

*Congratulations,
Quarterback.*

You scored.

TOUGH DOWN

baby

USA Today & Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

TABATHA KISS

TOUCHDOWN BABY

A COLLEGE FOOTBALL ROMANTIC COMEDY



TABATHA KISS

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More from the Tabiverse...](#)

[Excerpt: On His Face](#)

[Also by Tabatha](#)

[About the Author](#)

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2022 by Tabatha Kiss
All Rights Reserved. eBook Edition.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction intended for mature audiences only. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This title was originally published as *Whiplash* or *Bump & Run* by Tabatha Kiss. Significant changes have been made from its original publication.

SUBSCRIBE TO MY NEWSLETTER FOR FREE BOOKS!
VISIT [TABATHAKISS.COM/NEWSLETTER](https://tabathakiss.com/newsletter) FOR MORE INFO.

For Mom

Thanks for getting knocked up.

CHAPTER 1



JUNIOR

SEPTEMBER

“Cary Pierce?!”

Ty nods at my reflection in his mirror as he adjusts his bowtie. “Cary,” he repeats, pausing for effect. “Pierce.”

I blink, forcing my vision to focus, but my head still spins. “No way,” I say. “That’s impossible.”

“Before he retired, he said he’d like to coach a college team someday.”

“They all say that on their way out,” I argue. “They usually don’t.”

“They do this time.”

“Ty, there is *no way* Cary Pierce is our new coach.”

He performs a perfect turn in his shiny black shoes before reaching for his jacket hung up on his closet door. “Wanna bet?” he asks.

That shit-eating grin. That cocky tilt of his head.

I’ve known Ty Fisher for two years. Rush Week 2018, to be specific. This, this face right here, is his *gotcha* face. His *I know something you don’t* face.

“What do you know?” I ask.

He adjusts his collar. Fixes his cuffs. Runs a hand through his trim black hair.

“Ty.”

“Nah,” he says, smiling. “I’ve already said too much.”

“Seriously?”

“We gotta go.” He grabs his wallet and keys off his desk and passes me

into the hallway. "Need to swing by Delta Xi to pick up John."

"Oh, come on!" I follow him from the hall to the living room. "You can't leave me hanging like that."

"I can and I shall."

"Ty."

He ignores me, bolting straight for the front door.

"Ty," I say again.

"Let's go, Junior!"

I inhale to argue, but stop as I notice the time. We really are going to be late if we don't leave *now*.

With a huff, I lock the door behind us and follow him to his Charger parked in the driveway behind my van. I suppose if we really are going to meet professional football royalty tonight, then we should arrive in a style that matches our suits rather than... well, my mini-van that looks right at home here on Shanty Row.

I roll my eyes at the thought. Cary Pierce *is not* our new coach.

He's just not.

Ty's grin remains in place for the entire drive across campus. By the time we reach Greek Row, I'm more than convinced that he's messing with me. That's what he does, and he knows that Cary Pierce is my childhood hero.

We park in front of the Alpha Delta Xi house and Ty blares the horn twice. While we wait, I swivel my head, purposefully checking out the girls sprawled across the lawn of the Beta Kappa house across the street. Sunglasses and bikinis.

God bless end of summer Midwestern heat waves.

"Good evening, Beauties," I greet through the open window.

A few giggles. Bright smiles and lip bites.

I *am* Junior Morgan, after all.

One of them rises off her beach towel. She crosses the lawn in a pair of flip-flops and a yellow two-piece, not even bothering to look both ways before waltzing out into the street. She's in no danger, though. Everyone knows a Beta Kappa Beauty can stop traffic.

Especially one like Samantha Jaxx.

She leans over to peek through my open window. I immediately stare into the crevice of her cleavage. It's fine. She's not focused on me, anyway.

"Ty," she says.

"Hi, Sam," he replies.

“Long time no benefits, friend-o.” She tilts her head, shaking her sun-bleached locks to the side. “What’s with the ghost?”

“I didn’t ghost you. I’m right here.”

“You don’t text. You don’t snap.”

He shrugs. “I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy for me?”

“Yeah.”

I grimace. *Cold, bro.*

Samantha sighs, unaffected. “That’s a pity. Guess I’ll have to find a new plaything this semester.”

“Okay,” Ty says, also unaffected.

I sink lower into my seat between them.

“Hi, Junior.”

I nod. “Hi, Samantha.”

Her big blues draw a purposeful line down my body, lingering long on my crotch.

Ty honks again, keeping his hand on it for several seconds before letting go.

She licks her lips, still focused on me. “Keep that van gassed up for me,” she says.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say as she stands.

We watch her walk away. It’s what she wants us to do.

Afterward, I look at Ty. “What was that about?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he says before honking again. “Come on, John...”

“I thought you guys were still seeing each other.”

“Samantha Jaxx and I were never *seeing each other*. In fact, I haven’t seen her since May.”

I furrow my brow. “Then, who have you been hooking up with every weekend this summer?”

“*Finally.*” Ty bangs out a few more honks as John appears at the front door. “Let’s go, Kirby! We’re gonna be late!”

John steps down the porch, but morphs his quick strides into a slow strut as the Beta Kappa Beauties catcall him for his outfit. And his new side cut. Can’t blame them, though. John Kirby is totally rocking that suit. And the side cut.

Ty turns to me, clearing his throat. “We’ll talk about it later,” he says. “Okay?”

John throws open the back door and slides into the back seat. I nod at Ty, zipping my mouth and tabling the question.

“About time, Johnny,” Ty says as he shifts gears.

“Don’t call me that. And relax.” John reaches for his seat belt. “Cary Pierce won’t start the festivities until the quarterback shows up and—” he gestures at me, “he’s right here.”

I twist in my seat, my head spinning at the name again. “Wait, Cary Pierce? Where did you hear that?”

“Ty told me three hours ago.”

Ty laughs.

“Okay, dammit.” I deflate as John joins in at my expense. “*What is going on?*”

“All right, all right.” Ty waves a hand. “I’ll tell you. In a minute.”

John chuckles. I bite down, impatiently waiting as Ty drives us through Chicago. We avoid the high traffic streets, hoping to make up a little lost time.

“So, you know Sal,” Ty finally says.

I nod. “Yes, I know Sal.”

“He’s a real estate agent.”

“Yes, I know,” I say when he pauses for far too long.

“He just sold a big house just outside the city.” He points to his phone mounted on the dashboard. “*This big house.*”

I glance at the GPS map on display. ETA twenty minutes. “Okay.”

“He had to sign a non-disclosure agreement before meeting his client,” Ty continues. “But we went out for drinks last night and he said...”

He stalls on purpose.

“What?” I ask.

A sinister smile. “He said that he’d kill to be in my cleats this season because our new coach is a retired four-time pro champion.”

“You are so full of shit, dude.”

“Nope.”

I turn to look at John. “Do you actually believe this crap?”

He shrugs. “Why not?”

“Even if Cary Pierce wants to coach a college team, why would he pick Chicago North? We—”

I stop myself from saying it out loud. We all know what I was going to say.

Suck.

We suck.

“*Make a right turn,*” the GPS says, filling the silence.

Ty barely slows down to make the turn. I pull my seat belt a little tighter, reminded once again why I don’t let Ty anywhere near my van.

“Who knows why?” Ty says. “And who cares? All I know is that we’re on our way to meet the new coach right now... at Cary Pierce’s new house.”

“Yeah, well, I guess we’ll see,” I say.

He hums an affirmative.

I shift to get more comfortable. A suit and tie aren’t my usual style, but the invitation the team received insisted on us looking our best to meet the new coach and to pay our respects to the last one, Marty Duncan. He’d been Chicago North’s football coach for the last three decades until he died last week — just two weeks before the first game of the season. The gentle, relieved sighs of the board were heard throughout campus for days as they celebrated the idea of bringing in some new blood after begging him to retire for years.

But *Cary Pierce* blood? Not a chance.

Still, a bit of doubt seeps in as we leave the city behind. A long, winding road takes us out to the suburbs, then another road takes us even further out than that. Soon, houses drift farther and farther apart until the GPS finally tells us to take a left. Beyond the trees, I see it. It’s not a house. It’s a damn mansion with a large, black gate surrounding it.

“Holy shit,” John says from the back seat. “I didn’t even know this was out here.”

“Me neither,” I mutter.

Ty just grins.

We come to a stop at the front gate. A security guard steps down from the hut by the driver’s side and scans the three of us with a grin.

“Welcome!” she says. “Come to meet the new coach?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ty says as we flash our phones, displaying the invite we all received.

She bobs her head, and the gate opens. “Straight ahead.” Another wide smile. “Have fun!”

“Thank you!” we say.

The gate slides open slowly, adding even more annoying anticipation toward finding out who this mysterious new coach is. As Ty drives forward,

his smug smirk dances a little more on his face. Could he be right? Could we be driving toward professional football royalty right now?

I shake the thoughts away, not wanting to get my hopes up. Chicago North is a good school, but it's not good enough to attract someone like Cary Pierce. He's from New York and, last I heard, he retired there along with his millions. He could coach anywhere. Why would he ever choose this place?

"Whoa-o-o!" Ty laughs as we swing into the circle drive. His eyes flash around, taking in the perfect lawn and the enormous fountain at its center.

John sits forward in the back. Even my jaw sags a little. I grew up about a half a block from the bad part of town in a neighborhood that pretends to be nicer than it really is. My family got by just fine, but never in a million years did I think I would ever set foot in a place as nice as this.

A man in a vest charges down the front steps and meets us, signaling for Ty's keys as we climb outside.

Ty passes them off. "Valet parking," he remarks, staring at me.

"It's *not* Cary Pierce's house, man," I say, although I'm not even sure what to believe anymore. The valet drives off. "For all you know, that guy just stole your car."

The front door opens, cutting off Ty's reply.

"It's about time, guys! The team is waiting for you!"

My jaw drops. John's does, too. Even Ty stands a little taller.

Cary Pierce. *The* Cary Pierce. Four-time champion Cary Pierce, a man I've looked up to since I was ten years old, is standing in front of me. He looks exactly the way he did when I was a kid, with the small exception of his black hair looking a little thin around the edges and the slight wrinkles taking hold of the skin around his eyes.

No fucking way.

He waves us in with a thick hand. "Well, don't just stand there. Let's go!"

Ty takes the lead, shoving forward to shake hands with a legend. "It's awesome to meet you, sir," he says. "I'm Ty Fisher, wide receiver."

"Fisher?" Pierce asks. "You know a Sal Fisher?"

"Sal's my cousin."

"Good man! He got me a decent deal on this house."

"And what a beautiful house it is!"

Cary Pierce gestures him inside and his eyes fall on John.

"John Kirby, sir," John says, thrusting his hand forward.

"Halfback."

“That’s right.”

He looks John up and down. “You’re a little lean, John.”

John smirks. “Just means I move fast.”

“Can’t wait to see it.”

Cary Pierce waves him inside, then turns to me. I swallow hard.

“And *you* must be Junior Morgan,” he says.

I blink, taking his hand. “How did you know?”

“Process of elimination. You’re the only one I haven’t met yet — and you’re gonna have to work on that grip if you’re going to be my quarterback.”

My cheeks bleed red. I just gave the world’s daintiest handshake to Cary freaking Pierce.

“Sorry, sir!” I laugh, giving him a hard squeeze. The steel band of his championship ring presses into my skin.

“That’s much better! Maybe the tales of your legendary arm are true after all.”

He pats my shoulder and I feel like a little kid. He’s so much taller than I thought he was. I’m six-foot-two myself, making him nearly six-six by my estimation and close to two-hundred and fifty pounds. He’s a damn truck.

“Well, I don’t know about that.”

“Never tone down your strengths, Junior,” he says, leaning in. “Even if you have to fake it.”

“Yes, sir.”

He shakes his head. “None of that *sir* stuff. Coach is fine.”

I beam like a damn jester in the king’s presence. “Thanks, Coach.”

“Come on out back,” he says. “We’ve got a lot to go over tonight.”

I follow him through the foyer toward the back, passing through a huge kitchen before stepping out onto the lawn. The air is thick with the scent of barbecue and burning charcoal. A perfectly landscaped garden rests in the center, along with a large pool and a pool house on the other side of it. String lights and soft classic rock music.

Our teammates linger around with sodas and plates stacked with burgers and chips. Ty and John instantly dart over to grab their own plates while I stand back, taking in the moment.

I’m in Cary Pierce’s backyard.

“Hey, Junior.”

A light hand brushes my shoulder and I lock eyes with Bob, our assistant

coach. He's been around the university for nearly as long as Duncan was. "Hey," I greet him.

He chuckles at my expression. "Bit of a shock, eh?"

I laugh. "I thought for sure you'd be our new coach."

Bob waves his hand. "With this old mug? Nah. I mean, I did, too, but when the Dean himself called me about *this*... I didn't argue with it. It's what's right for you boys."

I nod. It hasn't sunk in at all yet.

"Hey, guys!" Coach's voice booms across the lawn, instantly grabbing our attention. He claps his hands together and scans the crowd, making eye contact with each one of us at least once. "I can tell by the looks on your faces that I don't have to introduce myself or list off my qualifications. But who I am isn't important — tonight's about you. It's an honor to meet you all. I look forward to getting some one-on-one time with each of you and, hopefully, being the coach you deserve."

Ty nudges my ribs, practically giggling to himself with a full plate of fried food. I have no idea how any of them can eat right now. I can hardly even breathe.

"I'm coming in a little late here," he goes on. "The semester has already started, and your first game is this Saturday. It was unfortunate to hear about your old coach. From what I've been told, Martin Duncan was a good man, but from every tragedy comes opportunity. You know, when I told people I was moving here to be your coach, they looked at me and asked — *Why?* You're Cary Pierce. You can coach anywhere you want. Why go to *that* school? They're a bunch of losers."

I glance around, feeling the team's morale plummet. We won one game last season and even less than that the year before. The term *loser* is more spot-on than we'd care to admit.

"No talent, no wins," he says. "You know what I said? I said they were right. You *are* a bunch of losers." He glances around again, letting it all sink in on us. "But so was I. When I played college ball, I was nothing. We were nothing. We had stats not so different from yours right now. Then, one day, a new coach came to town and changed everything. He trained us harder than we'd ever thought possible. He motivated us to not only change our minds about how we saw ourselves, but to change everyone else's mind as well. I want you to let me be that coach for you."

I feel a boost of confidence, one I haven't felt before in my entire life.

The rest of the team stands a little taller, too.

“We went all the way to the top that season and the next one and the next one. *This* season, I’m going to do the same for you. My old coach died two years ago. Before that happened, I got to see him one last time, and I promised him I’d change a few lives just like he did. I’m going to start with yours. How does that sound?”

The team erupts with shouts and applause. I clap louder than anyone.

It’s a dream come true. An absolute fairy tale made a reality.

“All right!” he shouts, clapping with us. “I like the enthusiasm! Now, eat up. Mingle. But do not leave until I’ve had the chance to talk with you. I want ten minutes with each of you tonight! No exceptions.”

I chortle. As if any of us are going to waltz out of here without kissing his championship ring first.

I expected this semester to be awful. My classes aren’t great, and I wasn’t planning on the team doing much better than last season, but *now*, with Cary Pierce leading the charge...

We might end this year as kings.

Movement draws my eye toward the house, along with a sudden flash of light as the kitchen fluorescents flick on. A shape passes by the windows, short and petite with feminine curves. She rounds the island counter toward the refrigerator and my breath catches in my throat.

I step toward the house, my gaze locked on her body. Tight yoga pants hug her hips while a baggy sweater hangs off one shoulder. Her bare feet glide along the floor with bright pink toenails. Brown hair sits on top of her head in a sloppy bun.

Complete, casual elegance.

I walk into the kitchen through the open door and she spins around with two bottles of water in her hands. I gulp saliva down as her stunning blue eyes flash at me.

“Hey,” I say, nearly choking.

She kicks the refrigerator door closed. “Hi,” she says.

Voice of an angel.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean...” I step closer to the counter. “I’m Junior.”

“Junior of what?”

“Just Junior.”

“Your parents named you *second best*?” she asks, giving a short smirk.

“My big sister used to say that.” I chuckle. “I proved them wrong.”

Her eyes jut up and down with skepticism. “*Have you?*”

“Mr. Morgan!” I spin around as Cary Pierce walks inside. “I see you’ve met my daughter, Alyssa.”

Alyssa.

“You interrupted the introductions, actually,” she quips. Her eyes move from his to mine. “I’m Alyssa.”

She holds out her hand, but his thick palm slaps my shoulder again.

“How about we head on back outside, eh, Junior?” he says, not really asking. “I’ve got a few more motivational speeches in me and I’d hate for you to miss them.”

I nod. “All right.”

He tilts his head at Alyssa. “I thought we agreed you would stay upstairs tonight.”

“Relax, Dad.” She’s still smiling. I like it. “I’m just getting us some water.”

“You have a sink upstairs.”

I glance up at him, jarred by the sudden hardness in his tone, but it doesn’t seem to faze her at all.

“Whoops. *My bad*,” she says, spinning on her pointed toes. “It was nice to meet you, *just Junior*.”

“You, too,” I add, feeling another tight squeeze on my shoulder.

“Go, Bearhawks,” she adds with a smile before spinning around on the tips of her toes and leaving.

Coach guides me away from the counter. I crane my neck until it hurts just to watch her go, aching to see more of that tight body, but it disappears into the shadowed hall before I can memorize another detail of her.

“Junior...” Coach clears his giant throat. “I expect three very specific, yet *simple*, things from you guys this season.” He holds up a hand and counts on his fingers as he talks. “Hit the gym hard five days a week. Don’t fuel your body with crap. And...” He shifts around to stand in front of me and drops his hands from my shoulders. “Stay away from my daughter.”

I blink. “Excuse me?”

His eyes keep a hard edge. “Does that sound simple enough?”

I glance over my shoulder into the kitchen again, hoping this is enough to cover my ass. “I’m sorry, Coach. You’ve got the wrong idea. I was just being

polite.”

“Good.” His lips curl into a forced, almost menacing, grin. “It’s nothing personal. Don’t think I’m singling you out. It goes for the entire team. I’d rather not have my work life mixing with my family life. You understand.”

“Completely, Coach.”

“Excellent.”

Phew.

He turns away and marches back into the yard, leaving me with a very annoying chill racing down my spine. In any other situation, if a person of authority spoke to me like that, I’d be all about getting them back for it, but this is Cary Pierce. The term *childhood hero* doesn’t quite cover the admiration I feel for the man. He could have told me to drop and lick his shoes and I’d immediately ask whether he preferred the laces or the soles.

And yet, there’s a magnet on the back of my head, drawing my eyes into the kitchen, hoping for just *one more peek* at Alyssa Pierce.

Ty hops out in front of me. “I fucking told you, man!” he shouts, throwing his arm around my shoulders. “This is going to be the best year of our lives.”

I laugh. “Looks like it might be.”

We walk out onto the lawn where Cary Pierce’s booming voice fills the air again. I hang on every word that falls from his mouth, soaking it all up, because Ty is right.

If Coach does what he says he can do, and we go all the way to the top, then nothing can stop all of our dreams from coming true.

Hairs stick up on my neck. I glance up at the house. Curtains move in a window on the third floor and I catch sight of that feminine shape again.

Alyssa Pierce stares down at the lawn, looking right at me from behind the glass, sitting next to... *some guy?*

Damn.

I focus on Cary Pierce instead.

CHAPTER 2



ALYSSA

“*T*ell me *everything*.”

I chuckle and kick my bedroom door closed. “Well, I went downstairs, grabbed two bottles of water, and came back.”

Grant narrows his thin eyelids. “You left out the chapter about Junior Morgan walking inside just as you made it to the kitchen downstairs.”

I shake my head. Of course, he was watching from the window. “He walked in and introduced himself.”

“And?”

“And then, my dad interrupted us and yanked him back outside with the rest of the good dogs.”

Grant sighs, relinquishing his love for decent gossip. “Damn.”

“What do you know about him?”

He pauses, blinking quickly. “Oh, honey. He’s *Junior Morgan*.”

I hand him a bottle of water. “And?”

“I keep forgetting you’re new around here,” he mutters, leaning back to peek out the window again.

When he heard there would be dozens of young footballers gathered in my backyard tonight, Grant basically invited himself over to watch. Not that I mind the company. It gets lonely up here on the third floor.

“Junior’s a *player*, in every sense of the word,” he says. “Throw a rock in the quad and you’ll probably smack a girl he’s hit and quit.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, collapsing onto my floor cushion and reaching for my script. “We should keep running lines.”

“*Shush*,” he snaps, his eyes still focused outside. “Ty Fisher just bent over to tie his shoelaces.”

I push off my cushion to join him by the window. He scoots a bit to the left to give me room and we stare down at the lawn below. My father stands tall above them with a pressed suit; his big, thick hands waving around as he spews out more words to them than he's ever said to me in my entire life.

"Your dad seems cool," Grant murmurs.

I shrug. "I suppose."

I find the only familiar face in the crowd other than my old man: Junior Morgan. A player, in every sense of the word. No wonder he practically broke his chain to nip at my heels.

Grant sighs again. "Ty is *gorgeous*."

I look down at the lawn again. "Which one is Ty?" I ask.

He points.

"The one with the brown side cut?"

"No, that's John Kirby. The halfback. Though..." He tilts his head with interest. "He is looking good this semester. Very... *tight*."

"So, which one is Ty?" I ask again, bringing him back.

"Oh." He points. "Stage right of John."

I spot him. Built and tall with perfectly styled black hair. Is Grant his *type*? I can see it, *maybe*. But who knows nowadays.

I hum with approval. "He's adorable."

"*I know*." Grant lets out another sigh and spins away from the window, lost and lovelorn. "All right, let's do this," he says, pushing his blond hair back with a defeated hand.

I shift back down onto my cushion with my script, ready to dive into this scene. Auditions for the fall show are this Friday and I'm eager to make a good impression on the theatre director, Mr. Young. I would never have gotten into the program at all if it weren't for my father's influence, and Young made it perfectly clear that I'd have to impress him right out the gate or he'd boot my ass to the curb.

"Okay..." I clear my throat. "Page twenty-nine. You read Danny, I'll read Nora."

Grant puffs out his chest and flips to the page before reading his first line. "Don't you see what you did, eh?! You made a fool outta me."

I chuckle. "Maybe drop the De Niro and try again?"

"Too much?"

"Just a *smidgen* too much," I say. "Good impression, though."



“Move, move, move!”

I hear my father’s voice before I even step out onto the football field. He’s got the team running drills with a third of them running to catch a pass, another third throwing the ball, and the last third racing to tackle the thrower before he gets the chance to throw the ball.

I look away, getting dizzy. *“Hey, Dad!”*

“Come on, guys!” he spits at the field. *“Pick up that speed!”*

I linger next to his shoulder, my eyes flicking back and forth at the nameless faces behind helmets. They react to my dad’s voice as if their lives depended on it. I suppose they think it does. He’s Cary Pierce, after all. I wish I could admire him the way they do.

To me, he’s just... Dad.

I clear my throat. *“Hey, Dad.”*

He looks over this time. *“Alyssa, what are you doing out here?”*

I can’t tell whether he’s annoyed I’m here or if he’s happy to see me. Story of my life. *“I just wanted to come say hi and see if you wanted to get some lunch later.”*

His focus never leaves the field. *“Not today.”*

It’s the answer I expected. Bring an idea to my father within twenty-four hours of it needing to happen, and he’ll reject it outright.

“Okay,” I say. *“How about tomorrow?”*

Once you set the time, bring the *incentive*. What’s in it for him?

“We can go to the student union during the lunch rush,” I add. *“Loads of people will see us hanging out and you’ll gain a rep for being the charming dad on campus.”*

He looks down at me. *“That’s not a bad idea, Alyssa.”*

“I’ll meet you at the athletic center and—”

The sound of colliding bodies brings our attention back to the field. A player is on the ground, pinned down by another one nearly twice his size. He must not have gotten his toss off in time before getting sacked.

“Get up, Junior!” Dad shouts at him. *“Walk it off.”*

Oh. Hello there, *just Junior*.

He pushes himself off the grass. His shoulder pads are askew and there’s a brand-new grass stain trailing down his tights, but he doesn’t seem to care.

He’s looking at me instead.

“What were you saying, Alyssa?”

“Um...” I pull my eyes away from the field. Away from Junior. “I’ll meet you at the athletic center and we can walk to the student union together.”

“Sounds good.” He pats my shoulder. “Now get going, you’re distracting my boys.”

He’s right. Junior Morgan is still staring at me, but he’s doing a decent job of making it look like he’s not. I add a little flair to my hips, giving my skirt a sway as I leave. Might as well make the view worth taking another tackle for.

“Come on, Junior! Get your head in the game!”

I chuckle as I step off the field.

CHAPTER 3



JUNIOR

*I*t's way too early in the morning for geometry.

I'm not sure what I was thinking when my academic adviser talked me into a math class at nine-thirty in the morning, but here I am. At least there's a coffee cart stationed between me and Prism Hall.

"I need coffee," I mutter at the barista. "With a *shit-ton* of sugar."

He nods and snatches an empty cup to fill up. I glance over my shoulder at the quad and flinch at the dull pain firing through my back.

That tackle at practice yesterday never should have happened. It wouldn't have if Alyssa Pierce wasn't standing on the sidelines. One look at her and the next thing I knew, I was on the ground and Coach was shouting.

I scan the quad while I wait and my eyes land on *her*, Alyssa Pierce, as if fate itself dropped her in front of me again. She's sitting alone on a bench with a paperback book in one hand and a pen in the other, scribbling down notes on a pad balanced on her crisscrossed legs. Her lips move as if she's reading aloud to herself as her eyes pass back and forth on the page.

Cary Pierce's darling daughter. Untouchable Alyssa. His voice echoes in my head, growling that phrase badass alpha dads just love to throw at unsuspecting prom dates to scare the piss out of them.

Stay away from my daughter.

But I'm not scared. Hell, I'm more curious than anything.

The disposable coffee cup beside her topples to the ground. She bends down to pick it up, exposing the gentle upper curve of her breast for one wonderful moment before throwing the empty cup into the trash by her bench.

"Hey." I nod to the barista and point at Alyssa. "Do you remember what

she ordered?”

He follows my gesture into the quad. “Black coffee.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” he confirms.

“Her?”

“I thought it was weird, too.”

“Give me one of those, too,” I say, passing my debit card to him. He steps back to fill another cup with piping hot brew and slides them both to me. “Thanks.”

I walk across the grass toward her and with each step, her voice gets louder and louder. She is reading aloud to herself, repeating the same phrase over and over again, sometimes with closed eyes to recite it from memory.

I clear my throat to get her attention. “Looks like you could use a refill, Alyssa Pierce.”

She turns her head up, and recognition instantly crosses her face. Her eyes bounce between mine and the coffee in front of her. They’re soft and blue, like digitally altered photos of the ocean beside a tropical island paradise. She takes the cup from me and holds it to her nose to smell inside.

“It’s black coffee,” I say.

Alyssa nods slowly and takes a quick sip. “How did you know?”

I stand up taller. “A magician never reveals—”

“You asked the barista?”

“I asked the barista.”

“Well, thank you, *just Junior*.” She slides the cup between her crisscrossed legs, nestling it against her inner thigh. I force my eyes upward so she doesn’t notice me trying to glance up her skirt.

“Do you mind if I sit?” I ask.

It takes a moment, but she nods, reaching for her messenger bag and sliding it onto the grass beneath the bench. I sit down beside her and take a quick drink from my own coffee, cool and relaxed. My nose detects her perfume. It’s faint, but flower-scented.

“So, why are you over here talking to yourself?” I ask her.

Alyssa flips her hand to expose the front of her book.

“*The Bigger Book of Comedic and Dramatic Monologues*,” I read the title aloud. “You act?”

“Occasionally. It’s for a class.”

“What class?”

“Theatre 375.”

“375? Okay, so when you say you act *occasionally*, what you really mean is...”

She smiles. “It’s my life.”

“Gotcha.” I laugh. “You’re a theatre nerd. That’s cool.”

“Oh, thank heavens,” she says. “I have the approval of the quarterback. My undergraduate life is complete.”

“No, really. I think it’s cool.”

“I highly doubt that.” She side-eyes me. “How about you cut right to it already? I have some memorizing to do.”

I blink. “Cut right to what?”

“You know what.” She reaches between her legs and grabs the coffee cup, dangling it in front of me like an obvious sign.

“Well, I am *offended*, Alyssa,” I say, placing my palm on my chest. “I was just being nice.”

“We have coffee, we have compliments.” She chuckles. “All we need now is condoms.”

I snap to attention, completely buzzed by the fierce crack of her words. She doesn’t blink, calling me out before I even raise my hand. “Well, since you brought it up...”

“No,” she says, taking a sip of her coffee and flipping her book open again. “Not gonna happen.”

“Worth a shot.” I sit back and take a deep breath to recharge. “So, who was that guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy in your window the other night,” I say. “He your boyfriend?”

She reluctantly smiles. “No.”

“Does your dad not let you date? What’s going on there?”

“No, I can date. I’m an *adult*,” she says. “He just doesn’t like me dating footballers.”

“Why not?”

“Because he knows what you’re all like.”

“What are we all like?”

She inhales a quick breath and slides a bookmark into place before setting the book down. “Well, if you’re anything like *him* — you’re all dirty, cheating, lying scoundrels.”

I feign offense again. “Well, I must say, that’s quite insulting, Alyssa.”

“Insulting...” she agrees, leaning in, “but *accurate*.”

I realize she’s talking about me. “Says *who*?”

“Your reputation proceeds you, Junior Morgan.”

“Who have you been talking to?”

She flicks out her fingers as she lists them off. “Maddy Bryant, Samantha Jaxx, Lisa Lawrence, Wilder Beck—”

“*Okay, you can stop.*” I shake away the quick flashes of faces from my mind. “You’ve proved your point... and done your homework.”

Alyssa chuckles softly as she takes a victory sip from her coffee.

“You make friends *very* quickly,” I note.

“And you break hearts just as fast.”

I flex my jaw. I crashed and burned before I even sat down. Might as well throw a Hail Mary. I lean closer and soften my voice. “Okay, I’ve broken a few hearts here and there but with *those eyes*, I’m willing to guess you have, too.”

“*Oh, my god.*” She laughs, twisting toward me. “You *did not* just say that.”

“Yes, I did,” I say, owning it.

“Does that line ever work?”

“I’ll let you know.”

She leans over to grab her bag and tosses her books inside. “Thanks for the coffee.”

I watch her stand up, not even hiding the fact that I’m staring at her ass. “We should do it again sometime.”

“Nah,” she says.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not interested.”

“You’re stone cold *now*, Alyssa Pierce.” I raise a brow. “But later, you’re going to think of this moment, and *you’re going to blush.*”

She pulls a pair of black sunglasses from her bag and slides them onto her nose. “I doubt it.”

“I don’t.”

“Bye, Junior.”

“Bye, Ally.”

She twitches at the nickname but doesn’t stop her long stride across the grass toward Talon Hall. Her hips give an unnatural sway, almost as if she’s making the view worth my while, but I might just be seeing things.

She tosses her coffee cup into the trash outside and gives the front doors a hard yank, not even offering me a glance back as she disappears inside.

Shit. I'm officially late for geometry.

It was worth it.

CHAPTER 4



ALYSSA

I take one step into Talon Hall and Grant juts out in front of me.
“*What’d he say?*”

I gasp. “Jeez, Grant, don’t you have other things to do?”

“No. Junior Morgan just bought you coffee and sat down beside you for ninety-seven seconds.”

“*You counted?*”

“What’d he say? Tell me now.”

I roll my eyes as I continue toward the classrooms. “I think you can probably guess.”

Grant follows so closely our elbows bump with each step. “Did he ask you out?”

“I slammed on the brakes before he got the chance.”

“*What?*” His face contorts as if I just smacked him. “Wh-wh-wh-why? Why would you do that?”

“You’re the one who said he was a player.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing!” He chuckles as I do. “It’s *Junior Morgan*, Alyssa.”

“So?”

“So, he plays to *win* — if you know what I mean.”

I squint. “I don’t think I do...”

He sighs. “Junior doesn’t take *no* for an answer.”

“*Creepy.*”

“*In a good way!* Once a girl is in his sights, he doesn’t stop until she’s screaming yes and, trust me, *you want to be that girl screaming yes for Junior Morgan.*”

“Sounds too good to be true.”

He points over my shoulder. “Go back out there and tell him you’ll go out with him.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I continue through the lobby. “Because even if I wanted to go out with him, *I can’t*. He’s on the football team. My dad would flip his shit if he found out.”

Grant deflates, his vicarious dreams dashed upon the rocks. “I forgot about that. You’re supposed to be playing Daddy’s little princess...”

“Yeah,” I remind him. “Sorry, Grant. I won’t be screaming yes for Junior Morgan.”

“But you want to, *right?*” he teases, nudging my ribs.

I blush. I fucking blush. Just like Junior said I would.

“No,” I say.

“*Liar.*”

“I’m sure there are worse ways to spend an evening, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Find a monologue for the fall semester showcase yet?” he asks me, shrugging as he changes the subject.

I reach into my messenger bag for his book. “Not quite. Need your book back?”

“Keep it. I have like three copies of that thing.”

“Thanks for helping me out, Grant.” I let the book settle into the bottom of my bag. “Mr. Young kind of put the fear of God in me.”

“Don’t sweat it. The guy’s a cuddly puppy on the inside. Just stick to the classic, romantic monologues. He likes those. But don’t blubber during the emotional scenes. It’s too Streep. He hates that.”

I nod. “I can handle that.”

He throws his arm around my shoulders. “I know you can — *because you have to*. I’ve been waiting two years for a halfway decent ingenue to stroll through here.”

“So, I’m *halfway* decent?”

“*You’re more than decent*. You’re Bergman to my Bogart, baby. We are going to blow Young’s frail old mind at the audition.”

I grin, completely seduced by his pep-talk. “Yeah. You’re right!”

“I’m *always* right.” He releases my shoulders. “I need to get to class. I’ll

meet you back here tonight and on Friday — *we shine!*”

I wave him goodbye and he spins around toward the auditorium. Once he’s gone, I pause and turn around to gaze through the windows at the quad. Junior’s long gone now, not that it matters.

I’m Daddy’s little princess.

And she doesn’t date footballers.



This place is a damn labyrinth.

I’ve only been to the athletic center once before. Now, I wish I’d asked for Dad to meet me outside. I’m pretty sure I’ve passed that janitor’s closet three times now.

I round a corner and spot a familiar face in Bob, the assistant coach.

“Hey, Bob,” I greet, relieved.

His wrinkled eyes barely glance up from his clipboard. “Hey, darling,” he says. Bob’s only known me a few weeks, but he always calls me *darling*. He’s such a lovable old man, so I find it difficult to feel upset about it.

“Have you seen my father?” I ask. “I’m meeting him here for lunch.”

“In the locker room, last I saw him,” he murmurs, pointing over his shoulder with his pen.

I think to walk inside but pause, reading the MEN’S sign on the door.

“Go on in,” Bob adds, reading my hesitation. “The team’s cleared out already. Check the office in the back.”

“Thanks, Bob.”

“If not, just keep your eyes on the floor.”

He chuckles softly. Dirty old man.

I smile and push the door open, instantly struck in the face with hot steam from recently run showers.

“Dad?” I call, my voice echoing throughout the room. It’s dead silent, save for the occasional tap of a dripping showerhead and the sound of my boots thumping beneath me. “Mr. Car-y P-ier-ce?” I say, adding vibrato and listening to it echo back at me.

I walk toward the office in the back, performing quick head tilts around corners as the rows of lockers pass me by.

A white towel comes into view, tossed around the naked hips of a man

standing before the last row of lockers.

“Oh—!” I halt, nearly slipping on the moist floor. My eyes crash down, just like Bob told me to, and I keep them there. “Sorry, he told me the team wasn’t here and—”

“It’s okay, Ally.”

His chuckle fires down my spine.

I look up. It’s Junior in nothing but a damp, white towel. His skin is wet with little rivulets of water still tumbling to his toes. I press my lips together, my eyes instantly drawn to the toned muscles pushing hard beneath his skin.

Whoa.

“Oh, Ally.” He whistles. “I’m up here.”

I clear my throat and force my eyes to meet his. “I was just looking—”

“For your dad.” He grins as he reaches into his open locker for a deodorant stick.

“Right.” I take a breath. “Why didn’t you say you were in here?”

“Well, you weren’t screaming *my* name.” He shoots me the briefest of glances. Just enough to see if I’m still gawking at him.

I am.

Heat spreads over my skin. It’s far too warm in here for this sweater, but there’s no way I’m taking it off with Junior Morgan standing half buck in front of me. A bead of sweat travels down my back, tickling my nerves with welcome discomfort.

“He left a few minutes ago,” Junior adds. “Before I got in the shower.”

“Oh. Thanks.” I turn my back to him, eager to put a mile of distance between us before I let that Adonis belt of his turn me extra stupid.

“Leaving so soon?” he asks, amusement dripping off his tone. “You just got here.”

Don’t turn around.

Just be quiet and leave.

I turn around and look at him, my pulse quickening at the wet strands of his dark hair poking down over his eyes.

Extra stupid.

“You’re naked,” I say.

He shrugs. “I know.”

“So, that means I should *leave*.”

“If you wanted to leave, you would have left by now.”

I twist away, spinning on my heels to take me far, far away from that

throbbing magnet begging to keep me here. “Bye, Junior.”

“Wait. Come here.”

“I have to meet my dad.”

“It’ll only take a minute, Ally. I promise.”

I pause, a battle raging between my head and my core. When I look back at him, he turns to face me and draws an X over his upper chest, slicing two lines through the moisture built up on his skin. Water runs downward, dripping along the small Greek letters tattooed on his right abs.

Alpha Delta Xi.

“Cross my heart,” he says. “Come here.”

“Why?” I ask, stalling.

“Because I have a theory and I would like to test it.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a science enthusiast, Junior.”

He smirks. “Just biology.”

I cross my arms, trying to ignore the next wave of heat coursing through me. Everything about him bleeds confidence, and I despise him for it. Mostly because it’s working exactly how he wants. I’m pretty sure the wetness between my thighs isn’t from the steam in here.

“*Come here,*” he says again. “No games, no bullshit. Just come here.”

My feet pull me forward on their own, bridging the distance between us. As I move closer, I see the finer details of his body. A freckle here. A scar there. Water glistens against his skin. Or is it sweat? Does it matter?

“Touch me.”

I snap out of it. “Huh? No—”

“Come on, Ally.” Junior stands up a little taller, his hooded eyes calling every bluff I have in me. “I can tell you want to. Just do it.”

My lungs take quick, shallow breaths, never quite satisfied with the thick locker room air. I reach out, pointing one finger, and slowly trace it over his abs.

He flexes against my touch, protruding them even more and I can’t help but suck in my bottom lip.

A sinister chuckle. “Ally.”

I twitch. “What?”

“I wasn’t talking about my *abs*.”

My eyes jump to his. He waits, refusing to even blink as he locks me in place using only the power of his gaze. My fingers tremble against his wet skin, easily gliding down his torso toward the towel tied loosely over his hips.

Still, I don't look away. Neither of us looks away as I slip a lone finger beneath the towel.

And pull.

It falls to the locker room floor.

I glance downward, bewitched by the stunning V-shape pointing down to his...

Um.

Whoa.

I lick my lips, tasting sweetness in the air. My fingers twitch, moving on instinct, drawing a line down his dripping happy trail. I admire his Adonis belt again, but that only whips up a mental image of my tongue gliding over it. I can practically taste the clean water on his skin.

I connect with his gorgeous eyes again as my fingertips reach the base of his rock-hard cock.

Junior places both hands on the locker behind my head, trapping me between them. "Don't worry. It won't bite," he teases. "Well, it might spit."

I bite down to keep from laughing. I let my touch crawl, following the trail of pulsing veins along his shaft.

His brown irises twitch. A sharp inhale invades his nose. I like it. I like how much desire he breathes from a single touch.

I want to hear it again.

I reach the head of his cock and pause, holding back.

Junior growls softly, just barely audible behind his breath. "You see what you do to me, Ally?"

I nod.

He leans closer. His wet chest presses against me. His lips brush my cheek. "Do I do the same to you?"

I quiver, barely breathing.

"Alyssa?"

Fuck.

My father.

"Oh, shit!" I whisper.

Falling to the floor, I crawl away from Junior, bolting around to the next aisle of lockers to hide out of sight.

Junior follows me, staying upright. "What are you doing?" he asks as he casually re-wraps his towel around his waist.

"Alyssa, are you in here?" my father calls from the doorway.

“Hiding,” I say.

Junior smirks with confusion, lowering his voice to meet my whisper. “Why?”

“Because if he finds me here, I’m in deep shit.”

“But you came in here looking for him.”

“And I found *you* instead, and he *really* doesn’t want me talking to you guys.”

His eyes sparkle. “Really?”

“If he finds you talking to *me*, he’ll have you running laps until sundown.”

He considers it, chewing his cheek. “Worth it.”

“Come on, Junior—”

“*Who’s in here?*” my father shouts.

Junior leans down. “Go out with me tonight and I’ll tell him you’re not here.”

My cheeks turn red, but I’m far from blushing. “*Are you fucking serious?*”

He grins as my father’s shoes tap against the floor.

“*Fine*,” I spit in response.

Junior winks at me and turns away, strategically holding his towel together to keep Junior *junior* from springing out in front of his coach.

“Hey, Coach,” I hear him say by his locker.

“Hey, Junior.”

I focus my hearing, trying to pinpoint my father’s exact location in case I have to move. Unfortunately, my heart is pounding so loudly I can barely hear him at all. My fingers throb, the memory of what I just did still alive on them.

I touched Junior Morgan’s dick.

I shove my hands into my sweater pockets.

“Have you seen Alyssa?” he asks. “Bob said she came in here.”

“Nope, haven’t seen her,” Junior lies. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, we were supposed to meet for lunch today.”

“Have you tried calling her?”

Goddammit, Junior.

I reach into my bag, sifting quietly through the pockets to find my phone, unsure if I left it silenced.

“I’ll try. Thanks, Junior.”

“Anytime, Coach.”

I sigh with relief as my fingers wrap around my phone and I flick the switch to silence it. One second later, it vibrates in my palm.

Dad calling.

I exhale until my lungs fight for air, listening to the sound of his shoes fading off toward the door.

Junior appears over me again, his expression smug as fuck. “You’re welcome,” he says.

He offers me his hand to help me up, but I push off the floor by myself. “Oh, come on...” He laughs. “Don’t be like that.”

I hold out my ringing phone. “*Have you tried calling her?*” I mock. “I had my damn ringer on.” He snatches it out of my hand. “What are you doing?”

“Adding my number for later,” he says, tapping away at the screen. Once he’s done, he passes it back. “I’ll pick you up at seven, Alyssa Pierce.”

“Fine — *wait*, no.”

“*Ally...*” He raises a brow. “We had a deal.”

“Yeah, I know, but I have an audition on Friday, so I’ll be rehearsing in Talon Hall tonight until eight.”

“Ah.” He smiles. “Then, I’ll meet you there at eight.”

“That works.”

Junior takes a purposeful step closer to me. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

He releases the strategic grip on his towel, but he keeps it pinned to his waist. His cock slides out, still hard as stone, pointing just an inch or two from my hand.

“Do I do the same to you?” he asks again.

I swallow the desire down my throat. “Do you give me a raging hard-on? I can’t say I’m equipped for it.”

“You know what I mean.” His eyes fall down my body. “Don’t lie. I can tell.”

“You can *tell*?”

“Oh, I can tell *a lot* just by looking at you, Ally.”

I scoff. “Like what?”

“Like how you’re definitely not a virgin. You didn’t even flinch when you pulled off my towel.”

I say nothing. Not his business, anyway.

“You also touched me without even hesitating,” he continues. “Tells me you know *exactly* what to do with it and honestly, I’m *dying* to find out what you can do.”

“Oh, really?”

“*Really.*”

“Fat chance.”

He chuckles. “So, tell me. Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Blush.”

I open my mouth to lie, but my gut stops me. He’s expecting a denial. That would just prove his point. Telling the truth would only vindicate him, too.

“Your silence is very loud, Alyssa Pierce,” he says, briefly flashing his entire groin at me as he readjusts his towel. “Makes me wonder how loud you can be in other ways.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“I guess we will.” He slides back toward his locker. “You’re welcome to stay and watch me get dressed.”

“No, thank you.”

I brush past him, catching a quick whiff of his fresh deodorant, possibly some lingering cologne in the air as well.

Fuck, he smells good.

“I’ll see you tonight, then. *Wait...*”

I spin back in a huff. “*What now?*”

Junior shuffles toward the door, clutching his towel as he reaches for the handle. “Hang on...” He gestures for me to stand back and he opens the door, peeking out into the hallway like a professional look-out. “It’s clear. Wouldn’t want *Daddy* to see you walking out of here, would you?”

My lips curl on their own. “Thanks,” I say. “That’s very thoughtful.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I am a little.”

He holds the door open for me. “Get used to it.”

I blink once, torn on whether to thank him again or issue a snarky comeback. I choose silence instead, nodding softly as I step through the doorway.

It closes behind me and I take a deep breath of crisp, air-conditioned

freedom, hoping it subdues the nerves dancing inside of me.

My phone vibrates again in my hand. This time, I answer the call. “Hey, Dad.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the athletic center looking for you—” I round the corner and come face-to-face with him. “And I found you!”

He sighs and lowers his phone from his ear.

“Sorry I missed you,” I say, pulling a lie right out of my ass. “I was in the ladies’ room and—”

“Why are you wet?”

I freeze. “*What?*”

He gestures at my shirt.

Shit.

Junior Morgan’s hard, moist chest imprinted on my blouse.

“Oh!” I roll my eyes. “I spilled some water. Still hasn’t dried yet...”

Please buy it. Please buy it.

He shrugs and nudges toward the stairs. “Well, let’s get to it.”

I release a silent breath as he stalks off.

Dammit, Junior.

And yet, I smile.

CHAPTER 5



JUNIOR

*A*lyssa Pierce touched my dick.

I'm supposed to be in class right now, but I can't tell you which one.

All I can think about is her. The way she quivered when I pressed her against those lockers. The rush of pink in her cheeks. The lust hidden in her glistening, sinful eyes. One more minute alone and she would have dropped to her knees and—

Ouch.

Someone punches my shoulder, sharp and hard, instantly bringing me out of my Alyssa spiral.

"Hey, little brother."

I glance up from my table and I smile, all pain fading away. "Hey, Mag."

Maggie slides into the chair across from me. "What are you doing over here?" she asks as she sets down two cups of coffee cart coffee. "You're staring off into space like a weirdo."

Maggie is four years older than me, but you'd think it was the other way around. She's got that cutesy vibe to her, along with a child-like voice and baby-fat cheeks, so she's always had an issue with people taking her seriously.

Luckily, she's got me and I'm more than willing to correct anyone who even glances wrong in her direction.

"Just killing time," I say.

I shrug at the very active student union food court. It was coincidence I walked in here at the same time as Alyssa and Cary Pierce. She hasn't noticed me yet. I think. I've been gawking at them for the last twenty

minutes.

Maggie raises an eyebrow. “Wanna talk about it?”

And that’s Mag.

She got her degree in psychology before I even set foot here. Now, she’s going through Chicago North’s prestigious graduate program, but she’s had a thing for Freud since we were kids. She was my very own Lucy from Charlie Brown, charging me a nickel for every problem of mine she solved.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“But we’re almost *two weeks* into the semester,” she says. “Surely, you have some girl problem to throw at me by now.”

I feel Alyssa’s phantom touch beneath the belt. My eyes flick on their own, drawn to her. Moth to the flame. Her father says something, and she laughs back at him, although I can’t tell if it’s genuine or forced.

“I have a date tonight,” I say. “Maybe I’ll have something for you at lunch on Sunday.”

Maggie rubs her palms together. “Ooh, a date tonight? With whom?”

“Wait until *Sunday*, Mag.”

She slouches with disappointment. “Fine. Here—” She pushes the second coffee across the table at me. “You can have this. Nate was supposed to meet me ten minutes ago, but he’s not here yet, so it’s forfeited to you.”

I palm the cup, letting the warmth tickle my fingers. “What’s he up to nowadays?”

“Same old, same old,” she murmurs, rolling her eyes. But she ends it with a smile. A girl still very much in love.

I laugh. Maggie met Nate three days into their freshman year, and they’ve been attached at the hips ever since. They’re the very definition of relationship goals, but I know Maggie wishes she’d experimented a little before latching onto him so fast. That’s why she grills me about my escapades at our weekly Sunday lunches. She lives vicariously through my many, many mistakes.

My eyes float to Alyssa again and a shock trembles my system. She’s staring right at me, but she looks away the second we make eye contact.

“So, that’s Cary Pierce, huh?” Maggie asks, pointing across the room at their table.

“That’s him. You should have heard the sound that came out of Dad when I told him.”

“I can imagine.” She takes a sip from her coffee. “Who’s the girl?”

“I don’t know.”

I force a shrug, feeling the rush of words filling my throat. Talking to Maggie about my problems is just about the only good habit I have, but I don’t want her analyzing Alyssa right now.

“Look, I gotta get going,” I say, making my escape. “I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“Bye, little brother.”

I slide the untouched coffee back over to her and she takes it to give to Nate. All will be forgiven as soon as he flashes his handsome face.

“Bye, Mag,” I say.

Don’t look at her.

Don’t look at her.

Don’t look at her.

I beeline for the exit, but my damned eyes pull toward her on their own.

Apparently, Alyssa Pierce has the same problem. She watches me walk away, little eyes flicking downward at least once to check me out. Make that twice.

I smile, inside and out.

Tonight, I’ll have her pinned again.

Tonight, I’ll taste those sweet lips.

Tonight, I’ll feel her body quiver as I’m thrusting and—

“Hey—!”

I walk right into some guy. He drops his textbook, and it slams onto the floor, drawing the eyes of people around us.

“Watch it, *dick*,” the guy spits at me as he grabs his book.

“Sorry,” I say. I keep my head down and bolt through the exit, just knowing that Alyssa’s piercing blues caught the entire thing.

First that tackle at practice and now *this*...

If I could stop embarrassing myself in front of Alyssa Pierce... that’d be *great*.

CHAPTER 6



JUNIOR

I open the door to Talon Hall, stopping just beyond the entryway to look around.

I've never been in this building before.

Talon is for the artsy majors like theatre and music and... well, art. I've never had a reason to set foot in here. Meeting up, and possibly *hooking up*, with Alyssa Pierce is more than a good enough reason to go in now. I doubt I'll have an accidental run-in with anyone I know, anyway.

After a few minutes of wandering the enormous lobby, I make it to the double doors of the auditorium. Voices echo from inside, my ears perking at the sound of Alyssa's wickedly feminine tone.

The voices get louder. I pause.

She's shouting.

No. She's *arguing*.

She's arguing with some guy.

I yank open the auditorium doors. She's up on the stage, her face contorted with anger and sadness as *this punk* screams at her. He's tall, nearly as fit as I am, and perfectly capable of hurting her if he wants to.

"Do you see what you did, eh?! You made a fool outta me."

"I'm sorry!" she says, her voice quivering. "I don't know how many times I can say it..."

Her eyes glisten, full of tears.

I bound toward the stage.

"Say it again," he growls. "Say it like you mean it this time or so help me —"

He grabs her arm. She winces with pain.

Oh, hell no.

“You’re hurting me!”

“Good!”

“*Hey!*” I launch onto the stage, forcing myself between them and giving the guy a hard push with my palm. “*Leave her alone.*”

He looks at Alyssa, then me, then Alyssa again. Then they both burst with laughter.

“It’s okay, Junior...” Alyssa guides me away from him, slow and gentle. “We’re just rehearsing a scene.”

“And I guess we *nailed it!*” the guy says, his tone suddenly soft as clouds. “*Finally.*”

“I told you we needed to make it more aggressive,” she says to him.

“Wait...” My eyes bounce between them. “That wasn’t real?”

“No,” he says, “but that sudden burst of powerful masculinity certainly was...”

He rubs my shoulders, his hand lingering for a second too long.

I pause, trapped between extreme embarrassment and awful confusion.

Alyssa clears her throat. “Junior, this is Grant. I highly doubt you’ve met before.”

“Not officially,” Grant confirms. He glances me up and down once before looking back at Alyssa. “Well, I’m going to call it a night. You two have fun — but not too much. That’s my job.”

“Bye, Grant,” she says.

He winks as he grabs his backpack off the stage and hops off. Alyssa stares me down, amusement bleeding from her eyes while she waits for Grant to exit the auditorium.

The door closes behind him, and she smiles.

“Now that we have the unsolicited *chivalry* portion of tonight’s events out of the way,” she says.

“*Hey,*” I say. “Anyone could have walked in here and got the same idea I did.”

“I know.” She chuckles. “Grant and I are auditioning for the leads in the fall play, so we’re pulling out all the stops — the more intense, the better.”

I study her face. Her cheeks are still pulsing red, but her eyes show absolutely nothing of the fear I saw before. No tears. No pain. One shaking breath and it’s all gone, almost as if it never existed at all.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

She waves a hand and bends over to grab a bottle of water from her bag. "I'm fine. The adrenaline will wear off soon."

I take a breath, too, feeling my own adrenaline firing through me. The way I leapt up there to defend her... I've never done that before.

"So, you have a tryout?" I ask.

Alyssa laughs mid-sip, nearly spilling water down her chin. "I have an *audition*."

"What's the difference?"

She considers. "Nothing, I guess. There's really not much of a difference between what you do and what I do, come to think of it."

I glance around at the stage. Red curtains and a grand piano. "It's *completely* different," I say.

"How?"

I smirk. "I play *football*, Ally."

"So?"

"One is *football*. The other is... a little performance on a stage."

"Isn't that what football is, too?"

"No. Sports are about strategy and anticipating the opponent's move before it even happens. I have to train hard to do what I do."

Alyssa crosses her arms. "And I don't?"

I stand up taller, matching her energy. "I'm in the gym five days a week."

"So am I. You think actors aren't scrutinized over every bit of their appearance? Pound for pound, I'm probably judged more than you are."

"Okay..." I blink, yanked off course by the logic in her reasoning. "But my team counts on me to be in shape. I have to be where I'm supposed to be, when I'm supposed to be there, or we don't win."

"I have to hit every cue, memorize every word of my lines *plus* everyone else's," she says, her voice steady as a rock. "I have to live and breathe this place for weeks before opening night because if I don't, then everyone will notice every missed step, every skipped line, and my crew will judge me for it — same as you. You memorize a few plays, you go out on the field every weekend, and you perform for the crowd. It's the same thing."

"But people respect what *I* do a lot more than what *you* do."

She smiles. "Hate to break it to you, Junior, but this auditorium is *always* sold out. Can you say the same for that stadium out there?"

I open my mouth to argue, but nothing comes out. My throat clenches, smacked down into submission with the slightest crack of her tongue.

“It’s the audience that gives it life, isn’t it?” she continues, her tone much softer. Almost *comforting*, as if she’s nursing a wound. “Grant and I were just rehearsing until you walked in and made it *real*. Without the crowd, it’s just a scrimmage. Right?”

Total fucking whiplash.

She offers me her bottle of water. “See? Not so different.”

I take the water, feeling a sudden, dry thirst. “Yeah,” I concede. I twist the cap off and drink a hard sip. “Not so different.”

“*By the way*, thanks for programming your name into my phone as *Big Dick Morgan* because *that* wouldn’t be difficult to explain to my dad or anything.”

I crack up the instant she says the name. “It was *funny*. You laughed, admit it.”

“You’re an ass.” She narrows her eyes. “I might have *tittered*. A little.”

“I’ll take it.” I hand the bottle back to her. “Shall we?”

“Depends on where we’re going.”

“I have a few off-campus ideas,” I tease. “It won’t get back to the coach, I promise.”

“You sure?”

I draw an X across my chest. “Cross my heart.”

Her eyes fall to my body and I know she’s thinking about earlier. Hell, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. I’ve nearly jerked off a half dozen times since, but I didn’t in favor of saving it for tonight in case she touches me again.

Who am I kidding? Of course, she’s going to touch me again tonight.

I’m Junior fucking Morgan.

“Let’s go,” I say, smiling at the thought.

CHAPTER 7



ALYSSA

We step outside into the quad. It's highly populated tonight, full of people enjoying the warm evening, hanging out and having fun. I pull the hood of my sweater over my head and slide my sunglasses on. The sun is falling fast, but I can't risk being seen out with Junior. I even slow down to keep at least two paces behind him on the sidewalk.

"Ally, what are you doing?"

I look up to find Junior walking backward along the sidewalk, his eyes locked on me.

"Turn back around," I snap.

"You look like you're casing the place."

"I'm not *casing*. I'm being *cautious*." He stops suddenly, making me collide with his thick chest. "*Junior*."

"*Alyssa Pierce!*" he shouts. "Watch where you're going!"

I jump back to put several feet of distance between us. "Knock it off!"

"See? Not a single person looked up. Except that guy." He waves. "Sup, Newbury?"

"Yo, *Junior!*"

A sociable laugh, and then he's right back to staring at me again.

I hide under my hood, annoyance spiking inside.

This was a horrible idea from the start. I should have just spoken up in the locker room when Dad came in. I could have avoided this whole damn thing.

"Hey..." Junior takes a step back and tilts down to find my eyes. "I'm sorry, all right? That was kinda dickish."

"Living up to your name, *Big Dick Morgan*."

"There she is!" He laughs, then sighs. "Look, I'm parked in G lot. We can

split up and you can meet me there if you'd rather."

I straighten up. "No, it's okay. I'll walk with you."

He pauses, staring down at me with soft, concerned eyes. "You're really freaked out by the idea of Coach finding out about this, aren't you?"

"I just don't want to get on his bad side."

Junior goes quiet. "He doesn't... *hurt you* on his bad side, does he?"

"No." I shake my head. "*Never*. He can just be difficult. And we've gotten along pretty well lately. I don't want to..."

"Rock the boat," he says with a nod.

"Right."

"Well..." Junior clears his throat. "Now I feel kinda bad about coercing you into going out with me tonight."

I can't tell whether he means it. His face still shines with that cocky confidence, but his voice sounds sincere enough.

"I could have told you to fuck off anytime, Junior," I say.

"You certainly could have." He leans over, still towering over me. "But you didn't."

I think of him in that towel, remembering the pained lust in his voice.

Touch me.

I swallow hard. "I suppose you're about to enlighten me with what that tells you about me," I say.

His lips curl. "I think you already know."

He's so damn sure he's getting laid tonight. It's almost cute.

"G lot, you said?" I ask, deflecting.

We walk the rest of the way in silence. I keep a constant watch around us, eyes darting from face to face, but Junior was right. No one's looking. No one cares about two people casually walking through campus. Each step becomes easier.

I wonder what *that* says about me.

Junior guides me toward an old, white mini-van.

I pause. "*This* is your car?" I ask.

Junior grins. "Oh, you're *definitely* new around here if you've never heard of the Junior-mobile."

"The..." I blink. "The *Junior-mobile*?"

"I didn't name it. The team did."

"And what's so special about the *Junior-mobile*?"

He slides the side door open. "Take a look."

I step closer. There are no back seats, for one. Everything has been stripped out and replaced with an air mattress on the floor — along with a few thick pillows and a wrinkled comforter. Tinted windows. Strings of soft blue lights pinned to the roof to set, well... a mood, I suppose.

I roll my eyes. "I'm not getting in this thing!"

Junior laughs. "Why not? It's perfectly safe and clean."

"Doubtful."

"Play your cards right and you'll be the first classy lady to grace the Junior-mobile this semester."

I feign a gasp. "You mean the great Junior Morgan hasn't gotten laid yet this semester?"

"I didn't say that. I said you'd be the first one *in the Junior-mobile*."

I cross my arms and lean against the open door. "So, how does this whole *player persona* work for you?"

"Persona?"

"Yeah," I continue. "You pick out a girl, drag her to the old *mobile*, score a touchdown or two, and then what? *Sayonara*, lady? Hope we don't randomly bump into each other again?"

"You sound surprised, Ally," he notes. "I thought all of us were dirty, cheating, lying scoundrels."

"Don't you ever feel badly about it?"

"I've never been dishonest to a girl to get her in here," he says. "I've led no one on, never made a promise I didn't keep, or done anything shady to get laid. It's clear from the beginning what I want, and I've done the same with you."

"Is that all this is?" I ask. "After tonight, you're just hoping to carve another notch into your floorboards?"

Junior chews on his bottom lip. "Honestly, yes."

I scoff and push off the door, unable to hide my disgust. "Wow..."

"Ally..." He takes a step forward. "Don't even *pretend* like you're not interested."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

He drifts in closer. My nose twitches with the scent of his cologne again. I ease back, struggling between smacking him or *accidentally* stumbling inside the van.

"I'll tell you what..." he says. "I'll give you another shot to tell me to

fuck off. Then you can leave, and I'll never bother you again. Cross my heart. *But...*" He places his hands on the van, pinning me to it just like he pinned me to the lockers before. "If there is *any* chance you want me as much as I want you, then you'll get in the van and we'll continue our little date like normal. Don't lie. *I can tell.*"

I gaze down his body, eyes drawn to his groin as if I'll see his cock again — *hoping* to see his cock again.

I close them, embracing the darkness.

"Ally..."

A shudder tingles my spine.

The way he says that...

"Say you'll stay. With me."

His lips graze my cheek, so close to my mouth. They never quite connect, Junior leaving a hair's distance between us the entire time.

This fucking guy.

He's baiting me. It's working. It's totally working, but I don't want to be just another notch in Junior Morgan's dirty van floorboards.

The bitch of it is that I don't want to leave, either.

I do want him.

I *want* to watch his body towering over me, thrusting me into oblivion while I cry out in blissful agony.

But I've spent my whole life as the daughter of a narcissistic womanizer. I'm not about to be taken advantage by one now.

I open my eyes and look into his. "Let's go," I say, shifting away from his touch and walking around the van to get into the passenger's seat.

You want to fuck me, Junior Morgan?

You're going to have to earn it first.

CHAPTER 8



ALYSSA

“*W*hy are you here?” Junior asks me.

I wrinkle my brow. “What do you mean?”

“You’re a transfer student, right?” He takes his eyes off the road for a split second to look at me. “You’re new and you’re taking three-hundred level courses.”

“Ahh.” I nod. “Welcome to the glorious world of P.R. representatives.”

“What?”

“When my dad decided he wanted to become a coach, his public relations guy told him he should *revamp* his entire image,” I say. “That meant shifting away from his old manwhoring ways and embracing a more *family friendly* lifestyle to gain good press when his new job went public.”

“Ah, so they called you.”

“Well, you can’t be family friendly without a *family*. He contacted me out of the blue — or his P.R. rep contacted me — and offered me a deal. If I came to live with him, pose nice for photos, and act the doting daughter, then Dad would continue paying for my education. If not, I was on my own.”

Junior pauses, shifting his attention back to the road ahead. “I guess that’s why he doesn’t want you involved with the team?”

“It could cause *unnecessary drama*, or so he claims.”

Junior chuckles.

I turn toward him. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he says. “It’s just so strange that we’re talking about *Cary Pierce* right now. I have *Cary Pierce’s daughter* in my van.”

“Why is that strange?”

“I mean, he’s your dad, you’re used to knowing him. But me? I had a

poster of the guy on my bedroom wall as a kid. It's a bit... *strange*."

"I guess I get that." I shift in my seat, facing him more. "Why did you want to go out with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Most guys who ask me out just want to meet my dad. You've already met him."

"I wanted to get to know you," he answers.

"Bullshit."

"I'm serious!"

"Do not think that I won't tuck and roll out of this van while it's moving."

"Are you always this suspicious of men that show interest in you?"

His question brings me pause. "Yes," I say, unable to hold it back.

"Honestly..." His chuckle falls. "It kinda pissed me off when he told me to stay away from you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He told you to stay away from us, right?" he asks. I nod. "I dare you to say that your first instinct *wasn't* to go jump the bones of the first one of us you could find."

I smile. "Maybe a little."

He looks straight ahead, the edge of his lips twitching slightly in satisfaction while I glance out the window beside me. We've been driving for a while now, leaving more and more of the city behind us.

"Junior, where exactly are you taking me?" I ask.

"Patience, woman."

"If you're planning on murdering me, I'll have you know that I am highly trained in many forms of stage combat."

"*Stage combat*?" He laughs. "Uh-oh. Better gird my loins."

"Damn right."

Junior turns us right, then left, then another left, and we end up in a picturesque town square in suburban hell.

"Oh, I get it," I joke. "You're not going to kill me, but boredom will. Okay."

He says nothing, but he fires a sly glance at me from the corner of his eyes before turning off the square into a parking lot with only a dozen spaces. Half of them are empty.

Junior parks the van. "Oh, I forgot to ask. Do you like pizza?"

“Yes,” I say. “I like pizza.”

“How about Skee-ball?”

“Skee-ball?”

“Yeah, Skee-ball.”

“I hold no strong feelings about it in either direction.”

“Good.” He unbuckles his seat belt. “Let’s go have some fun.”

I follow Junior across the lot, genuinely curious as he approaches an unmarked red door between a coffee shop and a used bookstore. He holds it open for me and waves a hand, gesturing for me to enter first.

I raise a brow as I step forward across the threshold.

While the outside was suspicious, the inside is full of color and life. Arcade games line the walls, leaving a counter on the fourth wall for people to order food and drinks or exchange tickets for prizes. Families sit around, children racing back and forth between their parents and machines, begging for quarters.

It’s... not at all what I expected.

“Hey, Junior!”

The old man behind the counter shouts his name and Junior beams.

“Hey, Frank!” he says, swiftly walking toward him. I follow.

“Where’s Maggie tonight?”

Junior shrugs. “No idea.”

Frank glances kindly at me behind Junior and smiles. “What can I get you and the lady?”

“Two big slices, two colas, and enough tokens to choke the machine.”

“Coming right up!”

Frank disappears through a doorway marked *kitchen*.

I stare at Junior, pausing until the old man is out of earshot. “Who’s Maggie?”

He searches my eyes for envy that isn’t there. “Maggie is my big sister.”

“Ah.”

Frank sidles back through the curtain with two huge paper plates, each with a giant slice of pepperoni pizza lying on top. “Here you go, you two,” he says, slapping them down on the counter between us. He reaches below into a small fridge and pulls out the sodas as well.

“Thanks, Frank,” Junior says, passing a crisp twenty over to him.

Frank snatches it up, opens his cash register, and counts back the change in nothing but quarters. “Let me know if you need anything,” he says, his

wrinkled eyes shifting between us. “Refills, more tokens...” he leans closer to Junior, “*mood music*.”

“I’ll let you know.” Junior gestures for me to follow him. “Come on.”

I grab my plate and drink and we navigate through the sporadic minefield of tables and running children, all the way into the back where a lonely table for two sits off to the side in the quiet corner.

“Do you and your sister come here a lot?” I ask, taking the seat across from Junior.

“Not as often as we did growing up, but sometimes,” he says.

I pause. “You grew up here?”

Junior picks up his pizza, easily balancing the giant slice in one hand. “Yeah. Frank’s an old friend of my dad’s. We came here almost every weekend when we were kids.”

I try to imagine what Junior was like as a child. Hell, I can hardly remember what I was like as a child. I certainly didn’t get to spend my weekends at places like this.

“It’s nice,” I say, genuine. “I like it.”

“Wait until you try the pizza,” he says, chewing softly. “I’ve never had better — but you might have, I guess. You’re from New York, right?”

“I am.” I slide my plate a little closer. “Let’s give this a try...”

I pick up the enormous slice with both hands and fold the crust before taking a big bite of it. The cheese melts the instant it hits my tongue, mixing with a thick sauce and an even thicker pepperoni. My taste buds dance.

“Oh, wow,” I say, setting it down and covering my mouth. “That’s *good*.”

“Yes, it is.”

I swallow it down. “It kind of reminds me of this street vendor near the boarding school I used to go to.”

Junior takes a swig of his soda. “Boarding school?”

“The drop-off zone for absentee parents everywhere,” I say. “Cary Pierce wasn’t exactly around and my mom, well... she liked to enjoy herself.”

He hums with a nod.

“Could have been worse, I guess,” I add, keeping a light mood.

“Where is your mom now?” he asks.

Her face flashes in my memory, but only for a second. “She died a few years ago.”

So much for that light mood.

Junior’s face falls. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay,” I say. “Honestly, I didn’t really know her that well. I’ve kind of looked after myself my whole life, mostly.”

He stares at me for a moment, clearly dying to ask more questions, but he keeps it simple. “Do you miss it? New York, I mean?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “But it was either stay there without the ability to pay for it or come here to live with Dad.”

“Tough choice.”

“He promised me it’d be worth it. Not sure why that promise felt more legit than every other one he’s broken, but here I am.” I take another bite to avoid Junior’s inquisitive eyes, licking my lips to get as much of that delicious cheese flavor as I can. “But I kind of like it around here, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, everyone’s so nice in the Midwest.”

He shakes his head. “They just want in your pants.”

I laugh, nearly choking on my soda. “Well, I guess that explains it.”

“I mean... I don’t want to speak for everyone, *but...*” He scratches his cheek, smiling. “Once word gets out that all it takes to get you to go out on a date is *flashing you in a locker room*, they probably won’t be so nice anymore.”

My jaw drops. “Yeah, that and straight-up *blackmail*.”

“I did not *blackmail* you,” he says. I sit back, crossing my arms. “Okay, there might have been a *little* blackmail.”

I say nothing.

“Hey, the age-old trick and coffee, compliments, and condoms didn’t work. I had to improvise,” he says.

He fires another grin, this one sparking a wave of warmth from my head to my toes.

I wipe my lips with a napkin, strategically getting my damn smile out of my system before pulling it away.

“Okay.” Junior nudges his empty plate aside as he stands. “Come on.”

“Come on?” I ask.

“Come with me,” he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me along.

He takes me across the room into the Skee-ball corner and reaches into his pocket for some quarters.

“You can go first,” he says.

The coins clink loudly in the machine and it comes to life, rolling nearly a dozen balls down toward the front, all in a line.

I grab the first one and pause, feeling a sting of self-consciousness as Junior's eyes stay locked on me. My palms heat and I feel the sweat gathering on the heavy ball before I roll it hard down the aisle. It veers to the left and nets me a mere ten points.

I wince. "Oops."

Junior smiles. "Try again."

After a few rolls, I get the hang of it and the feeling of Junior's eyes on me doesn't bother me as much. Goose bumps prickle on my neck, lulling me into an even warmer security blanket, but I can't lose focus now. I have to remember who he is and the driving motivation for why he even brought me out here.

He wants to fuck me.

After a few rounds, we have a line of tickets over four times his height.

"And what exactly does this win me?" I ask him.

Junior gathers them up. "Let's go see."

We walk across the room to the prize counter, and Frank greets us with his permanent smile.

"Quite the haul tonight, Junior."

He feeds the tickets into a machine. I watch the numbers tick up at a fast pace, feeling Junior's gaze on me. I pretend like I don't, though.

"Looks like..." Frank turns to the prize wall and points toward a line of teddy bears. "One of those."

"She'll take one," Junior says, looking smug.

Frank pulls the bear off the wall and hands it to me. "For the lucky lady."

I chuckle and squeeze it in my hands. The fur is light brown and incredibly soft, far higher in quality than I would have expected at a place like this. It might just make a decent pillow or cuddle companion. "Thank you," I say.

Frank nods and excuses himself to go help another customer nearby.

"Do you like it?" Junior asks.

I shrug and hug it against my chest. "It's not bad, but I bet every girl you bring here leaves with a teddy bear."

"Them? No." He points through the glass countertop at the cheap prizes on display. "They get pencil erasers and friendship bracelets."

"Oof!" I chuckle. "*Harsh*. Something tells me second dates aren't that common for the great Junior Morgan."

"How'd you guess?" he jokes. "Actually, first dates aren't that common,

either.”

“Why not?”

He shrugs. “Most girls aren’t worth the trouble.”

I recognize the obvious line, but I play into it, anyway. “So I’m worth the trouble?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

His eyes go softer as he leans closer, licking his lips and gazing down at me. “I just know.”

I hold back the scoff.

Junior squeezes the ear on the teddy bear with playful fingers. “Wanna get out of here?”

A shiver rolls down my spine. I hesitate as it reaches my core and stays there.

Yes. Emphatically, yes, I do want to get out of here, but I don’t want to tell him that. I don’t want to tell him that rolling a damn ball down a lane toward plastic holes was the most fun I’ve had in forever, or that just looking into his eyes makes me want to bend over for him.

He’s a player, and he’s not just playing football. Everything he’s done tonight has been designed for one thing and one thing only.

I can’t exactly let him get away with it, can I?

“Sure,” I say, smiling softly. “Let’s get out of here.”

CHAPTER 9



JUNIOR

*A*s I drive Alyssa back to campus, I have trouble keeping my eyes on the road.

She's just so... *stunning*.

I'm not sure why. Maybe it's the way her blue eyes sparkle beneath the street lamps as they pass over us or how her hair shines like gold if you look at it just right. It could even be the adorable way she clutches that teddy bear — as if it's the first one she's ever owned.

"Can you drop me off at my car?" she asks, breaking the long silence. "I'm parked in E lot. Near the quad."

I navigate through the center of campus, avoiding groups of jaywalkers shuffling across the streets. E lot is the largest lot on campus, meaning there will be plenty of witnesses around, which doesn't bode well for me getting Alyssa into the back seat. But that won't stop me from trying.

Perhaps Alyssa Pierce has a bit of a voyeuristic streak in her.

Fingers crossed.

Alyssa points out the window ahead. "The blue car," she says.

I spot it at the back of the lot, surrounded by nothing but empty spaces. Excellent.

I park. I turn off the engine, but I keep the internal lights running. When I look toward her, I find her already turned in her seat to face me. Her eyes shine with nervous excitement.

I feel it, too.

"This was fun," Alyssa says. "Thanks, Junior."

"Yeah, it was." I nod. "I'd be up for doing it again sometime, if you are."

Her face falls but her lips curl, an obvious yes. "Maybe," she says instead.

As she glances up again, her eyes twitch once toward the back seat.

She wants it.

“You know, it’s still early...” I hint. “How about we sit in the back and talk for a while?”

“Right.” She snorts. “*Talk.*”

“Talk.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“You, obviously.”

“Not you?” she asks.

“I’m not nearly as interesting.”

“And I’m not as interesting as you think, either.”

“Fine, we won’t talk,” I say, taking the risk. “How about we sit in the back and stare at each other until we get bored?”

Alyssa bites her bottom lip, showing some sweet hesitation. Her dimples. Her pointed chin. Her thick eyelashes and colorful irises. Truthfully, I could stare at her all night and never get bored.

She’s gorgeous.

Her voice quivers. “All right,” she says.

Ladies first. I sit still and watch her go, shifting from her seat into the back, leaving the teddy bear behind. I follow behind her, settling onto the pillows beside her as she gazes around.

Alyssa chuckles. “Wow.”

“What?” I ask.

She bounces on a pillow. She taps the soft floor. “Okay, this is more comfortable than I thought it’d be.”

“Of course.” I laugh. “The ladies get only the best out of me.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, what else you got for me, *just Junior?*”

She really fucking wants it.

“Come here and I’ll show you,” I whisper.

Alyssa doesn’t move at first. Her gaze gently scans mine for a few moments before she finally shifts closer. She takes a few trembling breaths, her chest rising and falling. She presses her lips together, wetting them.

I’ve got her.

She’s mine.

I reach out with one hand, wondering how she’ll react. I touch her face,

softly crawling my fingers up her cheek, burying them behind her ear. She inhales sharply through her mouth, and I tremble at the brief sight of just half an inch of her pink tongue hidden inside.

I take it slow. As badly as I want to crush our mouths together, I wait. I prolong. *I suffer*. I brush my lips against the edge of her cheek, tempting her to steal a kiss first.

They always do.

Warm breath passes between us. Any second now, she'll cave. She'll kiss me. Only then will I kiss her back. Then, she'll be—

Her hand touches my hip, firm and forceful. I flinch in surprise, her fingers mere inches away from my groin. Heat bleeds from her, spreading through my thigh like a chemical burn and I— *no*.

Don't kiss her.

It's hard. So very *hard*, but I fight the urge to give in. Alyssa's playing her own game here, that much is certain. But I'm no amateur.

And I have home field advantage.

"You're so beautiful."

A smile twists her mouth. "You say that to all of us, don't you?" she asks.

"I mean it." I really do. "I could get lost in you, Ally."

She blinks once, the doubt in her bright eyes shifting slightly in my favor. She's seen the effect she has on me already. I didn't get sacked at practice on purpose, for instance. She knows how *dangerous* she can be. How dangerous we can be together.

But I get the feeling she doesn't care about that, either.

Alyssa kisses me first. Her lips find mine in the dark. I feel them part for mine. I taste her sweet tongue emerging. I pull her closer, unable to hold back any longer. A moan passes over her breath as a deeper kiss takes over both of us.

God-fucking-dammit.

It's better than I thought it'd be.

It's so much... *more*.

There's no moment of awkward pause or hesitation. From the first breath, there's only passion and lust. Her lips, firm yet pliable. Her breath, quick yet deep. Her touch, finding its way closer to my belt.

I shudder. I smile, unable to help it. I risk everything all over again, reaching beneath her sweater to cup her breast. She sighs, her hand coming to rest on mine, urging me to squeeze harder as she rolls her head back. My lips

naturally fall to her neck. My mouth waters, blissfully intoxicated.

Alyssa shifts even closer to me, sliding her knee up to my side, fitting us together. My erection presses between her warm thighs. She grinds herself against it, and I let out an insatiable groan. I wrap an arm around her, resting my hand along the small of her back to pull her even closer. She quivers and shakes in my arms, her lips never leaving mine for more than a second.

“*Junior.*” Her voice, so small. She tugs at my belt. “Do you have a condom?”

Jackpot.

“Yeah,” I answer, kissing her even harder.

Alyssa pushes my jacket back over my shoulders. I let it slide off, tossing it away as she grabs my shirt. She eagerly pulls it over my head to get rid of it, her eyes laser-focusing on my Delta Xi tattoo as she exposes it.

Hell yeah.

I move to undress her, but she guides me down and straddles me, holding me down with both strong hands on my bare chest. She towers over me, grinding and leaning down to kiss my neck.

I sigh, relaxing against the mattress. If Alyssa Pierce wants to dominate me for a while, who am I to resist? She travels down my chest, peeking up at me with those perfect eyes, licking her lips as she tugs at my jeans. Laughter strikes me down as happy visions of her head bobbing fill my head.

“*Damn, girl.*” I chuckle, eagerly kicking off my shoes.

Alyssa pulls my jeans down, sliding them all the way to my ankles, hooking my boxers, too.

“Close your eyes,” she says, her voice full of lust.

Aw, she’s shy. That’s all right.

I close my eyes, completely naked, as she moves over me. Her lips crash down on mine and I cup her ass. She wiggles free, sliding downward. I wait patiently, jonesing for the moment when her warm kisses grace my throbbing

The van door slides open. My heart stops.

“What—”

Alyssa yanks the blanket out from under me.

“Wait—!”

I lunge for her, but she easily slips free and steps outside into the lot... along with the rest of my clothes.

“What the hell, Ally?”

“What kind of girl do you think I am?!”

She lurches backward, baiting me to follow her outside. I stay back in the van instead, struggling to process the situation with all of my blood still throbbing through my dick.

“I... don’t understand the question,” I say.

“Did you think I was *easy*?” she asks, shouting. “That I’d get down on my knees after a little bit of *Skee-ball*? That I’d suddenly *forget* how much of a narcissistic, ego-maniacal *jackass* you are?”

She takes several steps toward the... very crowded quad.

“Ally, what are you doing?” I ask.

“Something I’m honestly surprised no one on has ever done to you before, *just Junior*.”

“Give me back my clothes!”

“Come and get ‘em!”

“Yeah, no. Whatever. I don’t need them.” I smirk. “I’ll just drive home naked.”

Alyssa raises her hand... and jingles my keys.

I spin around, glancing back to confirm that my keys are still in the ignition where I left them.

They’re gone.

She took them. When the fuck did she do that? That’s... impressive, if not *infuriating*.

“Ally, come back,” I say.

She pretends to consider it. “Nope.”

“Alyssa.”

“*Junior*.”

“*Ally!*” I gesture to the blue sedan beside me. “You’re just going to leave your car here?”

She twists back around to grin at me. “That’s not my car.” She tosses her hood up. “Goodnight, Junior Morgan.”

My chest sinks as she leaves me with nothing to cover myself with other than a few crappy pillows.

Well, shit.

Alyssa reaches the center of the quad and drops my clothes on the ground, along with the blanket and my car keys. She abandons them, drawing a few odd looks from Northies scattered about on the brightly lit grass.

I heave a sigh and grab the nearest pillow before stepping outside the van.

I underestimated Alyssa Pierce. I've never been above admitting when I'm wrong. It doesn't happen often, but I know when to bite that bullet. Tonight is definitely one of those times.

You got me, Ally.

The giggles start before I even reach the grass. Fingers point, girls cackle, and guys whistle at me. I throw on my sincerest grin, owning every step of my magnificent failure before bending over to retrieve my things.

"Lookin' good, Morgan!"

"Thanks!" I say.

I guess that's it. It was fun while it lasted, and I mean that. Unfortunately, this little date with Alyssa was the most fun I've had with a girl in a long time, but in the end, she's right.

I *am* a jackass.

CHAPTER 10



JUNIOR

I park the van in the driveway of my house on the corner of Shanice Street, or Shanty Row, as it's affectionately known by Chicago North students. It's not the nicest neighborhood in town, but it has been home to me and Ty since we moved out of the Alpha Delta Xi house. The rent is cheap, the parties are legendary, and no one would look twice at the dejected quarterback licking his wounds from the driver's seat of a converted sex machine.

Walk it off, jackass.

I force myself to get out of the van, putting one foot in front of the other and shaking this feeling out of my gut.

I feel... wrong.

Off.

Twisted in a way I've never felt before.

I think I really liked her.

Oh, well.

I fish into my pocket for my house keys, but the door opens wide before I reach it.

Ty pokes his head out and cocks it to the side. "Welcome home," he says, his mouth raised with a smirk.

"Hey," I mutter, not wanting to say anything more.

Ty blocks my way inside. "Date over already?"

I release a grunt as I step forward, an obvious sign for him to get out of my way.

He doesn't budge.

"It's early," he says.

“Yeah.”

“And you’re alone.”

I exhale hard. “Yeah.”

Ty squints. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Then, do you want to talk about *this*?”

He holds up his phone, and I stop cold. It’s a video of me strolling through the quad with nothing but a pillow to cover myself with, surrounded by laughter and... other phones. The entire spectacle was most likely caught by every angle possible.

Fuck.

“The date didn’t go as planned,” I say.

Ty snorts. “You think?”

He lets me pass. I walk into the house and he follows, but he keeps a respectable distance behind me as I charge through the living room toward the hallway.

I turn right, entering my bedroom.

“So, who was the girl?” he asks.

“Some townie,” I lie through my teeth.

“Named?”

“Already forgot.” I glance back, realizing that one of those cameras may have caught Alyssa. My stomach clenches. “You couldn’t see her on the video?”

“Nah. She’s in the background, but her hood is up,” Ty answers, swiping through the footage again and chuckling. “Seems hot, though.”

I look away from the sounds of laughter and applause blasting through his phone’s speakers.

Looking good, Morgan!

“Whatever.” I clear my throat. “All over with now.”

Ty pockets his phone, reading the room. “So, I was just on my way out, but I can cancel. You wanna hang?”

“No,” I say, waving a hand. “You go.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. One of us should get some tonight.”

He nods in agreement. “All right, then.” He steps back from my doorway, then pauses with a gesture toward my hand. “Hey, what’s that about?”

I look down. The teddy bear I won Alyssa at the arcade rests in my palm,

clenched in my fingers. I must have brought it inside with me. Don't remember doing that.

"Nothing," I say, tossing it into the bin next to my desk. "It's just trash."

Ty doesn't reply to that. He nods and steps back into the hall. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah. Have fun, bud."

"Oh, I will."

He disappears from the doorway, his stride creaking the old floor on his path to the door. It opens and closes. A few moments later, I hear his car start on the street outside my window.

I sit still, listening and waiting for... nothing at all.

I glance at the bear in my trash can. I let the night replay once again in my mind. Picking her up in the auditorium. Walking with her across campus. The arcade. Kissing her. Kissing her some more. Then... *nothing at all*.

That's what I'll get if I dwell on this any longer. Nothing.

I give myself one more minute, and then I'm over it.

I am over Alyssa Pierce.

I frown at that damn teddy bear again.

Totally over her.

CHAPTER 11



JUNIOR

I wake up early to hit the gym at the athletic center on campus. My sleep was fairly restless, but a cold shower and a stiff drink knocked me out for a few hours. A quick run on the treadmill should dislodge that deep frustration in my gut for a while — at least long enough for me to forget Alyssa Pierce ever existed.

The gym is deserted, as it usually is this early in the morning. I push my earbuds in and crank some music, setting a fast pace on the treadmill before hopping on the belt and leaving my troubles behind.

After a few minutes of forgetting Alyssa Pierce, I feel someone step onto the treadmill next to mine. I give a quick glance over from the corner of my eye and... *dammit*.

It's Alyssa Pierce.

I yank my buds out. "What are you doing here?" I ask, nearly stumbling.

She reaches behind her and grips her ankle, pulling it back to give her thighs a deep stretch. "This gym is nicer than the one at the rec center," she says.

"This gym is for athletes *only*."

"And my father is the football coach." She shrugs, stretching her other leg. "I asked if I could work out here instead and he said yes."

"Go away."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want you around here."

Alyssa laughs. "Oh, *please*. You can't possibly be mad about last night."

"Actually, yes. I am."

"Get over it." She turns her treadmill on, setting it to a brisk walking pace

while she warms up.

Of course, my eyes instantly fall to her tits, pressed tightly against her beneath a black sports bra. They bounce with every step she takes, each jiggle sending fireworks down to my groin.

Forget it, buddy.

She ain't worth it.

I push my earbuds back in and resume my run, targeting a speed a little faster than my usual gait, trying to ignore the fact that Alyssa Pierce is running beside me in skin-tight leggings.

She increases her speed, easily matching mine. It pisses me off. A lot. There's no way in hell I'm going to let her outrun me. Not here. Not in *my* gym.

I fill my lungs and knock the speed up a notch, tapping into my stamina to keep me going. It's a fast but easy stride, something I can maintain long enough to prove my point.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her tap the dash. She runs faster. *Faster?*

Are you fucking kidding me?

She can't keep up with this pace for very long. No way. Soon, her little girly legs will slow her down. She's not nearly as fit as I am.

My chest heaves. A slow burn builds in my chest, telling me to slow down before I hurt myself, but...

Nah.

I glance over at Alyssa. She's barely broken a sweat.

Oh, come on!

I tap the speed up a little higher. She does, too.

"What's wrong, *Junior?*" She chuckles, her words labored between thick breaths. "Having trouble?"

I grunt.

"Maybe you should slow down," she says.

"I'm— fine."

"Oh, yeah—?"

"Yeah!" I glance at her bouncing chest. "You should— take it— easy."

"I'm good—" She heaves harder. "I could do this—" A stumble, but she smooths it out. "All day."

I keep running. She does, too.

Fuck.

I can't keep this up. If I don't stop, I could injure myself. If I injure myself, I can't play football. If I can't play football, then I'm nothing. I'm no one.

I will not ruin my life over a stupid girl.

I push the stop button and hop off the treadmill. My legs turn to jelly beneath me, but I force myself to stay upright as I plow toward the locker rooms on the opposite side. The last thing I want is to fall over and humiliate myself in front of her. Again.

I glance back at her. She's still running, of course. Lady has to make her point, I guess. Whatever. Don't care.

My eyes move on their own, taking in every curve of her *perfect fucking body*. Blood that should fuel my pounding heart fires downward. Images of her lying spread eagle in my van flash in my mind. Her taste emerges on my tongue; a flavor that no amount of vodka could get rid of last night.

I've never wanted to hate-fuck a girl so badly in my entire life.

I lean over the water fountain by the locker rooms and shoot the water on my face to drown myself. It's ice cold, and it hurts, but I don't care. I let it trail through my hair and bleed into my eyes.

When I stand up, there she is.

"Hey," Alyssa says, leaning against the wall beside the water fountain.

"Nope."

I twist away, headed straight for the men's locker room.

She latches onto my arm, tugging me with her instead. My weak, jelly-filled legs follow her as she shoves me through the door to the ladies locker room.

"Alyssa, what are you doing?"

She closes the door behind us and blocks me from leaving. "I wanted to talk to you and it's safer in here where no one will see it," she says.

"Oh, heaven forbid someone sees us talking," I say. "You didn't seem to have an issue with anyone seeing you stealing my clothes last night."

"You had it coming."

"*I had it coming?*"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Junior, you openly admitted that the only reason you asked me out in the first place was to sleep with me."

"Right. I was *honest* with you from the start," I say. "Some girls might

consider that *a good thing*.”

“Maybe, but—”

“You know, for a second there, I thought you were having a good time.”

“For a second there, I was.” She takes a breath. “Junior, I grew up with a dad who collected women like trading cards. Obviously, I don’t appreciate being treated that way and I don’t put up with it. But to each their own. If you want to keep doing what you’re doing, I’m not here to stop you or judge you. I just ask that you pivot your intentions elsewhere from now on.”

“No problem, lady,” I say, barely keeping my calm. “Honestly, I think you might be more trouble than you’re worth, anyway. I’ve lost interest.”

She twitches. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. Girls like you are too high strung to let loose the way I like.”

It’s ballsy, and stupid, but I’m getting hard just watching the subtle anger boiling the oceans in her eyes.

“Fine.” She clears her throat. “I guess we’re cool, then.”

“*Totally cool*.” I grip the door handle behind her. “Excuse me.”

She slides over a little, but not far enough for me to open the door to leave. I jerk it open, smacking her ass with it before stepping back out into the gym.

“Hey, Junior!”

I freeze in my tracks. Cary Pierce is heading toward me. Cary Pierce knows my name.

Nope. Still not used to that yet.

“Hey, Coach!”

He stops in front of me. “Hitting the gym early,” he says. “I like that.”

“Yeah, I—”

“Grab a towel and dry off,” he interrupts. “Then meet me in my office. We need to talk.”

Oh, shit.

“Sure, no problem,” I say. “I’ll be right there.”

He passes me by, heading down the hall toward the offices.

I glance at the ladies’ room door behind me. Did someone see us last night? I thought the arcade would be far enough away from Chicago North that prying eyes wouldn’t be a problem. Was I wrong? Or did someone notice us in the quad before we even left... you know, because I had the brilliant idea of shouting her name?

Fuck.

I grab a towel, dabbing my sweat off as I make my way into the hallway. Is this it? Am I finished? Coach only had three rules, and I broke the most important one.

Stay away from my daughter.

It was the *easiest* one, too, and I couldn't even do that because my dick runs the entire Junior Morgan Show. I didn't care about anything last night other than getting her in the back of my van, as she so eloquently pointed out only a few minutes ago.

I linger a few feet away from Coach's office doorway before gathering my courage.

"Come on in, Junior," he tells me from behind his desk. "Close the door behind you."

I obey, acting casual. "What's up, Coach?" I ask.

He points at the chair in front of his desk.

"Junior, we need to talk about your future here."

"My future?" I ask as I sit down.

"I don't need to ask you where you see yourself in five years because I'm pretty sure I already know the answer to that," he says. "You want to go pro, right?"

"Absolutely," I say without hesitation.

"Then you need to plan *now*," he continues. "You don't want something completely avoidable to impede that. I took the liberty of speaking to your academic advisor and she had a few concerns about your grades."

"Oh. Yeah..." I wince, but I breathe a little easier. Somehow, I doubt Alyssa moaning in my van is about to come up in this conversation. "Studying isn't really my strongest area."

"It wasn't mine, either. But if your grades get any worse, they're going to put you on academic probation. You don't want that during your senior year."

"No." I clear my throat. "No, I don't."

"Senior year means scouts. And drafts," he says, his eyes soft. "And, honestly, out of all the players on the team, you have the best shot of them to go all the way."

Whoa.

Cary Pierce thinks I can go pro. He said it to my face.

"That's... *thank you.*"

He smiles. "You and I come from the same world. Dirt poor. Not a lot of

opportunities. But that doesn't define who you are. I saw how wide your eyes got the other night at my house. I'm guessing you've never been in a place that big before, right?"

I nod.

"Take it from me, Junior — you don't want unnecessary complications weighing you down. When I was about your age, I screwed up big. I got horrible grades, I wasn't taking care of myself, and I..." He pauses, shaking his head. "I knocked up a girl I barely knew. I got Alyssa from that — and she's great — but her existence made achieving my dreams a whole lot harder."

I feel a twist in my gut; a sharp sympathy pain for her. "Right," I say.

He taps his fist on the edge of his desk. "Straighten up. Get focused. Hire a tutor to bring those grades up if you have to. And *tonight*," he grins, "I'm going to show you off at that press event."

My eyes grow wide. "Really?"

"This season, we get their attention," he says. "Next season, we keep it. By then, every college football fan in the country will know your name and the scouts will be lined up at your door."

Holy shit.

"Thank you, Coach."

"Now, get out of here," he says, smiling. "Go to class or something."

"I will," I say as I stumble out of his office.

It's all happening.

I don't know what cosmic force decided I was worth bending the rules for, but I suddenly feel the need to get down on my knees for it. With Cary Pierce as my coach, backing me up, and pointing the spotlight in my direction, there's no way I won't get everything I've always wanted. I'll get the contracts and the fame and the women. Everything beyond my wildest dreams will be in the palm of my hand.

Straighten up. Get focused. Forget about distractions.

Distractions like Alyssa Pierce.

CHAPTER 12



ALYSSA

“*T*ake me with you.”

I scan the script, blinking repeatedly as I try to find the words. “Grant, that’s not your line.”

He pulls the book away from my face. “I’m talking about the shindig at your house tonight.”

“It’s not a *shindig*.” I glance around the talkative classroom. The professor broke us off into pairs to memorize a three-page scene and Grant and I have to perform ours first... in twenty minutes. “It’s an *opportunity* for my dad to parade me around in front of the cameras to better his image.”

“But the whole team will be there, right?”

“Most of them, probably. Why?”

“Uh, strapping young men in *suits*? Take me with you.”

“You don’t want to go, Grant. Believe me.”

He furrows his brow. “What’s gotten into you today? You don’t seem like your usual bright and fluffy self.”

I push aside the memories from earlier. “I just have a bug up my ass. Don’t worry about it.”

“Is this bug named Junior Morgan?”

“*Shh.*”

“Sorry. Is this bug named Munior Jordan?”

Grant grins.

I glare.

“What’d he do?” he asks, pressing onward.

I sigh. “He said some shit that kinda ticked me off this morning, that’s all.”

A sly wink. “This morning, eh?”

“I ran into him at the gym,” I say before he implodes. “We didn’t spend the night together if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“What happened on your date?”

I cringe. “Long story.”

“Come on. You’ve gotta give me *something*. What’d he say?”

The kind of shit that makes me a hypocrite.

One moment, I’m telling him to shift his focus to other women. The next, I’m feeling dejected when he actually does.

I gesture with the script. “We should really memorize this scene.”

“Okay, fine. But... just one more question.” His face hardens. “Do I need to kick his ass?”

I laugh.

“Because I can,” he adds, still serious. “And I will.”

“No ass-kicking needed. I can handle it. But thank you,” I say.

“Good.” He waits a moment, then... “But seriously, can I *please* be your plus one tonight? Ty will be there.”

I chuckle at his obvious crush. “Fine. Just stay out of the way. And don’t break anything.”

He gives a celebratory fist-pump. “Yes!”

“And dress up. It’s a black-tie kind of thing.”

He frowns. “What are you going to wear?”

“I thought about going shopping after class...” His eyes grow wide and I grin. “You are more than welcome to join me.”

One last happy fist-pump later and we’re back into the scene, struggling to memorize it with our time now cut in half.



Junior is going to flip.

I’m not sure why the thought entered my head.

I’m not even sure why I bought the dress in the first place.

It’s a little out of my style preference — and way out of my price range — but my immediate thought went straight to what Junior Morgan’s reaction will be when he sees me in it. It’s sleek and black with a lone red stripe down the side that travels over my curves perfectly.

However, the reason is more than obvious, no matter how dumb I try to play.

Sweet revenge.

Junior told me he wasn't interested in me anymore. I'm more trouble than I'm worth, he said. Getting brushed aside by men shouldn't be such a shock to me anymore, but for some reason, coming from Junior Morgan, it stung. It cut deep — even deeper than feeling like my father's accessory.

"This is my girl, Alyssa!" he announces. "Everything I've done, I've done it for this girl right here!"

There are a series of *awws* from the news crews and their voices echo through the foyer as cameras flash in our direction, making me dizzy. I'd probably tumble down these stairs if it weren't for his arm wrapped around my shoulders.

The reporters fire off a series of questions at me, but my father doesn't give me a chance to reply to any of them. He answers for me with his loud voice, singing my praises while getting the details very wrong.

I'm not a singer. I'm an actress.

I'm not a sophomore. I'm a junior.

But none of that really matters. Details mean nothing in the end. Just stand and smile. Hug him as if he's a giant, protective teddy bear because that's what he wants me to do. Do that, and he'll let me have everything I want.

Well, almost everything.

Finally, he releases me and waves for the camera crews to follow him. "Come on back and meet the team. There are some fantastic young athletes here that I'm *dying* to introduce the world to."

I grip the railing, staying put and smiling as I wave them goodbye like a pretty little princess.

They follow my father through the house, and I wonder how I photographed in the dress. Hopefully, they couldn't notice that I'm not wearing underwear. The darn thing was too tight to wear them comfortably.

"You look *great*. Relax."

Grant emerges from his hiding spot upstairs and offers me a wide grin.

"He's definitely going to cream his boxers," he says.

"Who?" I ask.

"Oh, don't play dumb," he snips. "I think we *both* know who you bought that dress for. It certainly wasn't *moi*."

I roll my eyes, but I don't bother trying to deny it. "I want to have the last word, that's all..."

"Honey, I think he's going to be *last wording* to this dress three times a day for the next month..." Grant makes a subtle jerking motion with his fist and I laugh. "Consider your mission accomplished."

"Okay, then."

He presents his arm for me to take, looking rather dapper in his rented suit. "Shall we? I just have to get my eyes on these fantastic young athletes."

I latch on to Grant's arm. We walk through the house together into the backyard. My father has arranged several members of the football team, Junior included, in the center garden. Cameras surround them on all sides, lights flashing as reporters shout questions.

"I think Ty looked at me," Grant whispers in my ear, his voice full of excitement. I chuckle and find Ty standing next to Junior, but there's no way to confirm Grant's suspicions. I won't kill the wind in his sails, either.

I lock eyes with Junior, who actually is full-on staring at me.

"This one here—" my father shouts, shaking Junior's shoulders, "is Junior Morgan. Now, you don't have to write this one down because I *guarantee* after Saturday's game, you'll have no problems remembering it."

Cameras flash again. Reporters shout questions at him. Cary Pierce nudges his ribs, smiling with pride.

But Junior Morgan's eyes never stray far from my body.

Mission accomplished.

CHAPTER 13



JUNIOR

O kay.

Being *not interested* in Alyssa Pierce is a hell of a lot harder than I thought it would be.

That *dress*. That *body*. Those *eyes*. There isn't a single part of her I wouldn't kill to touch or kiss or completely *destroy*.

"Junior?"

Coach shakes my shoulders again, snapping me out of the extreme sexual fantasy taking over my mind... starring his daughter.

I throw on a smile and wave, forcing myself to look away from that black dress hugging every curve of her body.

I saw the way she looked at me. I saw that subtle twitch of her lips — like she's starving for food and just saw a defenseless animal walk right into her trap. She wanted me to look at her, to notice her, to *want* her.

There's a word for this and I'm more than happy to enlist.

War.

I field a few questions and take several more photos with the coach and the team, all the while glancing at her in the crowd. Her face lights up every time we make eye contact. Blush races to her cheeks and I tingle with adrenaline.

But why?

Why is she doing this now?

This morning...

I must have struck a serious nerve with what I said. Why else would she put in this much effort to entice me? To *prove* that I still want her? This is classic cat and mouse. She's dangling herself in front of me, toying with my

hunter instincts just to whip it away at the last second and laugh at me.

Not tonight, Alyssa Pierce.

This is my game you're playing.

And she really needs to be taught a lesson.

The coach calls a few other players forward, cycling us out to give everyone a chance to shine. I take a bow and make my escape, sneaking off into the crowd. I weave through the cameras and microphones to get closer to Alyssa. It's risky, but necessary. A text would suffice, but I want to see her reaction myself.

Alyssa watches me approach from the corner of her eye. She doesn't move. She doesn't speak. She stands still, looking forward, pretending to ignore me.

I lean in close. I discreetly touch her arm, rolling my fingers around the exposed flesh of her elbow. "Pool house. Now," I whisper in her ear.

She doesn't even flinch as I release her, but her chest rises sharply with the sudden intake of breath.

Good.

I walk away, cutting a quiet path across the lawn toward the pool house. I go carefully, waiting for the camera flashes to blind Coach before beelining for the door on the far side.

It's unlocked. I hover in the darkness, waiting for my vision to adjust. In the shadows, I scan the furniture inside. A few couches. A kitchenette. A table with several chairs. I lean against the table, gripping the edge behind me as I wait, counting my breaths until I see her curvy shadow on the walkway outside.

Alyssa closes the door softly behind her. Then, she pauses as I did, blinking her big eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Words rush my tongue, but I bite it instead. Words to scold. Words to punish. I'm not the type of man you mess with. I'm the type who takes what he wants. She shouldn't be such a tease or else...

Damn. I'm kind of creepy.

I shake it off, inhaling to speak.

Holy shit, she's gorgeous.

My tongue turns to mush in my mouth. I forget everything. All the words melt away. I wanted her to bend to my will, but now all I want to do is fall to my knees and *worship her*.

"Junior." She steps forward, fearless. "I'm up here."

I grab her arm and pull her closer to me. Alyssa inhales sharply, stunned by my sudden movement, but she does nothing to distance herself from me. I cup her face in one hand, running my thumb over her bottom lip. She trembles beneath my touch. My tongue erupts, just begging to taste her again. Again, I bite down. Now would be the time to say it. To put her in her place. To—

Dude, stop being creepy and just kiss her.

I kiss her. She kisses me back. Her arms curl around me as I take hold of her hips. I spin her around to set her on the table behind me. She hops onto it, hiking up her skirt as she wraps her legs around my waist, holding us together with perfectly toned thighs.

“Admit it,” I say. “You wore that dress to get my attention.”

She chuckles. “I wore this dress because it makes me look *good*. Don’t be so self-centered.”

I bite her neck. She flinches at the sudden pain, but melts even harder against me. Her skin tastes sugary sweet and my mouth waters, eager to know what she tastes like elsewhere.

I reach for my belt to free the throbbing monster inside. She grips my wrists to slow me down.

“Junior, stop.”

“Ally...”

“A quickie in the pool house might be enough for other girls,” she says, holding my eyes. “I’m an *all night long* kind of lady and if your fucking stamina is anything like your running stamina... you could use a little more training first.”

Her words crack like a damn whip, but I tingle at the pleasure it brings. “I assure you, I can rock you until dawn, Ally.”

“I have my doubts.”

She lowers her legs as she presses against my chest, forcing me to take a very difficult step back.

I growl in frustration.

She chuckles, delighted by it. “You’re used to these girls just *opening* themselves to you anytime you want, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I say. It’s true.

“Then, you don’t know what it’s like for them to stop you like I have, do you?”

I don’t answer. Of course I don’t.

She extends her palm, her eyes shining with devious light. "Give me your hand."

I hesitate, unsure what her touch on my skin will do to me, but I obey, utterly bewitched by her.

Alyssa guides my hand. She sets it against her knee. I sigh, feeling her body heat against my palm. She trails it up her thigh, inching closer to her slit, and halts it just before it reaches her core.

"Stop," she says, sensing my need to keep going. "You can just feel it, can't you? My heat *bleeding* against your skin..."

I lick my lips, starving. "Yes."

She spreads her legs a little wider, but keeps my hand still against her inner thigh.

"How wet do you think I am right now?" she asks, her voice seductive as fire. "How *tight*?" I can't answer. I can barely even breathe. "What do you think I feel like? Smell like? Taste like?"

"Heaven."

She laughs. "Maybe you're right."

My breath catches in my throat as she slips her hand beneath the skirt of her dress. Her pink folds show in the darkness. She's not even wearing panties.

Fuck me.

A slow sigh escapes her lips as she pushes a single finger inside of her. I chew on my bottom lip, my palm shaking against her thigh as she pulls her hand away, her knuckles glistening.

Alyssa sticks her finger in her mouth. "Mmm," she hums, tasting herself. She sucks it clean. "*Like warm milk and honey—*"

I move my hand closer, unable to stop myself, but she snatches it and stops me.

"This is *torture*," I say.

"It's *incentive*." With a jerk, she pushes my hand away and hops off the table, pushing her dress back down. "My pussy is a loser-free zone, Junior. Win the game on Saturday and you just might qualify for admission."

She steps around me and walks to the door.

Holy hell.

I roll my hands into fists, frustrated with sin. "I'm going to bury my face in your pussy until you're screaming my name, Alyssa Pierce."

She pauses in the doorway. As she gazes over her shoulder at me, she

licks her lips one more time. “Won’t that be fun?” she says. “Bye, Junior.”

“Bye, Ally.”

She exits, leaving the door open wide.

I drop my head and stare at my bulging junk.

Win the game on Saturday. Qualify for admission.

Okay, then.

I will.

CHAPTER 14



ALYSSA

Deep breaths.
Deeper breaths.

Grant and I are up next to audition. Nervous butterflies aren't usually part of my pre-stage routine, but I can't shake them this time. It might have something to do with Mr. Young's endless supply of doubt and misery that he's always so insistent on bludgeoning me with. Or I'm just hungry. I haven't been able to eat anything all day because of how nervous I am.

Or perhaps it has something to do with Junior Morgan.

Speaking of things I can't shake off.

I've been wanted before. I've been liked. Maybe even loved. But no one's ever *desired* me like he does. And when his hands are on me — dammit, I think I *desire* him, too.

When I'm around him, I feel like a glass of water out in the desert or a blanket on a snowy mountain. I'm not just something he needs for convenience or luxury. No, if he doesn't get me, *he'll die*. That's how badly he wants me.

And when his hands on are me — dammit, I think I want him, too.

He excites me in ways I haven't felt in a long time. Possibly ever.

Grant nudges my elbow from the seat beside me. "So, you gonna tell me about it?" he asks.

I keep my voice down to avoid interrupting the other act on stage. Oh, and they're also *really freaking good*. Not that I wasn't nervous enough already...

"Tell you about what?" I ask.

"About the two minutes and forty-three seconds you spent alone with

Junior Morgan in the pool house last night.”

“Okay, you have got to stop being so *weird*.”

“*Come on*. What happened in there? I require details.”

My lips curl on their own. “We talked.”

“With your genitals?”

I silently smack his arm. “No.” His eyes burrow into mine, reading me for every lie. “Well, kind of.”

“*I knew it*.”

“Let’s just say the *player* and I have come to an *understanding*,” I say.

“Like?”

“Like if the team wins the game tomorrow, he and I can *talk* some more.”

“With your genitals?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

“Well, well, well...” He grins with pride. “Sounds like Cary Pierce isn’t the only new coach around here. I’m impressed.”

“I don’t want to be another girl he bangs and forgets about,” I say. “I have more self-respect than that.”

“Sure.”

“If he wants me, then he’ll show me that same respect and earn it on my terms.”

“Oh, you don’t have to justify it to me, honey. I’m all for it. You just have to worry about what Daddy thinks of it.”

“What Daddy doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“That’s always been my motto,” he jokes.

“Which is why I trust you to keep this *quiet*.”

Grant presents his hands in surrender. “I swear on my life, Alyssa. If this gets out, it won’t come from me.”

“Thank you.”

“*Next!*”

My heart stops as Mr. Young calls us out.

Grant takes my hand in a vise-like grip. “You ready?” he asks.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

I nod, quickly forcing every butterfly to wither and die in my stomach. “You ready?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, faking it with me.

We rise together.

“Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 15



JUNIOR

What am I doing here?
Why am I doing this?

The question repeats in my head until the words become meaningless. They beg for answers, but I don't have them.

What am I doing here? *Fuck if I know.*

Why am I doing this? *Beats me.*

But here I am.

I'm the idiot hiding on the balcony, silently staring down at the stage while Alyssa Pierce auditions for... I'm not really sure what play this is.

She's incredible.

"Do you see what you did, eh?!" Grant's voice carries throughout the auditorium. "You made a fool outta me."

"I'm sorry!" Alyssa cries out, her entire body bleeding with emotion. "I don't know how many times I can say it..."

My chest clenches. It's insane. I've seen this bit before. I know it's all fake, but the urge to rush onto that stage and save her still lingers in me.

What's that about? *I don't fucking know.*

Do I care? *Ask again later.*

I flinch as my phone vibrates in my pocket. Drifting back behind the curtain to make sure I remain unnoticed, I check it to find a new text from John.

WHERE ARE YOU?

I furrow my brow, but my confusion only lasts a second.

I have football practice today.

I have football practice... in three minutes.

My gut lurches. *Shit*. Coach is going to lose it. If I don't go right now, I'll spend the next hour running laps.

I lean back to leave, but I hear her voice again.

"I wish to God I didn't love you!"

The pain and anguish in those words draw me right back to my perfect view of the stage. Alyssa Pierce beneath the lights. Her chest rising and falling. Very real tears streaming down her face. But it's not real. She's just...

Incredible.

I linger in place until the audition is over.

I need to do more cardio, anyway.

CHAPTER 16



ALYSSA

“*W*e didn’t get it.”

Grant exhales patiently. “We don’t know that yet.”

I plop onto my bed, my gaze locked on the ceiling as I talk to him through my phone. “Yes, we do. Mr. Young didn’t say a word. Not one damn word!”

“I told you, he *always* does that.”

“Not one nod. Not even a smile. A sneer. I’d have taken a sneer!”

“Alyssa.”

“He just sat there with that dumbass expression of his and waved us off — like we were nothing.”

“Alyssa.”

“*Next!*” I mock with an arm flourish over my head. “I mean, who does that?!”

“Alyssa.”

“What?”

“*Relax,*” Grant says, his voice full of sincerity. “This is your first time auditioning for Young. Meanwhile, *I* have been through this *four times*. Trust me. The more stoic he is, the better your chances are.”

I sigh, still unconvinced. “Maybe we shouldn’t have gone so aggressive.”

“No,” he says. “We played it perfectly. You and I know it. Young knows it. Everyone in that auditorium knew it, too. Did you hear what they said after we stepped off the stage?”

I squint, trying to remember, but that hour of my life is a hazy blur. “No,” I say at length.

“*Exactly.* Pin-drop silence, babe. They didn’t know what hit them.”

“Or they’re all just great at staying in character.”

Grant exhales again, but this time not as patient as before.

"I know," I say, closing my eyes as a wretched feeling takes over. "I'm sorry. I know I'm just being stupid."

"You're not stupid," he says. "You just need a distraction. That's what I'm doing."

"What are you doing?"

"Going on a date."

I pique with interest. "Really? With who?"

"Ah-ah-ah," he says amid the shuffling of cloth. I must be on speakerphone. "My love life is a very closed book."

I scoff. "Says the man who insists on knowing every single detail of mine?"

He pauses. "You make an interesting point. However, I still can't say."

"Why not?"

"Because this suitor isn't... *out* yet. I cannot and will not do it for him."

"Respect," I say, letting it go.

"Thank you." Grant shuffles again, picking up the phone. "Just try not to worry about the audition, Alyssa."

"Find a distraction," I repeat.

"Precisely."

"I will try." I force a smile. "Go have fun."

"I always do."

I hang up, letting the phone slide off my cheek onto my pillow. With closed eyes, I take a breath, willing my mind to blank. Unfortunately, I can't seem to picture anything other than that damn audition. What if we did it all wrong? What if I didn't emote? What if? What if? *What if?*

"Distraction," I say to myself. "I need a distraction."

I grab my phone, ready to immerse myself within the endless scroll of social media. A little serotonin should provide a few minutes of distraction.

3 new tags.

Excellent.

I check them. Two are nothing, but the third one is from the Bearhawk Bulletin, the university newspaper. They've tagged me, along with my father, with an article detailing the team event the other night in our backyard. It starts with a photo of the two of us in the foyer downstairs, his large arm wrapped around my shoulders in a fatherly embrace.

Cary Pierce and daughter Alyssa, 19.

It's convincing enough, I'll give it that.

I swipe down. Fortunately, I disappear and the true focus of the article comes up. Four-time champion Cary Pierce, of course, but also a profile of the Bearhawks' major players.

Junior Morgan included.

I slam my thumb down, pausing the scroll. Junior, tall and smiling, his toned body wrapped in that suit. The quarterback destined to flourish under Cary Pierce's wing.

I'm going to bury my face in your pussy until you're screaming my name.

The phone nearly slips from my fingers as his voice echoes in my memory. I couldn't believe he said that. I still don't.

Hell, I can't believe *I* told him I'd fuck him if he won the game on Saturday. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but there's no way I can actually go through with that, right? As much as I'd like to, he's the quarterback and I'm the coach's daughter. Big no-no. I'd risk not only screwing up my life, but destroying Junior's athletic career as well.

But...

I assure you, I can rock you until dawn, Ally.

The way he says my name.

I switch the phone to my left hand. My right drifts down my body before I even realize I'm doing it.

This means nothing, I tell myself as I push my hand into my shorts.

It's just a distraction.

I spread my legs. I run my fingertips along my smooth lips, teasing myself as I look at Junior's photos again. With the team. By himself, posing for the camera in the backyard. Kissing me in the pool house. Pinning me against the table, his tongue caressing mine.

My clit is throbbing by the time I finally touch it. I release a gasp, remembering the feeling of his hand crawling along my thigh. The sin in his eyes. The lust on his breath. He wanted me so badly, he would have fallen to his knees for me right then if I had let him.

I close my eyes, picturing Junior with his head between my thighs. Kissing me. Licking me. Sucking me. Moaning and groaning as I grip his hair and gasp his name.

"You taste like heaven," he says.

"Junior," I whisper, alone in my bedroom.

I come softly, my body lurching on the thick bedsheets, but I keep my

grip on the phone. Junior, looking into the camera lens. Looking at *me* as I mewl in pent-up frustration.

I lie still, letting it roll throughout my body, until it passes.

“Junior,” I say again.

This means nothing.

CHAPTER 17



ALYSSA

I step into Talon Hall.

Mr. Young said the cast list would be posted outside of his office by eight o'clock this morning. It's seven-thirty now, but I've been up since five.

We're going to get it.

I round the corner toward his office.

Grant and I killed it yesterday. It's going to be— Junior?

I halt in the hallway.

He looks at me and smiles.

"Hey, Ally."

I blink, convinced it's just some sleep-deprived illusion, but no.

Junior Morgan is here, lingering outside of Young's office with a cup of coffee cart coffee in each hand.

You taste like heaven.

I swallow hard, willing myself to smother my fantasy from last night.

"Hey." I move forward with suspicion. "What are you doing here?"

Junior extends a coffee in my direction. "Black, as you like it."

I don't take it. "*What are you doing here?*" I ask again. "If someone sees you and tells my father—"

"Ally, this is the *theatre department*."

"So?"

"So no jock would be caught dead in here. We're safe."

I keep my brow raised high. "Then why are *you* here?"

"Moral support."

"What?"

He brushes the back of my hand with the coffee, forcing me to take it.
“Cast list gets posted at eight, right?”

“Who told you that?” I ask.

“The internet.”

“Why did you look that up?”

“So I could surprise you with coffee.”

“Why?”

“You’re very cranky in the morning. I’ll have to remember that.”

“Junior.”

He chuckles. “I just wanted to see your face when you got it,” he says, pushing off the wall. “I caught part one yesterday. Didn’t want to miss part two.”

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

He grins. “How did you guys make that slap look so *real*? Did you *actually* slap him?”

Blood drains from my face. “You watched the audition?”

“I was on the balcony. You didn’t know?”

“No.” I absently take a step closer. “Why were you there?”

“Because the audition was important to you and I wanted to support you.”

He takes a sip of his coffee, filling the silence while I stare at him, dumbfounded. “Why are you always so surprised when I do something thoughtful?”

“Because you’re Junior Morgan.”

He laughs. “Fair point.”

“*Good morning, Ms. Pierce.*”

I twitch at Mr. Young’s old, stern voice as he pops out of his office.

“Good morning, Mr. Young,” I say, spinning nervously to face him.

He slides out in front of his bulletin board and pins a paper to its center. “I think you’re going to be quite pleased,” he says, flashing me the first smile I’ve ever seen on him. “I certainly was.”

Without another word, Mr. Young ducks into his office and closes the door behind him with an audible lock. I guess he likes to disappear after posting a cast list. With how competitive we can be, I can’t really blame him.

“Well...” Junior bobs his chin toward the board. “Go on.”

This is it.

All the butterflies. All the sleepless hours left waiting to know. It all ends now; either with blissful happiness or crushing disappointment.

I step over to the bulletin board and look for my name.

Nora ... Alyssa Pierce

“*Holy shit,*” I breathe. “I got the lead.” I spin toward Junior. “I got the lead!”

He nods, seemingly unsurprised by it all. “I knew you would.”

“I got the lead.”

“I know.”

I grip his jacket with my free hand, using him to keep my balance. He doesn’t seem to mind at all.

“*Did he post it?!*”

Grant charges around the corner toward us, out of breath and sweating.

“Traffic sucks,” he spits. “Did I miss it?!”

I hop back, giving him room to see for himself.

Grant gasps so wide, his jaw practically detaches from his face.

“I got the lead!” he says.

I point to the next name down.

Grant squeals. “You got the lead!”

“We got the lead!”

We crush together in excitement. Grant squeezes me so hard I can barely breathe as we jump up and down.

I can’t believe it.

I really can’t.

When Grant finally releases me, I turn to look for Junior.

But he’s gone.

“Can you hold this?” I hand my coffee to Grant. “I’ll be right back.”

I leave him to squeal more to himself. Junior couldn’t have gotten far, and I want to... I’m not sure. Thank him? Maybe?

A hand latches onto my arm as I round the corner of the lobby. One soft pull and I’m in his arms. Junior guides us backward into a dark classroom, kicking the door closed behind us and pressing me against it.

“Congratulations, Ally,” he says before crushing his lips on mine.

Junior.

I lean into his kiss. It’s a sweet kiss, full of warmth and longing. Full of what I need at this moment.

“Thanks for coming,” I tell him, my voice quivering, “at eight in the morning on a *Saturday.*”

He attacks my neck, leaving a line of kisses from my ear to my

collarbone. "I had to be on campus anyway," he says, sliding his fingers beneath my blouse. "Coach wants to get in one last practice before the game today."

"Aren't you going to be late?"

"Probably," he breathes, kissing me again. He leans down to cup my rear and lifts me up to pin me against the door with little effort. "But I wanted to be sure you're still in on our deal."

Our deal.

Last night I was so sure I wouldn't go through with it. But today...

He watched the audition. He came here today. He was exactly where I needed him. I didn't even have to ask.

My heart quivers as his body presses against mine. "Yes," I whisper. "I'm still in."

"Good." He sucks my bottom lip between his teeth, giving it a precious bite. "Because I want to fill this little mouth of yours, Alyssa Pierce..."

I moan, imagining his salty sweetness on my tongue.

He gives me one last kiss and drops me back down. "Are you coming to the game tonight?"

"Uh..." I straighten my skirt back down. "I don't think so."

"What? You don't like football?"

"Not really."

Junior chuckles. "But your dad is *Cary Pierce*."

"Yeah, that's why I don't like football."

He nods, understanding. "Where can I find you after?"

I hesitate for a moment.

"Here," I finally say.

He slides his thumb along my bottom lip, his eyes sparkling with imagination. "Bye, Ally."

I fight the temptation to give him more. To give him everything. "Bye, Junior."

He leaves. I take a deep breath. Then another one. And another one.

Well, fuck.

It's only eight in the morning, and I already need a new pair of panties.

CHAPTER 18



JUNIOR

*P*ure adrenaline.

There's no other way to describe it. The rehearsed rhymes from the cheerleaders. The weight of the pads on my shoulders. The cry of the screaming crowd — most of which came just to catch a glimpse of Cary Pierce. But I can't blame them for that. It all comes together with the pouring sweat and pulsing blood and that's what it creates: *Pure, unfiltered adrenaline.*

Add in the taste of Alyssa Pierce's lip gloss still clinging to my tongue, and I'm surprised I'm even conscious right now.

I look straight ahead into the faces of the defensive linemen, each one just itching to push forward and take me out. Their black eyes give a nervous twitch, but I fight the grin from spreading across my face.

Earlier tonight, that twitch was nonexistent. They knew the reputation this school has, just like everybody else does.

We're a bunch of losers.

Not anymore.

We're twelve points ahead. *Twelve.* That's a bigger lead than we've ever had. The other team thought they had this in the bag, but since the start of the fourth quarter, they've been sweating a little more than we are.

Go, Bearhawks.

I lock eyes with Cary Pierce on the sidelines. He stands tall with his thick arms crossed over his chest, and he nods. Confident and assuring. For a moment, I think this is all just a dream. Damn well feels like it still. If someone walked up to me when I was ten years old and told me that someday I'd be the quarterback for a college football team coached by *Cary freaking*

Pierce, I'd have said they were full of shit. Especially when they added in the part about feeling up his hot daughter in a dark, empty classroom.

One thing at a time, Junior.

With eyes forward, I lean down to prepare for the snap. The world spins in slow motion as I turn my head to check the positions of the offensive line one last time, my cleats digging into the turf just twenty yards from the end zone.

"Hike!"

The center snaps the ball back. I catch it as the defensive line shoves forward with hell in their eyes.

I target the wide receivers on either side. The one to my left struggles to make it past the cornerback, but Ty bolts like lightning around the fray.

I throw the ball over their heads, arching it far down the field a split second before a two-hundred-pound mass topples me to the ground. I roll them away and push up onto my knees to watch the play unfold.

Ty sprints and launches forward to catch the ball before rolling onto the ground — smack dab in the middle of the brightly lit end zone.

The crowd screams, shaking the world with the sound of their feet pounding the bleachers.

Seven seconds on the clock. There are only seven seconds left in the game, and we're officially up eighteen points.

We're going to win.

I throw up my hands and scream. It's hard to say who's more shocked: our team, their team, or the crowd.

And then there's Cary Pierce.

He's stands there, unmoved. The only difference now is that he's smirking. It's as if he knew this was how it was going to end all along.

I don't even hear it when the clock hits zero.



Ty hops up onto the bench and waves his hands to get our attention. He's still clutching the football, but the man deserves to hold on to that for as long as he fucking wants.

"Party on Shanty tonight, boys!" he announces, igniting a wave of celebration from the team that echoes throughout the locker room. "Bring

your booze! Bring your friends! Leave your inhibitions at the door!”

He hops off the bench and pats my shoulder, quickly realizing that I didn’t actually approve a giant post-game party at our shared residence.

“That cool?” he asks.

I laugh as I toss a clean shirt over my shower-fresh skin. “Of course.”

“John and I are hitting the liquor store on the way home. Want to follow us? We *might* need help physically unearthing the store from the ground and dropping it into our backyard.”

I lick my lips. They’ve been buzzing since the moment I realized we were going to win. “Actually, there’s something I have to take care of first, but I’ll meet you at the house after.”

Ty twitches a suspicious brow, but he lets it pass. “All right. I’ll see you there.”

I close my locker and bolt outside into the quad.

“*It’s Junior!*”

My feet barely hit the sidewalk before the screaming starts. Students rush at me, their faces painted blue and gold, our school colors.

I pause, immersed in the strange glory of it all. I accept the high-fives and take quick selfies with various girls that can’t keep their hands off me.

Holy shit.

We won one game. *One game.*

I push through them, grinning like a madman and listening to them scream my name.

I love every moment.

But there’s only one voice I really want to hear saying my name right now.

Another wave of screams pierce the air. The girls release me, bolting toward the athletic center as more of the team steps out, Ty and John if I’m translating their shrieks right.

I slip away, rushing around to the back entrance of Talon Hall to stay out of sight.

It’s quiet inside. I guess the celebration hasn’t reached this place yet. Or they just don’t care. Neither would surprise me, given how nonchalant Alyssa is about sports.

Voices touch my ears, a sudden uproar of laughter echoing from the auditorium. I pull the doors open and step inside. It’s a small group hanging out by the stage, Alyssa Pierce herself among them. I sit down in the back

row, deciding to watch her from afar, just like I did at her audition.

There's something about the way she is around other people that's different from the way she is around me, but I can't put my finger on what. She's always beautiful and confident and well-spoken, but...

Maybe it's her *eyes*. Those shimmering blue pools of light that almost seem to twinkle when she looks at me.

"Bye, Alyssa. Bye, Grant."

My lips twitch as the others excuse themselves, leaving her and Grant alone on the stage. I stand up as they leave and walk down the aisle toward them as Grant rattles off about the upcoming theatre showcase.

Finally, Alyssa notices me. Her teeth instantly clutch her bottom lip and her cheeks take on a rosy tint.

"What?" Grant asks her. "Why are you doing that? What's with the lip?"

She doesn't answer, but she silently looks at me.

"What?" he asks again before twisting to glance over his shoulder. "*Oh.*" His eyes roll. "Of course."

"Hey," I greet.

Grant looks me up and down. "Hello."

"I'll text you tonight, Grant?" Alyssa says, a gentle and friendly nudge.

He flashes a knowing grin and grabs his backpack. "All right. I'll just go home and... wait for your *detailed* text message."

Alyssa stares at me, ignoring him as he hops off the stage. He passes me with quick strides and pats my shoulder on the way, but it's less a friendly gesture than it is one of warning — kind of like a big brother sizing up his little sister's date.

I wait for him to leave, listening for anyone else roaming around backstage, but there's nothing but silence.

Alone at last.

"What do you want?" Alyssa asks, playing dumb.

I smile. "We won."

She rolls her eyes. "Is that what all that screaming out there was about?"

"It was a good game."

"Was it down-to-the-wire exciting?"

"It was, actually."

"Bottom of the ninth?" she asks. "Bases loaded?"

"That's *baseball*."

"I know. I'm just fucking with you, Junior." She sits down on the edge of

the stage, her bare legs dangling beneath the hem of her skirt. “So, what are you doing *here*? Shouldn’t you be out celebrating with the other jocks?”

“You know why I’m here.”

She raises a quick brow, playing up the innocent coyness in her tone. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

I step in front of her, just barely easing between her legs. “I’m here to fill that smart little mouth of yours and you’re going to swallow every drop of me.”

“I never agreed to *that part*.”

“You will. You will because you’ll want to... because you’ll like the taste.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and speaking of taste...” I lay my hands on her thighs. “Tonight, I’m finally going to find out what you taste like.” She exhales softly, her breath warm with lust. “I’m going to eat you like no one ever has, like no one ever will, and by the end, you’ll be mine.”

“You sound *very* confident about that,” she whispers.

“I told you I’d make you scream my name, Ally. *I meant it*.”

I raise a hand to the nape of her neck. She leans into my touch as I pull her forward to claim her lips. She shudders with the kiss, parting her mouth to massage my tongue with hers.

She lays her palms against my chest and gently pushes me away as my other hand travels beneath her skirt. I pull back and we both take a deep breath.

“Stop pretending you don’t want this...” I hook my thumb into her panties, “and spread your legs—”

“*Not here*,” she warns, guiding me back again. “This room has good acoustics.”

“Then, *where*?”

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this...” She heaves a reluctant sigh as she hops off the stage. “Where’s your van?”

CHAPTER 19



ALYSSA

Junior grabs my hand and pulls me down the sidewalk, not caring at all who might see him doing it.

Luckily, the campus is so full of life that no one seems to notice or care as we bound toward the parking lots across the quad. His grip is so tight around my hand that I feel my blood pounding in my fingertips. Is he scared I'll back out at the last moment? I feel a twinge of satisfaction knowing how badly he wants this.

How badly he wants *me*.

I don't hesitate for a second after he slides his van door open. I hop inside and he follows me in. The door isn't even closed all the way before I feel his hands on my body, laying me down onto my back. He kisses me; hard and fast, sucking and nibbling at my lips until it hurts while he pushes my sweater off my shoulders.

I reach below his belt to rub his growing bulge, drawing a grunt from the back of his throat. "Lie back," I say, sitting up and guiding him down.

He moves without question, but keeps his hands on me to make me straddle him. His hardness presses between us as he pulls me closer, kissing me as we grind our bodies together.

Sweat breaks on my brow and the windows fog from our heaving breaths. I reach for his belt, sliding it free with both hands and pushing through his zipper to claim the prize I've wanted since the moment I first touched him in the locker room. I feel his veins pulsing along the shaft and I lick his lips in anticipation as I squeeze him in my palm.

"*Fuck, Ally...*"

I slide along his muscled torso, feeling his fingers burrow deep into my

hair as I move downward. My senses soar, pushing me higher and harder than I've ever felt in my life. I've never wanted to taste a man so badly before. To feel his hand on the back of my head as I suck him dry. To hear the sharp, raspy breaths on his lips while I torture him. Every part of me throbs. I want to give him everything he wants.

And I will.

I pull his pants down his thighs, revealing his stiff cock. A gasp catches in my throat all over again. Junior's... *junior*.

I try to remove his pants, but Junior lunges forward to stop me.

"Let's leave the pants *on* this time..." he says.

I laugh, hard. He can be taught.

"Whatever you want," I say, leaving them be.

"I want..." He grabs me again and guides me to his lips. His kiss is firm and true — like it's the first one we've ever had. "I want these lips wrapped around my cock. I want to paint that little pink tongue a bright shade of white."

The absolute filth of this man. It charges me, fueling an even greater thirst for him and an urge to do as he says. I pull away from his kiss, slowly stroking his shaft with one hand as I drift down to it with an open mouth. I rub his tip, swirling the drops of pre-cum with my thumb and his body trembles beneath me.

Just one taste and my tongue erupts at his flavor. I suck on his tip, teasing him as his hand grips my hair again. His hand flexes, squeezing with eager intensity.

He wants me to take him deeper. He wants to feel himself push into the back of my throat, but I stay on the tip with curling lips. I'll let him writhe and beg for it first.

I work him slowly, taking my time to memorize the taste of his skin and what areas send the biggest shock through his system. His hips tremble with anticipation as I flick and rub and encircle him. I widen my mouth and force him back as far as I can.

"*Holy shit—*"

His groans push me further, building my confidence to keep him in the back of my throat a little longer.

"I want to fuck your little mouth, Ally."

I drag my nails up his body, and he twitches from the pain. My lips become numb, but I keep at it, determined to rock him until he explodes.

Junior squeezes my hair so tightly I fear he might pull it out. The pain blends with pleasure inside of me and I moan for him, taking him even deeper inside until I can't anymore.

"Ally, lie down."

He forces my head back, pulling out of my mouth. With a jerk, he pushes me down onto my back and shifts onto his knees, pointing his cock at my face.

Yes. Yes.

I grab him, stroking him as his eyes roll back.

"Open your mouth," he says, his voice a heated whisper.

I obey, eager to catch every drop of him.

"Don't swallow yet," he says, reaching his peak. "I want to see it on your tongue."

He grunts. I feel his tip pulse between my lips. Warm cum fires onto my tongue, tickling my taste buds. I let it gather in my mouth, moaning for more. I can't help it. I'm truly and utterly *obsessed* with this moment.

And he knows it.

Junior strokes my forehead, smiling down at me with soft, satisfied eyes. "Show me," he says.

I tilt my head back and open my mouth.

He smiles. "Good girl." I tremble at the words. "Go ahead. You can swallow now."

I let it trickle down my throat. His fingers caress my brow again; a grateful gesture. I lean into it. I yearn for it. I question it quietly, but I don't dare say a word and risk ruining it.

What the hell am I doing?

In silence, Junior moves over me. He takes me into his arms and lifts me up. I feel weightless as he lays me down on the pillows and kisses me. Warm and tender. Hard and possessive.

"Spread your knees." He doesn't wait for me to do it myself. He shoves a pointed knee between them, forcing my legs apart. "It's your turn."

My heart races as he descends me. He stops at my breasts and doesn't hesitate before ripping my blouse open. I cringe as little buttons tear free and smack against the foggy windows, but the tension fades the moment his tongue graces my skin.

He licks my breasts and pulls them free of my bra to attack my nipples. They grow hard against his tongue, standing to attention and firing bolts of

extra pleasure toward my core.

“Your body...” Junior whispers, “*is perfect.*”

Every word he speaks feels like truth and everywhere he touches turns to warm milk in his hands. I run my fingers through his thick hair, quivering with anticipation as his mouth inches closer to what he promised me...

I’m going to bury my face in that pussy until you’re screaming my name.

Junior raises my skirt over my hips. He places his nose against my panties, inhaling hard. It’s so primal and strange, but it turns me on even more. He doesn’t just want to please me.

He wants to *devour* me like a wild animal.

Junior pulls my panties down to my toes. I expect him to ravage me, but he lingers near my feet, bending down to kiss my legs as he moves upward.

By the time he reaches my thighs, I’m twitching and dripping wet. His brown eyes flash up at me as he parts his lips and I feel his hot breath on my skin.

I grip the pillow behind my head with frustration, waiting for him to touch me, but his devious eyes linger on me instead.

“*Please...*”

Junior kisses my inner thigh, inciting another ache inside of me. He chuckles, taking pleasure in my frustration.

Finally, he slides the tip of his tongue along my folds, and he moans at my taste. His eyes roll back and he takes a deep breath before pushing his hands beneath me to cup my ass and bring me closer to his mouth. He plunges between my slit and desire takes over my entire body.

“*Oh, God!*”

“*No.*” He stops and looks me in the eye again. “Don’t scream for *him*. Scream for *me*.”

I tremble as pleasure radiates through my spine, my voice thick with passion. “Junior...”

He gets back to work. My thighs twitch with each touch. I cry out, barely hanging on, as he fucks me with his tongue.

“*Junior!*”

He laughs, sending vibrations through my throbbing sex, pushing me closer to the edge.

I scream his name, just like he wanted. I dig my nails into his hair, pulling him closer. My hips buck on their own, grinding on his face, bumping his nose and chin. He buries his impressive tongue deeper, enjoying every

second of my pleasure.

He warned me about this. He said by the end, I'd be *his*. I laughed it off as a joke, but now I'm not sure why I ever doubted him. I grip his hair, pulling him harder against me and his tongue goes wild on me.

I come hard.

"Junior—!"

Hard.

He shoves his tongue in deep again, lapping me until I'm too sensitive to go on. I touch his forehead, but I can't bring myself to push him away yet. The pleasure of his tongue is too much, too *good*. He massages me slowly, softly. His nose rubs against my aching clit, each one almost too much, but not nearly enough.

"*Oh, Ally.*" He drinks every drop of me as I lie twitching in his hands. "You really taste like heaven."

I laugh, on the verge of tears. Everything hurts, everything vibrates, and I never want it to end.

Junior travels up my body, licking my navel and breasts to taste even more of me.

I melt under his heat. I cup his face as soon as I can reach it, stealing a kiss from him.

"I need to be inside of you," he says.

I look down, feeling his cock brushing between my thighs, rock hard and dripping with desire. Wet heat radiates from me and I imagine what that thick shaft feels like thrusting in and out of me, but...

I silently shake my head.

Junior reaches into his pocket and he pulls out a small package — square and flat between his fingers. A condom.

I grab his hand. "No."

He crushes his lips against mine. I taste the begging passion on his tongue. It nearly pushes me over the edge and my fingers quake around his, so tempted to just let him rip that wrapper open and take what he wants.

"Junior, wait."

He leans up and balances on his arms. "Alyssa..." He says my full name with a growl powerful enough to send shivers down my spine. "*We won tonight.*"

"I know," I say, taking control. I slide away from him and sit up. "But one win doesn't make you a *winner*. It could have been a fluke, just a lucky

break.”

Playful darkness clouds his eyes. “*Ally...*”

“Win next week’s game and I’ll let you fuck my brains out.”

“*That’s not fair.*”

“I’ll make it worth your while, Junior,” I say, filling my voice with seduction. “Or would you rather go back to fucking Beta Kappa girls again? Sure, they’ll bend over for you after a wink and a smile, but something tells me that won’t do it for you anymore. Am I right?”

He hesitates. *Good.*

“Okay,” he says, his eyes smiling. “We win next week’s away game... and I want you in my bed wearing nothing but high heels and red lipstick by the time I get back.”

“That can be arranged.” I hold my ripped blouse closed. “That won’t be so hard, will it?”

“Wrong choice of words,” he mutters, glancing down at the kickstand between his legs.

I chuckle. “I think you’ll survive.”

Junior stuffs *junior* back into his briefs and pulls his pants up. “One week.”

“That’s all. Assuming you win, of course.”

“Oh, we will,” he says, his eyes falling down my body again. “I have excellent *incentive.*”

I smile, taking deep and slow breaths to keep myself from falling to little pieces.

One week, I remind myself.

Small price to pay to stay in control.

CHAPTER 20



JUNIOR

“*W*hat’s up, little brother?”

I glance at Maggie. She’s got that look in her eyes, the same one she’s graced me with since she picked up her first psychology book when she was twelve.

“Nothing,” I answer, hopefully dodging the inevitable psychoanalysis.

“You’ve barely touched your lunch,” she notes, looking down at my half-eaten burger.

I shrug. “Still a little shocked, I guess.”

“Yeah, you and the entire school,” she says, scanning the student union around us. “Sounds like the new coach has really brought the competitive spirit back to the team.”

Alyssa flashes into my memory, naked and moaning in the back of my van.

Win the next game and I’ll let you fuck my brains out.

“He certainly has,” I say.

“Well, I’m proud of you,” Maggie says. “Keep it up.”

I raise a brow. “Did I just hear the P-word from you?”

“Yeah, it felt weird to me, too.”

I take a big bite of my burger, but it doesn’t go down easy. I didn’t go to the gym this morning. There’s a chance I’ll run into Alyssa. After last night, I can’t guarantee I’ll keep my hands off her.

One week.

Six days to go.

“I bet the girls were all over you last night.”

I blink out of it. “What?”

“More than usual, right?” Maggie asks, taking a sip of her drink. “Keep up the wins and I bet you’ll have to beat them off with a stick. No wonder you look so tired today.”

“You got that right,” I lie through my teeth.

I haven’t even looked at another girl since I first laid eyes on Alyssa. Her comment about Beta Kappas not being enough for me was more truthful than I care to admit. Not that there’s anything wrong with the Beta Kappa Beauties or anything, but they don’t push my buttons the way she does. I’ve never been more annoyed and turned-on at the same time.

“So...” Maggie clears her throat. “You gonna tell me about that date or not?”

“Oh, *that...*” Our first date feels like months ago now. I’m not even pissed anymore. “She was... *interesting.*”

“Interesting enough for a *second* date?”

I shake my head. “I don’t do second dates. You know that.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Someday, you’ll change your mind about that, little brother.”

“Someday is not *today*,” I say, grinning. “And *today*, I’m shopping for a big stick to beat the ladies off with.”

“How *romantic*,” she slurs.



The professor drops my quiz on my desk. I instantly cringe.

A bright red F glares back at me.

Fuck.

Failing a second math quiz in a row is not what Coach had in mind when he told me to get my grades up.

She hovers a moment, waiting for me to look up. When I do, she arches a thick eyebrow, her expression saying everything it needs to.

Do better.

I nod. She walks away.

“Another quiz next week, folks,” she says as she reaches the front of the classroom. “It’ll cover chapters four *and* five, so be ready.”

I stuff the quiz into my backpack. Out of sight, out of mind. For now. The last thing I want to do is get a tutor, but I can’t get another failing quiz grade

without my adviser taking notice. I don't want to let Cary Pierce down either.

Professor Brows dismisses us. I keep my head down to avoid her glare as I beeline toward the exit.

As I round the corner in the hallway, a harsh whistle strikes my ears.

"Oh, *Lover Boy*."

I pause, glancing over to find Alyssa's friend leaning against the wall with a cup of coffee in each hand.

"*Grant*," he reminds me.

I nod. "Right. Grant."

He hands me one coffee. I take it with confusion.

"What—"

"*Shh*." He reaches out and turns the cup in my hand, exposing the words written on the side.

"*Buzz buzz?*" I read aloud.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Grant smiles, obviously pleased with the timing of it.

I check it to find a new text from Alyssa.

Library. Second floor. Study room B. Now.

Interesting.

"Thanks," I say to Grant.

He bows his head, takes a silent sip from his cup, and gestures for me to go away.

I don't move. "So, you're her little messenger boy, eh?"

"I prefer the term *liaison*," he says. "But yes."

I chew on my cheek. The fewer people who know about me and Alyssa, the better. "How much has she told you?"

"*Relax*." He rolls his eyes. "I've been hiding trysts from *my* parents since I was fourteen. I've got you covered."

I nod. "And what exactly do you get out of it?"

Grant pushes off the wall with a devious glint in his eyes. "Well, now that you mention it. You live with Ty Fisher, right? In that grungy house on the corner of Shanty?"

"I do, yeah."

He nonchalantly shrugs his wide shoulders. "Let's just say if my name comes up... you put in a good word or two."

I quickly decipher his meaning. "I don't want to disappoint you, Grant, but I think you might be barking up the wrong tree on that one," I say.

Grant takes a short step closer, smiling softly with knowing eyes. “You worry about pussy. Let me worry about the dogs, all right?” He taps my cheek twice with his palm and spins on his heels to take off in the opposite direction. “Better hurry, Lover Boy. You don’t want to keep her waiting.”

My phone vibrates again in my hand. I check it.

I said now.

I rush outside, charging down the sidewalk toward the library across campus. I didn’t even know the library had private study rooms.

That might explain my grades, actually.

I hop up the stairs to the second floor, following the signs down the hall to Study Room B. I push the door open, not bothering to knock first. At first glance, the room is empty except for a small, two-person table and two chairs.

I sense movement behind the door, along with the pleasant aroma of Alyssa Pierce’s perfume.

“Close the door,” she says.

I obey.

She’s on me before I can even say a word.

Pinned to the door, my eyes instantly drop to the impressive cleavage peeking out from her sky blue top. I let my backpack fall as I wrap my arms around her to cup her ass over her black skirt. She kisses me, her hands pushing beneath my shirt. She drags her nails over my abs while she probes my mouth with her tongue.

Whoa.

I kiss her, giving her ass a firm squeeze while I can.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I say, taking a breath.

Alyssa shrugs, smiling. “Figured I owed you a cup.”

She tries to back up, but I hold her close. I kiss her again. She parts her lips for mine, breathing with desire as she presses her chest against mine.

I release her, gently pushing her away as she tries to kiss me again. She trembles with frustration, just like I wanted.

“So, what’s this about?” I ask, gesturing to the study room.

Alyssa exhales as she leans against the table. “I have some time to kill until my next class,” she answers as she combs her fingers through her hair. “Figured I’d make good use out of it.”

“So, you thought I’d be at your beck and call?” I ask. “That I have nothing better to do than come running at the snap of your fingers whenever

you have an itch you can't scratch?"

"You're here, aren't you?"

I laugh. She's got me there.

"I didn't want to wait until Saturday to see you again," she says.

I pause. "Is that right?"

"That's right."

"But you said you wouldn't let me touch you until then."

"No, I said I wouldn't let you fuck me until then." She presents her hands.

"That doesn't mean we can't still have fun."

I furrow my brow.

She tilts her head. "What?"

"I'm feeling a little jerked around here."

"Why?"

"Well, you've been pretty hesitant about hooking up with me at all. Now, you're suddenly pinning me to doors in private study rooms. What's up?"

Alyssa pauses, briefly biting her lip in thought. "Honestly, Junior..." She heaves a light sigh, stalling to build up her nerve. "I haven't been able to get what you said to me out of my head."

"What'd I say?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Her eyes touch the floor. "You said you'd... eat me like no one ever has and that..." A reluctant sigh. "And that by the end, I'd be yours."

There's a quiver in her tone. I like it. *Really* like it. It's a stark contrast to the strong, confident lady she is in every other moment. She's dropping her guard. For me.

"Is that so?" I ask.

"No one has ever said anything like that to me before."

I step closer. "Alyssa Pierce is a fan of dirty talk, is she?"

"She might be. I don't know, I..."

Her voice struggles again. She goes quiet as I touch her outer thigh. A breath rushes past her lips.

I smile.

"Which part turned you on the most?" I ask.

She keeps her eyes down as if she's too embarrassed to look me in the eye as she speaks. "The second part," she says.

I move my hand up her thigh, crawling beneath her skirt. She doesn't stop me. "Is that what you want, Ally?" I whisper. "To be mine?"

She shakes her head no, but her body doesn't.

Her body screams yes.

I place my hand beneath her chin, firmly guiding her to look at me. I give her a kiss, soft and sweet. A simple tease, but she trembles on demand.

Good girl.

“Do you want me to *own you*?” I ask.

“No,” she says.

Yes, her eyes beg.

“Junior—”

I silence her with another kiss while I hook the crotch of her panties with my other hand.

Alyssa startles. “Junior, the door doesn’t lock.”

“You better be quiet then,” I say, not stopping. I touch her, my fingertips gliding between her wet lips. She tries to warn me again, but only a single gasp of pleasure comes out. Her eyes flicker closed. “No, open your eyes,” I whisper. “Look at me.”

Alyssa fights her heavy lids, and her blue eyes find mine. I keep her focus on me, gently placing my hand around her neck. Her pulse pounds against my thumb, so fast and wild.

I slide a single finger inside of her. Her jaw drops in a silent scream.

“Don’t close your eyes,” I warn her again as she blinks. “Look at me while I’m inside of you.”

She grips my arm, holding herself up. “Junior,” she moans softly.

“That’s right.” I fuck her slowly, putting pressure on the right spot. “You’ll remember my name for the rest of your life.” I push in further to grind her clit with the heel of my hand. A tremor shakes her body. “You might even scream it by accident in another man’s bed because no matter how hard you try not to... you’ll think of *me* while they’re inside of you. I’m not only going to fuck your brains out, Ally... I’m going to ruin you for other men.”

A moan escapes her, almost too loud. I shift my hand from her neck, resting a finger over her mouth to remind her to be quiet. She takes it between her lips. Her eyes lock on mine as she sucks on it.

Fuck me. She’s good.

“You’re going to come for me, Ally,” I growl, focusing on her instead. My pleasure can wait. “I want to feel it.” I slide a second finger in and she bites down hard on my knuckle. “Don’t make a sound.”

Alyssa nods. She doesn’t even blink, but her cheeks burst with shades of

pink.

“Come,” I whisper, holding her steady. “*Do it now.*”

Her body answers with a hard jerk, letting go of all the tension in her as the orgasm takes over. Her inner muscles twitch wildly on my fingers, squeezing me so tightly it almost hurts.

She holds her breath, struggling to stay quiet. I pull her in and bury her face in my shoulder, letting her belt out a quiet scream that only we can hear.

“You’re mine now,” I say in her ear. “No one else will ever touch you like I can. *Remember that.*”

Alyssa breathes hard against me for several moments before easing back to look at me again. She nods silently, her pussy still firing a subtle pulse around my fingers.

I pull them out and stick them in my mouth. “Fuck, Ally,” I say. “You taste so fucking good.”

She chuckles between breaths. “You’re not too bad, either.”

I step back to lean against the wall, playing it cool and hoping she doesn’t notice the rock-hard tent pooching my jeans. “Well, is that what you wanted?” I ask.

“*Oh, yeah...*” She pushes her skirt down and hops off the table. “Where did you learn to talk like that?”

“I learned a lot living in the Delta Xi house for two years,” I say.

“Well, I take back everything I’ve ever said about lazy frat boys.” She laughs, then stands a little taller. “Did you mean it? Or was it all just to get me off?”

“Did you want me to mean it?” I ask.

She hesitates. “Shit, I don’t know.”

I laugh. “Such is the power of dirty talk.”

“No kidding.” She bends over to grab her messenger bag. “I have to get to my class, but... let’s just say I owe you one.”

I scoop my bag off the floor. “I’m sure you’ll make it up to me—”

She gasps at my backpack. “Wait—”

My books topple out onto the floor. A sharp pang of embarrassment fills my gut, ruining my moment of glory.

“*Shit,*” I say, bending to grab my math textbook.

Alyssa kneels to help me gather the papers and pens. She scans a wrinkled page and pauses. “Are you having trouble in geometry?” she asks.

I snatch my quiz from her hand. “No.”

She tilts back, surprised. "Sorry," she says as she rises and hands me the rest of it.

I hide my expression from her. Of all the damn times to embarrass myself, it had to be the moment directly after she looked at me like I was a damn sex god.

"So, I should get going," I say, reaching for the door.

"Wait." Alyssa touches my arm. "Junior, you don't have to freak out over one quiz. It happens."

Her voice caresses me, quelling the nervous anger taking over my gut. "It's not just one quiz," I admit.

"Can I see it again?"

"Ally, I don't—"

"Please?"

She bats her eyes, laying it on a little thick.

It works, though.

I give it back to her. "Coach told me I'm in danger of academic probation if I don't get my grades up," I say.

"Well, that's not good." She points at the page. "Did you even use the Pythagorean theorem here?"

"What's that?"

She rolls her eyes. "I guess not."

"I'll get a tutor or something." I shrug. "The athletic center should provide one for me."

Alyssa kisses her teeth. "Sure, you can get a university-sponsored tutor who'll lick your toes and do all the work for you because if you don't get the grades, they don't get paid, *or...*"

"Or?"

She hands the quiz back to me. "Or *I* could tutor you and you'll actually learn something."

I blink twice. "*You'll* tutor me?"

"Sure, why not? Geometry is a piece of cake."

"You'll help me get my grade up?"

"Yeah."

I pause, studying her sly eyes. "You're not... *jealous* of this potential toe-licking tutor, are you?"

She scoffs. "Please. It'll provide a decent excuse if we ever get caught in public together. That's all."

She has a point there. And I'll do just about anything to ensure a few more private study room fingerings with Alyssa Pierce.

"And what do you want in return?" I ask.

"What are you willing to give me?"

"Whatever you want."

She chuckles. "Oh, that is one *dangerous* bargain, Junior Morgan."

"Tell me what you want," I say, catching her eyes again. "Anything."

Alyssa bites her lip in thought. "I'll think about it." She snatches the quiz out of my hand again. "I'll look this over to see what you're doing wrong."

I nod. "Sounds good."

She folds it into her bag. "Bye, Junior."

"Wait." I block her path to the door. "Ty and I are having a party Thursday night."

"Cool."

"You should come."

Her eyes narrow. "Why?"

"It'll be fun. We're on Shanty Row."

"Shanty Row?"

I chuckle; I forget she was new. "Shanice Street. Just south of campus."

"Why is it called Shanty Row?"

"You'll see," I quip.

"Ah." She nods, getting it. "Classy neighborhood, huh?"

"Very. We're the house on the corner. 218. You can't miss it."

She hesitates. "I'll think about it."

"Don't overthink about it."

"Oh, but it's my specialty."

Alyssa steps forward. I reach for her arm.

"Kiss me," I say.

Again, she hesitates. "Why?"

"Because I told you to."

Her lips press together in rebellion, but it only takes a moment. She pushes up onto her toes, getting closer as I cup her cheeks. She kisses me. I kiss her. I fight the urge to throw her down on the table and bury my cock deep inside her warm and tight—

"*Bye, Junior,*" she says, turning her head and snapping me out of the fantasy.

I lick my lips. "Bye, Ally. *Thursday.*"

She doesn't reply. She opens the door and walks out into the silent library.

Once she's gone, I exhale hard. That went... better than expected.

I glare at the raging hard-on fighting with my zipper.

Soon, buddy.

CHAPTER 21



ALYSSA

Junior Morgan is *not good* at math.
I wouldn't say he's *bad* at math, though. There's definitely some cause for a *Needs Improvement* stamp on his forehead, but it's nothing a girl can't work with.

The quiz vibrates on my desk. I lean back for a second, confused, until I realize it's just my phone lying beneath it.

Big Dick Morgan calling.

I roll my eyes as I answer it. "Junior, what's six times seven?"

"Uh." Party sounds echo through the phone, laughter and music. "Forty-six," Junior says after a few seconds. "Why?"

"Yup." I nod as I draw a line through problem five. "That explains that."

"That explains what?"

"Forty-two."

"Forty-two?"

"Six times seven is forty-two. Not forty-six. Please make note of that before our next study session."

He pauses. "Are you grading my math homework right now?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

I sense the disappointment in his voice. "Oh, what?" I ask, setting my pencil down.

"It's just... there's this party I'm having."

"Yeah."

"Right now."

"I know."

“And... you’re not here.”

“I know that, too.”

“Grant is, though. He’s...” Junior breathes a laugh. “He’s very much here.”

I chuckle. “The man likes to party.”

“But you don’t?”

“No, I like a good party. I just didn’t go to yours.”

A door closes on his side, blocking out the noise. “Well, this sucks,” he says. “I was really looking forward to seeing you tonight.”

I stand up and wander over to my bed. “Oh, you did?” I ask as I lie down on my back.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” I say, meaning it. “But I couldn’t come.”

“Why not?”

“Going to a party with a bunch of football players?” I shake my head. “Doesn’t really fall under Cary Pierce’s idea of staying away from the team.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“Sorry,” I say again. “My introduction to Shanny Row will have to wait.”

“*Shanty*,” he corrects.

“Shanty. Right.”

“Well, you’re just going to have to make this up to me.”

“Oh, am I?”

“Tomorrow. I want to see you.”

I smile, welcoming the butterflies in my stomach. “I don’t know,” I answer. “Is there a reason you should?”

“For fun.”

“Fun?”

He lowers his voice. “You said we could still have fun, right? I wanted to have some more... *fun*.”

“Naughty. But no.”

“No?”

“I’m in classes all day, then at rehearsal all night,” I say. “Tomorrow no bueno.”

“*Damn*,” he whispers. Then, a moment of silence. “Are you alone now?”

“Yes. All locked up in my dungeon on the top floor.”

“Your dad’s not home?”

I glance at my closed door. “Haven’t heard him in a while. I think he’s

asleep.”

Junior pauses, the silence extending for several minutes.

“Junior?” I ask.

“What are you wearing?”

I laugh out loud. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” His chuckle tingles down my spine. “We don’t have to be in person to have fun, do we?”

“Don’t you have a party to get back to?”

“Something more important came up.”

“Junior *junior*?”

“Only every time I hear your voice,” he says, his growl barely above a whisper. “So... what are you wearing, Ally?”

I bite my lip in hesitation, but I don’t resist further than that. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. “Lingerie,” I whisper. “Red and lacy.”

Junior chuckles. “Liar.”

I grin. “Flannel pants. Baggy sweater.”

“Now we’re talking!” he says. “Take the sweater off.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, take it off.”

I say nothing.

“Please?” he adds.

With a chuckle, I obey. I peel my sweater off over my head and cast it aside, leaving me in the safety of the tank top I didn’t mention I had on under it.

“There,” I say into the phone. “Done.”

“The top, too.”

I scoff. “How did—” He laughs. “Ugh, fine.”

“You can leave the pants on.”

“Good.”

“For now.”

I set the phone down and remove my tank top. Cool air touches my skin, my bare breasts. As I lie back and grab the phone, Junior’s chuckle continues.

“What are you laughing about?” I ask.

“Just happy,” he says. “Close your eyes.”

I close them.

“I want you to picture me there, with you,” he continues. “Over you.”

“Are you naked?” I ask, smirking.

“Not yet.” His voice smiles. “Close your eyes... and imagine me kissing your forehead.”

I do as he says. I picture his lips touching my forehead, soft yet firm. A kiss. A single kiss. Somehow, I feel it in the real world, too. His warm skin. His nose gently brushing my hairline.

“Your temple,” he whispers. “The tip of your nose.”

I feel his lips and my heart flutters.

“Imagine my thumb rubbing against your bottom lip,” he says. “You part your lips. You kiss it.”

My mouth purses on its own, following his instructions.

“You want me to kiss you,” he says, not a question.

“Yes,” I say, my breath quickening.

“Good.” He waits a moment. I exhale, quivering slightly. “I slide my thumb down your face, along your neck... toward your breasts.”

I exhale, quivering slightly.

“Touch yourself. Pretend it’s me.”

I graze my bottom lip, drawing a slow trail down my body along the same path he spoke of. My nipples twist in anticipation, standing hard by the time my fingertips reach them. I shudder, enjoying the sharp pleasure dancing through my core as Junior chuckles in my ear.

“Good girl,” he says, hearing the sharp intake of my breath.

I bite my lip. He has got to stop saying that to me. He’s giving me a praise kink.

“I kiss your neck. Your chest. Your cleavage.”

I cup my breasts, using the edge of my finger as if it were his tongue on my nipple.

“I want to taste you so badly, Ally,” he growls, his own hand obviously extending below the belt.

I hum in response, my eyes still closed.

“You want me to,” he says. Again, not a question. “If I were there right now, you’d let me.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“I’d lick your sweet skin. I’d pull those sexy flannels off nice and slow.”

I chuckle, urging him to go on.

“I’d kiss your navel, moving down, down, *down*,” he says, his growl returning. “Inch by inch until I reached those juicy lips.”

I let my touch glide down my body, inch by inch just as he said, slipping

my hand into my pants. I'm already throbbing, a wet spot forming in my underwear. The tease is unbearable, but I don't dare touch places he hasn't told me to yet. Blood pounds between my ears as I picture his thick head of hair disappearing between my thighs.

"Ally?"

I jolt, opening my eyes. "Huh?"

"I said, *don't touch*."

"I'm not!"

"Your moan says otherwise."

"I didn't!" I slap my mouth, adjusting my volume. "I was just..."

"Yes?" he asks.

"Picturing your head between my thighs."

He exhales a thick breath. "Go on."

I slide my hand back into my pants. This time, I caress the very tip of my throbbing clit. "You kiss me there. You lick and taste me everywhere except where I want it."

Junior chuckles. "That sounds like me, all right."

"Your tongue gets so close, but you take it back."

"Yes," he says, his voice heavy with pleasure.

"You stick it inside of me, so deep." I feel my wet lips, my dripping pussy. I moan slightly, holding back. "I grind against your face, but it's not enough. I need more."

"You need me to suck on your clit," he says.

"Yes."

"To use my tongue until you beg me to stop."

I mewl, so close to the edge. "Junior."

"Do it," he says. "Make yourself come."

Pleasure overwhelms me before he even says it. I rock my hips against my hand. I quiver and shake, my clit dancing with every touch as I come hard. I try to keep quiet. I'm not alone in this house, after all.

"*Fuck*," Junior whispers. He's not alone in his house, either. "I'm addicted to hearing you do that."

I chuckle, breathing hard. "I certainly don't hate it."

"Do it again."

"No," I say, still laughing.

"Do it again. I know you can. You women are talented creatures."

I pull my hand from my flannel pants. "I'm addicted to hearing you do

that,” I joke.

“What?” he asks.

“*Beg.*”

He laughs. “I can tell.”

“No more *fun* until the game.”

His whine becomes a deep growl. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

“It’s only one day.”

“Practically *two*.”

“You’ll survive, I promise.”

“Cross your heart?”

I smile. “Cross my heart.” My pulse quickens. “You should get back to your party.”

“Yeah, I... uh...” His throat clears. “I need to calm myself down here first.”

“You didn’t finish?” I ask.

“Nope.”

“Go ahead. I’ll listen.”

“I think I’ll save it for you, actually.”

I raise a brow. “Are you sure? You might be saving it for a while,” I tease.

“Ally... *Ally, Ally, Ally.*”

“What?”

Junior lowers his voice to a whisper again. “I’ll see you Saturday night.”

He hangs up before I can reply.

CHAPTER 22



ALYSSA

*M*y phone chimes and I reach into my pocket to check the new text message from Junior.

We won. I'll see you in an hour.

A reflexive smile spreads across my face before I text him back.

On my way over.

I stuff the phone back into my pocket and push open the door to Junior's room.

The anticipation got to me. I've been following the game's score online for the last few hours, fighting a losing battle against checking it every minute.

The lead bounced back and forth from the beginning. They scored, then we scored, then they scored again. The odds of me having to be here at all were fifty-fifty.

But here I am. Not because of a silly bet we made.

Because I want to be here.

I walk around his room, easily tempted to sift through his belongings. His desk is a mess with papers stacked on every corner, weighed down by used textbooks, along with his most recent geometry homework.

I plop down onto his desk chair and twitch as something soft breaks my fall. I reach behind me and pull it out, freezing when I realize that it's the teddy bear we won at the arcade. Soft brown fur. Little black eyes. I completely forgot about it after I left it behind in his van after the date.

I set it down in my lap and pull his math homework closer. A rush of pride washes over me. He's checking his work and everything, just as I taught him. This must be what a coach feels like when a kicker finally nails a

field goal.

I go over it in pencil, marking the mistakes he's making so I know what to go over with him later.

But I didn't come here to correct his homework.

I set my bag down on his bed and pull out the high heels I stashed in the bottom.

My heart races faster with each piece of clothing I strip off. Junior was very specific about what he wanted tonight, and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been fantasizing all day about making it happen. To be honest, I probably would have been here even if the team lost. I'm not about to admit that to him, though...

When I finally hear the front door open, I grab my red lipstick and spread it over my lips before settling beneath his covers.

My body throbs with eager anticipation as I try to imagine what his expression will be like and what he'll do when he sees me this way. Will he instantly kick off his shoes and dive into the bed? How much foreplay will there be? Hell, the last week has been nothing but foreplay between us. I chuckle. He's probably been rock hard for the entire bus ride back to campus.

The bedroom door cracks open. Junior walks in with his phone attached to his ear. "Yeah, I'll meet you there, Ty. Just gonna freshen up—"

His eyes land on me. He releases an amused grunt as he hangs up, not even bothering to say goodbye first. "You know..." he says, kicking the door closed. "I wasn't serious about the whole *naked in heels* thing."

"Are you complaining?"

He looks down at my body, gently obscured by his bedsheet. "No."

"Then, shut up."

Junior laughs. "How did you get in here?"

"The door was unlocked."

"It was?"

"You should really lock it. This is a terrible neighborhood."

"You are not wrong." He drops his gym bag to the floor. "How long have you been waiting?"

"A few minutes," I lie. "Do you have somewhere you need to be tonight?"

"No."

I look at his phone. "Isn't Ty waiting on you?"

He tosses it onto his desk. "Ty won't even notice I'm not there."

“Are you sure?”

“Why? You got somewhere else to be?”

“No.”

He leans against his desk and crosses his arms. His eyes constantly roam over his prey. Over me. I’m trapped in the lion’s den, counting down the moments until his hunger overwhelms him and he strikes at me.

I grow more anxious with each breath, but he’s holding back, prolonging the torment and watching me squirm.

“How was the game?” I ask.

“It was...” He sighs and his expression shifts away from the familiar, devious intent. “*Amazing.*”

“Really?”

He pushes off the desk and paces at the foot of the bed. “Yeah, I mean, it was *frustrating.*”

“Why?”

“We just couldn’t pull ahead for longer than a few minutes at a time,” he explains. “I thought it was over. We all did. We were tired and ready to throw in the towel but then... your dad completely turned it around.”

I instantly regret asking. The last thing I want to think about is my father while I’m naked and horny. “Well, it’s all over now, right?”

“He just...” Junior’s eyes gloss over with admiration. “He *never* gave up on us. It was like he knew what we were capable of before we did, and he knew *exactly* what to say to bring it out of us.” He stops pacing and sits down beside me on the bed. “I’ve never had a coach like your dad, Ally. He’s like... the missing piece of me I needed to finally believe in myself.”

There’s a sharp pain in my chest. “That must be a good feeling.”

“It is!” he says, still smiling. “Once it was over, I heard the crowd chanting and screaming for us and he walked up to *me* and put his hand on my shoulder. He didn’t say a word, it was just—” His hand slaps onto my bare shoulder and squeezes. “It felt awesome. Of all the players on the team, Cary Pierce did that to *me.*”

His hand drops from my skin and I wonder if he’s forgotten how naked I am. I certainly feel more naked than I did five minutes ago.

“Congratulations, Junior,” I mutter. “You’re the son Cary Pierce always wished he had.”

I sit up, holding the sheet tighter around me so it doesn’t fall as I throw my feet to the floor.

“Wait...” Junior softly grips my elbow. “Okay. What did I do?”

“Nothing. Can we...” I stand up and Junior rises on the other side. “Can we stick a pin in the whole *praising my father* thing until *after* we’ve...”

His jaw sags. “Oh, right. Yeah...” He chuckles. “*Shit*. Of course. You’re... you’re naked and I’m over here talking about your—”

“*It’s okay*. Let’s just...” I perform a short, stabbing motion. “*Pin it*.”

“Consider it pinned.” He holds up his hands. His eyes fall down my body again. “Completely pinned...”

“Thank you.”

Junior cautiously steps around the bed, getting a good look at me. “I like the shoes.”

I flash my ankle. They’re my favorite pair, saved only for special occasions. Feels a little wasted now.

“Thanks,” I say, still annoyed.

He stares at me for a moment, easily reading the hostile emotions in me. “Come here,” he demands, holding out his hand.

I keep the sheet in place with a tight grip while he guides me to his desk.

“Ally...” he whispers. “Tell me what went through your mind that day in the locker room.”

I sigh to cover up the lust in my voice. “When you defied my father and coerced me into going out with you? I thought, *what a manipulative jackass*.”

Junior laughs. “Before that.” He pulls his T-shirt off over his head, revealing his bare, muscled torso. “I want to know what you were thinking when it was just the two of us. Steam in the air. Beads of moisture...” his smirk tugs on his lips, “dripping...”

I look down, unable to stop myself from picturing his wet body in front of me. He reaches for his belt. I inhale sharply as he pulls it free, strong fingers pinching his zipper. I bite my lip, my heat spiking as I wait to see more of that rigid V-shape I’ve thought about licking a hundred times.

Junior stops the zipper halfway down. “Ally...” His hand nudges my chin, drawing my eyes up to his. “It’s just the two of us here now. I want you to remember how you felt back then. I want that girl...” He leans forward and slides his lips over my cheek. “The one that quivered against me. The one that touched me with shaking fingers. I want *that* girl in my bed tonight.”

Phantom shower steam fills my lungs. A sweat breaks on my brow. I swallow hard, unable to voice the yes on my tongue, but that doesn’t stop him

from hearing it, anyway.

Junior pushes the zipper the rest of the way and lets his jeans fall. He stands still, naked and aroused, just like that day. And, just like that day, my body responds exactly the way he wants it to.

“*Ally...*” he whispers. “Do you see what you do to me — what you *still* do to me?” I nod, knowing what he’ll ask me next. “Do I still do the same to you?”

My grip on the sheet loosens, but I don’t let it drop. “Yes...”

He leans forward, pinning me against his desk. “I wanted to take you then,” he says. “I wanted to hold you against the locker and—” He crushes his lips on mine. I melt into his kiss. “Did you want me, too?”

“Yes.”

He kisses me again, this time harder and firmer. “I felt your touch on me for *hours*. I couldn’t shake it. I *needed* it.” Our tongues meet in a blazing fire. “Tell me again. What you said I could do to you if we won tonight.”

“I said...” My lips shake. My entire body shakes. “I said you could fuck my brains out.”

He smiles. “You want it, don’t you?”

I nod, practically falling apart against him.

“Say it.”

“Yes,” I answer. “I want you to fuck my brains out.”

Junior pulls the sheet from my weak grasp. I let it tumble, removing the final barrier between us. It’s a shock to my system, firing ripples of pleasure across my skin as Junior puts his hands on me. He plants me on the edge of the desk, legs open and knees hugging his waist. His cock presses against my slit, but he doesn’t enter me yet.

“Are you on the pill?” he asks, his lips barely leaving mine as he speaks.

I shake my head. “No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“IUD?”

“No.”

“Shot? Patch? Diaphragm? Anything?”

“No.”

“*Fuck*,” he spits.

“Do you not have condoms?” I ask in surprise.

“No, I do. They’re just... not as fun.”

I chuckle, purposefully teasing him by tilting my body closer to his. “Hey, if you wanna stop, we can—”

His grip tightens playfully. He kisses me, slow and tender.

He shifts forward, his cock rubbing me in the right places. I bite down, hesitating while my body betrays reason. Everything throbs; a constant metronome of heat and desire I can’t control. I look down, reaching to take hold of him. He inhales as I wrap my fingers around him. I think I’m in total control, but I’m not. His bare skin on mine. A raw, animal nature taking over us. The temptation is more than I can stand.

And there’s a pharmacy right down the street.

I angle him downward. His eyes flicker in surprise. The pleasure in them is instantaneous as I push his tip inside of me. I gasp as my pussy stretches for him, igniting an even deeper lust within me.

His jaw tightens. “*Ally—*”

“*Shh.*” I kiss him, reaching around his body, pulling him closer. He goes deeper, and both of us groan. “Don’t talk. Just fuck me.”

Junior Morgan doesn’t need to be told twice.

He thrusts once, filling me completely. Leaving it there, a smile creeps along his lips as I clench him on the inside. I yearn for more, more, *more*. I moan and gasp, blissfully lost in his eyes as he slowly moves within me. In and out, never leaving me completely. He rests a hand on my cheek, fingers curling around my head and locking our lips together with deep kisses.

Each thrust knocks down another wall between us. We could stop — we *should* stop — but passion overwhelms danger. His body heat overwhelms mine. Moans fall from our lips, blending together. I want — I *need* — all of him.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he grunts.

I obey, locking my ankles behind his back. He raises me off the desk and I whimper as his cock briefly slips out of me, but I know it won’t be gone for long. Junior carries me to his bed, his grip firm and unyielding on my flesh. Before I know it, he drops me down. I bounce onto the mattress and he’s on me before I can take a breath. He pushes me up the bed, placing me where he wants me as I keep my legs spread wide.

As he aligns us, I reach for my foot, thinking to slip my heels off, but Junior grabs my wrist.

“Leave them on,” he says, a chuckle in his voice.

I laugh, letting him pin my hands above my head. “Whatever you want.”

“That’s my girl,” he whispers, his lips caressing mine.

The words send a pleasant shiver down my spine. I’m *his* girl. Me. Alyssa Pierce is in bed with the quarterback. I never meant for this to go this far, but there’s a little piece of me that’s glad it has.

Junior enters me again.

I gasp.

Okay.

There’s a *big* piece of me that’s glad it’s gone this far.

My core instantly clenches with pleasure. I angle my hips, taking more of him, and Junior’s face contorts.

“*Fuck*,” he mutters as he pushes up, his hands still holding mine down above my head. “You’re so wet for me.”

I nod, my toes curling.

Junior looks down, watching as he thrusts home. In and out. I watch him fuck me, too, his cock rock hard and slick.

“You. Feel.” He grunts between every word. “So. Amazing.”

I open my mouth to speak, but my voice forms nothing but vowel sounds. Junior releases my hands and touches my body. He palms my breasts, teasing my twisted nipples between his fingers. He never stops fucking me. In and out. He doesn’t slow down, even as he towers over me and kisses me hard on the mouth, sucking the moans off my tongue.

I’d heard Junior Morgan was good in bed.

But this is *amazing*.

CHAPTER 23



ALYSSA

“*J*unior.”

It's the only word my mouth can form. It draws an instant smile to his lips.

“Say it again,” he says.

I arch my back. I curl my toes. I moan as my entire body catches fire. “Junior.”

He fucks me harder, deeper. “You belong to me tonight. Say it.”

A shudder rattles my core. “I belong to you tonight,” I repeat, barely getting the words out. I'm so close to coming, and he knows it.

“That's right.” Junior draws a hand between my breasts, caressing down my belly until his fingers find my clit. “This is mine,” he says, pressing the pad of his thumb against it as he slows his thrust. “Your body. Your cunt.” He takes me with shallow thrusts as he rubs. “I'm going to take that smart mouth of yours tonight, too.”

Yes.

I bite my lip, trembling all over.

“I told you I'd ruin you, Alyssa,” he says, “and I *always* keep my promises.”

I grip the pillow beneath my head as climax threatens me again.

Junior feels it as my pussy tightens, his eyes glazed with pleasure.

Yes. Yes.

His thumb works harder, bumping my clit in just the right spot.

I come hard, unable to stop myself as he thrusts deep.

“Come all you want.” He chuckles. “You're not leaving this bed until I'm done with you.”

Holy fuck dear me fuck fuck fuck—

I throw my head back and round my hips, riding the long tail of my orgasm on his thick cock. Junior lets me move, shifting his hands to my hips as I grind on him.

“Fuck, Ally, you’re so fucking good.”

I laugh. I moan. I touch myself, targeting my clit to give myself a second orgasm.

“Get it, baby,” he says, his voice strained and rough. “Show me what you like.”

I don’t stop. I make myself come again, not caring how loud I am or what my O-face looks like. I lose myself, every insecurity melting away as my body responds to his touch and nothing else.

“Good girl,” Junior growls as I settle onto the mattress.

I breathe hard, taking a much-needed rest, but Junior doesn’t. He stays deep inside of me as he leans over and sucks my nipple between his teeth.

“*Very good girl.*”

I dissolve into a mixture of uncontrollable laughter and moans. I’ve spent the last few weeks torturing Junior Morgan, practically waving my pussy in front of his nose. Now that he’s got it, I wonder if he’ll ever leave it. His eyes flare with passionate fire for me — *me* — and his entire body burns with lust as I writhe beneath him. Pleasure blooms across my skin, a healthy, constant surge of heat and longing.

I don’t bother trying to make sense of it. Not that I even could in my current state.

Junior kisses me again. This time, he shifts his hips backward, pulling out of me, and I mewl in response. *Put it back*, I want to scream. I want to grab hold of him and do it myself, but he flips me over onto my stomach before I can even move.

His kiss tingles my spine as he kisses the space between my shoulder blades. With one hand, he pushes my hair away, clearing a path. With the other, he palms my ass cheek, giving it a good squeeze as he groans in my ear.

“Your ass is perfect.”

I smile as his palm connects again, this time with a healthy smack. “Thank you,” is all I can think to say, making us both laugh.

He kisses my back again, the soft shadow on his cheeks scratching me just right. “Don’t pretend like you don’t know,” he whispers down my spine,

“how fucking sexy you are.”

I tremble, my skin pebbling with goosebumps. Moans tumble from my lips as he licks the small of my back, and he doesn't stop there. He spreads my cheeks, quickly finding my asshole.

I nearly lurch off the bed in surprise, but he holds me down with a firm hand on my back. Pleasure rolls in, sending a wave of desire to my clit as he eats me. I settle once more, backing up to encourage him. No one's ever tasted me there before. I didn't think I'd even like it, truthfully, but the new pounding in my sex extinguishes any doubts I had about that.

I moan into my fist, biting my knuckles to hold myself together.

“You like that?” Junior asks, his voice full of heat. He flicks my hole again, and my entire body shakes in response. “Do you want more?”

I nearly moan yes, but my brain forces some hesitation.

When he says more, does he mean more *licking*? Or more... *more*?

“No,” I say, somehow putting some strength behind the word.

Junior chuckles. “Had to ask.” His teeth etch a line in my right cheek, making me flinch. “But let me know if you change your mind. I'd do anything to fuck this ass.”

Noted.

Before I can reply, he shoves his tongue into my slit. I lurch and quiver, my hips shifting on their own to fuck his face. I balance on my knees and Junior reads my body language, moving to position himself behind me. His cock presses hard against my crack, and I absolutely notice the way my anus puckers as he slides his tip across the opening on his way toward my pussy.

Junior enters me from behind. He rests his hands on my hips, clinging to me as he fills me to the hilt. “You're still so tight.”

In and out. Harder and faster. His body slaps against the back of my thighs. I struggle to hold myself up. My elbows turn to jelly, along with the rest of me, as orgasm builds in me again. I hang my head, moaning and aching for release.

Junior. Junior. Junior.

Finally, everything in me tightens. Climax crashes through me again and I smother myself with the nearest pillow. My entire body numbs to everything but pleasure, ignoring the discomfort in my muscles and joints. Before I can collapse from it all, Junior grips my hips and thrusts in me one more time, his final groans obvious. He pulls out. I feel his warm cum dripping out of me and even more spilling onto me as he jerks himself off.

I roll over weakly, still clenching the pillow beneath my head. With eyes closed, I take a dozen breaths, willing my heart to stop pounding, but that's easier said than done.

Daddy's gonna be so mad at me.

I chuckle to myself. It's not the first time in my life I've had that thought, and it sure as hell won't be the last.

"What?"

I open my eyes to find Junior lingering over me on his hands, his expression amused but curious. I must look like a crazy lady.

"Nothing," I answer, licking my lips. "Just feeling good, that's all."

He smirks. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

I reach out to him. I comb my fingers through his hair. He turns to kiss my wrist, my palm, my fingers, before lowering down to my lips again.

Oh, yeah.

Daddy's going to be pissed.

CHAPTER 24



JUNIOR

I draw a line along Alyssa's naked hip, tracing up and down for what must be the two-hundredth time. Neither of us seems to care, though.

Usually, I'd come up with an excuse at this point. *Tonight was fun, babe, but I have practice in the morning. I'll see you out.* Something plausible but strategic. Something that reminds them of who I am, and how this probably won't happen again.

But right now, the thought doesn't even cross my mind as I stare over at Alyssa. I'm lying here, looking into the stunning ocean currents she calls eyes, refusing to look at the clock because I know that doing so will put a limit on this moment.

"What?" she asks, smiling gently with her head on my pillow.

"Nothing," I say, letting my fingertips dance along her skin.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like it's just an *intermission*."

I laugh. "Maybe it is."

She props herself up on her elbow. "Bullshit."

"I told you I could rock you all night, Alyssa Pierce. You should have believed me."

"I stand corrected."

I shake my head and slide closer to her. "No, if you're standing, then I've done something wrong. Spread your legs again—"

She slaps me away. "Not so fast. I need a little more rest first."

"That's what I thought." I settle back, feeling a rush of satisfaction as she laughs.

“Oh...” She sits up. “Speaking of you doing things wrong...” I raise a confused brow as she crawls across the bed and reaches for my notebook on the desk, flashing me the most exquisite view of her tempting ass as she moves. “I checked over your math homework while I was waiting on you.”

“I thought you were only here for a few minutes before I got home,” I say, glancing at the pencil notches taking over my homework.

She clears her throat, ignoring the accusation as she points to the paper. “I think we need to go over the last chapter again because you keep—”

I snatch the notebook from her and toss it to the floor. “Not now.”

“But—”

“Ally...” I shift her onto her back and drop my lips to her breasts. “*Not now.*”

She smiles and exhales the tension from her muscles as I descend her body. “Okay... *tomorrow*, then.”

“Tomorrow is *Sunday*.”

“That’s the perfect day for studying.”

“When a guy fantasizes about his tutor riding him, a stern work ethic is *not* what he has in mind.”

“Get used to it, *Junior*. I said you’d learn it and I meant it.”

I kiss down her navel, sliding my tongue along her flavorful skin. “You know... you haven’t told me what you wanted in return for tutoring me.”

Her lips curl. “Oh, *that*.” She runs her fingers through my hair, quivering softly as my tongue inches even closer to her core. “Grab my bag.”

I reach for it, curious to know what she brought with her and what dirty things I can do to her with it.

She withdraws a book from the bag. “Page ninety-seven.”

I blink with confusion as she tosses it at me, but I do as she asks. “Okay...”

“Read Danny’s lines.”

My tongue twitches with disappointment. “What is this?”

She presents her hands. “I help you study geometry and you help me memorize my lines,” she says.

I chuckle at the book. “This wasn’t really what I had in mind.”

“I know.” Alyssa grins. “But you said you’d do whatever I wanted and *this* qualifies.”

“Does it?”

“Yes.” She sits back against the headboard, staring at me with

expectation. “I’m waiting, *Danny*.”

I sigh and look at the script, finding Danny’s first line at the top of the page. “If this is right, then why does it feel so wrong?”

She smiles at my stiff delivery but swings into her character. “It feels wrong because we don’t know any better,” she recites from memory. “You just need a little time to think about it like I have.”

“Nora, I don’t give a good goddamn what your head thinks.” I furrow my brow. “All I care about is what that beautiful heart of yours feels—” I drop the script. “This is *stupid*.”

“You said you’d do *anything*.”

“No, I mean... these lines. No one talks like this.”

“I asked you to read, not to think.”

“I don’t want to do *either* right now,” I hint, tossing the script off the bed.

She lunges forward, wincing as it slides along the floor. “Junior, that’s my only copy—”

I grab her arm and pull her toward me. “Right now, I’d rather be *moaning* or *grunting* or *tasting* — none of which require *reading* or *thinking*.”

She winks. “Maybe a *little* thinking.”

“I beg to differ, Ally,” I say, sliding down her body. “I can do some very good things to you without even thinking about it.”

I lick her sweet folds and her thighs twitch against my shoulders. She moans softly, her breaths growing more powerful with each lap I give her clit. I focus on it, drawing circles around it and adding pressure in all the right places until she’s squirming beneath me.

My mouth waters with every taste and I immerse myself in her, not caring how much of a mess she makes on my face. I reach up her body to squeeze her breasts, and her hips buck and grind on me.

Alyssa grabs my hair and digs her nails into my scalp. “Stick a finger in me.”

I do as she pleases, sliding my digit inside until I can’t anymore. She writhes against my hand, trembling wildly as I fuck her with it.

Her back arches, and she moans at the ceiling as she comes. Every piece of her quakes under me. Her moans squeak from her little throat, an adorable change from her usual deep, feminine tone.

Slowly she relaxes, gently twitching every few seconds as I kiss up to her neck.

She opens her eyes and slight panic crosses her face. “*Oh, my god*.” She

deflates, staring at my bedside clock. "My father's really gonna kill me now."

"He gives you a curfew?"

"It's *suggested*. But still, I'd rather not..."

"Rock the boat."

"Yeah."

I finally give in and check the time. It's two in the morning.

"Relax." I laugh, hoping to keep her in my bed for as long as possible.

"Stay here. The damage is already done."

She slides out from under me and reaches for her bag, but I squeeze her hand. "Junior, come on."

"Come on *what*?" I ignore her protest and pull her over me so she straddles my waist. Her wetness hugs my cock and I feel myself growing hard again.

She feels it, too. "*Junior... I have to go...*"

Fuck, I love the way she says my name.

"No, you don't."

I press myself against her glistening folds *and* she sighs with pleasure.

I sit up and wrap my hands around her naked curves. Her nipples pebble against my palms as I kiss her to taste the warm desire on her lips.

She melts in my arms, losing more of her will to leave with every hard inch of me she feels.

"What will it be, Ally?" I ask. "Are you coming or going?"

She smiles. "Why not both?"

"Correct answer."

I settle back against my pillows as she impales herself on me, instantly breathing a soft moan as the inches slide inside.

I take her with slow, upward thrusts and she lays her palms on my chest to hold herself up as she rides me. She matches my speed, grinding and purring with each buck of our hips.

Her pussy is still so tight around me, even after the hard fucking I already gave her tonight. I groan with each massaging grip, climbing that hill faster than usual, but if her eyes are any sign, she just might come before I do.

I slide a hand down her body and push my thumb against her sensitive clit to help her along.

She gasps. "Junior, don't stop..." I intensify the grind, drawing a sharp moan from the bottom of her lungs. "*Faster...*"

I oblige, flicking my thumb and pounding upward even harder. Her face

contorts into an expression of sinful agony with closed eyes and an open mouth.

“*Junior—!*”

Her body freezes in place above me and her inner muscles claim my cock with quick spasms, forcing me over the edge as her nails claw into my skin.

White light tears my vision apart, blinding me as I come with her. I pull out just in time, covering her navel with cum. She collapses forward to kiss me and our lips vibrate together with moans and grunts of satisfaction. I bury my nose in her hair to smell the mixture of her natural scent and her perfume and her shampoo — anything that will make me memorize every sensation of this moment.

Alyssa slides off me, her chest heaving up and down. “Okay...” she says after she catches her breath. “Now, I *definitely* have to go.”

I reach for the hand towel on my nightstand. She takes it from me with a grateful smile and cleans her belly off before getting dressed. I throw on my jeans to cover up with before I lead her out into the hallway. The house is dark and silent. Ty must still be out.

As we step outside onto the porch, I spot Ty’s car in the driveway. Or maybe he’s not. “I didn’t even hear him come in,” I say.

Alyssa’s round eyes grow wider in the dark. “You don’t think he heard *us*, do you?”

“Oh, he most definitely heard *you*.” She halts and smacks my shoulder. “I’m kidding! Ty’s the deepest sleeper I’ve ever met. I bring girls in and out of here all the time, he’s never complained.”

She pauses. “Oh, really?”

“That... did not come out right,” I choke. “I meant I *used to*—”

“Calm down, Junior.” She chuckles. “We both knew what this was.”

My body feels twenty pounds heavier. “Right,” I say. “We’re just having fun.”

“Exactly.” She pops up onto her toes and lays a quick peck on my cheek. “Bye, Junior. Library at twelve?”

“Library at twelve,” I confirm. “Bye, Ally.”

I linger on the porch until her car disappears from sight, but I try to pretend I’m not. I check inside the mailbox, even though I know it’s empty. I adjust the welcome mat because it’s about thirty degrees off-center.

Thirty degrees? I guess Alyssa was right when she said I’d actually learn something with her as my math tutor.

I step inside and run right into Ty's judgmental face.

"What *the fuck* do you think you're doing?" he asks, the whole truth flashing back at me.

"Checking the mail," I claim.

"At two in the morning?"

"Is that weird?"

Ty shakes his head. "Cut the crap. That was Alyssa Pierce, wasn't it?"

I scoff. "Come on, man. She's just my math tutor."

"Oh, okay..." His voice drips with sarcasm. "*Alyssa Pierce* was in your bedroom all night, moaning at you to *solve equations* harder and faster?"

"Okay, *fine*. You caught us. We're just having some fun. That's it."

"There's having fun with girls and then there's having fun with *Cary Pierce's daughter*," he says. "Only one of those things will get you kicked off the football team."

I laugh. "No one is going to kick *me* off the team, all right?"

"I hope not because, *unfortunately*, we need your ass." He steps back, his head sagging with disappointment. "Don't let a few late-night *study sessions* blow this entire season for the rest of us."

"I won't."

"Good."

Ty takes off back to his room, but I linger behind in the darkness for a few more minutes.

I can't really blame him for getting angry. Hell, I'd be just as pissed off if I were in his shoes. *Hands off Alyssa Pierce*. It's a simple instruction, but as Alyssa the Tutor could easily tell you, I'm not great at following directions.

But Alyssa and I are just having fun. She confirmed as much a few minutes ago. No strings attached. Just good, old-fashioned, casual sex.

When the coach told me to stay away from her, he could have meant not to *date* her. We're not dating, so we should be in the clear, right?

I slink back to my room and the temporary comfort the thought brings me disappears. The place still smells of her. That flower perfume lingers on the walls and my bedsheets. Her moans of pleasure and laughter still echo in my ears.

It could all come crashing down at any moment. The mere thought of that burns. Every ounce of victory and satisfaction in me fades, replaced by nagging guilt and doubt.

It doesn't change a damn thing, though.

I plop down onto my desk chair and twitch as something soft breaks my fall. I reach behind me and pull out that teddy bear from the arcade. It takes me back to that night and how cute she looked sitting in my car with it on her lap. It's just a stupid stuffed animal, but it makes me grin like a damn idiot every time I look at it.

I'd do it all again. I'd throw everything else away for a minute of her in my bed.

Does that make me an asshole?

Screw it.

I'll be an asshole.

CHAPTER 25



ALYSSA

What the hell was I thinking?

I had sex with Junior Morgan. My father's new protégé. I was off-limits. He was out of bounds. But we went and scored, anyway.

If that wasn't bad enough, we went and scored *without a condom*.

I sink a little lower into the passenger's seat, hopefully obscuring myself from view as a few young women enter the pharmacy hand-in-hand. One of them is wearing a Chicago North Bearhawks sweater. If she's really a sports fan, then it's a good chance she knows who Cary Pierce is and, by extension, she'll know who I am, too. All it takes is for someone to recognize me looking shifty in the family planning section for the rumor mill to ignite.

Finally, Grant emerges from the entrance doors and casually walks back to the car.

"Did they have it?" I ask before he even lowers himself inside.

He passes me the plastic bag. I look inside, exhaling with relief at the lone box of emergency contraceptive.

"Thank you," I say. "Sorry about this."

"Don't worry about it," he says as he fastens his seat belt. "Believe it or not, this is not the first time I've done this for somebody."

"You're a good friend, Grant," I say, meaning every syllable.

"I know." He smiles. "So you and the quarterback finally..."

"Yeah."

"And you didn't use protection?"

"We meant to," I say. "It was there. He had condoms. They were *right there*, ready to be used. We just..." I scold myself with closed eyes. "I'm so stupid."

“Hey, man, I get it. If Junior Morgan wanted to pump me full of cum, I’d let him do it, too.”

I grimace. “*Grant.*”

“What? Is that *not* what we’re talking about here?”

“I mean... yeah. It is.” I sigh, letting it go. “I can’t let this happen again.”

“Just use the condoms next time,” he says with a shrug. “You’ll be fine.”

“No, I mean there won’t be a next time. I’m ending this.”

He snorts. “Oh, no, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am. Once was enough. I can’t risk my father finding out.”

“Do you really think once was enough for Junior?”

“Once is *always* enough for Junior, isn’t it? He’s a player, in your own words. He’s hit it, now it’s time to quit it. He won’t mind.”

Grant tilts his head. “Why are the pretty ones always so dumb?”

“What?”

“Alyssa, the man watched our audition.”

“So?”

“He woke up at the asscrack of dawn on a Saturday morning and rushed to campus just to see the look on your face when you got the part.”

“And?”

He exhales. “And I don’t think he would have done all of that if he didn’t care about you.” He mimes an inch between his thumb and forefinger. “Just a *little* bit.”

I scoff. “He cared about getting laid. That’s all. It was always about the chase.”

“Somehow, I’m not sure anymore.”

“Well, you don’t know him.”

“And you do?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” He presents his hands. “I yield.”

“Thank you.”

“But the next time you see him,” he says, “and the two of you make eye contact and his hungry eyes look you up and down and your heart flutters in your chest and you take the first opportunity you can to get alone together just so you can sneak one little kiss but that kiss is so mind-blowing that you feel it deep down in your knees and the only thing keeping you upright is his strong arms wrapped around you—”

“*Grant.*”

“You’ll think of me.”

“Doubtful.”

He starts the engine. “Yeah,” he mutters, looking smug. “You will.”

“No,” I say, meaning it. “Tomorrow, I’m going to remove myself from this situation. I’m going to tell him it’s over and that he should find himself a new tutor.”

“Why wait?”

“What?”

“Why wait?” he asks again. “If you’re so sure, then end it now. Text him.”

I twitch. “No.”

“No?”

“You...” I stutter. “You can’t break up with somebody over text, Grant. It’s rude.”

“If he’s really just a player, then yes, you can. It’s practically expected.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever. Just get me home, please.”

Thankfully, he gives it up. “I will, but one more thing. It’s very important.”

“What?”

Grant looks at me, his gaze briefly falling to the plastic bag. “Are you okay?” he asks.

I smile. “Yes, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Good.” He pats my knee before facing forward, then he pauses again. “One more question. It’s just as important.”

I sigh. “What?”

“You wanna get some Taco Bell?”

“Oh, *hell* yes,” I answer as I fasten my seat belt.



“It’s over,” I whisper to myself as I enter the library.

I’m going to tell Junior that it’s over.

We had fun. A lot of fun.

“But it’s over,” I say again as I cross the lobby toward the stairs.

I'm early for our twelve o'clock study session. I barely slept last night, trying to find the right words. It shouldn't be this hard, though, right? It was just a casual fling. A total coach's daughter with benefits situation. It should not be so difficult for me to look him in the eye and say, "*This was fun. Bye now.*"

Why do I care this much?

I reach the second floor with those two words still fresh on my tongue. *It's over. It's over. It's...*

Junior.

I spot him before he sees me. He's already here, sitting on a couch outside the study rooms with his phone. The door to room B is closed. Occupied. At least I'll have another few extra minutes to figure this shit out.

Why do I care this much?

Junior doesn't care this much. Grant is wrong about that. Junior Morgan only wanted what I so enthusiastically gave him last night. There are hundreds of young girl fishes in the campus sea, and he'll be more than eager to make his way to the next one.

Junior looks up. He sees me standing at the top of the stairs. We make eye contact. His gaze drifts downward, taking me in. My heart flutters.

Fuck.

He smiles. It's a brief smile. A sweet smile. One made for me.

I realize I'm smiling, too.

The door to Study Room B opens. Two guys walk out, their backpacks stuffed full and balanced on their backs. Junior rises from his chair and quickly strides toward the open room to claim it before someone else can.

I realize I'm still standing in the same spot. My heart is racing. *Aching. Begging* me to step forward. A deep urge takes hold of me and I forget the two words I came here to say.

A phantom thread pulls me in his direction, forcing me to enter the study room. As soon as I do, I close the door behind us, blocking out the world. It's just him and me now. Me and Junior Morgan.

He looks at me, still smiling, and opens his mouth to say something.

I kiss him before he can. Our lips come together, firing a shockwave through my body. My knees tremble, but Junior wraps his arms around me and holds me against him. He kisses me back. We cling to each other in the silent room, our hearts beating together.

This isn't over.

It's barely even begun.

"Dammit, Grant," I whisper.

Junior tilts his head, confused. "What?"

"Nothing."

I kiss him again, leaning further into his arms as he wraps them even tighter around me.

CHAPTER 26



ALYSSA

OCTOBER

“*I*t’s over.”

I say it without blinking, without hesitation, and Junior stares at me from the other side of his bed with a blank expression on his face.

“I don’t accept that,” he replies.

I try not to look down at his naked abs. It’s a distraction I don’t need right now. Thankfully, his bedsheets obscures his groin, but if he even sneezed just right, it would fall down to expose his—

Focus, Alyssa.

This is important.

“I don’t care what you accept,” I whisper, forcing my eyes down to my shirt — or I should say *his* over-sized T-shirt that I’ve claimed as my own. “It’s over, we’re done. I can’t do this anymore.”

He sits up. “You’ve sung this song before, Nora. What makes this different than any other time you’ve run away from us in the last ten years?”

“It’s...” I clamp my jaw in frustration. “It’s the... *shit*. Line.”

Junior smirks and twists his wrist to flick the script open. “It’s the first time I’ve thought more with my head—”

“More with my head and not my heart!” I complete the line. “*Dammit*. Why can’t I remember that one?”

He tosses the script down. “From the top again?”

I sigh with amused frustration. “You’re not even looking at the script.”

“I don’t need to anymore.”

“You have it memorized?”

“I guess.”

I kick his chest with my bare foot. “I can’t believe you know this scene better than I do.”

Junior cradles my foot in his hands, putting soft pressure against my arch. “Well, maybe if you didn’t end up with my dick in your mouth every time you came over to run lines, you’d know it by now.”

My jaw drops, and he laughs. “Wow. You know what? I think you’re right, Junior. Maybe we *shouldn’t* hook up anymore.”

He drops my foot and points a finger at me. “*I didn’t say that*,” he argues. “I did not say that.”

“I see the light now.” I add more emotion to my voice. “Sex is a *bad* thing. It’s naughty and horrible for productivity.”

“But that’s why it’s fun.”

“*It’s over*,” I say, taking it from the top.

He smiles and leans forward, letting the sheet gently slip off his naked groin. “I don’t accept that.”

“I don’t care what you accept...” I slide beneath him as he crawls up my body. “It’s over, we’re done. I can’t do this anymore.”

Junior shifts between my willing thighs. “You’ve sung this song before, Nora...” He crushes his lips against mine, and I stretch toward his condom stash to grab one off the top. “What makes this different than any other time you’ve run away from us in the last ten years?”

“It’s the first time I’ve thought more with my head and not my heart,” I say, rolling the latex onto his stiff shaft. “This is the right thing for both of us, Danny. I know it.”

He adjusts my knees, pulling me closer to align us. “If this is right... why does it feel so wrong?”

I moan as he pushes inside, stretching me out with every thick inch of him. “It feels wrong...” He rocks me with quick, firm thrusts. I twitch with pleasure. “It feels... *oh, fuck*, Junior, that feels good.”

“That’s not your line.”

“I don’t care.” I raise my knees and he drapes them over his shoulders the way I like it. His tip presses against my most sensitive spot and my back arches off the mattress as I squirm on him.

Junior grins down at me. “Nora,” he continues, keeping hard, consistent thrusts, “I don’t give a good goddamn what your head thinks. All I care about

is what that beautiful heart of yours feels.” He leans down, flashing his best, melodramatic eyes at me. “It feels the same as mine. I love you. I’ve always loved you since the day I saw you and I *refuse* to let you go.”

I laugh from the bottom of my gut. “You fucking show-off!”

He chuckles, breaking character. “I think I may have missed my calling with this acting stuff.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think you’re handsome enough to be an actor.”

He halts his thrust. “Oh, those are some fighting words, Alyssa Pierce.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

His eyes narrow, firing down at me with intense, playful revenge. “Okay, then—”

I laugh out loud as he takes hold of me and spins me around onto my stomach.

He’s back inside of me in seconds, entering me from behind as he pins me to the bed. I tremble, feeling the weight of his body against my back. He takes my hair in his fist and pulls my head up to expose my neck for his bites while pounding me hard and fast.

I grip the pillow beneath my head, moaning into it with each breath. His lips graze my ear and his warm touch tickles my spine.

“Are you going to take it back?” he teases, grinding me a little harder.

Fire burns inside, almost ready to explode. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing but pleasure falls from my tongue.

“*Ally...*”

He stops thrusting, and I whine beneath him. “No, keep going—”

“Take it back and I’ll let you come...”

I grit my teeth in dissatisfaction. “You son-of-a—”

He twists my neck, guiding my face back to kiss me. “Take it back and I’ll make you come all over this cock.”

I whimper. “I take it back—”

“*Take what back?*”

“*You’re handsome.*” I laugh. “Born for the stage.”

He slaps my ass. “Good girl.”

The pleasant pain charges through my lower back. I moan as he resumes his domination of me. He has me so close again within minutes, and he groans with me as he races me to the edge.

“I want to own this tight little body.” He wraps my hair tighter around his fist. I kindle at the deep growl of his voice. “Let me own you...”

I moan, fueled by his perfect, dirty mouth. He reaches for my hips and guides me to raise my ass, sending his cock deeper. I gasp at the extra pleasure. “Right there! *Don’t stop.*”

He bites my neck, etching a line into my skin. “I’m not stopping until you’re coming on my dick,” he teases into my ear, “and then I’m going to come all over your ass.”

He reaches around me to cradle my clit between two fingers, rubbing and fucking me until I’m purring like a damn kitten in heat.

“You’re mine, Ally,” he says. I spasm with lust. “Tell me that no one else makes you feel like this.”

“*No one—!*” I gasp, barely able to speak.

Climax takes over, crashing around me like a fierce ocean wave and there’s nothing I can do but lie here and drown in it.

Junior kisses my neck as I come, chuckling softly in my ear as he does every time I submit to him.

I settle against the pillow and he pushes off. I hear him tear the condom off before his bare tip touches my ass, dripping and shaking as he strokes himself with a tight fist.

He lets out a final grunt and drops his cock, letting it twitch against his thigh. “*Goddamn*, I love this beautiful ass...” he says, slapping me again with his open palm.

“It’s not *that* impressive,” I say.

“Never tone down your strengths.” He raises a finger at me. “Even if you have to fake it.”

I cringe. “Quoting my father probably isn’t the best thing to do after coming on my ass, Junior.”

“Shit, you’re right. *Sorry.*” He gives my cheek another tap before climbing off the bed and retrieving a rag from the nightstand to clean me up with.

I lie still, watching the sweat glisten on his skin as he moves across the room. “Did you mean what you said?”

“About what?”

“About owning me?”

“I say that because it’s what you like to hear,” he says as he wipes me down. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but every time I say it, you come

within seconds. I certainly have.”

“But did you mean it?”

He folds up the towel and tosses it across the room, easily landing it in his laundry basket in the corner. His eyes trail up my body to mine, but he quickly looks away. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

I shift onto my side. “Why not?”

He hesitates.

“Answer the question, Junior.”

“Yes, of course. I meant it,” he spits. “But no one could ever own you, Ally. That’s why I want to.”

I let the words sink in and my brow furrows.

“Look—” he says, overruling my chance to react. “Don’t read into that. What we’ve got going on right now is more than enough for me.”

I push the disappointment aside. “Is it?”

“Yeah. I enjoy having fun with you. There’s no reason that should change.”

I nod, playing the part. “I agree.”

His eyes shift to his bedside clock, and he sighs. “I gotta get to practice.”

“Hope I didn’t wear you out too much,” I say with a grin.

“Eh.” He shrugs. “That ass is always worth it.”

“What are you doing later?”

He snatches a fresh pair of underwear from his dresser. “I need to study for tomorrow’s geometry test.”

“Need me to help you?”

He laughs. “No amount of real studying will happen if I say yes to that.”

“Decent point.”

Junior steps into his pants and wanders over to the bed to lean over me. “But I’m sure you can change my mind with the right *incentive*...” He pecks my shoulder and travels upward, grazing his lips on my skin until he reaches my mouth.

I lay my finger over his chin, blocking him from kissing me. “No, you’re right. We should take a little break. You have a rough weekend coming up and you need to stay focused.”

His cheeks turn pale white. “*The Homecoming game*.”

“You guys are going to kick some serious ass,” I say, punching his arm. “Trust me.”

“This team *slaughtered* us last year,” he recalls. “I’m pretty sure we

ended the game with negative five points — which you might think is impossible, but we managed.”

“You’ve won every game so far this season. If anyone is shaking in their cleats, it’s *them*. Not you.”

“Still...”

“I’ll tell you what...” I sit up, leaning in a little closer to kiss his neck. “How about I give you some *serious* incentive?”

Junior considers. “What kind of incentive?”

“Well, if you guys win the Homecoming game *and* you ace this test tomorrow...” I lick his earlobe. “*I’ll let you put it anywhere.*”

He flinches. “Anywhere?”

“*Anywhere.*”

“Including—?”

“Uh-huh.”

He forcefully exhales. “That is some *serious* incentive.”

I slip off the bed and grab my panties off the floor. “I mean, if you think that’s too easy, I can make it more difficult.”

“No.” He stands up. “Your terms are reasonable.”

“Are you sure?”

He watches me dress, his eyes blissfully riding my curves as I hide them under my skirt. “I got this.”

“Good.” I toss his over-sized shirt off and put on my blouse. “Have fun at practice. Text me if you run into any study issues later.”

Junior slides out in front of me. “What if I get a B on the test *and* we win the game?”

I smile. “All or nothing, Junior.”

“B-plus?”

“It’s an A or you get no A.”

“*Shit.*” He laughs. “That was clever.”

I pop up onto my toes to kiss his cheek. “Bye, Junior.”

“Bye, Ally.”

I scan the street for any witnesses before stepping outside, a habit I’ve developed since the first time I strode down Shanty Row weeks ago. And, just like every other time, I tell myself that this will be the last time.

Stupid girl.

I used to hear it in Grant’s voice, but now it’s all me.

I can’t resist Junior Morgan. I wish I could, I truly do, but something

happens to me when he's around. I tell myself it's done. It's over. We've messed around long enough, but it's time to stop before anyone else finds out about us. Then, I open my mouth to tell Junior and... well...

He puts his dick in it.

I submit like the *good girl* he says I am.

Welcome back to square one, Alyssa. Population, you. And *only* you, because it's just sex, it's always just been sex to Junior Morgan and, despite Grant's instance to the opposite, he's done nothing to show otherwise. We go over his homework. We run my lines. We fuck. Repeat. We haven't even been on another date since the arcade. I tell myself that's just because we're both busy, but I know the real reason.

He's already getting everything he wants from me.

I climb into my car as Junior steps outside to make his way back to campus. He throws a quick wave in my direction and I return the gesture. I think to blow him a kiss, but that's not what we are.

We're having fun. That's all this is. Just good, old-fashioned, casual sex. A quick wave is justified. A blown kiss means something we're not.

I can keep pretending that doesn't bother me. I'm an actress, after all.

The show must go on.

CHAPTER 27



JUNIOR

“*P*ack it in, guys!” Coach shouts. “We’re done.”

I pick myself up off the grass. That last tackle knocked the wind out of me. Not as much as Alyssa promising me her ass this weekend, but enough to make me lightheaded.

“*Hey, Junior!*”

I spit out my mouth guard. “Yeah, Coach?”

He nods as I pass by him toward the locker rooms. “Excellent hustle out there today. Whatever action you’re getting at night, keep it up.”

I grin. “Oh, I will.”

He waves me off and I feel someone bump my shoulder. It’s Ty, of course, casting me a vicious side-eye through his face guard, but his lips still twitch with amusement. He hasn’t said a word to anybody about me and Alyssa, despite his protests to the relationship entirely.

Relationship. I can’t really use that word, can I?

I mean, I suppose we have *relations*, but that’s not the same thing. There’s no acceptable label for what Alyssa and I are — at least, not one I’d openly admit to my mother or anything. Alyssa hasn’t exactly showed that she wants more than what we are, and I’m not about to screw up a good thing.

So, I’m keeping my mouth shut and my notifications on.

Got an hour to help me run lines?

That text is all it takes to get me hard now.

I shower off the sweat and dirt, listening to the echoing banter of my teammates in the crowded locker room. Sometimes I hear the clack of her shoes beneath it all and I remember that first day. I remember the bolt of

lightning that shot through me the moment I heard her voice inching closer to me. I could hardly move. Or think. Or even breathe. I had to have her. I had to feel her little body against mine. I had to pin her against the lockers and—

“Hey, Junior, you coming or what?”

I snap out of it as I spot John staring at me from the next stall over. “What?” I ask.

“Delta Xi party,” he says, running a hand through his shaggy, brown hair. “One last blowout before two days of clean eats and protein shakes in prep for the game.”

“Oh...” I twist the shower off and wipe the water from my eyes. “No, sorry. I gotta study tonight.”

“Study?”

I wrap a towel around my waist. “I have a test tomorrow morning.”

He laughs at me and follows me between the lockers. “You don’t have to study. You play *football*.”

“Maybe you don’t, Kirby,” I say, “but I need to ace this one to...” I notice Coach lingering outside the back office. He pauses, not even glancing at us, but I can tell he’s listening in. “To keep my grades up.”

“And to please that little tutor of yours, I bet.”

I blink. “What?”

“Oh, come on...” He nudges my ribs. “Why else would you have gone all *academic* this semester? There’s a sexy tutor, right?”

I hesitate. “I have a tutor, yeah, but she’s not—”

“Is she hot?” he continues. “She must put out if she’s got you hitting the books so much.”

I force my reply down my throat. Now isn’t the time for this.

Before, I would have spilled every bean I had about a girl. What she sounded like. How tight she was. Where every little birthmark or freckle was on her body. But now?

I don’t even want to mention it’s even happening — like it’s none of their business at all. That’s between me and Alyssa and it should stay that way.

An odd feeling settles in my gut, but I push it away.

“She’s a tutor,” I say.

“That’s a yes.” John grins. “You should give me her number. I’ve got a D that sure could use a little *extra attention*.”

The room erupts with whoops and cackles while John accepts his well-deserved high-fives, but I’m not laughing. The thought of Alyssa talking to

any of these bastards makes my vision turn red.

“So, what’s her name?”

I grab a shirt from my locker. “She’s not available.”

“Oh, come on.” He punches my shoulder and my blood boils. “We’re a team. We can take turns with her.”

I spin to face him. “*Back off,*” I growl. “I said she’s not available.”

His expression changes, shifting into something fierce and predatory. “My god.”

“*What?*”

“I never thought I’d see the day.” He looks me up and down. “Junior Morgan is whipped as fuck.”

“Say that again,” I warn. “*Johnny.*”

John smirks. “What, you think you can take me, Morgan?”

“Pretty confident I can.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“*Hey!*”

All heads swivel in Coach’s direction.

“Hurry and clear out,” he barks.

I back up, retreating to my locker to grab the rest of my clothes, ignoring the murmurs echoing throughout the locker room. John lingers for a moment, but I avoid his gaze until he leaves.

Where the hell did that come from?

John isn’t just some jerk. He’s one of my best friends. We never throw down like that.

I feel a light pat on my back as Ty passes by me on his way out.

“Delta Xi?” he says.

A friendly battle-cry. A subtle show of support.

Thanks, buddy.

“*Delta Xi,*” I repeat.

I finish getting dressed alone.

“Junior.”

Before I get the chance to leave, Coach steps out of his office.

“Yeah, Coach?” I ask, pausing.

“The team comes first. Nothing is more important,” he says, his arms crossed over his chest. “Not even a pretty girl. I don’t want to see you picking fights with the team like that again. She’s not worth it.”

I bite my tongue. Would he be saying that if he knew it was Alyssa?

“Yeah,” I say, swallowing it down. “You’re right. It won’t happen again.”

He disappears into his office and closes the door.

I see his point. If the team isn’t on the same page, we don’t play well together on the field. It’s my job as quarterback to lead the offense. I can’t do that effectively if they hate me.

Maybe I should make an appearance at this party, after all. Just an hour to smooth things over with the guys before heading to the library to do a few practice problems Alyssa assigned me.

It couldn’t hurt, right?

CHAPTER 28



JUNIOR

*A*ctually, this might hurt a little.

I pinch the ping-pong ball between my thumb and pointer finger, gently rolling it as I line up my shot. Dozens of eyes lock on me, but I do my best to block them out. Just like the field, it's just me and the end zone or, in this case, me and the red plastic cup on John's side of the table.

If I make it, I win.

If I miss, I lose.

For a split second, my concentration breaks. I look at John.

His brow rises, complimenting his pre-victory smirk.

Fuck it, I think.

Let him have this one.

I toss the ball, missing the rim by a mere centimeter.

The crowd erupts with joyful applause, but they do that no matter who wins beer pong. This is Alpha Delta Xi, after all.

Everybody wins in this house.

I raise my cup to John. "Delta Xi," I say.

He does the same to me. "Delta Xi."

"Delta Xi!" the crowd shouts.

We all take a drink. This one hits me a little harder than the last one. I did not plan on drinking this much, but I knew this was the best way to patch things up with John. The library is open until one. Still plenty of time left.

I step around the table. "Good game," I say to John.

He bows. "Good game."

"I'm sorry about earlier."

"Don't worry about it."

“We cool?”

He presents his hands. “We never weren’t. But she must be something if you’re willing to throw a game in front of all these promising young women,” he says with a knowing grin.

I chuckle. “Yeah, she is.”

“Well, I apologize, too. I said some uncool things back there.” He glances around. “Is she here tonight?”

“Here? No, she wouldn’t be caught dead in a place like this.”

“Damn. I’ll just stay curious then, I guess.”

“I guess you will.”

“Gotta say, I’m not too broken up about Junior Morgan being off-the-market.” He raises his cup. “Less competition.”

He’s not wrong.

“Long time no see, Junior Morgan.”

We turn and look up to find Samantha Jaxx balancing on the back of the couch behind us, her cleavage hovering an inch away from my chin.

“Hey, Samantha,” I say.

“Sup, Sam?” John greets her.

“Hello, boys.” She plops her arms over the back of my shoulders, clinging tightly to my neck. “You two in a tiff?”

“No,” he says. “We’re good.”

I shrug in agreement.

Samantha ignores the answer. “Because I was just telling Tammy — y’all remember Tammy?”

“Yes, we remember Tammy,” I say, wishing to distance myself from her potent perfume, but the scent in her breath tells me I’m about all that’s standing between her and hitting the floor in a drunken clump.

“I was just telling Tammy that I can’t stand to see my boys at each other’s throats like this.”

She fists my hair and yanks my head to the side to expose my neck.

I laugh awkwardly as John chortles. “Samantha...”

“Want me to take you home?” Her hand travels across my chest. “I’ve missed you...”

I pause with sudden clarity. Last year, I wouldn’t have hesitated to engage in a sloppy drunken romp with Samantha Jaxx. But tonight?

“No,” I say.

“Oh, come on. Don’t you miss me, too?” she whines.

“No,” I say again.

I really didn’t.

“*Boo!*” She leans in. “Let me lick your wounds—”

Her tongue grazes my earlobe. I shift out from under her. She instantly plummets, but John and I easily catch her and stand her back up.

“How many have you had tonight?” John asks her.

“None yet.”

“*Drinks*, Sam. Not men.”

Samantha giggles loudly, and she folds herself into his arms.

I release her as John holds her up on his own. “You should get her back to Tammy,” I say.

“Good call.” He adjusts his hold, pushing her blonde hair out of her eyes as he leads her forward. “Come on, Barbie. No more party.”

“Do you miss me, too, Johnny?”

“Maybe,” he says, not at all bothered by her using the nickname. John always did let the ladies get away with anything they wanted.

“Want to go home with me?”

“Depends. How quickly can you sober up?”

Samantha tries to snap. She fails. “Like *that*.”

“Well, we’ll see. Let’s find Tammy first, all right...?”

“Oh, a threesome!”

“No.” He pauses. “Well...”

I take an empty seat on the couch as her cackles carry over the party. If my rejection stung her, she certainly isn’t showing it.

Have fun, you two. Or three.

A body plops onto the loveseat beside me.

“Saving yourself for me, Lover Boy?”

I laugh. Of course. “Hello, Grant.”

His brows bounce as he takes a sip from his plastic cup. “Is your roommate here tonight?”

“He’s around.”

“*Good*.”

Grant scans the crowd like a ravenous hawk. I think to gently remind him once again that Ty doesn’t play for his team, but there’s no use at this point. The man’s determined.

Instead, I glance at my phone to check the time and find a new text from Alyssa.

How's the studying going?

I've been here for two hours longer than I intended. I've done what I came here to do, so it's time to hit the library.

I tap out a simple reply.

Good.

There's no sense in getting into details with her now. "I'm gonna head out," I say to Grant.

"So soon?"

"I have some studying to do." I pause at his smiling face. "Hey, Grant."

"Yes, my love?"

"Can you... maybe not mention to Alyssa that I was here?"

"Oh." He blinks. "Was I not supposed to?"

My chest sinks. "What?"

He flashes me his phone. I read his most recent message to Alyssa.

Lover Boy is here. Where you at?

Her reply is brief, but it cuts me like glass.

He is?

"When did she send that?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "Few minutes ago."

Well, shit.

I reach for my phone. Alyssa knew I was here when she asked how the studying was going, meaning that my passive, simple, no-details-required reply wasn't as innocent as I thought.

I lied to her. She caught me in it.

"Bye, Grant."

I push through the crowd of drunken Northies, dodging a few handsy Beta Kappa Beauties as I go.

I call Alyssa as soon as I step outside. After five or six rings, I heave a sigh. "Pick up, Ally..."

The phone vibrates with a new text message from her.

I guess that incentive was too easy after all.

I call her again, but she doesn't answer.

"Dammit."

She thinks she's not a priority to me, but that's not the case at all. I retrieve my backpack from my van parked on the street and send a reply.

Meet me at the library. I'll explain everything.

The last thing I want is for Alyssa to think I lied to her. Which I did, yes,

admittedly, but it's far from what she must think right now. For all she knows, I knew about the party earlier today and just didn't bother to tell her about it. She thinks I went to it and blew off studying because being the star quarterback is more important to me than acing a math test, but it's not. It's

Holy shit.

Who am I?

Maybe John was right. I *am* whipped as fuck.

Getting an A on this test doesn't just mean I'm one step closer to ravaging Alyssa's body in fun, new ways. While that excites me to no end, the real reason I want to do well is that it would make her *happy*. She works so hard at making sure I stay off academic probation. I don't want to let her down.

I sit down at the table in our study room and pull out my geometry book. Every few minutes, I check my phone. No new messages. No missed calls.

I don't really blame her at all.

CHAPTER 29



ALYSSA

I walk out of class and run right into Grant holding yet another cup of coffee cart coffee.

I heave a thick sigh as I take it from him. “He better be paying you to deliver these.”

“He is.”

Grant spins my cup around to show me the words written on the side.

Buzz buzz.

I retrieve my phone from my bag as the text message vibrates it.

Library. Second floor. Study room B. Now.

“Think you’ll actually go this time?” Grant asks, taking a sip from his own cup.

I inhale the strong scent of black coffee. This is the fifth cup in the last two days Grant has hand-delivered to me after class — all courtesy of Junior Morgan.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Or you can keep this up for a while longer. Three more trips to the coffee cart and I’ll be able to afford that jacket I saw at the mall last week.”

I give a short laugh. “In that case, I might wait it out.”

“In all seriousness, though.” He squares his shoulders. “Cut the guy some slack.”

“Why?”

“Because he did nothing wrong.”

I blink. “He asked you to lie for him, Grant.”

“He asked me *not to mention* it to you. That populates the gray area between truth and lies, in my opinion.”

“Hey, the guy can do what he wants. It’s not like we’re dating or anything.”

Grant chuckles. “Okay. Let’s try that one again. This time, *with feeling*.”

“Shut up.”

I walk down the hall, but Grant stays close.

“I’m just saying, maybe you should *re-evaluate* that last part,” he says. “Beta Kappas were throwing themselves at him all night and he politely declined them all faster than that retail hag and my credit card.”

“I will happily buy you that jacket *myself*, Grant.” I laugh. “You can stop hinting at it.”

“Yay! Friendship!” He holds up his hand and I give him a high-five. “Look, just go talk to him. Okay? Either put him down gently or make up. I don’t enjoy seeing you this miserable.”

“I am not miserable.”

He arches his brow at me. I suppose I can’t argue with it. It hasn’t even been two whole days and I already miss Junior. Late-night phone calls. Hidden texts. Impromptu study sessions.

“He declined them, huh?” I ask.

Grant nods. “Let him explain what happened in his own words. If you don’t like it, then we’ll sit across the quad and throw shade at him from now until graduation. It’ll be fun.”

I try not to laugh, but it’s impossible not to love Grant’s sassy side. “Fine,” I say. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“*Thank you*,” he says. “You just earned me another twenty bucks.”

“*What—*” He takes off in the other direction before I can finish. “Traitor!”

“Bye, Alyssa!”

“*Brutus!*”

My phone tickles my palm with a new message.

Please.



I push the door open to study room B.

Junior immediately drops his phone and stands up from his chair. “Hey.” Surprise crosses his face. “You came.”

I close the door and lean against it. “Well, someone has to stop Grant from cleaning you out.”

He smiles. “It’s a worthy investment.”

I stand still and wait, unsure whether I should ask questions or if I should just let him speak. Despite everything we’ve been through and done to each other, this is the first time there’s ever been an awkwardness between us and I fucking hate it. All over a stupid party.

“I’m sorry,” he says, breaking the silence.

“For what?”

“For lying to you, to start.”

“Why did you?”

“I don’t know,” he says, thinking hard. “I guess I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

I pause, feeling a light flutter in my gut. If cocky bastards everywhere needed a poster child, Junior Morgan would be the instant front-runner. I’ve never gotten the impression that he cared at all about what I think of him.

“Why would I be disappointed in you?” I ask. “You went to a *party*. That’s your thing.”

“I was supposed to be studying,” he says. “I was on my way to the library when I got your text asking how it was going. Rather than explain the whole story, I said it was going good. I didn’t know that Grant had already told you I was there.”

“Junior — party, study, fuck, kill — *I don’t care*. You can do whatever you want. The one thing I don’t get is why you didn’t mention the party when I asked what you were doing that night.”

He takes a step forward. “I wasn’t going to go to the party, but the team invited me at the last minute and when I said I needed to study, John and I fought about you and I felt like I needed to make it right with—”

“Wait, you fought about *me*?” Unease rises in my chest. “Why were you fighting about *me*?”

“Not you, *specifically*. But with how much I study nowadays, he kind of figured out that I have a tutor.”

“Why does that mean you have a tutor?”

“What else would make a guy like *me* suddenly care about my grades, Ally?”

“Okay.” I nod slowly, seeing the logic in their reasoning. “But why would a tutor cause a fight? Why would Kirby even care?”

He opens his mouth to answer, but hesitates. “Because... he...”

His eyes fall to the floor between us.

I sigh with annoyance. “He *what*, Junior?”

He keeps his head down. “He wanted to *borrow* you and I got a little defensive.”

My lips twitch at the red in his cheeks. “You...” I push the chuckle down. “You defended me?”

“Yes.”

“Like...” I exhale a quick laugh and his head jerks up. “You defended *my* honor?”

He narrows his eyes. “He was out of line. Coach was, too. He said you weren’t worth starting fights over.”

My smile drops. “He said that?”

“Yeah, but...” Junior shifts on his feet. “I’m sure if he knew I was defending *you*, he wouldn’t have said it.”

I nod, but I don’t believe a word of it. “So, they still don’t know about us?”

He shakes his head. “John and I made up at the party, and I confirmed that I was *involved* with my tutor, but I didn’t say it was you. The only one who knows is Ty, but he’s not saying anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“If he was going to tell somebody, he would have by now. Trust me.”

I take a deep breath, feeling better but still annoyed — especially at my father’s dismissive remarks. Daughter or not, he obviously doesn’t give a shit about treating women with respect. Never has.

“Ally...” Junior takes a step forward and lays his hands on my arms. “Are we okay? Please tell me we’re okay. I’m officially out of cash.”

Small blooms of comfort travel up my body, reacting to his touch. “Of course, we’re okay,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You defended my honor.”

“Good.” He picks up his phone. “Now that *that* nonsense is settled, I wanted to show you *this*.”

I try to sneak a peek while he taps and swipes, but he tilts the screen away from me. “What is it?”

“The TA posted our test grades this morning.”

I step closer. “Already?”

“Yup.”

I fidget with anticipation. “*And?*”

He finally turns the phone to show me. My jaw drops.

“*Ninety-two?!*” I snatch the phone from his hand. “Junior, that’s awesome!”

“Best damn math grade I’ve ever gotten *in my life*. All thanks to my lovely tutor.”

“I had nothing to do with it.”

“Bullshit.”

“This was all you, Junior.”

“It was *us*,” he says. “I never would have had it in me without you... well... letting me *in* you.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Wait...” I pinch and zoom.

“What?”

“Just making sure you didn’t manipulate this.”

He takes the phone back. “It’s *real*, I swear.”

“I know. I’m proud of you.”

“Good.” He leans in, chewing on his lip. “Now that *the hard part* is over, I suggest you pick up the biggest bottle of lube you can find, Alyssa Pierce.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Uh-huh...” He grabs my arm and tugs me toward him, twirling me around. I place my hands on the table in front of us. “Because I’m going to own that field tomorrow and then I’m going to take you home with me... and I’m going to own that ass, too.”

I swallow, instantly throbbing at his words. “Don’t get too *cocky*, Junior,” I whisper, craning my head back to look at him. “This team *slaughtered* you last year, remember?”

“Oh, they won’t this time,” he says, dripping with confidence. He inches forward, pressing himself against my rear, and I melt for him. His hand slides up my thigh and disappears beneath my skirt. “Cross my heart.”

I grow tense as his hand slides between my cheeks. He kisses my neck, breathing heavily against my skin as he rubs my tightness.

I let out a soft moan. “Let me feel it...”

He doesn’t ask questions, nor does he deny me.

His zipper falls. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes.” I turn to feel his lips on mine, but he refuses my kiss.

Junior smiles and pushes his tip against the entrance...

He lets go, and it falls away from me.

I gasp. “Wait, more—”

“No...” he says. “No, you’ll take it when I want you to take it, Ally. I own you like I own that field every weekend. Say it.”

My core flinches, forever manipulated by his perfect, dirty mouth. “You own me.”

He spans me once and steps away, pushing himself back into his zipper. “We’ll continue this tomorrow night.”

I lower my skirt back down. “Maybe we will.”

“Meet me at my place after the game?”

“Actually...” I spin around, laying my skirt down. “We have an early rehearsal tomorrow, which means I’m free to *attend* the game.”

He blinks. “Really?”

“I may only catch the second half, but that’s the only part that really matters, anyway.”

His eyes narrow. “You’re going just to psyche me out, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“It’ll take a lot more than that to rattle me on the field, Ally. Once I’ve got my eye on the ball, nothing can stop me from getting it to the end zone.”

“Let’s hope so.” I kiss his cheek. “Because *my* end zone is *really* looking forward to your balls.”

Junior bites his lip. “That little mouth of yours... is *amazing*.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m going to stick my dick in it later.”

I crack up and shove him backward. “That was so *weak*.”

“Sorry. I couldn’t resist...” He pauses, his gaze lingering on me for a long moment, but I’m too busy staring back to count the seconds. “Coming over tonight?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Well, I don’t want you to get *bored* with me,” I joke.

“You’re right.” He smiles. “Don’t want to ruin a good thing.”

“*Exactly*.”

Junior grabs his backpack off the table and tosses it over his shoulder. “If I don’t see you between now and then, I’ll see you after the game.”

I nod. “After the game.”

“Bye, Ally.”

“Bye, Junior.”

He steps out into the library and the door is barely even closed before I’m

grinning like a fucking idiot. It's one of those deep smiles, too. The kind that completely takes you over and refuses to let go until your face muscles can't take it anymore and you end up feeling the pain for days.

Junior Morgan defended my honor.

That means something, right?

Based on his reputation before me, I have to imagine that chivalry was low on his list of priorities. The fact that he took my side over his teammates has to *mean something*.

Or maybe I'm grasping at straws again. Maybe I'm so desperate to make something from nothing that I'll cling to even the slightest of chances that there could be something there that resembles a real relationship. That didn't go so well with my father. What makes me think Junior Morgan is any different?

A chill rolls down my back, the latest of many that have shaken me today. I sit down at the table and wait for it to pass.

CHAPTER 30



JUNIOR

I lied.

Thinking about Alyssa Pierce sitting out there in those bleachers is *absolutely* psyching me out.

She's there right now, watching every hike, toss, and move I make. She's going to notice if I fumble, slip, or fall.

I scan the crowd again, searching for her long, brown hair, but I can't look for long before I have to get my head back in this game.

I cringe at the scoreboard.

We are losing by eight points, and there's only one minute left in the game.

I look at my teammates and I see it on their faces, just as they can probably see it on mine.

It's over.

The ref blows the whistle, signaling a time-out. Cary Pierce bellows my name from the sidelines. I sprint to meet him, slightly annoyed by the nonchalant nod he gives me. Can't he see how fucked we are?

"What's wrong, Junior?" he asks.

Dirty Alyssa thoughts linger in the back of my mind. I force them away, hoping he can't read them through my face guard. "We're losing," I say.

"Losing happens in your head first."

"There's less than a minute left, Coach. There's no way we can—"

"That's plenty of time for a touchdown and a two-point conversion," he says over me. "That will tie us up and we'll wipe them out in overtime."

I look over my shoulder at the field. He's not wrong, but it's a risky play, especially with us sitting fifteen yards outside the red zone.

He knocks on the side of my helmet. “Get out of *here*. Get in *here*.” He lays a firm finger against my chest. “You know what I’m seeing right now?”

“What?”

“*Weakness*. It’s all over your goddamn face and I guarantee your team sees it, too. Your team needs *you*, Junior. The quarterback falls and the rest follow. What are you going to do about it?”

“I think—”

He knocks hard against my helmet again. “*Get out of here*. What are you going to do?”

My mind goes dark, surrounded by an ether of cold nothingness. I can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I see Alyssa’s face instead, standing out amongst the dark gray wisps.

“I’m going to fake the hand-off,” I say through sudden clarity. “Put the focus on the halfback and run it in myself.”

Cary Pierce smiles. “Go do it.”

I rush back onto the field, igniting screams in the surrounding crowd. Pure adrenaline fires through my limbs and it never stops tingling, even as we huddle up. I watch the look of shock on my team’s faces shift into powerful confidence.

We’re going to fight this right down to the very last second.

Suddenly, the idea of Alyssa Pierce watching over my shoulder isn’t so bad.

My team stands in formation, creating phantom twitches to their left, making it as obvious to the other team as possible.

“*Hike!*”

The center snaps the ball back and I catch it, twisting around to lay it into John’s cradled arms — but I tuck it beneath mine instead.

John sprints to the left, taking half the offensive line with him, and the defense falls for it.

I bolt to the right, slipping around them with the ball safely in my hands, and the crowd explodes.

A few on the other team notice. They jut forward to grab me, but I’ve already gained the momentum to dart right through them.

With the end zone in sight, I pick up my speed, running on pure adrenaline all the way to the goal. Ty rushes in after me, slamming against me in celebration.

But the game isn’t over yet.

There's still a two-point conversion to worry about.
I look at the crowd, searching for her face, but I still can't find her.
We head to the three-yard line. If we don't nail this play, the game is over. We lose.

And I'll never hear the end of it from Alyssa.
"Just pop it up," Ty says, pounding once on his chest. "I'll catch it."
He rushes to the end of the line with the rest of the wide receivers.
I fill my lungs with humid air.
Then...
"Hike!"

The next few moments blur past me. I feel the ball in my hands. I see the rage of the defensive linemen, just as determined to win as we are not to lose. I smell the turf beneath me and feel the crushing weight on my chest. Multiple tackles crash in front of me and my team falls.

I let the ball fly from my fingers, arching high toward the center of the end zone. It spins downward and a dozen hands launch into the air, so many that I can't even tell who is who.

Finally, the whistle blows.
Ty stands up with the ball clutched in his hands.
Holy shit.

I watch the numbers tick up on the scoreboard. Tie game.
I lock eyes with Cary Pierce, feeling that insane rush from my head to my toes.

We'll wipe them out in overtime.
You bet your ass we will.



They didn't stand a chance.

Cary Pierce promised everybody that they'd know my name. This season, we'd get their attention. Next season, we'd keep it. The man knows his shit, I'll tell you that.

"Junior! Junior! Junior!"

I stand on the sidelines, submerged in complete shock and awe while they chant my name.

By now, the entire city knows of our victory — especially with the

amount of screaming threatening to tear the stadium down — but there's only one person I care about celebrating with.

I keep looking through the crowd, hoping to catch sight of her, but Alyssa Pierce is still nowhere to be found.

Finally, my eyes land on a familiar face near the bottom of the bleachers, leaning casually against them and watching with great interest as the team passes by him.

Grant holds up his hand as Ty draws closer. "Good game, Mr. Fisher!"

Ty slaps his hand. "Thanks, man!"

I pause in front of Grant, but he doesn't seem to notice I'm here. His eyes are too busy over his shoulder, locked on Ty's rear end.

"Hey, Grant!"

His eyes flick in my direction. "Oh, hey, Lover Boy." He nods. "Did you see that? Ty gave me a high-five."

"I saw."

"I'm making progress."

I smirk. "Is Alyssa with you? She said she'd be at the game today."

He shakes his head. "She went home."

"Home?"

"Yeah, she's sick."

Disappointment stabs deep into my chest. Or is this concern? "Sick? How?"

"I don't know. She left rehearsal early today because she started throwing up."

"Is she okay?"

"I'm sure she is." He cranes his neck to watch the rest of the team rush inside. "Check your messages. If you had plans, she probably texted you."

"Thanks."

A visual shiver crawls over him. "I don't do vomit, man. Blood and guts? Cool. Vomit? *Nope.*"

I pat his shoulder. "I'm sure you'll make it through this."

"I hope so."

I head for the locker room, sifting through the victory high-fives and pats on the back, and dig through my backpack for my phone. Just as Grant said, there's a single message from Alyssa.

I'm not feeling well tonight. Reschedule? Sorry.

My fingers tap out a reply, telling her she doesn't have to apologize and

that I'll see her on campus Monday if she's feeling better.

I don't send it. I'd much rather go check on her myself, but I can't just wander over to her house. If her dad comes home, it'll be hell trying to explain what I'm doing there.

I drop my phone into my locker and peel off the rest of my uniform while I try to think of a way to see her tonight.

I should be buzzed as all hell, ready for a night of partying with the rest of the school. We just won *the Homecoming game*. This school hasn't done that since the late twentieth century. No one's sleeping tonight. It's going to be a straight-up hootenanny here until dawn — and I'm the quarterback. Girls, booze, whatever I want tonight, I could probably snap my fingers and have it hand-delivered to me on a silver fucking platter.

But all I really want to do is see her.

After a quick rinse in the shower, I get dressed and step out into the hallway of the athletic center, flipping my phone over and over in my hand. There has to be some way to—

A sharp giggle pierces my ears. I pause before rounding the corner toward the offices and peeking around. I spot a middle-aged woman in a too-short skirt lingering in the hallway... with Cary Pierce.

He's got his hands all over her and she just keeps on giggling while her own hands scratch down to his groin.

Yeesh.

Coach leads her away, wrapping his arm around her and whispering who-knows-what into her ear.

A smile strikes me. If the stories Alyssa has told me are true, then Cary Pierce will party harder than anyone else tonight. It's possible he won't make it back home at all until morning...

Leaving Alyssa home alone all night long.

CHAPTER 31



JUNIOR

The last time I was here, there were armed security guards and valet parking. Now, without the burden of press snapping a hundred photos a minute, it seems like Cary Pierce doesn't give a shit about home security.

I stroll up the driveway with a to-go cup of coffee in each hand, walking straight through the very open gate. No guards. No dogs. No cameras, at least none in plain sight.

As I reach the front door, I take another look around. It's dead quiet. No loud neighbors. No abandoned cars. Definitely not Shanty Row.

I poke out a finger, being careful not to drop the coffees as I push the doorbell. It rings inside, echoing off the walls before falling silent once more. I wait a few moments, listening hard for any movement before tapping the bell again.

Still, nothing stirs inside.

I balance both cups in one hand while reaching for my phone with the other.

Answer the door, I text.

Finally, I sense movement on the other side. The gentle tapping of feet on the floor just beyond the door. Still, silence.

"Ally! Open up. It's me."

The door opens. Alyssa stares at me with hard, suspicious eyes. Her face is paler than usual, but that just makes her blue eyes stand out more.

"Junior, what are you doing here?"

"We won the game," I say.

"Yeah. I heard."

“So, I came to see you.”

“I told you I was sick...” She slinks back a little in the door frame. “If you came here to collect, I need a rain check.”

“Relax, Ally. I didn’t come here for sex. I came here because I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Her face screws up. “Really?”

“Yeah. Grant told me you got sick at rehearsal.”

“Oh. Well, I’m fine,” she says, fighting the blush in her white cheeks. “Just a little stomach bug going around, I think.”

“Good. *That you’re fine*,” I say. “Not the stomach bug part.”

I admire her face, her eyes, and her sloppy hair, holding back every urge in me to risk catching whatever bug she has. She’s just as beautiful in a dirty tank top and flannel pants as she is in her collection of come-fuck-me skirts. Maybe more so.

I hand her a cup. “Think you can stomach some coffee? Black, as you like it.”

She brings it to her nose to inhale the scent through the hole at the top. “Mmm. That’s the first smell in, like... twelve hours that hasn’t made me nauseous.”

“*And...*” I reach behind my back and grip the soft plush hiding in my belt. “I thought this guy might make you feel better, too.”

She smiles as I hand her the teddy bear. “Aww.” She hugs it to her chest. “Thank you. That’s so...”

“*Thoughtful?*”

“Yeah.”

I pause, fixated on the glee trembling in her cheeks. “Can I come in?”

Her face falls. “I don’t think so, Junior. My dad could come home any minute.”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll be busy for a while tonight,” I say. “I saw him getting *inappropriate* with some woman after the game.”

“Typical.” She smirks. “Even as a coach, he’s scooping up victory hoes.” She peeks over my shoulder. “Where’s your van?”

“Not here. I had an Uber drop me off down the street,” I say. “If Coach comes home, he won’t know I’m here. I’ll sneak out and he’ll be none the wiser.”

She arches her brow. “You’ve *really* planned this out, haven’t you?”

“What can I say? I’m a rebel.”

“You’re an *idiot*.”

“Come on, Ally. Don’t leave a poor boy hanging outside. It’s getting dark. I could get *mugged*.”

“In *this* neighborhood?” she teases.

I throw on a pout, batting my eyes. “*Please?*”

“*Fine*.” She takes a step back. “But just for a few minutes. Okay?”

“Just a few minutes,” I repeat as I draw an X over my chest. “Cross my heart.”

She smiles.

CHAPTER 32



ALYSSA

Junior follows me into the house. My senses spike on full-alert — just waiting for when my father's car grows into the driveway.

I glance at any reflective surface we pass on the way upstairs. I look like hell. There's dried sweat on my brow. My hair sits in a messy bun on my head. I'm pretty sure I haven't washed this top since the last time I wore it out.

But Junior doesn't seem to notice any of these flaws. Either that or he's picked up quite a few acting skills from me during our study sessions.

We climb the stairs to the third floor. I hesitate for a moment with my hand on the doorknob, quickly realizing that I'm about to invite a man into my damn bedroom.

I hold my breath as I open the door.

Junior chuckles as he steps inside. "This is your room?" he asks, his brown eyes invaded by bright pink colors and cartoon cats.

"It sure is. Well, it's the bedroom of the daughter Cary Pierce *thinks* he has. It was like this when I moved in."

I stand still as Junior wanders over to the bed. He sets his cup down next to my lamp and then scans the room again with interest. I take a quick sip of my coffee. It's warm and comforting, but I can't seem to shake the awkward feeling off my shoulders.

"So... what did she look like?" I ask.

"Who?"

"My dad's victory ho."

He laughs. "Oh, your standard blonde, I guess. Long legs, big jugs. An outfit about ten years too young for her."

“Sounds about right.” I smile. “So, there were no more victory hoes left for the star quarterback to take home?”

“You are my victory ho.”

I raise an eyebrow and his grin falls.

“I mean...” he chokes, “that sounded *way* different in my head.”

I laugh at the embarrassment on his face. “It’s okay. I know what you mean... *I think*.”

I take another sip of coffee to break the chill in the room, but it doesn’t work. I set the cup down and grab a zip-up sweater off the back of my desk chair to throw on.

“Aren’t you warm?” he asks. “It’s hot in here.”

“Can’t seem to break this chill today,” I say, feeling it scratch down my back again. “Must be part of the bug.”

“Here.” Junior steps over to me and lays his hands on my arms. He rubs them up and down, creating friction on my skin. “Let me warm you up.”

Another shiver rolls over my body, but it isn’t from the cold this time. “Thank you,” I say through chattering teeth.

“Come on.” He guides me over to the bed and sits me down, grabbing a folded-up blanket near the edge to wrap me up with. “Luckily, you’re looking at the king of sick days.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Nothing makes you feel better like a big blanket, a comfy bed, and—” he reaches over to my bedside table and snatches the TV remote, “really shitty television.”

I laugh and collapse against my pillows. “Sounds like a plan.”

Junior slides onto the bed. A dizzy rush trembles me as he lies down behind me, wrapping his arm around me to hold the blanket in place. “I always preferred the cartoon channels,” he says. “Still do, if I’m to be embarrassingly honest, but I understand if you’d rather binge on something a little more *mature*.”

I smile. “I could go for some cartoons.”

“Good answer.”

Junior surfs for a while before finally finding a channel amongst the thousands available on my father’s useless satellite dish.

He tosses the remote aside and tightens his grip on me. His heat blends with mine and the chills roll off me as quickly as they appeared.

After a few minutes, I feel his lips against my ear. “This okay?” he

whispers.

I hum with approval.

His thumb caresses my arm. He doesn't say another word. He just... lies still and holds me. It's...

Nice.

Really nice.



I wake up the next morning, locked in a cocoon of warmth and comfort.

Junior stirs as I do. His eyes flick with confusion, but it vanishes as he realizes where he is.

My bedroom. We spent the night alone together, fully clothed in my bed.

I swallow hard, far too nervous to break the silent tension myself.

Junior gazes at me and smiles. "Hey."

My lips twitch. "Hey."

A knock strikes the door.

"Hey, Alyssa!"

Junior bolts up on the bed as I instinctively shove him away.

"Closet, closet, closet—" I say, pointing at the other door.

He stumbles to his feet, but somehow hides himself away a split second before the door opens.

Dad walks in wearing the same clothes he wore last night with the added stench of cheap booze and dollar store perfume.

My nose twitches from the smell, sending a wave of nausea to my gut. I guess I'm still sick.

"Hi, Dad," I say.

"Missed you at the game last night," he says.

I nod, focusing all my self-control on not drawing attention to the closet.

"Yeah, sorry. I wasn't feeling well and—"

"We won."

"I could hear the screaming on campus from all the way out here. Congrat —"

"Try to make the next one, all right? It looks good for you to show your support."

I force a smile. "Of course. I'll try. Sorry, I missed—"

He leaves before I even finish the sentence, closing the door behind him.
Yeah. That's my dad.

I walk silently to the closet. Junior has concealed himself behind a line of my blouses, but he's completely visible from the waist down. Better than nothing.

"He's gone," I say.

Junior steps out, staying light on his feet. "You feeling any better?" he whispers to me.

I nod. "A little. Not nearly as *ick* as yesterday."

"Good."

His eyes trace a halo around my head, and he grins.

I quickly adjust the nest in my hair. "Ugh, I must look *awful*," I say, my cheeks filling with blood.

"You look beautiful."

My heart flutters. I drop my hands, suddenly not caring about the possibility of severe bed head.

"I should get going. I need to meet with my sister."

I check the clock. It's just after ten on Sunday. I can barely remember the last time I slept this well or woke up so refreshed.

I open my door and stick my head out, focusing my hearing to pinpoint my dad's location in the house.

There's a brief shuffling of feet on the second floor somewhere beneath me. I signal for Junior to stay back as I descend the stairs, inching closer to the master bedroom below.

My dad's shower turns on. I breathe easier.

I wave up the stairs at Junior. We rush to the ground floor together, eyes constantly over our shoulders as we move. He throws the front door open and I force him outside onto the concrete stairs.

"Thanks for coming over," I say, birds chirping in the trees. "And for the coffee. I owe you one."

Junior closes the gap between us. He kisses me softly with his hands on my cheeks, holding me in place for longer than safety allows. A wave of warmth fires down to my toes, nearly knocking me off balance as his lips purse with mine.

He pulls away and smiles again. "Bye, Ally."

"Bye, Junior."

I watch him leave. He takes off, sprinting down the driveway to safety.

Junior Morgan.

You—

My gut twinges. I step back inside. A thick sweat coats my brow before I make it back upstairs to my room. I barely have enough time to close my door behind me and make it to the toilet before that nausea from yesterday returns with a heavy vengeance.

Afterward, I sit on the cold linoleum of my bathroom floor, once again wondering what the hell I got into that made me so sick.

This doesn't feel like the normal flu, but it doesn't quite feel like food poisoning either.

With my luck, it's mono. Junior will love that, I'm sure.

Or maybe it's Ebola. Nothing like a good flesh-eating bacteria to ruin a good weekend.

Maybe I'm... *no*.

No, that's not possible. We're safe. We're *always* safe. Except for that first time, but that EC should have taken care of that. And besides, my last period was... um...

I stare unblinking at the pink wall in front of me. I've been so busy with my classes and the play. I didn't even notice.

Oh, shit.

CHAPTER 33



JUNIOR

I just slept with a girl.
I liked it.

I've *slept* with dozens of girls, but I've never once fallen asleep with one. It's always been in and out. Bang and goodbye. But Alyssa? Not only did we sleep together, I heard she was sick, and I came running without a second thought. For once, getting laid wasn't at the forefront of my mind.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"You like her."

"No." I shake my head at Maggie across the table and chew a little more on my straw. "Wait, who?"

"Whoever you have in your head right now," she says. "Whoever she is, she's stealing away my sacred Sunday lunch date with my little brother."

I set the empty cup down. "Sorry, Mag. Just distracted."

"Yeah, no shit." She chuckles. "I expected Annoyingly Self-Confident Junior today after that win last night, not Oddly Pensive Junior. What's her name?"

"There's no *her*." I look down at the table and Maggie gasps, quickly bringing my eyes back to her stunned face. "What?"

"What's *his* name?" she asks, amused.

"It's not *that*, either."

She deflates in disappointment. "Well, there's *someone* out there putting you in a tizzy and I want to know who it is."

"I am not in a *tizzy*." I sigh, knowing that Maggie will play this game all day unless I give her something. "Okay, maybe I'm a *little* tizzy."

"What happened?"

"I slept with her."

"So?"

"Literally. In bed. Fully clothed. *Sleep.*"

Maggie reaches across the table to lay a comforting hand on mine. "Was there spooning?" she whispers.

"There might definitely have been some spooning."

"Did you like it?"

I close my eyes, recalling the warmth of Alyssa's body lying next to mine. "A lot."

"Junior." Maggie clears her throat, forcing the obvious cackle back down into her lungs. "I'm so proud of you."

I shake her hand off. "Don't do that, Mag."

"My little brother, all grown up and in his first exclusive relationship!"

"We are *not* exclusive," I say. "We're just having fun. Last night was an accident."

"*Last night?!?*"

I stop, but I've already said too much. There's no going back now. I tossed a fierce kitten a loose thread and she won't stop until she's through unraveling it with her claws.

"I came straight here from her place," I say.

"So, instead of partying with the team last night, you went over to see *her?*"

"We had plans, but she got sick and canceled. I wanted to see if she was okay."

"Did you bring soup?" she asks, leaning forward with wide eyes. "Please tell me you brought her soup."

"I brought her coffee."

"Junior." Maggie smiles. "You like her."

"No, I don't."

"*Junior.*" She gives her voice a hard edge. "I know *like her* when I see it and *you like her.*" I sit back and sigh with annoyance. "It's okay to like her. Why are you so embarrassed?"

"I'm not embarrassed. And *no*, it's not okay to like her. Not this one."

She chews on that for a moment. "Have you been *having fun* with anyone else since you first *had fun* with her?"

"No."

"Has she?"

“I hope not. I mean...” I give a passive shrug, reacting to Maggie’s twisted smirk. “I don’t know. Not that I’d care if she did...”

Liar.

“Hate to break it to you, little brother, but you are one very specific conversation away from being in an exclusive relationship with this girl.”

“She wouldn’t go for it.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re not allowed to see each other.”

“Not allowed?” she mocks. “What is she, a Capulet?”

“No. She’s a Pierce.”

“A *Pierce*?!” She blinks a dozen times. “As in the new football coach, *Pierce*?”

I gesture for her to lower her voice. “As in *his daughter*, Alyssa, yes. He doesn’t want anyone on the team involved with her, but we kind of... *rebelled*.”

“Wait.” Maggie gawks at me. “She’s *really* pretty.”

I note her confused stare. “This shocks you?”

“No, I’m just surprised you have actual taste for once.”

“Mag, I’ve been telling you about banging hot girls since I was in high school.”

“There is a *huge* difference between the hot girl and the pretty girl, little brother. The hot girl you brag about to your friends. The pretty girl you take home to meet Mom.”

I shake my head. “No one’s going home to meet Mom. Wait, how do you know she’s pretty?”

“Nate and I always go to theatre department showcases,” she says. “I noticed her name popping up in the programs this year and she is *very* hard not to notice up there. She’s really talented.”

“I know.”

“You’ve seen her perform?”

I hesitate, imagining the exact expression my response will bring. “I help her run lines.”

Maggie’s jaw drops in slow motion, the edges of her lips curling into a maniacal grin. “You help her memorize her lines?!”

“*Mag.*”

“That’s so cute!”

“*Stop it.* She helps me with my math homework. It’s an even trade.”

"I thought you two were *just having fun*."

"Can we drop this, please?"

"Okay," she says, giggling behind her soda cup.

I stare Maggie down. "You go to *all* the theatre showcases, but you've never *once* been to one of my games?"

She winces. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice that." She slaps her hand on the table between us. "Oh, speaking of *Mom*. Her birthday is next Sunday. I was thinking we could head over there and see her instead of coming here?"

"Fine by me," I say. "Want me to pick you up?"

Her face contorts. "Um, *no*. I will pick you up and we'll take *my* car. There's no way I'm getting in that shag wagon of yours."

"Fair enough."

"Anyway..." She grabs her purse off the back of her chair. "I need to stop by the campus bookstore. Wanna tag along?"

"No," I say. "I have some homework to do, I think..."

"I'll see you next week." She stands up, then pauses, her nose scrunching upward like a withering sponge. "You haven't dragged Alyssa into that van, have you?"

I hesitate.

She doesn't even try to hide her disgust. "You're lucky she even likes you at all."

"I tell myself that every day."

"Bye, little brother."

"Bye, Mag. *Wait*. You think she likes me?"

She grins. "Have you thought of asking *her* that?"

I shake my head. "We're not allowed to be together."

"It kind of sounds like you already are, Junior."

She squeezes my shoulder as she passes by, leaving me alone to absorb the situation.

Alyssa has been pretty clear from the start that this isn't serious. It can't be. That's rule number one. We hang out, we have sex, we study and read lines. No emotions necessary. No need to second-guess anything we say or do because it's all on the surface. I scratch her back. She scratches mine. It's a pleasant arrangement.

But then, why did I rush over there like that last night? Why did she even let me in? Why didn't either of us complain when we were *cuddling* in her bed?

Because you're dating her, you fucking moron.

I reach for my phone, instinct driving for me to call her, but I drop it back down. I don't even know what I'd say to her. I just want to hear her voice.

Shit. I really do like her.

No, that's not enough.

I'm fucking crazy about her.



I don't remember how I got back to Shanty Row. I've been so stuck in my head since lunch, obsessing over the possibility of having *the talk* with Alyssa Pierce that I arrived home completely on auto-pilot.

At this point, I've managed to talk myself into believing that Alyssa feels the same way about me as I do about her. There's something in her *smile*, something so beautiful and comforting, that there must be more than just casual friendliness behind it. No girl has ever looked at me like that before — at least, none that I've noticed as much as her.

The front door opens as I hop up onto the porch.

"Good morning, Lover Boy."

Grant steps out and pops the door closed behind him.

"Hey, Grant," I say with confusion. "Are you looking for Alyssa?"

He grins. "Nope."

I furrow my brow. "Then what..."

"Don't think too hard about it."

He taps my cheek with his palm as he passes. I stand still for several moments while he half-skips to his car parked on the street.

Okay, then.

I step inside the house and run right into Ty's worrisome face.

"Hey," he says, his eyes shifting from mine to the street outside. "So, *I can explain—*"

"Relax, man," I say. "Grant's a cool guy."

I give his shoulder a reassuring pat as I walk by on my way to the living room couch. Ty follows me, the tension visibly releasing from his shoulders as he watches me plop down on the cushions.

"Rough night?" he asks.

"No," I say. "It was good. *Really* good."

“Then why do you look like someone sucker-punched you in the nads?”

I stare at the ceiling. There’s a word on my tongue. I don’t think I’ve ever used it in this context before, but I might as well test drive it now.

“I’m in love with Alyssa.”

My body twinges. I jolt at the mere mention of it, but I settle just as quickly. Somehow, I feel lighter and better off than I was before — like a long overdue, cathartic shock to the system.

Ty chuckles. “Shit, dude. You just now figure that out?”

“Yeah.”

“I could have told you that.”

I look at him. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

“Do you feel badly about it?”

I let a moment pass. “No.”

“So, what’s wrong? Other than the obvious *she’s Cary Pierce’s daughter* part?”

“*Shit*. This is bad.”

“You didn’t seem all that concerned about it before.”

“Well, it was just sex before. I can do sex. I *like* sex.” Words fall out of me with little thought. “Sex and I are buddies. Being in love is something else entirely.”

“Is it, though?” he asks, tilting his head.

I blink. “Isn’t it?”

“You sure you’re not just over-thinking this?”

“Probably. I mean, what do I do now? Do I tell her? How do I talk to her? How do I act around her? Do we stop having sex? Do we have *more* sex?”

“Okay, yeah. You’re definitely over-thinking it.” He angles toward the kitchen. “I’m going to put on some coffee and then we’re going to talk this out.”

I look straight ahead as he wanders out of the room, once again spiraling down into a labyrinth of what-ifs and maybes. What if Alyssa doesn’t love me back? Maybe she does. Maybe she *doesn’t*. I was so sure just five minutes ago that she wanted me, but now I’ve dropped anchor right back to square one.

This love thing sucks.

“Junior.”

I look up at Ty in the kitchen doorway. “Yeah?”

“Whatever you decide — don’t fuck it up,” he warns softly. “We’re on

track for the championship this year. I would very much like for that to happen.”

“Me, too,” I say, meaning it.

He disappears into the kitchen again, leaving me crushed and nauseated. Maybe I caught a little of Alyssa’s stomach bug after all. Or maybe I just can’t deal with the fact that I have no business falling in love with her. We can’t be together the way I want us to be.

But that hasn’t stopped us so far, right?

CHAPTER 34



ALYSSA

I feel *strange*.

Almost broken, in a way. Except there's nothing shattered or missing. There's something new inside, shifting the usual formation out of place like a pebble shaking around in my shoe.

A pebble. It's smaller than that. If it even exists at all. Just thinking about it gives me a stress headache.

How can something so small mean so much so quickly?

"When is it due?"

I snap up from my book to find Junior staring across the table at me. "What?"

He smiles and taps his pencil against my book. "The scene. When do you need to have it memorized?"

"Oh, um..." I rub the bridge of my nose. "Next Thursday, I think."

"Are you okay? You seem strange today."

"I'm fine."

"A little *off*."

"Not off. No strangeness. Just tired, I guess." I point to his notebook. "Have you finished that proof?"

"Yup." Junior slides it over to me. I pick up my pencil to check his work. "What are you doing this weekend?"

"I have rehearsal on Saturday," I mutter, glancing over the page. "This looks good. Try the next one."

He takes the notebook back, but sets it off to the side. "What are you doing afterward?"

I pause, noting the intensity of his stare. "I have no plans. Why?"

"I want you to come by my place," he says. "There's no game this weekend and Ty is making himself scarce for a while."

"Okay." I sit back, taking the bait. "Scarce for what?"

He shows a short, but sinister, smile. "I just want you to stop by for something."

I raise an eyebrow. "Stop by for *what*?"

"I want to talk to you about something."

"We're talking *right now*. What's up?"

"This isn't a..." he gestures around us, "library study room discussion, you know?"

"Oh." My gut lurches. "You want to discuss something?"

"Yes."

"Is everything okay?"

"It should be."

"What does that mean?"

He sighs, but that nervous flicker never quite leaves his eyes. "Come over after rehearsal and we'll talk. Okay? Please, just say yes."

I bite my lip. Junior's invitations aren't usually so wordy. *Coming over tonight?* That's about all he ever needs to say to make his intentions known and I never expect *talking* to be on the agenda for very long.

He wants to *discuss* something.

Is he breaking things off? Is he inviting me over to dump me? Wait, that doesn't make any sense. If he didn't want to hook up anymore, he'd just stop talking to me altogether.

Maybe he feels like he has to put in the extra effort because of what happened last weekend. He woke up in my bed after holding me all night long. I imagine that was quite the shock for him. It was for me.

"Ally?"

"Okay," I answer. "Yes. I will stop by after rehearsal."

He smiles, victorious. "Good."

"You know," I say, "there's, uh..."

I fall silent, thinking better of it.

Don't bring it up yet. You don't know anything concrete. We're still in stomach bug territory. I'm not—

"What?" he asks.

But I owe it to him to mention the possibility, right?

"There's something I need to talk to you about, too," I say.

He leans forward with interest. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah! Yeah. Totally. It's just not..."

"Library study room discussion?"

I nod. "Right."

"Then I won't worry about it until Saturday," he says, grabbing his notebook.

"Well, I mean... there's nothing to *worry* about, really. Unless you think I should be worried about something?"

"No!" He flinches. "There's nothing to be worried about."

"Good."

I tap my pencil on the table, feeling even stranger than I did before. Come to think of it, Junior hasn't tried to kiss or grope me since he walked in here.

Does he already know?

No, that's impossible. There's no way he could know before I do. But why else would he be treating me so differently?

I pick up my book to pretend to go over my lines again. The words on the page are just a faded blur right now.

This is fine. I can compartmentalize this. Junior seems to have no problem doing so. He's focusing on his math homework. I can do that until Saturday, too. No problem. That's only three days away. That's nothing.

This is totally fine.

CHAPTER 35



ALYSSA

I've stood on this porch so many times before. It's always a rush to get across the lawn and inside the house before someone drives by and recognizes me. But now...

I hesitate.

I associate the other side of Junior Morgan's door with two things: orgasms and more orgasms.

Tonight, I don't know what to expect, because tonight I'm going to tell Junior Morgan that I might be pregnant with his child.

I exhale hard. Even thinking it knocks the wind out of me.

I roll my fingers into a fist, preparing to knock, but the door swings open before I get the chance.

"Hey, Ally."

I pause.

It's Junior in the doorway, but... a side of him I haven't seen yet. His hair is combed and perfect — not the usual rugged post-shower tuft I'm used to. He shaved, too. And recently. I can smell the aftershave from two feet away. And... I don't think I've ever seen him in that sweater before. Did he iron his jeans?

"Hey," I say.

Junior steps to the side to invite me in. I have to force myself forward into the living room. It's usually a mess — about what you'd expect from two college athletes living together — but tonight, it's neat and tidy and... Is that air freshener I smell?

Junior takes my hand, sending a quick shiver from my palm to my shoulder. "Come with me," he says.

He leads me with him into his bedroom. My mouth sags open wide. It's even more spotless than the living room tonight. No laundry stacked in the corner. No mountain of trash in the bin. The bed is made. His desk is clear of clutter.

And candles. *Scented* candles.

"Junior, what's going on?"

He guides me to his desk chair and sits me down. "I need to tell you something," he says, lowering onto the edge of his bed. He grabs the chair beneath me and rolls me closer, planting me only a few inches away from him.

"Okay," I say.

"But I know you also had something you had to say, so you can go first."

"Oh, no." I shake my head. A lot. "No. You go on ahead. It looks like you're a little more..." I gesture around the room, "*prepared*."

"I am."

"Then you should go first. I insist."

"Okay." He inhales a deep breath and makes eye contact with me. "Alyssa..."

Alyssa?

He never calls me that.

"Wait." I hold up a hand. "I—"

He grabs it and guides it back to my lap. "Let me finish. Please."

I fall silent, locked in place beneath his firm grip and handsome brown eyes, and nod.

Junior smiles at me again. "Ally, I like you." He shakes his head. "I sound like a damn second-grader saying it like that, but... it's true. I am — without a doubt — absolutely crazy about you."

Oh.

"Why?"

"Why?" He laughs. "What do you mean, why? You're *perfect*."

"No, I'm not."

"Ally, I could have anybody. I'm not going to sugar-coat that. We both know it. I have a reputation, as you mentioned the *second time* we spoke to each other, but I only want you now. Since the moment I saw you, you've completely broken me."

"I've *broken* you?"

"I want you in my life," he says. "All of you. And not... not just in my

bed anymore.”

“Junior,” I whisper, barely able to speak louder than that. “We can’t *be together* like that.”

“We keep saying that, but...” He leans over and squeezes my hands a little harder. “We *are*. We have been and we *can*.”

I pull my hands out from under his. “No, we can’t.”

“Ally, come on.”

“Junior, nothing has changed,” I say. “You’re still you and I’m still me and my father—”

“Fuck him.”

I snort. “*What?*”

“Forget about him. Just for a minute. Forget about your dad and his stupid rules and just think about *this*.” He rolls my chair even closer to him. “Look at me and tell me you don’t want this as much as I do.”

“Junior, come on. Don’t...”

“You do.” He stares me down. “I can tell. I’ve always been able to tell what you’re thinking, Ally.”

I bite my cheek, tempted to test him. “What am I thinking now?” I ask.

“You’re thinking that you’re scared,” he says. “You’re terrified of getting hurt. Of *me* hurting you because you think I’m not serious and that I really am just like your dad.”

Damn. That’s... pretty close.

“I am, too,” he says. “I’m scared that just by admitting this to you, I’ve destroyed any chance I have with you. I told myself all day that you would never speak to me again after this, but I knew... I just *knew* that the possible reward was worth the risk.” He rests his hands on mine again. “I want you, Alyssa Pierce. If that means breaking all the rules, I’m in. I won’t give up. I’ll wait for you. And I’ll be here when you’re ready. I don’t care how long it takes.”

Holy shit.

My lungs jerk in my chest, reminding me to breathe. I fill them to the top while I stare into Junior’s expectant eyes... and say nothing.

Because he’s right.

Everything we’ve ever said we can’t do, we’ve done since the very beginning — no matter the consequences. Every time I was sure he’d give up and forget about me, he came back to prove me wrong. I gave him the right incentive to succeed. Now, he’s giving the same to me.

It won't be easy. It might even feel impossible, but being with Junior Morgan might be worth the risk.

Junior swallows nervously. "Ally?" he asks.

"Can you just kiss me already?"

His lips twitch. He doesn't hesitate. He pulls me onto his lap and I straddle him as he wraps his arms around me, fiercely holding me against him as we kiss.

It's soft and true, different from any other kiss we've had before. Happy quivers shake my body as I settle even closer to him. He cups my face to kiss me again, and I sense the desire on his lips. I touch his body, roaming downward to grip his sweater and pull it over his head. Doing so messes up his hair, and I grin at the familiar, disheveled look before tugging at his belt.

His hands push beneath my skirt and he grips my ass. "Ally," he whispers. "Are you sure?"

I pause, trembling softly against his body.

Am I sure? Am I sure how he makes me feel every single day? Am I sure I want to wake up next to him every morning from now on? Am I sure I want to listen to him talk dirty to me every night for the rest of our lives?

I answer him with a kiss.

Junior reaches for a condom in the desk drawer. He rolls it on and I wrap my legs around his waist as he aligns our bodies. I hold on to him, throwing my arms around his neck as I bounce softly on him, grinding his cock deep into me until I moan.

He holds me tighter, clinging to me with bucking hips. I throw my head back and his lips find my neck, sucking and tasting me as he groans for more.

"I'm going to make you come like this every night," he whispers in my ear. I bite my lip, shaking hard as his cock tears me apart inside. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

"You want to give me this body?"

"Yes."

Junior lifts me up and lays me down on the bed. "*Strip*," he says. "I want to see every inch of you."

I unbutton my blouse and toss it at him. He catches it with a wide grin and lets it fall to the floor, along with his pants and my skirt. I stare hungrily at his stiff cock and he shakes his head at me.

"That's not for this..." he says, tracing his thumb over my lips. "Not

tonight.” He leans down to kiss me, drawing my bottom lip between his sharp teeth. “Turn around.”

I do as he says, and he unhooks my bra as I move onto my hands and knees for him. He kisses the back of my neck. I squirm as he moves downward, his lips tickling my spine.

He hooks my panties. I crane my neck to watch.

“Turn around.”

I snap forward as he gives my rear a soft spank to make me obey. A finger slides along my crack and I stiffen for a second before sighing with devious pleasure. He rubs my tight entrance with a single fingertip, his warm breath hot on my cheeks.

“Ally,” he whispers. “I want your ass tonight.”

I gasp at the feel of his tongue on me, gently lapping at my forbidden nerve endings. My body flexes with electricity as I grip the bedspread beneath me, but I can hardly keep myself still.

“Has anybody had your ass before me?” he asks.

“No.”

Junior chuckles before nibbling at my flesh, firing sharp bolts of heat throughout my core. He stands up. I peek behind me to see him pull a bottle of lubricant from his desk drawer.

He returns and leans over me again, laying soft kisses up my spine toward my neck. His hardness presses against my ass, teasing and tempting me to give in.

“Do you want to give it to me tonight?” he asks, begging but firm.

I twitch with tension, locked between taboo and desire, but he keeps a comforting touch on me as he pops the lid off the lube. A coldness drips onto my skin and I inhale sharply, prompting a quiet chuckle from Junior. He rubs it in, sliding his touch between my cheeks. I quiver with anticipation, unable to speak as he pushes a single finger against my opening.

“Relax. You’ll like it. I promise.”

I obey, trusting him.

“Good girl.” He pushes past the tight ring, taking me by surprise. “Oh, I’m going to make you come so hard.”

He fucks me with one slippery finger. Each slow thrust sends jolts toward my clit, filling me with pleasure I’ve never felt before.

“Do you want more?” he asks.

“Yes,” I gasp automatically.

He leans over me again and I feel his tongue slide along my back, tasting and tickling me as he fingerfucks me.

He reaches beneath me with his other hand, his trained fingers cradling my throbbing clit. "Keep begging."

I moan louder as new pleasures mix with the familiar. My senses dissolve until I can't feel anything except the urge to climax.

"More, please," I say.

"Come for me and I'll give it to you, Ally," Junior says, thrusting and rubbing. "I'll give you everything."

His words send me over the edge. The tension breaks. Wave after wave rushes through me. I lean into Junior's touch and he happily holds me in place to keep me from losing control.

Yes, I think to myself.

Give me everything.

Junior slides his finger out of me. I twitch, instantly missing him, but then I feel the tip of his cock take its place. I shiver as he pours even more lube on me, on him. He strokes himself, covering every inch of him.

Then a pause. Junior finds my eyes, silently asking the question. Do we go on? Is this okay? Do you want to stop?

"Keep going," I say.

He smiles, happy to oblige.

I exhale to relax, to melt the tension from my body, as he pushes inside. Junior works me slowly, stretching me out with steady, rhythmic thrusts.

"Oh, fuck," he says, his fingertips digging into my hips as he takes me.

My senses soar, relishing in the feeling of his glide inside of me. Primal urges overtake me, and I open myself to him, taking his manhood until it won't go any further. It's so tight and wild, I lose myself in overwhelming passion for him.

Junior hugs my body to his chest as he fucks my ass, grunting and groaning with each deep thrust. His breath warms my body. His teeth scrape my skin. Everything drives me to come again. He feels my climax and lets out one final growl before taking his own.

Junior embraces me. "Ally," he whispers through bated breaths. "You feel so amazing."

I chuckle. I can't help it. "You, too."

He kisses me before letting me go. I tumble onto the bed, taking a reprieve as he leans in behind me to kiss my shoulder.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks.

I look back, seeing the concern in his eyes. I smile, gently quivering as blooms of quiet pleasure course through me. “No,” I say.

He climbs off the bed and opens his door. He’s gone only a moment before he returns with a damp towel.

“Thank you,” I say, happily taking it to dab the excess lube off my skin.

Junior joins me on the bed. He lies beside me, tracing random patterns on my skin with his fingertips. “You’re amazing, Ally,” he whispers.

I chuckle as I turn to face him. “I know.”

He laughs and kisses my nose. “So, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

My smile fades. “Oh.”

I swallow the panic down as I search his eyes. He’s so happy right now, so tender and perfect and *loving*. There’s a moment for something like this. This isn’t it.

I can’t stand to ruin this one.

“You beat me to it,” I lie, bringing my smile back. “And said it better than I ever could.”

Junior smiles, believing me, and leans in for a kiss.

CHAPTER 36



JUNIOR

I wake up. Still smiling.

Still holding Alyssa Pierce in my arms first thing in the morning is exactly what I was missing in my life.

Especially a *fully naked* Alyssa Pierce.

Her skin is like melted ice cream. Silky smooth and just as sweet. I taste her shoulder, kissing softly and silently so I don't wake her, but she stirs at my touch.

I kiss her before she opens her eyes and her lips twitch against mine.

"Hey." Her voice comes out a whisper, as if we were in her room instead of mine, tiptoeing around to avoid her dad.

But Cary Pierce isn't here.

And morning sex sounds just perfect right now.

I shift on top of her. She spreads her legs for me without hesitation. There is as much desire on her breath as mine, and I grow hard against her. She reaches below and grips my cock, stroking me while I groan on her lips.

"Good morning," she says, squeezing my shaft a little tighter.

I laugh. "Good morning."

Alyssa turns and guides me onto my back. *Fuck*, I love it when she takes control. She's so petite and one-hundred and eighteen pounds soaking wet, but I can safely say I'd let her dominate me whenever she wanted to.

She glides downward, leaving wet kisses on my chest and abs, pausing on her way down to lick the black letters of my Delta Xi tattoo. I lie back, enjoying every second of her lips on my body and her soft kisses traveling up my shaft.

Her wet mouth opens to me and embraces my tip.

I inhale sharply, feeling that quick suction of her lips on me, and every drop of my blood invades my glands.

“Oh, yeah...” I say, gently bucking my hips, matching the glide of her bobbing head.

She moans for me as her tongue flicks fast. I groan, feeling her hot breath take me over and my vision blurs.

“Ally, you’re gonna make me—”

“Junior!”

Oh, shit.

I look at the door as someone pounds against it.

No, not someone.

Maggie.

My cock slips from Alyssa’s mouth as she peeks out from under the covers. “Who is that?” she asks.

I wince. “That’s my sister.”

“Junior, come on! We gotta go!” Maggie shouts, knocking even louder on the door. “You better not be in there with some bimbo!”

Alyssa raises her brow. *“Bimbo?”*

“Just...” I slide off the bed and grab my pants from the floor. “Let me get rid of her. Hang on. Don’t—” I gesture at her perfect, naked body. “Don’t get rid of this.”

“Junior!”

I pull my pants on, rushed by the urgency in Maggie’s tone.

Alyssa hides under the covers as I pull the door open and push outside into the hall, guiding Maggie to take a step back.

“Hey, Mag,” I say, closing the door behind me. “How did you get in here?”

“Ty let me in.”

“Oh.”

“Why aren’t you dressed?” she asks. “Did you forget about Mom’s birthday?”

I cringe. “Yeah.”

She tilts her head, annoyed. “Well, hurry up and shower. You stink like sex.”

“*Shh!*” I lay a finger against my mouth and lower my voice to a whisper. “I need a few minutes here—”

“Wait.” She takes a step back and glances over my shoulder with an

upturned nose. “You *do* have a girl in there.”

I nod. “Give me, like... twenty minutes.”

“What happened to *Alyssa*?”

“It is *Alyssa*.”

“Seriously?” She bites her lip, cringing. “Did she hear the bimbo thing?”

“Yes, she heard the bimbo thing.”

“Sorry,” she says. “I want to meet her.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because—”

Maggie reaches around me and throws the door open before I even know what’s happening.

“*Mag—*”

Luckily, *Alyssa* was blessed with the glorious gift of foresight. She’s already dressed in her blouse and skirt by the time Maggie gets inside.

“Hi!” my sister says. “You must be *Alyssa*.”

“Hi,” *Alyssa* says, forcing her tangled hair to one side of her neck.

I sigh. No turning back now. “*Ally*, this is my sister Maggie.”

Maggie takes several steps forward. “It’s so great to finally meet you. I’ve heard all about you.”

Alyssa’s eyes flick up at me. “Really?”

“Well—” Maggie waves a hand. “Nothing too *personal* or anything.”

“*Mag—*” I tug her back toward the door. “Can you excuse us, please?”

“Oh, sure. I’ll just wait in the living room— Oh, hey!” She pulls her arm from my grasp. “*Alyssa*, you should come with us to the party.”

“*Party?*” *Alyssa* asks.

I grab her again. “No, *Mag*. Bad idea.”

“It’s a great idea!” Maggie ignores me. “Today is our mother’s birthday and we’re going to see her. You should come along. It’ll be fun.”

Alyssa tries her very best not to panic.

I grit my teeth. “*Mag...*”

“It’s just a casual get-together with our parents,” Maggie says despite all my effort to shut her up. “My boyfriend will be there as well and our dad is a *huge* fan of your dad. He’d love to meet you. Mom, too!”

“*Mag, for fuck’s sake—*”

I yank her through the doorway, but she digs her heels into the floor.

“Come on, *Alyssa*. Please?” Maggie asks. “It’ll be fun, I promise.”

“Um...” Alyssa’s blue eyes shift nervously. “Okay.”

“*Awesome!* I’ll just be in the living room—”

I push her out into the hall. “Okay! Thanks, Maggie!”

She pokes her head back in. “Sorry about the bimbo thing!”

“*Get out!*” I slam the door and turn back to Alyssa’s petrified face. “I am so sorry. She can be a real...”

“Sister?”

“Yeah. Look, you *do not* have to come with us today.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll go. Unless you don’t want me there...”

“No, I do,” I say. “I mean, I don’t *not* want you there. But don’t feel like you *have* to go. She shouldn’t have invited you out of the blue like that.”

“I don’t want to be rude,” she says. “I said I’d go, so... I’ll go and...” she swallows hard, “meet your parents.”

I cringe. “Yeah.”

She raises her fists in mock celebration. “Yay.”

“I guess it’s only fair. I’ve already met your dad, right?”

“Right.”

“And you don’t have to worry about anyone seeing us. They live almost an hour away.”

“Near the arcade, right?”

“Yeah, *ish*,” I say.

She nods. “Well, we might as well get cleaned up. Wouldn’t want to meet your parents stinking like... sex.”

I laugh. Even in the trenches, Alyssa Pierce cracks a joke.

They’re going to love her.

This is not good.

CHAPTER 37



JUNIOR

I cast one more apologetic glance at Alyssa, but she just keeps smiling next to me in the back seat of Maggie's little car.

I don't know how she does it. She's obviously screaming inside, but there's not a single thing on the outside that shows it. Maggie and Nate bark question after question at her from the front seats and Alyssa answers each one — never once showing an ounce of inconvenience. It's amazing, honestly. I guess this happens when you grow up in the shadow of a famous father.

"So, where's your mom?" Maggie asks, staring more at Alyssa through the rearview mirror than at the road.

"Mag," I warn.

Alyssa pats my hand. "No, it's okay," she says, smiling politely. "My mother is no longer with us. It's just me and my dad."

"Oh, man, *that's awful*," Maggie says. "I can't imagine life without my mother."

"Mag."

"What?" Her eyes shift to me in the mirror. I give her the sternest look I can muster. "I'm just preparing her for the same questions she's going to get from Mom."

"It's okay." Alyssa chuckles. "Really. I don't mind."

Nate adjusts his glasses. "So, Junior, what are the team's odds for taking the championship this year?"

I nod at him with gratitude for switching the subject. "I'm not huge on numbers, but fair to really good," I answer.

"That's awesome," he says. "When I was a Northie undergrad, no one

gave a shit about the football team. Now you guys actually get news coverage.”

“I guess all it took was for someone to come in and give a shit.”

“I guess so.”

“Boring!” Maggie says. “I want to hear about the play. Alyssa, how’s that going? Got all of your lines memorized?”

I kick the back of her seat.

Alyssa laughs. “About ninety percent of them, I think.”

“Well, I cannot wait. Nate and I already have tickets for opening night.”

I lean forward. “You know, Maggie...”

“What, Junior?”

“Opening night and the last game of the season are on the *same night*.”

Maggie tilts her head, feigning ignorance. “Oh, really? I had no idea.”

“There’s a show on Sunday,” I say. “You could always go to that one and come see us qualify for the championship on Saturday instead.”

She hisses. “I mean... I *would*... but... I kinda already bought the tickets, so...”

“They’re *refundable*. I’m sure you could get them *exchanged*.”

“Nah.”

I plop back and shake my head at Alyssa’s grin. “Nothing is more supportive than family,” I quip.

She takes my hand, entwining our fingers.

My heart skips.

“Hey, you’ll have hundreds of people in the stadium and thousands of sports fans across the country watching and supporting *you*, little brother,” Maggie says. “Someone has to support Alyssa.”

“Thank you, Maggie,” Alyssa says, batting her eyes at me. “I appreciate that.”

We turn off into my neighborhood and my chest constricts. Alyssa has certainly passed Maggie’s test, but getting her to survive against my mother is another feat entirely.

“We’re here!” Maggie says. She slams hard on the brake in the driveway for no purpose other than to jolt the car a little.

I watch Alyssa’s expression as she takes in the street with interest. Contrary to what I told her last night, I can’t tell what she’s thinking now. Her face is blank, betraying nothing inside.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans as we step onto the porch.

Maggie barrels on inside, loudly announcing our arrival with Nate following close behind her.

“Ally.” I slip my fingers around her arm. “We can run.”

“Run?” she asks.

“Run away. Now. Right now. We can just—” I extend an arm down the street. “*Bolt.*”

Alyssa smiles. She pops up onto her heels and pecks my cheek. “*Relax,*” she says. “It’s going to be fine.”

The imprint of her lips spreads across my face and tingles all the way to my toes. Well, if she’s sure, then I guess I am, too. Maybe.

I take her hand and lead her inside.

My mother has joined Maggie and Nate in the foyer. She’s pinching Nate’s cheeks, both of them grinning as she blesses him with their special greeting. Mom has loved Nate since the moment she met him, but I think she’s just thankful that there was actually a man in this world patient enough to put up with her daughter’s sass.

Her eyes catch Alyssa’s and she instantly drops her hands.

“Mom.” I gesture to my right. “This is Alyssa.”

Alyssa throws on the sweetest smile in her toolbox. “Hello,” she says with a quick wave.

My mother stares as if Alyssa just spoke some alien space language.

“Roy!” she cries out my father’s name.

I squeeze Alyssa’s hand even tighter.

“*What is it, Bonnie?*”

His voice travels from the living room across the house. I picture him now, sitting in *his* chair with his gaze glued to the game on TV.

My mother’s voice pitches higher with each word. “Is this a *friend* of yours, or...?”

“Yes, Mom,” I answer. “She’s a friend of mine. Maggie invited her to come along today.”

I fire a quick glance at my sister. She grins at me from the hallway by the kitchen.

Alyssa drops my hand and steps forward, taking complete control of the moment with a confident stride. “It’s nice to meet you,” she says. “Happy birthday.”

My mother shakes Alyssa’s hand, her smile spreading slowly across her face.

“Roy!” she calls again. “Get in here. Now.”

“Why?” he shouts back.

“Come and meet *Alyssa*, a friend of *Junior’s*.”

I hear the shift of his recliner closing.

Mom’s attention twists toward me. “I really wish you’d *told* us you were bringing company, honey. I would have cleaned up a bit more.”

Alyssa waves a hand. “Oh, no. It looks great. You have a beautiful home, Mrs. Morgan.”

I blink, probably way more impressed with her than my mother is. Alyssa is a damn champion at this. I breathe a little easier as my father finally makes an appearance from the living room.

“Roy,” my mother says, “this is Alyssa.”

My father peels his glasses off his nose while my mother slides her hand over his shoulders to flatten out the non-existent wrinkles in his shirt. He narrows his eyes for a moment, looking Alyssa up and down as Mom gives her another scan as well. I’m almost tempted to hide her under a damn sheet. It sure would be nice if they’d stop staring at her like a damn leper.

Alyssa extends her hand toward my father. “I’m sorry if we’re interrupting your game, Mr. Morgan.”

My mother slaps his arm. “Oh, he doesn’t mind at all. Right, Roy?”

He curiously shakes Alyssa’s hand. “Not at all,” he says.

Maggie slides in from the kitchen. “Isn’t she pretty?”

I glare at my sister, fighting the childish urge to shove her down the stairs or yank her hair out.

“She’s very pretty,” my father agrees.

“So pretty!” my mother adds.

“*Guys...*” Blood burns my cheeks. “Come on. Don’t embarrass her.”

But Alyssa just grins. “Thank you very much.”

Maggie opens her mouth again, and I cringe with fear. “Alyssa’s dad is the new football coach.”

Their faces drop cold.

“Your father is *Cary Pierce*?” my mother asks.

Alyssa nods. “Yes, ma’am.”

If she was a leper before, then right now, she’s a leper with three heads and each one of them has a pierced nose.

My father says nothing. He just flashes a quick nod of approval at me, so I guess Alyssa passed with him.

My mother, on the other hand, shifts between an expression of seasickness and abject terror.

Cary Pierce's daughter is in her house and she didn't know she was coming.

Her fiery stare falls on me.

This is *my* fault, obviously.

"So, who's playing today?" Alyssa asks my father.

I furrow my brow, knowing that Alyssa doesn't give two shits about football, but her face feigns great interest.

"New York and Dallas," he answers.

"Oh, what's the score?"

"You know..." my mother says, "if you'd all like to watch the game for a while, lunch won't be ready for another twenty minutes."

"I'd love to," Alyssa says.

And then, I realize... Alyssa baited my mother, giving her the perfect excuse to isolate her location while she worked like a damn bee to get the rest of the house in top condition for her guest.

She's a fucking champion.

Alyssa follows my father into the living room. I move to follow, but Mom grabs my arm before I can pass.

"Kitchen. Now."

I fire another hateful glance at Maggie's amused grin before dragging my feet into the kitchen.

CHAPTER 38



ALYSSA

“So, how long have you been dating my son?”
Junior sighs. “*Mom.*”

“What? Is that not an appropriate question?”

The entire Morgan family stares at us from around the dining room table and I feel more on display than the fancy centerpiece Bonnie obviously pulled out from the back of the closet. It’s a sea of brown hair and brown eyes. Sharp cheekbones and strong chins. Maggie and her mother could pass as sisters, but it’ll take Junior about twenty years to catch up to his father’s wrinkles.

“Not too long,” I say with a shrug. “But I’ve been tutoring him in geometry since the start of the semester.”

Bonnie looks at Junior. “I didn’t know you had a tutor, honey.”

He nods. “Yeah, I needed to get my grade up a little.”

Roy furrows his brow. “You weren’t in any academic trouble, were you?”

“No, Dad. I wasn’t... I just needed someone to help me study. That’s all.”

Bonnie points her fork at him. “Get that grade up and keep it up. It’s just as important as football.”

“I know, Mom,” Junior answers through clenched teeth.

“I don’t want you flunking out before graduation,” she says. “My baby is going pro!”

I laugh. “I can confirm that Junior has made excellent progress. You don’t have to worry about him flunking out. I won’t let that happen.”

Bonnie grins at me, her eyes bright and accepting. I guess I haven’t lost my touch. “And *you*... he’s never said a word about *you* at all.”

“There’s nothing to say, really.”

“Well, you’ve clearly been a good influence on him.”

I smile. “It’s nothing he didn’t already have in him. All Junior really needed was the right incentive.”

Junior chokes on his water.

“*For heaven’s sake, Junior,*” Bonnie snaps at him. “*Chew your food.*” I look over to find him glaring at me. “One thing’s for sure, I need to call up that coach.”

Junior swivels his head toward her. “Why?”

“To thank him, of course! I’m not one to speak ill of the dead, but if that old man who ran the team before didn’t keel over, Cary Pierce wouldn’t be here and you wouldn’t be on your way to the championship. And if he weren’t here, Alyssa wouldn’t be, either. If you ask me, we owe the Pierces a great deal of gratitude.”

He shakes his head. “No, Mom. Really. *Don’t call him.*”

“Yeah,” I say, keeping my cool better than he is. “I’d be more than happy to pass on any message you have.”

Maggie flashes us a knowing wink. “Don’t bother the guy, Mom. Remember when you harassed one of *my* professors after he wrote me that recommendation letter?”

“I did not *harass* Professor Shelton,” Bonnie says. “And that was completely different. That recommendation letter got you into graduate school!”

“Being a *badass* got me into graduate school. The recommendation letter was a formality.”

Bonnie sighs. “Well, I can’t help it if I appreciate those who help my children. Your father and I did the best we could to provide you two with every opportunity, but we couldn’t give you everything. Cary Pierce has changed Junior’s life for the better and if we keep our heads up and minimize mistakes, then *nothing* can stop him from achieving his dreams.”

My gut lurches.

Junior laughs. “Damn, Mom! Maybe *you* should coach the football team. You certainly have the motivational speeches down.”

She smirks. “I may have applied for the job.”

I pick up the napkin from my lap as I slide out of my chair. “Excuse me. Where is your restroom?”

Bonnie points. “We’re having the one on this floor redone, but the one upstairs is fine. Up the stairs and to the right.”

“Thank you. I’ll be right back.”

“Redone?” I hear Maggie quip as I leave the room. “Since when do we have rooms *redone*?”

I head up the stairs, and the voices dim into whispers behind me.

The bathroom is just where Bonnie said it would be. I sneak inside to dab a bit of cold water on my forehead. I hold my hair to the side and let a little drip onto the back of my neck, cooling myself down as I hold my breath.

So, this is Junior Morgan’s family.

Honestly, I never pictured it before. I knew he had a sister — he mentions Maggie about once a week — but other than that, he doesn’t talk about them. I don’t like to talk about my own much, so I never thought to ask.

And now his mother sees me as the Messiah’s beautiful daughter, sent down from heaven above to make all her baby boy’s dreams come true.

Oops.

I check myself in the mirror, giving myself a quick pep-talk glance before stepping out into the hallway. As I turn toward the stairwell, my eyes catch the small faux license plate attached to the door across the bathroom.

JUNIOR, it reads.

Curiosity takes over. I twist the doorknob and silently let myself in.

His room is decorated black and blue with enough posters on the walls to cover up most of the white paint. Sports trophies line a shelf with medals and certificates flashing Junior’s name, most of them in gold.

I smile at a photo above his bed showing a pre-teen boy flexing in swim trunks over his big sister’s teenage head. No real muscle mass. No fraternity tattoo. Just little Junior Morgan before he became who he is now.

“Ally?”

I spin around as Junior pokes his head into the room. “Oh, hey. I was just...”

He inches toward me with suspicious eyes and nervous pink cheeks. “Snooping?”

“Snooping.” I shrug, glancing around again. He flips the picture frame down while I’m not looking. I pretend not to notice. “Sorry. I know I’m invading your privacy here, but I just needed a little break. You know?”

He laughs. “Oh, I know. It’s all right. I honestly don’t remember most of what’s left in here.”

I scan the walls again. My focus lands on a familiar face above his shoulder. It’s an old poster of my father looking poised and strong in his

jersey, holding a football and winking right at the camera.

“Even that?” I point.

Junior follows my gaze. “Oh.” He winces. “No, I remember that. I’ve had that for a decade, at least.”

“I guess you weren’t kidding when you said he was your hero.”

“I really wasn’t.” He blinks at me and smiles. “So, *who the hell are you* because you are amazing.”

I laugh. “I make a decent first impression.”

“No shit.”

“I, uh...” I pause, searching for the best way to explain it. “I used to spend a lot of time at other people’s houses.”

Junior says nothing. He listens.

“Friends. Neighbors. Mostly,” I continue. “My father was nonexistent. My mother often disappeared for days at a time. She’d leave me some money — a little chunk from the child support — and take off until the rest of it ran out. Eventually, she got sick of coming back to check on me, so she put me into boarding school. I saw her about once a month. Maybe.”

His mouth opens and closes. “Oh.”

“People noticed. They’d take me in until she got back. I never wanted to be a burden on anybody. I always felt like one, though.” Junior stays quiet. I think to shut up, but the words just keep spilling out. “I was *that Pierce girl*, once again taking up space in places where I didn’t belong, but I did chores, I helped make meals, and I worked hard to earn my keep wherever I stayed. I learned a lot about manners and making a good impression from the grateful mothers of my friends.”

“Wow,” he says, his eyes soft on me.

“Couple that with a natural acting ability and you have the perfect girl to bring home to your parents.”

He chuckles. “I’m sorry about her, by the way, she can be...”

“Like Maggie?”

“Maggie 2.0.”

I laugh. “They’re great. *Really* great.”

He steps forward, studying my eyes a little closer. I realize I’ve dropped my guard and I look away.

“What is it?” he asks.

I bite my cheek, hesitating to say anything, but I’ve already started the avalanche of weight falling off my chest.

"I've always wanted a family like this," I say, my voice low.

"Like what?"

"Boring."

Junior scoffs, feigning some fake offense with his hand on his chest. "You think we're *boring*?"

"You know what I mean." I rub my palms together. "*Normal*. Your parents love each other. They're *still* together. You have a sister and you get along. Birthday cards and Christmas cookies."

He gives a short nod. "I don't know if we're *normal* anymore, honestly. My family could easily be weird to most others."

"Well, it seems a hell of a lot better than having a famous dad you barely see or a mom who couldn't even remember whether you're allergic to peanuts or penicillin."

"You're allergic to peanuts?"

"Penicillin."

"Noted." He smiles. "Come on, Ally, look around. You grew up in New York going to fancy boarding schools. All we ever had was each other."

"You were wealthier than I was, Junior."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is."

I take a step back, hoping it'll hide the river of tears just begging to fall from my eyes. Years of repressed thoughts and emotions build up in my chest, but I fight the hormones down. This isn't the time or the place for it. The last thing I want to do is get emotional in front of Junior. We've been exclusive for less than a day, for fuck's sake, and yet...

"I became an actress just so I could escape my life," I hear myself say. "Be someone else — even for just a little while. It wasn't about being noticed. It was about disappearing."

Junior looks at me with kind eyes, completely void of judgment. "I became an athlete so people would notice me."

I stop a tear before it falls. Once again, Junior and I find ourselves standing at opposite ends of a long spectrum. One about the size of a football field, ironically.

"That's some mighty green grass you have over there, Junior Morgan."

He smiles. "Looks a lot like yours, Alyssa Pierce."

"Sorry." I turn away. "I didn't mean to bring up this shit right now. I just felt like talking and you were standing there."

“Hey.” He places his hands on my shoulders to draw me back to him. “You don’t have to apologize. You can talk to me anytime about anything. That’s why I’m here.”

For a second, I believe him. I believe everything will be okay and that I really can tell him everything.

The moment passes.

“*Don’t let them see your weaknesses,*” I quote. “Isn’t that what Cary Pierce always says?”

He shrugs. “Well, I hate to say this, but... Cary Pierce is kind of a dick.”

I laugh as Junior pulls me closer, wrapping his arms around me in a perfect embrace.

“There she is,” he says, reacting to my smile.

I hold him tighter, entwining my fingers together behind his back and hoping to stay here forever.

His lips graze my forehead. He lays a soft kiss on my temple. His arms flex slightly, holding me with an even tighter grip. I nearly cry again.

“We should get back downstairs,” I say, pulling away. “Before they start wondering what we’re doing up here.”

Junior nods, but his eyes say differently. “Wait.”

“What?”

“You look really beautiful right now. I don’t want to waste it.”

He kisses me. I cling to him; body and soul. Every taste, every smell. Everything about him drives me as crazy as it always has.

“You’re perfect, Alyssa Pierce,” he says.

I chuckle. “Promise?”

Junior steps back and draws an X over his chest.

CHAPTER 39



ALYSSA

“Alyssa? Is that you?”

Grant shoves the paper sack into the pocket of his coat, hiding it away as I close the front door behind us.

“Yeah!” I answer. “It’s me. And Grant.”

“Who?”

I roll my eyes as Grant grins. You know, the guy I’ve brought over here a dozen times. The guy who’s stayed for dinner. Twice.

“Grant, Dad,” I say. “We’ll be upstairs.”

There’s a long pause. I rush toward the stairs, hoping to get up before he says anything more.

“Alyssa, come in here for a minute.”

But I’ve never been that lucky.

I meet Grant’s supportive eyes and shake out my tension as we turn and make our way toward his voice. Throwing on a smile, I walk into the kitchen to face my father sitting at the island counter with a sports magazine in one hand and an empty glass in the other.

“Hey, Dad,” I greet as I step forward. I set my bag and notebooks on the counter beside him as I lean in to kiss his cheek, instantly smelling the alcohol in his breath. At least I know he’ll sleep heavily tonight.

“Hello, daughter.”

He looks at Grant in the doorway, his expression only showing the vaguest recognition. “Evening, Grant.”

“Good evening, Coach!” Grant says, waving. “How are you tonight?”

“Not bad.” Dad looks at me. “You didn’t come home last night.”

“Oh, yeah. I...” I walk to the refrigerator to grab us a few bottles of

water. "I stayed at Grant's last night," I lie.

"Oh?"

"We were up a little too late running lines and then we did some homework at the library today."

Dad eyes my notebooks. "What kind of homework?"

"History. And some English Lit."

I return to the counter to grab my bag and get out of here. As I reach for the notebooks, Dad grabs a loose page and slides it out.

"Why do you have Junior Morgan's math homework?" he asks.

Shit.

I meet his eyes, speechless. "Um..."

"Oh, that's mine!"

Grant lurches forward and takes the top notebook.

"Yours?" Dad asks.

"Yes, I... am Junior's math tutor. Yup. I'm helping him with math. I like math."

I glare at him over my father's thick shoulder, but Grant throws everything into this performance.

My father tilts his head. "*You* are Junior's tutor?" he asks.

Grant nods. "Yes, sir."

"You?"

"Uh-huh."

He stares at Grant, his glossy eyes full of confusion. "O-kay," he says at length.

"Well, we'll be upstairs," I say, snatching the page out of his loose grip. "Love you, Dad."

"Yeah. You too, sweetie," he mutters as we bolt from the kitchen.

"Goodnight, Coach," Grant says. "Go, Bearhawks!"

We rush to my room together, staying quiet until we close the door behind us.

"Fuck, Grant. You... are... my hero," I say, out of breath.

"I know," he says, smug as always.

He withdraws the paper sack from his jacket and holds it out to me. I look at it, silently chewing on my cheek.

"Just do it," Grant says.

"Can't we wait for a bit?" I ask.

"Why?"

"I don't know!" I turn away from it. "I just want to wait."

"For what?"

"Well, I don't have to go right now. So, we have to wait."

Grant snorts. "Alyssa, you *always* have to go."

I glare at his truth. "Do I really need to know right this second?"

"Will it make a difference an hour from now?" he asks. "Two hours from now?"

"No," I say with a sigh.

He extends the sack closer to my hand. "Just do it, honey."

In my gut, I know he's right, but it's not my gut I'm afraid for. My heart clenches as I take the sack and open it. A single item rests inside. A small rectangular box holds the answer to my entire future.

"First scare?" Grant asks.

I swallow. "Yeah."

He gently squeezes my shoulder. "I'll be right here."

"Thanks."

"No matter the result," he says, squeezing again. "*I'll be here.*"

I look at him and smile, somehow. "Thanks," I say again as I turn away. "Guard the door, please."

Grant cracks his knuckles. "Ain't nobody getting through me," he says, leaning into his De Niro impression.

He's trying to make me laugh. I try, but all I can manage is a push of air through my nostrils.

My heart knocks against my ribs so hard it hurts as I enter my bathroom and close the door behind me. I dump the box onto the cabinet, wondering if I should even bother reading the instructions before doing it. How many ways can there be to pee on something?

I read them anyway. I read them twice.

Then, once I'm done, I read them again.

Ninety seconds.

I leave the test on the counter and return to my bedroom. Grant chuckles as I enter. I tense, but relax when I realize his focus is on his phone.

"Who are you texting?" I ask.

"Hm?" He pockets his phone. "Oh, nobody."

"Nobody?"

"*Nobody.*"

I tiptoe closer. He shields the screen. "I wonder how *Ty* feels being

referred to as *Nobody*.”

Grant gasps. “Who told?”

“Junior.”

“Naughty boy.”

I sit down on the edge of my bed. “Pillow talk can be dangerous.”

He hums in agreement as he plops down beside me.

“So, you two are...”

“Pretty much, yeah,” he says.

“I’m sorry I doubted you.”

Grant laughs. “Everybody does.”

“I’m really happy for you, Grant.”

“Thank you.”

I bob my chin toward his pocket. “What are you texting about?”

“Eh.” He shrugs, brushing it off. “Nothing important.”

“Must be nice if he’s got you giggling.”

“I do not *giggle*.”

“There was definitely some giggling there.”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” His eyes drift toward the bathroom door. “It doesn’t feel like the right time to rub my happiness in your face.”

I smile. “I don’t mind.”

“No?”

“Rub away. Please. I could use the distraction right now.”

“Okay.” Grant shifts to the side and hugs his knee. “We were supposed to hook up tonight, but something came up.”

“Sorry.”

“Not you. He waited until the last minute to study for a test, so he had to back out. He’s cramming right now, so naturally I’m sending him filthy text messages.”

“Naturally.”

“I’m thinking of pulling a page from your playbook and promising him full access to my mouth if he gets a good enough grade.”

“Very nice!” I say with a chuckle. “What grade?”

“I dunno, a C? C-minus? I’m not picky.”

“Where’s your self-respect?” I tease.

“Fine. B-plus.”

We laugh.

Grant glances at the bathroom again, but he looks away just as quickly. “And you and Lover Boy?” he asks.

“What about us?”

“You two are now...”

I take a breath, barely. “Official. Yeah, we are.”

“Does that make you happy?” he asks.

I’m not sure how to reply. On the surface, yes. I’m happy. So very happy. But if I dig even an inch, I meet nothing but doubt.

Can I really answer that question before I know for sure?

I rise off the bed. Grant stands as well, but he lingers in place as I walk back into the bathroom. I hesitate for a moment before forcing myself to look.

Plus sign. Positive.

How is that possible? We were careful. Except for that first time, but... dammit, maybe the EC didn’t take.

I’m pregnant.

I can’t have this baby.

That’s a fact. I’m too young. I’m in college. I would very much like to graduate.

And Junior. He doesn’t need this. A baby would only hold him back from his dream. I can’t do that to him. I won’t.

So, I guess there’s only one thing to be done.

I pause, feeling the phantom touch of Junior’s hands on mine and how he makes me feel every time he looks at me.

A smile creeps across my face.

I’m carrying Junior Morgan’s baby.

An image flashes in my head. A fictitious spark of hope. Junior standing in front of me with his eyes gazing down at the swaddled lump in his arms. He can’t stop grinning.

For a second, it’s the warmest thought I could ever imagine.

In another second, I fall in love with it.

I have to protect it. Even if the odds are as tiny as this baby is inside of me right now, I have to protect the possibility.

“What are you going to do?” Grant asks me.

I don’t answer.

I imagine a perfect world where this *doesn’t* come crashing down around

me.

CHAPTER 40



JUNIOR

NOVEMBER

“A lly?”

“What?” Alyssa exhales a pleasurable sigh. “Why did you stop?”

I’m throbbing so deep inside of her I can barely feel anything else, but I still pause. Her face is flushed, covered with a thin layer of sweat and sex-blush. If there’s one thing I’ve grown to know about Alyssa Pierce, it’s that her brain shuts off during sex. She gets into it and completely immerses herself in the experience. Rarely do her thoughts distract her, but right now...

She’s not even here.

“I said, are you okay?” I ask again.

“Yeah,” she says, flexing her inner muscles to encourage my thrust.

“Don’t stop.”

I don’t move, fixated on the doubt in her eyes. “What’s on your mind?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

She sighs. “I’m just... freaking out about tomorrow.”

“There it is.” I smile. “Me, too. That’s why we insisted on a bout of *stress relief* before going over your lines again.” I kiss her neck. “Calm down, Ally. You’re going to be great up there.”

“I wish you could be there,” she murmurs.

“I’ll be there right after the game,” I promise, tracing her collarbone with my tongue. “And then, I’ll be in the front row on Sunday.”

“Really?”

I look into her happy eyes. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

“I’m sorry I can’t make the game.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

She smiles. “But I’ll be at the championship game.”

I wince. “If—”

“No *if*.” She brushes my hair away from my eyes. “There’s no way in hell you guys don’t win tomorrow.”

“I can’t believe we’ve come this far,” I say. “We’re one game away. That’s it. Just one game away.”

“I’m proud of you, Junior.”

“Yeah?”

“I knew you had it in you.”

My heart bursts. I kiss her, crushing my lips on hers as if my life depended on it.

Cary Pierce couldn’t have gotten me this far on his own. As much as I admire him, it wasn’t his coaching that pushed me toward greatness and made me into a better man.

That was all her.

Her hands move down and grip my ass, pulling my hips closer to her begging body. I give her a thrust and she moans into my mouth. Every time with her is like the first time. Always full of amazing sensations that I never thought possible, ones that I’ll never feel again after the moment has passed, but that just makes them even more intense.

I fuck her faster, gripping the sheets beneath us as her hips meet every move. She kisses me back, locked in the moment unlike before. I feel her body tense, just a few deep grinds away from climax. I race her to the finish line, bucking and moaning with her.

I entwine our fingers together, squeezing her hard as everything crumbles inside of us. I tremble against her with closed eyes, wishing I could tie her to this bed and feel this over and over again.

“Junior?”

I open my eyes to her smiling face. “What?”

She chuckles. “I said, are you okay?”

I shake it off. “Yeah.”

She pulls me closer and rests my head on her breast. I listen to her heart pounding away inside of her, feeling her lungs expand with each breath she

takes.

Alyssa Pierce.

Nothing could ever come between this.

“It’s over,” she says.

I sigh. I kiss her warm skin. “I don’t accept that,” I say, instantly recalling the response from habit.

“I don’t care what you accept...” Her breath quivers as I descend her body, but she never breaks character. “It’s over, we’re done. I can’t do this anymore.”

“You’ve sung this song before, Nora.” I nibble at her hip. “What makes this different than—”

“Junior.”

I look up and see a little darkness in those blue eyes. “What?” I ask.

Alyssa takes a breath. She chews on her lip with hesitation. “Nothing,” she finally says, gently shaking her head. “I should get going.”

She moves away, throwing her feet off the bed while I stay in place.

“Wait, what?”

“Sorry.” She grabs her sweater off the floor. “I’m still a bit distracted.”

“But you just got here.”

“Three hours ago.”

I glance at the clock on my desk. Okay, it has been a few hours, but still. It’s not like her to leap out of bed like this. “Ally, what’s up?” I ask.

She flashes a smile as she pulls her skirt up over hips. “I’m just tired, Junior,” she says. “Exhausted, even. I’m fine, though. I probably just need to take an aspirin, lay down, and pass out for the night.”

“Okay.” I nod. There’s something wrong. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do. I’ll come running.”

“I will.” Her lips curl into a quick smile, one that I easily could have missed if I blinked. “Thanks.”

I shoot off the bed and block her path to the door. “I want to see you tomorrow,” I say. “Before the game.”

She nods. “Sure.”

“The study room? Four o’clock.”

“I’ll be there.” She pops up onto her toes and kisses my cheek. “Bye, Junior.”

I grab her arm and pull her back in for a real kiss. “Bye, Ally.”

Her eyes flutter open, and she smiles one last time before opening the

door.

I wait for her to leave, listening to her shoes march across the grouchy floorboards, before getting dressed and walking out into the living room.

“Alyssa leave already?” Ty asks as he slides his jacket on.

“Yup,” I answer, beelining to the kitchen.

“She coming back? It’s early. And Friday night.”

“No. She’s freaking out about the play. Wants to be alone.”

I grab a beer from the refrigerator.

Ty leans against the doorway. “And how are you feeling about tomorrow?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m so nervous, I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

I take a quick chug. “We’ll be fine, Ty. We just need to trust each other.”

“You talking about the game?” he asks. “Or Alyssa?”

I just glare.

“Well, if it makes a difference, Grant’s been freaking out, too,” he says. “Might just be an actor thing, you know?”

“Yeah. Probably. Maybe.”

I take another drink. I hope it’s all just a case of pre-stage jitters, but Alyssa’s been off for weeks now. There’s something going on behind her eyes, but she won’t say a word. Tonight was the first time it really seemed to mess her up.

“We’re going to dinner,” Ty says. “Want to tag along?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

“See you later, then.”

I linger in the kitchen, sipping my beer long after he leaves. Part of me thinks that if I wait here long enough, Alyssa will come back. Maybe she’ll need me or call. I know she won’t, though. She’s too strong. If there is something bothering her, she’ll tough it out. I love that about her, but it also kills me a little.

I wish she trusted me the way I trust her.

CHAPTER 41



ALYSSA

I can't tell him. I've tried.

I've woken up every single day for weeks with a surge of confidence dancing in my veins. *Today's the day.* This is it. This is the day I tell Junior Morgan there's a life growing inside of me and that it's his as much as it is mine. I'll tell him I don't want to live without it. I want to keep it. I'm in love with it and I want him to be in love with it, too.

Then I see his face and that confidence burns to the ground.

I climb the stairs to the third floor and walk through my room toward the bathroom. It's strange how fast something becomes a ritual. Just another part of your daily routine that's so necessary you don't even remember what life was like before it.

I open the drawer next to the sink. One of these days, the positive result might fade, but right now, it's there for me to stare at every day. Right now, my life is long bouts of daydreaming and fantasy before bed, just me lying there imagining what Junior will say or do once I tell him.

I reach into the drawer to grab it. I squeeze air. Panic grips me. I pull the drawer out as far as it'll go, sifting through the mess of hair ties and makeup brushes, tossing the curling iron away, aggressively pulling everything out because it has to be here. It's *always* here. It was here this morning.

"Alyssa."

My heart stops. Everything stops.

I turn to see my father standing in my bedroom doorway. He's holding a white plastic stick. *The white plastic stick.*

I try to say something. No words come out.

He gestures to the bed. "Sit down, Alyssa," he says.

“Why are you going through my things?”

“I said, *sit down.*”

He doesn’t budge. He doesn’t even blink, but his voice somehow digs a little deeper.

I walk. My knees shake. “Why are you going through my things?” I ask again as I sit down.

“It’s my house. They’re my things,” he says, flicking his wrist to toss the test into the trash bin next to my desk. “How far along are you?”

“Dad, please.” I pull my eyes away from the trash. “I don’t feel comfortable talking to you about—”

“I don’t care. I’m your father and—”

“Since *when?*”

“I am your father and you will answer my questions,” he says, ignoring my interruption. “How far along are you?”

A rock builds in my throat, latching on so tightly that I can’t force it down. “I’m not sure,” I say.

“You don’t know?”

“It’s hard to say. Two months?”

“Who’s the father?”

I press my lips together. “Dad, please.”

“Alyssa,” he growls, “if you say you don’t know, I swear...”

“No, I *know* who the father is, I just...”

“Then, who is it?”

I look at the floor. This wasn’t how this was supposed to happen. I should have told Junior when I found out. He could have been here with me for this. We could have done this *together*.

How could I be so stupid?

“Alyssa.”

I flinch at his tone. I dig my nails into the bed beneath me, clinging to anything I can.

“Junior Morgan.”

His silence turns the room ice cold. I keep my head down, physically unable to move. I wait as the silence stretches far too long.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” The disappointment in his voice cuts deep. “Does he know?”

“No,” I say. “I haven’t told him yet.”

“Good. Don’t.”

I snap my head up. "What?"

"Don't say a word to him about it," he says. "On Monday morning, you and I will go upstate together and have it taken care of."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"You *really* don't have a say in that at all."

"I don't?" he says. "I get to pay for your school, give you a home, clothing, food, but I don't have a say in how you conduct yourself?"

"Not with this."

"We had a deal, Alyssa. I'd say I've more than held up my end of it. You sneaking around behind my back, whoring yourself out to my football players wasn't part of that deal."

"I did not *whore* myself."

"That's what they'll say, right? *Like daddy, like daughter.*" He shakes his head. "I brought you out here to give us both a fresh start. Think about what this will do to that life. What it'll do to Junior's life."

I close my eyes, letting tears fall. "That's what this is really about, isn't it? You don't give a shit about me. It's about your little coaching project."

"With my help, Junior will go straight to the top just like I did," he says. "Don't you want that for him? If you have this baby now, you'll rob him of that, and he'll resent you for it."

I force the sob down. "You know what, Dad? You're right. Maybe he is just like you. Maybe I *should* spare this child a lifetime of missed birthdays and broken promises."

His brow hardens. "That's enough of that, Alyssa."

"No." I stand up, ignoring my shaking knees. "You are a *terrible* father, but Junior *isn't like you.*"

"Yes, he is." His lips twitch. "Don't be naïve, girl. Do you *really* think that he's going to throw all of his dreams away... for *you*?"

The sob invades, triggering a truth that I can't ignore. "I love him," I whisper at the floor, trying to convince myself more than anybody how much that matters.

"That fades," he says, calm and cold. "A man isn't remembered for the women he loved. He's remembered for the victories he earned and the legacy he leaves behind. That doesn't include you." He turns away and grips the doorknob. "Monday morning. Pack a bag. You'll be gone for a few days."

I collapse before the door even closes. Tears erupt from my eyes as sink I

onto my bed. I cry until my throat burns and my heart turns numb.
Fuck.

CHAPTER 42



JUNIOR

*F*our thirty-five. I have to be at the stadium in twenty minutes, but Alyssa was supposed to meet me here in the study room at four.

Where are you?

I send the text, but I don't expect a reply. She hasn't replied to the last three I sent her since I got here.

There was something wrong last night, I just knew it. I could feel it in my gut all night long, but I didn't do a damn thing about it. And now she's gone, ignoring my calls and texts. I can't think of a damn reason why.

I grab my jacket and rush through the library to the ground floor.

Alyssa has a show tonight. She'll be on route to Talon Hall right now if she's not there already. I push through the crowds of gathering students and sports fans as I cross campus, all of them heading toward the stadium to witness the final game of the season — the one that determines our status in the regional championship, which was the other thing that kept me awake all night. I care little about that right now. I'll find focus on the field.

Alyssa comes first.

I pick up my pace as I reach the quad. It's crowded, as usual. A line extends from the coffee cart. It's a sea of school-colored sweaters and painted faces. Blonde. Redhead. Wrong brunette. Another blonde.

There!

"Ally!"

She doesn't acknowledge it, but I know she's well within earshot. Even her pace quickens — like she's purposefully trying to outrun me. She grabs the door handle to Talon Hall and throws it open, leaving me behind.

"Alyssa!" I cut across the lobby to block the hall to the auditorium. "Hey,

wait a second!”

She pauses, her head low. “Oh. Hey, Junior,” she says.

I stare into her pale face, catching all the emotion as it bleeds from her icy-blue eyes. “Ally, what’s going on? Why didn’t you meet me?”

She blinks. She twitches. She looks at any and everything other than me. “Sorry. I forgot.”

“You forgot?”

“Look, Junior, I really need to get backstage—”

I grab her arms to keep her in front of me. “Ally, *stop*.” She deflates, heaving out the last of her breath. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Junior, please—”

“Ally, *look at me*.”

She finally looks up, but only for one fleeting second. “Junior, we both have a lot on our minds right now. You have your game and I have my show, so can we just focus on those, please?”

Every muscle in my body tenses. “Are you breaking up with me?” I ask.

“No,” she says. “Maybe. I... I don’t know. Not now, Junior. Please.”

“Alyssa.”

“We always knew it’d happen eventually, right? Might as well end it now.”

I shake my head, hurt and confused. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“I have to go.”

“Ally—”

Alyssa dodges around me, taking off toward the auditorium like a damn bullet.

“Ally, what did I do?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer. It hurts, but I let her leave. I fear it’d hurt even more if I didn’t.

What did I do?

It had to be something I did, right? Girls don’t just break up with you for no reason. There’s *always* a reason — something concrete that you can look back on that pinpoints the exact moment when things went wrong. An emotional lynchpin that brings everything down.

Or maybe I'm not the one who pulled it at all.
Being with Alyssa was always a risk, and that risk had a face.
Cary Pierce.

I spot Grant as he enters the lobby. "Grant!"
He glances up from the floor, his entire body weighed down with nerves.
"Oh, hey, Lover Boy."

"Have you talked to Alyssa today?"

"Not since dress rehearsal yesterday. Why?"

"There's something wrong with her."

He stands up a little taller. "How so?"

"I don't know. She won't talk to me."

Grant chuckles. "There's nothing wrong with her, man. It's *opening night*. You're lucky I'm even forming complete sentences right now."

"No, this is different. She just broke up with me."

He pauses. "Okay, yeah. That's weird."

"I need you to go in there and ask her what happened and text me what she says."

"*Absolutely not.*"

"Grant, come on," I say. "This is important."

"So is *this*," he says. "I don't expect a big dumb jock like you to understand, but what you're asking of me directly violates the code of friendship. If I did that, it'd be a serious breach of trust. I will not, under any circumstances—"

"I'll let you borrow the Junior-mobile for a night."

His brows twitch. "*A weekend*," he counters. "*Next weekend*. Ty and I have plans."

"It's all yours."

"Deal. Give me ten minutes."

"Thank you."

Grant heads for the auditorium. I check the time. It's almost five. I want to stay here, but I can't skip out on the game, either.

I leave for the stadium, keeping my head down to avoid the constant cries of people screaming my name. Usually, this turns me on like nothing else. I used to make sure they noticed me, but right now, all I want to do is get out of sight.

Ally...

What happened?

CHAPTER 43



ALYSSA

The show must go on.

I have to focus on what I can control. Right now, that's the show. Get dressed. Put on stage make-up. Go over my monologue for the hundredth time since breakfast.

The show must go on.

I smear a thin layer of foundation on my skin. I draw thick lines around my eyes with black liner to make them pop under the stage lights. I swallow the lump down my throat to keep from crying again. I try not to think about how I just broke the heart of the only man I've ever loved.

The only man who's ever loved *me*.

Grant sits down on the edge of my vanity table. "Lover Boy wants to know what's wrong with you."

I sigh. "You talked to him?"

"He accosted me in the lobby. I feared for my life," he jokes, clutching his metaphorical pearls. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I say, grabbing the lipstick from my makeup bag.

Grant snatches it from my hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

I reach for the bag. He slides it away.

"*Grant.*"

"What's wrong?" he asks again.

"We need to get ready *now*."

"We'll get ready after. What happened?"

I take a deep breath, but it doesn't help the pain in my chest. "Dad knows," I say.

Grant arches a brow. "How much does Daddy know?"

"All of it."

"*All of it*, all of it?"

"Grant," I say, annoyed.

"Well, there's a *lot*."

"Yes. And he knows all of it. He knows about Junior and me. He knows I've been lying to him. He knows about..."

I look down at my lap.

"How does he know about that?" he asks.

"He found the test."

"The pee stick?"

"Yeah."

"You still have that?"

"Of course."

"You just... kept a stick covered with your urine lying around your bedroom this whole time?"

"Yeah."

He grimaces. "*Ew*."

I glare. "Are we done here?"

"Did you tell Junior?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"*Grant*..."

"He said you broke up with him."

I say nothing as my eyes brim with tears.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because we can't be together," I say, swallowing hard. "We never should have been in the first place and we both know it."

Grant shakes his head. "Alyssa, you're having a baby together."

"So, what?" A fresh wave of nausea plagues me. I've felt it a lot since last night. There's a slow burning inside that never goes away. "Junior will never choose me," I say, my voice weak.

"Over what?"

"Over football. Over everything. Fame. Money. Power. All of it."

"That's *crap*," he says.

"Is it?" I ask. "My dad chose it all over me. My mom chose freedom over me. What makes Junior any different?"

“The difference is that Junior *loves* you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“It’s written all over his face, honey.”

“It doesn’t matter. Even if he loves me now, how long will that last? How long will he let me and this baby hold him back before he leaves us for good?”

Grant sighs, his jaw flexing with sad frustration. “Alyssa...”

I reach across him, reclaiming my makeup bag. “We have a show to do.”

He slides into the vanity next to mine. “Well, for the record, I think you’re making a really stupid mistake, Alyssa.”

“Noted.”

A really stupid mistake.

I would love to admit that I’ve made a mistake and race out of here to fall back into Junior’s loving arms, but I can’t. Junior has wanted to play in the pros since he was a little kid. His family is expecting it. Who am I to take that from him? What kind of person does that make me to take away everything he’s worked so hard for? To ruin his life?

My father is right.

Junior never has to know.

CHAPTER 44



JUNIOR

*M*y phone vibrates in my locker. A new text from Grant.
Daddy knows.

I lean against the locker, my chest constricting. I re-read it once. Twice. And again to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks.

Of course. What else could upset Alyssa this much?

He knows.

"Everybody gather around..."

Cary Pierce scans the locker room, his eyes landing on each of us in our uniforms.

"This is it, guys," he says, his grin full of pride. "You're one more win away from playing in the regional championship game."

The team erupts, screaming and slamming their fists against the lockers. I do nothing.

He raises his hand to calm them down.

"But to me... it won't matter if you win or lose tonight because, in my mind, we've already won. The group of guys I met back in September don't exist anymore. They were weak, they were *losers*. You are bigger. You are better. And tonight, you're winners." His eyes fall on me. "All of you."

I look away as they cheer again, fear coursing through me.

"This is as much of an achievement for me as it is for you," he continues. "I came to this school to make a difference. I'm pretty sure I did. Win or lose, the world knows who you are now. And they will not forget."

The team bangs and shouts again.

"But still..." He grins again. "I don't know about you guys, but I'd rather win tonight, so let's go out there and be winners. Come on!"

I grab my helmet from my locker and follow the rough scrape of cleats across the floor as the team rushes for the field. Their enthusiasm pulses through me, forcing all doubt and fear aside and replacing it with powerful adrenaline.

As I pass by Coach, he lays a thick hand on my chest to stop me.

“Hold on, Junior,” he says.

I fall back against the wall, feeling the power in his hand even beneath my pads.

The rest of the team passes by without notice and races outside onto the field along with Bob.

Once their shouts echo away, Cary Pierce looks at me and smiles.

“I’m proud of you, Junior,” he says, keeping his hand on my chest. “You’ve come a long way.”

I nod, torn between fear and admiration. “Thank you, Coach.”

“The night we met, I told you one thing. Do you remember what it was?”

“You said I had a legendary arm,” I quip, my nerves getting the best of my words.

He doesn’t react. “What else?”

“I’m sorry, Coach. I don’t remember.”

“I told you to stay away from my daughter,” he says, staring hard at me. It’s odd, but this is the first time I’ve noticed that he and Alyssa have the same blue eyes. “Do you remember now?”

His hand slides off my chest, but I still feel the weight of it, along with the crushing blow of the last few months. Every kiss, every minute spent inside of her. All behind Cary Pierce’s back.

“Coach, I can explain—”

“You’re benched, Junior.”

My jaw drops. “*What?*”

“You’re not playing tonight. You can sit this one out.”

I look at the field, listening to the thunderous cries of the crowd. “You can’t just not let me play! It’s the final game of the season.”

“I can and I will.”

“We’ll lose.”

“Good.” He doesn’t even blink. “Maybe having this championship pulled out from under you will make you think twice about disobeying me again.”

Every part of me rages red. “She’s an *adult*,” I say. “She can date whoever she wants.”

“*Don’t you dare talk about her.*” He steps forward, towering over me like a damn giant. “You’ve done enough *scoring* this season, Junior. Next season, you can try again.”

I shake my head. “This is bullshit. You have no right—”

“Don’t say another word or I’ll make sure you never pick up another ball for the rest of your life.” He narrows his eyes. “Think about *that*, Junior. Is she really worth throwing your dreams away for?”

My vision blurs with spots of white. The crowd fades in my ears, leaving nothing but the pleasant memory of Alyssa laughing in my bed.

“Okay, fine. I admit it,” I say. “I’m dating Alyssa, but that’s not enough of a reason to let the team waste an entire season.”

“It’s not?”

“No.”

“Then, how about this?” He lowers his voice, growling through a thin line between his teeth. “I’m benching you for letting me down, for letting this team down, but *mostly*, I’m benching you for *knocking up my daughter.*”

My heart sinks. “Wait. What?”

He points a stiff finger at the field. “Get out there, sit down, and don’t get up again until the clock strikes zero... or you’re finished.”

Alyssa.

“*Now, Junior.*”

I pause, split between her and the team and everything in the middle. My feet carry me toward the field, drifting slowly. I don’t even realize it when I sit down on the bench.

Alyssa Pierce is having my baby.

CHAPTER 45



JUNIOR

“*Junior! Junior! Junior!*”

At the start of the game, their cries were eager and excited. A lot can change in ninety minutes.

Now, they're angry and confused. They're calling my name with seething hatred, just like Cary Pierce wants them to. I have to sit here and take it or else my life as an athlete is over.

I keep my head down. I stare at the grass, avoiding their eyes. Avoiding the team's eyes.

It's not their overwhelming disappointment keeping me in place on this bench. It's not the plummeting scoreboard leaving me numb inside, nor the constant sound of my teammates getting trampled across the gridiron.

It's her.

Alyssa knew about this. She didn't tell me. I like to think I know her pretty well at this point. After ninety minutes of letting this sink in, I'm sure I know why she kept this from me.

She's scared.

She met my family. She spent time in my childhood home, my bedroom. She knows how important this sport is to us and how much opportunity I have now that Cary Pierce is leading me straight to Draft Day. She knows I can't do that on my own.

Having a baby right now could derail that into oblivion.

“Her existence made achieving my dreams a lot harder.”

From the man himself. Cary Pierce told me that in his office. I'm damn sure the bastard said the same thing to her when he found out. That's why she broke up with me. It wasn't because she wanted to. She thought it was the

best thing to do for me and my future.

Well, I disagree.

I stand up off the bench.

“Junior.”

Coach’s bark carries over the rest of the fray. He stares at me with hateful eyes, firing a warning shot for me to sit back down.

I ignore him. I drop my helmet on the grass.

“Junior!”

Alyssa doesn’t know how much she means to me. She doesn’t know how I’d go to hell and back just to see her smile again. She doesn’t know how much I’ve fallen in love with her.

But she’s about to.

I walk off the field, cutting through the haze of cameras and screaming voices, rushing down the ramp toward the stadium exit.

A hand grips my shoulder. *“Junior—”*

I jerk away from his grasp. Away from Cary Pierce, my childhood hero.

“I’m out,” I say.

His hard eyes twinge with amusement. *“I never thought you were this stupid, Junior. Don’t give up your dreams over something like this.”*

“Playing ball isn’t my dream, Coach. She is.”

He doesn’t reply as I turn my back on him one last time.

I break into a sprint, peeling off the layers weighing me down as I run. I toss my jersey to the ground. My shoulder pads. I won’t be needing them anymore.

I cut through the quad, weaving through the grass, dodging the confused faces of students hanging out, and plow right through the doors of Talon Hall.

The lobby is silent. I hear the gentle echo of voices on the stage before I reach the auditorium, including hers.

My Alyssa.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Some douchebag stops me in front of the auditorium doors. He stares at me with an upturned nose, flashing me what little authority the theatre department has bestowed upon him.

“You can’t go in while the show is in-progress,” he says.

“I need to talk to one of the actors,” I say, nearly choking, out of breath. *“It’s important.”*

“It can wait until curtain.”

I grunt at him with impatience and take off down the hall, following the sound of her voice around the corner until I find the backstage door.

It's almost pitch black inside. I take a moment to let my eyes adjust and to catch my breath with my ears tuned to her voice.

I smile. She's recited this monologue over a dozen times in my bed.

"*Junior?*"

I squint into the dark curtains until I see Grant's stunned eyes staring back at me. "Grant—"

I rush to him. He holds up his hands.

"What are you doing here?" he whispers. "You *can't* be back here."

"I need to talk to her."

"Okay. Cool. She's a little busy right now."

I look over his shoulder and there she is, standing on the other side of the stage. Her hair is curled and dolled up on her head — absolutely nothing like her usual style. A yellow sundress hugs her body. For a second, my mind runs wild.

Soon, her body will change. Our child will grow and kick. Someday soon, I'll hold it in my arms.

I fall in love with it.

I fall in love with her all over again.

"Let me go on."

Grant blinks. "Um, *no*. This is not a wrestling match. I cannot just tag you in."

"This is the ending, right?" I ask. "Page ninety-seven."

"... Yeah."

"I know the scene, man. Ally and I ran it a thousand times. Let me do it."

He stares at me, emotionless. "You're serious."

"Completely."

"You're *gesturing* right now, aren't you?" he asks. "This is a love gesture."

"Are you going to help me get her back or not?"

Grant smirks, his eyes filling with lovable pride. "Okay."

I take a quick step around him, but he pulls me back.

"*Whoa!* Are you in cleats?"

I look at my shoes. "Yeah."

"You can't walk onto a stage in *cleats*, you filthy savage," he says. "Take them off."

I kick them off with impatience while Grant slides his suit jacket off.

“Put this on, too,” he says. “You’ll look ridiculous, but it’s better than whatever the hell it is you’re wearing now.”

“Thanks, Grant.” I throw the jacket on. “I owe you one.”

“You’re lucky I’m a hopeless romantic.” He shakes his head. “Mr. Young will never cast me in anything ever again after this...”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Please don’t fuck this up.”

“I won’t.” I peek through the curtain. “Holy shit. That’s a lot of people out there.”

Grant slaps my cheek. Hard. “Man up, Lover Boy. That’s your cue.” He spins me around and gives me a firm shove through the doorway. “*It’s showtime.*”

I stumble out onto the stage. Bright white lights shine on my face, instantly blinding me. And I thought the stadium lights were rough.

There’s a hum of confused voices in front of me. I can barely see them behind the spots taking hold of my vision.

A gasp. *Alyssa.*

She freezes with a mix of anger and surprise invading her face. She studies me from my head to my socks, not once blinking her icy blue eyes.

Oh, shit.

What the hell am I doing?

CHAPTER 46



ALYSSA

What the hell is he doing?

The audience shifts in their seats. I stiffen my neck to avoid breaking the fourth wall. I keep my eyes on Junior, trying not to show shock, but holy shit — *what the hell is he doing right now?*

Grant waves at me from backstage, urging me to continue on like normal, but I can't stop every muscle in my body from shaking.

A tear slides down my cheek. I wipe it away. "It's over," I say to Junior.

He doesn't hesitate. "I don't accept that."

My lip quivers. "I don't care what you accept," I say, slipping as far into character as possible, but part of me still shines through. "It's over, we're done. I can't do this anymore."

Junior steps forward with nervous energy, his eyes obviously so tempted to look out at the gawking crowd, but he keeps his focus on me instead. "You've sung this song before, Nora. What makes this any different than any other time you've run away from us in the last ten years?"

"It's..." I inhale deep, forcing the emotions just below the surface. "It's the first time I've thought more with my head and not my heart." My chest tightens, feeling every word. "This is *the right thing* for both of us, Danny. I know it."

"If this is right..." He pauses. "Then why does it feel so wrong?"

"It feels wrong because we don't know any better. You just need a little time to think about it like I have."

"Nora, I don't give a good goddamn what your head thinks," he says. "All I care about is what that beautiful heart of yours feels. It feels the same as mine."

Junior steps closer. I brace myself for the next line.

“*I love you,*” he says. “I’ve always loved you since the day I saw you... and I *refuse* to let you go.”

“Love isn’t enough,” I say, my heart breaking.

“I will spend the rest of my life proving that it is.” He cups my face and wipes the tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. “I don’t care what I have to give up. It’s you and me, Nora. It always will be.”

He kisses me and the music cues on, rising to a crescendo before the lights go black. The curtain falls, drawing a sudden, heavy clamor of applause from the other side.

I break our kiss and shove him away with all the strength I have.

“Junior, what the hell are you doing here?!” I squint at him in the dark, making out the sincere shock on his face.

“Ally, I—”

I shove him again, just barely rocking his muscled body backward. “Do you have any idea how *stupid* that was?! Did you even *think* about it for more than two seconds?!”

Grant swoops in and grabs my hand while brushing Junior off the stage. “*Curtain, curtain!*” he whispers. “*We have curtain!*”

I bite down, swallowing my words as the curtain rises on a standing ovation. We raise our arms. We take a bow. The rest of the cast walks out. We bow again. I force a smile. A laugh. Another bow.

The curtain falls.

I spin on my heels and there’s Junior, lingering in the wings like *a fucking idiot*.

He walks toward me. “Ally, we need to talk,” he says, his voice barely audible as the clapping continues.

“You bet your ass we do!” I point at Grant lingering nearby with the rest of the confused cast. “And *you!*”

“Don’t blame him,” Junior says, blocking my hand. “It was all my idea.”

“It was your idea to *embarrass* me? To ruin any chance of me *ever* standing on this stage again?!”

“*Ms. Pierce!*”

I jolt at Mr. Young’s fierce growl, counting down the seconds until I can say my theatre education is officially over. “Mr. Young, I am so sorry—”

He stops in front of me, but his eyes instantly lock on Junior. “What happened to Grant? Who the hell are you?”

I swallow the fear down. "Sir, I can explain—"

"You have quite the stage presence, young man," he says, glancing Junior up and down. "I can't say you chose the best of moments to showcase your abilities, but I appreciate tenacity when I see it."

Junior blinks. "Thanks?"

Young turns to me. "You kept it together up there, Alyssa. I like an actress who can handle a curveball."

I heave a thick sigh. "Thank you, sir."

"Let's make sure tomorrow's shows go just as smoothly, everybody!" he says, addressing the entire crew. "And can we please lock the stage doors next time?"

Young wanders off.

I spin toward the dressing rooms before Junior can grab me again.

"Ally—"

"Go away, Junior."

I slam the door behind me, but he throws it open and follows me anyway. "*Dammit, Junior.*" I hold back tears. "I can't do this right now."

"This isn't over," he says.

"Yes, it is."

"Don't I have a say?"

"No, and no amount of *gesturing* is going to change my mind."

Junior furrows his brow. "Is that a theatre thing? I've never heard of it before."

"*Get out.*"

"No." He stands up a little taller. "I said that crappy dialogue, but I meant every word. I'm not going anywhere. I love you, Ally."

"Junior, you..." I inhale, feeling the sharp stab of guilt in my gut. He doesn't know what he's getting into because I was too much of a coward to tell him. "There's something I have to tell you."

"I know."

I shake my head. "No, Junior. I *really* have—"

He kisses me, but that just makes me feel even worse.

"*I know, Ally.*"

He entwines our fingers together with a tight grip.

"You know?" I ask.

"I know."

"You know all of it?"

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? Because there’s *a lot*.”

He looks down, eyes pointed at my stomach. “I know about the baby.”

“How do you know?”

“Your dad told me.”

My face falls. “*Why would he—*”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, nudging my chin up to make me look at him.

“Wait. Why aren’t you at the game?”

Junior pauses, but his touch on me never ceases. “He wanted me to choose. I made my choice.”

My eyes fill with tears. “Junior, *no*.”

“Yes.”

“You can’t give that up for me.”

“I already have.”

“But—”

“I’m *in*, Ally. I love you. I’ll never let anyone take you from me.” His hand falls to my belly and his warm touch fires a spark throughout my body.

“Or this.”

I let the tears fall. “Promise?”

He draws an X over his chest and kisses me again.

CHAPTER 47



JUNIOR

SEPTEMBER

I walk from room to room. My room, empty. Ty's room, empty. Kitchen, bathroom, living room, all empty.

It's moving day.

Technically, I moved out a month ago, but Ty stayed to finish out our lease before shacking up with Grant. Today's our official last day at 218 Shanty Row, so I stopped by to return my key and do one more walk-through of the house to make sure I didn't forget anything.

And to remember.

We didn't live here long. Only a year, but there are so many great memories. This party. That party. The night we moved in. The night after we moved in when we got up on the roof and I drunkenly fell off. That first epic night with Alyssa, and all the secret nights we spent together after that.

And now it's over, but life goes on in the best way.

"Hello?"

I follow the unfamiliar voice to the living room. There's a young woman on the porch. She smiles through the screen door as she spots me coming out of the hall.

"Hi. Are you Mac?" she asks.

"Oh, no," I say. "He's downstairs working on the dryer."

"Oh, sorry."

She steps back, clearly shy.

"It's okay," I say. "Are you here to check out the house?"

“Yeah.”

I open the door and wave her in. “You can come in and wait. He won’t take long.”

“Thanks.”

As she enters, I notice her eyes. They’re golden and bright, shining beneath a head of blackish-brown hair. Cute. Real cute.

But I’m taken.

“Are you a freshman?” I ask.

She blushes. “Is it that obvious?”

“Well, you didn’t squeal when you saw me, so I figured you were new in town.”

Her eyes narrow. “Is that common for you?”

“Yes.”

“Congratulations.”

I extend my hand to her. “I’m Junior.”

“Heidi,” she greets me without a hint of recognition as she shakes my hand. Not a sports fan, I take it.

“Where are you from, Heidi?”

“Iowa,” she says, ashamed.

“Home of Adventureland!”

“In Des Moines!” She nods. “That’s right.”

“My family went there almost every summer back in the day.”

I make a note of it. I have some great memories there, too. That’s a family tradition I definitely want to continue.

“Mine, too!” she says. “Until the time my brother threw up on me after riding the Outlaw. Then, we kinda stopped going...”

I chuckle. Great memories come in all shapes and sizes. “So, how do you like the house so far?”

Heidi glances around the living room. “I see four walls, a roof. I assume there’s a bathroom somewhere?”

I point down the hall. “Right over there.”

“Then it looks great to me! My roommate-to-be is on her way. She demanded final say, but it’s the only one near campus that’s in my budget, so I’m hoping she likes it.”

“Well, it’s a nice house,” I say.

“Is it?”

“No, not really.” We laugh. “But I have some memories here. Good

things happen in this house.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I look around, into the kitchen, toward the bedroom. “No regrets.”

The back door opens and closes.

“Well, that’d be Mac,” I say, shifting toward the door. “I’ll get out of here. Just stopped by to drop off my keys.”

Heidi sidles to let me pass. “It was nice to meet you, Junior.”

“You too, Heidi. I’ll see you around campus.”

“You, too!”

I step outside onto the porch, smiling at the squeaky sound of the hinge one last time.

CHAPTER 48



ALYSSA

Junior takes my hand and gives it a light, reassuring squeeze as he rolls his eyes at me.

“Don’t think I didn’t see that, young man,” Bonnie says, pointing a finger at him from the loveseat across the room.

“Mom, we already said no,” he says.

“Not that we don’t appreciate the offer,” I add. “We do.”

“Right. We do.” He nods. “But... *no*.”

She sighs. “Well, *why not?*”

I chuckle at her desperation. Everyone else sitting around does, too.

Ty and Grant hold it back the best so they don’t appear rude in her home, but I see the humor dancing in their eyes.

Maggie lets it all out, cackling hard at her little brother’s expense while Nate keeps his head down beside her.

Roy just shakes his head quietly from his chair.

“Because...” Junior says, “I don’t want to move back in with my parents.”

“Well, this isn’t only about *you*, Junior.” She gestures at me. “This is about *Alyssa* and what *she* needs.”

“Really, Bonnie. Thank you, but...” I hesitate, trying to think of the best way to say it without offending her. “I have all the support I need near campus.”

“But it’s far *quieter* out here. You can’t raise a baby by a college campus. It’s too noisy! Especially now that the stadium will surely sell out for every game.”

“It’s *fine*, Mom,” Junior says. “The condo Ty’s cousin found us is far

enough away that noise won't be an issue."

Bonnie flinches at the word *condo*. "But what about daycare?" she fires back. "It's far too expensive nowadays. If the three of you move in here, then I can take care of the baby while you're in class or at football practice."

"You live an hour away from campus, Mom," he points out. "The daily commute would probably cost the same as daycare."

"I'm taking the fall semester off," I say. "We don't have to worry about the daycare situation until spring."

Grant points at me. "And you absolutely *have* to be back by then," he says. "*Shakespeare showcase!*"

I smile at him. "I won't miss it."

"What about you, little brother?" Maggie asks, her cheeks pink with wine. "Will you be gracing us with your amazing stage presence again next semester?"

Junior glares at her. "You're not going to let me live that down, are you?"

She grins. "Never."

"No," he answers. "I'll be sticking with football."

Nate leans forward. "Have they chosen a new coach?"

The air shifts slightly. Junior squeezes my hand a little tighter.

"Yes," Ty says. "Well, kind of. Bob is taking over, and he's nailing it so far, if you ask me."

Junior nods. "He's doing great, yeah. Not surprising, though. He's been around forever. He knows what he's doing."

Bonnie sighs to pull attention back on her. "Fast forward to spring and we're right back to square one," she says, gesturing with zeal. "What are you going to do with the baby *then?*"

Roy finally chimes in. "Bonnie, the kids have made their decision."

"But they have better *options*."

"I'm sure they've considered every single option available to them and they've decided, together, to do what they feel is best for them and their family."

"But they don't—"

"Remember when Maggie was born and how you used to complain about *my* mother not leaving us alone?"

Her jaw drops. The room cringes. "This is completely different."

"No, it's not."

The doorbell rings.

Junior shoots up off the couch. "I'll get it!"

"Don't leave me," I whisper.

He grins and drops my hand, abandoning me to fend for myself.

"Alyssa," Roy says, looking at me.

I swallow hard. "Yes, sir?"

"We're just a phone call away if you two need anything. You know that."

"Yes, I do. Thank you."

"Anything *at all*," Bonnie says.

I smile. "Thank you. Really, though, we're fine. We've figured out our routine and I don't expect any big surprises to come knocking anytime soon."

"Ally?"

I look up at Junior and pause, catching sight of the familiar face lingering behind him in the open doorway.

My father.

I stand up, but I can't bring myself to step any closer.

He looks at me over Junior's shoulder with soft eyes and a long expression, neither of which I've ever seen on him before. It's strange, almost foreign, like an alien wearing his face as a mask. Strangely, I don't feel an ounce of hatred or fear of him. I thought I would if I ever saw him again.

"I would like to talk to my daughter in private, please," he says.

Junior doesn't budge. "That's up to her."

"Junior," I say. He turns to me and I nod. "It's okay." I push forward through the silent room and Junior steps aside, his eyes asking me for reassurance, and I nod again. "We can go out back."

My father scans the room, vastly outnumbered here. "Hello," he says, nodding awkwardly at their wide, unblinking eyes.

I always forget how much of a celebrity my father is. Even after everything he's done, it's difficult for them not to look at him like that — Junior being the obvious exception in the room. There's a subtle anger hidden behind his brown eyes, but he remains calm and strong.

"Come on," I say to my father.

I lead him through the house to the backyard, feeling Junior's watchful stare on me the entire time. Silence falls between us despite months of planning what I'd say to him. All the anger and frustration I imagined melt away. It's pity that takes their place.

He seems older. More wrinkles. He hasn't shaved in days judging by the scruff on his face.

“Where have you been?” I finally ask.

“I went back to New York for a while,” he says, his voice low. “Thought about staying there, but...”

“But what?”

He clears his throat. “I wanted to see my daughter again.”

My tongue twitches, but I force down my snarky reply.

He glances at the house. “Seems like you’ve been taking care of yourself.”

“The Morgans took me in after you... left.”

“Good. And Junior? I hear he’s still got that arm—”

“Dad, what do you want?”

He goes quiet, but looks right at me for several moments. “Alyssa, I was never meant to be a dad. Then, suddenly, I had a little girl. I didn’t know what to do with you. Where I come from, family was just something that held a man back. Love, marriage, kids — it was all a distraction from what really mattered.”

I cringe away from him. It’s one thing to know it, but to hear it so blatantly is something else entirely.

“I never gave that a second thought,” he continues. “Not until Junior walked away from that game last year. When he did that... I don’t know.”

His voice trails off.

“Is that why you took off?” I ask.

“I couldn’t bring myself to face you again after...” He shakes his head. “Alyssa, I don’t know a lot about what family means or what it’s supposed to be, but I know that you’re my daughter. You’re the only family I got left. I’m willing to try... if you’ll let me. I’d like to start here with the home you’ve built for yourself and hopefully... you can find a place for me in it.”

And just like that, I’m a little kid again, staring up at the television screen, screaming, “*that’s my dad!*” at the top of my lungs. It took years for the truth about who he really was to decay the rosy tint in my vision, but I’ve always longed to feel that again.

Turning my back on him now might feel good for a while. It’s downright *tempting*, to be honest. It’s what he’s done to me, but it’s not who I am.

It’s not how I’d raise my own child.

“Well, *to start...*” I shift on my toes. “Would you like to meet your granddaughter?”

He smiles. “Yeah, I would.”

I take him back inside and up the stairs. The house is far too silent for the number of people in it, but I imagine the voices ceased the second we stepped inside.

“She’s been napping for a while,” I say outside of Junior’s old room. “Being around people wears her out, but I don’t think she’d mind one more.”

I push the door open and we step softly toward the crib in the corner. Even before I see her, I can feel her turning to look at me — like a magic link constantly pulling us together.

“Hey, baby...” I whisper, reaching down to pick her up. “Someone here wants to meet you.”

She twists her head, instantly drawn to the massive man behind my back, but she doesn’t make a peep.

“Wow,” my father says. “She looks just like you did.”

“Yeah?”

He nods, gently smoothing his palm over the brown tuft on her head. “What’s her name?”

“Courtney.”

I shift her closer to him. There’s a quick panic in his eyes, but it passes as soon as he takes her from me. I chuckle at how much smaller she appears in his huge hands.

“Hello, Courtney,” he says, chuckling. “I’m your grandfather.”

Still, she doesn’t make a noise. She just stares at him with wide eyes, confused yet comfortable.

I take a deep breath to swallow the rush of tears down. “Dad, if you want, you can stay for a while. I don’t think Bonnie or Roy would mind setting another place at the table.”

He furrows his brow. “What about Junior?”

I raise my voice a little, sensing the near-silent movement in the hallway. “Junior won’t be a problem.”

Dad finally tears his eyes away from her face to look at me. “Is he taking care of you two?”

“Yeah,” I say, my heart throbbing. “He’s a good man.”

He nods, regret filling his eyes. “Yes, he is.”

CHAPTER 49



JUNIOR

I stay behind on the porch as Alyssa walks her dad to his car.

She holds our daughter in her arms, swaying confidently with her as if she always knew how. I can't say it came that easily to me. Holding something so fragile has quite the learning curve.

Luckily, I had the perfect tutor to guide me through it.

She lets out a laugh and says goodbye to him. I breathe a thankful sigh. Cary Pierce showing up like this could easily have gone south fast, but it went as well as it could have. I'm sure Alyssa will spend the next several hours replaying the encounter in her head, but I don't want that.

I'm not about to let Cary Pierce ruin tonight.

Alyssa walks up the driveway, whispering into the baby's ear to keep her calm, but Courtney is far more interested in looking up at the dimming sky.

She climbs the porch. "Well, that was strange and slightly traumatizing," she jokes.

"Which part?" I ask. "Your dad showing up out of the blue or *my* dad trying to have a conversation with him?"

"Both."

"Think he'll really be sticking around?"

"I'm..." she tilts her head, "*cautiously optimistic*. He really seems... different."

"He does," I say, agreeing.

I gesture for the baby, and Alyssa slowly slides her into my arms. "Hey, honey." I kiss above her ear. She looks up at me with those tiny eyes. I breathe in the perfect, clean scent of her head and Alyssa smiles.

"Okay," I say. "Time to go."

“Yes, *please*,” Alyssa says. “I’m so tired.”

“Oh, I’m not talking to you.”

She stares at me. “What?”

I turn toward the front door. “Grandma, she’s all yours.”

My mother lunges out onto the porch. “I have been waiting all day for this,” she says.

I hand Courtney over to her and turn back to Alyssa’s horrified face. “I have a surprise for you.”

“No, Junior.” Her eyes constantly watch the baby over my shoulder. “I really can’t handle another surprise today.”

I smile. “Just one more.”

“No.”

“Ally, get in the van.”

She furrows her brow. “The van?”

I look at my parents. “Mom, Dad... we’ll come pick the baby up in the morning.”

Her face turns pale white. “Wait. *In the morning*—?”

“Ty...” I hold out my hand as Ty and Grant step out onto the porch. “Keys, please.” Ty tosses them at me. I hand mine off to Grant. “Try not to scratch it, okay?”

“Try not to get the van dirty.” Grant smiles. “I just replaced the sheets.”

Alyssa’s eyes shift wildly as Grant and Ty walk straight toward our car. “Okay, hold on—”

“Maggie...” I shake my head at her in the house. “You don’t get a job. You’re too drunk.”

She scoffs. “*I am not!*”

“Nate, get my sister home.”

“Already on it,” he says, handing Maggie a large glass of water.

“And *you*...” I point at Alyssa’s confused face. “Get in the van.”

“That’s not our van anymore,” she argues.

“It is tonight.”

“No, ours has fully functional safety features and a car seat for our kid who was supposed to be in bed a half-hour ago.”

I grab her shoulders and spin her around. “*Get in the van.*”

She digs her heels in. “What about Courtney?”

“Courtney will be *fine*. Get in the van.”

“Junior—”

“Van.”

She grunts with frustration before stomping toward the van.

I turn back around and place one more kiss on my daughter’s head. “Be good, baby.”

“Have fun, you two,” my mother says, unable to look away from the tiny life in her arms. “Drive safe.”

I follow Alyssa down the driveway and climb into the van, an experience that actually feels a little more nostalgic than I thought it would. I haven’t driven this thing in months — not since I sold it to Ty in order to upgrade to something a little more baby-friendly.

We drive off down the street.

I glance over into Alyssa’s withering stare and laugh. “She’ll be *fine!*”

Alyssa taps her foot against the floor. I can’t help but trail a line up her bare legs to the hem of her skirt. “Where are we going?” she asks.

“Patience, woman.”

“Junior, come on—”

“You don’t remember what today is, do you?”

She pauses with a creased brow. “No...”

“I’ll give you a hint,” I say. “One year ago today, you touched my dick.”

Her eyes go wide. “Oh, my god. You’re right!”

I nod. “So... in honor of that *wonderful* occasion, you and I are going out.”

“Has it really been a year?”

“Yes.”

“It feels *longer* than that.”

“The year or my dick?” She slaps my arm. “Also, I forgot to ask. Do you like pizza?”

She smiles. “I’m quite fond of pizza.”

“How about Skee-ball?”

“I might have a decent memory or two of Skee-ball.”

“Good.” I smile back. “Let’s go have some fun.”

CHAPTER 50



JUNIOR

Alyssa throws her head back, laughing hard.
My heart beats faster.

“That’s two wins for *me*, and...” she playfully leers at me, “and *zero* for you? Is that correct?”

“Who knew you had such a hidden talent for busting balls?”

“It’s my specialty.”

I gather the tickets from the machine. “One more game?” I ask, glancing around the nearly abandoned arcade. My nerves skip, torn between delaying the inevitable or ripping that bandage off.

She holds back a yawn. “Sure, if you want.”

I smile. “Or would you like to go home and get some rest?”

“Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” I feel a rush of panic, but it quickly goes away while I look into her eyes. “Come on.”

I take the tickets to the counter.

Frank grins at us. “Nice haul tonight, Junior.”

He feeds the tickets through the counting machine. The numbers tick up and I stare at Alyssa’s gorgeous face as my pulse skips faster toward the next moment.

“Looks like...” Frank turns to the prize wall and points toward a line of teddy bears. He fires a wink at me. “One of those.”

“She’ll take one.”

Alyssa laughs. “The last one is covered in baby drool now, so we can definitely use a new one.”

Frank pulls the bear off the wall and hands it to Alyssa. “For the lucky

girl.”

She’s absolutely right — it’s hard to believe it has been a whole year since I first brought her here. Back then, it was just a fun night out with a pretty girl that hopefully ended in copious amounts of casual sex. Back then, that’s as far forward into the future as I could think. Tonight is different.

Very different.

Alyssa squeezes the bear, grinning just like she did before. It’s the same bear with light brown fur and extra soft padding. It doesn’t take her long to notice the one difference between this one and the one tucked inside our daughter’s crib.

Her finger slides along the red ribbon around its neck until it touches the diamond ring hanging there waiting for her.

She pauses, her face blank, until it finally sets in. “Junior,” she whispers.

I lower to one knee and her jaw drops.

“Ally, I know we talked about this already—”

“Junior, what are you doing?”

I take the bear, untying the ribbon to free the ring. “I want to talk about it again.”

She says nothing as I take hold of her left hand, but her fingers tremble.

“I love you, Alyssa Pierce,” I say. “I’ve said that to you every single day since November, but I still don’t think you believe me.”

She blinks. “That’s not true.”

“It’s okay, Ally.” I lay my hand over hers. “I don’t blame you. Life hasn’t always been fair to you. Trust doesn’t come easy.” Her eyes water. “I’ve always said I’d wait for you — and I still mean that — but I want you to hear this.”

“Okay,” she says with a nod.

“You told me once that you always wanted a normal, boring family. I want to give you that.” She chuckles, wiping away a tear as it falls. “You deserve that more than anybody. You’ve already given me the most perfect, gorgeous daughter. I owe you the world. I will spend the rest of my life making sure that happens.”

“Birthday cards and Christmas cookies?”

“All of it.” I slide the ring onto her finger and breathe a silent sigh of relief as it fits her perfectly. “You’ll never feel lonely or ignored ever again, Alyssa Pierce.”

“Promise?”

Her lips curl as she waits for me to say it.

I draw an X on my chest. "Cross my heart."

More tears fall, but she laughs. I stand to wrap my arms around her, embracing her as close to me as possible.

"I love you," I whisper in her ear. "Marry me. I'm nothing without you."

She wipes her eyes. "Well, when you put it like that..."

"It's true. Do you really think I would have won all those games without your incentive?" She buries her face in my chest again, shaking hard with laughter. "I swear, Ally, there is not a single thing I wouldn't do for you."

"Oh, really?" she says. "Sounds like you'll need my incentive again this season if we expect to keep your stats up."

I point at her, realizing the mistake I've made. "Now, hold on. I didn't mean—"

She steps out of my arms and grins. "Too late now, *just Junior*."

I wince. "I hate it when you say it like that."

"Win the game next week and I'll stop."

"Ally."

She spins around with her teddy bear and walks toward the exit. "Keep up, *just Junior*."

"Ally."

I growl with a grin, struggling to catch up with her as she exits. She plows through to the parking lot and I follow her back to the van.

"Can we maybe talk about this first?" I ask.

"I think we've talked enough," she says, sliding the back door open. "Words won't get us anywhere. Moans and grunts, however..."

I bite my lip. I glance at the mattress, then at her. She smiles.

"Does this mean I still qualify for admission?" I ask.

"Well, you're not a loser... *yet*." She lowers herself inside and lies back against the pillows. "Might as well take what you can get while you can."

I raise an eyebrow. "Anything I want?"

She refuses to say, but her eyes tell me everything. I'm not about to argue with that seductive smirk, so I hop inside the van and slam the door closed behind us.

Her hands instantly fly to my belt. My cock springs to life, pressing hard against my zipper. She licks her lips and her little blue eyes flick up at me. After the eventful and stress-filled year we've had, I'm happy to see her as playful and beautiful as ever tonight.

The diamond on her finger shimmers in the soft lighting as she reaches into my pants.

“Wait...” I pause, grabbing her hand. “You haven’t said yes.”

Alyssa’s eyes fall to the ring. “Oh,” she says. “Yeah. Sure. I guess.”

“You *guess*?”

“I’ll think about it.”

She bends, lowering her mouth toward my groin, but I pull her back up.

“Excuse me,” I say. “I nailed that proposal.”

She wrinkles her nose. “It was all right.”

“You cried!”

“I sniffled a little.”

I straighten up. “Say yes.”

Her lips curl. “*Maybe*.”

“Okay, that’s it...”

I push her onto her back while she squeals with laughter, not lifting a hand to stop me while I travel down her body. I hook her panties beneath her skirt and pull them down to her ankles.

“I’m going to make you say yes,” I growl. “And then, I’m going to do it again.”

I spread her knees wide, positioning myself between them while I kiss her again. She tugs at my belt, her kiss full of that sexy, primal urge I love so much.

It has been months since we’ve been alone this way. Just two kids getting it on in the back of a van without a care in the world. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss it, but I wouldn’t trade what I have for anything else in the world.

I enter her, filling her. She gasps in pleasure. She holds onto me, wrapping her legs around my waist, urging me to take her. There’s no way in hell I’ll ever deny her.

I get to work, and she purrs in my ear. My entire body surges with hers, blending passions until we feel nothing else.

I sit up, pulling her along with me to straddle my waist. She cries out in pleasure before settling against me again.

She crushes her lips on mine, each of us moaning and fucking until we can hardly breathe. Her nails dig into me and her body goes tense, just moments away from wreckage.

I gaze into her perfect eyes. I fall in love all over again with the way she twitches with passion as she moans my name.

She kisses me as she comes, counting on me to hold her steady, but I can barely keep myself together.

I fall onto my back. She collapses with me onto the mattress, gently quivering against me as we both ride our climaxes to the end.

“Well?” I ask, laying kisses along her forehead.

Alyssa smiles, pausing for a moment to catch her wild breath.

“Yes,” she says.

EPILOGUE



ALYSSA

FIVE YEARS LATER

I pull the blanket off the back of the sofa and drape it over the giant beach ball taking hold of my stomach. After a few seconds of fidgeting to get comfortable, I end up giving up completely.

“Alyssa, are you even listening to me?”

Grant’s voice is barely audible through the speaker on my phone resting next to my head.

I grab it and hold it to my ear. “Yeah, I’m here,” I say. “I’ve officially reached the stage of this pregnancy where nothing is ever good enough and I want to launch myself off the nearest skyscraper.”

“Oh, boo-hoo.” He laughs. “You get to lie around all day in Suburbia and eat bonbons with my adorable goddaughter. I’m the one who has to deal with actual children.”

I chuckle. “Louise isn’t *that* bad.”

“She’s no *you*.”

“Well, I’ll try to schedule my next procreation so it doesn’t interfere with your plans, Grant.”

“Thank you. That’s all I ask.” He sighs. “When does Lover Boy get back again?”

I glance out the window at the quiet street corner. Snow tumbles down from the sky, covering the black street with a fresh layer of white.

“I’m picking him up from the airport in the morning,” I say. “Did you watch the game on Thanksgiving?”

“You ask that as if I had a choice. Ty has been emailing me highlights from it for two days straight.”

“He’s just proud of his favorite client.” I shift again on the couch, feeling a harsh cramp taking hold of my lower back. “Is Ty home yet?”

“No, I think he’s got some conference this weekend in Dallas or somewhere. No one told me marrying a sports agent would mean spending so many holidays alone.”

I throw on a pout and look out the window again. “I feel your pain.”

“At least I have my ingenue... while she’s not *gestating*.”

I laugh. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s all right. I’m only kidding. If that kid is anything like the one you already have, it’ll be worth it.”

I slide a hand over my belly. “I agree.”

A taxi pulls to a stop on the corner outside. I squint to get a better look through the thick, falling snow.

A man steps out from the back seat. He’s tall with wide shoulders. Handsome and—

I gasp. “*Oh, my god!*”

“What?” Grant asks. “Is there baby? Is baby happening?”

I rock back and forth, gaining momentum to push myself off the couch. “It’s Junior!”

“*What? Where?*”

“Outside.” I hobble to the front door and throw it open, not caring about the cold, invading snow. “A taxi just dropped him off.”

Junior looks up at the house and grins, no doubt getting the exact reaction from me as he planned.

“*Oh,*” Grant says. “It’s the old *I caught an earlier flight to surprise you* trick. I love that man.”

“Back off. He’s already taken,” I say, watching as Junior pays his driver and grabs his suitcase off the ground.

“Well, bed him well. He’s earned it. Meanwhile, I’ll be over here in the city, drinking Chardonnay alone, and crying over Louise’s headshot.”

“Bye, Grant.”

“Bye, Alyssa.”

I lower the phone as my husband climbs the porch in front of me. Junior pauses a few feet away and drops his suitcase, his eyes never leaving my face.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I caught an earlier flight to surprise you,” he says.

I throw myself at him. He opens his arms, embracing me and laughing in my ear.

“I guess that’s okay?”

“It’s more than *okay*,” I say, my voice muffled against his chest. I feel the tears threatening to take over already, but I defeat the hormones before they spill over. “Come on. It’s *freezing* out here.”

Junior grabs his suitcase. I brush the snow off his coat as we step inside.

“Okay.” He kicks the door closed and motions for me to twirl. “Let me look at you.”

I sigh and spin in a slow circle.

“My god,” he mutters.

“What?”

“You’re *huge*.”

My jaw drops. “Excuse me, sir. This is all *your* fault.”

“I’ve been gone *two weeks*. Not two months.”

“Welcome to the ninth month, Junior,” I say. “I don’t know if you remember it from last time, but *it sucks*.”

“Oh, it’s all coming back to me now.” He chuckles. “Soon it’ll be Lamaze practice drills and midnight runs for strawberry ice cream and curly fries.”

I raise a brow. “Are you complaining?”

“No.”

“Then, shut up.”

He laughs and tosses his coat onto the rack by the door. “Who were you talking to so late?”

“Who do you think?”

He snorts. “Grant.”

“Yup.”

“What’s he up to?”

I return to the living room. I ease onto the sofa and try to reach for the blanket on the floor. Junior bends down and grabs it for me. “Thank you. His directorial debut goes live next week...” I sneer, “*with my understudy*.”

Junior lays the blanket over me before sitting down beside me. “You’ll be back up there before you know it, Ally,” he says. “Just focus on this right now.”

I take a deep, slow breath. “I know. I’m fine. I worry about Grant, though. I’m out for the whole season and Ty is never home.”

Junior smirks. “Well, I don’t want to spoil anything, but Ty and I shared a flight back.”

“Really?”

“Grant should get a nice surprise of his own in about ten minutes.”

I smile. “*Good.*”

Junior gets that look in his eyes. The one that begs for me to kiss him. He leans in, slowly inching closer to me on the couch.

“Daddy!”

He stops and turns toward the hallway, his mouth expanding into an even wider grin.

Courtney races into the room. Junior opens his arms, easily catching her and flipping her little body around to cradle in his thick arms.

“Why aren’t you asleep? It’s late,” he teases, tickling her belly.

“I heard Mommy scream,” she says.

“Mommy *screamed*?” he says. “I’m sorry, baby. Daddy has that effect on Mommy sometimes.”

I slap his arm.

He lays a kiss on her brow. “Courtney, you need sleep if you’re going to grow up to be beautiful and smart like your mother.”

He winks at me, firing off sneaky compliments like a champ.

She nods. “Lack of sleep can impair cognitive ability.”

Junior blinks at me. I hold in my laugh. “I see Aunt Maggie and Uncle Nate made it to Thanksgiving this year.” He balances Courtney on his knee. “Have you been driving Mommy crazy like I told you to?”

She beams. “Yes!”

“What?” I ask, laughing. “Are you two ganging up on me again?”

Junior holds up a finger. “I told her to do *three things* every day that Mommy *hates* while I was gone. What were they?” he asks her.

Courtney thinks hard. “Clear my plate.”

He nods. “That’s one.”

“Brush my teeth.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Pick up my toys.”

Junior smiles at me. “That’s right. Drives Mommy *crazy*.”

My heart swells as he slides her to the floor.

“Go pick out a book and I’ll come read you back to sleep, all right?”

“Okay, Daddy!”

“Dr. *Seuss*!” he shouts after her. “Not *Freud*, please.”

I chuckle. “I don’t know, Junior, I think *Seuss* might be a touch outside your reading comprehension.”

“Alyssa Morgan, are you calling me a big dumb jock?”

“I might be.”

“Well, in that case—” He tugs me closer to him. “I better scoop up my victory hoe.”

He kisses me softly. My chest flutters the same way it always does.

“Is that what you call the mother of your children?” I ask.

“If the booties fit.”

I glance down the hallway toward Courtney’s room. “She was *perfect* while you were gone.”

“Good,” he says. “You had enough to worry about. Threats of bed rest. Thanksgiving dinner.” A serious expression crosses his eyes. “I wanted to be here.”

“You’re here now.”

“And here I will stay until he’s born.”

“Junior, you have a game *next week*.”

He grabs my hand. “They will play without me.”

I inhale to argue. “Junior—”

“I will not miss the birth of my son because of a football game,” he says, his voice hard and defiant. “He’s due in two weeks. I’ve already cleared it with the coach. I’m staying.”

I press my lips together, thankful and proud. “Okay.”

Junior kisses my cheek and stands up. “I’m going to get her to sleep and then, I will meet you in the bedroom.”

“Oh, yeah?” I ask. “What’s gonna happen in there?”

“First...” he leans over me, “you’re going to lie down on the bed and *then...*” His lips graze mine. “I’m going to rub your *enormous* feet.”

I burst out laughing. “Sounds *orgasmic*.”

“Need help standing up?”

“I can manage it. Probably.”

He turns away, leaving me to sink into the couch cushions a little more.

Yet another muscle twitches in my back. I shift to a slightly different position to kill the spasm before it begins.

“Okay, buddy,” I say to my stomach. “Any day now...”

I hope for a pain. One quick pulse. One measly contraction that will tell me it’s time.

All I get is bubbles.

“Damn.”

I heave a sigh and rock myself up.

Junior’s voice drifts down the hall, carrying softly with rhythmic words of childish prose. Courtney giggles with him, her tired voice dimming more and more with each turned page.

I lean against the wall just outside the doorway, listening as I try to imagine what our son will look like. If he grows into anything resembling his father, it’s safe to assume he’ll be quite the handful.

And then there are the eyes. Courtney is the spitting image of me except for the eyes. They’re all Junior’s. Right down to the light specks of gray around the brown edges. Being away from him the last two weeks has been a serious challenge for me, but sometimes, at just the right moment, I’d look at my daughter and I’d see Junior looking back at me. I’d fall in love with him all over again.

Junior enters the hall, moving as silently as possible, and closes her door behind him. He looks up at me and smiles, but his eyes shift with concern.

“You okay?” he whispers.

“Yeah.” I nod. “Why?”

“You’re crying.”

I touch my cheeks and feel the warm moisture trailing down my face. “Oh.” I laugh it off. “Yeah, that happens.”

Junior wipes them away with his thumbs and tilts my face up to kiss me. There’s desire on his lips, a lingering urge that sends quivers throughout my body. I pull him closer, relaxing away from mommy-mode to serve my womanly needs.

“I missed my wife,” Junior whispers between kisses.

I smile. “She missed *you*.”

He kisses me harder, pressing my back against the wall. My desire takes over. His touch does to me as it always has, igniting fire where there wasn’t one before.

I wince as firm pressure shoves from within. “Oh—!”

Junior eases back, forced away by the life occupying the space between us.

“Did...” He blinks. “Did he just *kick me*?”

I feel my belly. “He most definitely did.”

“That almost *hurt*.”

“How do you think it felt from the inside?”

He holds up his hands and talks to my stomach. “Okay, buddy. I get it. Hands off Mommy.”

“He has to sleep, eventually. Maybe a few pages of Dr. Freud will knock him out.”

“Works on *me* every time.”

Another series of flutters dances against my ribs. “He’s kicking again.”

Junior touches me, his eyes wide with admiration as he traces the movement inside. “*Whoa*,” he says. “He’s going to make so many field goals with that kick.”

I shrug. “Or maybe he’ll play soccer.”

He fires a hard stare at me. “Don’t you even *joke* about that.” I laugh at him. “Take that back.”

I head for the bedroom. “I will not.”

Junior follows me in and closes the door behind us. “Ally, I’m just saying, this kid has quite the legacy to live up to.”

“Let’s not put so much pressure on him,” I say. “He’s not even born yet.”

“Son of Junior Morgan. Grandson of Cary Pierce. People will expect it. It’s in his blood.”

I lie back against the pillows and pull my feet onto the bed. “I say we let him do what he wants.”

“I agree, but...” He hesitates, smiling softly at the thought. “Admit it. It’d be kinda cool. Third generation pro football badass.”

“Maybe. But you know what would be even *cooler*?”

“What?”

“If he took after his *mother*.” I point my thumbs at me and grin. “Eh? Yeah? Theatre kid!”

“I’m not walking into *that* trap.”

He sits down on the edge of the bed and pulls the socks off my feet.

“It’s not a trap,” she says. “It’s a fact. Artistic children rank higher in academics and social skills.”

“Hey, *my* social skills were fine.”

“Getting laid a lot isn’t a social skill.”

“It should be.” He slides his fingernail along the arch of my foot, sending

a tickle up my ankle. I kick him and he laughs. “We had this same argument when Courtney was born.”

“Yeah, and I won that one, too.”

“You did not *win*,” he says, gently massaging between my toes.

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to settle *again* for agreeing that Connor can choose for himself.”

I pause. “Connor?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

I sit back, letting the name sink in. “I like it.”

“Me, too.”

“Good choice.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s about time,” I joke. “Cutting it pretty close, don’t you think?”

“That’s what you get for letting *me* name him.”

“I’ll just do it myself next time.”

He raises a brow. “*Next time?*”

I cringe. “Did I just say *next time?*”

“You did. I thought we were done having kids.”

“We better be.” I stare at my giant stomach. “As soon as this guy comes out, I’m having my vagina fused shut.”

Junior tilts his head. “Well, you don’t have to go *that* far. I’m a little attached to your vagina. Sometimes, in more ways than one.”

I laugh. “Fine. You’ll just have to get snipped.”

He shrugs. “Okay.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I expected more pushback than that.”

“Hey, if the choice is between me getting snipped or you fusing your vagina closed, I’ll suffer through the weekend of icing my junk with a bag of peas.”

I tilt my head. “How thoughtful.”

Junior smiles. “That’s me.”

He slides up the bed and lies beside me, raising his arm to guide me against his chest. His lips graze my head. I feel him smell my hair, as he always does. Then he releases a thick sigh, relaxing.

“It’s good to be home,” he whispers.

I cling to him, resting my head on his thick shoulder as he lays a hand on my belly. Connor stirs inside, reacting to his loving touch.

I smile. “Any day now...”

I look up at my husband, and he kisses me.

“He’s going to be perfect,” he says.

“Promise?”

Junior draws an X over his chest.

“*Cross my heart.*”



For a glimpse into the Morgan Family’s future, read their Extended Epilogue!
[Click here.](#)



Move over, Junior Morgan.
It’s Johnny’s turn.

First Down Darling
is coming February 15, 2022!

Be among the first to know the moment it goes live!
[Click here to subscribe to my newsletter.](#)

MORE FROM THE TABIVERSE...

Who is Heidi Newbury, Shanty Row's newest resident? Read her story in *On His Face*, the first book in my *Bad Boys of Delta Xi* series! **(Turn the page to read an excerpt!)**

For the complete character map, visit <http://www.tabathakiss.com/charactermap>.

Happy reading!
xo Tabby

EXCERPT: ON HIS FACE



HEIDI

“*T*his guy looks like a total prick.”

I glare with surprise at Jenna sitting at the easel beside me.
“*Shh!*” I say. “*He’ll hear you.*”

“Well, he *does*,” she says, her strawberry blonde bob tickling her chin.

I quickly check the model standing still in the center of the classroom. His face points to the right, his expression dull and void since class began, but that’s his job. Stand still for an hour. Earn fifty bucks.

“No, he doesn’t,” I whisper.

“No, definitely an asshole,” she says at normal volume.

“*Jenna.*”

“Resting prick face alert.”

“*Stop.*”

She raises a brow at me. “What?”

“*He’ll hear you,*” I say.

“Oh, calm down.” She scoffs. “No, he won’t.”

“He *might*, though.”

“So what if he does? He probably already knows and if not, then I don’t mind being the one to tell him.”

I focus on my drawing again. Two dark charcoal eyes stare back at me from the easel, matching the ones on the model. Tonight’s assignment is drawing faces. Luckily, I’ve always been good at faces — and only faces. Hands? Nope. Clothes? Nada. But I can do faces.

I snap my head toward my elbow as I sneeze. Stupid allergies.

“Bless you,” Jenna mutters.

“Thanks.”

I glance up from my portrait as the model's eyes flick away from me. Or maybe I just imagined it. Either way, my stomach turns somersaults. Did he hear Jenna call him an asshole? Or worse, did he think *I* said it? I hope I imagined it.

Please let me have imagined it.

I press charcoal to paper and add a little texture to the shadows beneath his nose. I blend it upward, following along the sharp cheekbone up to his ear, giving him a thin five o'clock shadow. I fill in the prominent cleft beneath his nose, then look at him again before outlining his lips.

I lean forward without thinking. I squint to focus on his lips across the classroom. They're thick, but not too thick. They dip down on the edges, creating a slight scowl. That's probably why Jenna thinks the way she does, but I disagree. I think it makes him look pensive and wise. He's young, but older than us by a few years. A real college man.

His eyes flick in my direction. My hand jolts and I accidentally drag the pencil too far up his cheek.

"*Shit,*" I whisper.

Jenna leans over on her stool and chortles at my portrait. "*Why so serious?*" she says.

I groan before reaching for my rubber eraser.

"So, I'm thinking of heading to Bobby's after class," Jenna says.

"Oh, yeah?" I ask as I attempt to save my portrait.

"He and his roommates are having a little get-together. You should totally come along."

"Oh, no thanks," I say. "I don't want to intrude."

"Heidi, it's not an intrusion if you're *invited*," she says, her voice slipping into that annoyed tone I know so well.

"I know. I just..." I pause, searching for an excuse. "I have some homework to do."

"No one does homework on a Thursday night," she says. "It's the law."

"Well, I'm tired," I say, grabbing the next available excuse. "I worked a double shift at the diner today and I wanted to catch up on my sleep."

"So you're going to sleep *and* do all that homework, too?"

I glare at her gotcha smile. "... Yes," I answer.

"Or you can come with me to Bobby's and have some fun."

"No, thank you."

Jenna scoffs. "Heidi, do you remember the deal we made when we moved

to Chicago together?”

I sigh. “Yes, I remember.”

“You said that you were the boring homebody in high school and you wanted to branch out at college.”

My nose twitches. Another sneeze incoming. “I know, I just—”

“I agreed to be your mentor on the condition that you actually *try*.”

I snap toward my elbow again to obscure my sneeze.

“Bless you,” she says again.

“Thanks. I will try, Jenna. I just don’t want to try *tonight*. That’s all.”

“Okay, fine.” She slowly draws the line of his jaw on her own portrait. “But tomorrow night, you’re going out with me.”

I nod, jumping on the opportunity to satiate her and end this conversation. “I will go out with you tomorrow night,” I repeat.

“Promise?”

I cringe playfully. “Do I have to?”

“Heidi, you will never fall in love with a stranger if you never meet people.”

“But meeting people means they aren’t strangers anymore.”

She pauses, briefly taken back by the logic. “Whatever. I’m not letting you weasel your way out of this one. You are going out with me tomorrow night and that’s final.”

I chuckle. “I will.”

“And then, you will do what your BFF Jenna would do, and bring a cute boy home with you to play with.”

I shake my head. “Yeah, I’m not doing that.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“*Heidi.*”

“*Jenna.*”

She pivots on her stool to face me. “Heidi, I love you. I adore you. You’ve been my bestie since we were five. All I want is for you to be happy.”

“I appreciate that,” I say, waiting for the punchline.

“That’s why I want you to drink and be merry and invite cute boys over on a whim to touch your naughty bits.”

And there it is.

I blink twice. “How sweet.”

“Seriously. Every day that I come home and I don’t see a hair scrunchie on your doorknob, I die a little inside.”

I snort at her dumb system. “Okay, Jenna.”

“So, please, do it for me.” She reaches out and pats my knee. “Do it for your naughty bits, Heidi. We need this.”

“Please stop calling it that.”

“Bring a boy home and I will.”

“If I say I’ll think about it, will you drop it?” I ask.

“Yes,” she answers.

“Then, I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you. But don’t over-think it. It’s just naughty bits.”

I cringe as I twist back to face my portrait. With blushed cheeks, I raise my charcoal and try to focus on finishing his lips.

I glance up at the model’s face. His eyes turn away again, sending a brief shiver down my spine.

Can he hear us?

No, definitely not.

Dear lord, I hope not.



I stuff my sketchpad into my backpack as thunder rumbles just outside the doors of Ramsey Hall. Rain pours down from the sky. Lightning every few seconds. This storm isn’t going anywhere. I try to find a way to keep my backpack — and my precious sketchpad — from getting soaked on my way to the parking lot.

No more rain, the weatherman said.

Leave the umbrella at home tonight, he said.

No wonder my allergies are going nuts tonight.

Jenna groans as she flicks up the hood on her jacket. “Another storm?” she asks.

“Another storm,” I repeat.

“This better not mess up my hair before I get to Bobby’s...”

I chuckle at her little face just barely visible through the hole of her hood.

“If he really likes you, then it shouldn’t matter what your hair looks like.”

Jenna scoffs. “You got a lot to learn about men, kiddo.”

I shrug. "I guess so."

She throws her messenger bag strap over her shoulder and exhales, locked and loaded for battle. "All right. I'll see you later tonight."

"Okay," I say.

"Or tomorrow morning." She chuckles. "We'll see."

"Have fun."

"*I will!*"

Jenna charges through the door into the rain. I quickly follow, pinching the hood of my jacket with one hand and keeping my backpack shielded with the other. The rain is loud and unyielding over the sounds of my sneakers stomping through the puddles as I sprint through campus toward the student parking lot. I spot my old, beat-up sedan parked beneath a lamppost on the west side and bolt faster toward it.

Jenna weaves through the parked cars ahead of me, racing to her Mustang a few spots down from mine. "Bye, Heidi!" she shouts into the wind as she opens the driver's side and leaps inside.

"Bye, Jenna!" I shout back as I rustle through my pocket for my keys.

I open my door and toss my backpack inside, resting it on the passenger's seat before climbing in myself. I close the door and sit back, happy to listen to the rain slapping against my roof for a few seconds while I catch my breath.

Jenna's engine revs with life, her bright headlights flashing on a mere second before she hits the gas and blazes out of the lot way faster than she should.

With a chuckle, I slide my key in the ignition and turn it.

Click, click, click.

"No..." I whisper. I turn it again.

Click, click.

"Oh, come on! Please..."

Click, click, click.

"I think I can," I say, feeling some hope. "I think I can. I think..."

Click, click, click.

"*Dammit.*" I abandon the keys. "*Dammit. Dammit!*"

I must have left my lights on. No, I didn't. Did I?

Shit.

I reach for my backpack in search of my phone. Jenna will *hate* me for this, but I don't have anyone else I can call.

A horn blares outside. I look up at a car sitting idle directly in front of me. I squint, but I can't make out who it is through the blinding headlights.

The lights flash twice at me.

Jenna!

I put the phone away and grab my bag. She must have spotted me sitting here like an idiot.

I'm saved!

I rush outside, locking my dumb car behind me as I race toward her. The passenger side door pops for me. I grab it, quickly sliding in and out of the rain before I get soaked all over again.

I drop my bag on the floor between my feet. "Jenna, thank you—"

I freeze.

No. Not Jenna.

Definitely not Jenna.

Jenna's not a man.

Jenna doesn't have those cheekbones.

Or that chestnut hair. Or a five o'clock shadow. Or those perfect, round eyes I shaded with charcoal just twenty minutes ago... which I can now see are a bright shade of green.

It's the model from class.

And I just got into his car.

I just got into a stranger's car.

My stomach clenches.

He looks at me with one hand on the wheel. The other touches his chin, giving it a simple scratch as he bobs his head toward my car.

"Car trouble?" he asks with a deep, youthful growl.

I open my mouth to answer, but nothing comes out. My voice, lost somewhere in the depths of my throat, refuses to do its job.

"I..." I squeak.

Leave.

Get out.

Run.

Now.

"I'm sorry!" I say as I fumble for the knob. "I thought you were someone else."

"Wait," he says, making me pause. "It's all right. Stay out of the rain."

Another bolt of lightning flashes in the sky and I flinch.

He smiles, that perfect jawline dipping with the most delicious dimples I've ever seen.

Why did I have to flinch *like a damn child*?

My cheeks burn. My fingers shake. Still, I say nothing.

His throat clears. "So, car trouble?" he asks again.

"Uh..." I find my voice. "Yeah. I think so. I tried to start it and it did that clicking thing."

"Sounds like a dead battery. You leave the lights on?"

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, probably. That's definitely something I'd do."

Again, he smiles. "No worries, I'll give you a jump."

"No—!" I shake my head. "No, don't... don't trouble yourself. I can get my roommate to do it in the morning."

"It's no trouble."

"It's pouring out there! Really don't. I'd feel like an asshole — more than I already do."

He sits back and laughs. "Then, can I give you a ride home?" he asks.

I hesitate. I can walk it. It's not too far. It's only... on the other side of campus, plus two blocks. And my backpack would get soaked, my sketchbook included. I can't even describe how much that would ruin this already horribly eventful night.

Or I can do as my BFF Jenna would do and let the cute boy drive me home.

I hold my breath, feigning confidence. "Okay," I squeak.

He smiles again.

Dimples for days.



[Click here to keep reading On His Face!](#)

ALSO BY TABATHA

SUBSCRIBE TO MY NEWSLETTER FOR *FREE* BOOKS!
VISIT TABATHAKISS.COM/NEWSLETTER FOR MORE INFO.

KINGS OF CHICAGO NORTH

Touchdown Baby
First Down Darling
Home Run Baby

BAD BOYS OF DELTA XI

On His Face
On His Knees

THE HEARTTHROBS

Ego Trip

HEARTTHROB HOTEL

Just a Touch
Just a Kiss
Just a Fling
Just a Crush
Just a King

CHICAGO NIGHTS

Pretty Little Thing
Pretty Dirty Trick
Pretty Ever After

SWEET CRAVINGS

Muffin Top
Hot Sauce

OLD HABITS

The Mechanic
The Milkman

STAND-ALONES

2 in the Pink
Lumberjack Boss
I Hate You, Kai Casablanças

PARANORMAL & FANTASY ROMANCE

Death

KILLER LOVE

Writing as Tabatha Drake

Killer Love

Secret Love

Tainted Love

Broken Love

Mad Love

Cruel Love

Endless Love

THE MIDWEST DIARIES

Writing as Tabatha Drake

Untouched

Unbroken

Undying

FOR MORE, GO TO TABATHAKISS.COM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUBSCRIBE TO MY NEWSLETTER FOR FREE BOOKS!
VISIT [TABATHAKISS.COM/NEWSLETTER](https://tabathakiss.com/newsletter) FOR MORE INFO.

FOR INQUIRIES, CONTACT TABATHA:
authortabathakiss@gmail.com

