



#1

~~Strategy #10:~~  
Don't drunk text  
your enemy

The Hater  
**PLAYBOOK**

BAYLIN CROW

# THE HATER PLAYBOOK

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# BOYFRIEND RULES BOOK TWO

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BAYLIN CROW

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The Hater Playbook by Baylin Crow

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ONE

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# OWEN

THE SUN BLAZED down from the cloudless sky on my tanned shoulders as I dunked the oversized sponge back into the blue bucket filled to the brim with soapy water. Sweat rolled down my forehead, stinging my dark brown eyes, and I blinked them repeatedly for relief. Summers in Texas were awful.

“It’s hotter than Satan’s asshole,” Vaughn, my best friend, mumbled from beside me as he absently ran a sponge over a custom wheel of the SUV we’d been washing for the last ten minutes. His voice rose several octaves as he mimicked Coach Turner, the girls’ high school basketball coach. *“We should do a carwash to raise money to support the athletic department! Everyone in town will be there!”*

She hadn’t been wrong, and the two of us were joined by twelve other kids, ranging from ten to eighteen years old, struggling to keep up with the flow of traffic. The buzz of conversation and laughter filled the parking lot of the old dry cleaners that we’d converted into a makeshift car wash with multiple lanes. It was an organized mess at best.

I rolled my eyes, glancing at Vaughn, who was scowling with his forest green eyes narrowed at the long line of cars parked along the curb of Main Street as they waited their turn. Shaking my head, I rose to my feet to reach the windows better. “Well, we’ll never get them all done if you’re just going to complain every five minutes.”

Vaughn sighed and reluctantly rose to his feet as well, swiping wide circles with suds along the dusty white paint. “I



just don't understand why we couldn't just have our moms bake shit we can sell instead of sweating our asses off. My new video game finished downloading this morning. *Fucking finally*. But can I play it? Hell no. Fundraising now includes child labor, apparently. And we don't even get paid."

"You cuss more than any other fifteen-year-old I know," I mumbled as I inspected the glass for any missed spots. "Besides, I think we did the world a favor by not trying to sell anything my mom bakes."

A sudden wet splat hit me square in the cheek, and I jerked my head to the side, glaring at Vaughn as I gathered the glob of soap on my finger and flung it down on the cracked concrete. "You dick. What was that for?"

"I like your mom's food. And I'm telling her you said that." His threat fell on deaf ears.

"You're not going to tell her because you have some gross crush on my mom. You wouldn't want to hurt her feelings." I grimaced because I'd been forced to listen to his lovesick rambling about her for as long as I could remember.

Vaughn wiggled his vibrant red-colored eyebrows as he shot me a wide, gap-toothed grin and tapped one finger on his scrawny, pale, freckled arm. "You just wait, O. One day, I'm going to get braces and big ass muscles. She's going to fall in love with me, and I'm going to be your stepdad. You're going to have to call me dadd—"

I threw the sponge, smacking him dead center in the mouth. Vaughn's eyes shot wide as he pulled it away and started rubbing at the soap left behind, spitting to get rid of the taste. "I hate you, Owen Walsh."

"Don't talk about my mom then." I held out my hand, and he slapped the soaked sponge back on my palm.

"*Jeeez*. Fine." Vaughn scowled as he swiped at the messy red curls that clung to the sweat at his temples. "You know you're pissier today than usual. And that's saying something."

My eyebrows shot high. “*I’m* pissy? You’re the one moaning on and on about—”

“Yo, Pace!” The deep voice that yelled out to my brother was one I’d heard my whole life. One I’d loved almost as long. I froze, and my gaze jerked over to Knight, my older brother’s best friend, who was sliding out of the fancy red sports car his rich parents had bought him a month ago when he’d turned eighteen. He’d parked next to the rest of the workers’ vehicles and strolled across the lot toward my brother and the rest of his jock friends.

I tracked his movements, silently worshipping his chestnut-colored hair that stuck out from his backward ball cap and hung down to his slate-colored eyes. Knight, with his pale athletic body, was easily over six feet tall—and still growing. He towered over everyone at the fundraiser. Every muscle, toned from years of playing basketball, was displayed by his red sleeveless tank, which was a shade brighter than his lips, and black mesh shorts.

Was I drooling? Just in case, I discreetly swiped at the corner of my mouth.

“I’m surprised Knight showed up,” Vaughn said as he followed my line of sight. “Shouldn’t he be with Abby, Kenzie, or the dozens of other girls he taps regularly?”

I ripped my gaze away from Knight, scowling at Vaughn. “Seriously?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s true. At some point, you gotta let that go. Knight is straight and too old for you. You’re just making yourself miserable.”

He had a point about Knight drowning in girls, but Vaughn had worked out my not-so-secret crush on my brother’s best friend years ago when I confided in him that I was probably gay. In turn, Vaughn had shared that he was decidedly bisexual.

“*He’s* too old for me? But *you’re* going to marry my mom?”

“You are missing the point, Owen.” He huffed.

I wasn't. I also knew Vaughn was right, but it wasn't like I'd given my heart permission to fall in love with Knight. Or constantly picture his blood-red lips on mine. It just happened when he spent the night with Pace most weekends. I mentally shook off the thoughts as best as possible and forced myself not to look again at Knight when I heard his raspy laugh over the spray of water coming from the car on the other side of the SUV. "What time is it?" I asked to distract myself.

Vaughn's gaze flicked to the sun as he shielded his eyes with his hand. "Probably around two."

I stared at him. "Since when can you tell time by the sun?"

"Since forever, Owen." He frowned as if I was dense, which was a semi-understandable response coming from my near-genius best friend. "Anyway, wanna come hang out when this torture ends? We can play that new game."

Coach Turner cut into our conversation, startling me with her sudden appearance. "Owen and Vaughn, are you boys just about done with this one? We have a line piling up here."

"Almost done," I replied with a forced smile.

She clapped her hands once. "Excellent! We are doing so well!"

When she turned to walk away, I glanced at Vaughn and rolled my eyes. "Come on, let's get this one done. The sooner we get this finished, the sooner you can stop crying and we can leave."

Vaughn nodded and grabbed the bucket before moving around to the opposite side to finish the job while I snagged the water hose. As I rinsed the suds away, I couldn't stop myself from glancing at Knight, who was holding a water hose over the roof of a sedan, spraying it down. He was now sandwiched between Pace and some girl from high school. My brother had his head tipped back, laughing at something Knight said, while the girl stared at my crush with big dopey eyes.

"I think you've sufficiently rinsed that spot about a hundred times," Vaughn said with amusement, snagging my

attention.

When I looked at him, I shrugged, hoping to mask my disappointment that the girl had a shot with Knight and I didn't. Even if Knight had been into guys, I couldn't see him drooling over a skinny kid like me that barely stood at five-eight. "Sorry, I just got sidetracked."

Vaughn scoffed. "If by sidetracked you mean staring at Knight, then yeah, I'd say you were."

"I don't even know why I like him," I admitted, frustrated with myself. "He only thinks of me as Pace's little brother."

"And he's straight and too old for you," he reminded me helpfully.

"So why am I still hung up on him?" I asked as I moved around to his side to hose off the soap dripping onto the pavement.

While I finished my task, Vaughn dried his hands on a towel hanging from his cargo shorts. "I think maybe most of us just want what we can't have."

When I glanced at him, he was circling the car as if searching for a spot of dirt we'd missed. Vaughn was probably right, but it didn't change anything. "Maybe."

"So, you didn't answer me." He followed me as I continued to rinse down the SUV. "My place afterward? Games and popcorn. You can stay the night too."

Immersing myself in the world of virtual reality would help me stop thinking about real life, so I nodded. "Sounds good. When my mom picks us up, we can swing by my place and grab my bag. I don't think she'll care if I come over."

"Sweet." He grinned. "Prepare to get your face stomped."

"You wish." I chuckled, but I was looking forward to some hard-core gaming.

Vaughn cocked one brow before turning slowly. I watched him carefully, and he darted to the side, grabbing the hose and pointing it at me. "Say I'm the master of the video game world or get soaked, Walsh."

I glared. “You wouldn’t.”

He grinned, an evil tilt of his lips. “Oh, I totally would, and you know—”

“Owen.” We both stilled at the gravelly sound of *that* voice.

Vaughn’s eyes widened as he stared up over my shoulder. “Heya, Knight. What’s up?”

I swallowed hard, refusing to turn around. Or more like my body was frozen in place.

“S’up,” Knight answered Vaughn before tapping on my shoulder. “Hey, Pace asked me to give you guys a ride when we close up. He’s splitting early because your mom called. She has car trouble and needs help getting it to a shop. Since your dad is out of town, you two are stuck with me.”

I swallowed again, audibly. “Like...a ride in your car?”

He chuckled, and my brain short-circuited at the sound. “Would my back be better? Want a piggyback ride home?”

Vaughn cackled, and I glared. But honestly, wrapping my legs around Knight, plastered against his back, didn’t sound like the worst idea.

When I reluctantly turned to face him, my gaze collided with his steely eyes that were at odds with the boyish dimpled grin he shot down at me. His eyes crinkled at the sides, amusement glimmering in them. “Your call. My car or my back.”

My cheeks lit up with heat that I was sure showed, even through my bronzed skin. I croaked, “Your car works.”

Another laugh rumbled up his throat, humor flickering in his eyes. “Come find me when you wrap up then.”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “I mean, okay. You got it.”

I really wanted to slap myself for rambling but figured it would only make the situation worse.

Knight’s brow furrowed. “You good, Mini Walsh?”

*Mini Walsh.* Well, the use of the nickname he'd called me from my first memory of him was one way to break through the idiocy clouding my brain. My brother and I looked alike in some ways, with beige-blond hair and dark brown eyes, so that was fair. But I was shorter and much slimmer than Pace. I was also my own person, dammit.

I scowled. "I have a name, you know."

Knight reached down, and I grimaced when he ruffled my sweaty hair with his mammoth hand. At least he didn't seem disgusted by the state of my strands, probably because he was used to it from playing ball. "Of course you do. You should have said it bothered you, *Owen*." He dropped his hand, and I hid my disappointment. Or at least I hoped I did. "I'll be waiting for you. Just find me when you're ready."

He shot me one last dimpled smile that made my knees wobble a bit before he turned and strode away back toward his friends.

"Breathe," Vaughn whispered. "You look seconds from passing out."

I shot him a glare. "Don't even start. But... Do you think he knows?"

"That you're into him?" Vaughn arched a brow. "If he didn't before, he does now. Pretty sure those pretty brown eyes of yours formed heart shapes."

I felt the color drain from my cheeks, embarrassment and dread flooding through me. "Just go tell Coach Turner we're done so we can start the next car."

Vaughn snorted. "Fine. Just get your shit together, okay?"

I couldn't make any promises, but I nodded anyway. "I'm cool, I swear."

He didn't appear to believe me, rolling his eyes. "Be right back."

I grabbed the bucket to rinse it out and refill with fresh water, determined to ignore Knight for the rest of the day. And failing miserably.

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THE SMELL of new leather and sweaty gym socks mingled together in the small confines of Knight's car. But I barely registered the scent or the vibration from the motor whipping through my body. I was more concerned with the hammering of my heart attempting to beat out of my chest or passing out, my lungs screaming for oxygen with each shallow breath I managed.

To be fair, Knight had casually dropped one arm onto the console, forcing his wide shoulders to brush mine each time he whipped around a turn. Not to mention how the raspy timbre of his voice affected me as he made small talk.

"So, you're off to college next month, right?" Vaughn asked from the cramped backseat.

"Less than a month," I interjected.

Soon Knight wouldn't be at my house several days a week. I was both grateful and disappointed by the thought. Maybe with him hours away, I could finally stop stupidly daydreaming about a future of us together.

Knight craned his neck, shooting me what appeared to be a confused look. "Pace didn't tell you?"

My eyebrows scrunched together. "Didn't tell me what?"

"That I changed schools." He gave me a baffled look, and I quietly cursed my brother as unease gripped my gut.

"He didn't tell me anything."

Knight shook his head before shrugging one shoulder. "Well, anyway, I decided to stay here and attend Harksford."

"Why?" Both Vaughn and I asked at the same time.

Knight barked a laugh. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you both wanted me gone."

What did he mean *If he didn't know any better*? It was probably best not to ask. Instead, I opted for a safer route as I

lifted one shoulder. “No, I’m just surprised you’re turning down a top athletic program.”

“Harksford is pretty well known for their program, and I like it here,” he said simply. “And I won’t have to hole up in a tiny dorm.”

Knight was staying. My stomach hollowed as I let the unexpected change sink into my mind. What about my plans to get over him? I mentally saw that idea smashing like shattered glass. But at least he’d be busy with college, and I wouldn’t have to see him at school walking down the halls with girls anymore. One year of that had been bad enough.

“You’re quiet.” Knight nudged his elbow against my arm. “What’s up with you, mini... I mean, *Owen*.”

The sound of my name rolling off his tongue did stupid things to my body. Hormones really were a pain.

I choked out, “Nothing. Just a little worn out from the sun, and my arms are pretty much limp noodles.”

He chuckled. “Believe me. I get it. I feel that way after practice. But it also feels amazing.”

“If you say so.” I did *not* feel amazing. More like ready to faceplant on my mattress. “I just want a nap.”

“No nap,” Vaughn cut in. “We are grabbing your bag and heading to my place. Remember?”

“Oh?” Knight asked, shooting a glance my way before looking back at the road. “Want me to hang around for a minute and drive you two over there?”

“No!” The word burst from my lips with more force than necessary. I laughed uneasily to cover up my nerves. “I just mean he only lives a block away. We’ll walk.”

“You sure?” Knight asked, and when I nodded, he shrugged and then turned up the volume of his radio.

As Knight drove, he tapped a single long finger on the steering wheel to the bass that began thumping through his speakers. With his attention off me, I finally relaxed into the tiny bucket seat. The drive to my house was less than ten



minutes away, and I breathed a sigh of relief when Knight turned into the middle-class subdivision I'd called home my entire life.

The cookie-cutter homes of varying shades of brick surrounded by well-kept lawns were spaced close together, a stark contrast to the massive Mediterranean-style home on the vast land Knight called home. But he'd never acted as if the financial gap between his parents and ours existed at all. It was just another thing I loved about him. Towering oak trees lined the road, coating the street with scattered leaves that had fallen and withered beneath the brutal summer sun.

My house came into view, and I prepared to jump out of the car as he rolled to a stop along the curb. When I popped the door open, a warm hand with a strong grip wrapped around my arm.

I shot a confused look at Knight because he rarely touched me. "Yeah?"

"Give me your phone." He loosened his hold, hand falling away as he turned it palm up and wiggled his fingers. At my quizzical stare, he sighed. "I'm not going to start prank calling you, Owen. I'm just trying to give you my number in case you need a ride or something while your mom and Pace are busy."

That made sense, I supposed. I dug my phone from my shorts pocket and handed it to him, trying to hide how my hand shook. My gaze was glued to his face, sharp features relaxed as he tapped on the screen.

Once he was done, he held the phone out, and I took it, careful not to brush his fingers with mine. According to my best friend, I'd already been transparent about my feelings enough for one day, and I really needed to wrap my head around the fact that Knight wasn't leaving. I gave him a strained smile. "Thanks for the ride."

He nodded. "Any time. Seriously, just give me a call, and I'll be right there."

It was difficult not to read into meaning that wasn't there. Knight was a player, both on the court and with girls, but he

was a decent guy. He was sincerely offering help if I needed it. He'd do it for anyone. I repeated the reminder over and over as I tugged the lever to draw the seat forward so Vaughn could climb out.

Before I shut the door, I offered Knight one last grin. "Okay, thanks again."

His dimples popped as he smiled back. "See ya 'round, *Owen*."

He kept using my name, and I knew he was making a point. One I appreciated. "Yeah. See ya."

Vaughn and I stepped back onto the sidewalk as Knight pulled away.

I didn't glance at my friend as we turned and headed for the front door. But it didn't stop him from running his mouth.

"Are you going to start a scrapbook of how your kids might look now?" Vaughn whispered. "Start planning the wedding? Do you see yourself in all white, or are we talking rainbow themed?"

"I hate you," I hissed, and he snickered.

"I'm just giving you a hard time." Vaughn stopped behind me as I fished my house key free from my pocket and unlocked the door. When we stepped inside, Vaughn sighed. "He may not be leaving, but you still gotta—"

"Move on," I finished for him as I closed the door. "I know, okay? Now can we please drop it?"

He followed me to my room and sat on the bed as I grabbed my bag and started stuffing it with a change of clothes.

The problem was that I wasn't sure if I was just lying to myself. For as long as I could remember, I'd been in love with Knight Jackson. Meanwhile, as far as he was concerned, I'd always just be Pace's little brother.

TWO

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# KNIGHT

APPROPRIATELY NAMED THE BIRMINGHAM GIANTS, these motherfuckers were huge compared to most of the competitors I was used to facing off with on the court. But standing at six-eight, I was still the tallest on either side. Hell, I was practically created to play the game. Still, as Rook took off across the glossy floor of our campus arena, nerves rippled through my sweat-drenched body, and my heart pounded in my chest. My future career of playing professional ball was hanging on a perfect season. And the game was tied as it had been all night, too close for comfort.

The sound of squeaking shoes and the ball thudding against the floor as we raced down the court blended with the noise from the crowd packing the stands. My stride matched Rook's in case he needed to pass me the ball. He twisted to the side, dodging the greedy hands trying to steal the ball before he stopped on a dime, poised to shoot. Time stopped and I, along with the crowd, quieted as if holding our breaths. My teammate raised his arms and released the ball, letting it roll off his fingertips.

Long arms stretched upward, trying to block the shot, but with a perfectly timed arc, the ball cut through the air, followed by the best sound in the world. *Swish*. Nothing but motherfucking net.

The buzzer went off, blaring loud, and the crowd erupted, cheers echoing off the arena walls. I loved home games because the sound of so many fans losing their shit over the victory was the cherry on top of a fudge-covered sundae.

“Fuck yes!” I sprinted toward Rook, grabbing his arms and shaking the hell out of him. He stumbled from the force, and I gripped his shoulders to keep him upright. “That’s what’s up!”

Several of our teammates did the same, slapping Rook’s back, ruffling his short black hair, and smacking sweat-slicked palms. Winning a game with a perfectly executed shot could leave you battered and bruised by your own damn team. He didn’t seem to care, laughing with abandon. The smile that stretched his lips was born of pure adrenaline and the infectious energy from the Harksford University fanbase.

Coach knocked his arm into Rook’s. “Damn boy, way to get it done.”

“Yes, sir.” Rook chuckled before grabbing the bottom of his jersey to wipe away the sweat dripping down his face.

When he glanced toward the stands, like always after a game, I didn’t even need to look to know he was searching out his best friend. Still, I followed his gaze toward Noah.

Dressed in jeans and a white and blue Wolverines—our college mascot—hoodie, he clapped louder than the rest and flashed Rook a grin.

I rolled my eyes, wondering when the two would figure out they were stupidly in love with each other. “You can stare at your boyfriend later. Let’s go.”

His gaze jerked toward mine, followed by a swift elbow to my stomach, making me grunt. I probably deserved that, but I was already out of breath from the game, so I didn’t appreciate the move. Wasn’t my fault they were blind as fuck when it came to their *friendship*.

“He’s not my boyfriend, asshat.” Rook glared, and I suppressed another eye roll.

I wasn’t really in the mood for more inflicted pain, so I decided against continuing to rib him about Noah. Instead, I turned and jogged across the court toward the locker room with the rest of the team. My nose wrinkled as I stepped into the spacious room that reeked with the musty scent of sweaty

athletes that no amount of bleach could kill. I swore the smell seemed to soak into the tiniest fibers.

Coach's postgame speech was quick and to the point, throwing another comment of praise Rook's way, along with other players who had made key shots and blocks, including me. When it was over, I stripped out of my uniform and took a cold shower, appreciating the cool water against my heated skin.

"We partying tonight?" Jacob, the point guard, asked from the shower next to mine.

I cocked a brow as I soaped up. "Is that even a question?"

We celebrated at my place after every game, but with my parents out of town, shit was going *down* at Casa de la Jackson. Word quickly spread throughout the locker room as I stepped out of the stall and tied a towel around my waist.

The room was filled with excitement from winning, and I quickly dressed in warm clothes before I sat down to shove my feet into my shoes.

As usual, Rook was the first one done, slinging his game gym bag over his shoulder.

"Where's the fire?" I asked, knowing damn well the fire was in his pants in the form of a boner for his bestie.

His eyes narrowed. "No fire. Just ready to be done looking at your ugly mug."

Ugly mug, my ass. I snorted as I laced my shoes. "Coming over to celebrate with us?"

Rook shrugged as best he could with the heavy weight of his bag. "I don't know, man. I'll let you know."

"Got to check in with the missus?" I stood, stretching my arms over my head as I cocked a brow.

He shook his head, and Newb, nicknamed for the obvious reason that he was new to the team, piped up. "I didn't know Rook had a girlfriend. Thought he didn't do serious."

When I glanced at Newb, he was frowning. To be fair, Rook did have a reputation of being a campus manwhore—whispered rumors that weren't true.

He was too busy with basketball and secretly sweating Noah's nuts to spend that kind of time on girls. I snorted. "Keep up, Newb." I didn't bother to hide my amusement. "Rook has a girlfriend with blond hair, pretty blue eyes...and a big dick."

Newb's eyebrows shot straight to his hairline. "What?"

Jamey, one of our teammates, butted in. "How do you know it's big, Knight? You been scoping out Noah's cock?"

I looked at Rook, knowing the comment would crawl under his skin. His glare shot to Jamey and back to me.

I shrugged. "Must be since he has Rook on lock."

Rook took the bait, shoving my shoulder. "Shut up. You know Noah's off limits to locker room talk."

My lips twisted into a smug grin. "Tell me you're not going to check in with him first."

Rook's mouth formed a flat line before he scowled. "Fuck you, dip shit."

My laugh boomed off the walls, and I smirked. "Like I said. *On lock.*"

"You're an idiot." Rook flipped me off and then shouldered open the door.

Everyone laughed, and I half expected Rook to turn around and punch us all.

When the door swung shut behind him, Newb asked, "Rook's gay?"

Eh, it wasn't really my place to out my teammate, especially when I wasn't sure if he even knew he was into Noah, so I shook my head. "Nah, just giving him shit."

Newb frowned thoughtfully. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

I grabbed my bag from the floor and turned around, facing everyone as I walked backward toward the door. “Anyone needs directions to my house, text Jacob. I need to go grab a few things before people start showing up.”

Jacob rolled his eyes. “Since when did I become your secretary?”

“Since you brought up the party first,” I yelled as I stepped out into the hallway, pushing the door shut before he could argue. Grinning to myself, I strode down the hallway, whistling a catchy beat before I pushed open the door and stepped out into the cold as fuck parking lot.

Icy wind assaulted my cheeks, and I cursed myself for not drying my hair. On my way to my truck, I scanned the dimly lit parking lot and spotted Rook’s black SUV still in its space with the lights on and exhaust pouring into the frigid night.

He’d bolted so quickly that I hadn’t been able to badger him about coming to the party. Half of which he usually missed because he and Noah had other plans. I strolled over to the SUV and tapped on the passenger side window.

Noah jerked around, glancing at me with a curious look. Rook, on the other hand, scowled. I gestured for one of them to roll down the window, and Rook pressed the button, only allowing a few inches.

“Miss me already?” He appeared annoyed, much to my amusement.

*Smartass.* I decided to ruffle his feathers a bit more, so I switched my attention to Noah and winked. “Hell no. I missed Noah. Hi, boo.”

Noah grinned. “Hey, ba—”

Rook snapped his fingers in front of Noah, blocking his view before glancing at me with narrowed eyes. Though he knew I was straight, he still seemed pissed as hell when I flirted with Noah. It was harmless fun, but I did love working my teammate up. Maybe someday, it would provoke him to actually do something about the boner he carried for his bestie.

“What do you want?” Rook snapped.



I narrowed my eyes back, taunting him further. “You’re like a jealous girlfriend, you know that, right?” Really, I was doing him a favor. He just didn’t realize it yet. I flicked my attention back to Noah, refocusing on why I’d come over in the first place. “Party at my place to celebrate. The whole team is coming. Make sure he’s there?”

“On it, captain.” Noah half-saluted me, and my lips twitched in amusement.

“Captain Knight.” I wiggled my eyebrows, not hating my new title. “Has a kinky ring to it. Kind of makes me wish I was gay.”

I glanced at Rook, whose features twisted in a way I was sure meant he wanted to strangle me. He growled, “Don’t you have places to be? *Girls* to do?”

I grinned as I backed away, holding up my hands as I retreated. Riling Rook up was fun, but I wasn’t looking to get punched in the face. “I better see you two later.”

I couldn’t help the last wink I tossed at Noah before I strode toward my brand-new apple red truck, with a serious lift kit, parked several spaces away.

Once I slid onto the cold black leather, I cranked the engine and flipped on the heat and seat warmers. After connecting my phone to the speakers, I spotted a missed call from my best friend. I spoke aloud as I pulled out of the parking space. “Call Pace.”

The phone rang one time before he picked up.

“You win?” my best friend asked.

I snorted. “Hello to you too, and yes, we wiped the court with those dudes.” No one ever accused me of not exaggerating.

Pace chuckled. “Close game then?”

Even after three years of living in separate states and only seeing him for breaks, Pace knew me better than anyone. “Too close. Could have been a fucking disaster.”

“So dramatic.” He chuckled. “Congrats on the win, but that’s not why I called. You know I’ll be in town in a few weeks for Christmas. I sort of...met someone, and she’ll be coming too.”

I paused, not expecting that piece of news at all. “No shit?”

“Yep. I know you had plans to drag me to every lame party you manage to fit into those seven days you’re off from practice.” He sighed. “Dude, Laura’s honestly great. I really do think there’s a potential future with her.”

I was happy for Pace. Though I couldn’t imagine settling down, maybe ever, Pace had marriage in his future plans for as long as I’d known him. “Yeah? Well then, I can’t wait to meet her. Not gonna lie, though. I can’t believe you found someone willing to put up with you.”

“Shut up, dick.” He laughed. “I wanted to give you a heads up but also make a request.”

Curiosity piqued, I asked, “Should I be afraid to ask?”

“Uh, maybe? Mom called me and said Owen was doing great in school.” He paused. “But I don’t think he’s really left his dorm except for class. I know you have a party planned tonight. You should invite Owen.”

Owen, Pace’s little brother, had been dodging me for years. If he thought I hadn’t noticed, he was wrong. The fact that Owen had never once used my number since I’d given it to him, and he was always conveniently missing when I stayed at their house, made it clear he was avoiding me. And I had a good idea I knew what had triggered his absence.

When he had come out in high school, I learned about it from Pace. Though I hadn’t been surprised. I wasn’t blind, and I’d have to be to not notice the way Owen had looked at me while we were growing up. My best friend’s little brother was into me. While a crush usually hung around, Owen had sprinted for the hills.

After the effort he’d put in to stay away from me, there was no way he’d come to a party if I invited him. Besides, I didn’t have his number and didn’t see a reason to ask for it so

he could just hang up on me. Even guys like me with huge egos hated rejection.

Pace mumbled to someone in the background before his voice became clear again. “I need to go but have fun tonight. Stay out of trouble.”

“Always.” I chuckled. “Talk later.”

“Later, man.” The call ended, and almost immediately, my phone chimed with a text.

Having my phone set to read texts out loud, Rook’s voice filled the cab of my truck.

Rook: *See you tonight.*

Rook: *Don’t hit on Noah, jackass.*

A laugh rumbled up my throat. The demand only ensured I would definitely flirt with Noah.

“*Reply to text,*” I said. “*I would never do that.*”

I imagined the scowl on his face. My grin broadened before I started making plans for the night.

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THREE

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# OWEN

“DID you see Knight’s having a party tonight?” Vaughn asked from his side of the room where he was lying flat on his back on the uncomfortable dorm bed. When I looked up, he turned his phone, flashing the screen toward me. “A big one too.”

A crush of bodies was moving to the bass of the music thumping loudly through the speakers as someone streamed the live video.

While Knight had opted to live in the guest house just behind his parents’ sprawling Mediterranean-style home, I’d been happy to move into the campus dorms for a little more privacy from my parents.

I sighed and looked away from the phone, setting my textbook down on our shared faux wood desk. “There’s always a party at Knight’s place. We’re supposed to be studying. *Not* social media stalking campus athletes.”

“Oh, please.” Vaughn scoffed. “Knight isn’t just some random jock on campus, and you know it. Plus, they won their game today. A little celebration never hurt anyone, O. Why don’t we ever go to his parties anyway?”

“You know why. And you were the one who was all *Get over him, O. He’s straight and too old for you.*” My brow furrowed as I glanced at him. “Did someone invite you?”

Vaughn snorted. “Uh, no. Last time I checked, I was still a part of the loser crowd. And since you *are* over him now, what’s the problem?”

In many ways Vaughn had changed over the last few years. The gaps in his teeth had been closed thanks to braces, and he'd filled out more than I had, gaining a few pounds of muscle where my body refused to. His red hair was still bright, but he kept the wild curls tamed most of the time. What hadn't changed was the fact that he still had no filter on his mouth.

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the sarcasm thick on his tongue. "Well, that's why we don't go. We don't even get invited."

Not being invited was only part of the reason. I might have lied to my best friend a bit about the feelings I still had for Knight, even if he didn't believe me. So I decided against responding to that comment.

From the day I found out Knight wasn't moving away I'd done well avoiding him by spending a lot more nights at Vaughn's house. And Knight had made things easier on me once he started hanging out with the college crowd after my brother had moved to attend a university out of state. But since I never kicked the lingering childhood crush I'd had on him, it seemed smart to keep my distance as much as possible now that we were on the same campus.

Vaughn propped himself up on his bony elbows. "C'mon, O, one party is not going to kill you. If you ask, it's not like he's going to turn you down."

I was already shaking my head. "No way. I haven't talked to him in years. And anyway, I don't want to go to a party full of jockholes."

"Buzzkill." Vaughn flopped back down on his mattress, watching his phone again, eyebrows arching high. "Wow. Well, it looks like *they* are having fun, at least."

Against my better judgment, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Look." Vaughn turned his phone to face me again. A brown nipple was taking up almost the entire screen. I refused to acknowledge out loud that I could identify Knight by a few inches of his body alone, especially his damn nipple.

The camera shook and adjusted until Knight's face came into view. He was clearly drunk. Steel gray eyes were bloodshot, and his brown hair messier than usual. And yet my cock twitched just at the sight of him. No one should be allowed to look that good while wasted.

Giggling sounded through the speakers, although it was nearly drowned out by the pounding music. I tensed, even though I should have been used to it by now. Knight was never going to settle down. Not until he fucked, at minimum, half the girls on campus.

Knight winked at the camera, and his reddened lips tilted into a crooked grin that made one dimple pop. "If you're not here, you're a loser."

That smile still slayed me, but Knight had only grown cockier as the years passed, and he'd become one of the most popular guys on campus. To be honest, I was pissed at myself for the way my body reacted to Knight, betraying my brain that knew better than to get hung up on guys like him.

I looked away from the phone and swept my hand toward the stack of textbooks on the desk. "Some of us don't get a free pass because we're athletes. We need to actually study."

"You're still into him," Vaughn accused with narrowed eyes, daring me to argue.

It wasn't a question, but the automatic denial fell on my lips as I scoffed. "I've told you this before, several times. I'm over him. Can we please get back to studying now?"

Vaughn sighed. "Whatever you say. But I need a break. Want to grab some food and recharge?"

"Recharge?" I gave him a baffled look. "You haven't even started."

He grinned in response and tapped his temple. "Don't need to. This baby is a sponge."

A long breath escaped my lips. At this rate, I'd never catch up on the classes I'd gotten behind on, thanks to a nasty bout of the flu at the beginning of the semester. But I'd been working for hours, and my stomach growled at the mention of

food. I couldn't concentrate anymore anyway. I wouldn't acknowledge that part of my inability to focus was because my thoughts had shifted to Knight and that he was probably screwing at that very second at least one of those girls I'd overheard.

I hid the scowl attempting to creep up my face as I pushed my chair back and stood. "Fine, but then we, or rather I, have to get back to studying."

"Hell yes." Vaughn's dark green eyes lit up before he rolled off the bed and strolled to his closet. If it could be called that. The thing was at full capacity with only a handful of shirts and pants. He glanced over his shoulder as he tugged a pair of dark jeans off the hanger. "Pizza sound okay?"

Greasy meat and cheese would only make me more tired, but now I was craving heaps of pepperoni. My stomach made the decision as I made my way to my own closet and began rifling through the few hanging clothes.

"Sure." I snagged a pair of stonewash jeans and a long-sleeved graphic t-shirt that depicted classic video games that had been released before I was born.

As I traded my plaid pajama pants and plain t-shirt for the outfit, my thoughts returned once again to Knight and what he was likely doing. At some point, my feelings for him would change. They had to. One of my goals over the summer had been to start dating in college. Yet here we were months later, and I hadn't even talked to a guy. Not in *that* way.

"Hello, earth to Owen." Vaughn's voice cut through my thoughts. "We going or what?"

I snagged my shoes from the worn carpet that was years overdue to be replaced, and shoved my feet into them. I glanced at Vaughn while pretending I hadn't been distracted. "Are we walking?"

I checked the mirror hanging on the back of my closet. The image of a scrawny body and beige-blond hair that hung down nearly to my dark brown eyes was reflected back to me. If I



was actually going to attempt to meet someone, I needed at least a haircut.

“Yes, I need blood to start circulating again after sitting so long.” He grabbed his keys from the dresser, so I didn’t bother with mine.

We both bundled ourselves in thick coats, and then I snatched my wallet off my nightstand before heading toward the door, stopping as Vaughn swung it open. I waited for him to lock up in the hall, glancing at where a girl and guy were making out. The girl wasn’t even supposed to be in the building, but our RA really didn’t seem to give a shit about the rules.

As we passed the couple and a few other loitering students, no one paid us any attention. Sometimes I felt like a ghost on campus but preferred it that way. I couldn’t imagine living like Knight in the limelight all the time, though he didn’t seem to mind the attention one bit.

As we stepped outside, I pulled my black puffer coat tighter around me to ward off the plummeting temperatures, made worse by the nightfall and gusty winds. We took off at a quick clip to the pizza joint one block away from the dorms. If it had been any further, there’s no way I’d have walked.

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THE AIR in the mom-and-pop Italian restaurant was warm and filled with the scent of garlic and herbs. I eyed an empty booth set back in the far corner. “Order, and I’ll grab the table,” I suggested.

Vaughn glanced around the packed joint, typical for a Saturday night crowd on campus. “Yeah, okay.”

“Just don’t get that pineapple crap you love so much,” I warned, and he rolled his eyes before stepping up to the counter.

I headed to the table and slid into the booth, glancing around to make sure no one had a view of my phone screen.

While Vaughn was preoccupied, I couldn't resist sneaking onto social media and pulling up Knight's page again, preferably without my best friend's judgmental smug grin aimed at me. So what if I was curious?

Several videos with Knight tagged in them had been posted since the one Vaughn had shown me, and the timestamps ran all the way up to ten minutes ago. Turning down the volume, I glanced at Vaughn, leaning on the counter, flirting with the guy taking his order. With his attention elsewhere, I looked back at the screen and clicked on the newest clip, hitting play.

Even with the sound low, the music still hummed through the speakers, and I could make out the words coming from several guys I recognized as Knight's teammates.

A couple of guys stood around the driveway basketball hoop, egging each other on as they made a bet with another guy I didn't recognize. He was blond and looked pretty trashed as he threw the ball, missing the backboard entirely. So definitely not on the team.

"Noah, time to go," said Rook, one of the star players, to the drunk guy.

He shook him off but cast him a sloppy smile. "Nah, I got this."

"Noah..." Rook flashed him an amused grin and shook his head. "You are going to regret this in the morning. Just don't say I didn't tell you so."

"Ahh, let your boyfriend play already." The screen panned to Knight, who was grinning like an idiot while everyone around them started laughing. "You can take him upstairs to make sweet, sweet love later. Or maybe Captain Knight, king of all gay kinky things, will handle it—"

Rook was in his face in a flash, glaring. "What did I tell you about flirting with Noah, dick?"

Knight grinned wider, dimples popping. "That I should keep doing it just to watch you get all jealous and shit?"

"I'm not jealous." Rook scowled, taking a step back.

Knight didn't appear to believe him. Neither did I, and I didn't even know what was going on. But I was really focused on the two girls at Knight's side. Not the same two from earlier. I couldn't get one guy, but Knight had four girls in like an hour? I scowled, clicked on the comments, and started typing. There was no way I was sending it, but I needed to vent. I couldn't even do that with Vaughn.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Four girls in one night. That a record?*

"Whatcha lookin' at." Vaughn's voice, combined with the loud clack of the tray hitting the table, startled me. "Is that Knight's party?"

I quickly swiped the screen, hiding the evidence, before locking my phone. "No," I blurted and cleared my throat. "Just messing around while you try to get the guy who took your order to bend you over the counter."

My best friend sighed and scooted onto the opposite bench. "If only. At this point, I'm pretty sure my hormones would settle for just about anyone. It's been like a month."

I snagged a slice of pizza, my mouth watering as the cheese stretched as I put it on my plate. Rolling my eyes, I arched my brow. "It's barely been a week."

He tipped his head, snapping his fingers. "Ah, that's right. Fluke—"

"Luke," I corrected, though I knew the flub had been on purpose. "Can't you just call him up?"

He shook his head and grabbed his own slice. "Nah. I mean, I guess I could, but he's got a bad case of *I'm only gay when my dick is getting sucked*."

"So?" I asked, quickly chewing a bite of cheesy goodness. After I swallowed, I continued, "You just said *anyone* would do."

"Okay, *anyone* but the Fluke. I was drunk. He was drunk..." Vaughn shrugged. "It's best to leave that alone. And anyway, what about you? What happened to your mission to get over Knight's fine ass by fucking the next guy you talk to?"

I blinked slowly because...*what?* “That’s definitely not what I said, and you know it. I said I wanted to maybe date a little.”

“Same thing.” He shrugged.

“No, it’s really not. And I’ve told you a thousand times, I’m over that. It was a stupid childhood crush.” I bit off another chunk of pizza with more force than necessary, chewing hard.

Vaughn gave me a doubtful look. “A childhood crush that spanned fifteen years and counting.”

I swallowed and blew out an exasperated breath. “I didn’t even know I liked boys at three, idiot.”

My best friend rolled his eyes. “I’m pretty sure you came out of the womb with Knight’s name tattooed on your ass.”

My nose scrunched. “Okay, this officially just got weird. Can we drop it? Please.”

He lifted one shoulder. “Sure. Let me find you a date, and then you can go out with a guy and prove it.”

If I was going to date someone, Vaughn sure as hell wasn’t picking them.

I wanted to do it, but there was a problem. I still hadn’t built up the nerve to approach anyone. Never wanted to unless it was my brother’s very uninterested best friend. Until last year, I reminded myself. I was now one hundred percent over him.

“I can handle finding someone,” I lied.

Vaughn snorted. “You’re going to die a virgin.”

I grabbed a napkin from the holder on the table and wiped my mouth while glaring. “No, I’m not. In fact, maybe I’ll see if Luke is interested.”

Vaughn tensed, and I bit my tongue to keep myself from pointing out what I’d noticed. He seemed to relax, but I wasn’t buying it when he simply replied, “Go for it.”

“Maybe I will.” I tapped on the table, tilting my head side to side as if considering it. “You sure you wouldn’t mind me dating him?”

“Why would I care?” He dodged my gaze and scanned the restaurant before looking at me again. “But I’d hardly call what he’s willing to do *dating*.”

He had a point, but I could tell he was still bothered by whatever had happened between them. Whatever it was, he had no intention of sharing it with me. “I’m not interested in Luke, but I’m sure I’ll find someone. But first, we need to study, which we should be doing right now.”

“We’re refueling, O.” Vaughn studied me and grabbed his drink, pointing it at me. “But after we get back from winter break, if you haven’t found anyone, I feel like it’s my duty as your best friend to take on the responsibility of finding a guy to dick you down.”

I was ready to agree to just about anything if it shut this down. “I really don’t need help, but if it’ll end this conversation, then fine. If I haven’t started talking to a guy by then, have at it.”

A smile stretched his cheeks before he shoved a huge mouthful of pizza in his mouth.

The victorious gleam in his eyes said he thought he’d won the battle. But the truth was, after seeing those videos of Knight, I was more determined than ever to prove to myself, Vaughn, and the universe as a whole, that I. Was. Over. Knight. Jackson.

FOUR

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# KNIGHT

MY ABILITY TO dodge serious hangovers was both a blessing and a curse. As the newly appointed Captain of all things kinky and horny—thank you very much, Noah—it was safe to say pain was not one of my kinks. On the other hand, not suffering consequences the morning after doing shit like drinking myself stupid made it really hard to learn my lesson.

Teachable moments aside, I needed to get my ass up and go for a run. Keeping myself in top shape took priority over everything else, except the way I currently smelled. A mixture of different perfumes clung to my skin, and I was pretty sure beer was seeping from my pores. A fuzzy memory surfaced as I looked at the rumpled sheets draped around my waist as I sat up in my bed. Two girls, one me, and a pile of regret when I placed a name to one of them who had been chasing my dick for years. I didn't do stage five clingers, and now I'd basically given her the green light.

See? Bad decisions.

I groaned, vowing to get my shit together, and crawled my naked ass off the mattress. After gathering my dirty sheets and comforter, I discarded them into a laundry hamper on my way to the bathroom.

I yawned as I cranked on the shower, waited until it ran hot, and stepped beneath the spray. The tiny guesthouse bathroom filled with steam and the scent of eucalyptus as I washed my hair and body, erasing all evidence of the night before.

Once clean, I switched off the water and grabbed a fluffy blue towel from the open-faced cabinet. I stepped out and ran the soft material through my hair and over my body before tying it around my waist. After brushing my teeth and drying my hair, I returned to my bedroom.

It was cold outside, so I grabbed a pair of running sweats and a long-sleeved thermal t-shirt from my dresser and slipped them on before stepping into a pair of running shoes. On my way out, I snagged my earbuds and phone from the nightstand and stuffed them in my pocket before heading for the front door.

After I stepped outside the guesthouse into my parents' backyard, I locked the door and turned to head down the driveway.

As I set off for the main road, I remembered how trashed Noah had gotten the night before and vaguely recalled Rook telling me they were just going to crash upstairs. I wondered if they'd even made it out of bed yet and made a detour through the dying winter grass to the main house. I glanced around the yard, observing some of the damage left behind from the party, and groaned. Red plastic cups littered the lawn and massive pale stone back patio, and everything was out of place, including one of the wicker chairs sitting at the bottom of the deep end of the pool. I cursed under my breath, but all in all, it wasn't the worst I'd woken up to after one of my parties. I'd deal with it once I got back from my run.

Stepping between two oversized pillars and then sliding open the back door, I barely stepped into the house when the sounds of echoing footsteps met my ears. Following the sound, I walked through the modern rustic kitchen decorated in shades of red and brown. Every expensive gadget known to man, usually perfectly arranged on the marble countertops, was now askew and sandwiched between empty beer bottles and cups. I pretended not to see them and entered the living room which had far too much space for just my parents. I glanced over at Rook, who was heading down the stairs.

"Where's your boyfriend?" I asked, glancing behind him for his blond sidekick.



Rook glared. His whiskey-colored eyes, which were more intense due to his bronzed skin and obsidian-colored hair, narrowed. “Not my boyfriend, asshat. And he’s cleaning up.” I chuckled, a ready comment on my lips about what exactly Noah was cleaning up, but Rook spoke first, a bite in his tone. “Don’t say another word.”

I chuckled because, really, he’d walked straight into that one. “Ah, come on. Give me something. You two cuddle all night?”

An uneasy look colored his features, and my eyebrows shot high. “Really?”

He scowled. “No. But I need to talk to you.”

*No*, my ass. I only wondered if that was as far as it had gone. Maybe they’d finally boned. Would be about damn time, though I wasn’t sure either of them was aware of how into each other they were. Denial at its finest.

Rook headed toward the back door, and I followed, wondering what he needed to say that required us to stand outside in the bitter cold air. When we stepped out onto the patio, I leaned against the house and crossed my arms over my chest, cocking a brow. “What’s up? You need the morning-after pill?”

He matched my stance, holding up the wall next to me. “Can you not be a dick for five minutes?”

I rolled my eyes. “I can try.”

Rook snorted. “I’m going with Noah to his brother’s wedding in two weeks during our break. You think you can drive us to the airport?”

That shouldn’t be a problem. It wasn’t like I had fuck else to do at Christmas. My parents would probably be skiing, and I’d likely waste time having another party. Or talk Pace into letting me crash his family Christmas as usual. “Sure thing. Are you going as his plus-one?”

Rook sighed in exasperation. “I knew you wouldn’t last the whole five minutes. But thank you. I don’t want to leave my truck in the parking lot that long.”

There was no reason he couldn't have asked me in the house, so I assumed there was more to what he was saying. "It's cold as fuck, and my dick is in total shrinkage mode. Is there a reason this conversation is taking place out here?"

Rook ran his hand over his face before sighing. "There's a situation at the wedding. And I sort of volunteered to go as his date." He paused, glaring, and rightfully so. I had about a hundred smartass comments and serious questions ready to fire back. "And before you say something else stupid, it's fake."

Fake? My brow furrowed, wondering why that would be a thing at all. But I knew about Noah and his ex-boyfriend, Brad. A guy who cheated on him and happened to be Noah's brother's best friend. If his brother was getting married, Brad would likely be there. But a fake date? To confirm, I asked, "Does this have to do with Brad?"

Rook nodded with a disgusted scowl in place. "Yeah. He's a dick, and he should know he lost out on the best thing that ever happened to him."

My friend and teammate was head over ass in love with his best friend. I didn't understand why he couldn't see that or, if he did, why he didn't just admit it. Noah was obviously equally in love with him. As much as Rook thought I was an idiot, I could easily say the same about him. "So, what does this fake relationship thing have to do with me?"

He lifted a shoulder. "I guess I needed to tell someone in case word got out. It's not real, and Noah wasn't totally on board with the idea. So, if someone says something about it while we're gone..."

"So, if people talk, I'm on damage control duty?" I glanced around at the surrounding mess, finding it ironic I'd be on damage control.

He finally met my gaze. "If you can manage not to make the situation worse, I'll be shocked, but I also don't know who else to ask."

I nodded, understanding. As for people I knew around campus and on our team, he and I were closest. I figured I could handle an occasional rumor if it arose. I nodded, but it was still fucking cold. “On it. Is there anything else, or can I warm my balls back inside?”

Rook kicked off the wall. “That’s it. I appreciate your help. I’ll give you the flight details when I have them.”

“Not a problem.” Grateful to be done with the conversation, I followed him back inside. Footsteps sounded again on the stairs once we reentered the living room. I glanced up, finding an obviously hungover Noah making his way down.

Mischief swirled in my gut as my lips hooked up on one side as Noah met my gaze. Bleary-eyed, he appeared to struggle to focus.

“Noah.” Rook’s tone held an annoyed edge when his bestie looked at me for a beat too long for his liking.

Noah blinked and focused on him. “Yeah?”

Rook frowned as his gaze switched from Noah to me and back to his best friend. Finally, Rook simply grumbled, “Let’s go.”

Yeah, Rook was definitely not getting away that easily. Not without some poking of the bear first. Plus, it was just fun to flirt with Noah, even though I was straight.

“So soon?” I asked and waited for Noah to look at me. Knowing Rook would be watching like a hawk, I winked at Noah.

He rolled his bloodshot eyes, pointing a finger in my direction. “Don’t. I was *not* checking you out. I was just wondering why you didn’t look like complete shit.”

I let a flirty grin stretch my lips as I strolled over to Noah’s side and hung my arm over his shoulders. “Had to look good for you, didn’t I?”

I could practically feel the heat from Rook’s glare burning a hole into me.

Noah shrugged me off. “Maybe you are still drunk.”

“For fuck’s sake, Knight,” Rook snapped, finally losing the grip on his control.

I bumped my arm against Noah’s. “I’m not sure why it’s fun to see him so worked up.”

“Because you’re an asshole?” he offered.

“I’m going to hold back my extremely inappropriate retort to that just to prove I’m not.” I smirked, deciding to relent before Rook actually decked me. Fucking with him was fun, but I wasn’t looking to show up to practice Monday with a black eye.

Rook took off for the front door after shooting me one last annoyed look, and like a lovesick puppy, Noah followed. When the door closed behind them, I was met with silence. Too much quiet. I headed back to the kitchen and took my phone from my pocket, setting up my playlist before putting my phone away again. After I tucked my earbuds in my ears, I snagged a bottle of water from the refrigerator and went out the front door. I took off down the long driveway lined with perfectly groomed shrubbery that would bloom with pillowy white flowers in the spring.

The rural road that ran along the front yard was void of cars at this time of the morning, which was why I liked to get an early start. Jogging down the asphalt road, I let the heavy bass pumping from the speakers guide my stride. Lost in the music, I took my usual route, a large circuit that would lead me four miles out then wrap back around to the house.

Blood pumping, breaths even and deep, I got lost in the feeling, forgetting about the party. Forgetting about my basketball obligations. Forgetting about everything except the peace surrounding me. Mornings were my favorite time of day. I was known as the life of the party, someone who loved attention, but no one really knew that I enjoyed my time alone more than anything.

By the time I got back to the guesthouse, I was drenched in sweat, and my body sang high with endorphins. I needed to

grab a shower, but my legs were on the verge of collapse. After letting myself back into the house, I flopped down on the two-seat couch in the living area and kicked my feet up on the dark wood coffee table.

Breathing hard, my chest heaving, I lifted the bottom of my shirt and wiped the sweat from my forehead. While I recovered, I pulled my phone from my pocket and shut off the music. Swiping my thumb across the screen, I wasn't surprised to be met with a flood of notifications.

I opened my social media, finding hundreds of *likes* and comments on several videos I'd been tagged in that had been posted from the night before. I was almost dreading pressing play on any of them, considering the fuzzy memories that had surfaced the minute I'd opened my eyes.

With a sigh, I decided to assess the damage, first watching the videos that, all things considered, weren't that bad. Then I lazily scrolled through the comments. It was the same people, as usual, leaving the same comments as always, but then one made me pause.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Four girls in one night. That a record?*

*Owen.* Pace's little brother. Well, that was new. And sounded a little judgmental. Since when did he give a shit what or who I did at my parties? And why did he suddenly need to call me out? Publicly too.

I should be annoyed, so why was I grinning like an idiot? I chuckled to myself, re-reading his little snippy comment. *The fuck is your deal, Little Walsh?*

He hadn't used my phone number since the day I'd given it to him. And he'd conveniently dodged my visits every time I'd gone to his house to see Pace after that day. This is the first thing he had to say to me?

There was no way I was publicly responding to him, so I clicked his name and shot him a DM.

KnightJackson23: *That sounded a bit judgmental, Little Walsh. You don't approve?*

Yes, I purposely used the name that got under his skin. After the comment he'd left, he couldn't fault me for being a dick. Fair's fair.

I waited a minute, staring at the screen, but when no immediate reply came through, I shut off my phone, tossed it onto the table, and forced myself to my feet. I dragged my heavy ass back down the short hall and into the bathroom, where I cranked the shower to the highest heat my body could stand to loosen my muscles, rinsed off, and was back in my bedroom within ten minutes.

I was starving, and my stomach rumbled as I quickly redressed in a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. I grabbed a black hoodie from my closet and set off for the main house again.

As usual, my parents were out of town, so I had the house to myself. I wandered into the kitchen and popped open the refrigerator. Digging around the shelves, I grabbed what I needed to make an omelet of egg whites, cheese, and various colored vegetables. As I moved around the kitchen, I thought back to the message I'd sent Owen.

As the cooking spray warmed up in the pan, I fished my phone from my pocket, pulling up the app. There were new notifications, but still nothing from Owen. Knowing him through my best friend, I was well aware he was an early riser too. He was either ignoring me or hadn't checked his phone.

I'd give Owen the weekend to reply, and if I didn't hear from him by Monday, I'd hunt his little ass down and demand an answer. I grinned to myself, already planning out what I'd say. He had hidden from me long enough. He could run, but his short legs were no match for mine, and I'd tackle him if I had to.

Little Walsh had some explaining to do.

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FIVE

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# OWEN

“NO,” I whispered, blinking rapidly, willing the private message on my phone from Knight to magically disappear. “No,” I repeated, yet the words on the screen only came into sharper focus with each blink.

The notification reminder had woken me, and the absolute last thing I ever expected to see stared back at me. Mortification swam in my veins and my cheeks flamed with heat as my eyes scanned the words again. With warm late-morning sunlight filtering through the sheer curtains and cool air hitting my skin, I knew I wasn't still asleep and just dreaming the nightmare.

*KnightJackson23: That sounded a bit judgmental, Little Walsh. You don't approve?*

I was an idiot and had somehow hit send on the comment I'd typed out on Knight's social media yesterday. I groaned under my breath. How could I have been so stupid?

I cast a quick glance at Vaughn, who still slept soundly in the twin bed on the opposite side of the room, before looking back at the screen.

Accident or not, I shouldn't have written the comment at all. I scrubbed a hand over my face, unsure of what to do in response to his message.

Maybe I should transfer to a new school altogether. Moving to Ireland crossed my mind. Going completely off the grid sounded even better. A change of scenery was good for people, right? Healthy even.



None of those things would actually happen, of course. I needed an excuse for why I'd commented, and I needed one fast.

Other thoughts raced through my mind as my worry continued to escalate. Had Knight told my brother? Was I completely overthinking it?

Just in case he hadn't told Pace, I tapped on the screen, went to the photo, and deleted my comment before my brother saw it for himself.

I considered waking Vaughn, confessing what I'd done. My best friend was the one I talked about everything with, but he was also the one who would never let me live down the massive mistake. He'd no doubt insist he'd been right about my lingering feelings for Knight, which held some truth. *Dammit.*

I set my phone back on my nightstand and slid quietly out of bed, careful to make as little noise as possible. I needed to think, and I couldn't do that if Vaughn woke up. Walking lightly over to my dresser, I slowly inched open the top drawer and retrieved a pair of pale blue boxer briefs. In my closet, I slipped a plain gray t-shirt and a pair of dark jeans from their hangers before grabbing my shower caddy and moving silently to the door. After I eased the door open and stepped into the hall, I blew out a long breath at my stealthy escape.

The door hinges squeaked a little when I closed the door, but I didn't stick around to find out if the noise had been enough to stir Vaughn. I headed for the communal bathroom in the center of the hallway on our floor.

I'd stayed awake way too late last night, cramming as much studying into the hours as possible. I never slept in this late and it was just one more thing throwing me off-kilter.

With the lack of sounds coming from the other rooms, it appeared everyone was still asleep. I breathed a sigh of relief when I entered the empty bathroom and claimed a stall. After sliding the curtain closed, I stripped out of my clothes and set them on a shelf where they'd stay dry along with my caddy and outfit for the day before turning on the water. I stepped

beneath the subpar heat of the water and closed my eyes while I hung my head.

What was I supposed to do now? I had no intention of answering Knight's question, that was for sure. I reconsidered whether that was the best course of action because I would eventually cross paths with him. We were on the same campus, and he was my brother's best friend, so it was only a matter of time. I groaned in annoyance at myself. Maybe I should respond to him. If I didn't, it would come off as suspicious at best; at worst my true feelings would be known.

I could play it off as a joke, I mused. But I'd never joked around with Knight, so why would I start now? Maybe I could claim I'd been drunk and don't remember posting the comment at all. Plausible deniability could work, right?

Considering my options, I sighed. Nothing sounded like a solid reason to even be looking at Knight's page in the first place. I was convinced no matter what excuse I gave, I'd be transparent, all of my secrets exposed for his inevitable rejection.

I was growing more anxious by the second, and thinking about it wasn't helping as I'd hoped. So, I snatched my shampoo and soap, and started scrubbing my skin and washing my hair. By the time I shut off the water, I still didn't feel any better about the situation. I needed to get out of the dorm and into some fresh air. Luckily I had plans for the day that would keep me busy and, with any luck, distracted. After I toweled off and dressed for the day, I headed back into the hall and made my way back to our room.

When I stepped inside, I found Vaughn sitting up, propped against his headboard as he scrolled through his phone. He glanced up, eyes sharpening on my appearance as he cocked a bright red brow. "Someone woke up ready to go."

"I told my mom we'd be there for lunch today, remember?" I barely met his gaze before I tossed my clothes and towel in our shared laundry hamper. "Are you still coming?"

When I glanced at him, he was eyeing me, appearing baffled. “Miss a chance to see my future wife? That’s a dumb question, O.”

Since Vaughn’s parents had packed up their house and moved away from our hometown a few weeks after we started our freshman year, he usually tagged along with me when I made frequent trips home.

“You do realize she’s still married to my dad, right?” I rolled my eyes as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose to his feet.

Vaughn stretched while letting out an obnoxious yawn. “Minor details. Give me fifteen, and I’ll be ready to go.”

I waved him off as he gathered his things and left the room to shower.

After slipping on my sneakers, I sat on my bed and eyed my phone on the nightstand again. I tapped my foot against the carpeted floor in a chaotic rhythm before making a split-second decision. Before I could chicken out, I snatched up my phone and pulled up the message from Knight.

My fingers flew over the screen, even as my heart rate skyrocketed. I hit send and squeezed my eyes closed, but the words were out there now with no option to delete.

Owen\_Walsh01: *What you do in your spare time is your business. Doesn't matter to me. I was just curious.*

Lies. All lies. But he didn’t need to know that. Now, I just had to hope my answer would satisfy him and he’d have no reason to keep questioning me.

I switched over to my text messages and pulled up the thread between my mom and me.

Me: *We'll be there earlier than I thought. Is dad going to be there?*

One thing that hadn’t changed was my dad’s erratic work schedule, which often took him out of town with little notice.

The reply chimed almost immediately.

Mom: *Unfortunately, he had to fly out last night and won't be home until mid-week. You boys head over as soon as you want.*

Well, that would be good news as far as Vaughn was concerned. Another opportunity to hit on my mom. Gag.

Me: *Okay, see you in about an hour. Love you.*

Mom: *Back atcha, kiddo.*

Another notification came through, and my heart sank at the noise because it wasn't the sound assigned texts. It was DM tone, and I knew without looking that my hopes had been in vain. When I clicked on it, I held my breath and skimmed over the reply from Knight.

KnightJackson23: *Do you really want me to answer your question then?*

Hell no, I didn't. While I wouldn't consider myself the jealous type, there were still details I could do without. And what Knight did with girls was not my business. Still, my stomach turned as I debated on what to say back to him. I'm not sure how long I sat there gnawing on my lip before another message popped up.

KnightJackson23: *I can see you're still online. Plus, you read my question. Don't ignore me, Little Walsh. You started this.*

My temper immediately flared at the nickname and at the app for being such a tattletale. Instead of signing out, I shut off my phone completely. The thing had gotten me into enough trouble.

The door opened, and Vaughn entered wearing a long-sleeved graphic tee and jeans. His red curls were wet and clinging to his forehead, that wrinkled when he looked at me. "Why do you look like you're sick and pissed off at the same time?"

*Because I am.* If I told Vaughn the truth, he'd have questions, so instead, I stood and grabbed my keys. "I'm fine. Ready to go?"

“Of course.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Can’t keep my future wife waiting.”

I shook my head at the idiot. “Never going to happen.”

“Never say never.” Vaughn cackled as we bundled in our coats and left the dorm room, locking it behind us.

He had been joking, but at some point *never* just had to be good enough. Because Knight and I were *never* going to happen.

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# OWEN

MY CHILDHOOD NEIGHBORHOOD had been bustling with kids riding their bicycles and playing in fallen leaves only a month ago. Now the streets we drove were silent and still due to the bitter chill that gripped the air. My two-seater cherry red hatchback car's heater was doing a piss poor job of keeping my bones warm. I was fully prepared to make a beeline for some indoor heat the second we arrived at my parents' house.

Most of the lawns were covered in various Christmas decorations, and several were littered with festive inflatables that now lay in haphazard heaps in the dead winter grass. What looked awful during the day would come alive with color and light when they filled with air as soon as the sun set.

I loved the holidays. Between the food, presents, and break from school, what wasn't there to love?

"You think your mom's making that stuffed chicken thing I like today?" Vaughn asked while tapping his fingers against his denim-covered legs to the uptempo beat of the song coming from the speakers.

"The spinach stuff?" Glancing over, I cocked a brow. "We had that last week."

He cocked a crimson eyebrow right back. "So? It's fucking amazing."

Amazing was a pretty strong word to describe the end product of any meal my mother slaved over, but I had to admit it was the one dish I looked forward to most for Sunday

lunches. Luckily, enough butter and salt made most things tolerable. “Think she said she’s planning some sort of pasta. And the way I’m feeling right now, that sounds perfect.”

The promise of warmth in my belly alone made my mouth water.

Vaughn hummed, offering a single nod. “Does sound pretty good.”

I turned down my parents’ street and sighed in relief when the house I’d grown up in came into view. I was ready to get inside and permanently take up residence in front of the vent that actually blew hot air.

Swinging my car into the driveway lined with plastic candy canes, I pulled alongside my mother’s white sedan and parked. Vaughn was out and jogging toward the front door before I even shut off the ignition. Blowing out an exasperated breath, I hurried from the car, chasing after him so I could intervene between him and his over-the-top, gross flirtation with my mother. One she seemed fairly clueless about.

He didn’t stop to knock, just flipped off the oversized, rosy-cheeked, ceramic statue of Santa Claus on the porch—for no reason—and let himself into the house.

I followed, flipping it off because it nearly broke my toe when I set him up last weekend. *Dick*.

“Mom, we’re here,” I called out when I stepped into the living room and closed the door behind me, sealing out the winter wind. The space was normally outfitted in neutral tones with pops of blue, but this time of year Mom filled every nook and cranny with Christmas décor. A seven-foot faux tree covered in colored ornaments took up one corner of the room and a rope of garland lined the mantel.

The sounds of clattering pots or pans nearly drowned out her voice when she answered.

“In the kitchen, hun. Come on in.” She sounded distracted, which wasn’t good when the scent of something burning hung in the air instead of the normal vanilla bean wax she warmed year-long throughout the house.



My nose wrinkled as we headed toward the sounds. When we stepped into the newly renovated kitchen, the scent strengthened. Mom was moving around the space in a pair of old jeans, a loose t-shirt, and a messy bun tilting slightly askew. She dug through cabinets and drawers, moving things around, clearly agitated.

I resisted the urge to cover my nose. “Something smells \_\_\_”

“Delicious,” Vaughn interrupted, and my mother spun around, a bright smile blossoming on her makeup-free pretty face.

Pace and I didn’t inherit her pale skin, short curly dark brown hair, and wide topaz-colored eyes. Short and slim, with a small nose and slightly pointed ears, she had a whole pixie vibe going on. “Well, it should be ready soon. I’m just having a bit of an issue with the oven and can’t find the meat thermometer. I think it’s about time to replace this old thing. The thermostats are testy at best.”

As soon as she looked away, I rolled my eyes. Vaughn caught me and shot me an amused smile. There was literally nothing wrong with the damn oven. And she didn’t need a thermometer to know whatever she’d been cooking that involved meat was well past well done.

She donned oven mitts and lowered the door, muttering unintelligible words to herself as she pulled the baking dish out. She slid the pan on the top of the stove and popped her small hands to her hips, frowning down at the thick black char covering the tops of what appeared to be pork chops. “Well, shoot. I thought I’d try something new, but I think this is ruined. I’m sorry, boys.”

“It’s fine, Mom. We can find something else,” I reassured her while removing my jacket.

Vaughn did the same, and I carried them both into the living room and hung them on the wall-mounted coat rack near the door.

When I returned, she sighed. “We don’t really have much else, I’m afraid. I’m overdue for a grocery trip. I was at the store when you texted this morning, so I just grabbed these and came right home.” She shook her head, clearly disappointed things hadn’t gone to plan.

I felt bad for every awful thought I’d had about her cooking because she honestly did try hard and enjoyed the effort.

I walked over to her and wrapped her in a hug. “You should have said something, Mom. We could have come a little later. No need to put yourself out for me.”

She squeezed me tight. “You are never putting me out. Don’t say that again.” When I loosened my hold, she leaned back. “I might be able to throw together some sandwiches for you boys.”

“Or,” Vaughn piped up, “Owen can run his lazy butt to the store. I can stay behind to help you clean up or whatever you need me to do.”

His tone sounded polite and respectful, but I had a clear idea of how he’d like to help. I shot him a discreet glare. He just winked back as my mom grinned brightly and glanced at me. “If you wanted to pick something up, I wouldn’t mind fixing something better than some measly sandwiches.”

I clenched my jaw as I repressed the urge to sling expletives at Vaughn. It was clear my mom wanted me to run to the store. It was also crystal fucking clear Vaughn wanted to stay behind so he’d have unchaperoned access to her. Nope.

I tilted my head side to side casually as if considering the idea and then glanced at my best friend. “Fine. But Vaughn’s coming with me.”

“*What?* Why?” He shot me a scowl.

“Because...” I looked around, searching for an answer, and ended up shrugging. “I don’t want to go alone.”

He tossed up his hands, sputtering, “That’s a dumb rea—”

“Now, no name-calling in this house,” Mom interrupted in a stern tone that shut the idiot up. “Vaughn, I think you should go with Owen. You two choose whatever you want me to make. I’ll clean up around here and be all set when you boys return.”

I grinned at my best friend, who didn’t appear to share in my joy as he stomped out of the kitchen like a toddler. I leaned down and kissed my mom’s cheek. “Be back in a bit.”

“Drive carefully. And if you see any of those little pieces of dark chocolate I like…” She trailed off.

I chuckled as I took a step back. “I’ll grab you a pack.”

She cast me a grateful smile and turned back to the pan with a frown. Shaking my head, I returned to the living room and found Vaughn already wearing his coat and shooting me a glare as he tossed me mine.

“You are the worst best friend,” he muttered.

I scoffed as I slid my coat on. “But I’m an amazing son, and since she gave birth to me, I sorta owe her. Starting with keeping you away from her.”

“She loves me,” Vaughn argued, and he wasn’t wrong.

Tugging up the zipper on my coat, I snorted. “She also saw you play the part of a rock in a pre-k Thanksgiving play. Pretty sure it’s not the kind of *love* you’re making up in your head.”

His lips hooked up on one side. “I was a pretty cute rock.”

I closed my eyes, blowing out a long breath, so I didn’t deck my best friend. “Okay, let’s just get this over with.”

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THE BELL chimed as I pulled open the door to the grocery store, holding it open for Vaughn to walk through first. Heat flowing from the vents immediately met me as I stepped inside behind him, letting the spring door close automatically behind me.

“What are we getting?” I asked, but we were already moving, me following Vaughn’s sure footsteps as he made his way down an aisle lined with canned vegetables on one side and packs of rice on the other.

He quickly glanced over his shoulder just before snatching a package of wild rice. “The chicken stuff.”

That made sense, and I honestly wasn’t surprised. It sounded good, though I wouldn’t voice that since I was still irritated that we were at the store instead of soaking up sweet, sweet warmth at my parents’ house.

“We should have grabbed a cart,” I mused, and Vaughn snorted.

The fresh-cut meat selection ran along the back side of the store in deep coolers. Vaughn went straight for the raw poultry, reaching in and snagging a pack of chicken breasts. “We aren’t getting that much. We’ll be fine.”

“What else do we need?” I asked while glancing around the store. I couldn’t say much about my mother’s inability to cook because my skills weren’t any better. However, Vaughn was pretty handy with a recipe or fifty.

He hummed before taking off for the produce section on the far side of the market. “Just a few veggies. That should do it.”

Baskets and crates overflowed with seasonal produce, but Vaughn made his way to the refrigerated section. I hung back, hands in my pockets, as he gathered a tub of baby spinach and picked through multiple peppers. I honestly had no idea what went into the stuffing and didn’t really care. As long as he didn’t touch an onion.

“Well, look who it is. Little Walsh, fancy seeing you here.” A raspy voice—deep and sexy—came from behind me, so familiar I’d recognize it anywhere. Knight chuckled when I didn’t respond or even turn to look at him.

To be fair, I was frozen in place as a wave of panic, more extreme than any reaction I’d had to his presence before,

coursed through my body, flooding my blood with anxious energy.

*Fuck my life.*

Why was this happening now? Did the universe actually hate me? I was betting on yes at this point. I must have angered the gay gods and not realized it.

Vaughn had no such issues, turning and offering Knight a surprised smile. “Heya, Knight.”

“S’up.” One word to Vaughn, and then he tapped a long finger on my shoulder. Twice. “It’s rude to ignore someone when they’re talking to you. *Almost* as rude as leaving a judgmental comment on one of their social media posts.”

The humor in his tone didn’t stop my shoulders from stiffening as I shot Vaughn a nervous glance. He looked at us with a confused expression on his freckled face when he asked, “What comment?”

Knight smirked. “Seems your bestie has strong opinions about my bed companions.”

I scoffed, frustration and annoyance loosening my limbs and tongue as I spun around and glared at the sexy, overgrown jockhole. Knight’s chestnut brown hair curled up around the edges of the black beanie that matched his hoodie. “I told you I was just curious.”

I knew I’d have to deal with Vaughn, but I had to get Knight off my back first.

Knight’s dimples popped as he smiled down at me, steel-colored eyes sparkling. “*Curious.*” He sounded like he didn’t believe me and even found it funny. My hackles continued to rise when he chuckled. “Well then, did you satisfy your *curiosity?*”

“No, because after I sent it, I realized I honestly didn’t care.” I forced my expression into something more neutral, I hoped.

“Is that why you deleted the comment?” He arched a brow, saying in one action *bullshit.*

How did he even know I'd done that? There had been at least a hundred other comments. I didn't know how to reply, but there wasn't a need since Vaughn chose that moment to interrupt.

"Well, I, for one, approve of your safe sex practices with your many *bed companions*. What is that? Like ten boxes?" He walked over, nosily looking into the blue plastic basket I hadn't even noticed hooked around Knight's arm.

But I noticed now. Mixed in with various colorful fruits and vegetables were enough boxes of condoms to supply our entire dorm. I wasn't sure why he didn't just buy them in bulk at wholesale prices. My stomach sank imagining all of the women he'd have in his bed.

Knight fingered a pack of them and looked right at me. "Owen here did seem kind of concerned about the number of women I companionize. Safety first."

Companionize? Was that even a fucking word? I scowled at them both. "I don't care what you do, Knight. It was a comment. Nothing like what you keep trying to imply."

His dimples only deepened as his grin widened. He really was enjoying crawling under my skin. I just wasn't sure if he knew how much the whole thing was bothering me. And why. With each word out of his mouth, I was growing more agitated.

"Can I have one of these?" Vaughn snatched a box from the basket. "Owen's going to need them soon, too, since he's now on the prowl for some hot stud to pop his cherry."

"Vaughn!" I hissed. My cheeks blazed with fire as mortification swept through every cell in my body. I was going to murder my ex-best friend. They were going to do an entire documentary on the things I now had planned for Vaughn. "Shut up."

He tossed the box at me, causing me to awkwardly fumble to catch the stupid thing. I chanced a look at Knight, who was now studying me with a contemplative look on his face. "You're a virgin, Little Walsh?"

Did he seriously just ask me that? “That is none of your business, Knight.”

“Hey, you asked about my count first. Or at least my record. Fair’s fair,” he countered.

I couldn’t exactly argue that point, but I also had no plans of telling him that I’d never even kissed anyone. “I don’t want to know how many people you’ve been with.”

And I really didn’t want to have this conversation in front of Vaughn.

“I do,” Vaughn chimed in, making me mentally tack on more torture to his ultimate demise.

Knight ignored him. “Your cheeks are as red as the apples in my damn basket. You embarrassed?”

“Red as an unpopped cherry,” Vaughn continued, even though neither of us acknowledged him.

Of course I was. “Why would I be embarrassed?”

“No idea. It’s just sex.” He shrugged.

*Just sex.* Not for me, it wasn’t. Knight was the only person I’d ever wanted in that way, and he wasn’t an option. Not that I still wanted him, anyway. Between the condoms and public questions about my virginity, Vaughn and Knight were both on my shit list.

I glared at each of them. “This conversation is over.”

Vaughn apparently had hearing problems. “Owen wants to date but doesn’t know how. He doesn’t like my advice. You have any pointers?”

Knight laughed, deep and throaty. “You want me to tell you how to make a guy want to date you, Little Walsh?”

“Hell no,” I snapped, and it was the truth. How ironic would it be to have the guy I wanted to date—or used to—give me pointers on how to make a guy want me. I was uncomfortable, irritated, and a thousand other adjectives that didn’t quite describe the train wreck of emotions ripping through me. “I hate you both.”

They both laughed, and I tossed the box of condoms at Vaughn. “You can grab a ride with Knight.”

I turned around and stomped off, Knight calling after me, “I was just messing around, Owen. Too far? I’m sorry.”

*Way too far.*

Vaughn’s apology barely registered either, unable to penetrate the clusterfuck that was my current state of mind. The only thing I knew for certain was that Vaughn and Knight were now the only two people on my shit list.

I was officially over Knight, and I would start dating to prove it.

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SEVEN

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# OWEN

THE AMPHITHEATER-STYLE CLASSROOM was silent other than the faint tapping on laptops and the occasional flip of a page in a textbook. I sighed in relief as I entered the last sentence on my last final exam for the semester. My foreign language class was admittedly my worst subject, and I wasn't feeling super confident about the paper. As I hit submit, a weight lifted off my shoulders.

I closed my laptop and slumped in the hard plastic seat, taking a breather and glancing around. Some students were still typing, focused on their screens, while many others had finished before me and taken off to begin their winter break. I lingered because I knew Vaughn would be waiting for me outside as he'd done every day this week as some form of apology. But I needed some time to think.

Rolling my neck side to side, I lifted my hand to massage the aching muscles that had become rigid with stress and sitting in one place too long.

While it had been a long chaotic week full of finals and packing up my stuff in the room, it had also been five days since the grocery store incident. That day, I'd made excuses about why I'd gotten back to the house before Vaughn, who arrived a few minutes later. I put on a friendly smile for my mom and told her it was just a prank. But the truth was, I hadn't uttered more than simple one-word answers to Vaughn since then—not an easy task since we lived together.

I was still mad and embarrassed. As expected, he'd badgered me with questions the whole ride back to campus

about the stupid comment, that wouldn't die, on Knight's profile. I didn't know how to answer him, and he was smart enough to know exactly why I'd written the thing anyway. It was a stalemate between us.

Knight had been on my mind a lot too, which was nothing new, but this time the rose-colored glasses were off. I was beyond angry at him for purposely embarrassing me. He'd never done that before. Couldn't say I was a fan.

Knight was much easier to avoid. Despite his many attempts to message me, I hadn't said a single word to him. I might have caved and read them a time or two, but I had no intention of answering him. Ever.

My professor suddenly looked up from where he sat behind a large cherry-stained wood desk. Mr. Bauch squinted his light blue eyes through a pair of bifocals as he locked gazes with me, tilting his head, wordlessly asking if I was done. And if so, to get the fuck out of his classroom. Or at least that's what I imagined I'd be thinking if I were him. Either way, that was my cue. I gave him a single nod and snagged my backpack from beside my desk, sliding my laptop into the inner pocket and zipping it closed.

I stood and slipped on my jacket and then threaded my arms through the straps of my backpack then up over my shoulders, quietly walking as I made my way to the exit.

"Have a good break, Mr. Walsh," my professor said in a low tone as I passed his desk.

After offering him one last smile, I pushed through the heavy metal door, letting it swing shut behind me. My footsteps echoed off the cement block walls as I headed down the hall, and I stopped short at the sight of an unruly mop of red curls.

Vaughn grinned, pushing off the wall he'd been leaning against near the door. "Well, how'd it go?"

"Fine," I responded as I resumed walking right past him and pushed open the door to leave the main building.

The air grew colder by the day, and with a blanket of thick clouds blocking the sun, there was no reprieve from the bitter chill. I turned down the sidewalk that led to our dorm, passing other students bundled up to ward off the cold. Vaughn was hot on my heels, sighing obnoxiously.

“You can’t hate me forever, you know?” He caught up to me, falling into step with me.

I shot him a quick glare. “Can’t I?”

He shook his head, a smile playing on his lips. “No. For one, I’m an idiot. But I’m your idiot best friend, so you signed up for that. Two, there’s a party tonight, and you have to come.”

“I’m mad at you. No *friend* would have done what you did. You sided with Knight and made me look foolish. That was fucked up, Vaughn.” I picked up my pace.

Undeterred, he matched my stride. “Yes, you’ve made that extremely clear, and I’m sorry, okay? I’ve said I’m sorry a hundred times already. I didn’t realize you would get so mad, but in hindsight, I did say some pretty dick-ish things.”

“Ya think?” I widened my eyes before narrowing them again.

Vaughn sighed. “Look, Owen. I’m really sorry. I was an asshole. We’ve been friends our whole lives. You always put up with my shit, and I thought you’d know it was just shit-talking. I got carried away and didn’t mean to hurt you. I may give you hell, but I’d never intentionally mess with our friendship.”

Vaughn was right. He was an asshole sometimes, but he was also my closest friend. I still needed him to squirm for a while.

“What’s it going to take to get you to forgive me?” Vaughn asked. “A virgin sacrifice? Be careful when you answer that. You’re the only virgin I know, so that sounds counterintuitive.”

Rolling my eyes, I shrugged at the dumbass. “Not sure. But the one thing I am sure of, if you want my forgiveness,

you've got to stop talking about Knight. Don't mention him or bring him up to me."

As far as I was concerned, my ex-crush was now pointless to even bring up.

I could feel Vaughn's stare burning a hole in the side of my face, studying my expression. There was no need because I really was done with Knight. Finally, he knocked his shoulder into mine. "Knight who?"

Thank fuck. I switched topics. "What's this about a party?"

I wasn't much on parties or any large get-togethers, but the slight misstep that almost sent Vaughn sprawling on his ass didn't surprise me. When I glanced at my newly reinstated best friend to make sure he was okay, his eyebrows shot high. "You really want to go?"

"After the way this week has gone, I really need a drink, and until I'm twenty-one, I can't exactly hit a bar or club," I pointed out. Alcohol wasn't my go-to for stress relief. A movie or playing a video game was my drug of choice, but I needed something stronger. Also, our gaming system was packed away neatly in a box to be moved in the morning. I made that a point as well. "Nothing too crazy, though. My dad will be here at like eight to load our things. He'll take my stuff home, and then I'll take you to your parents' new place. That is still the plan, right?"

"As far as I know, nothing's changed. And we won't do anything over the top tonight," Vaughn promised. "Just a few people from my math class are doing a small thing at one of their apartments across town. Should be pretty low-key. Thought it would be nice to celebrate the end of exams and start the break off right."

"Sounds good," I agreed as we drew closer to our dorm building. And it did. I wasn't in the mood to be social, but the promise of taking the edge off with a little booze in the system was too good to pass up. "What time do we need to be there? I need to shower, change, and grab some food. I'm starving."

“Everyone’s planning to get there early since most of us will be hammered in the morning.” Vaughn followed me as we turned down the path to the entrance to our dorm.

“Good.” I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but Vaughn chuckled.

“Someone’s in a hurry to get liquored up.” He snorted while opening the door and holding it as I passed into the lobby.

The place was bustling with students, and luggage was piled up in random spots as they talked and laughed, sharing hugs and goodbyes to those leaving early to avoid the chaotic rush in the morning. We bypassed everyone on our way to the stairwell, opting to avoid the elevator.

Vaughn and I didn’t talk until we reached our room. I scanned the unit once I stepped inside, tossing my backpack on the floor by the foot of my bed. Everything was somewhat tidy, with most of our belongings being packed in boxes and stacked on top of the two dressers. We had a few plastic bags ready to throw last-minute items into in the morning.

Luckily, I’d left a few outfits hanging in the closet just in case, so I didn’t have to dig through boxes if something came up.

Slipping off my jacket, I hung it in the closet and pulled out a long-sleeved black t-shirt and pair of jeans before snagging a pair of gray boxer briefs from the drawer. I didn’t need to get fancy. I just needed to get presentable enough to actually leave the room.

After grabbing my shower caddy, I glanced back at Vaughn. “I’ll be back in ten.”

Vaughn snorted. “I’ll be waiting.”

---

FOR A BUNCH of brainiac future rocket scientists the party was pretty wild with a drinking game based on academia. If you consider taking a shot of tequila for every missed physics

question a good time. Of course, I had no answers to any of their questions, so my veins were practically eighty-proof before eight o'clock at night. I was supposed to be taking it easy, but the drunken stupor had crept up quietly, unnoticed, until it was too late.

From my seat on the worn-out leather couch belonging to one of Vaughn's classmates, I scanned the group of ten people I hadn't met before. Then my gaze skimmed over the mostly bare cream-colored walls that only had two poster-sized portraits of prominent historical figures on it. My vision had grown hazy long ago, and I'd bowed out of the game half an hour ago. The entire second-floor apartment seemed to tip to the left, and I realized it wasn't the unit. Rather it was me starting to give in to the alcohol-induced stupor. Never again, I swore. Drinking was so not my thing, and I was quickly reminded of why. I didn't like the way it made me feel.

I needed fresh air, so with the promise of an icy wind to slap some sense back into me, I struggled to my feet. I swayed slightly before regaining my balance.

"You cool, O?" I recognized Vaughn's voice and sought him out. He still sat in the semi-circle of people sitting on the carpet around a wooden coffee table that wobbled just as bad as me at the moment.

I nodded, swinging an arm in the general direction of the sliding glass door that led to the balcony. "Just getting some air."

He watched me closely, green eyes studying me, before climbing to his feet. "I'll come too. I could use the break."

I didn't mind the company, so I resumed walking across the shoebox-sized apartment's living room. The wheels squealed as I slid the door open, and I was immediately met with a freezing cold breeze that ruffled my blond hair. It didn't feel as cold as it had during the day, even though it should have felt worse since the sun had gone down, leaving the sky dark and seemingly endless. Maybe it was. My thoughts were all over the place, and I tended to move to random topics when

I'd been drinking, another reason to avoid the situation in the first place.

The balcony was small, with a rusty iron rail that overlooked a packed parking lot lit by only a few tall lamp lights. At least it was quiet except for the sounds of the neighbor's TV as well as the party inside.

As Vaughn closed the door, I took the chair furthest from the door, sinking down and letting the cool air sober me enough that my world at least stopped appearing tilted off its axis. Vaughn took the seat next to mine.

"You sure you're cool, O?" he asked again, and when I glanced at him with a sloppy smile, he frowned. "That was a dumb game to play. I'm sorry."

I waved him off. "I just don't drink enough to know my limits. Shouldn't have played."

"I feel bad, though," he continued. "Obviously, we aren't driving anywhere tonight. We can crash in the living room. You can take the couch, and I'll take the floor."

"We have to be up and ready to load the truck when my dad gets there," I reminded him. I just hoped I wasn't too hungover though I suspected that would be too much to ask for.

"We'll get it done," he assured me while slouching further into his chair.

I wasn't sure he was right, but I nodded anyway. "When you first brought up the party, I thought you would suggest hitting up one of Knight's."

Vaughn shook his head. "Nah, they have a game tomorrow, so I'm sure his house will be swarming with people tomorrow night."

I'd always made it a point not to follow his basketball schedule because I'd been busy trying to get over him. Lately, I'd done it because I just didn't care what the asshole did. Mostly.



“So, for our deal, has using an app crossed your mind?”  
Vaughn’s quick change of topic took me a minute to process.

*The deal.*

I groaned. That was the last thing I wanted to think about in my current condition, but using an app had crossed my mind and was quickly dismissed. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Talking to someone through a screen would be easy enough, but meeting them, not so much. There would already be so many expectations.”

Vaughn arched a brow. “The expectation of going on a date is the goal if I remember correctly.”

“Well, yeah. But just because I might click with someone online doesn’t mean we’ll click in person. I’m awkward enough on my own. I just think it would be better for me personally to meet in person first. And then, if there’s a spark, move on to a date.” I’d put enough thought into it to know that would be something that worked better for me. “I’ll figure it out.”

“You better. The clock is ticking, my friend.” Vaughn grinned wide when my eyes narrowed. I was fully aware I had a deadline because I didn’t back out of deals. “You ready to go back inside? Pretty sure my balls are a solid block of ice now.”

My nose wrinkled at the unwanted mental image. I also wasn’t ready to put myself back into a room of energetic geniuses who might as well be speaking a foreign language. After my final exam earlier, I’d have enough of that for one day. “Go inside. I’ll be inside in a minute.”

“You sure?” Vaughn asked, hesitating.

I waved his worry off again once more. “I’m fine. Feeling slightly more sober.”

I was feeling more alert, at least. However, I was definitely still intoxicated and still firmly in the never-again camp.

Vaughn rose to his feet. “Don’t stay out here too long. You’ll get sick. Or rather sicker than you probably already will be.”

The mention alone made my stomach turn. “I won’t.”

Once Vaughn headed inside, and I was left on my own, my thoughts began to scatter again, bouncing from Knight pissing me off to how the hell I was supposed to find a new guy to replace him. I was pretty positive getting over someone by dating someone new wasn’t the right way to start a new relationship, but what else was I supposed to do? Stay hung up on him forever? No thanks. Maybe I should give an app a shot. Couldn’t hurt to browse, at least, and I’d never done that.

With the idea in my head, I shifted in my chair, pulling my phone from my pocket. Before I could navigate to the app store, the little red notification count on my social media app caught my attention. The number had gone up, and since only two people messaged me there—one of them was with me tonight—it left only one option. Knight.

Curiosity and lack of willpower made me click on the little purple icon where two new messages waited for me after the three I’d already read. I skimmed over all of them, starting with the ones he’d sent throughout the week.

KnightJackson23: *On a scale of 1-10, how mad are you?*

KnightJackson23: *I didn’t mean to upset you, Little Walsh.*

KnightJackson23: *Owen\* Fuck, sorry.*

Those had been the ones I hadn’t replied to. Then I read the new messages.

KnightJackson23: *You seriously going to ignore me?*

KnightJackson23: *For how long? You can’t hide forever, you know. I am going to be around. Might as well yell at me now.*

He was wrong. I could be stubborn as hell and avoid him for the rest of our lives if I really set my mind to it. But he was right in that I did feel like yelling at him, or I probably would have if I wasn’t hammered.

My fingers started moving across the keyboard before I even realized what I was doing, but even when I did, I still hit send.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Easy, 10, and yes, ignoring you forever did cross my mind.*

My phone vibrating with a response less than thirty seconds later surprised me before I remembered Knight would likely be home relaxing since it was the night before a game day.

KnightJackson23: *You're not ignoring me now.*

I scowled at the words, fingers flying across my screen.

Owen\_Walsh01: *I could start again.*

KnightJackson23: *Don't do that. I really am sorry. You know I wouldn't do that shit on purpose. Tease you, yes. Piss you off, no.*

That was the Knight I'd always known, yet I was skeptical at best. I didn't know why the next thought occurred to me when it did. Maybe it was a mix of the reason I'd grabbed my phone in the first place, Knight having extensive experience in the dating department, and the alcohol causing me to make impulsive decisions. But the last thing I ever thought I'd ask Knight Jackson flowed from my fingertips.

I might not have known what I was doing when it came to approaching guys, but if anyone was an expert on *dating*, it was Knight. And he owed me for the years I'd spent pining for him. Right?

My eyebrows furrowed as I did my best to consider if the thought made sense. It definitely did. Knight owed me, and I planned to collect.

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EIGHT

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# KNIGHT

OWEN\_WALSH01: *You're forgiven IF you help me. I don't know how to approach a guy or what to do to attract them to me. You do know what a guy likes, so you have to teach me the art of catching a guy's attention.*

My eyebrows shot straight to my hairline as I read over the message from Owen. What the fuck? I sat up straight from where I'd been reclined on my couch, watching mindless TV in just my boxer briefs. I pressed mute on the remote.

Teach Pace's little brother how to catch a guy's attention? My eyebrows fell, furrowing as I considered exactly what he meant by that.

Another message came through almost immediately after.

Owen\_Walsh01: *And other stuff...after.*

After... My eyebrows would have whiplash at the rate they climbed my forehead again. There was no way Little Walsh was asking what I thought he was asking.

I tapped out a response.

KnightJackson23: *Clarify what you mean by "after."*

Owen\_Walsh01: *If I need to spell it out for you, maybe you aren't the right person for the job.*

I scowled. The request had come out of the blue and was way more forward than anything I'd ever heard out of Owen's mouth.

KnightJackson23: *I'm just asking for a little direction here. Because it sounded like you wanted me to teach you about the birds and the bees. But in much dirtier detail.*

Owen\_Walsh01: *Much, much dirtier detail.*

A laugh burst from my lips, half in humor and half completely caught off guard, in utter disbelief. I drummed my finger along my bare leg, dusted in a light layer of dark hair.

KnightJackson23: *What brought this up?*

I remembered the conversation with Vaughn and Owen at the grocery store, and suddenly things made more sense. I'd been so wrapped up worrying about how mad Owen was that I'd forgotten what was even said that day. And that meant Owen was actually serious about this.

Owen\_Walsh01: *I'm just ready. You better not say anything else about me being a virgin.*

Owen\_Walsh01: *Also, I stupidly made a deal with Vaughn that if I didn't find a guy myself before winter break was over, he would set me up.*

Well, that was a dumb idea. Although considering I was already in trouble, I kept the thought to myself. He'd also confirmed what I'd suspected. Owen was untouched but didn't want to be. I could understand that because I was a horny bastard at best.

KnightJackson23: *Why haven't you lost your v-card if you're ready?*

Owen\_Walsh01: *I already told you. I don't know how to get a guy's attention. And not just any guy. I don't want to lose it, just for the sake of losing it, to some random stranger.*

That was exactly how I'd lost my virginity. I'd been horny, and there had been nothing special about the opportunity that had presented itself. I respected Owen's choice and understood where he was coming from. Meaningless hookups held their appeal, but they got old.

But even if I wanted to help him, he was my best friend's little brother, for fuck's sake. Pace would murder me if I

agreed to this insane idea. I rolled my lips as I considered what would go into something like that.

KnightJackson23: *You just want me to give you pointers?*

That wouldn't be so bad, would it? Except for the sexual stuff. I couldn't see Pace approving of that.

Owen\_Walsh01: *I might be drunk, but didn't I just say that?*

Well, that explained a whole hell of a lot. He'd probably forget about the whole thing by tomorrow and wake up with a pile of regret when he read back through our conversation.

KnightJackson23: *How drunk?*

Owen\_Walsh01: *Drunk enough to ask when I normally wouldn't. Sober enough to mean it.*

Fuck. I reached back, rubbing a clammy hand up the back of my neck, nervously scratching.

Was I really considering this? I doubt that when Pace asked me to help jump-start Owen's college social life, this was what he'd meant. But also...wasn't it? Owen dating was part of getting out there and experiencing life. Before I changed my mind, I typed out my final answer.

KnightJackson23: *Deal. Consider yourself my student in all things about catching a guy.*

Owen\_Walsh01: *Consider yourself forgiven when I finally kiss a guy for the first time.*

He'd never even been kissed. At his age, I'd locked lips with more girls than I could remember, which wasn't something I was proud of, but I wasn't ashamed, either.

Owen\_Walsh01: *I think I should probably sleep now, but this is happening. Don't back out, Knight.*

I didn't plan to, even if I was a bit worried about how my best friend would react when he found out.

KnightJackson23: *How long do we have before Vaughn gets to take over?*

Owen\_Walsh01: *After winter break.*

That was doable. Hell, I'd only need a week tops.

KnightJackson23: *Get some sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow.*

I watched the screen for a few minutes, but he didn't respond. Tossing my phone on the coffee table, I leaned back into the cushions again, draping one arm over the back of the couch.

Okay. Well, *that* had just happened. Yes, my best friend was not likely to approve, but at the same time, I wanted to help Owen. He'd always meant a lot to me, too, and he'd been in my life for as long as I could remember.

Tonight had just gotten a lot more interesting. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. And I really hoped agreeing to help didn't come back to bite me in the ass.

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THE SOUND of shoes squeaking across the polished basketball court and the thud of the basketball were usually things I loved. But today, I was distracted and having trouble focusing.

"I think I'm dying," Newb whisper-groaned as he hunched over, hands on knees as we waited on the court's sideline.

We'd both played hard. Our jerseys were stuck to our sweaty skin, and our hair was hanging in damp strands. As the clock ticked down the final seconds, we were up by more than the other team could score. I was glad there wouldn't be an opportunity to sub me back into the game.

Coach stood only a few yards away, head bent as he spoke to the other coaches. Thankfully he was too distracted, and the cheers from the home fans were too loud to have overheard the new guy on the team. He didn't like any sign of weakness, especially in public.



I scowled over at Newb. “Don’t say shit like that out here unless you don’t want to see any more playing time.”

He winced, and I felt bad, but Coach would sit his beanpole ass out of a game. When the buzzer sounded, it was really just a formality. The game had been over fifteen minutes ago when we’d dominated the game.

We headed for the locker room, quickly showering away the sweat from our skin and dressing in our street clothes.

We were all tired as hell and would only have tomorrow off before Monday was the first of three games scheduled for the week. While the rest of the campus had started their winter break, the basketball team still had a week before we’d finally have a whopping seven days off. But with dreams of going pro, this was what my future looked like if I was lucky.

Sitting on the padded bench in front of my locker, I replayed the conversation I’d had with Owen last night. How could I not?

Owen was a virgin. The news had come as a surprise, but at the same time, it wasn’t. He’d always been a mouthy little thing but kept to himself outside of his friend squad that only included Vaughn. I had enjoyed crawling under his skin at the grocery store, teasing him a bit. But I hadn’t meant to outright piss him off. His bright red cheeks should have warned me he was near his limits, but the fire in his eyes had tempted me to push my luck. And I had.

The condoms hadn’t even been for me. I was being a dick as usual and planned on stuffing them into Rook’s and Noah’s suitcases when I drove them to the airport next week.

But after the conversation last night and the cost of Owen’s forgiveness... I hadn’t seen that coming at all.

A pair of huge shoes came into view, followed by a hand waving in front of my face to get my attention. I jerked upright, gaze swinging upward and colliding with Rook’s whiskey-colored eyes.

He frowned. “Hey, you doing okay?”

Fuck, I hadn’t realized I’d zoned out yet again.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I arched my eyebrows, playing dumb about just how distracted I’d been. “Why?”

He eyed me suspiciously. “You were staring at your shoes like you couldn’t decide which one went on which foot.”

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed one shoe, shoving it onto the correct foot. “It was a hard decision, okay?”

Rook shook his head, but before he could make another comment on my mental well-being and shoes, I looked down and began tying my shoe. “I’m seriously fine. Aren’t you running late to meet your boyfriend?”

“Yeah, you must be okay because you’re still a dick.” He sighed, and I chuckled with the teammates close enough to overhear. I never would understand why riling him up about Noah brought so much joy into my life.

A voice cut through the sounds of lockers clanging shut and laughter. “So, party at your place, Knight?”

I recognized Newb’s voice, so when I glanced up from tying my shoes, I sought him out and shook my head. “You guys act like I’m a machine, just partying all the damn time.”

Rook snorted, and when I looked at him again, his eyes sparkled with humor. “Because you do.”

I chuckled while glancing down to lace up my other sneaker. “Not tonight. Between exams this week, games, practice...” I trailed off as I thought about the other thing on my mind, leaving my brain a cluttered mess of ideas and thoughts. *Owen*. Specifically giving him lessons on how to attract guys. Never saw that coming. I also didn’t need to be thinking about that situation while surrounded by my teammates, so I cleared my throat and stood from the padded bench in front of my locker. “Sorry, guys. Just not feeling it tonight.”

*Boos* went up from the guys around me, but I was exhausted mentally and physically. I simply was not up for it. Plus, I needed to decide how to move forward with the whole get-Owen-a-dick project.

As the guys started to file out of the locker room, I grabbed my game bag from my locker and fished my phone from the side pocket, automatically checking for any messages from Owen. I was disappointed when the only notifications I had were from the usual suspects. My phone rang while I was already holding it, and my best friend's name flashed across the screen.

*Pace.*

For the first time, maybe ever, I hesitated to answer the call. I already knew I wouldn't tell him about the conversation between Owen and me or our upcoming plans. Helping Owen figure out how to attract guys wasn't what he had in mind. But wasn't it the same end result? Get Owen socially involved, confident, and thriving?

Pace would be in town in less than two weeks for Christmas, and I'd explain things then.

Probably.

Maybe.

I sighed and scrubbed a hand down my face, feeling conflicted about how to handle things.

I needed to think before I opened my mouth for once, so I muted the ringtone and waited for it to stop vibrating.

As soon as it quieted in my hand, I tapped out a text to him.

*Me: Still in the locker room with Coach. I'll call as soon as I leave.*

When I ignored the call, I was filled with a sense of guilt, hollowing out a pit in my stomach—though I wasn't sure why I hesitated to tell him everything. Nothing about what I planned to do with Owen was *wrong* exactly. I just didn't like keeping it from Pace. He could very well be all for the idea. But if he wasn't and I had to call it off or go behind his back to help his little brother...I wasn't sure which option was worse. So, for now, it would have to be a secret between Owen, me, and possibly Vaughn if he'd told him. And that I needed to find out because Owen's bestie had a big fucking mouth.

I tapped on my phone screen again, bringing up the thread with Owen. Even though I was drained, I was itching to get started on this thing, so I sent him a message.

*KnightJackson23: Come over tonight, so we can discuss your idea in more detail.*

The reply followed short seconds later.

*Owen\_Walsh01: I've been moving back to my parents' house all morning, and I'm exhausted.*

That was a solid no, and I didn't really understand why I suddenly felt disappointed. Maybe I was actually looking forward to this insane plan which was crazy. I gained nothing from the arrangement. I typed out a response.

*KnightJackson23: Fine. Tomorrow then. It'll just be me at home, so we have the place to ourselves.*

I almost always had the house to myself. While I enjoyed the silence between parties, I found sharing that quiet time with Owen appealing.

Just when I thought he wouldn't respond, my phone vibrated in my hand.

*Owen\_Walsh01: I'll be there around noon.*

An odd sense of excitement traveled up my spine. Maybe because it was something I hadn't done before—sharing my expertise with anyone. Whatever it was, I found it thrilling and couldn't wait to get started.

By the time I was done with Little Walsh, he'd be riding any fat dick he wanted to. And it would be all thanks to my dedication to making his college experience memorable.

Owen would be happy.

Pace would be relieved.

And I'd have one hell of an ego boost.

Grinning to myself, I stuffed my phone in my pocket and slung my bag over my shoulder as I headed out of the locker room.

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NINE

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# OWEN

MY HEART WAS HAMMERING in my chest as I pulled down the driveway at Knight's house. I couldn't believe I was going through with this plan and with Knight, of all people. It seemed like a great idea when alcohol controlled my words, but without the liquid courage, I was crumbling under the pressure of the anxiety racing in my veins.

The only reason I'd shown up was because I believed he could help. But that didn't make it any easier.

Knight's house was a sprawling home, made of sun-soaked stucco walls, white stone, and red roof tiles. Wide windows stretched across the front of the house, and purposely weathered iron Juliet balconies were attached to many of the bedrooms. Two stories of sleek Mediterranean opulence. The evergreen shrubbery gave the illusion of year-round warmth when it was freezing outside.

It would be easy to feel out of place here, but Knight had been part of our family for so long that the elegant property had no effect on me. It was the guy standing in the driveway, bundled in a navy blue hoodie and sweatpants, as he leaned against his truck with his hands stuffed into the pouch that made me want to turn around and drive straight home.

I'd come too far to do that. No use in turning back now. Blowing out a steadying breath, I came to a stop behind his truck and shifted into park. Knight didn't move. He simply watched me with those steel-colored eyes as I got out of my little hatchback car and closed the door.

Unsure of what to do, I gave him an awkward wave. “Hey.”

A slow grin tugged at one side of his blood-red lips, making a single dimple pop. “Hey, back.”

When he said nothing else, I shrugged. “So... What now?”

Knight chuckled as he pushed off the truck. “Stop being weird and follow me.”

I hurried after him, trying to keep up with his long strides as he headed toward the backyard. “I’m not being weird.”

He shot a look over his shoulder, winking. “You so are, but it’s cool. Just remember, this was your bright idea.”

I couldn’t argue with that, so I settled for glaring at his back as he led me toward the guest house. I’d known Knight lived there, but I’d never had a reason to go inside. So when he pushed the door open and ushered me in, I scanned the room, taking in the details of the living room and attached mini-kitchen. The walls were all painted a warm beige with white trim. Instead of family photos, Knight had framed posters of his favorite basketball players.

Knight closed the door and headed into the kitchen, popping open the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle of water. “Want something to drink? I got beer.”

The wink he tossed in told me he was just fucking with me, but the mere mention of alcohol made my stomach clench. “Water, please.”

He grabbed a second bottle and carried it over to the coffee table, setting them down before plopping down on the smooth brown leather couch. He rubbed his hand around the cushion and patted it twice. “Have a seat, and let’s talk this thing out.”

Hesitating for a second, I debated making a run for it, going so far as eyeing the front door. Knight snorted. “Don’t even think about it, Little... *Owen*.”

“Little Owen?” I scowled, but it was enough to break through my nerves, so I marched to the couch and flung myself down on the third cushion, furthest from him.



Knight rolled his eyes dramatically. “It’s a bad habit and one I’ve been trying to break. Cut me some slack. I’ve known you your entire life.”

I snagged my water before sinking back into the plush cushion. “Let’s just get this over with. Tell me what to do, and we’ll be all set.”

Knight said nothing, and when I finally glanced at him, he was rubbing one long finger over his reddened lips. “Get this over with,” he mumbled before dropping his hand. “You want me to just give you the standard run-of-the-mill advice? Just be yourself, Owen. You’ll find your person.” There was a trace of sarcasm in his tone. “It’s not bad advice if you’re talking long-term marriage material. Is that what you’re looking for?”

I didn’t know what I was looking for, but starting with a kiss would be nice. “I don’t know.”

His eyebrows crashed together. “So what’s the goal? I need something to work with, Owen.”

Picking at the label on the bottle to give my hands something to do, I spoke freely. “I think I want to know what it feels like to kiss a guy I’m into. But I don’t really know my type. I’d like to go out on a date. Maybe to the movies...or anywhere really just to be seen in public. I’d like to know how that feels.” I lowered my voice, avoiding all eye contact as I focused on the blank screen of the massive TV mounted on the opposite wall. “I sort of want to experience a random hookup.” When he didn’t comment, I continued. “And eventually, yes, I’d like to find my person. I guess I want to experience it all, but no one seems interested.”

Knight hummed deep in his throat. “I know for a fact that isn’t the case. Everyone is someone’s type. Maybe you don’t give off available vibes.”

I shot him a curious look. “Available vibes? What the hell are those, and how do I control whatever vibes I have?”

Knight tried not to laugh, but his lips twitched once, twice, and then the raspy laugh I’d loved my entire life burst free. Had it been any other time, I would have been content to sit

and listen to that sound. But not when it was directed at me for not understanding something. “Knight,” I warned, and he coughed, clearing his throat.

“Sorry. I swear I wasn’t laughing at you. Well, not really. You just do this thing with your nose when you are confused. It scrunches up, and it’s just...cute.”

*Cute.* I loathed that word. When I thought of Knight, words like hot and too sexy for his own good came to mind. Definitely not *cute*.

“Whatever. So, my vibes...” I prompted.

Knight kicked off his shoes and propped up his feet on the coffee table, crossing his ankles. “Right. Available vibes are as simple as making eye contact, a smile, a compliment... something that makes people want to approach you. All of which could just be friendly. If you want someone to know you’re available, you just put a flirty spin on it.”

“You flirt with everyone,” I pointed out.

Knight simply winked. “Because I’m available.”

I closed my eyes, exasperation setting in. I couldn’t do this, whatever *this* was. “So you’re saying the first thing I need to do is flirt? Really? I already know that. Sort of.”

He shook his head. “Nope. Not what I said at all. I was answering your question. The first thing you need to do is figure out what you like and what you want. And then we’ll work on those vibes.”

“Can we stop saying vibes now?” I asked, beginning to hate the word.

Knight snorted. “Yes, please. It’s getting weird.”

“Finally, something we agree on.” I smiled. He smiled. It was a moment I would have happily held onto forever, but it would defeat my goal of getting over him. I looked away, resting my gaze on his enormous sock-covered feet. “And I told you what I wanted already.”

“You did,” he agreed. “Everything it would seem.”

“I was taught to set high goals,” I quipped.

Knight hummed low in his throat again. “And I train hard to meet them. Could be a good team, you and me.”

I wished he wouldn’t say things like that, even in jest. “So what’s the plan? How do I experience everything I want with a guy?”

When I finally looked back at him, he sprang off the couch. “Be right back.”

“Um, okay.” I watched curiously as Knight disappeared around a corner. He returned seconds later, holding a notepad. “What’s that for?”

“It’s going to be our playbook.” He sat in the same spot and kicked his feet back up as he turned the cover over to a clean sheet of paper.

My eyebrows rose. “We need a playbook?”

“Couldn’t hurt. We use them in basketball, and they do come in handy.” He shrugged as he scribbled something down. I leaned forward, trying to see what he’d written.

“Is it going to consist of X’s and O’s, telling me exactly where to be and what to do?” I asked with a snort, but Knight’s head jerked around, facing me.

“That’s not a bad idea.”

“You serious?” I frowned. “That’s like the worst idea.” Wasn’t it? The more I thought about it, having a set guideline could make things a lot easier. “What if things don’t happen the exact way you plan them?”

He scoffed. “Plans will always go awry. So consider it a basic starter guide. Once you’re *vibing* with someone, things will flow naturally.”

So much for doing away with that word, I thought, and Knight’s dimples popped even though he was still focused on the notebook. He’d done that on purpose.

“Can I see yet?” I asked impatiently.

He cast me a look that was all mischief as he passed me the notebook, and my curiosity piqued higher. Until I read the words written large on the front page.

### ***The Hater Playbook***

“I don’t even know what that means.” I tried to make sense of the words but came up empty, shooting Knight a look and asking him to fill me in.

His lips tilted into a lopsided grin. “By the time I’m done with you, you’re going to have more *haters* than me. Some might even post judgmental comments on your social media.”

He totally went there, and I refused to be baited. But also because he had a point. Somehow in the madness that was Knight’s brain, it made an odd sort of sense. But still... “What was wrong with *Catching a Guy 101*, or *How to Flirt and not Look Stupid?*”

“Because you have much higher goals, my friend. You want everything, and I plan to make sure you get them.”

He sounded confident, and a strange sort of excitement filled my veins. A curious mixture of nervousness and the promise of fulfilling so many things I’d only dreamed about. I bit my lip. “When do we start?”

Knight snatched the notebook back, scribbling down something else before handing it back. “As soon as you can answer this question.”

*Strategy #1 Figure out what it is you want first.*

That one was easy. For as long as I could remember, I’d imagined what Knight’s red lips would feel like against mine.

“A kiss.” His lips twitched, and I realized I was staring at them. I clarified, “I’d like to kiss a guy.”

“No flirting. Just straight to it, then?” He sounded as if he was trying not to laugh again. “Like kissing booth style?”

I glared. “Well, no. Of course not. I just...want that.”

He sobered at my honesty and nodded while taking the notebook back. “You have an assignment.”

“An assignment?” What was he talking about?

“Told you that you were my student, didn’t I?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. What is it?”

“I want you to give me a list of physical features you like, personality traits you’d be drawn to, and activities you might enjoy doing with someone, other than going to the movies.” Knight wrote as he spoke. When he stopped, he tapped the pen to the page. “And I want you to write them down in here.”

“Like submitting an order in a drive-thru. Wish I’d known it was this easy. Knight’s To-Go Delivery Dates.” I quipped as he slid the notebook back to me and I closed it.

Knight let loose a full belly laugh that made me grin. Things were getting too comfortable between us, and I found myself gravitating toward him more and more the longer I sat next to him.

“I guess I better get going.” I stood.

Knight actually appeared disappointed before replacing the frown with a boyish grin. “I’ll walk you out.”

By the time Knight accompanied me back to my car with the notebook tucked under my arm, I felt a little less stupid for asking for his help. With any luck, before winter break was over, I’d have several things crossed off my list of things I wanted to try.

Now, I just had to make sure the lid stayed firmly closed on wishing those things were happening with Knight.

TEN

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# OWEN

ROCK MUSIC PLAYED through my headphones as I bobbed my head to the fast-paced beat. I'd quickly gotten used to being back in my bedroom instead of the dorms, and it definitely had its perks, starting with the privacy of having the space all to myself. The scent of warm vanilla was a cozy reminder I was home, and it felt good. I suspected the feeling wouldn't last long because I loved the idea of being out on my own.

My parents hadn't changed anything in my room from how I'd left it. When I'd run off to college it was with all new bedding and needed accessories to have a functional place to live while on campus. The comforter on my full-sized bed was still the dark gray one I'd left behind. The walls were still decorated with things I'd collected over the years.

All morning, I'd been leaning back against my sand-colored headboard that matched the rest of my furniture, staring at the sheet of paper in the notebook where Knight had made columns for me to list my preferences in guys. I still hadn't written anything other than I preferred the age range of eighteen to twenty-three. And I wasn't even solid on that.

The problem was every time I tried to think of individual features and traits, the only thing I could imagine was a single guy. Every single damn time, I pictured Knight. It was honestly growing frustrating as hell. The project meant to steer me away from Knight just had him on my mind more than ever.

A steady tap penetrated through the song I was listening to, so I yanked the cans off my ears, hooking them around my neck. The knock came again, steady and slow. Only one person knocked that way.

“Come in, Dad,” I called out, and the door eased open. His imposing figure, which didn’t match his personality at all, filled the doorway as he folded his bulky arms across his chest.

My father was a tall man with the same shade of blond hair he’d passed down to Pace and me. Our deep brown eyes matched his too. I just didn’t understand why he hadn’t handed down the height gene to both of us. Pace had been the only lucky recipient of that gift.

“How you doing, kiddo?” he asked in his deep, monotone voice.

Remembering what I’d been working on, I closed the notebook and slid half of it under my leg. My dad’s gaze tracked the movement, but he didn’t question what I’d not so stealthily tried to cover up. “I’m fine. What’s up?”

He stepped into my bedroom, gazing at each picture, poster, and random drawing that had found homes on my walls over the years before he looked back at me. “Nothing, really. I just missed having you around the house and wanted to check in on you. Work has been crazy, and I don’t get to see you enough.”

Because he was a man with very slight inflections in his tone, he could be hard to read, but his eyes shone warmly. I’d missed him too and told him so. “Missed you too. I know your schedule keeps you busy, but I’ll be here for a while, and we have Christmas. Plenty of time to catch up.”

He nodded. “That we do. Speaking of Christmas, I was thinking about doing something special for your mother. We haven’t done a family portrait in some time, and she’s been after me about it for years.”

I had no problems with smiling for a few snapshots. “She’d love that. Just tell me when and where. I’ll be there.”



Dad smiled, close-lipped, but it still made the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes wrinkle. "You ready to see your brother? I know he's missed you. Talks about you all the time."

Pace rarely called me. I knew he loved me, but we'd never been super close. The age difference allowed us to be on the same school campus for only one year before he'd graduated and headed to college. "Definitely. Just another week to go."

"It'll be nice having you both under the same roof with us again." Dad's voice roughened, and I realized what was happening. Pace wasn't the one missing people. My dad was a total emo at heart.

I offered a smile. "It's going to be great."

He nodded. "You have anything special going on today?"

"Not really." I shrugged. Other than completing the assignment Knight had left for me, I had nothing planned.

He frowned. "Must be weird to be back here and Vaughn not just a short walk away."

I snorted. "I see enough of Vaughn every day. Won't kill us to be separated for a few weeks." Absence did make the heart grow fonder after all, and after what we'd been through recently, that wasn't a bad thing.

The sound of the front door closing grabbed both of our attentions just before Mom called out, "John, you here?"

I shared a grin with my dad, and then I whispered, "You're being summoned."

Dad sighed. "She's just going to put me to work, fixing something, no doubt."

"Or killing a spider," I tacked on as a possibility.

"Not a chance." He scoffed. "You're home now, so you're back on spider duty."

We both laughed, and then Mom's voice was right behind him. "Did you not hear me?"

We broke into a fresh round of laughter, and the infectious sound of my dad's laugh could make a mime break routine. The steady, slow *Ha. Ha. Ha.* was just weird and oddly endearing.

Mom looked between the two of us suspiciously before addressing my dad. "Honey, the garage door is acting up. Would you mind taking a look at it today?"

*Ha. Ha. Ha.* once again filled my bedroom, and I fell into a fit with him. Mom just appeared to think we were both crazy, gaze ping-ponging between the two of us. The space between her eyebrows creased. "Did I miss something?"

I spoke to my dad through laughter, "It's not a spider, so I'm afraid that one's all yours."

Dad wiped away some tears beneath his eyes and gave me a short nod with a small grin. "Okay, kiddo. I just wanted to check in, and I'll let you know about the other thing."

"What other thing?" Mom asked as she followed him back down the hall.

Feeling inspired by their relationship, I slid off my bed, crossed the room, and shut my door before returning to the same warm spot. When I crossed my legs, I flipped open the cover again and started writing under each column.

Physical features: *No preferences.*

Personality traits: *Funny, clever, and smart.*

Dates you'd find fun: *Movies, Museums, Zoos, Aquariums. Food is always a win, but I'd rather be out doing something active with someone.*

My phone chimed just as I wrapped up my short lists. My heart skipped a beat, and I checked the time to find it was almost three PM. Knight's basketball game should have ended half an hour ago, so it was likely from him and not Vaughn, who I knew was out shopping with his dad for Christmas.

I clicked on the notification.

KnightJackson23: *Hungry?*

I was actually starving.

Owen\_Walsh01: *I could go for some food. What did you have in mind?*

Knight: *Meet me at Lucy's Deli?*

The restaurant was half an hour away, but I didn't have to ask why we were meeting there. There was less chance we'd run into people either of us knew, so we'd be uninterrupted.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Leaving now.*

KnightJackson23: *Don't forget the notebook.*

Owen\_Walsh01: *\*eye roll\**

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LUCY'S DELI was a quaint sandwich shop with a modern twist on the mom-and-pop restaurant. An oldies radio station flowed through the sound system, and the food was absolutely divine for a place that was so unknown.

Crisp vegetables topped with freshly sliced meat and a thick cut of pepper jack cheese sauced in oil and vinegar was happiness in a bowl. In my opinion, anyway. Knight kept eyeing my dish in disgust.

"It's so good," I moaned before shoving another bite in my mouth.

Knight frowned at his simple grilled chicken breast folded in flatbread before his hand shot out as he snatched my bowl, pulling it to his side of the table.

"The fuck, Knight?" I reached for it back, but he easily swatted my hand away and dug a fork into my happiness, shoveling a massive bite into his mouth.

He chewed with a thoughtful expression in place. After he swallowed, he finally pushed it back to me and picked up his stupid, boring sandwich. "Can't moan like that and expect me not to try it."

I scowled as I looked at the bowl that was noticeably less full. “Some people moan like that when they have a metal rod shoved in their cock. Are you going to try that too?”

Knight smirked. “Sounding? What makes you think I haven’t tried it?”

Well, that wasn’t the response I’d been expecting. “You’ve done that?” I asked, surprised, though I wasn’t sure why.

Knight shook his head. “Not yet.”

And then he bit off a huge mouthful of his sandwich. Why wasn’t a normal bite ever an option for him?

“But you plan to?” I asked, interested. I’d never really thought about what Knight was into sexually and suddenly wanted to know everything. When he nodded, I debated on whether to throw the question out there or if he’d even answer.

Knight swallowed the bite and took a long sip from his water. As he screwed the cap back on, he studied me. “You look like your head is about to explode. Just ask already.”

I arched a brow. “Now you’re a mind reader?” He lifted a shoulder in response. Sighing, I asked, “Okay then, what other kinks have you tried or plan to try?”

He tilted his head side to side, appearing to consider his response. “I find the idea of exploring our bodies in every way exciting, but I do have limits like most people. I’ve dabbled in bondage—nothing too extreme—role play, spanking, flogging... Are you sure you want to hear all of this?”

I did, but at the same time, I also didn’t because of the unwanted mental images that came along with the knowledge. “How about we stick to the ones you haven’t tried but want to.”

“How about just one more, and we save the rest for another time,” he counteroffered.

The promise of future discussions about sexual things probably wasn’t the best idea. But, since we planned on doing that anyway as part of my learning experience, I figured it

couldn't hurt. "Okay, what's the one thing you've wanted to try most that you haven't?"

"Don't freak out," he warned, and my interest in the conversation doubled.

"No freakouts," I promised, wondering why he felt it necessary to add a warning.

He tapped a finger on the table before apparently deciding to share. "I really want to wake up with my dick already getting action. But not in a creepy way. A pre-arranged consensual way."

That didn't sound so bad. Of all the extreme kinks out there, that sounded mild at best. "I didn't even realize that was a kink," I admitted.

He leaned back in the hard plastic chair. "Eh, there are levels of how extreme it can be. I'm not talking about being taken advantage of while I'm unconscious. But in the right situation, I think it would be hot as fuck to wake up with a pair of lips wrapped around my cock...or other things bouncing on my dick."

While that wasn't what I wanted to picture, I was surprised he hadn't tried it. "Then why haven't you done that?"

Knight shrugged. "I don't let anyone sleep over simply because I haven't found anyone I trust not to take advantage of the situation. I've never been with anyone I would give that kind of trust to, and I'm not eager for mini-Knights to be walking around, if ever."

That was interesting and made me wonder why he never wanted kids. But at the same time, I didn't want to know because picturing Knight with a wife and children made me ill. So instead, I changed the topic. Fishing the notebook from my backpack resting on the seat beside me, I slid it across the table.

Knight's eyes lit up with amusement at the sight of it, and his lips slanted into a crooked grin. "Well, let's take a look and see what you've decided on, shall we?"

Knight appeared way too eager as he flipped open the cover to the page I'd filled out. When he looked up, he appeared confused. "There's almost nothing written here. You don't care what the guy looks like, but he has to be funny and take you on field trips."

A burst of laughter shot through my lips. I hadn't really thought of it that way. "I guess so. I just want to have fun with someone and laugh. I think it's sexy, and it just sounds... happy."

Knight closed the notebook. "I was thinking more along the lines of a guy you wanted to kiss, not shop for engagement rings with."

I hadn't thought about it coming across that way, either. Maybe I wasn't cut out for a quick random hookup because I couldn't imagine having sex with someone just because they ranked a ten in general society standards.

"You asked me to fill it out, so I did. I guess those are the things that are important to me." I shrugged and returned to devouring my bowl of goodness, or at least what Knight had left for me.

Knight ran his long finger over his lips again, an absent-minded move I was learning he did when deep in thought. "We are essentially trying to find you a boyfriend."

I paused, a fork full of ham and spinach that dripped with oil and vinegar halfway to my mouth, then dropped it back into the bowl. "Would that be so awful?"

Knight frowned. "Of course not. You want what you want, and you shouldn't settle or even care about anyone's opinion about it. It just changes what I thought I was trying to accomplish. You do realize the only girlfriends I've had were very short-term in high school, right? I may not be the best for this kind of thing."

While he appeared skeptical, I was already shaking my head. "I disagree. I'll never meet anyone if I can't approach them in the first place. Apparently, my vibe is off too."

He lost yet another battle to a smile that broke free, deepening both dimples. “That’s true. I could at least help you with upping your game. Though I have to say, I don’t think that’s an issue.”

Knight glanced behind me, and I turned to follow his stare. A preppy guy with shaggy light brown hair sat alone at a corner table, and when I met his eyes, a rosy flush lit his cheeks. I spun back around in my chair. “He’s definitely into you, not me.”

“Nope.” Knight let the *p* pop on his lips. “That one is definitely feeling you. You want to talk to him?”

I froze. The guy was cute, but I couldn’t go try to talk to him in front of Knight, could I? That would be weird for me. But at the same time, his encouragement might help me with the confidence factor.

“I don’t know,” I hedged. “What would I even say? It’s like cold calling, but in person.”

Knight bit his lower lip, and it was impossible not to look. “I have an idea.”

His ideas seemed to be hit or miss, so I cautiously approached the situation. “What is it?”

Knight stood and reached down, grabbing my hand from where it had been resting on the tabletop. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” I asked but let him pull me up from my chair. When Knight laced his fingers through mine, the tiny hairs on my arm stood on end. Could he feel the electricity running between us, or was it something I was building up in my overactive imagination? I didn’t know, but I followed him without question until he looked over his shoulder. “To practice.”

*Practice?* “I don’t know what you mean.”

Knight turned a corner, leaving us in an empty hallway that led to the kitchen, and dropped my hand. “You, Owen Walsh, are going to try to get my phone number.”

“I have your phone number.” I rolled my eyes.

Knight snorted. “You’re going to pretend I’m a stranger, and you want my number. And on a side note, I don’t have yours. We need to fix that.”

In my wildest dreams about something happening between Knight and me, that was the absolute last way I’d ever imagined it going down. As a fucking training exercise.

“This is stupid,” I complained, not a fan of this idea at all.

He sighed. “You wanted my help, so here it is. Show me what you got.”

I could already feel myself crumbling under the pressure and how unnatural the exercise felt. But he did have a point. As he stared at me expectantly, I squared my shoulders.

Knight was already shaking his head. “You look so stiff. Loosen up.”

“This isn’t real, so obviously, it’s going to be a little weird,” I shot back with narrowed eyes.

He paused. “Fine, I’ll go first, and then you can mimic me.”

That did sound easier, even if I did still find the idea dumb. “Well, actually, you don’t have my phone number, so let’s see if you can get it.”

Knight’s eyes narrowed. “Challenge accepted.”

I rolled my eyes at this ridiculous endeavor, but that quickly changed when Knight’s eyes became sensual as he stalked toward me with slow steps that made my breath quicken, rushing in and out of my lungs. I’d wanted to be on the receiving end of that look for years, but as it happened, the overwhelming intensity of nerves racing through my body was almost too much.

As he advanced, I retreated until my back was pressed flush to the wall. Knight leaned forward, one hand propped against the wall, the other lightly brushing fingers along my arm. He whispered one word and then bit his lip. “Hi.”

Had this been real and been approached like that, I’d have melted on the spot and given him my phone number. As it



was, I grew flustered, and a single breathy word flowed through my lips. “Hi.”

Knight chuckled, breaking through the lust-filled fog in my brain. I scowled and pressed my hand to his chest, pushing him back. “That totally did not work.”

His lips kicked up on one side. “Whatever you say. Your turn.”

There was no way I could copy something that came so naturally to him he could fake his way through it. So I completely chickened out. “The demonstration was enough. I can do that.”

“Lame,” he taunted. “Are you ready to try it on that guy out there?”

The answer was a resounding no. I’d already been beyond hesitant, but now there was no way I could focus on another guy. I shook my head. “He’s not really my type.”

Knight sighed. “You wrote you didn’t care what he looked like, and there’s no way you know if he’s funny or not since you won’t talk to him. How do you know he’s not your type?”

*Because he’s not you.* Of course, I wouldn’t tell Knight the truth, so I lied. “Then we can add ‘not preppy’ to the list.”

I was only interested in overgrown, cocky jocks at the moment, so that was technically true.

Knight took another step back. “We’re adding a new strategy to the playbook.”

“Perfect,” I mocked, but it seemed to roll right off his back. “And what might that be?”

“For you to seduce me, Owen. Unless I see you successfully hit on another guy, I need to see what I’m working with.”

Seduce Knight? That thought sent a rush of nervousness in a wash of heat through my body. “That’s crazy.”

“You say crazy. I say necessary. Consider it a test.”

A test on how much anxiety my system could actually handle, maybe. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good.” He appeared appeased with my answer. “In the meantime, I’m still hungry, so let’s go sit back down.”

I’d completely lost my appetite, but I forced myself to follow him back to our table and then picked at my food.

While he shoveled the rest of his sandwich down his throat, I kept waffling over whether or not I’d actually go through with his challenge to attempt to seduce him.

Frustrated, my stomach rolling with nerves, I resisted the urge to snatch the notebook. I wanted to scratch out the first strategy and replace it with something more fitting for my mood.

*Strategy #1- Don’t drunk text your enemy.*

Knight didn’t feel like an enemy anymore. More like an ally, but one wreaking havoc on my mind. I should never have asked for his help. I was doomed to fail.

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ELEVEN

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# OWEN

IT HAD BEEN two days since Knight put his fake moves on me, and it was still all I could think about. The way his voice had deepened was a sensual tease that drove me crazy. The feel of his body so close to mine I could feel the warmth radiating through our clothes. It didn't help that he'd messaged me after practice yesterday, badgering me about trying it out on him, as if there was a remote possibility I could pull off the same intensity that swirled in his gray eyes.

With my parents out shopping for last-minute Christmas gifts, I sat at the kitchen table munching on leftover spaghetti from the night before. I pulled up the thread, rereading the conversation between Knight and me for the third time as I considered how to move forward.

*KnightJackson23: Are you coming over tonight?*

*Owen\_Walsh01: Hadn't planned on it. Why?*

*KnightJackson23: You know why. You have some practicing to do. I'm waiting for you to prove those seduction skills you claim to have mastered from my demonstration.*

*Owen\_Walsh01: It'll have to wait. Mom's cooking, and I promised to spend the night in for a Christmas movie marathon.*

*KnightJackson23: Sounds fun. Almost as fun as it would be if you came over.*

I wasn't sure if he'd realized how the last message had sounded, but my cock had taken it wrong. Way wrong. As in Knight doing more than pretending to hit on me. I continued

reading as I mindlessly twirled my fork in the bowl full of noodles.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Maybe tomorrow.*

KnightJackson23: *Definitely tomorrow. The clock is ticking unless you want Vaughn to take over.*

He was smart, attempting to persuade me by dangling the deal I'd made with my best friend in front of my face. The only thing worse than practicing my moves on Knight was losing to Vaughn and having to go through with a date with whoever he set me up with.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Point noted.*

KnightJackson23: *I guess we'll find out how many points you noted. Tomorrow, Owen. No excuses.*

I hadn't responded to Knight's last message yesterday because I wasn't sure what to say. With Knight busy playing his second game of the week today, it bought me more time to think. And that wouldn't last much longer, considering his game had likely ended about half an hour ago. I still hadn't decided whether I'd go to his house.

A message popped up on the thread I was currently reading, and I groaned. I seriously hated that it showed the sender when a message was opened because Knight would know I'd already read it.

KnightJackson23: *So? Are you coming over?*

I rested my fork against the side of the bowl and thought about Knight's usual activities after games.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Did you win?*

KnightJackson23: *I find it slightly insulting that you don't keep up with the team. But yes, we won by a landslide.*

Shouldn't he be busy tonight, then? I definitely wasn't prepared to try anything in the middle of a jock-infested party.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Aren't you doing your normal after-game party?*

His instant replies made me feel a little less embarrassed that I'd been caught reading our messages. Something he'd graciously not pointed out.

KnightJackson23: *Not if you're coming over. It'll just be you and me.*

Was he saying he was canceling the party for me? It sounded that way, and I couldn't stop the sensation of butterflies in my stomach, stupid as it was. I gnawed on my lip, considering whether I was up for the inevitable practice I'd be hounded to perform. It was going to happen eventually anyway, and it might be better to rip the bandage off. Show Knight just how bad I was so he could fix it.

Resigned, I sighed and tapped out a reply.

Owen\_Walsh01: *What time?*

KnightJackson23: *Now. And bring whatever you swim in.*

Swim? My brow furrowed. It was nearly thirty degrees outside, so he was clearly insane.

Owen\_Walsh01: *A bit cold for that, no?*

KnightJackson23: *Not when you have a hot tub. Get your stuff together and head over. I'm on my way home now.*

Knight was getting bossy as hell. I didn't hate it, which irritated me. One day I was actually going to put a lid on the infatuation I had for him forever.

Owen\_Walsh01: *On my way in five.*

I closed the screen and set my phone on the table before scooting off the dining room chair and carrying my bowl to the trash. I dumped what I hadn't managed to eat and rinsed the dish and fork before loading them into the dishwasher.

As I made my way to my bedroom to gather my things, I mouthed the words Knight had said to me at the deli, imagining saying them back. My cheeks flooded with heat just from pretending, so I wasn't sure how I could manage to force them out at all when we were face to face. Much less do it the way he had, fire and sin lacing his tone. I couldn't. That was just a hard fact.

In my room, I snagged my board shorts, wallet, and keys before heading back through the house to the front door. Grabbing my puffer jacket from the coat rack, I slipped it on and stepped outside, locking the door behind me.

My car was parked along the curb now that my dad was back from his trip, and I strode toward it at a quick clip. I had to get behind the wheel and on the road before I could change my mind.

---

WHEN I PULLED down Knight's driveway, I found him exactly as I had the first time I'd made the trip to his house on my own. He leaned against his truck, this time wearing a similar hoodie but in a red shade nearly identical to his lips. Instead of sweatpants, he wore a pair of faded denim jeans. His brown hair stuck out from beneath a white beanie, and a crooked smile tipped his lips as I shifted into park. A smile that said he had won.

I bristled at the smug look on his face and snatched my things from the passenger seat before popping open the door and climbing out.

"About time. It's cold as fuck out here," Knight complained, but amusement lit up his eyes.

I rolled mine. "It's been like fifteen minutes tops, so you couldn't have even been here long."

"Long enough for my nuts to freeze," he said as he headed toward the guest house with me following. "The hot tub is going to feel ah-fucking-mazing."

"Or we could stay inside like sane people," I offered, earning a scoff.

"You just wait. I'm telling you, it feels good. You're going to love it." He stepped on the porch, once again pushing open the door and ushering me into the living room first.

Knight followed me inside and headed straight for the hallway, pausing for half a second to tap on the door just

before the corner. “You can change in here. I’ll be out in a minute.”

I nodded, and as soon as he stepped around the corner, I made my way into what I’d already suspected was the bathroom, closing the door behind me. Once inside, I quickly stripped out of my clothes, sliding my green and white striped board shorts up my legs, then tied them around my slim waist. Looking in the mirror, I hesitated to leave the bathroom.

It wouldn’t be the first time Knight had seen me shirtless, but it had been a while, and not much had changed. I was still lanky, nothing like his athletic build. At least my skin had a natural bronze that left a healthy glow. It wasn’t like I was going to magically fill out with muscle in the next few minutes, so I folded the clothes I’d taken off and stacked them onto the marble countertop next to the sink.

When I opened the door to hear noise coming from the kitchen. I followed the sound, finding Knight rummaging in the refrigerator, a beer bottle tucked between his arm and the white robe he wore over his red board shorts and bare chest.

“There’s a robe for you on the back of the couch. You’ll need it.” He glanced over at me and then back to whatever he was doing in the refrigerator.

When his gaze immediately swung back to me, skimming over me from head to toe, heat rushed to my cheeks. I knew he hadn’t been checking me out *that* way, but it was easy enough for my imagination to dream up a spark of heat in his steely eyes.

Knight cleared his throat, simply explaining, “It’s cold.”

Well, no shit. “It’s not cold, Knight. It’s fucking freezing, and I still think this is one of your worst ideas, which is saying a lot these days.”

“Right. Well, the robe will help keep you warm,” he said, stating the obvious once again.

His voice had been rougher than usual, which I found odd. It was a bit chilly in the kitchen, so I turned around to find a plush forest green robe draped over the back of the couch. I



slipped it on and sighed as the heavy material cocooned me in luxurious warmth.

Knight came out of the kitchen, holding our drinks, and passed me the water. “You’ll need this. I set the heat pretty high.”

Well, that was welcome news. “Ready when you are.”

Lies. I still thought this was a dumb idea.

Knight grabbed two folded towels sitting on the kitchen table and led me back outside. Even the thick fabric of the robe couldn’t shield me enough that I wasn’t a shivering mess. We both hurried across the yard toward the swimming pool. The hot tub was an extension of the pool itself but elevated with a space that let the overflow fall in a steady stream to the water below. Steam rose high and dense, carrying a subtle scent of chlorine to my nose. The promise of heat made me strip off my robe without waiting for Knight.

I tossed it over the back of a lounge chair and hurriedly hopped straight into the hot tub, submerging myself in the sweet, sweet heat up to my chin.

Knight chuckled as he slowly removed his robe. I focused on his every move as he exposed his chiseled abs and toned chest. His small brown nipples were hardened into tight points, but the cold apparently had no effect on his bulging cock. His suit was just tight enough to show a vague outline of how long and thick he was. I’d never had a cock in my mouth before, but my mouth watered, wanting nothing more than to debut my rookie skills at that moment. When he turned to toss his robe on top of mine, I might have checked out his perfectly rounded ass.

When Knight turned back to face me again, I quickly averted my eyes, staring off at the empty moonlit field that stretched for acres before running into thick lines of trees.

He stepped into the hot tub, sinking down to his chin while taking up one of the built-in seats. “Feels good, right?”

With his body safely out of view, I looked back at him, admitting he was right. “Amazing, just like you said.”

Knight grinned, and his dimples appeared before he tipped his head back, staring up at the night sky. “I can’t believe it’s already almost Christmas.”

I’d expected him to dive right into the flirtation-slash-seduction role-play, so I was relieved when he brought up such a normal topic. I hummed in agreement. “Does seem like it crept up pretty fast.”

“Pace will be back, so it’ll be nice to see him again. Feels like it’s been forever,” Knight said, clearly ready to catch up with my brother.

Personally, I’d rather not talk about him at the moment. I’d always had to share Knight with Pace, if sharing meant I occasionally hung out with him as a tagalong with my brother. The last few days Knight had been all mine, and I knew that wouldn’t last forever.

“Well, I wouldn’t plan on a huge reunion since he’s bringing his new girlfriend.” It was odd to think of my brother shackling himself to one girl when he’d always been similar to Knight about not getting serious with anyone.

“Never thought Pace would settle down, that’s for sure.” Knight chuckled and lifted his head, arching a brow at me. “He was worse than me in high school.”

My nose wrinkled. It was bad enough having the topic centered on my brother when I was craving Knight’s full attention, but there were certain details I just didn’t need to know. “Can we not discuss my brother’s sex life, please?”

Knight bit his lip. “You know he probably won’t approve of what we’re doing, right? Or at least how far we plan to take it.”

He was right, I supposed. Pace likely wouldn’t be supportive of Knight talking to me about what drove guys crazy in bed. “Does he need to know?”

Knight tilted his head. “Need to? No. But I feel a little guilty keeping it from him. He’s been my best friend my entire life.”

Of course, I'd known that and looking at him now, I did feel bad for ever asking Knight to sign up for this. But we'd come so far that there was no point in stopping now. But I offered him the out anyway. "We can stop if that's what you need to do. I'll understand."

He immediately shook his head. "I feel guilty, but I don't want to stop."

I was conflicted. On the one hand, the fact that he wanted to help me anyway, despite the consequences, created a warmth to bloom in my chest. On the other, I felt like a selfish dick. My second thought won the debate as I pushed away the idea of walking away from the arrangement. "Okay."

"Are you ready to prove you learned a damn thing the other day?" His teasing tone told me he was calling complete bullshit, but it also put me at ease after the heavier topic. "Or do you need me to give you another demonstration first?"

Knight was half joking, half serious. I stared back at him because this role-play wasn't happening unless I had his exact words and movements to mirror.

Knight's eyes flickered, skimming over my face, reading what I wasn't saying.

"Stay still," he instructed like I even had the capability of moving as he leaned in close. So close that his breath coasted over my lips. The scent of beer and mint hit my nose, and my eyes drifted closed as the soft sensation rushed over my mouth. "It's about body language, leaning in close."

I was fairly certain there was no reason for someone to be as close as Knight was to my mouth, but I didn't stop him as he continued speaking. I was too busy soaking up the sensations slowly sinking into every cell of my being.

"The tone of your voice," Knight said, his voice growing raspier, deeper, and filled with heat. "The subtle touches." His fingers trailed up my arm below the water, creating a tingle that shot straight to my cock. "Making them want more but holding back."

I wanted more, so he definitely was doing something right. Too right. My cock was hard as fuck. And then he was gone, just like he'd said, leaving me wanting so much more.

When I opened my eyes, Knight was reclined again in his seat. He winked. "And that's how it's done."

The arrogant bastard knew exactly how to crawl under my skin, and my jaw ticced. "That was *okay*. Nothing to get cocky about."

He snorted. "Fine. But now it's your turn. Let's see how quick of a learner you are."

I was so nervous I was worried I'd be sick. My stomach was tied in knots, but I wasn't backing out this time. If I couldn't do this with Knight, I wasn't sure I could do this with anyone.

When I scooted off my seat, Knight's eyes latched onto me, studying my every move with an intensity that caused my body to vibrate with nerves. He sat silently, watching and waiting.

Pushing away the words in my head telling me I couldn't and shouldn't do this, I mimicked what he'd done, leaning in close. Knight held still as I reached forward beneath the surface, trailing a finger down his arm. He shivered, and my confidence grew. Slowing my breathing, I let my breaths coast along his neck, something he hadn't done.

"Fuck," Knight whispered, surprising me. When I glanced at his face I found his eyes closed, nostrils flaring as if trying to control himself.

My confidence grew even more as I whispered, "See? I'm a fast learner."

Knight turned his head suddenly, causing his lips to brush mine. They might as well have been laced with hot wires with how fast I pulled back. I wasn't sure which one of us should apologize, so I waited for him to say something. Anything. But he only stared at me, an odd expression on his face. The silence was thick and filled with tension. I just wasn't sure if I

was the only one feeling it. Although there was no reason for it to have the same effect on him.

“You’ve never been kissed.” The first words out of his mouth were little more than a rasp and came as a surprise because he knew the answer to that already.

I shook my head anyway. “You know I haven’t.”

He continued to stare at me, making me squirm. “Kiss me.”

Shock froze me in place. “You want me to kiss you?”

Knight nodded. “I do.”

“Why?” His offer had me reeling, but I was so turned on, riding a high I’d never experienced before. When he only shrugged, I murmured, “We probably shouldn’t.”

“Have you thought about it before? Kissing me?” Knight cocked his head. “And don’t lie to me.”

“Yes,” I whispered, “but—”

I never finished my sentence because Knight lifted his hand, cupped the back of my head, and pulled me close. His lips were on mine before I could even think to argue. And then I was drowning in Knight, unable to breathe anything other than him. I was unable to think about anything other than how he tasted of beer and mint as his tongue slid along my lips and tangled with mine in a slow caress.

I barely registered how he pulled my body flush with his, and drawing me onto his lap. Hard cock to hard cock. With his big hand pressing my lower back, he guided my hips. Knight expertly ground me against him. And then he groaned, the vibration into my mouth nearly making me come that very second. It was enough to shock my system out of the lust-fueled stupor.

What the fuck were we doing?

I jerked back, scrambled off his lap and floated backward in the water as my eyes widened in shock. “What the hell was that, Knight?”

He seemed to contemplate the question before giving a nonchalant shrug. “A teachable moment for both of us.”

“Oh my god. What does that even mean?” I scrambled out of the hot tub, bolting for the robe and wrapping it around my body.

The one thing I didn’t ever want was a pity kiss, especially from Knight. And my first one? I glared as my anger grew.

Knight sighed. “It was just a kiss, Owen. Calm down.”

“Just a kiss?” I sputtered. “That was not *just* anything, and you were hard.”

Knight frowned. “And I’m still hard, which is unfortunate.”

Heat poured through my body, melting my limbs despite the bitterly cold air. He wasn’t making any sense. “You’re straight, and I am very, very gay. There is something seriously fucked up about this.”

“Can you tell me that kiss didn’t make you desperate to come for me?” Knight challenged. “Tell me you wouldn’t do it again. Go ahead and lie to me.”

I wanted to, but the lie stuck in my throat.

“You’re straight,” I repeated because I couldn’t make sense of why Knight had not only kissed me, but I was pretty sure he would have taken it further if I hadn’t pulled away.

Knight cocked a brow. “Seemingly less straight than I thought. It felt good, and who am I to make something that feels so good a bad thing?”

“My brother’s best friend,” I shot back because Pace was a problem whether I liked it or not.

Knight immediately sobered, and he blew out a long breath. “I’d never purposely do something to hurt him, and I didn’t plan that kiss, Owen. It just happened. And I don’t regret it, even if that makes me an asshole.”

I wasn’t sure what it made him. What it did do was feed my confusion. “I’m going to head back and change.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “You’re leaving?” He almost sounded disappointed.

But what else was I supposed to do? I needed to think, and I couldn’t do that near Knight. Not if I planned to make good choices. I’d been working on getting over him, and at this rate I’d end up under him with my ass popped up in the air.

I pulled the robe tighter around my body. “I think that’s a good idea.”

Knight sighed as he sank further beneath the surface. “I think you’re overreacting, but if you need space, I’ll give it to you.”

I stared at him for a beat before nodding. “I think we both do.”

Not waiting for a response, I jogged toward the guest house. I needed to be alone in my own bedroom to gather my scattered thoughts.

Knight had kissed me. He’d enjoyed it as much as I had, if not more. And he didn’t regret it. I had no idea what to do about that.

TWELVE

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# KNIGHT

I'D KISSED OWEN. No, I'd fucking devoured him. Probably would have taken it a lot further if he hadn't put a stop to it. Not gonna lie, I'd jerked off several times, remembering the feel of his hard cock grinding against mine. Here I was two days later, at the worst possible time, still thinking about it.

Night had fallen, and the temperature had taken a dive, bordering on freezing. I shivered as music blasted from the speakers inside my parents' house. Several of my teammates surrounded me, all bundled in hoodies and beanies, as we took shots at the basketball hoop in my driveway. It was Friday night, and today had been our final game before our week off. We were all still riding the high from another win that put us in a good place to make the playoffs.

I needed to get my mind off Owen before I popped noticeable wood. I was already covering a semi with one hand as Newb sank the ball through the net.

The guilt I felt toward Pace was eating at me a bit, yet I didn't regret it. I knew I'd do it again if Owen even gave me the slightest hint he was into it. With the way he'd freaked out and left though, I wasn't sure how he felt. And that was a novelty. So was the fact that I'd gone from thinking I was straight to knowing that line was bent more than I'd realized. I honestly just didn't care. It happened, and I wanted it to happen again.

I wondered if, like me, he couldn't stop thinking about the kiss. If he was reliving it over and over the same way I was. At the same time, I also didn't see the point of pushing the issue

when Owen had clearly been even more freaked out than anything else when he'd hightailed it back to his parents' house.

Owen had wanted space to think, and I'd given it to him. That was going to end tonight because, at the very least, we needed to talk about what happened between us and clear the air. There was too much history between his family and me. Ties that were strong and would cut deep if I lost them. And honestly, the idea of Owen going back to avoiding me as he'd done years ago affected me differently than it had back then.

I gave myself a mental shake as the ball bounced my way, and I barely caught it before it nailed me in the stomach.

Newb snorted, and his drunk ass slurred, "Damn, at least you didn't play like that today."

The guys laughed, but he wasn't wrong. I was distracted as hell. Still, I rolled my eyes. "Waiting on your drunk ass to take the shot took so long I almost fell asleep."

That wasn't a lie. Newb took a wobbly step forward, eyes narrowed. "And still made the shot. Think you can do better?"

He must not have been paying attention because I'd only downed one beer. Another thing I usually didn't do, but one way or another, I needed to talk to Owen tonight. And I didn't plan on doing that hammered out of my skull.

I bounced the ball twice before putting my arms in the air, letting it roll off my fingers toward the hoop.

*Swish.*

One of the guys snatched up the ball, and I shot Newb a cocky grin. "As always, nothing but mother fucking net."

He scowled as the guys broke into a fit of laughter and taunted Newb for talking shit.

His frown deepened. "Want to make it interesting? See who makes the most baskets?"

Sober, he couldn't win that bet, so it didn't make sense to waste either of our time. Any other night, I gladly would have

emptied his wallet. It was getting late, and I needed to get a hold of Owen.

I shook my head, stuffing my hands into the pouch of my hoodie. “Nah, let one of these other guys take your money.” I scanned my teammates who’d shown up and tipped my head toward the backyard. “I need to go make a call. Don’t take it easy on him.”

One of the guys piped up, “I could use some extra cash.” Newb swung his annoyed gaze in his direction.

As the trash-talking reached a new height, I made my escape, jogging down the driveway toward the guest house. Most of the people at the party were smart enough to be inside, dancing to the deep bass that filled the air and drinking themselves stupid. Passing a few people, I purposefully ignored them so no one would stop me on my way.

Once I made it to the front door, I pulled out my keys to unlock it. After I stepped inside, I flipped the lock and walked to the couch. I tossed my keys on the coffee table and pulled my phone from my pocket before sinking into the plush cushion.

Sighing at the warmth from the heater that was beginning to penetrate my clothes, I swiped over the screen and entered my passcode.

Ignoring the mountain of notifications on my phone from posts about the party, I navigated to my messages with Owen. I paused, thinking about how to approach him and convince him to come over when my place was crawling with people from campus. It wasn’t his scene. I wasn’t even sure it was mine anymore.

I’d almost nixed the party at my house again tonight, but I’d canceled enough of them recently that the team had grown suspicious. It was unlike me, and I was just realizing that I had everything to do with Owen. Ever since he’d asked for my help, I found that I’d rather hang out with him, talking about stupid strategies to get guys that he didn’t even need. He was absolutely clueless about his appeal.

Owen was good-looking in an understated way. He was smart, focused on his studies, and a genuinely good person. He'd just needed a confidence boost in the worst way, and the night in the hot tub, I'd felt the change. In more ways than one. He didn't need a fucking playbook. Owen could have any guy he wanted if he put in the effort.

My brow furrowed as I imagined him cozying up next to some random stranger, kissing him. Doing the things we'd done and more. I wasn't sure why, but the idea of him with another guy soured my stomach, which made no sense. We'd made out. That didn't make us a couple. I'd agreed to help him and planned to follow through with it until he realized he hadn't needed my help in the first place.

Taking a deep breath, I tapped the keyboard.

KnightJackson23: *Are you busy tonight?*

I didn't expect an instant reply from Owen. And true to Owen's nature, I didn't get one. During the time I spent silently waiting, my mind was going in circles, mulling over how to convince him to come over.

Should I apologize for the kiss? I didn't feel sorry or regret it.

Maybe I'd suggest that coming over tonight would be the perfect opportunity to practice flirting with a guy who wouldn't freak out at being kissed. There were definitely some guys around the party that would be into him. Maybe I was more selfish than I realized. I'd been determined to see the plan through not even fifteen minutes ago. But with each second that passed, it made me more uneasy.

I was confused, maybe even jealous of the idea. Little Walsh... *Owen*, had fucked with my head.

My phone screen lit up as it vibrated in my hand. Assuming it was just another comment, like, or tag, I was surprised to see it was a response from Owen. I clicked on the notification.

Owen\_Walsh01: *No, why?*

I tapped out a quick reply.

KnightJackson23: *Can you come over so we can talk?*

His response took longer this time, and I drummed my fingers along my thigh as I waited. After several long minutes where I imagined him contemplating not answering me at all, another message popped up.

Owen\_Walsh01: *What do we need to talk about?*

I frowned as I read the question. He knew damn well what we needed to discuss.

KnightJackson23: *Don't do that. Can we just talk and sort it out already?*

I sighed as I tacked on a single word I hoped would sway him.

KnightJackson23: *Please.*

I never begged, but I was feeling pretty desperate. It didn't matter if it made sense to me or anyone else. It just *was*.

Owen\_Walsh01: *Parties aren't my thing, and you know it.*

KnightJackson23: *We can stick to the guest house. You don't even have to talk to anyone else if you don't want to.*

Another full minute passed before his response came through.

Owen\_Walsh01: *I can be there in half an hour.*

That was good enough for me and much better than I expected.

KnightJackson23: *Message when you get here, and I'll meet you out front.*

Owen\_Walsh01: *Okay.*

With half an hour to waste and not wanting to spend it among the crush of people at the main house, I grabbed a quick shower. I changed into a pair of black sweatpants and a dark gray hoodie over a plain black t-shirt. I sat on my bed, shoving my feet back into my shoes.

I'd just finished tying the laces when my phone vibrated on my nightstand. I stood and scooped it up, finding a message

from Owen. My heart unexpectedly took an extra beat, nervous he was either canceling, or he was here. Both sent my pulse into an erratic rhythm I didn't understand.

Owen\_Walsh01: *I'm here, and your teammates won't stop staring at me.*

Knowing he was uncomfortable as hell, I started typing as I took hurried steps to the coffee table and snatched my keys.

KnightJackson23: *Ignore them. I'm on my way.*

I shoved my phone in my pocket and picked up my pace to the front door. After I stepped out onto the small front porch, I locked back up and jogged across the yard and down the driveway.

The guys glanced my way, but I ignored them as I slowed down when I neared Owen's little hatchback.

He popped open the door and stepped out of the car as I came to a stop near the hood.

Owen scanned the scene around us before meeting my eyes. "This couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

*Not without me losing my mind.* "I wasn't feeling the party and needed to talk to you."

Owen took a deep breath while locking his car. "Then lead the way."

"Was the drive okay?" I immediately felt stupid for the question, but the silence between us wasn't any better.

Owen snorted. "The same as it always is."

"Yo, Knight." At the sound of my name, I glanced at the guys. Newb eyed me curiously, along with everyone around him. "You coming back or what?"

I shook my head. "I'm done for the night. Don't do anything stupid."

He tilted his head, gaze shifting to Owen. I was tempted to grab his hand and pull him away faster before anyone could say anything to him. But I settled for shooting Newb a glare in warning.

Our newest teammate just held up his hands as if to say *fine*, and no one stopped us on our way to the backyard. Not until we made it to the backside of the house, anyway.

“Knight.” The sound of my name yet again interrupted our walk, and I paused as a guy I vaguely recognized as a regular at my parties stumbled toward us from the back porch.

I tipped my chin. “What?”

Owen elbowed me, and I held back the wince, knowing I’d sounded rude. But I was annoyed at the interruption, and I’d told Owen he didn’t have to deal with anyone if he’d come over.

The guy didn’t seem to notice, shooting me a laugh instead. Before he could even tell me what he wanted, the guy took a fucking nose dive straight into a patio table, sending it crashing to the patio floor. I would have ignored it if he hadn’t landed on his ass next to it and groaned in pain.

*Fuck.* The last thing I needed was some random ass dude getting hurt on our property and worrying about my parents freaking out if he took legal action. Where the hell were his friends or whomever he’d shown up with?

The loud crash brought a few people onto the back porch, curious eyes trained on the scene. From experience, I knew pictures or videos would make their way to social media if I didn’t fix the situation.

I sighed and glanced at Owen. “Sorry. Give me one second.” I pulled out my keys. “You can go ahead if you want.”

Owen pulled his thick puffer coat tighter to his body and shook his head. “I’ll just wait.”

Nodding, I slipped my keys back into my hoodie pouch and headed over to the drunk idiot with Owen following.

Once I stood in front of the guy, I held out my hand. When he clasped it, I yanked him to his feet and put my hands on his shoulders to steady him. “You good?”

The guy cackled as if the whole thing was hilarious “Never been better. This party is wild as fuck.”

“No wilder than usual,” I muttered as I turned to lift the table and a chair that had been turned over.

“Oh fuck.” The two drunken words were followed by a yelp and splash.

I spun around as the guy stepped away from the pool with his hands in the air. He shot me a frantic look, eyes wide. “I am so fucking sorry. Total accident.”

My gaze immediately sought out Owen, who was nowhere in sight, before shooting to the pool just as his hands broke the surface of the water.

“Son of a bitch,” I growled and darted forward, dropping to my knees at the lip of the pool as I reached for him.

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THIRTEEN

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# OWEN

WHEN I BROKE THE SURFACE, Knight was there on his knees, reaching for me. I held out my hand, gripping his palm, and let him haul me out of the water. I was immediately hit with the frigid air, and my teeth chattered as my entire body shook.

Knight was shooting daggers with his eyes narrowed at some guy taking slow drunken steps backward away from him. I didn't blame him. If looks could kill, the guy would have dropped from the venom in Knight's eyes.

"Knight," I said, the word choppy as I tried to control the shake in my voice.

His head jerked around, eyes focused in worry as he quickly scanned me over.

"Fuck," he cursed and grabbed my hand, pulling me after him as he headed toward the guest house. "We need to get you out of those clothes and warm you up."

I didn't argue. The promise of heat only made my legs move faster. Not fast enough, apparently, because Knight's strides were so wide I was almost running behind him.

He unlocked the door and all but shoved me inside, slamming it closed and flipping the lock when he stepped in behind me. Reaching for my jacket, he pushed my hands away and unzipped it before pulling the soaked fabric off my shoulders and down my arms. He scowled as he carried it into the kitchen and tossed it into the sink. "I'll deal with that in a

minute. Come on. I'll start the shower and find you something to wear." He beelined for the bathroom.

My legs were stiff as I walked through the living room. Even with heat flowing through the vents, my skin felt as if I'd been submerged in ice rather than the pool.

Knight switched on the light. Taking a few quick steps to the shower, he opened the clear glass door and cranked on the water.

"Get out of those clothes. Use whatever you need, and the towels are here." He patted the open-faced counter where a stack of fluffy towels filled the cubby.

I gave a jerk of my head in understanding.

His lips formed a straight line, clearly unhappy. "Someone better have gotten that drunk asshole the fuck out of the house."

"It was an-an accident," I stuttered, but he only shook his head.

"Just get warm." With that parting instruction, he left the bathroom, closing the door on the way out.

I made short work of getting the soaked clothing off my body and stepped into the shower under the spray of hot water. My skin tingled with tiny pinpricks as it warmed, and the heat slowly penetrated my body until I stopped shaking. As my muscles relaxed, I slumped against the slick tiles. I wasn't sure I'd ever been that cold before and would hopefully never experience it again.

I sighed as I reached for the bottle of body wash on the shelf, popping open the lid and holding it under my nose. It smelled like Knight, minty and earthy at the same time. Squirting a generous amount in my palm, I placed it back on the shelf and washed myself. With the fragrant lather rolling down my body, I'd never appreciated a shower more in my life.

The tapping came at the door just before it opened. I glanced toward the sound just as Knight stepped in, averting

his eyes and setting a folded stack of clothes on the marble countertop.

“I found these for you. They’re from years ago and will probably swallow you.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you need anything else?” he asked.

“I’m all set.” The soap bottle must have been too close to the edge. The clatter of it hitting the tiled floor made me startle, and Knight’s gaze jerked toward mine.

It had been instinctual. I knew that. What gave me pause was the way his stare lingered, trailing down, slowly over my chest, stomach... Knight swallowed, his throat bobbing before he jerked his gaze away and cleared his throat. “I’ll be in the living room. Just...holler if you need anything.”

What I needed was an explanation. Yes, I was inexperienced, but you didn’t accidentally look at someone that way like you wanted to devour them. He seemed pretty shaken up about his reaction, so I didn’t ask the burning question on the tip of my tongue. Instead, I simply said, “Okay.”

Without another word, he grabbed my wet things from the floor and left the bathroom, easing the door closed again. I stared for several long seconds at the spot he’d been standing, trying to decipher the look in his eyes. None of it made sense. Knight had kissed me. And Knight had totally just checked me out.

I finished washing away the soap, then stepped out onto the bath mat to grab a towel. I ran it over my hair and body before holding up the shirt Knight had brought me. He hadn’t been lying. It was old. He’d worn it often in high school and called it his lucky game day shirt. Holding it in my hands, I was hit hard with nostalgia over the countless times I’d seen him wearing it.

I held it to my nose, but the scent had faded until it was nonexistent from how long it must have been put away. I slipped it over my head. The baggy shirt wasn’t that bad, but a

laugh lodged in my throat when I unfolded the pair of gray sweatpants. They were huge, but with no other options, I stepped into them, tightening the string around my waist as much as I could.

Gathering the wet towel, I left the bathroom and found Knight sitting on the couch, tapping on his phone. Without looking up, he said, "I'm having the boys clear out the party."

I frowned. "You don't have to do that, Knight."

He continued typing on his phone. "I'm not in the mood to party. I just want them all to go home or anywhere else that's not here."

It was clear I wasn't going to change his mind. "Where should I put this?"

He glanced over long enough to acknowledge the towel I was holding. "The laundry room is through the kitchen. Just toss it in the bin. Your clothes are in the washer."

Yanking at the legs of the pants to keep them from under my feet so I wouldn't trip, I headed into the kitchen, following the soft whirring sound of the washing machine that was behind a wood-slatted door. I popped it open and tossed the towel in the bin. The light was suddenly shadowed, and I turned around to find Knight standing there. He was silent, but his body was tense, hands clenching at his sides.

A tingling sensation slid up my spine at the intensity in his slate-colored eyes. I tried to keep my voice steady, but I heard the quiver in each word. "Hey. What's up?"

"Tell me no," he croaked, followed by an audible swallow.

I stared back, afraid to ask what he was talking about. But I knew. Beneath the surface of his rigid stance, he was losing control. I whispered, "What are you doing, Knight?"

The question was loaded, and we both knew it. I wasn't asking whether he wanted me. That was clear in the way he watched me. Even though I was inexperienced, I recognized the hungry way his eyes dipped, scanning my body swallowed in his clothes. I was asking if he was ready to face any

consequences that might come from following through with the dirty promises burning in his eyes.

I wanted Knight's lips and hands on my body. How far was he going to take this?

As if reading my thoughts, Knight stepped forward. His eyes were laser-focused on mine as he silently prowled toward me, one aching slow step at a time.

"What are you doing?" I repeated in a breathy whisper.

Knight's nostrils flared. "Tell me to go. That you don't want this. And I'll turn around and leave you alone."

Nervous energy raced through my body, making me aware of Knight in ways I'd never imagined. With him so close, wanting me, the last thing I'd ever tell him was no. I shook my head, never taking my eyes off his. A long breath rushed through my lips. "I can't do that."

His jaw ticked. "Then say you want me too."

Even though he was the last thing I wanted to think about, my brother crossed my mind. I never wanted to hurt Knight, and there was a real possibility there would be consequences to their friendship. I blew out a shaky breath. "What about Pace? He—"

"Is my best friend. Not my boss. He's your brother. Not your guardian. We're both adults, Owen, and I want you. Now you just need to be honest and tell me if you want me too. If you do, I'm kissing you. And I'm not stopping until you beg me to make you come. You need to know that I go straight to my room to jerk off while thinking about you."

My cock was fucking rock hard, and the nervousness swimming in my belly was overpowered by the need sizzling in my veins. A lump lodged in my throat, and I swallowed hard to speak around it. "Kiss me."

"Fuck," Knight breathed out before advancing on me quickly with purpose. One strong arm shot out, wrapping around my back as he hauled my body to his and leaned down, slanting his mouth over mine.

I parted my lips, swallowing the groan that crawled up his throat. The sound sent a ripple of shivers through my body, making the tiny hairs along my arms stand on end. The taste of mint burst on my tongue as he slid his along mine. It was better than I imagined. Better than I could have ever hoped for. When Knight slid his hand to my ass, gripping one cheek firmly in his hand and pulling me against his body, I moaned. His cock was hard as stone and felt every bit as big as it had looked in his board shorts.

I wanted him. I needed him.

“Your bed,” I mumbled into his mouth.

“Fuck yes.” He groaned, and Knight stepped back without a pause or hesitation and grabbed my hand. I was nearly pulled off my feet as he dragged me through the kitchen and living room.

When we reached the hall, my pulse began to skyrocket and grew increasingly erratic as Knight tugged me behind him. Just before he stepped into the bedroom, he stopped and turned to face me, simmering heat burning in the depths of his gaze. “You sure?”

I’d never been more sure of anything in my life. Losing my virginity to anyone other than Knight just felt wrong. Unnatural. It had always belonged to him, even when I didn’t want it to. “I’m sure.”

Knight blew out a long breath, and then his lips hooked up on one side, making a dimple pop. “I guess we’ll figure this out together.”

My brow furrowed while I tried to understand what he meant, but then it clicked. Knight had never been with a guy, and for some reason, knowing his first time would be mine filled me with a need to claim him right back. Owning a part of him that would be mine forever. A rush of heat filled my cheeks, and a grin tugged at my lips. “I have faith in us.”

A roughened laugh rumbled up his throat before his smile slowly melted away. His teeth sunk into his lower lip. “I’m going to make you come so hard.”

A shuddering breath rushed from my lungs as he stepped backward, drawing me into his bedroom one step at a time.

I'd never been inside his room before, and my gaze skimmed over the oversized dark wood furniture. The massive, neatly made bed was covered with a dove-gray comforter. A matching nightstand and dresser completed the simple design and decor. It was surprisingly tidy.

Knight gave me a brief chance to check the place out before pulling me close to his body once more. Staring down at me, his lips curled into another familiar grin. "Do you approve?"

I rolled my eyes, and he chuckled, the raspy sound shooting straight to my balls. I'd loved that sound my whole life, but he'd never looked at me the way he was now when I'd heard it before. "Yes, I guess I do."

"Good. As much as I love seeing you in my clothes, can I please take them the fuck off you now?" Knight's hands lifted, toying with the shirt hem.

Swallowing hard, I nodded. Knight's nostrils flared as he slowly lifted the t-shirt. Inch by inch, he exposed my tanned skin while his stare remained on mine. I lifted my arms, allowing him to take it off, and he tossed it on the floor. His gaze lowered, to my chest, my stomach, and then lingered on the bulge of my cock.

"Fuck, I want you," he growled low in his throat, and my body broke out in shivers.

"You have me." In every way. Knight seemed to understand what I was really saying. When his eyes met mine, something soft was playing in their depths.

"You might just have me too."

The words sucked the oxygen from my lungs. I studied him, seeing how sincere he appeared. With my eyes focused on Knight's, his hand crept down my chest, brushing over a nipple, and I shivered.

"Keep going?" he asked.



Slowly I gave the slightest nod, and he slid his hand lower, tracing the thin trail of hair down from my belly button, following it until he reached the top of his sweatpants I wore. My cock jerked as he slid his fingers into the waistband. Teasing. Asking for permission.

Instead, I hooked my thumbs close to his fingers and pushed the pants down my legs, letting them pool at my feet before kicking them aside. He sucked in a harsh breath, gaze lingering on my hard cock.

“Never thought the sight of a dick would make me want to wrap my lips around it,” he mused just before slowly sinking to his knees.

“Oh my god,” I whispered before he even touched me. “Knight, you don’t have to do that.”

He looked up at me, holding my stare as he circled his long fingers around my base. “I fucking want to.”

I could have come right then, and had to slow my breathing, focusing hard on not coming, especially when Knight leaned forward and his warm breath coasted over my tip. I was afraid to speak a single word, so I silently watched as he parted those reddened lips and wrapped them around my tip. He dove forward like he sucked a cock on a regular basis, with no hesitation whatsoever. And it sent bliss spiraling through my body and made my balls draw tight.

“Holy mother of... Oh my fucking fuck,” I rambled as my chest rose and fell in rapid bursts. I was going to come. There was no stopping it. “Knight,” I warned. He hummed in response, eyes glinting up at me, a dare shining in them. The crazy ass wanted me to come in his mouth. “You sure?”

His answering hum came seconds before I lost control.

“Knight, Knight,” I whispered his name over and over as I began thrusting. I couldn’t help it. My body quaked, and my balls pulsed as I tangled my fingers through his chestnut brown hair. He only sucked harder, bringing his hand up and cupping my sac until I came hard in his mouth.

When he finally released my cock, he sat back on his calves, an arrogant smirk in place.

“Don’t ruin it,” I wheezed, and he chuckled.

“I was just going to say you taste fucking amazing.” Knight rose to his feet and then dragged his hoodie and shirt off in one move, exposing his chiseled athletic chest and stomach. My hands itched to trace every line. “I bet you feel even better.”

My eyes jumped back up to his, and the craving for me that swam in the depths of his gaze stirred my blood again. My feet automatically obeyed when Knight lowered his voice to a sensual purr. “On the bed, babe. I want you to come with my cock buried deep inside your tight ass.”

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FOURTEEN

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# KNIGHT

WHEN OWEN MESSAGED me asking for help trying to catch a guy's attention, I never would have believed *I'd* be that guy. But with Owen on his hands and knees in the center of my bed, something just felt right. Inevitable.

My cock throbbed at the sight of his tanned skin on full display just for me.

Standing beside the bed, I slowly stroked myself from root to tip as my gaze skimmed over his bare ass. With his legs spread, his tight little asshole was visible, along with his heavy balls. I'd never wanted to fuck someone as badly as I did Owen. Stretch his ass out for my cock to slide deep inside him. The thought made me groan, and Owen looked over his shoulder.

"This is a really weird position to be in if you're just going to stare. I'm a little nervous here."

I shook my head. "Babe, if you could see what I'm looking at, you'd never be nervous a day in your life." I eased my knees onto the mattress, moving forward until I was situated between his legs. Running my hand over his smooth skin, I popped one of his cheeks. "So damn sexy."

When I managed to tear my gaze away and meet his eyes again, his cheeks flushed red. "I'm not used to it."

"If I have my way, you're going to get used to it fast." I squeezed a palm full of surprisingly plump flesh, considering Owen was definitely on the skinny side. "This ass was made for my cock."

Owen squirmed, and I bit my lip to stifle a laugh. I was just as desperate for him, so I grabbed the bottle of lube I'd tossed on the bed beside him and popped open the cap. After I coated my fingers, I stole a glance at his face again. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." The quiver in his voice told me he was still nervous, and truthfully so was I. I'd never been with a guy, and I'd never been with a virgin. I was afraid I was going to ruin his first time, so I started slowly, sliding a slick finger over his asshole.

Owen moaned, low and silky smooth, as he dropped his forehead to the mattress.

"Feel good, babe?" I asked, even though his reaction said he was definitely enjoying it.

He murmured something into the comforter that sounded like *don't stop*.

Owen didn't need to worry about that. I had no intention of stopping until I was coming deep inside his ass.

Sliding my finger back and forth, I circled his asshole, massaging until his body was fully relaxed. Then I added pressure, slipping the tip of my finger inside. Owen jolted but didn't pull away.

"More," he breathed out, so I eased my slick finger inside him little by little until it was buried deep.

"Still okay?" I checked in.

Owen rocked forward and then pushed himself back. He paused and then did it again, except he didn't stop. Moans began drifting from his lips as he fucked himself on my finger. Precome beaded at the tip of my dick, watching him turn into a sexual creature, one I hadn't known was just resting beneath the surface of the introverted guy I'd always known.

Taking his wordless reply as an answer, I gripped his hip to hold him still. "I'm going to add another, so you have to stay still. I need to get you ready for me, babe."

Owen sighed, and I held back a laugh at how damn needy he was. This side of him was so unexpected and so stupidly

hot. I worked a second finger inside him and then a third, all while trying to get him to stay still. But he was determined as hell to ride my damn hand.

“Knight, I need to feel you inside me.” Owen’s soft plea made my cock ache. I wasn’t about to refuse him.

After removing my fingers, I grabbed the condom from the bed and tore it open. After tossing the wrapper aside, I rolled the rubber down my cock and covered myself in enough lube to make his first time as easy as possible. The idea of taking him bare made my cock jerk, but we weren’t there yet. If we took things further, it was definitely something I wanted to talk about. And I had no intention of being done with Owen anytime soon. If ever.

Rising to my knees, I pressed my tip against his ass. “Ready?”

Owen nodded. “Do it before I climb on top of you and do it myself.”

Had Owen been looking, he would have seen my eyebrows shoot high at the bold statement. Where had my shy, unsure virgin gone?

I mentally filed away that information for the next time we had sex. And there *would* be a next time.

“So impatient,” I muttered as I pushed forward, my tip stretching his ass until it slipped inside.

An audible gasp ripped from Owen’s lips, and a tremor ran through my whole body at the way he squeezed my cock so perfectly. It was hard not to thrust and sink my dick inside him balls deep because he felt so damn good.

“Fuck, you feel incredible.” I groaned as I slid forward, easing my cock inside him. I watched the way his ass stretched to accommodate my thick dick. As I said, he was fucking made for me.

Owen’s quiet moans mixed with my groans as I bottomed out. Nothing had ever felt as amazing as being inside him. “Still good?”

He moved the same way he had on my fingers, rocking back and forth, testing and adjusting. I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood to keep from pinning him down and fucking him hard. He was driving me insane with the whimpers and moans dripping from his lips.

“Feels so good,” he whispered. “Fuck me, Knight.”

I didn’t need to be asked twice. Pulling back until my tip was barely inside him, I thrust forward, slow and deep. I kept at the steady rhythm until he started moving faster, urging me to fuck him harder.

“I don’t want you to be in pain tomorrow,” I warned, but it fell on deaf ears. Owen pushed back faster and faster until I had nothing left to do but give him what he wanted. Tightening my grip on his hips, I slammed forward.

“Oh my god,” Owen groaned. “Fucking finally.”

“Finally?” I asked through panting breaths. “I was trying to be considerate of you and your tight ass.”

Owen ignored me, moaning louder and longer. I reached under him with one hand, wrapping my fingers around his hard cock, and began stroking him in time with my thrusts.

Owen’s back arched, and he went silent just as he coated my hand and blanket in ropes of come. *Holy fuck.*

“That was so hot. I love the way you come for me.” My balls drew tight, and a wave of euphoria rolled through my body. “Mmm, fuck.”

I thrust into him once. Twice. On the third, I held still as I came hard.

When my body stopped shaking, I slumped against his back. Together we caught our breath, me peppering kisses along his spine and neck between panting breaths.

“That was insane,” I breathed out.

Owen let out a dreamy sigh. “It was amazing. Better than I thought it would be.”

I chuckled as I rose up off him and gently pulled my cock out. “Well, good. I, for one, can’t wait to do it again.”

When I crawled off the bed, Owen turned onto his back and watched me as I removed the condom.

“Can I sleep here?” he asked, and I frowned at the question.

“I sort of assumed you would.” Did he think I was just going to fuck him and send him home? I shook my head. “I’ll be right back.”

I headed out into the hallway and then the bathroom. After tossing the condom in the trash, I washed Owen’s come from my hand.

Just before I walked back out, I glanced up and caught sight of my reflection.

I still looked the same, so I shrugged and winked at myself. “You, my friend, are very, *very* bisexual.”

With that parting comment, I went back into the hall and grabbed a clean blanket from the linen closet. When I made it back to my room, I found Owen half-asleep.

He was startled when I shook his shoulder, mumbling, “What?”

I chuckled. “Get up. You making a mess is hot as fuck, but that doesn’t mean we have to sleep in it.”

He peeked up at me through cracked eyelids and flushed cheeks. When he rolled over, I took the opportunity to pop his ass with my hand. He shot me a scowl as he slid off the bed, making me smile. Even a freshly fucked, exhausted Owen was fun to tease.

After changing the bedding, I tossed the dirty set in the corner to deal with in the morning. Right then, the only thing I wanted to do was slide under the blanket and wrap Owen in my arms. So I did. Lying on the pillow next to his, I spooned my naked body against his, drinking in his warmth.

“I have to drive Rook and Noah to the airport in the morning for Noah’s brother’s wedding. I may be gone when



you wake up. Stay?” The idea of coming home to Owen waiting on me just felt right. So perfect.

He yawned. “Okay. Less talking. More sleeping.”

I chuckled before sighing in contentment.

A comfort I’d never known before settled into my bones. The last thought I had before I drifted to sleep was that, for the first time in my entire life, I truly felt at home.

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TRAFFIC HAD BEEN a nightmare on the way to and from the airport, so I was happy once I hit the quieter streets of our hometown. With Rook and Noah in my truck, I’d been distracted, and still, the only thing I wanted was to race back home and climb into bed with Owen.

I eyed the time on the dashboard. It was still well before noon, but with Owen typically being an early riser, I wondered what he’d busied himself doing around the house.

As I turned down the county road to my house, I considered what else we could get into today. I could go for another dip in the hot tub, followed by mutual blowjobs. Maybe cozy up on the couch afterward and binge whatever show he wanted. That didn’t sound like a terrible way to spend the day.

From the road, I spotted a familiar vehicle in my driveway and cursed. “Fuck.” It was Pace’s white extended cab truck parked outside, and Owen’s car was no longer there. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.” It was Saturday. As far as I knew, Pace wasn’t supposed to be back in town until Monday.

I turned into the driveway and stopped next to his truck. I glanced in the truck’s window, but Pace wasn’t in the cab. A weight settled in the pit of my stomach. Where was Owen, and how much did Pace already know? I’d already planned to tell my best friend about his little brother and me, but not like this.

Blowing out a long breath, I shut off the engine, popped open the door, and stepped out of my truck. After locking up, I made my way to the guest house. Somehow I knew that's where I'd find Pace. And I did. As I neared the porch, the front door swung open, and my very pissed-off best friend stood there, filling my doorway. He looked like Owen in a lot of ways. In other ways, they couldn't be more different. Pace was a few inches shorter than me and nearly as broad. And even when Owen was mad at me, he never appeared ready to murder me. I couldn't say the same about Pace at that time.

"Hey, Pace," I hedged, aiming a hesitant grin his way. "You're home early."

He stepped out onto the porch, eyes wide, and spat, "I'm home early. That's what you decided to go with? How about explaining to me why my little brother's car was parked in your driveway. And then tell me why Owen was wearing a pair of your sweatpants when he answered the fucking door."

I understood why he was pissed, but his tone needed to come down because I was getting mad too. "You really want me to answer that, Pace?"

My best friend's fist clenched at his sides as he seethed. "The fuck are you doing, Knight? He's my little brother. You've known him your whole damn life. You also know how he's always felt about you." He threw his arms out at his sides. "Of all the dumbass shit you've done, you decided to fuck Owen? What the fuck, Knight?"

I'd let him rant, but it was my turn. First, I wanted to know where Owen was and that he was okay. "Where is he?"

Pace scowled. "At home, not that it's your business."

"Not *my* business. *This* is not *your* business, Pace. Owen is not your son, and he's an adult capable of making his own decisions. You can't just come to my house and send him home!"

"The fuck I can't," Pace growled. "When my best friend is using him, I can and will—"

I stepped forward this time, seething. “I did not use Owen. I would never fucking do that.”

Pace frowned, confusion creeping into his venomous expression. “What else would you call it then? Explain to me how this situation is the slightest bit okay.”

Because he was my best friend and I knew he hadn’t been prepared to walk in on the situation he’d found, I forced myself to calm down. Or at least appear to be, because my whole being was screaming to go find Owen and check on him.

I sighed and pulled off my beanie, running my fingers through my messy hair before sliding it back on. Finally, I just shrugged. “I care about him.”

“You care about him,” he repeated, not appearing appeased in the slightest. “You fucked him because you care about him. Knight, you’re straight. You’re going to give him the wrong idea, and he’s going to get hurt. That is the opposite of caring about someone. I can’t believe you did this.”

He continued to rant, and I’d had enough. “Shut up, Pace. The only person here with the wrong idea is you.” He froze, shooting me a look that said *explain* for the thousandth time. “I care about Owen in that way. I’m not as straight as we thought and I am very much invested in continuing to see Owen, whether you like it or not. Obviously, I would appreciate the support, but that’s where I’m at.”

I wasn’t even sure where Owen stood on our pending relationship, but if Pace was going to be convinced, I couldn’t let a thing like pride or fear of rejection keep me from being honest.

He studied me, appearing both confused and stumped. “You want to...what? Date Owen?”

I sighed. “First, I want to go find him and see if that’s okay with him.”

He shook his head. “You’re not already dating?”

There was such a thing as too many details in a situation like the one I found myself in, and I wasn’t about to tell Pace

how Owen and I got to this place. So I told him what he needed to know. “I like him. I want to date him. I’d like to see where this goes without you getting between him and me. And if at all possible, I’d like to salvage our”—I waved my hand between Pace and me—“friendship. But don’t make me choose, Pace.”

His expression morphed between emotions so fast it would have been comical in another situation. As it was, I needed him to at least back off, so he didn’t put Owen through any more stress than he likely already had.

My best friend crossed his arms over his wide chest. “I want the full story.”

I shook my head. “You’re going to have to live without it, Pace. This story belongs to Owen and me.”

Pace’s features softened slightly. “You’re fucking serious.”

“More serious than I’ve been about anything, including playing ball.” And I just realized how true that was at that moment.

His mouth opened, closed, and opened again before he finally shook his head. “Then go fucking talk to him, but I swear to god, Knight. If you hurt him—”

“I’m not going to do that, Pace.”

His jaw worked, and his nostrils flared. “I’m going for a drive. I’ll give you two some time. Tell my mom and my girl I’ll be home in about an hour.”

When he strode off the porch toward his truck, I hoped I wasn’t also watching my best friend walk away from our friendship. But I’d have to worry about it after I talked to Owen.

Pace was backing out of the driveway as I stepped back up into the cab of my truck and slid behind the wheel. Now I just had to hope Owen wanted to give this thing between us a real try too.

FIFTEEN

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# OWEN

“NO FUCKING WAY!” Vaughn cackled so loud I had to yank the phone away from my ear. I shot a scowl at the phone screen, though my best friend couldn’t see my expression. When he finished the fit, I placed the phone back to my ear and slumped further down the headboard of my bed. “I don’t know how I missed this. How did I *not* see this coming?”

I hadn’t seen it coming either. Last night had been amazing. Everything really. But then reality came pounding on the guest house door in the form of my very irate older brother. Awkward didn’t even touch the word needed to describe how uncomfortable that scene had been.

I’d been wearing Knight’s clothes I’d grabbed from his closet and thrown on to see who was at the door. When I saw it was Pace, I couldn’t just ignore him. My stupid car had been parked outside.

What was he doing home early anyway? Besides ruining my weekend. I hadn’t had a chance to even ask before he’d started in on me, asking questions I refused to answer. He’d told me to go home, and I just had to escape. I’d been hiding out in my room ever since.

I sighed as I picked at a loose thread on my blanket. “Not like I ever thought it would happen either.”

Vaughn quieted for several moments. “I’m sorry. I’m just in shock. I don’t even know what to say.”

I rolled my eyes. “The *one* time I need your advice, you got nothing, huh? Any other time you have too much to say.”

I almost felt bad for telling Vaughn what Knight and I had done. Though I'd left out plenty of details, my best friend had an active enough imagination to fill them back in.

"Ouch," Vaughn hissed. "Someone's in a mood."

*You would be, too, if you were handed everything you ever wanted and it got snatched away even sooner than expected.* That's what I wanted to say.

I'd known what happened between Knight and me last night was nothing more than a fleeting moment. Having sex didn't mean he was suddenly mapping out a future with me, even if that was a lingering wish in the back of my mind. But I hadn't even gotten to shower, much less see Knight, before my brother started throwing an epic fit for a guy his size.

"I'm just confused," I finally replied, which was true. I was completely and thoroughly lost on what to do about Knight, my brother, and my life as a whole.

Vaughn hummed thoughtfully. "Well, maybe take a day to think things through."

I snorted. "Pretty sure the *only* thing I'm going to be doing is overthinking things."

Tapping sounded at my door. "Vaughn, one sec." I called louder, "Come in."

The door eased open, and Mom stood there with a confused expression. "Honey, Knight is here. He's asking for you."

My heart skipped a beat. That was quickly followed by a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. Was Knight here to officially end things? Or worse, apologize for it. I forced a smile for my mom's benefit. "Oh, okay. I'll be out in just a second."

She smiled back but still appeared confused as she closed the door again.

Vaughn's voice came loud as hell through the phone. "Please tell me I heard what I think I heard. Knight's there?"

I put the phone back to my ear. “Yeah, I gotta go see what he wants.”

“You know what he wants, O.” Vaughn scoffed. “Some of that ass.”

My nose scrunched because, *ew*. “Bye, you psycho.”

He was still laughing when I ended the call. My stomach erupted with butterflies, but not in a sweet, endearing way. As I pushed off my bed, I was acutely aware that I might lose the store-bought cinnamon bun I’d eaten when I’d gotten home.

Walking across my bedroom slowly, I paused with my hand on the doorknob and took a steadying breath. Whatever Knight had to say would be fine. I’d handle it and move on with life as usual. So we’d had sex. He’d taken my virginity. No big deal. The swirling in my stomach worsened.

Before I chickened out completely, I opened the door and stepped into the hall. Two feminine voices came from the direction of the kitchen. My mom and Pace’s new girlfriend were already friends, but I hadn’t even met her face-to-face while hiding in my room.

When I turned the corner into the living room, I stopped short at the sight of Knight pacing the floor, hands shoved into the pouch of his hoodie. After gaining my composure yet again, I cleared my throat. “Hey.”

Knight spun around to face me, and a tired smile tilted his lips. “Hey, back.”

I bit my lip, wondering what I should say. Should I make it easy and just offer him an out, so he could walk away guilt free? I didn’t even know what Pace had said to him, but I was willing to bet it hadn’t gone well. Whatever needed to be said between Knight and me, I didn’t want to do it with my mother and Pace’s girlfriend nearby.

“Do you want to talk outside?” I asked.

Knight glanced in the direction of the kitchen, listening to the women before he looked at me and nodded. “Yeah, we can do that.”



When Knight stepped out onto the front porch, I grabbed my coat from the hook and slipped it on before following.

It was still freezing, so I huddled down in my jacket. It wasn't ideal, but I expected the conversation to be short and sweet. I found myself speaking first to rip off the bandage and let it bleed so I could start the healing process. "I know you talked to Pace. I should have warned you he was there."

Knight shook his head. "Pace had no right to send you home, Owen. I told you last night, and I'll say it again. I never want to betray him, but you and I are adults. He isn't going to dictate our relationship."

"Relationship?" My heart flip-flopped at the word, not understanding what he meant.

Knight's brow furrowed. "What would you call it?"

I shrugged. "A moment. Hot but temporary."

His frown morphed into a scowl. "That's all it was for you?"

No, it wasn't, but why was he so upset that it might have been. "You were trying to help me find another guy. Why would I think it was anything else?"

He lowered his voice to avoid being overheard. "That was before our cocks and feelings got involved, Owen."

"Feelings?" I was just repeating his words over and over as I tried to process and find meaning in them. To be fair, everything he said was not even close to how I expected the conversation to go.

Knight scrubbed a hand over his face before sighing. "For me, yeah. I thought maybe it was more than just a hookup for you too."

"It was more for me too. I just don't understand. You're "straight."" I used my fingers to indicate that having sex with another guy made that claim very disputable. "Where do you see this going from here?"

"Everywhere," he replied with sincerity shining in his eyes as he took a step toward me. My breath caught as I looked up

at him. “I want to see where this goes, Owen.”

I blinked and then blinked again. “So you want to date me?” When he nodded and took another step closer, I forced myself to stay rooted in place when I really wanted to close the distance. “Openly or on the down low?”

Knight’s expression morphed into something like he’d been insulted. “I would never keep you a secret. The fuck, Owen?”

None of this made sense, and I needed more clarification before my hopes soared. Life didn’t work this way, did it? “What about your friends, teammates, and going pro? You’re not worried what they’ll think?”

Knight snorted. “You’ve known me forever. When have I ever cared what other people think?” He closed the last bit of distance between us, now towering over me, as he looked down at me. His eyes were soft as he lifted his hand to palm my cold cheek. “You don’t think I’d show you off? Tell the world you were mine?”

“So I belong to you now, huh?” My heart pounded at the idea of being with Knight in a real relationship. It was what I’d always wished for every time I blew out my birthday candles or tossed a penny in a fountain. Yet nothing I ever expected.

Knight grinned, gently rubbing his thumb lightly along my lips. ” Yeah, since I belong to you, too. Fair’s fair.” My smile broke free as my heart soared. Knight mirrored my grin, his dimples sinking deep. “So? Are we doing this or what, Owen?”

“Yeah, we’re doing this.” I bit my lip as I nodded, trying to contain the smile aching to break free.

“Fuck,” he cursed as he tugged my lip free. “Finally. You were about to give me a heart attack.”

Unable to contain myself any longer, I grinned in amusement. “What happens now?”

“First, I was thinking about kissing my boyfriend. And then, I’m hoping you’ll finally give me your fucking phone number.” When laughter tumbled from my lips, Knight

chuckled too. That rasp in his voice will always be my favorite sound in the world.

“Done. Now kiss me.” I melted into his palm as he slid his hand to the back of my neck and leaned down. His lips pressed against mine in a soft and sweet kiss before turning claiming and deep. It was everything. I had always belonged to Knight, and now he belonged to me too. It was wild and so perfect until the front door opened, and my mother’s voice interrupted us.

“You two have some explaining to do.”

We broke apart, grinning at each other like a couple of lovesick idiots before I looked at my mom. “We’ll be inside in a minute.”

Her happy gaze bounced from me to Knight and back. “I want the full story.”

No way in hell was that going to happen, but I nodded to appease her. “We’ll tell you.”

Bringing up the story, I had a question for Knight, so as soon as she stepped back inside and closed the door, I glanced back toward my new boyfriend. “So I guess we don’t need the playbook anymore?”

Knight snorted. “You never needed it, Owen. I told you the right person would come along, and being yourself would work. And look, here I am. The right person for you.”

I shook my head, but the smile was starting to hurt my cheeks.

He sobered. “I know it’s early for this in our three-minute relationship, but it’s also overdue if that makes sense.” Curious, I waited for him to tell me whatever it was. His eyes shone with sincerity. “I love you, Owen.”

My stomach once again erupted with butterflies, the kind that left you feeling dizzy and euphoric. I nearly choked on the words as emotion balled in my throat. “I love you too.”

“Fuckin’ right you do.” When I rolled my eyes, Knight smiled again. “Fair’s fair.”

And it always would be. He was right. It was early. But I knew Knight. He'd meet me fifty-fifty, if not more, every time. A sense of contentment settled over me. "Early Merry Christmas."

He hummed low in his throat as he held me close. "And I already have everything I want. Merry Christmas, babe."

Knight kissed me again, saying so much with the gentle caress of his lips on mine. I didn't know what the future held, but I knew I wanted Knight by my side to experience everything life had to offer us. The good, bad, and everything in between. I kissed him for what seemed like forever, forgetting the cold air around us, forgetting everything except for us, and the love growing stronger with every touch.

My advice to anyone who asked: Keep wishing and blowing out those candles. Keep tossing pennies in that fountain. Wishes did come true, and when they did, life would never be the same.

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# EPILOGUE

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## KNIGHT/ONE YEAR LATER

SPENDING CHRISTMAS DAY with Owen's family wasn't new to me. I'd spent many holidays with them during high school and college. When my rich asshole parents decided to travel during the holidays rather than spend it at home like most people, I always ended up at Walshes' home.

But this holiday was different. This was the first Christmas that I was officially part of the family. I was no longer the lonely kid they made room for. I was now expected to be there and in the official family count, just like Pace's fiancée, Laura. That may be trivial to some people, but it was a big ass deal to me.

Owen had completely turned my world upside down and changed my worldview a year ago in the hot tub. As the pieces fell into place, I learned things about myself that had always left me feeling off-balance. I knew Owen had a thing for me in high school, but when I finally realized what I felt for him was love, I couldn't let him go. And the last year had been the best of my life because of Owen. Six months of college and even the beginning of my NBA career hadn't stood in our way. It just made me grateful for every minute I spent with him.

"Are you ready?" Owen's question drew my attention to him.

I smiled at him sitting in the passenger seat and reached for his hand to lace our fingers together. "I'm always ready to spend time with your family. I love them."

Owen nodded while a soft smile tugged at his lips. “I know that. And they feel the same way about you.”

We pulled into the driveway and parked next to Pace’s truck. He and Laura had arrived two days ago, but Owen and I hadn’t seen them yet. Pace had graduated from college, but instead of moving home, they had decided to stay in Colorado since they loved it so much. I didn’t blame them, just based on the Texas heat alone.

We stepped out of the truck and gathered all the gifts out of the back. I’d insisted Owen use my credit card to buy gifts for everyone, because he was still in college and needed to focus on his studies, not work part-time. Especially since I’d signed a multi-million dollar deal with the newly franchised NBA team in Austin. What was mine was his too.

Walking up the front steps past the Santa Claus statue that made an appearance every year, Owen juggled the presents trying not to drop them as he opened the door. We entered into a holiday wonderland, the same as every year. The air was thick with the smell of vanilla bean, burning from wax warmers throughout the house. My boyfriend claimed it was to cover up the scent of the burnt sacrifice of whatever his mom had attempted to cook. I was inclined to agree after the many meals I’d scarfed down to avoid the taste over the years.

“We’re here!” Owen called out as I closed the door behind us. Owen put our gifts under the tree that was beautifully decorated with colored lights and filled with the ornaments Owen and Pace had made in school as kids.

“My boys are finally here.” Owen’s mom hurried to meet us in the family room, wearing her Mrs. Claus apron.

Owen laughed. “You just saw me two days ago.”

“I know.” She wrapped her arms around Owen, squeezing him tight. “But I’m just now seeing Knight.” She turned to me next, giving me the same hug. “We haven’t seen you since Thanksgiving.”

When she loosened her hold and stepped back, I nodded. “Yeah, sorry about that. The season has started, and we’ve

been on the road a lot.” Honestly, I was still feeling a bit worn out, but Christmas at the Walshes’ had been one of my favorite days of the year since I was a kid.

“Well, you’re home now, and that’s all that matters.” Owen’s mom patted me on the face while standing on her tiptoes because she was such a tiny woman.

“Something smells amazing,” I said, surprised, pulling off my jacket, and then helping Owen out of his.

Owen murmured under his breath, “Please let this have been catered.” Louder, he said, “It does smell really good, Mom.”

I stifled a laugh as best I could before carrying our jackets to the coat rack.

She laughed as a delicate blush stained her cheeks when I returned. “Well, I’ll have to tell Maria’s Kitchen you think so. I’ve never gotten a handle on cooking, so I ordered everything you’re smelling this year from the little diner up the road. It’s just warming in the oven. Your father, Pace, and Laura are out in the garage *looking at something*”—she rolled her eyes —“but I think they are wrapping a last-minute Christmas gift. They should be inside soon. For now, you boys sit down and rest.”

Owen’s mom headed for the kitchen, leaving him and me alone in the living room.

After sinking down side-by-side onto the couch cushion, I scanned the room. When I skimmed over all the familiar decorations, a sense of nostalgia swept over me. When I looked at the family portrait of all six of us that we’d taken almost a year ago that hung above the mantle of the fireplace the feeling turned to appreciation and contentment.

“What are you sitting here thinking about?” Owen asked, leaning into me as I put my arm around him.

“Just thinking about all of the things I’m grateful for this year.” I pulled him in for a quick kiss. I’d missed him so much while I’d been on the road the last few weeks. The drive back and forth from Austin wasn’t horrible, but it ate up a lot of



time we could have been together. But I had a plan for us to be together much more often than I hoped Owen would agree to.

I'd planned to wait until later when we were truly alone, but the question was itching to burst free. To see what he thought of the idea. "I wanted to ask you something."

Owen turned his head, looking at me with wide brown eyes. "I'm not ready to be a college bride," he deadpanned.

I burst out laughing. "That's not it, smarty pants. I want you to move in with me. I've found a place halfway between Austin and here, and I think we could make it work. I miss you and hate wasting time driving to see each other when I could just come home and find you in our bed."

Owen tilted his head, appearing to consider the proposal before a wide grin stretched his lips. "Waking up with you does sound appealing. I accept."

"Thank fuck," I breathed out and hooked my finger beneath his jaw, tipping his head back. I dipped down, pressing my lips to his, pouring every ounce of love and appreciation he made me feel into a soft kiss.

When Owen's mom called us for dinner, we broke apart, and I stood first before grabbing his hand and hauling him to his feet.

We entered the small dining room that connected to the kitchen in an open concept design just as Pace, Laura, and Mr. Walsh entered through a side door in the kitchen that led to the garage. Owen's dad was, in fact, holding a large box wrapped in candy cane themed paper. While his wife was turning away, removing foil-covered containers from the oven, Mr. Walsh rushed from the kitchen toward the living room, disappearing around the corner. His not-so-sneaky mission to slip a gift beneath the tree without Mrs. Walsh noticing was comical. It wasn't the first time his dad had done something like that and likely wouldn't be the last.

Pace walked to Owen and slung an arm over his shoulder. "About time you two showed up." He ruffled his brother's hair, making Owen scowl as he batted at Pace's hand. I snorted

and yanked my boyfriend away from my best friend. Pace chuckled, looking at me. “Nice to see you, asshole. How’s professional ball life treating you?”

“You too, dick.” I smiled back, and Pace’s eyes lit up in amusement. “Been keeping me busy.”

“I bet.” He nodded as wrapped an arm around Laura’s waist.

I tipped my chin. “Nice to see you too, Laura.”

“Hey, Laura,” Owen greeted her too.

Pace’s fiancée was gorgeous with smile was full of stark white teeth between bubble gum pink lips. Her blond hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail, and she was dressed in a simple outfit of light blue jeans and dark green sweater. She was also nice. Too nice for a jackass like my best friend. I considered telling her so, but it was Christmas and I was feeling the holiday spirit.

Laura gave Owen and me a matching smile. “It’s nice to see you both too.” She turned to Pace. “I’m going to help your mom if you want to catch up with your brother and friend.”

Pace pressed a kiss to her blond hair and patted her ass. “Thank you.”

As she left to help Mrs. Walsh, Pace slid into his usual seat at the table. Owen and I grabbed the chairs across from him.

“You two set a wedding date yet?” I asked.

“Next June.” Pace glanced at his fiancée who was pulling drinking glasses from the cabinet. A soft smile played on his lips before he looked back at me. “You, of course, will be my best man.”

“Obviously,” I agreed just as their dad took his place at the head of the table.

Before anyone could say anything else, Owen’s mom and Laura began placing dishes on the table. Mrs. Walsh had gone all out. A feast of turkey and ham, stuffing, sweet potatoes, green beans, and all the trimmings covered the tabletop, barely leaving room for our actual plates. When she took her seat

across from her husband and Laura sat next to Pace, everyone dug in, loading our plates and stuffing ourselves full to almost bursting.

The season would keep me swamped between practice and games, and I wasn't sure when I'd be able to do this again. So I soaked in the moment with the people I loved most, especially the blond brat at my side.

When we pushed away from the table, everyone moved to the living room to watch a Christmas movie. My eyelids grew heavy as the film began to play. Owen snuggled up against my side, and I gazed down at him as he got comfortable.

"Merry Christmas, *Little Walsh*," I whispered with a teasing grin tilting my lips.

Owen tipped his head back, scowling up at me as he whisper-hissed, "I changed my mind. I think I'm happy in the dorm, after all."

I chuckled because even a year later, it was still fun to crawl under my boyfriend's tanned skin. I wrapped an arm around him, banding him tight to my side. "No takebacks."

He pretended to struggle for all of five seconds before rolling his eyes. A smile tugged at his lips, finally breaking into a wide grin. "I wouldn't take it back anyway, you overgrown jock."

My lips twitched, but I focused on the deep brown eyes I'd fallen in love with. "I do love you."

Owen sighed, the sound full of contentment. "I love you too. Merry Christmas, Knight."

"Merry Christmas, babe." I dipped down, kissing him, surrounded by the people who meant most to us.

Life had a way of working things out. One day soon, I'd slip a ring on his finger and make him mine forever. I was already his for as long as my heart beat. And fair's fair.

The End

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XOXO -Baylin

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Baylin writes gay romance stories full of sweetness and steam. She's best known for her Sugar Land Saints series that follows a college football team set in Texas, which she also calls home. Whether writing books or reading them, Baylin spends the majority of her time tucked into the pages of stories about men who love other men. She has two amazing children, a spoiled cat, an insanely energetic dog, and a heavy addiction to caffeine.

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