'm inflicting on him is just as sweet as the physical one.

I rip the gag out of his mouth and toss it to the ground.

"Please," he begs immediately, "please let me g—"

He cuts off abruptly when he feels the blade of my knife against his throat.

"What did you say to her?"

"I didn't say anythi—, ah!" He screams as I plunge the knife deep into his thigh.

I jerk his head back by his hair, treating him like the little bitch he is. "Next time I'll aim for the artery. I'll watch you bleed out as you beg for mercy. Tell me," I pause, my voice trembling with rage, "what you said to her."

"You stabbed me! Are you fucking insane?"

I yank the knife out of his leg and he screams as blood oozes out of the wound and drips to the floor. "Artery it is."

"No! Please!" He screams, hurling his weight back and sending the chair to the ground once more.

I step over him and bring my knife to his neck. "I can just as well slit your throat down here."

Fear turns into misplaced bravado as he decides to fight back.

It'd be a lot more impressive if he wasn't shaking like a leaf as he did so.

"I just told her the truth." He says, trying to tip his chin defiantly and suddenly recoiling when he feels the blade cut into his skin. "That you only fucked her for money."

I flip the knife in the air, catching it with the blade facing outwards as I bring the pommel down on his closed mouth.

Cold-blooded satisfaction flares in my chest at the sound of his teeth shattering. I straighten and bring him back up as I watch him spit out blood and pieces of tooth.

"You asked me to tell you!" He accuses, crying now. Tears and snot run down his face and mix with the blood already there to create a horrific scene.

"I didn't like your answer." I say, stabbing him in the other leg. He lets out a blood curdling scream that would make traditional walls shake. "Why did you do it?"

"You have everything," he replies brokenly, continuously sobbing. "Everything comes easy to you, including her. I wanted to take something from you."

I pull the knife out again and this time he doesn't make a sound, the adrenaline having kicked in.

"Let me tell you the mistake you made." I sneer, getting close to his face. "You could have done anything else. You could have messed with my future or my money and I'd have been more merciful. But you messed with her. You *touched* her. You tried to take her away from me and for that you need to pay."

"Please," he begs through his broken teeth, "I don't want to die."

"You're not going to die," I say.

His whole body sags in relief as Phoenix throws me a disgusted look. He must think I'm being too soft.

“Death is too easy for you.”

“T-thank you. I promise I won’t ever go near her again.”  
He stutters, his eyes finally meeting mine once more.

I always thought I was the most well adjusted of the three of us. That I’d get a phone call one day and have to bail Rogue or Phoenix out of jail.

Turns out, when it comes to Thayer there’s no limit to the damage I’ll do. No end to the pain I’ll inflict on someone.

“No you won’t.” I confirm, “Eyes or tongue?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a slow smirk curl the corners of Rogue’s mouth.

“W-what?”

“You’re losing one of the two. Your eyes for looking at her or your tongue for opening your fucking mouth. Pick which one.”

“No!” He shrieks, trying to escape again but this time Rogue holds the chair down. “Get away from me!”

“Choose before I choose for you. Three...”

“You can’t!”

“Two...”

“Stop! What do you want?”

“One...”

“I’ll give you anything you want!”

“You will?” I ask.

“Yes! Anything!”

“Great,” I say, advancing on him, “What I want is to cut your tongue out. Now open your mouth, time’s up.”

He slams it shut, sowing his lips firmly together, and fights against his restraints more ferociously than ever.

Phoenix hands me a pair of clamps as Rogue forces Devlin’s mouth open and shoves a block between his remaining teeth to keep it so.

He continues thrashing and throwing his body around like a fish on a dock so I take off my belt and use it to strap him to the back of the chair, loving the added humiliation.

With his head tied down and his mouth forced open, I easily clamp his tongue and tug it out past his lips.

His eyes are wild and afraid and I want him to live with the reminder of this fear for the rest of his life.

That's far better torture than killing him.

“You asked me if I was insane and the answer is yes.”

I grab a different knife and bring it up between us, showing him the instrument that's going to render him mute.

His eyes roll back into his head and then he passes out.

No matter, he'll come to soon enough.

I bring the knife down on his tongue and start hacking at it, taking no care to be neat or precise with my cuts.

He jolts awake at the pain and there's a beautiful beat of silence before his mangled screams fill the air.

I keep going, cutting through veins and muscle and watching with savage pleasure as blood fills his mouth and cascades past his lips and down his chin.

It's over in less than thirty seconds.

I hold his tongue up between us like I did the knife. “Let this be a valuable lesson to you, Devlin. If you ever come near Thayer again, I'll cut your dick off next and force feed it to you.”

I toss the clamp and his tongue to the side and grab the towel Rogue hands me, using it to clean my bloody hands.

“We need to cauterize the wound if you want to live. Do you want to live?”

He moans weakly in response, his body slumped over.

“Say a word of this to anyone and I'll see to it that your family is destroyed. After I take my time cutting you to pieces that is. I hope this little chat has made you realize that I will

see these threats through if you ever cross me again. Nod if you understand.”

He nods, the move almost imperceptible.

“Good.” I say, turning to grab the cauterizer from Devlin. I bring it against the remaining stump of his tongue and burn his flesh, the smell filling the room.

It’s a life saving measure and another opportunity to cause this piece of shit pain.

He passes out again but this time I don’t need him resuscitated.

“I’ll drop him off near a hospital.” Rogue says, working to untie him.

“Thanks.” I tell him, before asking as if nothing happened, “Everything okay with Bellamy?”

“Yeah, it will be. Don’t worry about it.”

“How’d it go with Thayer?” Phoenix asks.

My mouth flattens in a grim line as I face him. “I’m going to win her back.”

He claps me on the shoulder in a comforting gesture and turns to clean up the mess we’ve made.

The feelings that’d been temporarily pushed aside by my single minded focus on dealing with Devlin and the associated adrenaline come slowly trickling back into my mind.

There’s an almost physical urge to go to her, to spend time with her, but I can’t.

I don’t know how I’m going to survive this time apart.

It’s been barely a day and I feel completely lost without her, adrift with no sense of what to do with myself.

With revenge out of the way, I’m going to focus on doing everything in my power to get her back.

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*Thayer*

True to his word, Rhys is back the next day.

And the next.

And the one after that.

He comes every day for a week, sometimes waiting for me on the steps of my building as I come back from class or practice, sometimes knocking on the door when he knows I'm home.

Instead of flowers and chocolates, he brings me cool ranch Doritos — my favorite — and a Megan Rapinoe signed jersey.

He buys me a Christmas ornament of a Chicago flag and returns to the market in Geneva to buy me a matching one of the soccer ball I gave him.

“Hello, love,” he says with a cute smile, before asking me the question he asks every day, “Are you ready to forgive me yet?”

“No.” I answer.

“Alright,” he says, leaning over and kissing my cheek. “I’ll be back tomorrow then.”

And then he leaves.

And he comes back the next day.

He doesn't push me or try to make me forgive him beyond asking me that one question and bringing me all kinds of gifts like they're offerings to a deity.

His face is hopeful and I think I see him hold his breath as he waits for my answer. When I tell him no, he's careful to not give anything away.

Or so he thinks.

I know his face like I know my own now, and I see his disappointment clear as day in the way his eyes lose their shine and the way his smile no longer has that special luster.

Every day I fight the almost overwhelming urge to give in and say yes. To forgive him. To move on. But thankfully my mind wins the battle every time, wrestling my unwilling heart back to safety and away from forgiveness.

That treacherous organ is the one who got me in this mess to begin with and I can't trust it to discern the truth anymore, no matter how loud it calls for him.

No matter how much I miss him.

And I do.

It's almost comical how lost I feel without his hourly presence in my life. I don't even find the same joy in soccer now that I don't get to practice with him daily or talk about how our favorite teams' seasons are going.

I've loved playing soccer my whole life and in the matter of a few months it's become so enmeshed with Rhys that it feels hard to separate the two.

But the bottom line is he lied about the entire foundation of our relationship. As disappointed as he is by my refusal to forgive him, he has no one to blame but himself.

And as hard as this breakup is to deal with for me, I need to learn to live with it because there's no going back for us.

I can't loosen the chains of my mistrust and let him in again when I'm not convinced he wouldn't turn around and hurt me again.

So instead I prioritize spending time with my friends and concentrate on my classes.

Notably absent from those classes is Devlin who hasn't been seen since the night of the championship win.

Rumors abound for days until it's eventually confirmed that he unenrolled and moved back to England. His departure is surprising but not unwelcome, especially in my eyes.

I'd never wanted to see him again and I got my wish.

Although I can't help but wonder if something – or someone – prompted his hasty departure.

After class I see Rogue in the hallway talking to a couple of people. I hesitate for a second, wondering if he knows why Devlin decided to drop out and whether or not it has anything to do with what went down between us.

Eventually, I decide to just bite the bullet and ask him.

I head towards him and his eyes slide over to me as he notices me approaching. He doesn't say goodbye or even acknowledge the end of the conversation he was having, he simply leaves the people he was talking to behind as he walks up to me.

“Everything alright?”

“Oh, uh, yes,” I say, flustered by his focused attention on me. I'd half expected him to blow me off. “I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“It wasn't important.” He says, his face as closed off as ever. “What's up?”

I don't beat around the bush. “Did he do something to Devlin?”

His features remain carefully blank and unlike Rhys, I can't read him at all. “Rhys?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a question you have to ask him.”

“I think you might have just answered it.” I say, watching for a reaction.

He simply shrugs and looks at me, the silence between us stretching into long seconds.

When I realize he doesn’t plan on adding anything else, I turn around with a muttered “alrighty” and start to walk away.

His voice gives me pause before I can get too far. “When are you going to forgive him?”

I slowly turn to face him. “I’m not.”

He nods before looking away pensively. I can see the wheels turning as he chooses his next words carefully.

“We’ve been here before you and I.”

A small smile curls my lips, the first in a week. “Something like this, yeah.”

“You helped me get Bellamy back when nobody thought I deserved her.” He clarifies.

It’s my turn to lift a shoulder in a shrug. “I knew how you felt about her.”

He closes the distance in two slow steps. “And I know how he feels about you.” He says, watching me with piercing eyes. “He’s never lied to you about that.”

“You’re asking me to forgive him?”

“I’m asking you not to entirely rule out the possibility of forgiving him.”

“It’s not that easy.” I say, sadly, “I don’t trust him anymore.”

“Then let him earn that trust back. Give him the opportunity to show you how he feels.”

I swallow thickly, feeling my resolve start to slip again.

My heart’s been ready to throw the door wide open and welcome Rhys back, but my head’s been steadfast.

Now, I feel it crack open just the slightest bit. Not enough to let him in, but just enough to let hope peak through.

It wars with my pride, that part of me that begs not to forgive him for how he's betrayed me.

"I'll think about it." I say, before adding, "Thanks."

He nods in acknowledgement. "Are you heading home?"

"No, I'm going to the computer lab for a bit. I need to work on my essay for English Lit."

"Alright, I'll see you around."

He's gone before I can say anything else, leaving me feeling more confused than ever.

For some reason I find myself wanting to trust what Rogue is saying even though I know full well that he wouldn't hesitate to lie for Rhys.

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An hour later, I walk back into the lab from the bathroom. I'm focused on my phone, texting the girls that I'll be home in about thirty minutes, when a voice startles me.

"Hi, love."

Rhys is standing over my chosen desk, his hands casually tucked in his pockets as he drinks me in with the hungry eyes of a man who sees the sun for the first time after the dregs of winter.

Surprise hits me first, my heart thumping in my chest at him seeking me out outside of his daily visits and my stomach pitching at his affectionate name for me.

Want hits me next. It's partly physical desire as lust surges in my veins at how handsome he looks standing there waiting for me, his presence commanding the space and his trademark smirk in place.

But it's emotional want as well. I'd like nothing more than to wrap my arms around him and have him comfort me so I can forget the last few days.

God, I love him so much. It's so unfair.

"Hey," I say, walking up to him. "What are you doing here?"

"Rogue told me you wanted to ask me something."

That traitor. I'd known he'd speak to Rhys about our conversation but I didn't think he'd narc that quickly.

"And I wanted to see you."

Raw honesty sounds in his voice as he raises a hand to brush back a strand of hair from my face before thinking better of it. His hand drops and fists at his side, as if he has to physically work to restrain himself from touching me.

"Devlin dropped out."

His jaw ticks.

"I heard," he says, revealing nothing.

"Did you have something to do with it?"

"Yes."

I'm momentarily thrown off by his reply. I'd half expected him to deny it. "Oh. I didn't think you'd answer me honestly."

"I told you I wouldn't keep anything else from you."

I swallow around the weight in my throat as I think about what else I want to ask him. "Did you hurt him?"

His voice is unflinching when he answers. "Yes."

"Badly?"

"Yes."

"Do I want to know how?"

"No."

He answers each question unemotionally and matter of factly like I'm asking him whether he likes brussel sprouts or not and not whether he hurt someone.

“Why'd you do it? Because he revealed your secret?”

“No,” he answers, this time through clenched teeth. “I should have dealt with him a long time ago. That's the other mistake I made; letting him get so comfortable that he felt safe enough to put his hands on you. He'll never touch you again now.”

My stomach roils thinking about what Rhys probably did to him. I doubt he gave him a slap on the wrist and sent him on his way. But he's right, I don't want to know what he did to him. Except...

“Is he alive?”

My interest is purely for Rhys' benefit. I remember Phoenix's words at Devlin's house. I don't want Rhys killing anyone, especially not for me.

“Yes.”

I nod and turn away, starting to pack up my things.

“Are you ready to forgive me yet?”

I scoff. “No.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder, touching me with his hands for the first time in a week. A spark of electricity goes through me at the contact and turns to liquid heat that pools in my stomach.

If he feels it too, he doesn't comment on it.

He turns me around so I face him. “Why not?”

It's the first time he asks a follow up question and doesn't immediately leave after asking me if I'm ready to forgive him.

“We're going around in circles and I can't keep having this same conversation.” I say with a frustrated sigh, “I'm not going to forgive you for what you did.”

“Come on, Silver. There has to be something I can do.”

I don't know why he can't understand that what he did was unforgivable in my eyes.

"There isn't. Not only did you make a bet that you could fuck me, but you made it for *money*." I spit out. "Devlin told me about that too."

His eyes darken dangerously at my words. "There's still time for me to kill him."

"Stop." I say, my brow furrowed. "You don't even need the money, you're rich enough as is. Was it purely greed? Is that why you did it?" I ask, taunting him.

But behind my flippant tone is a real need to know, to make sense of why he'd do this. To understand just how little I meant to him.

Anger slithers into his gaze as he looks at me, his jaw working furiously. "I didn't fuck you for money."

I shake my head disgustedly, somehow even more disappointed. "You're lying again."

"I gave that money away, Silver." His voice cracks out like a whip, freezing me in place. "Long before you found out about this bet. The same day Devlin gave it to me, actually."

I blink a couple of times, surprised. That's the last thing I expected him to say. "Who did you give it to?"

"A girls' youth football club in London."

My heart flutters and I want to cry. "Why did you do that?"

"I remembered talking about the lack of opportunities girls have when it comes to football and how it was important to you. It felt like the right thing to do with money I never wanted anyway."

I bow my head as a tear crests past my eyelid and falls down my cheek. His hand reaches out to tip my chin towards him, the thumb of his other hand coming to brush the tear away.



“Please don’t cry,” he whispers, his beautiful voice hoarse, “it fucking kills me when you cry.”

“I want to believe you, I do. I just don’t know if I can ever get there.”

He uses the thumb of the hand on my chin to rub comforting circles on my skin. “You’re everything to me, Thayer. The only thing that matters. If words won’t work, what can I do?”

“Nothing,” I say, pulling my chin out of his hold, “Not unless you can turn back time and take us back to before you made the bet. To see if you would have still chased me if you hadn’t had a competition with your friends.”

“I can’t do that but believe me, if I could, I would. I’d go back in time and I’d punch Devlin in the face and I’d still want you. I’d still come after you.” He cups my nape possessively. “I’d still fall in love with you. That was always inevitable.”

My eyes snap to his as my stomach clenches. “I told you not to say those words to me.”

Inside, there’s a whirlwind of chaos and confusion. When we were dating and I was feeling myself start to fall in love with him, I’d dreamed of hearing him say those words. Of being the one who managed to get through to him and bring his guard down. Of being the one who made him risk loving someone when he was desperate not to.

It’s so bittersweet now that it’s reality. On the one hand, I love him. From the bottom of my heart I love this man, in a way that borders on insanity. I want us to run off into the sunset together and live happily ever after.

On the other hand, how do I know if this is real and not another ploy for some purpose or game I’m not yet aware of? Do I believe him? Do I take the leap and trust him?

I’m so torn between my head and my heart, stuck at an impasse with two clear paths forward and no idea which I want to take.

“Like I said, I’m not keeping anything from you anymore.” He says, “Do you believe me?”

“I don’t know,” I admit.

His hand slides from my nape to gently grip my jaw. “Maybe you’re not ready to hear it, but I’ll tell you anyway.” He pauses, before adding, “I’m going to marry you one day. I’m going to date you and then I’m going to wife you. It’ll be later than I wanted because I know you’re going to make me wait, but one day I’ll get down on one knee in front of all your friends and family and I’ll swear that I’ll love you until the day I die and I’ll be telling the truth. We’ve told dozens of lies to each other, Silver, but hear me when I say this – there’s no future for you without me in it. I’ll repeat it as many times as it takes for you to believe me and I’ll wait as long as I need to for you to come back to me.”

I love him too. I love him so much that the pain of that affection is just as great as the pain of his betrayal.

My heart pumps wildly in my chest, demanding that I go to him, that I give in and reconcile... but I’m still so unsure. With every declaration, he widens the crack of that door even further.

So I give in an inch.

“I... need time. And space.”

Triumph shines bright in his eyes, like we’re moments away from me telling him I’ve forgiven him. “I can work with that. How long?”

“I don’t know.” I say, before hastily adding, “And I’m not promising anything.”

“Alright.” He nods, accepting. “And we’ll see about that.”

He places a soft kiss on my forehead and my eyes flutter close as I lean into his touch, enjoying feeling his lips on my skin.

A phone dings in the background and he pulls away, but I stay in the moment a few more seconds, wanting to hold onto it for as long as I can.

“Thayer,” he snaps, the change in his voice so sudden it shocks my eyes open.

I look up at him and see his eyes are fixed on my phone where it lies on the table, his jaw set and the muscle in his cheek jumping dangerously.

I look down and see I have a new text.

From Carter.

“Why the fuck is he texting you telling you he misses you?” He snarls, his tone unforgiving.

I grab the phone and unlock it, seeing the text in question in my messages app.

**Carter:** I miss you.

I haven’t spoken to him since we broke up, not even to check if he made it home safely, so I’m not sure why he’s decided to reach out now.

But if I ever questioned whether I had any lingering feelings for him, this text gives me my answer.

I don’t feel anything. Nothing except a hint of sympathy and sadness that he misses me when I’ve moved on.

I can imagine that’s a painful place to be and I hope that he meets someone soon.

But I am glad to have final confirmation that this previous chapter of my life is definitively behind me. Regardless of where Rhys and I net out, there is no going back to Carter.

But Rhys is out of line for questioning who texts me and why. I’m single after all.

“Are you talking to him again?” He demands, his nostrils flaring and his voice distorted with barely concealed rage.

I let out a laugh. “No. You’re a liar and he’s a cheater. I just can’t catch a break in my love life.”

He doesn’t find that funny.

He rips the phone from my hand, presses the call button next to Carter's name and brings it up to his ear.

"What are you doing? Give that back!" I say, trying to reach for my phone. With the height difference between us though, he keeps it easily out of reach.

When it comes through the phone, I can hear Carter's answer as clearly as if he were standing in the computer lab with us.

"Babe?"

*Oh, fuck.*

Rhys' eyebrows drop as fury blankets his face. His anger is a physical thing that sucks out all of the oxygen in the room and leaves my lungs inoperational. His eyes darken until they lose the color I love so much, becoming shiny obsidian that drowns out the white around his irises.

Behind the anger are barely concealed hurt and betrayal, mirroring what I'm sure he sees when he looks into my eyes, the one notable difference being that I haven't done anything wrong.

Rhys' voice is unrecognizable when he speaks. At least a full octave lower than it usually is, it's sharp as a fresh blade and devastatingly terrifying. "You have no idea the kind of power and resources I have access to. I will deploy every single one of them to find you and bury you alive in an unmarked grave if you ever text or call this number again."

He hangs up and hands me the phone, his mouth in a grim line as he glares at me.

"You had no right." I tell him, flustered.

I have no need or desire to talk to Carter, but Rhys is overstepping. Whether he wants to accept it or not, I'm single.

"I have every right." He roars. "I have every right when it comes to you, especially if your ex is trying to claim what's mine."

"You're my ex too." I point out, knowing he won't like hearing it.

He turns away from me and brings his fist down violently on the table, making my math textbook jump up an inch off the desk before coming back down.

He paces the room and shoots me pointed but furtive looks as he does so, almost like a caged wild animal that sees fresh prey just beyond the railings of its prison.

His frustration is obvious as he runs his hand through his hair, leaving it completely disheveled and wild after his passage.

“If you wanted to hurt me like I hurt you, you’ve done it. Alright?” He asks, “You’ve made your point. We’re even now.”

“I haven’t done anything, if you’re hurting it’s because of the consequences of your actions.”

“Then tell me what I need to do!” He says, crossing the room in large, hurried steps and grabbing both my arms. “How do I fix this?”

When I remain silent, he adds softly, “Do you really want to see me move on with another girl?”

Based on the way my stomach plummets and bile rises into my throat, I’d rather have my toenails ripped off one by one than witness that.

My face must betray my thoughts because he cups my face and says, “You don’t want that anymore than I want you dating another guy.”

I shake my head and a relieved look crosses his face as he continues. “I won’t watch you with anyone else, Thayer. I’ll give you the time and space you asked for, but please don’t go to anyone else. Can you agree to that?”

As much as I’m not ready to forgive him yet, I know I don’t want anyone else either.

“Will you do the same?”

He tips my chin up towards him. “How could I ever touch anyone else when you’re all I think about?”

I give him a small smile and step into his embrace, flattening my cheek against his hard chest as his arms wrap around me in a warm, protective hug.

His chin comes down to rest on top of my head and he holds me for long minutes, the two of us remaining silent as we each take what we need from this hug – comfort, reassurance, and a bit of hope.

Finally, he presses a deep kiss in my hair, inhaling my scent as he does so, and says, “We’re going to be okay.”

I don’t know if he says it for his benefit or mine, but for the first time since we broke up, I believe him.

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

Sixteen days.

That's how long it's been since Thayer and I broke up.

Sixteen days since I had a real conversation with her about anything other than our breakup, squeezed her against my side as we sat with our friends, or made her laugh.

Sixteen days without claiming her mouth or taking her body.

Sixteen days of checking my phone every five minutes to see if she texted me and resisting the urge to smash it when I see she hasn't.

To summarize it succinctly, sixteen days of pure agony.

I'd been so focused on not falling in love and not opening myself to the pain of losing another person like I'd lost my parents that it'd never even crossed my mind that there might be multiple ways you could lose someone forever.

That you could still lose a person even if they were alive. And that that pain could be worse because you'd think of them, you'd dream of them and yearn for them, you'd even physically see them, but they wouldn't be in your life by choice, not fate.

I've learned since losing Thayer just how painful that type of loss can be.

Over the last week, I've given her the time and space she's asked for and I've stayed away. I still shower her with small gifts delivered to her place because I'll be damned if I let her use said time and space to forget and fall out of love with me, but we haven't seen each other since outside of furtive glances in class or hallways.

I miss her like I would miss a vital organ if it were unexpectedly ripped from my body and I was still expected to live.

It's impossible and I feel like I'm withering away without her.

I've done nothing except go through the motions of life since our conversation in the computer lab, going to class, then off-season conditioning, and then heading home with no need for other social interactions.

Tonight, Phoenix and Rogue stormed into my room and forced me out of my cave and to a bar in Geneva.

"If you're going to drink your feelings away, at least do it with good whiskey," they'd said.

That was two hours ago and in that time I've managed to get good and drunk.

The three of us sit at the bar itself, in the cover of darkness of this upscale lounge's subdued lighting, sipping our drinks in companionable silence.

I've got my whiskey in one hand and the strip of photos Thayer and I took in the photobooth at the Christmas market in the other, my thumb rubbing affectionately over her face like I've been doing every day of the past week.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" I say drunkenly, showing Phoenix who's sitting to my left. When he turns his head, I tilt the photos away from his gaze before he can look. "No, don't look at her. She's mine."

"You're down bad, Rhys." Rogue notes from my right.



“Hey,” I say, the word coming out slurred, “You’re one to talk. Bartender!” I motion for another drink.

“Chill out on the booze, drink some water.” Phoenix says, pushing my glass of water towards me.

I ignore it and instead reach for the new whiskey neat the bartender places in front of me, thanking him by placing a hundred euro tip on the bar.

“Keep them coming.”

I grab my phone and pull up my texts with Thayer, typing her a message.

**Rhys:** I miss u

**Rhys:** It’s killing me not talking to you

I lock my screen and place my phone face down on the bar, not expecting her to answer.

It doesn’t matter if she doesn’t, I just want her to know how I feel. To remind her that, even though I haven’t seen her in over a week, it’s because I’m respecting her wishes and not because I want to.

If it were up to me, I’d be at her place now.

I’m staring sightlessly across the bar, completely caught up in the drunken swirl of thoughts and feelings chaotically rushing through my brain, when someone taps me on the shoulder.

I turn and come face to face with Nera. Her eyes clock my level of intoxication as they move from me to my freshly poured drink.

I look over her shoulder and notice a man watching us in a booth. He must be who she’s with. He looks pretty familiar although my drunken state keeps me from being able to place him right away.

“How are you, Rhys?”

My eyes move back to meet hers. “Fine. How is she doing?” I ask her, hungry for any information about Thayer.

The corner of her lips pull up. “She might kill me for saying this, but about as well as you seem to be doing.”

I hate hearing that she’s in pain, but I love knowing that she’s not moving on. That she at least misses me, misses us.

There’s a hint of pleading in my tone when I speak next. “Tell me what I need to do to make her forgive me.”

“She’s the only one who can answer that and I think she doesn’t know the answer herself.” She watches me, her gaze searching. She must find what she was looking for in my eyes, because she adds, “For what it’s worth, I think she will forgive you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re on your own though, I’ve already said too much.”

“That’s alright, thanks for telling me.”

At that moment, my phone chimes. I pick it up and turn it over, revealing a text from Thayer.

**Thayer:** I miss you too.

My breath hitches and the drunkenness momentarily clears as I reread the text over and over again, making sure that it’s real and not a vision my love-addled brain has constructed to soothe my bruised heart.

I blink a few times to make sure, but it doesn’t change or disappear.

*I miss you too.*

She misses me.

She *misses* me.

I need to go to her.

Forgetting my level of inebriation, I jump to my feet from the stool I was sitting on and lose my balance, almost clotheslining Phoenix as I stumble a couple steps.

He catches me and helps me right myself.

“You alright mate?”

I fumble for my wallet. “Yeah, yeah. I have to go. Thayer texted me.”

Rogue puts a steadying hand on my forearm. “Go. We’ll close out.”

I nod at him in thanks before he turns towards Nera who’s still standing there with a smile on her face as she watches me.

“Nera.” He says, bringing her attention over to him.

“Yeah.”

He tips his chin towards the man sitting in the booth behind her. “Is that who I think it is?”

She looks over her shoulder at him and my gaze joins hers.

The man’s stare bores holes in the three of us, his body tense. I can tell he’s ready to intervene if one of us makes any type of move on her.

It takes Rogue asking his question to make me realize why I recognize who she’s with and when she turns back towards us, she confirms it with a blush.

“Yeah.”

Phoenix looks over at him as well before adding, “You’re playing with fire.”

Her eyes narrow on him. “You’re one to talk.” Her voice drops ten degrees when she talks to him, likely because of his history with Six. “I know what I’m doing. You won’t say anything, right?” She looks specifically at me when she asks the question, but I know she’s speaking to all three of us.

“No.”

She nods in thanks and walks back to her table without a word.

I down the rest of my drink, clap Rhys and Phoenix on the back and head out the door on unsteady, but reenergized feet.



Less than an hour later, I'm knocking on Thayer's door.

This is strangely reminiscent of the time I was here a couple of weeks ago, except this time I'm not actively trying to bang down the door with my fists.

She opens the door wearing jeans and a turtleneck and I let myself slump forward and drape over her in a hug. It's like my body knows it's home and is powering down for the night, feeling safe and secure.

"Hi."

"Hi," she says, her voice muffled by my large body as she tries to hold me up. "What are you doing here?"

"I missed you." I say, taking advantage of my position to bury my face in her neck. I inhale her like a drug addict, rubbing my nose up and down her neck as if imprinting her scent on me.

She pushes me off gently, resting me back against the opposing hallway wall. I give a displeased groan but let myself be moved, ultimately reclining my body and head against the wall as I look down at her through heavy lidded eyes.

She gives me a discerning look before a smile curls her lips. "Are you drunk?"

"Little bit."

"Why?"

I shrug noncommittally, running a hand through my hair. "Alcohol makes me dream that you forgive me." I rub over my face and down my chest, subconsciously placing it over my heart as if to protect it. "But then I wake up and you aren't in my arms like I'd dreamed."

"So the come down is brutal?"

"Yeah."

"Then why do you do it?"

“Because for the length of a dream, I get to spend time with you.” I cross the short length of the hallway to where she’s standing back against the opposing wall and bring my right palm softly down next to her head. I lean over her, bending to bring my face closer to hers as my mouth hovers over her ear. “Even if it’s in my head, even if it’s nothing but a hallucination, for a few moments it feels real.”

A shiver moves through her body as my breath hits the shell of her ear. I lean closer, using the excuse of my drunkenness to brush my lips against hers ‘accidentally’.

Sparks fly between us at the contact, the maddening chemistry swirling around us like it always does, more potently intoxicating than the alcohol flowing through my veins.

“Don’t kiss me,” she whispers, her voice thick with lust.

I resist a pained groan. I’ve never wanted to kiss anyone more in my entire life. It’s torture to be mere millimeters from her lips and not be able to close the distance, to press my lips against her soft ones and claim her mouth like I have done hundreds of times.

“It’s torture not touching you.” I mutter, my words garbled by the booze. “But pain is the price we pay for love. Trish taught me that.”

“She did? When?”

“When she was here after Bellamy was hurt. She was right that it’s a price worth paying, but this is worse pain than losing you. Seeing you and loving you but not getting to keep you.”

She grabs the arm keeping her trapped against the wall and pushes me back. Once she’s free, I expect her to release me, but she doesn’t.

I look down at where her palm is wrapped around my wrist and see that she’s running tentative fingers across her fluffy pink hair tie. I never took it off.

“Maybe you should give this back,” she says softly, her head bent to look at it.

I pull my wrist out of her hold. “You’ll have to pry it off my cold, dead body.”

I stumble back and she puts a steadying hand on me to keep me from falling. I shouldn’t have gotten this drunk, but it was the easiest way to forget the pain.

“Can you do me a favor?”

She quirks an eyebrow at me. “What?”

I bring my wrist and the hair tie up to my nose and inhale. “It doesn’t smell like you anymore. Can you put some of your perfume on it?”

She gives me a searching gaze, her arms crossed as I see her debate whether or not to agree. Finally, she turns and walks back into her apartment and to her room.

She didn’t tell me to wait outside, so I assume I can go in after her and I do.

Her bed calls to me, the fluffy pillows and the promise of her scent wrapped around me too enticing to resist as I let myself fall onto her mattress with a groan.

She turns from her shelf with the bottle in hand and sees me splayed on her comforter.

“Don’t get too comfortable.”

“Mhmm.”

She sits next to me and grabs my wrist, spraying her floral perfume a couple of times on the hair tie before letting it drop to the mattress.

I bring it back up to my nose and inhale it sharply, overwhelmed by her scent. “Fuck yes.”

My eyes flutter close to combat the dizziness. I feel like I’m laying in a bed on a ship in the middle of rough, open waters and not one in a dorm room.

I have no concept of how long I stay like this before I pass out, the smell of roses and jasmine tickling my nose.



I fight against a pounding headache to open my eyes.

I'm met with a bedroom that isn't mine and beautiful morning light that makes me want to never open my eyes again.

I've got the driest mouth I've ever had, like the last time I took a sip of water was two years ago, and very little memory of last night.

I remember going to the bar and coming to Thayer's. I guess I passed out in her bed and she let me stay over. I look down to see that I'm only in my underwear and tucked under the covers.

She must have taken care of me in my state. Guilt lances through me that I was a burden to her last night. I'd come here driven by the need to see her and talk to her, and I'd probably made my situation worse instead.

I look over to my left and see that the bed is empty. The covers are thrown back and there's an imprint of her head on the pillow, so she must have slept next to me last night before getting up early.

Grabbing my phone, I see that it's ten thirty am.

Not that early then.

I don't have any texts from her, just a couple from Rogue and Phoenix making sure I'm alright.

I sit up and put my feet on the floor, dropping my pounding head in my hands as I struggle to wake up and fight the hangover. Eventually, I pull my shit together, throw on some clothes and walk out into her living room where I expect to find her.

She's not there, but her roommates are. Six is paused comically with her spoon halfway raised to her mouth as she looks at me.

"Where's Thayer?"

“What are you doing here?” Six asks, setting her spoon down.

“He must have passed out here after getting drunk last night.” Nera concludes.

Bellamy turns a questioning look towards her. “How do you know that? Did you see him?”

“Oh, uh...”

“Hey.” I interrupt, bringing their attention back to me. “Where is she?”

“She’s not here.” Bellamy says unhelpfully.

I don’t know if it’s the hangover, the lack of carbs, or I’m just generally getting a shorter fuse, but I snap. “I don’t want to lose my friendship with you but I will if you play games with me, Bellamy.”

“I’m not playing games. She’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

“Home.”

I blame the alcohol for making me slower than usual, because I don’t understand what she’s saying.

“This is her home, where did she go?”

She gives me a sympathetic look and pulls out the fourth chair at the table, motioning for me to sit. I don’t.

“She went back to Chicago, Rhys.”

Now I sit, my legs all of a sudden incapable of carrying my weight. Her words are a blow made twice as painful by the fact that I wasn’t expecting them.

Nera pours me a glass of water and I down it.

“Why?”

“Her brother called her yesterday and told her their mom overdosed a couple of weeks ago. She’s fine, she was administered Narcan in time and released from the hospital yesterday. She didn’t think to let either of her kids know, Nolan only found out because he went over there to check on



her yesterday and saw the hospital bracelet on her wrist. Thayer's going home to check on her and make sure she's okay. I think she wants her to try AA again, but she doesn't have high hopes that her mom will listen."

Fuck. We've talked about her mother's addiction issues before and how they've impacted Thayer. I can only imagine how hard this is going to be for her.

"When is she coming back?"

"I don't know. Maybe not for a while – there's only a couple of days left until break, she mentioned finishing classes online and coming back in the new year."

I sit back in my chair, disconcerted. I thought we were making progress, why didn't she tell me about her mother? Better yet, why didn't she wake me and tell me she was leaving?

"Don't worry about her, Rhys. She knows how to take care of herself." Bellamy tells me, putting a comforting hand on my forearm.

I know that for a fact. Thayer's got endless reserves of strength, that's one of the first things that drew me to her and that continues to keep me intrigued.

I just wish she'd trusted me enough to rely on me in her moment of need.

\*\*\*

*Thayer*

I spend my first couple of days back in Chicago at Trish's apartment, resting and acclimatizing myself to the jet lag.

I don't go see my mom. The emergency has long passed so she can wait a couple of days while I get settled, plus I've got a lot of bitterness over the way this entire situation was handled.

Having to learn about her overdose from Nolan who learned about it by sheer luck himself instead of being told by our mom was hurtful. It's yet another display of selfishness from her.

She could have died.

I could be in Chicago for her funeral and not just to check up on her, but that fact either escapes her completely or she just really doesn't give a shit. I don't know which is worse.

So, I use the first two days to calm down so I don't barge into her place and start an argument. I've gone that route too many times, I know it won't work. I know it'll push her further into her bad decision spiral and not the other way around.

If I want to convince her to try AA again for the umpteenth attempt, hoping that this time is the time it actually

sticks, then I need to be as levelheaded as possible.

I take advantage of being at Trish's to let myself be coddled and loved on, my heart and soul in sore need of both what with the double whammy of having to deal with my mom and my breakup.

When Rhys showed up at my place the night before I left after a week spent apart, it'd felt like fate. Obviously, I'd known that I was leaving the next morning but he had no idea.

I'd wanted to tell him more than anything. I'd wanted his thoughtful advice and steadfast support, like he'd done before my second soccer game and every day since.

It'd been on the tip of my tongue half a dozen times, even with how drunk he was because I knew the topic would have sobered him up on the spot, but I'd held back at the last second every time.

I'd missed him so much over the past week, more than I could put into words. He'd listened to me and had given me the time and space I'd needed but it hadn't taken me long to realize that as angry as I was or had been, my feelings for him remained unchanged.

Seeing him at my place a couple of days ago confirmed that. He'd continued to prove his devotion to me through his words and actions and I'd decided that I wanted to try again.

But I hadn't wanted to guilt him into coming with me. I know if I'd mentioned it to him, he'd have felt obliged to come and I didn't want to burden him that way. No, I needed to keep this separate, to handle it myself and then when I was back in Switzerland, I'd mend the pieces with Rhys.

I walk into the kitchen just as Trish sets a plate on the counter. "Perfect, I was just going to call you for lunch."

"Thanks," I say, sitting next to her at the small table.

"Have you heard from Rhys?"

She's seen me check my phone a few times since I got here, hoping that he'd have messaged me. I thought that when

he realized I'd gone home that he would have texted me immediately and asked...something. But he didn't.

I haven't heard a word from him.

I don't know if it's him still respecting my request for space or if he's angry, but I hope it's the former. I'd text him myself, but I'm not sure what to say without word vomiting an entire novel at him of everything I'm feeling.

No, better to wait until I'm back in a few of days.

I shake my head and push my food around my plate, not taking a bite.

"Eat." She directs, "That boy loves you, baby. He's loved you for a long time. It'll work out but not if you starve yourself to death."

"How do you know he loves me?"

"The way he looks at you. He could hide behind his verbal denials back then, but there was no masking the way he watched you like you were the only person in the room." I eat as I listen to her. "He should never have participated in that bet, but I believe he truly loves you."

"So do I." I say, meeting her eye.

"Are you ready to forgive him?"

"I think I am, yeah."

She leans over and grabs my hand, squeezing it hard. "I'm happy for you, baby. You deserve all the good things in the world."

\*\*\*

After lunch, I head over to my mom's Hyde Park apartment, finally ready to face her.

She lives in the bottom unit of a completely run down four flat apartment building. I don't think any major

renovations have been done to it since it was built in the eighties, and I think at this point it'd be safer to demolish and rebuild it rather than try to fix the dozens of major problems there are.

Not that my mother cares or is sober enough to notice. So long as she has a roof over her head, she's happy.

I try the handle and find the door unlocked. It's not unusual but it's exasperating. I've told her hundreds of times to lock the doors, especially in this neighborhood.

There's nothing to steal here, but theft isn't the only crime that happens in this area.

"Mom?" I call, walking in and closing the door behind me.

The apartment is in total disarray.

It was never spotless even when I lived here, but Nolan and I at least tried to keep it tidy. In the months since we both moved out, it's turned into a real addict's nest. There are empty bottles, used pipes and syringes, old food wrappers and leftover crusts everywhere, not to mention extremely suspicious looking stains on the carpet with equally suspicious smells.

The hair raises on the back of my neck as I take in the scene. Nolan had warned me Mom wasn't taking care of the place, but that's an understatement. This place is unlivable and it makes me sick to my stomach to think that she lives here.

"Mom?" I call again, louder this time.

No answer.

I walk past the living room and peek into the old bedroom I shared with Nolan and onto Mom's room. Both are empty, both are completely disgusting. From what I can tell, she's been sleeping on the floor, the mattresses missing from the bed frames. She must have pawned them for a dime bag.

I swallow around the emotion clogging my throat and continue past the bathroom and into the kitchen. It's also unimaginably dirty but more importantly, it's empty.

Where is my mom?

I pull my phone out to text Nolan when I hear a noise coming from the front of the apartment. Before I can turn around, I'm shoved face first into the wall.

It happens so quickly that I can't even process it. There's a two second delay in my reaction that might prove to be fatal as a hand presses my face against the wall, keeping me trapped.

A large body molds itself against mine and I'm immediately assaulted by the smell of beer, weed, and piss.

Fear slams into me and I scream at the top of my lungs, fighting desperately against whoever is holding me.

"I've waited a long time to get you on your own." A terrifying voice grunts against my ear and my fear turns to dread as ice slithers in my veins.

All of a sudden, I'm eleven again and hiding from the screaming and fighting in my bedroom closet.

It's Mitch, my mom's on and off boyfriend of the last three years. I started staying more frequently at Bellamy's once he came into my mom's life. He's not the most violent of the boyfriends she's had, but I've always thought he might be the most dangerous anyway. He's always looked at me in a way that made my skin crawl, and I never felt safe around him.

He never crossed a line before, but that's only because I never gave him the opportunity to. If he was here, I was far away until he was gone.

Looks like my instincts were right.

I battle against the paralyzing fear that threatens to freeze me in place and scream again, my vocal cords straining as I push them to the limit while I thrash and struggle against his hold.

"Shut up, bitch."

He fists my hair and uses his hold to slam my face against the wall. Stars explode behind my eyes and temporarily render

me motionless as I fight against a wave of unconsciousness. I know that if I pass out now, I probably won't survive this and if I do, I'll never be the same again.

He uses my momentary daze to flip me around so I face him. He's as ugly and disgusting as I remember him, time and drug abuse having done nothing to help his already scarred face.

"I'm going to have fun with you." He says with a horrifying smile. A few of his teeth are missing and the rest are rotted, and that combined with his suggestive words makes for something scarier than what I've seen in horror movies.

*I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die.*

"Let me go!" I scream again, struggling even harder. I stomp on his foot and bite his forearm until I draw blood, refusing to let go even as he attempts to shake me off.

He punches me in the stomach with his other fist, sending the breath hurtling out of me and forcing me to release him. He wraps his hands around my throat and squeezes.

This isn't the way Rhys holds me dominantly in the bedroom, this is meant to hurt and potentially even kill.

"You don't need to be conscious for what I have planned for you."

Bile gathers in my throat and my eyes bulge out of my head as I fight him like a banshee.

I attempt to rip his hands off, but I'm no match for his size or strength. My nails dig into his forearms desperately then try to gouge his eyes, but he pulls his head back and out of reach.

Spots start to blur my vision as I feel my strength dwindle, but I don't give up. I attempt to knee him in the balls, but he evades me and smashes my head against the wall behind me.

A sob catches in my crushed throat as blackness starts to edge my eyesight.

I'm not going to make it.

I'm going to die because I tried to help my mom.

I'm going to die without having said goodbye to my friends.

I'm going to die without having told Rhys that I love him. I only told him once in anger, I want the opportunity to tell him for real.

As I fight against unconsciousness and slide down against the wall behind me, I swear I hear someone yell my name.

Maybe it's an angel and if it is, it has the most magical voice I've ever heard. It's one that I could listen to forever.

I hold on to that one ray of hope and battle to open my eyes one last time just in time to see Mitch tackled off of me.

His hands are ripped from my throat and I fall to the ground in a limp pile of limbs, my legs no longer able to hold me up.

I struggle to catch my breath, sucking in huge gulps of air that light my starving lungs on fire but also feel amazing.

I'm alive.

*I'm alive.*

I gingerly rub my murdered throat, working to even out my breathing and calm my racing heartbeat as the panic starts to recede.

I have no idea what happened or who saved me.

I sit up carefully, groaning at the soreness in my stomach, and make out Mitch struggling with someone whose face I can't see because his back is to me, but who I would recognize anywhere anyway.

It's Rhys.

He appears out of nowhere like my guardian angel, saving me as I'm on the brink of blacking out and suffering God knows what sort of atrocities at Mitch's hands.

I don't know what he's doing here or how he even knew to come here, but the relief at seeing him, at knowing he just



saved my life has tears immediately streaming down my face.

I know I'm safe now.

I can't see his face, but I feel his rage anyway. It suffocates all the air in the room as he rains down furious blows on Mitch's face who's no match for him in terms of size, stamina, or willpower.

Rhys doesn't say anything as he continues to hit him, the other man barely putting up a fight anymore.

He gets to his feet and grabs Mitch by the collar, dragging his inert body towards the bathroom. This new position allows me to see his face for the first time and it's unrecognizable.

Rage twists every line and contour of his face into something savage. Determination and murderous intent shine in his eyes as he hauls Mitch's large body towards the bathroom like it weighs nothing.

I crawl after them to the doorway, still too weak to use my legs, and see Rhys flip open the lid of the toilet open and yank Mitch up by the collar before plunging his head into the bowl.

"I'm going to fucking kill you." Rhys' voice shakes with the force of his anger as he holds Mitch's head underwater.

The latter fights for air, his hands flying every which way as he searches desperately for something to save him.

The irony isn't lost on me.

There's something surreal about watching Mitch being drowned in the toilet bowl of the apartment I grew up in. It's humiliating and terrifying and he deserves nothing more.

Rhys pulls him out of the water and he inhales a massive breath.

Fresh anger crosses Rhys' face at the sound of Mitch's breathing. "Just fucking die."

He plunges his head back into the toilet bowl, drowning him again. I have no doubt that he's going to kill him if I don't intervene.

I want nothing more than to see Mitch die, but I don't want that on Rhys' conscience. Let him be arrested, let him go to prison for the rest of his life, that's enough.

"Mackley," I call out weakly, the word coming out more of a croak than anything in my bruised throat.

He doesn't hear me, his entire focus fixated on the man he's suffocating in a dirty toilet bowl.

"Mackley," I try again, stronger this time, but I still don't get through. He's too far gone, too overtaken by revenge to hear me. Unless...

"Rhys!" I cry out and his eyes immediately snap to mine. They soften dramatically as they take me in. I'm half-sitting, half-kneeling, clutching the door frame for strength as I try to hold myself up. "Don't kill him. Please don't kill him."

Rage is back in his eyes as he debates whether to listen to me or not.

"Why not?"

Mitch is still fighting to free himself and get to oxygen, but his efforts are getting weaker and weaker.

"I don't want you to kill him for me. Please, let's call the police. I don't want to watch him die." I beg, brokenly.

The moment the words are out, Rhys pulls him out of the bowl and uses the leverage to smash his head down against the porcelain toilet seat.

There's a sickening crunch and blood sprays everywhere. If he's not done, he will be very soon unless he gets some help.

Rhys releases him and Mitch falls limply to the floor, unconscious but appearing to breathe even with the massive gash on his forehead.

Rhys strides over his prone body in one step and scoops me up into his arms, crushing me desperately against him. "My love," he whispers heatedly against my temple in his deep British accent, and I wrap my arms around his neck and cry.

I'm safe.

"I thought I'd lost you. I thought he'd killed you." He cries out and I hear the heartbreaking terror in his voice. I realize that as painful as this was for me, walking in on this scene must have been hard for him too. It's his greatest fear to have someone else he loves die, and he almost got a front row seat to that very thing.

He slides to the ground with me cocooned in his embrace and holds me as I cry, brushing my hair with gentle, comforting hands as sobs rack through my body.

"You saved my life," I say through broken sobs.

I don't know how long we sit there, but it feels like I cry forever. I cry for the past few weeks, I cry for the pain and fear, I cry for the relief and safety I feel in his arms.

The tears eventually subside, but Rhys doesn't move. He keeps rubbing circles on my back and caressing my hair and waits for me to move.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him.

"I told you that an ocean wouldn't keep me from you."

My heart lurches and I lift my head, cup his face and bring his lips down to mine in a sweet, longing kiss. He moans into my mouth, deepening the kiss and squeezing me even more tightly against him.

I taste my tears in this kiss and I know he does too, but he doesn't say anything. His lips move from mine to kiss the trail of my tears up my cheeks, licking up every one before pressing a kiss against each eyelid.

"Are you hurt?" He asks eventually.

I pull the collar of my shirt down to reveal my neck to him. I have no idea what the bruises look like but the way his eyes darken dangerously is anything to go by, it looks horrifying.

"Please let me kill him."

“No.” I say, burrowing closer to him. I can hear his heartbeat pounding against his rib cage, his pulse having not yet calmed down from the fight.

“Who is he?”

“My mom’s boyfriend,” I say with a shudder, before suddenly remembering the reason I came here in the first place. “My mom, Rhys. I came here to talk to her but she was gone. What if he did something to her? We need to go find her.” I exclaim frantically, trying to move out of his arms but he holds onto me tightly.

“Your mum is safe. I dropped her off at a rehab facility this morning.”

I stop struggling, my body sagging against him in disbelief.

“Why?” I ask, dumbfounded, “I don’t understand. How did you know I was here?”

“When I woke up at your place without you next to me, Bellamy told me you went home because your mum OD’d. I wasn’t going to let you handle that alone, love,” he says, pushing a strand of hair back behind my ear, “I took the plane to Chicago that afternoon and spent the past couple of days searching for the best rehab facility. I met your mum this morning and convinced her to go, then I dropped her off. I went to Trish’s place after I was done and she told me you were here, so I came right back. I wish I’d been thirty minutes faster so I could have stopped him from ever putting his hands you.” He growls, fury coming back into his voice as he looks off in the direction of the bathroom. “He’s a dead man, Silver, whether at my hands or someone who I pay to do the job, he won’t live much longer.”

Shock courses through me at the lengths he’s gone to over the past couple of days in addition to just saving my life.

“Why did you do all that for me?”

“Because I love you, Thayer. I’ve loved you for a long time now, even as I claimed to never want to fall in love. I would do a lot more than that to make you happy and ease

your pain. You see me for who I really am and you make me want to risk it all. I can't imagine my life without you."

I get on my knees between his, wrap my arms back around his neck and squeeze him in a death grip as I bury my face in his neck.

"Tell me you still love me, Silver." He pleads.

"I do," I answer, my voice muffled.

He cups my nape gently, careful not to hurt me even more and pulls my head back.

"I want to hear the words. And Thayer, I want to hear my name." He demands, "Say my name. Say you love *me*."

"I love you, Rhys. Even when I was mad at you I loved you. Even when I wasn't supposed to love you, I did. How could I resist you when you're the kindest, most generous person I've ever met? You're my best friend, although don't tell Bellamy because she'll kill me, my lover, and my savior. I love you forever."

He slams his lips down on mine in a bruising kiss, holding the back of my head so he can control the kiss. We paw at each other wildly, touch starved from our separation and excited by our mutual confessions.

Eventually, we break apart, gasping for breaths. He calls someone, a fixer of some sort who's going to take care of this situation, and carries me outside and to safety.

\*\*\*

*Rhys*

We end up spending Christmas in Chicago while Thayer recuperates from her injuries. The private doctor I took her to told her to avoid physical exertion for a week, so I get us a room at The Langham and I look after her.

I wait on her hand and foot while she recovers and refuse to touch her, no matter how much she begs.

She says she feels better after a couple of days, but I'm not taking any risks with her health.

Meanwhile, Mitch mysteriously disappears.

At least that's the story for anyone who comes looking, not that I think anyone will. In reality, he was tortured, dismembered and incinerated in various Chicago crematoriums.

Thayer doesn't ask questions, happy to live in blissful ignorance, and I say nothing, happy to know that he was in pain until the bitter end and wishing I could have found a way to bring him back to life just so I could kill him again.

Thayer isn't allowed to visit her mother while she's in detox, she can only write her a letter that will be given to her once she clears that phase. She writes to tell her how proud she

is of her and tells her she hopes that she'll be able to stay sober this time.

Only time will tell, but it's a good start.

We spend a lot of time with Trish and Nolan who after one conversation with me tells Thayer, "Much better than Carter."

My chest puffs out and I give her a proud smile at that. My smile only gets bigger as she tells him there's "no comparison".

It takes an Olympic sized amount of willpower to resist fucking her against the wall when she says that, but somehow I manage.

She shows me around Chicago and I fall in love with the city. It's got a great food and music scene and I could feel at home here if she decides this is where she wants to live.

I'll follow her wherever she wants to go.

Five days into her recovery, she tries to send me back to Switzerland so I can meet with the Arsenal scout who's in town. There's no way I'm leaving her behind, especially not when she's injured, so I simply raise an eyebrow and keep watching the movie.

The next day, there's an email in my inbox from him. Apparently Coach Matthews showed him some tape and he wants to offer me a contract.

Thayer screams so loudly when I tell her, I'm afraid she's going to hurt her bruised vocal cords. She doesn't care, she simply throws her arms around me and squeals excitedly, congratulating me.

I love that I can share those moments with her.

Today marks a week since I walked in and saw the most horrifying thing I've ever seen in my life. Thayer pinned against a wall, getting choked out by a man as the life drained out of her.

My heart was ripped out of my chest at that moment and it's only through watching her slowly recover that I've been

able to sew it stitch by stitch back where it belongs.

To celebrate the milestone, I went out and got tacos from Thayer's favorite place. I've come to learn that she can never get enough tacos.

I slide my keycard into the slot and walk into the presidential suite, coming to a stop when I see Thayer. She's clad in nothing but her bra and underwear and lying suggestively on the bed with her leg bent as she gives me a seductive look.

"What are you doing?" I growl.

She sits up, reaching behind her to undo the clasp of her bra before removing it and revealing her amazing tits.

"Waiting for my boyfriend to fuck me."

I drop the bag to the floor and cross the room to her in hurried steps before cupping the back of her neck and crashing my lips against hers.

She moans excitedly, her arms pushing my coat off my shoulders as my frenzied fingers rip open the buttons of my shirt before I yank it off.

"Are you sure?" I ask, not wanting to hurt her. There are still lingering shadows of the bruises on her neck and I don't want to add to them by being too rough.

At least not this time.

"Yes, fuck me."

I pounce. She falls back against the bed with a giggle as I crawl over her. I start by kissing her mouth and then move up the line of her jaw and down her neck to her chest where I suck her nipple into my mouth.

My other hand comes out to tweak the other one so neither feels neglected. I pinch her left nipple at the same time as I bite the right, and her back arches off the bed and into my touch.

I move down her body until I'm between her legs. I yank her hips down to the edge of the bed and rip her panties off



before diving between her folds. I lap at her center, my tongue moving up and down her slit as my teeth graze her clit.

She thrashes on the bed, her fingers digging into the sheets as she closes her eyes and calls my name.

“Look at me,” I growl, with my mouth still on her skin, “Look at me when I eat your pussy.”

She sits up slightly, holding herself on her forearms as she does as instructed. We keep eye contact, the intimacy deepening even further as I eat her like she’s my favorite meal.

I throw her legs over my shoulders as I bite her clit and she comes shouting my name. Her legs quake and I hold them on either side of my face as I continue to eat her out, happy to suffocate between her legs if it comes to it.

I stand and unbuckle my belt. She sits up at the noise and jumps to her feet, coming to stand before me as she reaches to pull my neck down and kisses me. I fucking love when she does this, when she tastes herself on my lips like a good little slut.

She places two hands on my chest and pushes me back until the back of my knees hit the bed, forcing me to sit. She kneels between my legs and removes my belt, working the button of my jeans next.

“No.” I say, grabbing her wrists and stopping her movements. “As much as I want to fuck your pretty little throat, it’s too soon.”

She shakes my grip away and continues unbuttoning my trousers before pulling my erect cock out.

“I say if I’m ready, and I’m ready. Let me suck your dick, please.”

I groan low in my throat. “Don’t say shit like that if you don’t want me to come the minute you put your lips on me.”

She gives me an evil little smile and her tongue peaks out to circle the head of my cock. She spits in her hand and uses it to lube up my dick as she pumps up and down my length.

Her tongue teases me, working the ridge of my head, lapping at the pre-cum, and licking the base of my cock where it meets my balls. Finally, she closes her lips around the head and works her mouth down the length until I hit the back of her throat.

“Fuck yes, just like that.”

She keeps going, gagging and tears pearling in her eyes as she works to take all of me in her throat. Once she does, she holds like that for a couple of seconds, her breaths tickling me as my eyes roll into the back of my head and I try not to blow right away.

She releases me with a loud pop.

“Look at me when I suck your dick,” she says, her words echoing my earlier ones.

She licks her lips before going back for another taste. This time, her head bobs and up and down as she takes my cock hungrily, her tongue flat against my shaft as she sucks me.

Her hand moves in tandem, twisting motions that compliment the way she guzzles my dick.

“I’m going to come,” I warn her, but she only hums in acknowledgement and keeps going. That hum sends vibrations down my length and makes my balls tighten before I empty myself in her throat, warm spurts of cum spilling into her mouth as she swallows it greedily.

She sits back on her heels and gives me a pleased look that makes me want to attack her. To dominate the fuck out of her.

I grab her upper arm and tug, sending her flying onto the bed. I pin her down on her back with an arm across her chest and spread her legs so I can access her sweet pussy.

Without preamble, I run two fingers down her slit to her entrance and push into her. She draws in a sharp breath as I do, but I don’t leave her time to get used to it. I immediately curl my fingers up and rub up against her sensitive spot.

Then I piston my fingers inside her at a furious rate, bumping up against that spot with every stroke. She screams and tries to close her legs to stop the overwhelming pleasure, but I don't let her.

I smack her thighs, forcing her to open them back up and keep the same furious pace. In less than a minute, her orgasm surges through her and hits her with the force of a Mack truck. She comes with a long, tortured scream as liquid gushes out of her and onto my hand.

I don't let up, drawing out her orgasm as much as I can as cum bursts out of her and all over the sheets. I fall back onto my knees and lap the wetness between her legs up, reveling in the taste of her and how I was able to make her come.

“Holy shit.” She calls out breathlessly. “I-I've never.”

“Good.” I answer, smugly, “I'll make you squirt whenever you want, love. All you have to do is beg.”

She blushes and that's all it takes for my cock to be hard again. I fist my dick and pump up and down a couple of times, getting myself ready for plunging back into her warm heat after all this time.

“I'm not going to last long, love. That's what happens when you don't let me fuck you for almost three weeks.”

I rub my cock up and down her slit a couple of times, collecting her wetness before I place it against her entrance.

“Never again?” I ask.

She nods. “Never again.”

I push into her with one swift thrust, bottoming inside her as her mouth falls open and her eyes widen in wonder. I throw her left leg over my shoulder and pump into her savagely, my eyes never leaving her face as I take in her every reaction.

I thrust into her like this for a few minutes before pulling out of her. She makes a disappointed noise soon replaced by a surprised squeak as I grab her legs and push them back over her until her knees rest next to her face.

Her eyes are comically large as I shove my cock back into her and piledrive her.

“Oh my god, Rhys.” She whimpers, trying to keep up with my furious pace.

“You love it when I treat you like this, don’t you, love?”

“Yes, yes,” she chants in time with my thrusts.

“Good girl.” I say, before I press my thumb down on her clit and rub it in tandem with how I power into her.

She stills for a second before her legs shake violently, her climax hitting her and making her clamp down on my cock. Her muscle spasms push me over the cliff as I come with a deafening roar, spilling inside her.

I want nothing more than to fall limply next to her, but instead I head to the bathroom and get washed up. I come back with a towel and clean her up before placing her under the covers and getting in next to her.

“You alright?” I ask her.

I didn’t mean to be rough, but I was. I got carried away by everything I feel for this incredible woman and I took her the way I wanted without regard for her injuries.

She caresses my face and presses a kiss against my lips. “I love you.”

I couldn’t have asked for a better response than that. I think I’ll never get tired of hearing her say the words to me.

“I love you too,” I say, squeezing her tightly against me and nudging her nose with mine, “And that’s the truth.”

**The End**

# Epilogue

## *Thayer*

“Tell me why you’re upset, love.” Rhys calls after me as I march up the stairs to our front door ahead of him.

“You touched her!”

“I grabbed her elbow.”

“Exactly.”

I can feel him smile behind me as he joins me on the doorstep. “So next time I should do what exactly? Let her get hit by that car?”

I search for my keys in my purse, digging around until I feel them. “If she can’t get out of the way in time, that’s her problem.”

He laughs loudly, his head tilting back and his throat bobbing as peels of laughter leave him. “Got it, love.” He says, leaning in to kiss me.

I know I’m being irrational. He doesn’t even know this woman, she was just some random standing on the street corner next to us. But I’d seen the way she’d batted her eyelashes at and how her eyes had lit up with interest when he’d saved her, like she’d found her own personal superhero.

No, bitch, he’s mine.

He's been mine for four blissful years.

After we reunited in Chicago, we returned to Switzerland just in time for New Year's Eve where he gave me the midnight kiss he'd promised me weeks earlier.

We finished out the school year together and graduated, and he was immediately recruited to play for Arsenal, accomplishing his lifelong dream.

There was no question of me not joining him, so we moved to London together and settled into a beautiful home in Barnsbury. I studied at UCL and coached at the youth soccer foundation he'd donated his winnings to on the side while he trained all day long.

It was hard living far from Bellamy, but I was lucky to have Six and Nera nearby and the years flew by. Bellamy and Rogue visited often and so did Trish.

My mom even came a couple of times.

It wasn't easy getting her clean, in fact it was really hard. It took her three rehab stints before she took it seriously and made a change. With every relapse, Rhys flew back to Chicago. He picked her up, accompanied her, and got her set up, each time in the best facility around.

The care he shows my mom and my brother, paying for his college tuition and accommodation, makes me fall even more in love with him than before, if that's even possible.

He's never made me doubt his devotion to me or my loved ones since we reunited and I know I'm the luckiest woman in the world to have him. I also love that he's the type of man who goes out of his way to help others. I feel like I've helped him embrace that side of him, although it obviously backfires sometimes when I see him touch other women to help them.

Bellamy was right, turns out I'm just as jealous of him as he is of me. It makes for an explosive combo, but we're good about resolving those issues in the bedroom.

Every day. Often several times a day.

Which is exactly how we got ourselves in this situation.

I turn my key in the lock as I think about how I'm going to break the news to him.

"Rhys... I have to tell you somet—," I start as I walk through the door but stop in front of our open plan living room.

There are hundreds of lit candles of various sizes displayed across the room, rose petals dispersed everywhere and shaped into a giant heart in the middle of the room, and gold balloons spelling out "marry me?" in capital letters floating above the mantel.

I turn around and my hand flies to my mouth when I find Rhys on one knee in the entryway.

"This is the only secret I've kept from you since that stupid bet, love, and it's been hard not to tell you. I wanted to propose to you the moment my heart started beating again when I found you in that dingy apartment in Chicago. I *needed* to propose to you when you forgave me, but I knew that I had to wait. It's been four long years and I can't wait anymore, Silver. I love you so much, it's actually disgusting. I never want to be separated from you, I never want to wake up without seeing your face, and I never want to experience anything without you by my side. Happiness doesn't come close to describing what I'll feel if you say yes, so please say yes. Will you marry me?"

I drop to my knees in front of him and clasp his available hand in both of mine. "I can't believe you're asking me this time instead of just telling me I'm going to be your wife."

"You were right back then – I need to hear you say the words. So what's it going to be, Sil?" He asks, and I see him hold a breath as he waits for me to speak, as if my answer isn't the most obvious thing in the world.

"I've also been keeping a secret." I say, tugging his hand and placing it on my stomach. "I'm pregnant."

He tackles me to the ground, the ring forgotten, and hugs me ferociously against him. He buries his face in my neck and

presses dozens of kisses against my nape as I giggle before he emerges.

His eyes have darkened with pleasure and shine on me with so much love, it steals my breath. “We’re going to have a baby?” He asks.

“And we’re getting married.” I say, sticking out my left hand towards him.

He sits up and reaches for the discarded box, pulling out the ring and placing it on my finger.

“Say it.”

“Yes, I’ll marry you!”

He cradles me in his arms and kisses me relentlessly, from my mouth to my jaw to my neck.

“My wife. The mother of my children. I fucking love you.” He growls possessively against my ear and I love hearing my new titles.

“My husband. The father of my children. I love you more.”

“I love you most.”

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**Thank you!**

**Books In This Series**

*Royal Crown Academy*

Long Live The King

*Rogue & Bellamy*

“Go ahead, scream for help.” He taunts darkly as his hot breath tickles my ear. “No one here will save you from me.”

When I get a scholarship to finish high school in Switzerland, I don't expect to meet a villain.

Rogue Royal.

He's the kind of gorgeous your mom tells you to stay away from, filthy rich and his family founded the school I just got accepted to.

Did I mention he makes my heart race?

Only because he hates me, of course. The first day we met, I accidentally spilled a milkshake on him and he's made my life hell ever since.

But this is my best chance for a better future for my mom and I. I won't let him break me.

\*This is a full length standalone semi dark romance novel, with an alphahole, possessive hero and containing scenes that are not suitable for all readers.\*

### **Books In This Series**

*Royal Crown Academy*

Pay For Your Lies

*Rhys & Thayer*

**Rhys**

**The moment I see her, I want her.**

**And what I want, I always get.**

It's the competitive side of me.

Learning that she has a boyfriend already enrages me, but does nothing to deter me.

I know that eventually she'll submit to me and be mine.

I'm so sure of it that I bet my friends I can crack her in a month.

I just hope I don't come to regret it.

**Thayer**

**From the moment I meet him, he's determined to have me.**

**He doesn't know that I'm just as competitive as he is and he's met his match.**

I'm attending Royal Crown Academy on an athletic scholarship for my senior year; the only things I care about are good performances on the field and lots of fun off of it.

I'm not interested in any of the resident heartbreaker's games but find myself sucked in when the soccer star becomes my personal Coach.

As we spend more time together, I see a different side of him and find myself falling for him a bit more every day.

But can I really trust him?

### **Books In This Series**

*Royal Crown Academy*

*TBD*

*Phoenix & Sixtine's story*

**TBD**

*Mystery man & Nera's story*

## **About The Author**

### **Khai Hara**

Khai Hara is an American author currently based out of New York City. An avid fan of the romance genre, 'Pay For Your Lies' is her second novel and the second novel in the Royal Crown Academy series. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling, hiking, reading and spending time with her boyfriend and their dog Thunder.

Follow her on IG at [@authorkhaihara](#) to stay up to date on upcoming releases.

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