



Triple Play

FOR THE
SINGLE MOM

REBEL BLOOM

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Rebel Bloom

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*****Olive*****

If my smile was any faker, I would've been a porcelain doll. I sure as hell felt as brittle as one while rushing through the Oklahoma Devils football stadium with my six-year-old trying to step on every line on the floor he could find. I had a job interview to be at and Jesse's babysitter, also known as his father, wasn't where he said he'd be. The stadium was huge and I could only get past so many security guards by smiling pretty before one of them started to worry that I was a crazy woman. I could feel my eyes growing wider with each minute that ticked away and I knew I was teetering into *Here's Johnny* territory.

"I think my dad's gone crazy." Jesse sang the Eminem song his aunt had proudly taught him at the top of his lungs, drawing the gaze of another guard. He loved to sing it and didn't realize his aunt had been being a dick about his dad when she'd taught it to him. He just thought he was singing about his dad.

My smile crept into something akin to clownish as I took Jesse's hand. "Remember that we talked about that song? Aunt Lydie was just playing a trick. It's not a nice song to sing about your dad, Jesse."

The guard walked over to us. "Do you need any help?"

I would've loved for him to help by hitting Jesse's father over the head with whatever weapon he had, but I doubt he was willing to offer that kind of support. "I was supposed to be meeting someone here but I can't find him. He said to meet him just inside of the north entrance, but he wasn't there. I'm hoping he's just running late after practice."

"Football?" When I nodded, the guard turned and pointed the way I'd been going. "The locker room is in that direction. That's probably your best bet. Practice just ended a bit ago."

"I'm going to see my dad!" Jesse pushed his glasses back up his nose as they slid down and flashed his brightest smile. "I haven't seen him in... Mommy, how many sleeps?"

I took a deep breath and squeezed Jesse's hand. "Too many sleeps. Say thank you to the nice man for giving us directions, buddy."

The man's expression had shifted when he heard Jesse call me his mom. Openness turned to confusion and then to judgment. I was used to it after six years of people doing the assumed math in their heads. I looked my age at twenty-one and Jesse looked a little older than six, thanks to his dad's freakishly big genes.

“Who are you looking for?” The guard crossed his arms over his chest as he studied me. “And does he know you’re coming? Or is this whole thing a surprise?”

I wanted to scream. I’d arrived in town the day before with a rental car full of crap to unpack and no time to adjust before I was thrown into the thick of things. I had to get the job I was interviewing for or I was going to be playing catchup before the semester even started. I had to get Jesse registered at his new school. I had to-

“Ma’am?”

I forced my brittle smile to stretch a little farther. “Taylor Clarkson. He knows I’m coming and he knows I’m with his son. The only surprise is that he wasn’t where he said he’d be.”

The guard stared at me and when I thought he’d speak, he just let the silence stretch on. Jesse danced around me, unconcerned that his mother was minutes from losing her shit.

“Taylor Clarkson.” He laughed. “The quarterback who’s supposed to be the top draft pick for the NFL this spring? *That* Taylor Clarkson?”

I opened my purse and started pawing through it, trying to find some form of proof that once upon a time Taylor Clarkson had unprotected sex with me. I didn’t know what I was looking for, but with each minute that ticked by, my sanity was crumbling. “Yes, that Taylor Clarkson. My name is Olive Oakley. I’m a new student here, a transfer from a community college in the town Taylor and I grew up in. This is Jesse

Oakley, our son. I don't know what else I can say to convince you, sir."

His radio crackled at his side and a disembodied voice barked something about a parking lot. The guard stared at me for another few seconds before shrugging. "I have to handle this. I don't have time to worry about relationship crap. Go down to the locker rooms and wait outside with the rest of the clingers. If he comes out, good for you."

My jaw dropped as I watched him hurry away. I'd never missed my little sister more. Lydie was only a year younger than me, but she had always been my protector growing up. She was fierce and while I'd started learning to channel her energy, I had nothing on her tongue-lashing skills.

"What's a clinger?" Jesse looked up at me with his giant blue eyes and his gap-toothed smile. "Was that man a douche?"

I swore under my breath and took back my previous thoughts about missing Lydie. "Don't repeat words that Aunt Lydie taught you, Jesse. Douche isn't a nice word for a little boy to say."

"Can a big boy say it?"

I scooped him up and held him on my hip. He was too big for it but I had enough adrenaline flowing that I handled it like a champ and still managed to take off at a sprint towards the locker rooms. "Big boys can say lots of things that little boys can't. Big girls, too. Like Mommy. Right now, Mommy wants to say lots of bad words."

He wrapped his arms around my neck just a bit too tight and laughed. “Like what?”

Even in my panicked state, I had to grin at his curiosity. “I’ll tell you when you turn thirteen. How does that sound?”

I followed an arrow painted on the wall pointing me towards the locker room and rounded a corner, just to find myself at the back of a group of women who all seemed to be waiting around for the door to open. While I stood there, it did, and a wave of energy rolled through the crowd in front of me. I watched as a pretty redhead hurried over to the giant of a man and threw her arms around his neck.

“Are you listening to me, Mommy?”

I put Jesse down and knelt in front of him. “I’m sorry, bud. I got distracted. I need to find your dad as soon as I can. Give me just a second to call him and then you’ll have my full attention, okay?”

I grabbed my phone and hit the button to call Taylor again. I pressed it to my ear and swore to myself that I hadn’t made a mistake when I’d decided to follow Taylor to Oklahoma A&M. I was reciting all the positive things about the school and cursing Taylor’s name when I looked down and didn’t see Jesse.

“Jesse?” Looking around where he’d just been standing, I felt my heart drop. Instantly, mom guilt set in and I was already halfway to thinking about what I was going to say to the cops who’d come looking for him. Then, I caught sight of his curly blonde hair at the front of the crowd.

I kept my eyes on him as I wedged my way past the rest of the women standing around. Just as I was within arm's reach, the locker room door opened and Jesse slipped inside. I didn't think twice about dodging the man coming out and charging in after my son.

“Jesse Oakley! Get back here!” I chased him past several rows of lockers and straight into a shower room. The steam and hiss of the running water didn't connect in my brain until I was already standing in a puddle of soapy water. As those dots connected, I looked up and locked eyes with a man standing less than six feet from me.

2

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*****Olive*****

“Oh, God!” I spun around and slapped my hands over my eyes. “Jesse, cover your eyes!”

Jesse’s laughter was too joyful for my liking in that moment, after the situation he’d just led me into. “They’re naked, Mommy!”

“Jesus Christ, this is not happening.” I turned towards Jesse’s voice and peeked through my fingers. “Jesse! Come here!”

He was standing in front of a very naked, very large man who was doing his best to hide his privates from my son. Staring up at the guy, Jesse pointed at me. “That’s my mommy. She doesn’t have one of those. She has ta-tas.”

“What the fuck is happening?” One of three men standing in the shower room turned his body away from Jesse and looked over at me. “He’s going to lose an eye in here, sweetheart.”

I gasped at the image that put in my head and gave up my dignity to move farther into the room with them so I could grab Jesse. My sandals weren’t meant for shower room floors

and I managed to slide as I passed the first guy. His hands snapped out and grabbed my arms to steady me before I could fall.

That left his trouser snake exposed and my eyes caught on it and refused to budge. I couldn't even think the word cock in front of my son, but my eyes were glued to the one in front of me. It was very large and I gasped when it swung a little with his quick movement. I hadn't seen a lot of them in my life but I'd definitely never seen one long enough to swing.

"Mommy, you're all red." Jesse splashed in the water like he was fucking Gene Kelley. "Aunt Lydie says when Mommy turns red, it's because she doesn't get layered enough."

The guy holding my arms tried to cover his laugh with a cough. "I don't know what's happening, but I think I'm having a nice time."

I reached out and palmed the top of Jesse's head. Pulling him closer to me, I tried to speak like I wasn't dying of humiliation. "I'm very sorry about this. We're looking for his dad and he just charged in. Have y'all seen Taylor Clarkson?"

The man farthest away from me stepped closer, hand securely over himself. "Olive?"

The steam in the room made it hard to see his face when he was standing farther away, but the moment he stepped forward, I felt a brand new wave of humiliation slam into me. Andrew Walker. Taylor's high school best friend.

“Olive. Wow.” He stopped himself from moving closer and shook his head like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re looking for my dad. He’s going to watch me while Mommy goes to work.” Jesse looked around. “Have you seen him? I saw his ding dong once. Aunt Lydie says it’s a cocktail wein-”

“Jesse Clark Oakley! You and your Aunt Lydie are both in so much trouble right now.” I slowly backed away, still doing my best to not look at the men. “I’m sorry. Just forget we were ever here. Taylor isn’t here, obviously, and that’s fine. Why should he be anywhere when I need him to be? It’s just a job interview and a source of income that’s going to support my son. That’s all! And now I’ve burst into a locker room and seen more ding dongs than I ever have in my life in a matter of seconds. This is just great. Everything’s great! I’m doing great!”

Andrew did move closer then and there were so many muscles moving at once and they were all wet and shiny that I nearly toppled over backwards trying to get away. He barked out a name and the man next to me caught my arms again to keep me from falling.

Jack, or at least that was the name he answered to, had shifted closer to grab me that time and I felt the distinct outline of his shaft pressing into my hip. He grunted and moved away as soon as I was steady on my feet. “Sorry about that.”

“Mommy has cooties now!” Jesse splashed a few more times, getting the bottom of my pants wet, and then gripped my arm and tried to hang from it. “Is Daddy not coming?”

I bent forward to grab Jesse and kept my eyes firmly on the floor. “I don’t know, Jesse. Let’s get out of here. I have to figure something out. I can’t miss this interview.”

“Olive, wait.” Andrew didn’t sound happy about what he was about to say. “Taylor left to hit up a bar almost thirty minutes ago. He’s probably three sheets to the wind already.”

My shoulders sank and Jesse suddenly felt too heavy to hold. As soon as I put him down, he was off jumping in puddles again. I dared to lift my eyes to Andrew’s and saw that he looked like he felt bad for me. Something about that pushed me past rationality. “Earmuffs, Jesse.”

Jesse knew when to be done playing. He slapped his hands over his ears and started humming to himself.

“I am so sorry to barge in on y’all and make a scene, but holy shit, I could snap that man’s spine in half right now. I drove for eight hours yesterday and I moved into an apartment that is smaller than my bedroom back home, not to suggest that my bedroom was large in any way. I’ve raised our son his entire life without ever asking Taylor for anything and he can’t be bothered to keep his word and do the absolute minimum? This is bullshit. I have a job interview to get to and if I don’t get it, I’m going to be eating scraps and standing on the street corners to make ends meet. All because Taylor Clarkson is a

piece of shit! Honestly, how hard is it to just do what you say you're going to do?"

I pressed my palms into my eye sockets and then blew out a deep breath and shook my hands out. Straightening my spine, I held my head high and forced that same brittle smile back on my tired lips. "You know what? It's fine? Nothing about me complaining is going to help this. Especially to three naked men who probably can't wait for me to get the hell out of here."

"I could watch him."

My mouth fell open and I stared at Andrew like he'd grown a second impressive penis. "What?"

"If you can wait a couple of minutes while I get dressed, I can watch him. You know me from back home. If you need, I'll call my mom and she'll back me up. I'm good with kids."

The guy next to me, Jack, nodded. "I'll help him. You're getting a hell of a lot more common sense with the two of us than you would be getting with just Taylor watching the kid."

I shook my head and gestured to Jesse. "I couldn't do that. I don't know two of you and I haven't seen you, Andrew, in years. I..."

"Give us two minutes to get dressed." Andrew flashed a kind smile that immediately made me feel slightly calmer. "Last time I moved towards you, you nearly cracked your head open. I need to get past you, though."

Managing to blush even hotter, I jolted to life and grabbed Jesse. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’re not the one who should be sorry, Olive.” I’d stopped just inside the room full of lockers, horrified to see there were more naked men standing around. Andrew’s voice came from right next to me when he spoke again. “Lady in the house, guys!”

The quickness in which the men grabbed towels or shifted to hide their bodies from my view would’ve been funny if I hadn’t felt like a creep. I was pretty sure I’d seen the same scene in one of my cousin’s movies from the eighties, only the roles had been reversed. “Sorry!”

Jesse giggled. “It’s a ding dong store!”

3

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*****Olive*****

“**Y**es, ma’am. Yes, of course. Yes, ma’am, I will.” I handed Andrew’s phone back to him after speaking to his mom, my cheeks redder than ever. “She said to give you a hug and a kiss from her.”

He grinned, fully clothed, and shoved his phone in his pocket. “Later. Do you trust me now? At least enough to watch Jesse?”

His mom, Melissa, had sworn up and down that Andrew was amazing with kids. She’d done a little more than hint that she was ready for him to start producing grandbabies for her. Andrew was my only hope of getting to my interview and starting my new life without catastrophe. I’d known him most of my life, but we’d never been close. He’d been best friends with Taylor when I dated Taylor, but I’d been fifteen to their seventeen at the time. He’d been too busy to do much more than nod his head at me back then.

“Caleb and I will help, too, like I said.” Jack was slightly less intimidating in clothing, but only slightly.

“Um, I can’t help with the kid.” Caleb, the one who’d been horrified about Jesse getting his eye poked out, held up his hands. “I’m good for just about anything else, though. Do you have a ride to this interview? I could drive you. Or I could do your homework, or something. I just can’t help with the kid.”

Jack and Andrew both shot him disbelieving expressions. Andrew shook his head, sending water droplets flying from his hair. “Ignore him. We don’t need him, anyway.”

Jesse, sensing weakness in the way that only kids could, inched closer to Caleb and just stared up at him. My son was never quiet, but as he watched Caleb, it was like he could tell he was weirding Caleb out.

“Whatcha doing?” Caleb took a slight step back. “You have your mother’s big eyes, kid, and you’re really using them right now.”

I pressed my lips together to hold in a laugh while tugging Jesse back to my side. “Are you guys sure? This isn’t a small favor. You’re saving me here.”

Andrew closed the distance between us and rested his hand on my shoulder. It made me feel tiny in comparison. “We’re sure. Give me your number and I’ll call you so you have mine. I’ll go ahead and text you our address so you can come over after your interview.”

I rattled off the numbers and made sure his number was saved in my phone before I knelt down in front of Jesse. Pushing his glasses up and brushing his hair off his forehead, I bit back the surge of emotion threatening to choke me.

“Mommy’s going to her interview now. Andrew and Jack are going to hang out with you and watch you until I get done. Is that okay?”

Jesse shrugged but turned a critical eye on Andrew. “Do you have Mario?”

Andrew knelt next to me and I had an out of body experience as he chuckled and charmed my son like they’d been best friends for life. “We have a bunch of different Mario games. You want to race? We’ve got it. You want to jump across blocks and get coins? We’ve got it. You want to play games and try to save Princess Peach? We got it.”

I’d never had someone kneel down with me to talk to Jesse and it felt so intimate that I found myself standing up and backing away from it. I’d been on my own with Jesse from the beginning. Taylor had never been around in any real way and seeing a man so naturally lean into caring for Jesse was so shocking it was almost alarming.

“Bye, Mom!” Jesse grabbed Andrew’s hand and that easily, they were best friends.

I tried to gather myself and make sure I was taking care of everything. “You’ll have him at your house? If he eats, I’ll repay you for the food. He just had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, though. He’s not allergic to anything... He’ll tell you he’s allergic to all vegetables, though. Um...”

Andrew stood up and turned that charming smile on me. “We’re going to be fine. You just focus on your interview.”

Caleb swung a set of car keys around his finger. “How about that ride?”

I nodded while looking down at my feet. “It would be really helpful, actually. I was going to walk but I’m not sure I have the time now.”

“Thank fuck. I was nervous about being put on babysitting duty.” He grunted when the adults all shot him looks. “What? I’m just being honest. I’ve never been around kids.”

Jesse made eye contact with me and slowly smiled. I knew what was coming before he even opened his mouth. “Thank fuck!”

Caleb paled. “Oh, fuck. I mean shit. I mean... What the hell do you say when you need to curse in front of a kid?”

I gave Jesse a pointed look. “You know better. That’s another big boy word.”

He nodded. “Mommy says when I’m thirteen I can say big boy words.”

I cringed, hating hearing my own parenting spoken out loud in front of others. “Um... Anyway, I guess that’s it... Are you sure you’re going to be okay with this, Jesse? If you need me, Andrew can call me at any time. I’m just one call away.”

“*Mom.*” He could already say my name like a teenager and I blamed Lydie. “Go to work.”

Caleb pressed his hand to the center of my back and nodded. “I’ve got to get out of here before I teach the kid how to-”

“Caleb!” Andrew and Jack both chastised him in unison.

He grunted. “See?”

I took one last look at my phone and made sure I had their address before kissing Jesse on the cheek and telling him that I loved him. Then, before I was truly ready, Caleb ushered me out of the locker room and past a smaller, but still present group of women. I ducked my head, not wanting any attention, especially the kind that came with people seeing you come out of the men’s locker room.

Caleb kept his hand on my back and the size of his hand spanned across both of my shoulder blades. It warmed me through my top and I quickly understood that it wasn’t all male touch that I didn’t like. Caleb’s actually felt comforting.

“Thank you for this. I can’t say it enough.” I glanced up at him and saw that he’d been looking at me already. “I’m sorry about saying all that stuff back there. I’m sure it’s not everyday that you have a crazy lady break into your shower time and rant at you.”

Opening a door out of the stadium for me, he laughed. “You’d be surprised. Normally, women are yelling at me for my own shit, though. It was kind of nice to not be the source of the anger.”

I put that aside to think about later. “Either way, I’m sorry. Taylor’s your teammate and I don’t mean to put you in an awkward position.”

His laugh was genuine and loud as a response. He led me down a sidewalk to a small parking lot that definitely wasn't one of the lots open to most students. "If you knew how few fucks I gave about Taylor, you wouldn't feel guilty at all. That guy's a dick."

I bit back a smile, not wanting to appear too eager at that. "Isn't he the captain of the team? Don't you football types stick together usually?"

He stopped next to a flashy looking car and braced his fist against the door next to my head as he leaned closer and gave me a wolfish smile. "One thing you'll learn about me, sweetheart, is that I don't give a fuck about sticking to what's expected of me."

4

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*****Olive*****

What would've been a long walk was a short drive in Caleb's car. He controlled the gearshift between us with ease and drove with a confidence that I couldn't help being impressed by. He glanced over at me often and smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he did. I wanted to study his features and take him in, but I stopped myself. He was doing me a favor and that was it. Plus, I had the interview to think about.

"You're interviewing at a retirement community?" Caleb parked in front of the front office at Jolly Pines and looked over at me in confusion. "What's the job?"

I took a deep breath and straightened my shirt. "Manager's assistant. I really hope I get it."

"You will. Chin up." He mimicked puffing his chest out. "Or something like that."

"Thank you so much for driving me, Caleb. I appreciate it so much." For some reason, I felt like we were closer than we

were after staring at him naked for longer than was polite. I normally never would've done anything like what I did next, but it just happened like second nature. I leaned over the console and pressed a light kiss to his cheek. "I should go. I'll see you later when I pick up Jesse, maybe. Thanks, again."

I hurried out of his car and tossed him a quick wave before letting myself into the front office. I didn't look back, terrified I'd see a horrified look on his face. If I'd just made an ass out of myself by kissing his cheek, I didn't want to know.

The front office was oddly decorated to look like Key West. I'd never been to Key West, but as soon as my eyes adjusted to the interior lighting, I was struck by the wash of pastel greens and pinks. There was even a flamingo in a corner of the office that had to be six feet tall. The couches in the small sitting area were wicker and I could smell suntan lotion in the air. I was so busy gaping at the decor that I didn't notice the woman approaching me.

"It's something else, isn't it?" When I jumped, the woman laughed and lightly patted my arm. "Sorry, honey! I didn't mean to scare you. You must be Olive. That, or you're lost."

I was average height for a woman and I typically didn't find myself being towered over by other women, but the woman in front of me was taller than any of the men in the locker room I'd just vacated. It might've been the stack of bleach blonde curls on top of her head, but she was the tallest woman I'd ever seen.

I realized I was staring and shook myself out of my stupor. “Um, yes. I’m Olive. I’m sorry. I just wasn’t expecting to be transported to Florida. It’s like a vacation, isn’t it?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. The bright blue of her eyes disappeared completely before making a reappearance. “The owner insists it feels just like the hotel she stayed in down in Florida. Thirty years ago. This place could use a facelift. Don’t worry, though. It’s the only place she got to decorate.”

“I admit nothing.”

Her face lit up and she clapped her hands. “Oh, I like you already. I’m Jerry, by the way. We spoke on the phone.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m happy to be here and I hope this works out.” I squeezed the strap of my purse tighter and gave her a real smile. “I was really close with my neighbor back home. She was seventy-five but she ended up being my best friend. She passed a couple of months ago so I’m really missing her.”

“What was her name?”

“Maggie.” I laughed quietly. “She always joked with me that I’d fit in perfectly in a retirement community and I always agreed with her. My ability to roll with whatever is thrown my way by senior citizens and my sense of humor really does seem to lend itself to enjoying places like this. So, here I am.”

“That’s beautiful, Olive. We need more people like you. So many people just forget about the old. If they just spent a few moments with our residents here, they’d learn a lot.” Jerry

lowered her voice and gave me a conspiratorial glance. “They’d also probably run screaming some days. If your friend, Maggie, was anything like our folks here, you know that they can get a little wild.”

“Maggie had way more boyfriends than I ever did and she wasn’t shy about it. Around the third time I was being bullied by a senior citizen for not having a love life, I knew that being old was going to be a lot of fun.”

“You get it!” She waved for me to follow her. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to a few of our residents and then you can tell me how you’re feeling.”

She led me to a set of older women who may have been a test to see how much I could handle. One of them had fire engine red hair that was pulled into the highest ponytail I’d ever seen. The ponytail was only around an inch long, but she was working it. She also had matching red lipstick smeared around her mouth and her mascara was smudged all around her eyes. The wildest part was the gold sequined bodycon dress she wore. The other woman had black, pin straight hair down to her waist and makeup to rival Cleopatra. She also had a bodycon dress on, but hers was neon green. Both were missing shoes.

“Olive, these are two of our resident party girls. Barbara is in the gold and Brenda is in the green. Ladies, meet Olive. She might be joining us here.” Jerry looked like she was fighting a laugh. “Barb and Brenda here stayed up all night partying by the looks of things.”

Brenda let out a loud burp and then giggled. She was at least eighty-years-old but the giggle was that of a schoolgirl. “Scuse me. I had a beers of couple, sure. I’m not drunk, though.”

Barb reached over and punched Brenda in the boob. “Don’t lie, you old skank! You’re as drunk as a... As drunk as a...”

“Skunk?” Jerry supplied.

“What? Why the hell would a skunk be drunk? Jerry, are you drunk, too? Jesus. Who’s running this place?” Barb looked at me. “This toddler? No wonder we’re all fucking drunk.”

I covered my mouth with my hand to try and hide my laugh, but Brenda spotted it. She pointed at me with one hand and ripped the long black hair off with the other. “Don’t you laugh at Barb. She’ll just keep going and going. Like a teenage boy, this one.”

Jerry sighed. “Can you two get to your house? And do not tell me that you’re going to drive this golf cart home. You’re both too drunk.”

“Too drunk to drive a golf cart? Who ever heard of such a thing?” Brenda waved Jerry off. “I’m eighty-three-years-old. If I crash this cart and die, I’ve lived a good life.”

“How about we have Olive drive you home?” Jerry grinned at me and I knew driving them would be my real test. “Find me in Florida when you’re done, honey.”

We all three watched Jerry stride away with the constant *swish* of her sequin windsuit quieting the farther she got. Then,

we all looked at each other. I knew I was in for a trip when Brenda reached into her dress and pulled two raw chicken cutlets out. They were in ziplock bags, at least.

“We’ll let you drive if you stop by the kitchen and grill these bad boys up for us.”

5

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*****Olive*****

There was a tall fence around Jolly Pines and by the time I was done with Brenda and Barb, I knew why. If anyone in the outside world had watched me drive two stripping grandmas around on a golf-cart, traffic would've come to a complete standstill. As it was, there was a traffic jam on the sidewalks inside the fence. I watched a man in a motorized scooter run over his aid because he was staring at Barb's bare ass. Before I could call anyone to help the poor man being run over by a scooter, an older man jogged by with his shirt off and both of the women in my cart started catcalling him and waving chicken cutlets at him.

By the time I got back to the front office, I felt like I'd somehow been to both a raging party and a dysfunctional family reunion. I wasn't sure what emotion to feel, but I thought that happy might've been winning. When I walked into Florida, as Jerry called it, Jerry was sitting on one of the wicker couches with another older woman.

The new woman looked closer to normal than Barb and Brenda but she was almost an exact replica of Dolly Parton. Her blonde hair was teased high and her makeup was absolute perfection. She was even in a rhinestone dress with fringe on the sleeves and it barely held in her larger-than-life chest. She grinned when she saw me and patted Jerry's knee. "Well, she's back and she's not crying."

I sat across from them and couldn't keep the smile off my face. "It was kind of fun."

"Fun?" Jerry whistled. "You're hired. I remember you said you have a son. I'm willing to work around your schedule. As long as I can have you here Monday mornings. After the weekend, these people can be a little testy. That's when I need the most help."

I sat forward and gripped my knees. "Are you serious? It's that easy?"

The older woman laughed. "Easy. She considers getting the Trashed Twins back to their house easy. She's a keeper!"

Jerry pointed to the table between us. "Fill out that paperwork for me and you can start on Monday. This is Kitty, by the way. She'll help you get used to what I need around here. She was my assistant for a while. Until she decided that she'd rather lay out and tan all day instead of hanging out with me."

"Oh, please. Since this place got more popular, I just can't keep up." Kitty crossed her legs and I saw she was wearing rhinestone cowboy boots. "Every day in this place is like a

freaking circus now. There are so many activities and around every corner is another geriatric person doing something they're not supposed to. I'd rather just be a part of the problem these days."

Jerry snorted. "If that isn't the truest thing you've ever said."

I took the paperwork and found a pen in my purse. "You have no idea how happy I am right now. It was scary moving here without a job lined up for sure. My son is six and I swear he's growing at astronomical rates. It feels like he needs a new pair of shoes every other month. I'm going to be the best assistant you've ever had. Besides Kitty, I'm sure."

Kitty just bounced her foot. "Honey, I was about as useful as tits on a man."

Jerry stood up with more windbreaker sound effects and pulled Kitty up with her. "You fill out that paperwork. Kitty and I have a date with an artist in the art room. The class he's insisting on teaching is giving me a fit and I'm hoping Kitty will bully him for me. Just leave the paperwork on my desk behind the palm trees when you finish."

"What time should I be here on Monday?"

"I start my day around seven usually, but I know you'll be a little later than that with your son. Just come in as soon as you can." Jerry held her fist out for me to bump it and winked. "You'll realize soon enough that all this gratitude you're feeling for this job is a trick. These old people will run you ragged. You've been raising a toddler, though, so maybe you'll be better equipped than most of my assistants have been."

Kitty put her hands on her hips and stared up at Jerry. “You know I’m one of these old people, right?”

The two of them walked away bickering and I hurried through the paperwork. I was excited to get back to Jesse and tell him that I got the job. I also wanted to call Lydie as soon as possible to tell her about the Trashed Twins. She would love it.

After I finished up I walked outside, already dialing Lydie. I’d order a car while telling her about everything, I figured. Lydie answered on the first ring, eager as ever to hear from Jesse. Too bad for her, it was just me calling.

When she heard my voice, she actually groaned. “No offense, sis, but I miss Jesse. Go away and call me back when you have my buddy.”

“That’s rude. You’re kind of a dick, you know that?” I stood on the sidewalk in front of Jolly Pines and looked through my purse for one of the dozen chapsticks I kept on hand. “I’m ignoring all that for now because I have to tell you that I got the job!”

Lydie screamed and cheered, ever my cheerleader even when she was busting my balls. “That’s awesome! I knew you would. Old people love you.”

The sound of a car starting in the parking lot drew my attention and I looked up to see Caleb’s fancy car pulling around to stop in front of me. I watched with my mouth ajar and my brain struggling to make sense of what I was seeing.

Caleb got out of the car and walked around to open the passenger door for me. “Care for a ride?”

I stammered for a second and then licked my suddenly dry lips before addressing Lydie. “Um, I gotta go. I’ll call you later.”

I hung up before she could protest.

“How’d the interview go? You’re not crying, so I’m hoping that’s a good sign.”

Standing next to the open car door, I looked up at Caleb and tilted my head. “You waited on me?”

He shrugged. “I figured you’d need a ride.”

“It’s been over two hours.” Still unmoving, I swallowed a lump in my throat and spoke with an embarrassing waver to my voice. “No one ever waits on me.”

He shrugged. “Well, I waited.”

Getting myself together, I let out a shaky laugh and shook my head at what a loser I was being. “Thank you.”

I slipped past him and slid into the leather seat, clutching my purse on my lap. I was still gripping my phone in my hand so I shoved it into my purse and pulled my seatbelt on while Caleb walked around the car and got in.

He looked over at me and shifted his body so he was facing me with his arm along the back of my seat. “The interview?”

6

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*****Olive*****

I'd been too shocked and embarrassed to fully notice Caleb's looks earlier. I realized quickly when I could take in his features, that he was gorgeous. Caleb was the kind of hot that made my palms sweaty and my brain skip a beat. His eyes were a deep blue with the thick lashes that brushed his tan cheeks, and they crinkled when he smiled or laughed. He had light brown curls and a full beard that hid a slow smile and perfect teeth. With his hair dry, I could see it was cut in a version of a mullet that should've been horrid, but it wasn't. He somehow made it work. Of course, he did.

As I took Caleb in, he did the same to me and I felt a flare of self-consciousness that brought hives to my neck and chest. Turning to face the front window, I rubbed my chest, hoping he wouldn't notice my reaction. "Uh... The interview... Oh! I got it! It was wild in there, but I think I'm going to love it. More importantly, I have a job and I can take care of Jesse without dipping into my savings."

Shifting in his seat, Caleb nodded. “Good. I hope they’ll pay you what you’re worth.”

I laughed, growing more comfortable as we moved into easy topics. “I’m an unskilled entry-level employee who’s working the job because she likes seniors. If they paid me my worth, I’m pretty sure Jesse would have to turn his current shoes into sandals to last a couple more months.”

“Bullshit.” Caleb easily maneuvered the car out of the lot and onto the highway. “Entry-level employees matter a hell of a lot more than companies will say oftentimes. Plus, I’ve spent every summer since I was fourteen working in my family’s company and there are some things you can just tell about a person after being in a business for a while. Anyone would be lucky to have you. You have a charming energy that customers, or in your case, seniors will love. Don’t sell yourself short.”

I turned to face him, a wide smile on my face. “I have a charming energy?”

He glanced over and flicked his eyes over the length of my body. “Among other things.”

My entire body flamed red. “Wow.”

He merged onto a side street and even though he didn’t look back over at me, I could see his smile growing wider. “I’m glad you got the job. You set ‘em up and knocked ‘em out. Taylor couldn’t get in your way.”

I grunted at the sound of Taylor's name. "Thanks to you and Andrew and Jack. I just had to drive two mostly naked, hammered old ladies around on a golf cart and I don't think I would've been as good at it if Jesse was there, being traumatized."

Sitting at a red light, Caleb turned to me. "Excuse me?"

"It was wild, Caleb." I giggled. "The manager calls them the Trashed Twins. They caused a man to run over his aid. I saw more shit in those two hours than I have in the last four years back home."

"I like the way you say my name." A car honked behind us and he raised an eyebrow as he watched me. "Say it one more time?"

I looked back at the traffic behind us. "You're blocking traffic."

His smile was devious. "Seems so."

My eyes widened as I realized he had no intention of moving until I gave him what he wanted. It should've annoyed me, but instead I found my blood plumping harder and my lips pursing to let him know I didn't take orders. So quickly we'd slipped into a playful back and forth, one I'd only ever had with friends after years of friendship.

Caleb rested his hand on my headrest and licked his lips. "You just say it so sweet in that accent of yours, Olive."

I smirked and crossed my arms over my chest. The honking behind us grew louder and more incessant. "They sound like

they're getting pretty mad.”

He didn't break eye contact with me. “I'm sure they are.”

I shifted as I started to crack. Whatever game we were playing, I was new at it and didn't have a clue what it was or what we were doing. It just suddenly felt like foreplay and there were a lot of angry drivers involved for that to be the case. I looked away finally and bit back a curse. “You win. *Caleb.*”

Speeding away from the scene, he laughed at my sulky expression. “Don't pout, Olive. You just made me very happy. Tell me more about these Trashed Twins now. Please.”

I did so happily and was so caught up in telling him every detail that I didn't notice he'd pulled over until he asked me what I wanted to drink. I looked up and saw that we were at Sonic. Shaking my head, I pulled my foot under me. “Nothing. Thank you, though.”

“Pick something.”

“No.” I narrowed my eyes at him, understanding we were in another standoff.

“You pick something or I'm going to order you something that you probably won't like and then will feel obligated to drink anyway.” He'd already stabbed the button to start the order and right away a woman's voice called back, asking him what he wanted. “Well, I know I want a Route 44 water, but my companion here is being stubborn about ordering something.”

I gasped and reached over to grab his arm. Afraid he'd say something worse to embarrass me, I quickly said the first thing I could think of. "Cherry Coke."

Caleb laughed and rolled up his window after placing our order. Looking back at me, he leaned closer. "Was that so hard?"

I nodded. "Excruciating."

"Brat."

"Worse things have been said." I looked down and saw that I was still holding his arm so I pulled my hand back and looked away. "So. What type of company does your family own?"

"It's... It's a lot of things, I guess. My great-great grandfather started it and the family has built it up over the years." He sat up straighter as he spoke about it. "We have different businesses under the same parent company now. My dad's a huge sports guy so he opened a division of the company that dabbles in sports interests solely. My great grandfather was a big candy guy, so there's a candy company under the conglomerate that makes the best fucking gummy bears I've ever tasted."

My stomach growled and I pressed my hand over it. "Sorry. Gummy bears do that to me every time. I love them. Your great grandfather and I would've been good friends."

"From all that I hear, he loved a pretty woman." Caleb wagged his brows at me. "You could've been set with gummy bears for life if you played your cards right."

I laughed out loud. “I could’ve been your great grandma. If only.”

He shuddered and shook his head. “I don’t like this game anymore.”

The carhop appeared with our drinks and after sticking my straw in mine and taking a big drink, I sighed. The caffeine almost instantly hit the spot. I rested my head on the headrest and rolled my face towards him. “Bless you.”

He nodded. “Stick with me, sweetheart. I’ve got that sweet, sweet Sonic hookup.”

“Such a good great grandson.”

“You want to walk?” Caleb reached over and lightly pinched my chin between two fingers. The sensation was electric as he leaned closer and his minty breath washed over my lips. “Because that’s how you end up walking.”

7

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*****Olive*****

Caleb drove us through campus and parked in the wide driveway of a two-story house. The house was cute with a large front porch and a giant old tree in the front yard. It maybe lacked some curb appeal, but it was beautiful. The rest of the houses on the street were just as beautiful and I knew I'd never be able to afford to live there. From the cars in the driveways to the fancy wreaths on the other doors, I knew it was out of my league.

“This is beautiful.” I thought of the tiny apartment Jesse and I were living in and tried to keep any jealousy out of my voice. Our home was fine for the time we'd need it. “I didn't know guys in college lived in houses this nice.”

Caleb shrugged. “Don't make any judgements until you see the inside. We're a little rougher than the typical family who might've lived in this house instead of us. We have a lot of things to repair and fix before my parents come down to see the place.”

I stepped out and breathed in air thick with the smell of a barbeque. Looking around, I smiled as I heard kids playing farther down the street. I could also see other people around our age outside, so it seemed like a mix of students and families. “The houses are a lot farther apart back home, but I like this, I think. This is a nice middle area from home and where Jesse and I are now.”

“Where are you living?” He leaned against his car next to me and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Why isn’t Taylor helping?”

“We’re staying in the Rose Hill Apartments. The owners really took their liberties in naming the place. It’s fine, though.” I saw the front door open and felt the same kick of shame I’d felt when I’d recognized Andrew earlier. “And Taylor isn’t helping because he’s not my boyfriend. He’s Jesse’s dad, when he can bother. I don’t expect a lot of help from him. The school offers free childcare for athletes, though. When Jesse isn’t in school, I can set him up with the college daycare program. That’s the reason we’re here. Otherwise, I wouldn’t personally choose to be anywhere near Taylor. It’ll be good for Jesse to have his dad near him, though. Hopefully.”

Andrew caught the end of my statement and I watched his jaw clench. I didn’t know if he was still friends with Taylor, but if he was, he probably didn’t want to hear me talk poorly about him. “Jesse’s down for a nap.”

I actually gasped. “Are you serious? How’d you do that?”

“I told you that I’m good with kids. We played for a while and had a big meal. Then, he tucked himself into my bed and has been out for close to an hour.” He looked at Caleb and then cleared his throat. “Mind if I talk to Olive alone for a bit?”

Caleb was quiet for an awkward moment and then straightened. Both of them were close to six and a half feet tall and solidly built so seeing them shoulder to shoulder was a lot. Caleb shot Andrew a look and then turned to me. “I’ll give you and Jesse a ride home.”

I got the strange impression that the two men were having a silent argument but it didn’t make any sense to me so I just nodded. “Sure. Thank you, again. You’ve been so much help, Caleb.”

His eyes softened when I said his name. “Thank *you*, sweetheart.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes, unsure what to make of him. He was a wild flirt, but I got the impression that he was like that with everyone and everything around him.

Andrew nodded to the truck parked in front of Caleb’s car. “Sit with me?”

I nodded and when he let the tailgate down, I was debating how to best jump up on the oversized truck when his hands wrapped around my waist. I gasped and clutched his arms as he lifted me onto the tailgate. “Andrew! You’re going to break something!”

He sat next to me and spread out so his thigh pressed into mine. “I’m not going to dignify that with a response.”

I pressed my hand to my chest and forced myself to take a slower breath before fixing my shirt and crossing my legs. “What did you want to talk about?”

Andrew had amber colored bedroom eyes. I’d known they were pretty as a teenager but seeing them up close as a woman was a different experience. With eyelashes so thick they made me jealous and a mouth just full enough to verge on feminine, his face would’ve been great at selling romance novels. So, when he turned those eyes on me and rubbed his strong jaw with a massive hand, I felt a flutter of awareness that I had no business feeling.

“I was so shocked to see you this morning that I could barely think. I just wanted to catch up and see how you’re doing.” He ran a hand through his thick, dark blonde hair and left the slightly too long strands standing straight up. “So, how are you doing?”

I blew a raspberry into the wind and held up my hands. “I’m here. I got the job. I’m not back home in Blackfoot anymore.”

He made a noncommittal sound. “So...good?”

“Yeah.” I hesitated. “I mean, yes. I’m doing good. Things are good. It’s just... I didn’t expect to see a face from back home. Besides Taylor’s, I mean, and I’d prepared for that.”

Andrew nodded and turned to look out over the neighborhood. “Seeing me isn’t a good thing, huh?”

I rushed to reassure him. I grabbed his hand and held it between mine. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry. I... I don’t know how to explain it without word vomiting. I was shocked to see you, but seeing anyone from that part of my life is hard.”

“Because of Taylor?”

“Because of the ridicule I went through, Andrew. I’m not that same girl anymore, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t still hear the shit that was shouted at me back then. I feel ashamed.” I let go of his hand and squeezed both of mine between my thighs. “It’s not *my* shame anymore, but when I see someone from that time, it’s easy to see myself the way I was seen then.”

“Olive, I-”

“Like this morning. I was already mortified. Chasing my son into a locker room full of naked men wasn’t my finest moment. Then I saw you and I just... It’s like I could hear all that old shit again. Of course, I’d run into a locker room. The town slut is back at it again. So trashy. So-”

Andrew leaned over and pressed his lips to mine. It shocked me silent and I was frozen as I felt someone’s mouth on mine for the first time in over two years. He pulled back just enough to speak. “I’ve wanted to do that for a long time. When I saw you this morning, I thought thank God you ran into the locker room while I was there. The hometown girl I crushed on for way too long is back. So fucking pretty. So-”

I kissed him then, shutting him up the same way he'd shut me up. Also in the same way, I pulled back right away to speak. "What are you doing, Andrew?"

"What I should've done a long time ago."

8

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*****Olive*****

Andrew cupped the side of my neck and stroked his thumb over my jaw. He kissed me once more before leaning back into his own space. His eyes never left mine, though. “Maybe it was wrong for me to kiss you, but I waited too long when we were in high school and that taught me a big lesson. Fucking kiss Olive before some other jackass swoops in.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. The tension I’d felt was gone that quickly and I felt a lightness that I wanted to latch onto and never let it go. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

He nodded, a warm smile stretching his lips. “I really am happy to see you, Olive. You look good.”

“You always were so sweet. Delusional, too, I see.” I turned to face him completely and even scooted a bit closer. “After I left high school, I didn’t hear anything else about you. I was shipped away to a hideaway camp and when I got back, you’d graduated. Not that I went looking, either. I figured you hated me the same way all of your friends did.”

His brows furrowed and he shook his head. “I never hated you. I fucking hated Taylor. What he did to you... I told him to go fuck himself the day you showed up to school and everyone knew about the baby. I tried to talk to you a few times but you only saw Taylor when you looked at me. I didn’t blame you.”

“I don’t remember much from that time. I’m sorry I shut you out. You were always kind to me before everything happened. You always made me laugh.” I found myself smiling. “You really told Taylor to go fuck himself?”

“In those words and more. We were seniors so I figured I’d be able to escape him as soon as the school year ended. Imagine my surprise when I show up to campus early for football and I run into the asshole.” He grinned. “I’ve spent the last four and a half years making sure he knows I fucking hate him.”

“It could’ve been four years and done if you both hadn’t decided to go the super senior route.” I nodded towards his house. “Are Jack and Caleb super seniors, too?”

Nodding, Andrew reached over and tucked my hair behind my ear. “You’re safe here. I don’t know how things have been for you in Blackfoot since I graduated, but I don’t imagine things changed all that much. Here, though, you’re good. I’ve got your back. We all will.”

More of that tension seeped out of my bones. “You don’t have to do that. You did more than enough today by watching Jesse.”

“Bullshit, Olive. I should’ve done more back then and I didn’t. That’s something I won’t forgive myself for. You’ve got a second chance here. I won’t let Taylor poison the waters this time.”

I moved closer. “You really feel guilty over the past, don’t you?”

He met my gaze and nodded. “If I hadn’t been such a fucking idiot kid, I would’ve found a way to stick up for you. I wouldn’t have let Taylor near you to start with.”

I pulled his hand into my lap and squeezed it. “As much as I hate Taylor, I have Jesse now and I wouldn’t change that for anything. You couldn’t be my friend then, but you can be my friend now, if you want. That more than makes up for anything you feel you did wrong, Andrew. You have to know that the only person I hold responsible for what happened to me is Taylor. Well. Him and my parents.”

He turned his hand over and palmed the top of my thigh. “I’ll be honest, Olive. Until you tell me that you aren’t interested, I’m going for more than friends. Seeing you again just reminded me of how beautiful you are and why I was interested in the first place.”

My body burned hotter under his touch and I smiled even as I leaned closer. “I think you’re nuts.”

Sliding his hand into my hair, Andrew shrugged. “Maybe I am.”

I turned my face into his palm and kissed his roughened skin. I looked back up at him and had every intention of opening my mouth to say something playful, but when I saw the heat in his amber eyes, I lost every thought in my head. Everything centered in on him and his eyes and his mouth and his hand pulling my face closer to his.

My lips parted just before his touched mine and it was clear that he wasn't kissing me to shut me up anymore. He was kissing me to make me understand what he wanted from me. I knew from the first touch, in explicit details. I could feel his desire down deep in my bones as he held my head and slipped his tongue past my lips to taste me. I whimpered and he growled in response, taking the lead and kissing me deeper.

His mouth tasted like mint when I shyly ran my tongue over his. I hesitated when he let me control the kiss, but when I copied the things he'd done, I felt his hand tighten on my thigh at different points. He liked when I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth and when I sucked the tip of his tongue the most. I grew more confident and found myself grasping at his shirt, clasping handfuls of it as I held him tight.

When I felt the world shift under me, I gasped and felt something even sturdier under me and between my thighs. My eyes popped open and I leaned back. He'd pulled me onto his lap so I was straddling him and as much as I liked the feeling of him under me, I was all too aware that people were in their yard just a few houses down.

I ducked my head and pressed my face against his neck. “I’m sorry. I can’t... People can see and I-”

Andrew swore and moved me back to my own side of the tailgate. “Fuck. I’m sorry, Olive. I wasn’t thinking.”

I was blushing so hot that I just wanted to get away from the situation for the moment. “Can we go inside? I should check on Jesse.”

He stood up and helped me down. “Of course. Jack’s been reading in the room while Jesse naps, so he hasn’t been alone.”

“I trust you, Andrew.” I stole a glance up at him and found him studying me. “I do.”

He let out a deep breath and nodded. “Thanks, Olive.”

The front door flew open before Andrew could grab it and Caleb ran out of the house like the devil himself was chasing after him. Jesse sprinted out after him, holding up his finger and threatening Caleb with it.

“Call him off, Olive! That’s the grossest thing I’ve ever seen!” Caleb jumped into the back of Andrew’s truck and waved his arms dramatically. “This kid really just pulled a giant booger out of his nose and was just sitting there, staring at it! No. No! That’s not okay.”

“Jesse!” I watched as my son froze in place, finger still held in the air towards Caleb. “Unless you want to be grounded until you’re thirty, you’d better turn your little butt around and go find some toilet paper.”

Andrew's entire body was shaking with silent laughter next to me and I could hear Jack just inside the house laughing. They seemed to take pleasure in their friend's torture.

"Aw, Mom, we were just playing." Jesse wiped his finger on his shorts and shrugged. "It's just a boog. Least I didn't eat it!"

I heard Caleb gag and barely managed to contain my own laugh. "It's super great that you didn't eat it, but you just wiped it on your shorts, buddy. Also, chasing Caleb when he's clearly scared of you and your boog isn't nice."

"I'm not scared of him." Caleb climbed out of the truck and cleared his throat. "I don't know what made you think that."

Jesse turned back to Caleb and I barely managed to catch him before he took off after Caleb again. I saved Caleb but I didn't escape boog free unfortunately. You win some, you lose some.

9

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*****Olive*****

Monday morning came too fast. I managed to get Jesse into his new school with only a few fits and I handled my first day at work with only a few flashing incidents. I had an afternoon class and then Jesse and I spent the evening in the campus laundry mat while we ate lunchables and did our laundry. Tuesday was a busy class day for me and instead of the laundry mat, Jesse and I went to the library and then ate our lunchables on our living room couch. It'd come with the apartment and it wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was clean.

Wednesday, I was back at Jolly Pines all day and I spent it following Kitty around, learning the ropes. I loved it already, especially being around Kitty. Every time I saw her, she had a different rhinestone outfit on and I was mesmerized. That night was my first night class and the first time I needed to use the campus childcare center. I'd already arranged everything and all I needed to do was drop Jesse off. He'd get a better dinner than a lunchable and I knew he'd have fun, but he didn't see it that way.

We were standing outside the center and Jesse was making it known that he was tired of all the changes. He'd finally stopped melting down when I dropped him off at school in the morning but he wasn't ready to handle another drop off at another new place. His face was red and I could feel a tantrum coming on. He didn't have them often, but when he did, it was all consuming.

"Jesse Clarkson Oakley, do not do this right now. I have to get to class, buddy. I know it's scary, but Mommy will be back in no time at all. They have cool toys here and you'll have so much fun. We just have to get you inside, okay?" I was close to begging.

"No!" Jesse crossed his arms around himself and turned his back to me.

I tugged at my hair and looked up at the still bright blue sky. "Please, Jesse. I can't be late to class."

"No!" He screamed it that time and I knew people were starting to stare. The campus was busy with students going to and coming from dinner. Jesse didn't care if they all watched him. I did, so he had the upper hand.

"Hey, what's all the screaming about, kid?"

I spun around and saw Jack walking up to us. I was equal parts embarrassed to have someone see me fail at parenting and thankful to see a friendly face. "Jack! Hi. Hey."

He lightly gripped my elbow and squeezed before moving to kneel in front of Jesse. "Hey, dude. I heard you screaming all

the way in my room at our house. Were you yelling ‘ho, ho, ho?’”

Jesse grinned and shook his head. “No!”

“Are you sure? I could’ve sworn I heard Santa out here.”

Tears peppered my eyes and I quickly wiped them away. It’d been days of Taylor sending a text here or there saying that he’d come see Jesse but then never showing up. Then there was Jack, someone with no obligation to help me or Jesse, and he was doing more in just a few seconds than Taylor had since we’d arrived on campus.

“Can I come to your house?”

I nearly choked I tried to spit out my words so fast. “Jesse, you can’t invite yourself over like that, honey. I told you, you’re going here tonight. Mommy has class and you have play time. It’ll be fun.”

“I don’t want to go here! I want to go with Jack!”

Jack stood up and ruffled Jesse’s hair. He smiled at my son and twin dimples appeared on either side of his mouth. “Let me chat with your mom. You stand right there and try not to give your mom such a hard time.”

Jesse stood ramrod straight and even saluted Jack. “Yes, sir!”

Jack moved closer to me and when he leaned in, I saw that his eyes were a pretty hazel. They looked brighter set against his short black hair and beard. “It’s completely up to you, but I could take him home with me. Andrew and Caleb are both

there already. I'm picking up pizza and heading that way. It wouldn't be a problem."

I squeezed my eyes shut and bit my lip hard to stop myself from crying. After inhaling and exhaling through my nose a few times, I opened my eyes and found Jack looking at me with concern marring his handsome face.

"I grew up with a single mom, Olive. Shit's hard. Let me help tonight."

I looked over at Jesse and felt a wave of anger at Taylor. Jesse's father should've been helping. His father should've been the one spending time with his son, bonding with him. I glanced back at Jack and nodded. "Okay. I... Thank you. This isn't your responsibility, Jack. I don't want--"

He smiled and gripped the back of my neck. "Take the help. Accept that I want to help. And then go to class before you fail out of college and set a terrible example for the kid."

I laughed and found myself nodding up at him. "Yes, sir."

Jack's gaze turned hungry for a moment before he shook his head and stepped away from me. "Give me your phone."

I found it at the bottom of my purse and handed it over to him, just to see him frowning at me. "What?"

"That took you too long. Keep it in one of the side parts or in your pocket. If something ever happened and you needed to call for help, having to dig it out of your purse wouldn't be ideal." He tapped away at my phone and then his own pocket

rang. “You have my number now. Message me when you’re done with class and I’ll pick you up.”

I blinked up at him, floored by his words. I’d been lectured my entire life about a myriad of things, but never about being safe. I’d heard everything from keeping my knees closed to never being alone with the opposite sex to god doesn’t like fast little girls, but never a lecture about being safe.

He held my phone out to me and raised his eyebrows when I didn’t move to take it. “What is it, Olive?”

I rolled my lips into my mouth to keep myself from blurting out all my thoughts. Shaking my head, I took the phone. “Thank you.”

Jesse jumped between us, his patience done. “Can I go with Jack, Mom? Can I? Please?”

I bent down and cupped his face. “You can. Listen to me, though. You’d better be good. If Jack tells me that you weren’t respectful for them, I won’t let you go back. Okay?”

He nodded at lightning speed. “Yes, ma’am! I’ll be so good, Mom. I love you! Bye!”

Sighing, I stood back up and met Jack’s gaze again. “I’m chopped liver around y’all.”

“The kid’s blind. That’s all I can say.” He winked and then scooped Jesse up in his arms. “We’ve got a mission, kid. Are you ready for the mission, Agent Jesse?”

I waved goodbye to them and only slightly melted at watching Jack part the crowd as he jogged away with my

cackling son. Jesse was so much better off with a man who played with him and took time out for him. I just wished his own father would give him the time of day.

10

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*****Jack*****

I kicked my way into the house with Jesse in one arm and four boxes of pizza in the other. Jesse laughed at the top of his lungs and I joined in when I heard Caleb swear from somewhere deeper in the house.

“That better not be a certain booger flinging kid I know!” Caleb stalked out of the living room and put his hands on his hips. “We sent you for pizza, dude. Not pizza and child.”

Jesse wiggled out of my arms and ran over to Caleb. Much to Caleb’s shock and maybe horror, Jesse threw his arms around Caleb’s legs and hugged him. “Mom said I have to be good so I won’t put any boogs on you tonight.”

Andrew came down the stairs still drying his hair after a shower. “Where’d you find this little dude?”

I could see him looking around, trying to find Olive. “She had a class. I heard this one screaming for Santa Clause outside of the childcare center.”

Jesse groaned. “I was screaming ‘no’, Jack. I didn’t want to go there. I always have to go to new places and I don’t like it. I just want to come here.”

Andrew grinned and welcomed the hug Jesse rushed over to give him. “As much as I love hanging out with you, little dude, I also want you to go easy on your mom. She’s going to all these new places this week, too. I bet she doesn’t like it, either.”

“Aunt Lydie told me she would stuff worms up my nose if I was bad to Mommy.” He shuddered. “Don’t tell Aunt Lydie, okay?”

“Never. Your Aunt Lydie once kicked me in the knee and I still haven’t forgiven her. So your secret is safe with me. For now. Just remember to be good to your mom.”

“Aunt Lydie kicks everyone.” Jesse shook his head and stared off into space like he’d really seen some shit. “She’s scary.”

I looked at Andrew and saw that he had the same expression on his face. “This is Olive’s older sister?”

“She’s a year younger. Olive got all the sweet and Lydie got all the mean. I watched her try to take Taylor out with a bat once. And that was before everything blew up.” Andrew shuddered the same way Jesse had over the worms. “I wouldn’t mess with Lydie if I was ten feet taller and wearing Kevlar.”

Caleb stared down at Jesse. “He might have a little of the aunt in him.”

I snorted. “Come on, chicken shit. Let’s eat.”

“Chicken shit.” Jesse spun around, sing-songing the new phrase I’d just taught him. “Chicken shit. Chicken shit.”

Grinning, Caleb held up his hands. “Maybe I was wrong about him. I like it.”

Following them to the kitchen, I winced. “What’d your mom say about cussing? Something about big words?”

“She said they’re big boy words.” Andrew leaned down to grab drinks from the fridge and came up with four bottles of water. “That rolled off the tongue a little too easily.”

Caleb caught a water Jack tossed his way and nodded. “Hanging around kids can’t be good for us. No offense, little dude.”

Jesse looked up from digging into the pizza box. “Huh?”

We all settled around the table and dug in. Seeing Jesse devour three whole slices, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach. My mom had struggled to keep food in the fridge when I was growing up and I couldn’t help wondering if Olive was having a hard time.

“What do you and your mom have for dinner normally?”

Jesse shrugged. “Sometimes she cooks. She’s a good cook. She doesn’t buy me pizza, though. Not like Maggie.”

“Who’s Maggie?” Caleb finished his water and shot the empty bottle into the recycling bin.

“Maggie was Mommy’s friend. She watched me while Mommy went to school.” Jesse wiped his mouth on the back of his arm. “She’s dead.”

Andrew choked on a bite of pizza and Caleb went pale. I swallowed my food and slowly cleared my throat. I suddenly felt like we were talking to the kid from *The Sixth Sense*. “Oh?”

“Mommy said Maggie was old and when people get too old, they can die. She said it was okay but she cried a lot.” He shrugged. “I liked Maggie but she smelled like flowers and it hurt my nose.”

I sat back and frowned. It seemed like Olive was having a hard go of things. I glanced over at Andrew and saw that he was frowning, too. “Do you know the Maggie he’s talking about?”

He shook his head. “No.”

My phone vibrated on the table and I looked down to see I’d received a text from Olive. The amount of excitement I felt from one text was ridiculous.

Thank you, Jack. I know you probably had better things to do than babysit, but you really saved me tonight. I owe you.

I turned around in my seat and took a selfie that showed all four of us. Sending it to her, I sank my teeth into my lip as I typed a message back to her. *Look at how much fun we’re*

having. Better things than this? You're crazy. Also, shouldn't you be paying attention in class?

“Really?” Andrew sounded annoyed and when I looked up at him he shook his head. “You’re texting her?”

I glanced over at Jesse and saw that he wasn’t paying attention to us. He was tracing the lines of the pizza box with his fingers while eating still. “Jealous?”

Caleb grunted. “Yeah. Knock it off.”

Andrew scowled at both of us. “Both of you can...kick rocks...”

That's the cutest picture I've ever gotten. I think I'll print it off and hang it on my fridge. And I am paying attention!!! My professor just spent twenty minutes going over the expectations for behavior in his class, though, so I think I'm good.

“Did she just text you back?” Andrew leaned over the table. “What’d she say?”

I pulled my phone to my chest. “Back off, man. Some things are private.”

“Private?” Caleb leaned into my space, too. “How private?”

My phone vibrated again and I looked down at it, expecting to see another text, but instead it was a picture. I opened it without realizing that Andrew and Caleb were hovering over me. A picture of Olive appeared on my phone screen, and in it she was making the cutest bored face with her tongue sticking out.

“Damn.” Caleb sighed. “She’s beautiful.”

Andrew nodded. “So damn pretty.”

I brushed my finger over her blonde curls and let out a low whistle. I loved words. I read religiously and I was majoring in English with plans on becoming a professor. I never found myself speechless. Staring down at her wide green eyes, though, I couldn’t think of anything other than what Caleb and Andrew had already said. Pretty. Beautiful.

Another picture popped up and we were all staring at her bright red face while she sank down in her chair. She looked like she wanted to crawl out of her skin she was so uncomfortable.

I have to drop this class. The professor just caught me looking at that picture you sent and tried to make me show him but I got weird and now everyone thinks I was staring at a dick pic in the middle of class. I hate this place.

Caleb’s wicked grin was instant after reading the text. “She’s mine.”

Shaking my head, I looked between my two best friends and frowned. “Seems like we need to have a talk about this.”

11

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*****Olive*****

“I looked you up, Ms. Oakley. Your scores from your last college were impressive. I know you can be one of my top students if you apply yourself.” Professor Allen held out his hand and nodded at me. “We’ll start fresh next week?”

I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Since that didn’t seem to be a possibility, I shook his hand. “Again, I’m really sorry, Professor. A couple of guy friends are watching my son and they sent me a picture of him. I should’ve been paying attention, though. It won’t happen again.”

The man’s eyes lit up. “How old is your son?”

The rest of the class had practically run out of the auditorium so Professor Allen and I slowly made our way out of the building while chatting. “He’s six. He started at the elementary school just off campus this week and when I tried to get him to into the childcare center tonight, he wasn’t having it.”

“I have twin seven-year-olds. They can be a handful, can’t they?” He stopped on the sidewalk in front of the building and smiled at me. “My friends are probably a lot older than yours and I don’t know a single one of them I’d leave my kids with. The twins would eat them alive.”

“There’s no guarantee that Jesse hasn’t picked the meat off their bones yet, but there’s three of them and only one of him so I’m hoping for the best. They’re also big, strong football players. I don’t think that makes them tougher, but it would take my son longer to eat them.” I looked at my phone and saw that it was already past Jesse’s bedtime. “I need to go relieve them of their babysitting duties. I promise I’ll do better, Professor Allen.”

He hesitated for a moment. “Olive... So many of the students in my class don’t have any real-life experience with children. Educating kids is foreign to them and so much of educating kids is understanding them and how they work. You’re already ahead of the game, as far as I’m concerned. I expect you to be one of the best in the class, but if you ever need to miss a class or take an extra day here or there, let me know. As a fellow victim of kids between the ages of six and eight, I understand. As long as you talk to me, we’ll always figure it out. Okay?”

I groaned when tears burned the backs of my eyes. “I’m sorry. I’ve been so emotional lately. Ignore me. What I mean to say is thank you for being so patient and understanding. I won’t let you down.”

“My wife is the same way. Don’t apologize. Just go save our football team from your son.” He laughed easily and patted my shoulder. “I’m an education nerd and the science of reading gets me wound up, but I’m a football fan through and through. I’ve had to stop myself from asking which team members you have babysitting half a dozen times.”

“Olive?”

Professor Allen and I both turned and watched Taylor confirm it was me before waving away a group of his friends. When he started walking my way, Professor Allen winked at me and excused himself. He seemed excited by the presence of Taylor, the school’s quarterback. I tried not to hold it against him.

“Olive, hey. What’s up?” Taylor strutted up to me, stopping just a foot away, and crossed his arms over his chest as he stared down at me. “I saw you tried to call.”

Frustration tinged my voice as I narrowed my eyes at him. “Yeah, a few dozen times. You’ve blown Jesse off all week.”

“I’ve been busy. I have a life, Olive. What do you want me to do?”

“Watch your son?” I started walking in the direction of the guys’ neighborhood. “Be a father?”

“I’ve got a life here. I didn’t ask you to follow me here. If you wanted someone to watch the kid, you should’ve stayed home with your parents or something. I’m not a fucking babysitter, Olive.” Taylor caught my arm and tugged me

around to face him. “I never said I was going to watch him while you went out and did whatever it is you want to do. I’m busy.”

I’d been fourteen, going on fifteen when Taylor starting chasing after me. He was seventeen. He’d pressured me, bullied me, and controlled every aspect of my life even after he knocked me up and dumped me. He’d always been the one in power and he was so used to being in a position above me that it didn’t cross his mind that I might’ve grown up in the years since I’d seen him face to face. He just assumed everything would be the exact same. His rules, his way, as long as he wanted it that way.

Too bad for him I wasn’t a child anymore. “Go fuck yourself, Taylor. Honestly. I talked to you before committing to Oklahoma A&M. You were fine with it when you didn’t have to do anything. Heaven forbid you pretend to take care of your responsibilities. He’s your son, you dick. He wants to see you and for some reason, I believe he deserves a father, even if that father is you. Suck your shit up and start doing what we agreed on, which is taking care of him when I have class or work and don’t have other childcare options. Or when he wants to see you.”

I yanked my arm away from him and started walking again. I hated everything about Taylor Clarkson. I hated his very existence, but I was willing to put that all aside so he could be in Jesse’s life. I didn’t know at what point I gave up on that idea and wrote him off completely. He wouldn’t complain, if he even noticed. If I was the one responsible for taking him

away from Jesse, though, I'd never forgive myself and every time he asked me where his daddy was, I'd feel responsible for not having an answer for him.

Taylor walked along behind me, not saying anything. I was considering the repercussions of roundhouse kicking him when he tried to grab my hand. I jerked it away from him, of course, and he reached around me to grab my hips and pull me to a stop. "Wait a second, Olive. Just let me talk to you."

I stepped out of his grip and shot him a dirty look. "Do it without touching me."

"When did you get all sassy?" His face had changed since informing me that he had a life and he looked at me like I was a slab of beef he wanted to eat. He even licked his lips in a display that was beyond disturbing to me. "I like the new attitude, babe. I like it a lot."

"Gross, Taylor." I shook my head and dodged his hands again. "Touch me again and I'll be wearing your hands as earrings tomorrow. Jesse's father, or not, I don't want you touching me."

"Goddamn, Olive. Why weren't you this fun back in high school? I could've handled a little fight from you back then."

My stomach twisted with nausea. "Fuck you. Stay away from me, Taylor. You can be a father to Jesse without coming near me."

He stayed put when I walked away that time but I could feel him watching me. "Maybe I was wrong about you, babe.

You're a lot more fun than I remembered. I'll see you around."

12

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*****Olive*****

Fuming at Taylor quickly turned into hugely furious feelings over what he'd put me through. After getting an ignorant kid pregnant with his lies and manipulation, he'd shamed me in front of the entire school and left me an outcast. As if everyone bullying me about it wasn't bad enough, my parents had shipped me away as soon as I'd started to show. I'd given birth to Jesse at a camp for unwed teen moms with no medication or support and I still resented the hell out of everyone involved for making the experience so nightmarish.

I didn't want to think about Taylor anymore, so I did my best to think about anything else. I tried thinking about class and that made me think about Jack. It was so clear that Jesse needed more men in his life. He was surrounded by women at home and he hardly ever got to experience men around him, especially nice men. My father hardly counted as anyone nice. It was so kind of Jack to help out with Jesse. I'd been in class with plenty of men while I still lived in Blackfoot and none of them ever volunteered to do anything with Jesse. It was like

they saw red flags when they heard I was a mom and ran the other way. Good riddance.

Thinking about Jack while keyed up from being angry at Taylor did something strange to my body. The tense feelings of anger shifted into something else entirely and I felt my body respond south of my belly. The way he'd looked at me with so much hunger in his eyes earlier had left me breathless. I wanted that look again.

It wasn't hard to imagine him staring at me like that when it was just the two of us. I stumbled a step as I thought of him moving closer to me, naked like he'd been in the shower. My imagination went wild, conjuring up his body, then picturing myself in the shower with him. The locker room shower turned into the shower in my apartment and when he moved closer, I felt a throbbing between my legs.

In my mind, Jack gripped my hips and pulled me closer, trapping his heavy erection between us. His eyes bore into mine as he stroked his hands up my sides and cupped my breasts. I shivered and then his hands moved over my shoulders and down to my ass. Gripping me tight, he opened his mouth and while I waited to hear his deep voice, I was shocked when a shrill ring came out.

Jarred out of my kinky imagination, I stood perfectly still and tried to clear my mind of all dirty thoughts. I wasn't sure where that'd come from. Daydreaming about sex had never been something I'd done. Something about Jack had washed

right over me, though. Even while standing still, shaking my head of the images, I could almost feel his hands on me still.

A truck honked its horn next to me and I jumped about a foot in the air. I grasped my chest and looked over to see Taylor in the truck, laughing hysterically. Glaring at him, I swore as the images of Jack vanished completely. “Leave me alone, Taylor!”

He honked again. “See you around, sexy!”

I flipped off the back of his truck as he drove away and rubbed hands up and down my arms, trying to get the chill out that he’d left. I was furious that he’d scared me, but also that he’d ruined the tingly feelings the thoughts of Jack had left me. I heard that same shrill sound from my daydream and frowned. What the hell was that?

It took a few more rings for me to realize it was my muffled phone. My heavy footfalls as I stomped down the sidewalk and my heartbeat pounding in my ears ate up all the other sounds around me. When it continued ringing, the sound pierced through my focus. I pulled the phone out and saw that Lydie was calling. I didn’t even get to say hello before she started talking.

“Something’s wrong with you. You’re upset or angry, right?” When I hesitated, she cackled. “Yes! I told you I have an extra sense for your moods, Liv. I just had a feeling that you weren’t happy. So, spill.”

I groaned. “Taylor.”

“Are you kidding me? Did he bail on watching Jesse again?” She swore. “If I didn’t have class, I’d come down there and kick his ass, Liv.”

“He’s bailed on watching Jesse every time. Tonight, he hit on me, though. Apparently, he liked the way I told him to go fuck himself. He’s disgusting.”

“Good for you! I’m proud of you for saying that to him.”

The street I was on started to look familiar and I grew overconfident in my navigation skills as I walked faster. “Did you hear the other part? I wanted to strangle him, Lydie. I hate him. I hate him with my entire soul.”

“Me, too. If he doesn’t leave you alone, we can just take him out and hide the body.” She barely sounded like she was joking. “He’s a pig, Liv, but forget him. You can handle him. Did Jesse see him?”

“No. He’s with Andrew’s roommate, Jack...” I hesitated. “Jesse threw a fit about going to the childcare center and Jack came out of nowhere to help. Jesse invited himself over and Jack seemed happy to babysit. I think Andrew and Caleb are there, too. That’s where I’m walking now.” I looked up and found myself at the end of a cul-de-sac. “Shit. I think I made a wrong turn.”

“Ok three men are watching your son! I need to see what these guys look like. Send me a picture, Liv. Please! I need to live vicariously through you. You’re running around with two hotties and Andrew and I’m stuck in Blackfoot for another year.”

“Andrew is a hottie, too. It’s ridiculous. All three of them are so good looking. It’s kind of freaking me out. I’m not sure I should let myself get too excited about them.” I turned down another street and frowned. “And, I think I’m lost. Jack said he’d pick me up after class but I was so pissed I just started walking. Now I don’t know where I am.”

“Ok first of all you absolutely deserve the attention of three hotties! And second, you’re just walking around a dark campus? Olive! Hang up with me and call sexy Jack right now.” She groaned. “Idiot. Do you want to get killed? Have you never watched any episode of any true crime show?”

I put her on speaker and tapped away at the map app. I wasn’t too far off. It was just a few streets over. “It’s fine. I’m only a couple of blocks away. I’m not calling him when I’m this close. I still need to work of some anger fumes.”

“I’m an ugly crier, Liv. I’m not cut out to be the cute sister mourning her dead sister.” She sighed. “Who am I kidding? I’d still be cute.”

“Hilarious. I love jokes about my funeral. Just know that Jesse goes straight to you if anything happens to me. Years of you negatively influencing him could all be your problem.”

“Oh, god, no. Be safe, Olive Ruth. Be so safe!” She pleaded. “I love that kid but I’ve taught him so many bad things. I don’t want that karma.”

“That reminds me. Did you tell Jesse that I don’t get *layered* enough? Because Jesse told the guys that.” I heard her quiet laughter and rolled my eyes. “You’re a monster.”

“To be fair, I said *laid*.” She laughed out loud and I could barely understand her through it. “On that note, bye. And don’t forget you deserve to get layered!”

Shaking my head, I put my phone away before remembering I was using the map. I refused to call for a ride when I was so close. I could find my way.

13

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*****Olive*****

I had just reached the guys' street when Jack called. After talking to Lydie, I was in a better mood so I was smiling when I answered. "I'm almost there. I'm so sorry. I got lost and all turned around. I'm just a few houses away now, though."

"You got *what?*" Jack growled and the sound sent goosebumps down my arms through the phone. "I'll be right there."

I looked up the street and shook my head. I was almost there. There was no reason for him to come out. Just a few seconds later, I heard his heavy steps coming down their porch. He rounded the sidewalk and came right at me, looking sexier than he did in my fantasy.

"I told you to call me. You've been out here walking by yourself? It's dark and you're all alone, Olive." He stopped right in front of me, blocking my path. "This is a pretty safe campus but why take the risk? Call me next time. I mean it."

His eyes burned with intensity as he spoke to me and I had to admit I liked the way he wanted to protect me. Even if it would ruin my panties.

“I didn’t set out to walk all the way by myself.” I saw the look he gave me and rushed on. “I mean it! I hadn’t had time to think about calling you when Taylor showed up and showed his ass. Then I was too angry to call. So, here I am. All in one piece.”

“Taylor showed up to your class?”

Groaning, I shrugged. “I think he just saw me as he was passing by. He saw an opportunity to piss me off and took it.”

“Asshole.” Jack stepped closer to me and hugged me, wrapping his large body around mine and holding with just the right amount of pressure. “Sorry that happened. I’ll happily kick his ass if you just say the word.”

I slowly brought my arms up and wrapped them around his waist. He was so warm and big that the hug felt comforting and safe. My face was pressed into his chest and the scent of cedar and citrus filled my senses. He smelled so good. I inhaled deeper and hugged him tighter. “This is better than punching something. You give a good hug, Jack.”

He laughed into my hair. “I give lots of good things, Olive. Let’s get you inside before I tell you all about them.”

I hadn’t expected him to take my hand and pull me after him, but when his palm touched mine, I wanted to follow him into the house and wherever else he wanted to take me. His skin

was warm and rough against mine. Before I could get lost in even more dirty fantasies, he was leading me into the house and I was faced with Andrew and Caleb, too.

My ovaries whimpered. It'd been so long since I tried to do anything with another man that I was sure there'd be cobwebs, but the three men in front of me had no trouble igniting the dormant flame inside me. It wasn't right to be attracted to all three of them, but I couldn't stop chemistry.

Andrew pulled me into his own amazing hug and kissed the side of my mouth. It had to be obvious to Caleb and Jack, but neither of them said anything. Actually, when Caleb tugged me into a hug, he didn't seem phased by Andrew's move at all, especially considering he grinned at me before leaning down and kissing me.

I was shocked and it was over before it could really get started, but it was enough for me to feel his mouth on mine. I looked between the three of them and found them all staring at me with more hunger than I'd ever seen on Taylor's face. "What the hell is going on here?"

Andrew motioned towards the living room. "Can we sit? Jesse's asleep, by the way. He tried to wait up for you but he couldn't do it."

Walking to the couch, I sank into it and continued staring at them with wide eyes. Andrew sat on one side of me and pulled my hand into his lap. "What the hell?"

Caleb sat next to me and kicked his ankle over his knee. "We talked about you while you were in class. After Jesse fell

asleep. No trauma for the kid, I guess.”

“Okay... I talked about early childhood education but you don't see me kissing it. Much less me and my two best friends. What are y'all doing?”

Jack held up a finger. “I haven't kissed you yet.”

“Yet?!” I pressed my hand to my forehead and took in a few gulping inhales of air. “Yet?”

Andrew sat forward and gripped his hands together between his knees. “We all want a chance with you. We've never wanted the same woman before and none of us are willing to back down.”

I stared at him with my mouth ajar. He couldn't be serious.

“You can pick any one of us, Olive.” Jack shrugged like he was offering me pumpkins at the pumpkin patch.

“You're not apples! What do you mean, I can pick any one of you? Have you all lost your mind?” I stood up and planted my hands on my hips. “I mean... I mean, it's crazy. People don't just offer themselves up to people.”

Caleb shrugged just as casually as his roommate had. “We are. Offering ourselves up, that is. Do you need to sample the goods before you make your decision?”

“You've all lost your minds. I'm not choosing one of you. I can't do that. I-”

Andrew tugged me into his chest and sat with me on his lap sideways. “Let's start with the easy stuff. Are you attracted to

us?”

My cheeks burned hot and I opened and closed my mouth a few times. “You’re just asking me these questions like it’s easy for me to answer them. This is crazy.”

Andrew pinched my chin between his fingers and turned my face to his. “If we’re wrong about all of this, just say the words. We’ll all apologize and pretend like this never happened if that would make you feel better.”

Jack sat on the couch next to us. “This part is easy, Olive. Are you attracted to us?”

I licked my bone-dry lips and groaned. “Yes! Yes, okay? I’m attracted to three men at the same time. Maybe some of those names they used to call me were accurate. I mean...three men at once...”

Jack tugged me onto his lap so I was straddling him and then he pulled my mouth to his. He was kissing me in front of Andrew and Caleb while I straddled him and the world wasn’t ending. The sense of horrible shame I expected to weigh on me didn’t. Instead, I felt...beyond turned on.

He held my head in one hand and my hip in the other and he kissed me deep, stroking his tongue past my lips. He tasted like mint chocolate and he seemed to like my taste as he moaned against my lips. “Fuck, Olive. You’re none of those bad names.”

I rested my hand on his chest and lifted my head. I was high on desire that quickly. I’d never felt it so intensely before, if at

all. Looking from him to Caleb and Andrew, I rocked my hips forward on Jack to relieve some of the tension building at my core. “This... I’ve never... I don’t know how to choose.”

Andrew leaned forward and kissed my shoulder. “We could make a game out of it. You know? Keep it easy and light.”

Caleb nodded along. “Yeah... Like, who does it better? And you don’t have to choose right away.”

Jack dropped his head back on the couch and looked up at me through half-lidded eyes. “Yes, *that*. We each kiss you and you can see whose kiss you like better. That’ll help you make a decision.”

I wasn’t sure if they were making sense, or if none of us were, but it suddenly sounded like a really great idea. My body was humming for them in ways it never had and I didn’t want it to stop. “That seems fair.”

“Fair is important.” Andrew nodded along. “We wouldn’t want it any other way.”

14

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*****Olive*****

Jack pulled my mouth back to his and hesitated when our breath mingled with just a hair of space between our lips. “You can tell us to stop at any time, Olive.”

I ran my hands through his short hair and watched his eyelids flutter when my nails raked over his scalp. I liked seeing his reactions. That was new for me. I didn’t want anything to stop. I wanted to kiss them all and pretend like it was for some test to see who was better.

Sensing that I wasn’t interested in stopping, Jack gripped my hair and kissed me. His lips were firm as he moved them over mine. When I felt his other hand grip my ass and pull me even closer, I gasped and he slid his tongue over my parted lips. With my knees planted on the couch on either side of his hips, my center pressed hotly against his. When he pulled me closer, my legging covered core rubbed over a hard ridge that felt too good under me. I rocked myself against it, lust drunk and unconcerned about Andrew and Caleb watching.

Jack's fingertips dug into my ass and he growled against my mouth. He tugged harder at my hair and kissed down my jaw. His beard was rough on my skin but his mouth was soft and he never stopped kissing me. With my mouth free, I was unable to hide a breathy moan that jerked me back to reality. Partly, anyway.

I licked my lips and stammered as I climbed off Jack's lap. "O-okay. That was a very thorough example. T-thank you."

Andrew pulled me into his arms without waiting and kissed me. He wrapped his arm under my ass and lifted me so I had to wrap my limbs around his body. Once more, I found a hard length pressing into my core and my eyes watered with need. I wanted everything. I needed more, but I couldn't take more.

His hands cupped my ass and squeezed as he slid his tongue over mine. His long fingers dipped low and I could feel their warmth over my sex. I locked my hands in his hair and held on tight as he rocked me up and down that hard length. The friction built and I struggled to continue kissing him with the same urgency he kissed me with. I took gasping breaths and arched my back. I needed something more, his hands or mouth on my breasts, or *something*.

One of his big hands moved higher and slipped under my shirt. Feeling his skin on mine made me moan and when his fingers easily unhooked my bra, that moan turned into a gasp. Gently pulling back from his mouth, I flicked my eyes back and forth between his hungry eyes and swollen lips. My voice shook as I flashed a smile. "N-nice try."

He groaned as I slid down his body. “Want to call a winner now and go for a walk with me?”

Caleb growled from behind me and pulled me into his chest, away from Andrew. He was already hard and his shaft pressed into my ass. “Fuck off, Andrew.”

I looked over my shoulder at Caleb. “I’m into fairness. You get your turn, Caleb.”

He wrapped his arms around me and then ran one of his hands up my stomach and between my breasts to gently cup my throat. Using his thumb, he tilted my head so he could reach my mouth. Then he kissed me like he was fighting for the win. He bit my lip and then sucked it before stroking his tongue into my mouth and growling again. He devoured me like he was starving and I found myself powerless as he held me. His hold was firm and all I could do was be kissed.

The feeling of being under his control while he kissed me was sexy in a way I’d never experienced. I did my best to roll my hips into him, just as desperate for more as when Jack or Andrew kissed me. As if he could read my mind, Caleb shifted and ran his hand over my breast. He cupped it, filled his palm with it, and then did the same to my other breast.

I pressed my thighs together, doing everything I could to alleviate the ache between them. I whimpered when Caleb took his mouth away from mine but then he pressed his mouth to my neck and I cried out. I was too turned on to be embarrassed but then I opened my eyes and froze. Jack and

Andrew were standing a few feet in front of me, both of their bodies tense and ready to pounce.

Caleb nipped my earlobe and ran his hand down to that junction between my thighs. He cupped my core like I was already his and spoke with a voice thick with desire. “Believe us now? We all want you, Olive. I know you feel how hard I am for you. Look at Andrew and Jack. They’re dying to touch you the way I am right now. So when we say you can pick one of us, we mean it.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Wait.”

Caleb let go of me instantly and the warmth of him against my back faded as he moved around to stand next to Andrew and Jack. He shoved his hands in his pockets and bit his lip as he watched me. I could see the way he ached for me in his eyes and I felt my knees wobble at that kind of desire.

I pressed my hand to my throat where his hand had been and licked my lips. I wanted to taste each of them. “I can’t.”

Their eyes each flashed with disappointment, but they each forced smiles and nodded. They were accepting my ‘no’ before I even gave it.

“No, I mean... I couldn’t pick between you. That was... I feel...” I cleared my throat and shook my head. “I want to. I’ve never wanted to like this. I didn’t even know I could feel like this. It’s just...I can barely take care of my life right now. With work and school and Jesse, I don’t think I have time for sex. Or anything.”

Andrew nodded and held up his hands. “No pressure, Olive. The ball’s in your court. If you change your mind, you know where to find us.”

I touched my lips and then wrapped my arms around myself for a moment before running my hands through my hair. “How do you... I feel like I’m on fire. How do you function like this?”

Caleb groaned. “You’re killing me, O. I’m not going to be able to function. I’m going to take a shower and take care of it.”

My lips popped open. “You mean...”

“I’m going to jack off.” He shrugged when Andrew and Jack both shot him looks. “What? You’re both going to pretend like you’re not going to be fucking your fists to the idea of what just happened here as soon as you’re alone?”

Jack growled. “Shut up, Caleb.”

“Will you?”

Jack turned his hazel eyes on me. “You want the truth?”

“Yes.” I watched him nod and flushed. “And will you think of this? Of me?”

“Yes.”

Andrew nodded when I looked at him. “For a few years, probably.”

I tugged at the neck of my shirt. “Maybe I’ll try that, too.”

Caleb swore and tugged at his hair until it was standing up in every direction. “*Olive.*”

“I’m sorry!” I took a few deep breaths and shoved my hair out of my face. “Okay. I think I should get Jesse and take him home.”

“I’ll take you.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“I’ve got it.”

I looked at them and covered my mouth to hide a laugh at the way they’d all volunteered at the same time. “I’ll get a rideshare this time.”

15

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*****Olive*****

I held my phone between my ear and shoulder and ran a soapy rag over Jesse's breakfast dishes. "Tell Kitty I'm coming in after my test this morning. I told her yesterday, but I think she just really doesn't want to deal with the pottery class."

Jerry laughed. "Absolutely. The last pottery class we had, she took a ball of clay to the tits. Between the implants and rhinestones, she was *not* happy. Just come in when you're finished with your test, honey. Kitty will survive."

I grabbed the faucet and turned it but nothing happened. Frowning, I twisted it back and forth. "What the hell? My water just stopped working."

"Uh oh. Did you pay your bill? That's usually why mine doesn't work."

I twisted again and two things happened at once. Three things, if you include my screaming. The entire knob came off in my hand and a blast of water shot out of the space where the

knob had been. I held up my hand to block the water but it was useless. “It’s spraying everywhere!”

Jerry’s cackling didn’t help me so I hung up and dialed the first person I could think of who might’ve been handy. I was grabbing the few towels I owned from the bathroom when Jack answered. Even after almost a week and in the middle of a crisis, his voice still made my stomach flutter.

“Olive?”

“Do you know how to fix a sink?! Mine is spraying water all over me, Jack!” I threw the towels over the geyser and screamed again when the pressure blew the towel right back at me.

“I’ll be right there. Do you know where the water shut-off valve is?” He heard my silence and grunted. “What’s your address again?”

I rattled it off as fast as I could.

“I’m coming.”

The water was starting to pool on the floor and I panicked. If I ruined our home, we’d have nowhere else to go. Making a quick decision, I ripped the front door open so Jack could come in and then raced back to my sink to wedge my body over the sink. I cupped my hands over the spray and did my best to direct the spray so it hit my chest and soaked me and the sink instead of the rest of the apartment. The water was cold and the pressure stung my hands, but I felt like I was saving my home. At least, I hoped I was.

A few minutes later, I heard heavy footsteps rushing towards me and then Jack's voice. "Olive?!"

"In here! Be careful! The floor's sli-" The sound of Jack hitting the ground cut me off. I spun around to see if he was okay and tripped over his feet.

Jack grabbed me and pulled me down on top of him as I fell. I wasn't sure the landing was much softer than my kitchen floor, but when I was flush against him I wasn't complaining. We were in a puddle and the water I'd been blocking was immediately raining down on us.

Jack grimaced and looked down at where we were connected. "You're soaked."

I couldn't stop the stray giggle that escaped. "I was blocking the water from getting on the floor."

He moved his hand and splashed a few times. "You weren't doing a good job."

I laughed and shook my head. "Doesn't seem like it."

His eyes moved to my mouth and stayed there. "You look good wet."

I sat up, straddling him like no time had passed since the last time I'd done it. Before I could say anything, he easily rolled me under him and pinned me to the wet floor with his weight. I could feel his erection pressing into me and tipped my face up to offer my mouth to him. It was so natural that I didn't have to think about it.

Jack grinned and winked before pulling himself up. “We have a plumbing emergency, Liv. I know I make a hot plumber but try to contain yourself, woman.”

I sat up and scoffed at him. “I was contained.”

He opened the cabinet under the sink and shoved his arm in. Looking back at me, his dimples were on full display. “You’re lucky you called me. Andrew and Caleb grew up in functional homes. My mom and I lived in places that didn’t exactly meet codes. I’ve fixed my fair share of sinks along the way.”

I gasped as the water stopped spraying everywhere. “You fixed it!”

He grinned and shook his head. “I turned the water off.”

I pulled myself to my feet and slid while moving closer to the sink. Jack grabbed my hips to steady me and I bit my lip as I stared down at him. “This place is dangerous.”

“Do you have towels?”

I pointed to the two towels on the ground already. “Those are my towels...”

His eyes narrowed slightly as he stared up at me and then he pulled me to the floor and laughed. “You’re already wet. We’ll just use you to finish drying up this mess.”

I let out a laugh that was part scream as he pushed me along the floor and then pulled me back towards him. I clung to him when I was close enough and wrapped myself around him while laughing so hard tears leaked from my eyes. When he

tried to push me away again, I held on tighter and found myself sliding under his large body on the wet floor.

He easily maneuvered himself over me and grinned down at my shocked face. “You know I’m bigger and stronger than you, right? Why do you look floored that you ended up here?”

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I thought I had a good grip on you.”

He lowered himself to his elbows and held his weight just off me. “The floor’s still wet.”

“My clothes are all soaked now. You’ll have to use your own.” When I said the words, I thought maybe I’d get to see him sliding all over my kitchen floor. Instead, though, he sat up, his knees on either side of my thighs, and pulled his shirt off. My mouth fell open and I couldn’t rip my eyes away from his muscular chest and abs. “Oh.”

He tossed the shirt aside and lowered himself over me again. “Is that not what you meant?”

I licked my lips and bit back a whimper as I watched his shoulder muscles flex. “Um...”

Jack braced himself on one arm and ran his other hand down my side and teased me by playing with the bottom of my shirt. “You should get out of these wet clothes.”

I nodded, my brain fizzling into background noise as my body took over. “Maybe take a hot shower.”

“You wouldn’t want to get sick...”

I swallowed. “You can’t get sick, either... What would the football team do without you?”

His grin was slow. “Okay, we’ll both take off our clothes. Should we take a hot shower too?”

I nodded. “For the same reason.”

He pushed himself up and pulled me to my feet. “We should leave the clothes here to soak up this water.”

My heart thumped wildly but I grabbed the bottom of my shirt and nodded. “We’re being very smart about all of this.”

16

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*****Jack*****

With her blonde curls soaked and sticking to her, Olive looked like a fucking mermaid. With her bright green eyes and curves, she was fluid. I didn't miss the way her hands shook as she pulled her shirt over her head. As it dropped to the floor at her feet, she held her arms by her side and tipped her chin up. She was forcing herself to stand proudly and I groaned under my breath at the sight of her. I needed her to know how beautiful she was so I took my time looking at her. When I was finished, she'd know that I looked at every inch of her naked top half.

From her soft shoulders to her slightly rounded belly, I drank her in. Her breasts were full and heavy with deep pink nipples that I wanted to suck red. I wanted to do things to her tits that probably made me an asshole, but she was a dream standing there. "If this wasn't just a shower to avoid getting sick, I'd tell you how fucking delicious you are."

Her cheeks darkened and the single dimple on the right side of her mouth showed up as she smiled. With her soft features

and round face she looked like the girl next door, like a perfect angel, but there was something about that dimple and her smile that made my blood run hotter. She had secrets and I knew they weren't the girl next door kind.

“Your pants.” She tucked her hands in the waistband of her leggings and took a deep breath. “I’ll do mine, too.”

I kicked my shoes off and shoved my pants and boxer briefs down. Kicking out of them, I stood in front of her completely naked and watched as her eyes devoured me. She’d been mostly good about not looking the day she’d walked into the shower on us, but that shyness was gone. She bent forward as she pushed her own pants down and her eyes never left my dick. It was so hard it was standing up against my stomach and she seemed mesmerized.

I understood the feeling when she stood back up and stepped out of her pants and panties. Her long legs pressed against each other and made a perfect V where they met. Her pussy was hidden until she widened her stance. She was trimmed neatly and her lips were full and shiny. That shine was her wetness for me and I balled my hands into fists to keep from grabbing her and shoving my face into her sweet little snatch.

Her voice was husky as she spoke. “Okay. I guess we should shower now. I’ll... I’ll lead the way.”

I nearly dropped to my knees when she turned around and I saw her full, heart-shaped ass for the first time. My feet moved before my brain could catch up. I knew then that I would’ve followed Olive to the end of the earth, just to watch her ass. I

didn't notice that we were in a bathroom until she stopped moving and turned around to face me.

My cock jumped when I saw how small the shower was. I'd never been so happy for a cramped bathroom.

"This water will still work?" When I nodded, Olive reached into the shower and turned on the hot water. Looking up at me, she licked her lips and I watched her throat move as she swallowed. "Is it okay that it'll be a tight fit?"

I moved closer. "We can handle it."

She stepped into the shower and winced when the water hit her back. "Still cold."

I stepped in after her and immediately we were pressed together from knee to chest. My dick pressed into her stomach and I could feel her nipples pressing into my chest. Looking down at her, I saw her pupils blow out with desire. "Want to switch places? So you don't get all the cold water?"

She nodded and we started moving, trying to switch places. We were both wet from the shower spray by that time and we slid against each other without really going anywhere. The feeling of her skin against mine was intoxicating.

"It's... It's hot now." Olive sank her teeth into her bottom lip and held my gaze. It seemed like she was waiting on me to make a move first.

I leaned over and spoke just next to her ear. "We should probably make sure you're warmed up all over. I could help."

She nodded. "Please."

With my dick leaking precum I took my time running my hands over every part of her body, except between her thighs. I cupped her breasts and ran my thumbs over her nipples and knelt in front of her so I could rub her legs. Her breathing had gotten faster each time I touched her thighs and she thought I was going to touch her where she needed it most. I was getting off on the needy little sounds she made, though, so I just kept teasing her.

“I think I got everywhere.” I stopped touching her and bit back a smile when she whimpered. “What is it, Olive?”

She grabbed my hand. “I’m not warmed up everywhere yet.”

I acted surprised. “Oh? Did I miss somewhere?”

She pulled my hand between her thighs and pressed it against her sex. “Here. I need you here.”

I backed her into the shower wall and tightened my hold on her pussy. “Warming you up here might take a little more effort, Liv.”

She reached up and grabbed the back of my neck. “I hope so.”

I didn’t let her pull my face down to hers yet. I wanted to watch her face when I touched her. Parting her lower lips, I ran two fingers through her wetness and watched her bite her poor bottom lip hard. I circled her clit and planted my other hand on the wall over her head as her eyes fluttered. Teasing her entrance with the tip of one finger, I held my breath as I eased it inside her tight walls. Tight, hot, and soaking wet, her pussy

accepted my finger and pulsed around it in beat with Olive's racing heart.

She moaned, unable to stop the sound from escaping her mouth. "*Jack.*"

"Fuck, Liv." Giving up whatever pretense we were using, I bent down and captured one of those pretty nipples in my mouth. I sucked lightly at first and then harder until she cried out and grabbed my hair. At the same time I centered my thumb over her clit and circled it.

"*Oh. Jack... Jack!*" Her walls fluttered around my finger and her grip on my hair turned painful when I slid a second finger in next to the first. Her body shook as she came that fast.

Kissing up her chest, I flashed her a wolfish smile. "So fucking delicious."

She pulled my mouth to hers and kissed me, running her tongue over my lips in the hottest, messiest kiss I'd ever received. Her need poured through it and she held nothing back.

I pulled my fingers out and picked her up. Pinning her to the shower wall, I reached between us and gripped my dick in a tight fist. "Tell me no if this isn't what you want, Liv."

Her eyes flashed. "Are you crazy? Yes, Jack. Just...yes."

"You shouldn't be able to look at me like that. You look so fucking sweet but..." I closed my eyes to keep my control and blew out a harsh breath. "Seeing you like this, desperate for

me to fuck you... It's a mindfuck. The kind that stays with you."

"I've been good for so long, Jack." She licked her lips and they tipped up in a smile that made my dick weep. "I'll get back to it later."

I pressed against her tight entrance and then froze. "Sonofabitch. I don't have a condom."

Her face fell but then she took a deep breath and leveled a serious gaze at me. "Teen mom here. I'm on birth control. I've slept with two people, the last one when I was nineteen. I'm clean."

My head buzzed with the idea of taking her bare. "I'm clean. I dated the same person from high school until sophomore year. I've always used protection and I've been with a few women since then, but I got tested during my physical for football. Coach thought it'd be funny."

"You dated the same person for that long?"

I growled. "Olive. I've got my dick in my hand and I'm so close to being in heaven that I could cry. I don't want to think about anyone else ever again. Are you okay with me being bare?"

She bit her lip and nodded. "You fixed my water. I trust you."

I hesitated, damned by the bit of my conscious not consumed by being inside her. "Liv, I didn't fix it. You shouldn't trust me for that reason. I-

She winked. “Teasing.”

I swore. “Goddammit, Liv.”

She pulled my mouth closer to hers and outlined my lips with her tongue before meeting my eyes. “Please fuck me now, Jack.”

17

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*****Olive*****

Jack pushed the first inch of his shaft into me and the stretch was intense. I held my breath and his neck as he eased more into me. He stopped and I looked up to see him frowning.

“Breathe, Liv.” He nodded at me as I took one shaky breath and then another. “Keep doing that.”

I watched his face as he pushed more of himself into me. A vein at his temple stood out as he bared his teeth. He looked like he was in pain. I tried to relax my muscles so he could slide in easier. “Just do it, Jack.”

His eyes flashed to mine and he shook his head. Slowly pulling out, he pushed those few inches back in and slowly fucked me with them. I wanted to tell him to take me the way he wanted to but the feeling of his shallow thrusts was so good that I couldn't complain.

Reaching between us, he circled my clit and I cried out embarrassingly loud. He sank more of his length into me and

watched my face. “Just a little more, Liv.”

I locked my arms and legs around him and shifted my weight forward. He braced his hand on the wall behind me and I used the movement to sink down on his dick. He grunted and pinned me to the wall harder as I took his full length.

I bit down on his shoulder to stop myself from screaming. There was a sting of pain but with Jack holding himself still in me, it slowly faded. I moaned into his shoulder and held him tighter. “That was more than a little more.”

“Are you okay?” Jack’s voice was strained and his body was tight against mine.

I let out a strangled laugh and nodded. “I think I may be bad at this.”

He took a handful of my hair and tugged my head back so he could look me in the eye. “Bullshit.”

“Are there normally so many start and stops?” I watched his eyes narrow.

“Do you want to hear the crude thoughts going through my head right now, Liv?” When I nodded, he let out a pained laugh. “I’m buried balls deep in the tightest pussy I’ve ever felt and I’m doing my fucking best not to come before I get a full stroke in. I’m having the sex that all other sex will be compared to right now and you feel so fucking good that I may not last a full sixty seconds.”

My sex pulsed and I watched his jaw clench. “I’ve already come, Jack. You can finish.”

His eyes flashed with anger and then he turned the water off and carried me out of the shower. “You deserve better than you’ve been given. If I could think about it without my brain exploding, I’d tell you what sorry assholes your previous partners were.”

I gasped when my bare ass landed on the cold counter and again when Jack pulled out of me and dropped to his knees in front of me. Pulling my thighs over his shoulder, he buried his face in my sex and I instantly believed every word he said. “Jack!”

He licked me and growled. “You come more than once, Liv. Making you come is as good as coming myself. I’m not done until your toes are curling and you’re crying out my name like a fucking prayer. Understand?”

“No one’s ever done... I’ve never...”

“If you tell me that no one’s ever eaten this sweet pussy before, I’m going to lose my mind, Liv.” He saw my expression and stood up. Leaning in, he kissed me hard and fed me his tongue with my taste on it. “You’re delicious and I’m going to feast on you.”

I opened my mouth to say...something...but then his mouth closed over my clit and my spine went ramrod straight as he sucked. I made a gasping, choking sound and came immediately.

Jack leaned back with a cocky laugh and raised his eyebrows at me. “Yeah?”

I caught my breath and groaned at him. “Shut up.”

“I’d better find something better to do with my mouth then.” He pressed his mouth to my sex again and at the same time, I felt his fingers filling me. It took me a little longer to come again that time, but just barely. Jack didn’t stop, though.

I twisted on the counter under his mouth but he bracketed his arm over my waist and held me still. I cried out and even cursed his name as he pushed me towards another orgasm. When his fingers curled in me, my toes curled so hard it hurt and an orgasm bigger than any I’d ever had slammed into me.

Jack stood up and, while I was still shaking from the orgasm he’d just given me, slid his full length inside me and met my eyes. He gripped the back of my neck and held me steady while he pulled out and thrust deep again. His jaw clenched as he did it again and again.

I held onto his arms and braced my feet on the edge of the counter. “I can take more, Jack.”

He ground his teeth and never took his eyes off my face as his thrusts grew faster. Every thrust caused my breasts to sway and forced a little burst of air out of my lungs.

I could feel myself getting close to another orgasm and cried out while shaking my head. I didn’t think I could take another one.

Jack thrusts grew faster and harder. “I can feel your pussy walls pulsing. Come again for me, Liv. Give me one more.”

I felt my nails biting into his skin but I didn't care in that moment. I gasped as he fucked me closer and closer to the edge. "Jack! Please!"

"Do you want me to pull out?" Jack growled my name when he watched me shake my head. "You want me to come in you, Liv?"

I came like a freight train, the feeling of being full of him making it ever better. "Yes, Jack! Come in me!"

He shouted and buried himself deep in me as he came. I felt his hot seed filling me and cried out his name again and again. Wrapping myself around him, I felt his body relax against mine as he finished inside me. I'd never experienced sex like that before and I was completely limp and speechless.

Jack picked me up and carried me into my bedroom, still inside me. He settled us on my bed and wrapped himself around me, even cupping the front of my sex. He pressed soft kisses to my neck and then covered us with the blanket at the end of my bed when he felt me shiver. He was everywhere, in me and around me, and it felt like exactly what I needed.

"Take a nap, Liv. I'm not going anywhere."

18

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*****Jack*****

A phone ringing stopped me from dozing off the way I wanted to. I had a few hours before football practice and after fucking Olive, I needed the rest. I grunted when she climbed out from under me. “Come back.”

She wrapped a pillow around her middle and shook her head. “It could be important.”

I sat up and looked around her tiny bedroom. It wasn't decorated at all. Her clothes were neatly hung in the closet, though, and everything that was out seemed neatly put into place. Her bed was about as uncomfortable as I'd ever felt, but the sheets were clean and smelled good. Leaning over, I buried my face in them and groaned. She smelled so fucking good, like the beach in the wintertime.

That smell was all mine. I'd break the news to Caleb and Andrew later and then rub it in their faces. She'd chosen me. I was a lucky asshole.

“I have to go.” Olive rushed back into the room and quickly pulled her hair up in a knot. “Jesse got in trouble at school and they’re sending him home for the day. They wouldn’t tell me what he did over the phone.”

I stood up and nodded. “I’ll drive.”

She stopped in the middle of pulling on a bra and her dimple disappeared completely as she frowned. “You don’t have to do that, Jack. This isn’t... This isn’t what you came over for.”

“I’m driving. I only require that you give me two minutes to run into my house and change. I’m not exactly excited about wearing wet clothes.”

She nodded and snapped her bra into place before hurrying over and hugging me. “Thank you so much, Jack. I’m sorry to use you like this. Eventually, I’ll get a car. Some day.”

I kept my hips away from the hug, doing my best to keep my semi from turning into a raging hard on. “Stop apologizing. I’m going to pull on my boxers at least. I can only imagine the shit I’d get if coach heard I was arrested for indecent exposure.”

Pulling those boxer briefs on was painful but the ride from her apartment to my house was somehow worse. I reached over to hold her hand and was promptly rejected.

“This... Having to run out to pick up Jesse from school, having a shitty apartment that breaks randomly... I can’t start anything. My life is a mess right now. I-” She swore and

covered her face in her hands. “I missed my test. Shit. I need to email my professor.”

I would’ve been a liar if I’d said I wasn’t shocked. I’d assumed that since she’d had sex with me, she wanted more. Pride kept me from showing any hurt feelings I might’ve felt. “Explain to your professor what happened with your water. It’ll be okay, Liv.”

“I’m supposed to be going to work.” Olive turned to face me and her eyes were bigger than I’d ever seen them, pooling with unshed tears. “I took a little bit of time for myself and now I’m behind on everything else. I can’t afford to want you, Jack. Without help from Taylor, I’m drowning.”

I took a deep breath and reached over to take her hand again. I didn’t let her pull it away that time. “My mom didn’t date until I was older. Even then it wasn’t a lot. My dad was nowhere in the picture so she did it all alone, too. If you’re not ready for dating, then let us be your friends, Olive. Andrew and I love Jesse. The kid’s a good time. Caleb could use him some experience with him. After watching how painfully uncomfortable he is around Jesse, I’m starting to worry that Caleb is an alien who was just dropped off at his parents’ and never experienced childhood. We’ll lend a hand where we can. Jesse could even hang out with us at practice today. Coach would murder us for the smallest shit but he’s a softy for kids.” I squeezed her hand. “You don’t have to do anything alone.”

“I don’t want to use you.” She’d pulled on a dress that covered her from neck to knees and she tugged at the hem

with her other hand. “I don’t know. I’m sorry for being a joy kill. You deserved cuddling and a fun time after sex.”

I pulled into my driveway and turned my truck off. “My joy is hardly killed. That was the best sex of my life and I’m just enough of an asshole to not back off. I’ll say it’s because you need to relax and my dick can do that for you, but I just want you any way I can have you, Liv. If you ever explicitly say no to sex, I’ll fuck off. Until then, though, I’m not taking my dancing shoes off.”

Her cheeks reddened. “I... You... Okay.”

I leaned forward and kissed the corner of her mouth. “I’ll be back in two minutes. If you see anyone approaching who looks like Andrew or Caleb, hide. I don’t feel like sharing yet.”

Her sweet smile made me feel ten feet tall. I was still feeling that high when I parked in front of the school a little bit later, in a new, completely dry outfit. I got out of my truck with her, not thinking twice about joining her on such a parental task. If she felt weird about it, she didn’t say anything. She even leaned into my hand when I pressed it to her back.

I could tell Olive was nervous and when she led me into the office, I found out a possible reason why. The expression on the secretary’s face when Olive said her name and why she was there was pure judgment.

Olive shifted from foot to foot in front of me. I knew parts of her story from Andrew and I knew that with her face bare of makeup Olive looked young. With her eyes as wide with anxiety as they were, she had a baby face. A baby face with a

six-year-old. It wasn't hard to understand what the secretary was judging. It was bullshit.

“You're so young, honey. Just a child yourself.” The woman shook her head and sighed. “Babies having babies.”

Olive stiffened against me and just as I was getting ready to say something, she spoke in a lowered voice that was woven with steel. “I'm twenty-one, *honey*. Despite being a child when I had my son, I still somehow learned how incredibly rude it is to criticize or judge someone for something they can't change. I'm sure you didn't consider how a comment like that is *just* judgmental and unhelpful in every way. Luckily, I cut my teeth on those kinds of comments, so you can't hurt my feelings. Not everyone who comes in here will have my background, though, so just think about it. Do you really want to be the person to convince a struggling young mom that the world is only made up of shitty, judgmental people?”

The woman's face was deep red by the time Olive finished. She stuttered out an apology and slid two guest badges across the counter to us. “It's Ms. Emily's planning period and Jesse is in with her. Room fifteen.”

Olive smiled. “I remember. Thank you.”

I trailed along behind Olive as we left the room, in awe of the woman in front of me. I wanted to get on my knees and worship her. I'd never watched someone dress someone else down and found it fucking sexy as hell.

Olive glanced back at me and stopped so suddenly that I bumped into her. Her eyes danced with mischief as she turned to face me. “What’s that look on your face for?”

I gripped her hips and groaned low enough that just she would hear me. “I can’t even say. What I’m thinking and feeling are ten different kinds of illegal considering where we’re standing and I want to be a professor one day, so I can’t be banned from being around kids.”

She lifted her chin a bit more and pride shown in her eyes. “Thank you.”

I licked my lips as I searched her face. “You’re a badass, Liv. But you need to turn around and walk before I do something we both can’t take back.”

19

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*****Olive*****

“I didn’t know you wanted to be a professor.” I walked ahead of Jack with an extra sway to my hips. I was proud that I stood up for myself and proud that he’d seen it and thought it was hot.

Jack blew out a harsh breath from behind me. “You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?”

Before I had a chance to tease Jack, we were at Jesse’s classroom door and he’d spotted us. I stepped inside and nodded at Ms. Emily while Jesse came sprinting at me full force. He hugged me tight and then saw Jack. I was instant chopped liver. He threw himself at Jack and Jack caught him with a smile and hugged him tight.

“What are you doing here? You’ve never been here! Do you want to see my cubby? I can show you the class pet. Will you come back when we have-”

Ms. Emily cleared her throat. “Jesse. You and I need to talk to your mom and dad about what happened today.”

I flushed at her mistake and tried to rush to correct her but Jesse had already run away with the slip up. All I could do was wince as he spoke over me.

“I wish Jack was my dad! If Jack was my dad, that’d be so cool. Jack bought me pizza and we play games together. *Can* you be my dad, Jack?” Jesse bounced with excitement so fast that his glasses slipped down his nose. He shoved them up, leaving fingerprints on both lenses. “Can you?”

Ms. Emily looked like she’d seen a ghost and Jack looked like he was caught in a hunter’s sights. Which left me to step in and stop the train from careening off course.

“Jesse, you have a dad. Jack is really cool and I-”

“I don’t want my dad. I want Jack.” Jesse stomped over to the alphabet rug in the corner of the classroom and sat down with his back to us.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t realize this wasn’t his dad.” Ms. Emily moved closer and lowered her voice. “I was hoping it was his dad. The incident today, Ms. Oakley, was regarding this topic.”

Jack cleared his throat and gently squeezed my arm. “I’ll go sit with Jesse and give you two some privacy.”

I watched him sit on the carpet next to Jesse and took a deep breath before looking back at Jesse’s teacher. “What happened?”

“It’s family week and we’re learning about all different types of families. Another little boy was talking about his family and

he talked about his dad the whole time. Jesse got upset and pushed the other student down. It was completely out of nowhere.” She gripped her hands together in front of her. “I’m not a therapist, but-”

“You wouldn’t have to be to see the issue here.” I shook my head and wrapped my arms around myself. “I moved here so we could use the childcare offered by the school, but also because Jesse’s father is here. I’ve tried. I’m still trying. How do you make a man be a father if he doesn’t want to? Jesse deserves a father, though. He needs one. I know it’s not normal for him to just ask men he’s only seen a couple of times to be his dad. I... Was the other boy okay?”

She took my hand and held it between both of hers. She wasn’t that much older than me but in that moment, I felt like a child. “He’s fine. No harm done. They were giggling together after I called the office. There’s a zero tolerance policy, which is why Jesse has to go home for the day. If it were up to me, I’d keep him here and not interrupt his school day.

“I have a two-year-old at home and I don’t know what I’d do without my boyfriend’s support. I’m sorry you’re having a hard time with Jesse’s dad.” She glanced over at Jesse and Jack and smiled. “He may have only seen that man a few times, but look at them. The male support doesn’t always need to be the bio dad.”

I forced a smile and looked away. “I can’t ask him to parent my son.”

“I just meant that seeing you with your male friend could be good for him. The three of you hanging out together doesn’t have to be parenting.”

Jack looked over at me and smiled. My fake smile turned real and I looked down at the floor to hide the look on my face. Taking a deep breath, I looked back to Ms. Emily. “I’ll talk to him, Of course, but is there anything else I need to do? If I need to apologize to the other boy’s parents, I will.”

“Don’t be silly, Ms. Oakley. There’s nothing else you need to do. You can use the room, if you want. I’m going to sneak down to the cafeteria before the first lunch teachers steal all the brownies.”

I waved her off and joined Jesse and Jack on the carpet. Jesse watched me closely as I knelt in front of him and then carefully kept myself covered while going to my butt. His eyes were wide with worry and I couldn’t stand seeing him like that.

“Am I in trouble?”

I scooted closer to him and brushed his hair off his forehead. He’d need a haircut soon. “Let’s come back to that. Can you tell me what happened?”

He toyed with his shoelaces and sighed like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. “I pushed Keaton down.”

“I heard. Can you tell me why you pushed Keaton down? I thought Keaton was your friend.”

“Keaton *is* my friend!” Jesse crossed his arms over his chest and pouted. He wanted to be done with the conversation.

“It’s okay to be upset right now. It’s hard to talk about mistakes we make. It’s important that we do talk about them, though, so they don’t happen again. And so you can get help if you need help with something.” I cupped his face and lifted it so he was looking at me again. “If Keaton is your friend, why’d you push him?”

Jesse’s eyes welled up with tears and his little cheeks turned bright red. “He wouldn’t stop talking about his dad! He always talks about his dad!”

I pulled him into my chest and wrapped him in a bear hug as he sobbed. I stroked his back while gently rocking him. “Thank you for telling me, buddy.”

He clung to me and I felt his hot tears on my neck. “I don’t have a dad!”

Pain suckerpunched me in the chest and I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to see Jack’s face watching me in that moment. I never felt guiltier for my past than when it hurt Jesse. I’d gotten involved with a guy who wouldn’t be a father to Jesse. I hurt Jesse. *Me*.

I flinched when Jack wrapped his arms around us, so used to being alone with Jesse that the contact startled me. I opened my eyes and met his questioning gaze. He wasn’t sure if he could hug us after my reaction. I desperately wanted to be held, even if it only lasted a few seconds, so I held out my hand for him.

He held us until the sound of a bell ringing startled us apart. Climbing to his feet, he noticed that Jesse had passed out and reached down to take him from me. Holding Jesse across his wide chest, he pulled me up with his other hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

20

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*****Caleb*****

I'd run through my drills twice already and Coach was still eyeing me like he wanted to punt *me* down the field. I winked at him and saw him shake his head before stalking away. Miss one field goal during practice and suddenly it's the end of the world with that guy. He didn't trust my method of saving it all for the game. In the four years I'd been the kicker, I'd never missed a single kick, though, so the proof was in the pudding.

I sat on the bench next to Andrew. The defensive team had just finished practicing and he was soaked in sweat, but I'd caught the tail end of a conversation between him and Jack before practice that I was willing to smell his stink to hear the rest of it.

His eyes were glued to the field, where the offensive team was still practicing. I followed his gaze and saw he was glaring in the direction of Taylor. "That fucker needs to learn a lesson."

I rested my elbows on my knees and found Jack on the field. “What happened today?”

In the middle of Andrew telling me, my blood boiled so hot that I had to stand up and shake my hands out. I didn’t know what the fuck to do with Jesse, but for the kid to be hurting so much because of a jackass on our team... I couldn’t stand it.

“I’ve seen his shit posts through the group texts and every night this week he’s been drinking with a new random woman.” Andrew cracked his neck. “Meanwhile, Olive is going to class, working, raising Jesse, and doing everything else by herself.”

I bent over and grabbed one of the footballs in front of us. Unclenching my jaw, I looked back at him. “Think I can nail him from here?”

Andrew nodded. “Anger is a powerful motivator. As your future lawyer, do you have a plan for what happens after you nail him?”

I gave him my best shit-eating, rich boy grin. “Money is also a powerful motivator, Andy.”

Throwing the ball forward with all my force, I watched as it sailed beautifully across the field and nailed Taylor in the head. Unfortunately, he was wearing a helmet. It still knocked him on his ass, though.

“What do you think he’ll be angrier about? You hitting him or you being able to hit him from here?” Andrew’s voice

sounded lighter already. Sometimes, you really did just need to hit something. Or watch your best friend do it.

Taylor climbed to his feet and yanked his helmet off. He started storming our way until I bent over and picked up another football. Flipping me off, he shook his head. “Fuck you, Evers! You’re not worth my time.”

I hammered another one at his back. “Oops. It slipped.”

Coach came at me with rage in his eyes. “Off my field right now, Evers! If you’re not going to use that arm to win me any games, I don’t want to fucking see it! Hit the showers!”

I saluted him and backed away. “You know the world couldn’t handle me as a quarterback, Coach. I’m obnoxious enough as it is.”

Andrew grunted. “All that power in one fool’s hands? You’re playing with fire, Coach.”

Coach shook his head and pointed to the tunnel. “Off my field. Both of you.”

Halfway through my shower, I sighed. “It’s just not the same without Olive barging in.”

“Don’t talk to me while you’re washing your balls, dude.” Andrew cut his water off and walked into the locker room. “But same.”

I finished up and had just buttoned my pants when the rest of the team filed into the locker room. Jack was silent as he slammed his helmet into his locker and yanked the rest of his pads off.

Andrew and I exchanged a glance. Jack rarely got angry and stayed angry. It was strange to see him slamming things around and being physical, too. He was more of a lover than a fighter.

Taylor rounded the corner of lockers and narrowed in on Jack. “Yo! What the fuck is wrong with you? You’ve had a pissy attitude all practice and then you have your little bitch attack me?”

I smiled and waved at the guys who’d started to gather. “He mentioned me!”

Andrew slapped my chest and moved forward to put some space between Jack and Taylor. Jack was still silent but his eyes were shooting fire. “Unless you want your teeth knocked down your throat, I suggest you walk away, Taylor.”

“Fuck you, too, Andrew.”

Jack moved faster than anyone expected and had Taylor against the lockers by the throat before Taylor made a sound. Glaring at him, Jack leaned in close and said something so just Taylor heard. Shaking his head, he let Taylor go and went back to getting out of his uniform like everyone wasn’t staring at him.

Taylor shot one last dark look at me and Andrew before stomping off. The rest of the guys gave up on watching anything else happen and went back to their own shit.

I leaned on the locker next to Jack’s and met his gaze. “You good?”

He shook his head. “Not here.”

Andrew and I waited outside by my car. We were both lost in our own worlds when Jack came out of the stadium like a dark cloud. I noted his bloody knuckles and straightened.

“Is there a body to be buried?”

Jack frowned. “What?”

I motioned to his hand. “Is Taylor in there, bleeding out?”

He seemed to notice his hand was bleeding for the first time and swore. “No, he got out of there pretty fast. You can’t say he doesn’t have bursts of intelligence.”

“So, that was...?” Andrew flexed his own hand.

“Ran into a wall.” Jack sighed and let his tailgate down so he could sit. “Seeing Olive and Jesse like that today fucked with my head. My dad wasn’t around and I remember being that little kid, angry at the fucking world on the days you were supposed to bring your dad to school.”

I swallowed a stupid knee-jerk response and sat next to him. “It makes sense that you wanted to bash Taylor’s head in, then.”

“It’s embarrassing to have fucking unresolved daddy issues at twenty-three.” He groaned. “I should be celebrating today. Instead, I’m acting like a baby.”

“Celebrating?”

Andrew scowled. “He says Olive chose him.”

My stomach tightened. “Bullshit.”

Jack smiled finally. “Jesse even said he wanted me to be his dad.”

“It’s not over until she tells two of us to fuck off.” Andrew crossed his arms over his chest. “I can’t believe I was feeling bad for you a second ago. Now I just want to punch you.”

I nodded. “Let’s go back to talking about your daddy issues, asshole.”

21

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*****Olive*****

“**Y**ou didn’t have to do this, Caleb.” I climbed into his car and leaned across the console to kiss his cheek. Without his last minute assistance, I might’ve been walking to work in the surprise rain shower that had struck. It didn’t occur to me that it might’ve been weird until I’d already done it and it was too late. “Um... Sorry.”

“You’re kidding, right? Did you just apologize for kissing my cheek? You could climb over here and kiss every part of me and I wouldn’t complain, sweetheart.”

I flushed pleasantly. “I heard a rumor about you.”

His smile fell. “Shit.”

Laughing, I buckled my seatbelt and let my body relax into my seat. It molded to my body perfectly and was the most comfortable car seat I’d ever put my butt in. “I’ll tell you in a second. Just let me enjoy this for a minute.”

He drove away from my apartment silently and shifted in his seat as the silence stretched. “Look, I’m sure what you heard

was shitty. Most likely, it was true. I've never been into relationships before and I've pissed a lot of women off along the way. I've always tried to be honest about what I want, but-

I giggled. "Jack texted me and told me to say that. Now I know why."

Caleb's jaw muscles flexed. "Well, he played that one smart."

I reached over and rested my hand on his arm, hating the frown on his face. "If I was able to have a relationship right now, Caleb, I wouldn't judge you for your past. You're sweet to me and you make me laugh. You woke up early to take me to work, just because. Plus, you kiss like a god. Those are the things that matter."

He stopped at a red light and turned to face me. Instead of gloating about the god comment, he looked serious. "You'd be different. You'd absolutely wreck me, Olive."

My breath caught in my throat. After days of only hearing from the guys in text form, being in front of Caleb was almost gutting in how beautiful he was. His normally playful blue eyes were serious as they moved to my mouth.

"I would never want to wreck you, Caleb." I leaned towards him, drawn to him like a moth to flame. "Don't let me be different."

A horn blared behind us and we slid apart, the moment broken. Caleb slipped back into his happy personality easily

and by the time he parked outside of Jolly Pines, I'd laughed so hard I thought I was going to pee in his fancy car seat.

I glanced up at the building and still felt a pang of guilt for missing work before. Of course, Jerry was fine with me not coming in, but I still felt bad. I didn't like flaking on my responsibilities.

When Caleb got out of the car with me, I tilted my head at him and raised my eyebrows. "What are you doing?"

He met me at the front of the car and slid his hands into my hair, lowering his mouth to mine in a fierce kiss. My purse slipped out of my hand as he tipped my head back and kissed me deeper. When he pulled back, his eyes were dark blue orbs of fire. "Too fucking late, Olive."

I was different. I tried to hide the selfish smile that wanted to twist my mouth. It wasn't fair to take from him what I couldn't give back.

"Go ahead and feel special. I know that you're not ready to date right now. You've said it a dozen times and we're stubbornly choosing to keep trying anyway. I'm just getting my foot in the door for when you *are* ready." He pressed his lips to mine again in a lingering kiss. When he pulled away, it felt like neither of us wanted to.

"Little Kitty! We need you in here! Bring your boyfriend! The Trashed Twins are demanding that they be allowed to model for the art classes!" Kitty faked a gag. "Save us all!"

I giggled like an idiot and grabbed my purse. “I have to go. I’m sorry!”

“She said bring your boyfriend. I don’t see anyone else around so I’m coming.” Caleb rested his hand between my shoulder blades and laughed. “Did she call you Little Kitty?”

“That’s Kitty. She was Jerry’s assistant before me. Now I’m Little Kitty to everyone in these walls.” I shot him a look. “If it gets out, I know where the leak is, Caleb.”

“I’ll keep your secret at a cost.” He opened the door for me and immediately, all sense of whatever he was saying was lost in the chaos. The last thing I heard from him was a shouted swear as he dodged a bra.

I approached Barb and Brenda, who were both naked and trying their best to crawl onto the front desk. Fortunately, it was too high for them to get on. Unfortunately, the views of them trying were expansive.

“What the hell, ladies?” I raised my voice to be heard over the ruckus of the art class participants arguing. It seemed some of them wanted nude models. Others did not.

Brenda turned to me and tried to straighten her Cher wig. “Little Kitty! Where have you been? Help us talk some sense into these prudes!”

Helen, a woman severely out of place at Jolly Pines if you only took in her pearls and cardigans, wagged her finger at Brenda. “I’m not a prude, you old bat! I just don’t want to lose the vision I have left trying to paint those bags you call tits!”

Barb had a full head of red curls and her wig seemed to be holding up okay as she flopped the one leg she'd gotten on the counter off and turned on Helen. "You take that back! We've got the perkier tits in this place, if you don't count Little Kitty."

Jerry cleared her throat. "And me?"

Barb stopped and for a few demented seconds, we all seemed to lose ourselves in looking from boob to boob. Finally, Barb shrugged. "Fine. It's Little Kitty, Jerry, and then Brenda and me."

Hank, a man old enough to be Barb and Brenda's father, hobbled forward on his walker. "If you're going to assign a ranking, we need to see the boobies and vote."

"Oh, go stick your willie in a pencil sharpener, Hank!" Helen patted my shoulder. "No one tries to see Little Kitty's boobies and gets away with it."

Caleb appeared next to me, his inner clown sensing his chance to create more chaos. "No one?"

I slapped his stomach and tried to inch my way in front of him, hoping maybe no one noticed him by some miracle. "Can we get on with art class now?"

"Oh, my. God is real, Barb. Look at him." Brenda fanned herself, not caring that the motion sent her boobs flying around.

"Oh, I'm looking. If I was looking any harder, you'd have to pick my eyes off the floor." Barb inched closer. "Are *you* the

model for today's class?"

Helen clutched her pearls. "Please, god, say yes."

"What's he got that I don't?" Hank grumbled to the backs of all the women he'd been previously speaking to as they all inched closer to Caleb. "Youth is fleeting!"

Caleb gripped my hips and firmly wedged himself behind me. "Little Kitty?"

I scoffed and turned on him. "You don't get to call me that. And for that, I'm going to have to agree. You should be the model for today's art class."

Jerry swooped in and put a protective arm around Caleb. They were around the same size and Caleb seemed shocked to be eye to eye with a woman for a moment. "No one touches the talent! You know the rules!"

Caleb stammered. "I-I'm not a model. I was just dropping Olive off."

"You had time to suck her face in the parking lot, honey, so you've got time to sit here for a few minutes. Do it for Little Kitty. If you leave now, this place is going to erupt in fist fights."

He looked back and narrowed his eyes at me. "Go on a date with me."

I put my hands on my hips and laughed. "Caleb!"

He grinned and I swear I heard the whole room moan. "Go on a date with me and I'll model."

Barb grabbed my arm. “Say yes, girl, or I’m likely to die right here on you.”

“Fine! Yes!” I covered my face with my hands and laughed.
“This place is a bad influence!”

22

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*****Olive*****

The art room at Jolly Pines had never been so silent. Caleb had just walked into the room and arranged himself on the padded table the models often posed on. He'd kept his pants on, but they rode so low on his hips that every one of his abs were on display. He hooked his thumb through his belt loop and leveled his stare on me. The smile that stretched his lips was breathtaking and the playful crinkle of his eyes made me feel like we were alone in the room, with him slowly teasing me.

“Oh, they’re doing it.” Barb whispered loudly to Brenda and elbowed her. “He’s practically mounting her with his eyes!”

Caleb’s eyes widened and his cheeks turned pink. I was amazed at seeing him blush, too amazed to be embarrassed myself.

Jerry sat in a chair at the front of the room and tapped a pen to a pad of paper she was holding. “While everyone else gets started drawing, I thought I’d ask you a few questions. Just stay in that position and answer me without moving. Okay?”

I noticed the doorway to the art room filling up as even more women came to see the new male model. I almost felt bad for Caleb, but he was just wild enough to be having fun.

“What are your intentions with Little Kitty?” Jerry glanced back at me when I choked. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re pretty fond of her already.”

Caleb’s eyes moved to mine again and he smiled. “She grows on people pretty fast. My intentions are pure. *Ish*. I want to take her on a date and see if she’ll agree to several more and then maybe keep doing that.”

“Where are you going to take her on the date she agreed to today?”

He bit his lip and I could read the dirty thoughts all over his face. When Jerry cleared her throat, he blushed again. “Dinner?”

Kitty appeared at my side, showing up out of nowhere. “Dinner, huh?”

Jerry tapped her notepad harder. “I do believe you have impure intentions with our Little Kitty. She deserves a good time, though, so we’ll allow it.”

Barb and Brenda cheered over the sound of my groaning. “Little Kitty’s going to get laid!”

Helen laughed along. “I hope she’s good enough in bed to have him come back around. This is the best art class I’ve ever taken.”

“Well, Little Kitty, I do believe you are as good as laid.” Kitty patted my cheek and winked. “Enjoy it while you can, honey. I swear, if I still had the moisture of a young woman, I’d rule the world.”

“Kitty!” I let out a shocked laugh and shook my head. “Everyone here is nuts.”

“Why do you think you fit in so well, honey?” She hugged me tight and then held me at arm’s length. “I have a rhinestone set that will blow his mind. You want to try it on?”

“Kitty, your boobs are just a bit larger than mine.”

She smiled coyly. “I never said the set involved a bra.”

After art class, Barb and Brenda pulled their clothes back on and dragged Caleb to lunch with them. I only slightly feared for his safety, but I had other stuff to do around the grounds so I couldn’t save him. I worked through my lunch and was heading to Jerry’s office when I heard a commotion in the game room. Fearing a couple of the men were trying to fight again, I hurried inside and what I found made me want to laugh and cry happy tears at the same time.

Caleb was sitting at a table full of old men, yelling just as animatedly as everyone else as they rolled dice. The gambling wasn’t great, but the men did that with, or without Caleb. I was happily surprised he hadn’t left and even happier to see him having such a good time with the people I’d already grown to care about. They clearly loved him, too. As I leaned against the doorway, there were high-fives and taunts exchanged as if they’d been gambling together for years.

Caleb glanced over and grinned when he spotted me. Sliding his change to the middle of the table, he didn't take his eyes off me. "My date's here, boys. I'll see you next week, same time. Try not to spend all your money before then."

I shook my head and grinned up at him when he came to a stop just in front of me. "Gambling with my residents, Caleb? Really?"

He gripped my waist and leaned in so his mouth brushed the shell of my ear as he spoke. "This place is raging with hormones, sweetheart. I feel like this whole day has been foreplay and I'm dying a little."

I pressed my cheek against his and gripped his shirt in my hands. "I hate that I know exactly what you mean."

"What time do you get off?"

"Now. I just need to let Jerry know I'm leaving."

"What time do we need to pick Jesse up?"

My heart fluttered but I shoved it down, beneath the raging hormones. "Today is his late day. He stays until four for bike club."

Muttering a curse, he leaned back and pressed his forehead to mine. "That's only an hour from now. Next time..."

My pulse quickened and I gripped his hand in mine, making a spur of the moment decision that I never would've made in my life before the guys. "Come with me. We need to talk."

Caleb's growl of approval spurred me on. His hand didn't slip from mine as I hurried to the staircase at the back of the rec building. There was a storage area upstairs that no one ever used. I glanced back to make sure no one was looking and then we were rushing upstairs. I pulled him to the back corner of the open space, a private area blocked off by a few forgotten game tables.

As soon as I turned to face Caleb, he pinned me to the wall and kissed me like he'd die if he didn't. I wrapped my arms around his neck and gasped into his kiss when he lifted me off my feet. He kissed across my jaw and sucked the skin under my ear, ripping a quiet moan from my mouth. His hands cupped my ass and stroked every part of me he could reach. When he filled his hands with my breasts, he let out a gravel-filled groan against my ear.

"Fuck, Olive." His ragged voice was like a prayer and I knew I had to stop him. When I put my hands over his and gently lowered them, he frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I kissed Andrew and had sex with Jack." I blurted the words out and then reacted like he'd already reacted by calling me names. I pulled away from him and rubbed my hands up and down my arms. "Before you guys, I'd only had sex a handful of times in my entire life, with two different guys. So, I'm not... I'm not normally someone who sleeps around. I don't know why it's so easy with y'all. I slept with your best friend and can't be in a relationship, even if that was what you wanted."

He grabbed my arm and pulled me to his chest. “Okay, Olive.”

“Did you hear me? I slept with Jack.”

“I know, Olive. I don’t care.” He licked his lips and looked away. “Okay, I care. That’s okay, though. I think I’m happy to take whatever you’re giving right now.”

I wanted him so when his hands found my breasts again, I didn’t stop him. The fire ignited just as hot and it was like I’d never stopped us.

23

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*****Olive*****

I fisted his hair. “*Caleb.*”

Wedging his hand between us, he tugged up the bottom of my dress until it was bunched between our stomachs and pushed my panties aside before sinking two thick fingers into me. Pressing his mouth to mine, he swallowed the sounds I made and fed his own back to me.

“Caleb, I need you in me. *Please.*” Dragging my nails over his scalp, I whimpered when he pulled his fingers free.

He spun me around so I was facing the wall and I heard his zipper lower seconds before his tip was pressing into my core. “Look at me.”

I looked over my shoulder and lifted my mouth to his. He wrapped himself around me the same way he had when we’d kissed the first time. With one hand on my throat, he kissed me as he thrust his full length deep. My hands fisted on the wall at the sting of being stretched, but Caleb pushed his other hand

into my panties and tapped his fingers over my clit. I pressed my hips into his, ready for more.

Caleb growled against my lips as he pulled out and thrust deep again. “Fucking hell, Olive.”

Our eyes met and held while he fucked me, with his pace increasing until we were both panting. I pressed my fist to my mouth to stay quiet as I got closer to my release. He swore and buried his face against my neck as my first wave of orgasm clenched down on his length. I cried out as pleasure rolled through my body and focused on his fingers on my clit and his shaft piercing into me over and over.

Caleb growled out my name and thrust into me harder. When he buried himself as deep as he could get and I felt him coming in me, I clutched at his arm and let the end of my orgasm stretch on. We clung to each other, with me pressed between his large body and the wall. My mind felt like peace as I slowly came down.

Stroking my throat, Caleb kissed my neck and jaw, his touch sending ripples of warmth through me. “Consider me wrecked,” he murmured against my skin.

I reached back and ran my hand through his curls. “If you’re wrecked, I’m totaled.”

He lifted his gaze to mine, his eyes holding a fiery emotion that made my heart flutter. “Does Jesse have a bike?” he asked softly, his voice a stark contrast to the intensity in his eyes.

Surprised by the sudden shift, I snapped my face around to look at him, only to be met by his steady gaze. He growled lowly. “Just answer the question, sweetheart.”

I gasped as he eased out of me, the loss of contact momentarily disorienting. Quickly recovering, I turned to face him, our eyes locking. “No. But, Caleb, that’s fine. He uses the extra ones at school.”

He was silent, staring down at his still half hard dick. Seeing it streaked with our mixed come made me blush and look away, but Caleb’s next words jerked my gaze back to him. “I forgot protection. I... I’m sorry, Olive. I’ve never...”

I didn’t want to think about how irresponsible I’d been. To not even have a conversation about it was stupid of me.

“If you get pregnant, I’ll take care of you.” His tone was so serious that he might as well have been telling me he was dying. “I don’t know shit about kids, Olive, but I wouldn’t leave you to do it by yourself.”

I pushed my hair out of my eyes and shook my head. “I’m on birth control, Caleb. It’s okay.”

He blew out a short breath. “I should’ve been careful with you. You deserved more than what I just gave you.”

Cupping his face, I looked up at him and met his heavy gaze. “You gave me exactly what I wanted and needed. I was dying for you to touch me, Caleb. This was good.”

“Still...”

“I’m not exactly being careful with you, either.” I pressed my face into his chest. “This is all so crazy. I don’t know what I’m doing, Caleb.”

“You’re having fun, sweetheart. Let that be what it is for now.” He stroked my hair and I heard him swallow. “I want you, Olive, but I’m not going to pressure you into anything. I’m here, though. And I’m going to buy Jesse a bike.”

“Caleb, no. I don’t want to take. If you want to do something for Jesse, come over and hang out with him.”

“Oh.” He nodded, like he was encouraging himself. “Okay, yeah. I can do that. Normally Jack and Andrew are there to act as a buffer, but I’m going to be in charge of a huge corporation in a few years. I can handle hanging out with a kid.”

“He already likes you. He mentions you at least once every night at bedtime. We read different books together and there’s one about a...” I laughed and then slapped my hand over my mouth.

“What’s the fucking book about, Olive?” He gave me a look that said he knew he wasn’t going to like what I said next.

“It’s about a socially awkward robot named Robert. Robert goes to class and doesn’t know how to talk to the other kids.” I was trying not to laugh so hard that I ended up snorting.

Caleb groaned and tried not to laugh but he cracked. Through laughter, he pointed at me. “Do not tell Andrew or Jack.”

I held up three fingers. “Scouts honor.”

He held me close and rested his chin on top of my head. “Let me take you and Jesse out for dinner tonight.”

My instinct to say no was halted by his hand over my lips. I smiled into his palm and looked to see him grinning at me.

“I knew you were going to say no right away. Just think about it.” Kissing my forehead, he breathed out my name so gently. “Olive... Go to dinner with me.”

I nodded. I wanted to. Jesse would love it. Why shouldn't I? I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him tight. With my mouth uncovered, I groaned into his chest. “What are you doing to me?”

24

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*****Olive*****

“I hate this place, Liv. I want to be chased by three hotties who buy my son bikes and make me orgasm like never before.” Lydie groaned into the phone. “It’s not fair. You’ve been keeping your goods locked up tight for over half a decade and now they somehow have magical powers of attraction. I’ve been out here, practicing and making an effort, and it’s like there’s a sign on my coochie that screams for men to stay away.”

I’d been in the middle of wiping after peeing and her outburst made me freeze. She was only a year younger than me but I still felt like she was my *baby* sister. It’d been hard enough for me to admit to her what was happening in my life, but hearing that she was active blew my mind.

“Liv? You there?”

I made a choked sound and sat back down on the toilet. “My baby sister has been *out here*?”

“Oh, don’t even start with me. I’m not even a full year younger than you. You would’ve been *out here*, getting your sexy on, if you hadn’t been raised by Mom and Dad.”

“What? You were raised by them, too.”

“Yeah, but when I was old enough to start thinking more about sex, everything happened with you and they stopped preaching at us about abstinence. That ship had sailed. I got to listen to lots of screaming about protection and babies.” She sighed. “That’s actually really sad.”

“I’m sorry, Lydie.”

“Oh, fuck off.” She laughed when I gasped. “You’ve never done a thing wrong in your life, Olive. You’re an angel. Even your wild sexual exploits are sickeningly domestic and... caring. Again, one of them bought Jesse a bike! *After* he made you come.”

“Don’t say domestic. I told them all that I’m not doing relationships. They know.”

“They hang out with your son, Liv. They *like* your son. I like him, but he’s my nephew. I have to. Jesse can be a little shit and they like him without having to.”

I scowled at the phone. “Don’t say it like that. You don’t just like Jesse because you have to. You know he’s-”

“That kid rules my life, Liv. You know that. He knows that.” She grew quiet. “I miss him. You, too, a little.”

Tears filled my eyes but it made me laugh at the same time. “I’m on the toilet. We *would* have an emotional moment while

I'm sitting on the pot.”

“Say you miss me, bitch, or I'm going to get a complex!” She sniffed. “And get off the toilet. That's disgusting. Imagine if your hotties could see you now. They'd think you let yourself go.”

“I do miss you. You know I miss you. I miss you so much that I'm going to go against my better judgment and beg you to come here this weekend. I have a little extra money and I can pay for the bus ticket. I guess it's a big football game, or something. I don't know. The guys invited me and Jesse and I don't want to go alone.” I smiled when she scoffed. “And I really miss you and want to see you.”

“Fine. I guess I could come to your college town where all the guys seem to be smoking hot and lusting for Oakley blood.” She sighed wistfully. “I'm going to make sure I shave and wax everything before I come. You want to pay for that, too?”

I gagged. “Keep it up and I'm going to put the child leash on you, too.”

“Tell me you're not going to break out the child leash in public, Liv!”

“It's supposed to be a huge crowd! I don't want to take any chances. Jesse's got your devious mind sometimes and I don't know what people might be looking for a beautiful kid to steal. He's leashed or we're not going. Especially after the locker room incident.”

Lydie let out a frustrated growl. “That kid got you laid! You should be thanking him, not leashing him like a dog. I’m coming and I’m going to save his future. With you at the helm, that kid’s going to need more therapy than either of us will ever be able to afford. Wait... Do you think your new boyfriend with the bike money has therapy money, too?”

“I’m hanging up on you now.” I did just that and had just finished washing my hands when she called back. “Yes?”

She grumbled. “I love you. Tell Jesse I love him. Don’t tell him I’m coming, though. I want to surprise him.”

“You mean scare him.”

“Same difference.”

I shook my head at her antics. “Fine. I love you, too. Jesse loves you more.”

We’d just hung up when someone knocked on the front door. A bolt of excitement ran through me since no one knew where I lived except for the guys. Even as I tried to tamp that excitement down, I found myself grinning into the mirror as I made sure I looked okay before practically skipping to the door.

I’d been so busy with work and class and Jesse that I hadn’t seen them in a few days. Jerry’s niece had started driving me to and from work as part of her punishment for sneaking into a neighbor’s farm to tip cows. Her name was Terri and she was a little rough around the edges, but she listened to good music and she drove a vintage pickup truck that made me wish I was

a flower child in the sixties. We'd become friendly with each other instantly, even though I was part of her punishment.

I pulled the door open, huge smile in place, and it immediately slipped away when I saw Taylor standing on the other side of my door. He had his arm braced on the top frame of the door and a look on his face that made me think he was trying to be seductive, but it was a flop for me.

I frowned. "What are you doing here?"

He bit his lip and smiled. "I just wanted to come by and check on you to see how you're doing. You seemed a little low the other night."

My lip naturally curled up like I'd smelled something dead. "What are you doing? Stop it."

"What do you mean, Livie? I'm just checking on my favorite girl." He at least had the good sense to stay on his side of the door.

"Gross, Taylor. I'm not your favorite girl and you're not even a guy I want to speak to unless it pertains to our son. How'd you get my address?" I knew the guys wouldn't have given it to him. They seemed to dislike him almost as much as I did.

"I have my ways. When I want something, I get it." He stood up straight, ditching whatever posing he'd been committed to. "You wanted me to make an effort, babe. Here I am."

I shook my head. "No. Just no, Taylor. I wanted you to make an effort with Jesse. Yet, you came here, uninvited, when

Jesse's in school and you haven't asked about him once."

"Um. How is the kid?" Rubbing his jaw, he smiled. "Starting to take after his dad with the ladies?"

My hands itched to punch him. "Go away."

"Come on, Olive. How am I supposed to show up for Jesse when you act like this? What's your deal? I'm here and it's still not good enough for you."

"Oh, so you *do* know his name!" I started to push the door closed but he put his hand out to stop me. "Go away, Taylor."

"What's going on with you and Jack? What are you telling him? That asshole said something to me about being a better father. How does he even know I have a kid?" Taylor's happy-go-stupid smile faded into something uglier. He was angry that he wasn't getting his way.

I hadn't known Jack spoke to Taylor. After seeing the anger and hurt in Jack's eyes as he held Jesse that day at school, it shouldn't have surprised me. "Was he wrong? You *should* be a better father."

"What business does he have knowing about it?" Raising his voice, Taylor still blocked me from shutting the door. "Are you fucking him?"

I saw red. I opened my mouth to rip him a new one but it was Andrew's voice I heard instead of my own.

25

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*****Olive*****

“**W**hy does it look like you’re stopping Olive from shutting her door? And why the fuck are you raising your voice at her?” Andrew shifted his gaze to mine and nodded. “You okay, Olive?”

I pushed past Taylor to stand in front of Andrew. I was glad he was there but also nervous. Taylor was a dickhead and while Andrew was a really kind guy, there was an edge to his voice that made me think he’d like to punch Taylor. “I’m okay. I’m glad you’re here.”

“What the hell are you doing here, Walker?” Walking towards us, Taylor glared over my head at his high school best friend. “Did Jack send you over to run his errands?”

Andrew’s smile was a warning. “You should go.”

I turned around and pressed my back into Andrew. He wrapped his arm around me and held me in a loose grip. “Taylor, you really need to leave. Unless you’re here to see Jesse, you shouldn’t be here. Matter of fact, I don’t want you

here at all. You have my number. You can message me when you want to see Jesse and we can meet on campus.”

His eyes narrowed in on Andrew’s arm and he let out a bitter laugh. “Are you fucking kidding me? No wonder you were such a little bitch senior year about her. How long have you wanted to go where I’ve already been?”

I felt Andrew’s body stiffen and pressed into him harder. “Goodbye, Taylor.”

“What’s that? Is that a fucking *game*? Wow.” Taylor moved closer and Andrew swept me behind him in one smooth motion. “You want my scraps in every way, huh?”

Andrew’s hands shook as he stood nose to nose with Taylor. “Scraps? She’s always been too good for you and she always will be. Jesse deserves better. Unfortunately, you’re his father and for that reason alone, I’m not going to touch you. You should stop pushing, though, Taylor. You’re going to catch one of us on a bad day and you’re going to embarrass yourself.”

Taylor turned his vitriol to me again. “You’ve been letting random men hang around my son? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I wedged myself between the two of them and pushed Taylor away. I angled him away from the front door and tried to wrangle Andrew inside with just my ass and sheer will. “Message me if you want to see Jesse. That’s all we have to talk about, Taylor.”

“Stay the fuck away from my kid, Andrew. You and your boy, Jack. Stay away from Olive, too. You’re sick for even trying to go there.”

Andrew grunted but let me push him inside the apartment. “Doesn’t look like that’s happening, Taylor.”

I slammed the door shut and locked it before pressing my forehead to it and groaning. I was embarrassed and angry. I couldn’t believe the audacity of Taylor. To stake some kind of claim on me like he had an ounce of right. To suggest that I was a bad mother for letting Jesse be around the guys... I hated him. I wanted nothing more than to never see him again. In my anger, I didn’t care that it was selfish. I just wanted him out of my life.

Andrew swore and scooped me into his arms. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have stopped by without calling or messaging. I just found this game and wanted to drop it off for Jesse.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pointed to the living room couch. “You didn’t do anything wrong. When I heard knocking, I was hoping it was one of you. Then I saw Taylor and wanted to punch myself for not checking to see who it was before opening the door.”

Sitting on the couch, Andrew arranged me on his lap so I was straddling him like it was something we’d always done. “If Jack hears that you just opened the door like that, he’ll have a stroke.”

“Then we won’t tell him. Right?” I smiled and toyed with his shirt. “I’m glad you showed up. I hate seeing Taylor and he

didn't seem inclined to leave until you were here.”

“Does he scare you?”

I sighed and shook my head. “No. I don't think he'd ever do anything to me. His style was never force. It was tricking, begging, and coercing, but never force.”

Andrew remained silent as his hands tightened on my thighs. He stared towards the door like he was contemplating chasing Taylor down.

“I'm fine, Andrew. You showed up and he left. Everything's okay.” I gently turned his face back to mine. “Can you tell me about the game?”

He cleared his throat and shook his head. “I need to admit something first.”

“What?”

“The game was only part of the reason I came by. I wanted to see you.” He picked up the game from the cushion next to us and held it up. “The game is pretty neat, though. The lady at the store said kids who play board games with their families learn faster or something like that. I figured it might be cool.”

I sat back on his thighs and just stared at him. He was this massive man with muscles on top of muscles and he looked like he could toss cars for fun but he'd talked to a lady about a game for my son. I melted. “You... That is the sweetest thing I've ever heard, Andrew. Jesse will love playing it. If it's okay with you, I think he'd love playing it with you.”

“I was hoping for an invite.” He smiled and shrugged. “The kid’s pretty cool. You’re a really great mom, Olive.”

I glanced at the watch on his wrist. I didn’t need to leave to pick Jesse up from school for another two hours. “You said you stopped by to see me, too.”

“After that interaction with Taylor, I don’t want to admit that I showed up when I knew Jesse wouldn’t be here in hopes of a few minutes alone with you.” He rested his head on the back of the couch and smiled. “Don’t get the impression that the guys are bragging, but we can read each other after being best friends for over four years. I know that they’ve each managed to spend more time with you than I have. I’m not tapping out, though, Olive. I’ve crushed on you for years and I’m not a quitter.”

My cheeks heated. “So, you know I’ve slept with both of them?”

He nodded. “And I don’t care. We talked about it, Olive, and the choice is always going to be yours.”

“How?” I frowned. “I slept with *one* guy in high school and became the town whore. Now, I sleep with your best friends and you still want me? College can’t be that different.”

He pulled me flush against him so our middles were as tightly together as they could be while still clothed. “I’m not a highschool boy, Olive. I’m an adult. You slept with my best friends who are also really great guys and who seem to like you a lot. Not as much as me, obviously, but still. We asked you to take the time to see which one of us you wanted more.”

“And I’ve consistently said I can’t date anyone with the way my life is right now.”

“And we’ve consistently said sure, okay, and gone about our lives.” He grinned. “We’re stubborn, Olive. We’ll have hope until the very end.”

I smoothed my hands over his chest. “Everyone always thought you were better looking than Taylor. They were right. I had a hard time looking at you when I first got to the high school. I’d blush every time and I could never think of what to say to you, so I just didn’t say anything.”

“You can look at me now, though.”

“I still feel my insides buzz when I catch you looking at me. A part of me is still shy and terrified I’ll make a fool of myself.” I moved my hands up to his shoulders and leaned into him. “I don’t think you’d judge me if I did, though.”

26

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*****Andrew*****

I forced myself to keep my hands on her thighs and not move them anywhere else. I wasn't going to push her or lead her in any way. I wanted her so bad that it physically hurt but I could wait. "I'd never judge you, Olive."

She climbed off my lap and stood in front of me. Reaching up to her hair, she removed the clip and let the silky strands fall all around her shoulders and chest. "I wish you had been my first. You would've made it special."

Olive always wore interesting dresses that did their best to hide her body. She had one for every occasion. She said it was to get ready for teaching, but I wondered if it had something to do with her past, too, if maybe she was hiding herself from the world. She was rarely in anything that showed her chest or knees so when she pushed her dress off of one shoulder while holding my gaze, I felt like the world ceased to exist outside of her living room.

She pushed the other sleeve down and didn't stop until the top half of the dress was bunched at her waist. The plain white

bra she wore was thin and her nipples peeked through, dark and hard. “You’re watching me like I’m a work of art.”

Before I could tell her that she was, she pushed the dress over her hips and let it fall to her feet. Her white panties had a damp patch that made the cotton cling to her lower lips. Her curves were mouthwatering. I wanted to bury my face in the softness of her thighs and fill my hands with every other part of her.

“I’m still a little self-conscious about my body. But it’s amazing what a few good men can do for your confidence.” She lifted a shoulder in a shrug and smiled while reaching behind her to unhook her bra. “Your eyes are seductive. Did you know that?”

A roll of thunder from outside caught her attention but I wanted it back on me. “Just a little thunderstorm, Olive. Tell me more about my seductive eyes.”

The sound of rain was loud inside the apartment as it started pouring outside. Olive tilted her head and a slow smile showed her dimple. “I love the sound of rain. Jesse isn’t afraid of storms, thankfully. I’d hate to have to redress and leave right now.”

Uneasiness spread up my spine. I hadn’t even known that was a possibility. I sat forward on the couch and gripped my hands together between my knees. “You’d see a grown man cry.”

She pressed her forearm over her chest while shrugging out of her bra. It fell to the floor with her dress and then she took a

deep breath before dropping her arms to her sides. Round, full breasts with pink nipples filled my vision and I licked my lips. She was perfect.

“Bedroom eyes.” She gripped the sides of her panties. “Your eyes always look like you’re close to coming. They make me think of sitting on your lap and stroking you between us. You lean your head back and do a little exhale thing when I’m on your lap and I can see it in my head with you looking at me stroking you. They’re seductive, Andrew. I can’t look you in the eye without feeling a flutter at the bottom of my stomach.”

I was harder than I’d ever been. “Come here, Olive.”

She pushed her panties down her long legs and stepped out of her pile of clothes. Moving to stand in front of me, she dropped to her knees and gripped my thighs. “I can’t give you my first time. I can give you a different first, though.”

My blood rushed through my body so fast that I could hear it behind my ears. I swallowed and tucked a finger under her chin to lift her face. “Olive...”

She moved her face and caught my finger in her mouth. She sucked it deep and cradled it on her tongue before slowly pulling her head back and letting it pop free. “I’ve never done it, but I get the idea. And I’m a quick learner. Tell me if something’s bad. Okay?”

My brain fizzled out as I stared down at her angelic face. All I could do was nod and stand up. I held my breath while she undid my pants and worked them down to my knees. My boxers followed and then my dick sprang free, jumping up to

slap my stomach. The little gasp from Olive drew a pained groan from me.

Her first touch made my knees weak. She wrapped her hand around the base of my dick and looked up at me with her green eyes dancing with desire. Seeing Olive Oakley needy for me was a sight I never wanted to forget. She smiled up at me, letting that lone dimple peek out, and then she leaned forward and delicately pressed a kiss to the head of my dick.

I didn't blink, didn't dare miss a thing as her tongue stole out and ran along the underside of me, from the base to the tip. I didn't even breathe when she opened her mouth and took my head in, sucking it like it was a fucking lollipop. "Jesus Christ."

Olive moved closer and wrapped both of her hands around the base of my cock while she took me deeper in her mouth. Her tongue never stopped moving and she started pumping her hands up and down the length she couldn't take into her mouth. The picture she made was out of my wildest fantasies and when she moaned, I wasn't sure I hadn't died and gone to heaven.

Burying my hands in her hair, I watched as her eyes stayed on mine even as she tried to take more than she could handle. Her gag sent a wave of pleasure down my spine and when she pulled back and giggled, I nearly lost it.

"Am I doing okay?" She licked her lips as she continued to stroke me.

I growled like a fucking animal when she lifted my dick and nibbled at the base. My hands fisted in her hair, pulling hard, but it just made her moan. “Do that again.”

She nibbled and then sucked before taking me back into her mouth and sucking. She was a natural at knowing just what to do and I felt a sudden, insane, urge to demand she only ever suck my dick. First and only were words that blared through my head.

I knew I couldn't take much more of her mouth without coming too fast so I eased her head back and met her gaze. “You're too good at that.”

She let me pull her to her feet but she kept her hand on my dick. “Can you get undressed now?”

I got naked faster than I ever had and pulled her back onto my lap on the couch. Positioning her closer to my knees, I spread her thighs on either side of mine and had her hold onto my shoulders to balance as I took my time looking at her. Her pussy was beautiful and slick with her desire and I could see her clit peeking out, begging for attention.

I flicked my gaze back up to hers and groaned. “We don't have enough time for all the things I want to do to this pretty pussy, Olive. I could spend an entire day with my face between your thighs.”

She gasped when I dragged my finger through her wetness and brought it to my mouth to suck clean. “Andrew!”

Her taste blossomed on my tongue and I caved. I flipped her over on her back and settled with my shoulders stretching her thighs wider. I unfastened my watch and tossed it on the couch next to her head. “Don’t let me make us late picking up Jesse.”

27

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*****Olive*****

By Andrew's second pass of his tongue up the entire length of my sex, I knew he loved what he was doing. The sounds he made when he spread my lower lips and speared his tongue into me made it clear. He didn't just eat; he devoured. It took me no time before I was coming with a chant of his name like a prayer. He didn't slow down, though. He continued to lick and suck at me until I was a gasping mess. My orgasms ran together until tears leaked from my eyes and he still tried to keep going.

Staring down at me with his face wet with my juices, he thrust two and then three fingers in me. "I could eat you morning, noon, and night, Olive. Fuck, I love the taste of you. I love the way you feel gripping my fingers."

I wanted him inside me. "Enough, Andrew. I need to feel you in me."

He sat up and gripped himself. "I'm clean, Olive. I've never been with anyone without a condom, but I need to feel you."

I shivered at his confession and nodded. "I'm clean and on birth control."

He pushed the tip of his shaft inside me and swore. "Look at us, Olive. Watch me sink inside and fill you up."

Watching him slowly thrust inside me while feeling the stretch made everything that much more intense. His tan thighs between my pale ones and his big hands gripping my smaller ones, he thrust himself fully into me and made a sound at the back of his throat that was pure male pleasure.

On my back on the couch, I watched him as he lowered himself over me and braced one hand on the arm of the couch over my head and cupped my breast in his other hand.

His throat worked with a hard swallow when I lifted my thighs and squeezed his hips between them. "I've thought about being here a thousand times, Olive, but I had no idea..."

I stretched my mouth up to his and wrapped my arms around his back. "Kiss me."

Andrew met my mouth with his own and gave me what I needed. His tongue danced with mine while he stroked his hand down my side and cupped my thigh. I felt each fingertip dig into my skin with his slow withdrawal and when he sank deep into me again, I knew we were both lost. He breathed out a moan into my mouth and I dragged my hands up his back.

"You feel so good."

He pulled out and thrust again. "You're so hot and tight, Olive. I've never felt anything so fucking right."

I could feel him holding himself back and scratched my nails over his shoulders. “You can give me more. You won’t hurt me.”

Sitting up, he lifted my legs over his shoulders and wrapped his arm around my thighs. The position made him feel even bigger inside me but when he pressed himself deeper, the new angle stole my breath. “Fuck, Olive. I want to watch you play with your nipples. Show me how you like them touched.”

Heat rolled through me as I did what he said. Cupping both breasts, I pinched my nipples and tugged them just the way I liked. Andrew dropped his hand to my lower stomach and stretched his thumb out to roll over my clit. Arching my back, I pinched harder and cried out when he thrust deep again.

“I can feel your pussy clamp down each time you pinch harder. You feel so fucking good around me.”

He thrust faster and I sank my teeth into my lip to stay as quiet as possible. It was like he was chasing my screams, though. When I managed to quiet down, he thrust harder and drew out breathy shouts.

Sweat coated his chest and face as he took me hard and fast. “I want to feel you come on my cock, Olive.”

I grabbed his arm and held on tight as my body hurtled towards my release. It was like even my blood wanted to rise to meet his needs. I gasped his name and lifted my hips as an offering to him that he accepted with a look that melted my brain. I felt my muscles stiffen as his shaft forced through my tightening walls and my pleasure exploded.

Andrew dropped his head back and swore. “Jesus, Olive, you’re sucking the come out of me.”

I felt him coming in me and shook with wave after wave of pleasure. The aftershocks made him groan as we both came back down to earth. I went limp under him and grunted when he lowered my legs and they tingled. My eyes drifted closed until Andrew pulled out.

I gasped and jerked my gaze to his. He was still leaning over me, his eyes on my sex where I could feel his seed filling me so full that some of it escaped.

“I think it’s all downhill for me after this, Olive. You’re my peak.” He lifted his eyes to mine and shot me a crooked grin while smearing his come over my lower lips and thighs. “You’re the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I was spread out in front of him in such a lewd way, but he made me feel beautiful. I stretched my arms over my head and smiled at the way his eyes flicked from my chest to my core. “You should be tired of looking by now.”

He pushed two fingers into me and then painted more of his come over my stomach. “Never.”

I laid still as he continued his artwork and coated my nipples and chest, all the way up to my lips. When he held his fingers in front of my mouth, I opened for him and tasted his release, anyone’s release, for the first time.

“You’re going to get yourself fucked again.” He reached up and grabbed his watch from next to my head. His eyes

narrowed when he looked at it. “Fuck. There’s no time.”

I looked down at his semi-hard length and bit my lip. After glancing at his watch, I pushed him back on his back and settled between his thighs. “I’ll be fast.”

“Olive, you-” Andrew’s voice faded when I took him into my mouth.

28

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*****Olive*****

After a great shift at work, Terri stopped in front of my apartment and nodded to the truck double parked in front. “Who’s the asshole?”

I frowned and shrugged. “I’m not sure.” Although, I thought it might have been the truck I had seen Taylor in.

“Want me to wait until you get in?”

“It’s okay, Ter. It’s the middle of the day. I’m sure if it’s a serial killer, they’re just doing recon. I’ve got to get inside so I can get changed and pick up Jesse from school.”

She shook her head at me. “You fit right in with those nuts at Jolly Pines, you know that?”

I nodded. “I figured it out after the second day when Kitty told me so.”

She waved goodbye and drove away, and I instantly regretted not allowing her to wait when Taylor stepped out of the truck the second she was out of sight. I forced myself to remain neutral as I passed him.

“I came to see Jesse.” Taylor held up his hands and followed me to the door. “I don’t want to fight.”

I unlocked my door and paused before pushing it open. Turning to find Taylor hovering way too close to me, I sighed. “Taylor, it’s a school day. He’s in school for another hour.”

“I can wait.” He reached around me and pushed open my door. “I don’t mind.”

Wanting to get as far away from him as possible, I hurried into my apartment and figured once he saw the state of things, he’d run. Andrew and I had played the card game with Jesse the night before and last minute, Jesse had informed us about a project he was supposed to do. Instead of being frustrated that no one had mentioned anything to me, the three of us started a macaroni art project that had left the apartment in a state of chaos.

“I mind. I have to get changed and then leave to pick him up.” I dropped my purse on the kitchen counter next to a pile of uncooked noodles and more scattered to the floor.

“What the hell happened in here?” Taylor crossed his arms over his chest and made a face. “Does it always look like this?”

“No, sometimes it’s worse. *The Blob* comes out of our bathroom and we have to fight it back.” I rolled my eyes and turned around to see Taylor lowering himself onto the couch that I’d had sex with Andrew on the day before. Shame colored my cheeks and I quickly looked away.

“I can drive you to pick him up.”

That made me forget all about the shame. “What? You want to go together to pick Jesse up from school? Why?”

“You’ve been bitching at me to make an effort. This is me making an effort.” Leaning back on the couch and stretching his arms out along the back, he ran his eyes down my body. “Please tell me that you’re changing out of that school marm get up and into something remotely sexier.”

I didn’t dignify his second statement with a response. “This is your effort? No hidden agenda or intent?”

“What the fuck do you want from me, Olive? I’m skipping a lot of shit tonight in hopes of hanging out with our kid.”

I didn’t trust him or like him being near me, but if that’s what it took to get Jesse time with his dad, I’d deal with it. “Okay. Thank you. Jesse will be super excited to see you.”

“I figured we’d have dinner in tonight, but... Does this place have working appliances?” He waved his hand. “Nevermind. We’ll order in pizza. I brought my games so we can play.”

Breathing in slowly and forcing it out just as slowly, I shrugged. “You and Jesse can decide together what you’d like to do tonight.”

“Sure. Whatever.” He pulled out his phone and started texting. “Go ahead and do what you need to do. I don’t want to be late picking him up.”

Annoyance bit at me but I kept my mouth shut and shut and locked myself in my bedroom so I could change. Barely a few

seconds passed before I heard a light knock on my door. I gasped and gripped the dress I'd just ripped off to my chest. "What?"

"What's the deal with you and Andrew?"

"Can we talk about this later?" I hated the way my voice shook and the way I silently started searching for my phone. I hated even more the panic I felt when I realized I didn't have it.

"Just tell me."

I pulled the dress back on and tugged a pair of leggings on under it. "It's none of your business, Taylor."

"He's a prick, Olive. All three of those guys are." He knocked again. "Can you let me in so we can talk about this?"

I yanked open the door and slipped under his arm. I grabbed my purse from the counter, knocking the rest of the noodles onto the floor, and hurried to pull open the front door. Only then, when a little bit of the outside world felt like it was seeping in, did I feel like I could breathe again. Still, I walked to the front of his truck and wrapped my arms around myself.

Taylor walked out a minute later with a smile on his face. "Should I lock up?"

I nodded. "Please."

As he walked towards me, he looked at my outfit and frowned. "Did you add more clothes? Jesus, Olive. It's a hundred degrees out here."

Even as sweat pebbled over my lip, I shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“Whatever you say.” He unlocked his truck and nodded at it. “Get in.”

I reminded myself that it was for Jesse as I climbed into his front seat and buckled myself in. I rambled off directions and clenched my hands in my lap. “I don’t think we should talk about personal things between the two of us, Taylor.”

“Shit. You’re really bent out of shape about Andrew, huh?” He laughed. “I’m just trying to warn you. Andrew’s a player. He’s not the loser you remember from high school.”

“I don’t care. I just don’t want to discuss it with you.” I looked out at the campus and wished I was anywhere else. “The only thing we need to discuss is Jesse. Can we agree to that?”

“No.”

I stared at him in shock. “What the hell, Taylor?”

“You don’t make the rules. If I want to talk to you about Andrew or Jack or Caleb, I will.” He laughed. “You don’t just get everything you want. I’m here, making an effort like you asked. Once I’m here, though, I do what I want.”

“No, you don’t. Taylor, this isn’t a game. You’re a father.” I ran my hands through my hair and turned to face him. “You need to be here for Jesse. He needs his father. That doesn’t mean you can barge in and question my life and do whatever the hell you want to. There are boundaries.”

He shrugged. “You want me to spend time with the kid, or not?”

I pressed my fist to my mouth and looked out the window. I didn't know.

29

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*****Olive*****

“Jack’s pizza was better.” Jesse’s innocent statement brought a cloud over the living room.

Things hadn’t been completely smooth between Jesse and Taylor since we’d picked Jesse up at school, but Jesse was so excited to see him that he’d barreled straight through any awkwardness. Taylor had looked bored while Jesse showed him his favorite toys, but then he’d brought out his video games and they’d bonded over racing cars.

Taylor’s pizza wasn’t as good as Jack’s, though, and if Taylor’s face was any indicator, he was furious. He dropped his slice on his paper plate and frowned. “Well, Jack-”

“Does anyone need more to drink?” I stood up and pressed a fast kiss to the top of Jesse’s head. “Tell Taylor thank you for buying your pizza tonight. It was nice of him to do.”

Taylor stood up. “I’ll get my own. You stay here, Jesse.”

I cringed and moved into the kitchen with a sinking feeling in my stomach. I hated him being in my home. I wanted him

gone but I didn't trust what he'd say to Jesse if he took him out on his own. He had little to no morals.

Taylor stood next to me at the fridge and glared at me. "You're just letting random guys feed your kid? You don't know Jack. He tried to choke me after practice the other day. He's crazy."

I poured Jesse a little more milk and myself more water. "I'm not talking about it with you. Go back in and hang out with Jesse or you can leave. You're not here to hang out with me."

He used his body to corner me between the fridge door and fridge. "You're going to need to learn to play nice."

One second he was in front of me and the next he was on his knees, holding his throat and coughing. I looked down at my hand and saw it was still balled in a tight fist. I'd punched him in the throat. Maybe it would've been unfair to him if he hadn't been the reason my fight or flight response was so in tune.

I heard Jesse moving in the living room and bent down to grab Taylor's arm. I yanked him to his feet and glared up at him. "Go in there and play games with him or get the fuck out of my home. I don't want to hear a word about your throat, either. Don't corner women in their bedrooms while they're changing or in their kitchens while they're just trying to exist. Next time, I won't go easy on you."

He continued coughing but he backed away from me and shook his head. "You're crazy."

I nodded. “Remember that.”

The smile that crossed his face sent chills down my back. “I like it.”

A few moments later, I heard the game start back up in the living room. He was staying. I felt like throwing up. I leaned on the counter and took a few deep breaths.

“Mom! Can I have my milk?”

I shook myself out of my trance and grabbed the cup of milk. I just had to make it work. As long as Jesse was happy, I could handle Taylor. At least, I hoped so.

Another hour had passed with me standing just outside of the living room. I didn’t want to be around Taylor, but I was terrified of what he might put in my son’s head. When someone knocked on the door, I nearly jumped out of my skin. I was standing right next to it and I’d been lost in thought.

“Who is it?” Taylor called out to me without looking away from the game they were playing.

“Just keep playing.” I should’ve punched him harder. That was going to be something I said to myself a lot, I figured.

I pulled open the door and my heart fluttered. Standing on the other side were the guys. A smile stretched my lips until I heard Taylor’s voice come from the living room. Stepping out of the house, I pulled the door mostly shut behind me and looked up at their confused faces.

“What’s going on?” Andrew motioned at Taylor’s truck. “The three of us each had the same idea to come see you, but it

looks like someone else did, too.”

“He’s spending time with Jesse.” I rubbed my eyes and shook my head. “You guys have no idea how happy I am to see you and how much I wish I could invite you in.”

Jack gripped the back of my neck and pulled me into his chest for a tight hug. “You’re tense, Liv. You feel like a fucking board.”

I blinked quickly to stave off tears and forced a laugh. “I fucking hate him. I hate him so much. I’m just trying to do the right thing for Jesse, but I just want this night to be over.”

Andrew wrapped me in a bear hug next and stroked the back of my head. “This doesn’t seem good for you, Olive. You’re trembling.”

“I have to get back inside. I don’t trust him not to say things to Jesse...” I moved into Caleb’s arms next and breathed in his scent before moving back to the door. “I’m okay. I just... I hate it. I’m sorry I can’t invite you in. I know Jesse would love to see y’all.”

“Sweetheart, just take care of yourself. Call us or text us if you need anything.” Caleb frowned and shook his head. “It doesn’t feel right leaving you like this.”

I forced a wobbly smile. “I’m okay. I’ll see you later.”

I slipped back into the apartment and leaned against the door. I wanted to grab Jesse and run away with the guys. I wanted to do anything except sit around while Taylor existed in my home like he belonged in it.

The sound of shooting came from the living room and I walked over to see people being shot on the screen while Taylor cheered and pointed his controller at it. Jesse sat next to him, looking more than a little green.

I hurried over and scooped Jesse up. “Time for your bath and bed, bud. Say goodnight to your dad.”

Jesse wrapped his arms around my neck and buried his face against me. He mumbled something and it was good enough for me. I walked into the bathroom and shut the door behind us. I leaned against it and held Jesse tight.

“You okay, Jess?”

He clung to me tighter so I stayed there and held him, waiting for him to either talk to me or fall asleep. He fell asleep first. My stomach was in knots about what had upset him. I didn’t know if it was the violent video game or if Taylor had said something while I stepped outside. Guilt ate at me as I imagined that scenario.

Instead of taking Jesse to his own bed, I carried him to mine and tucked him in. I grabbed his favorite stuffed animal, a seal that Lydie got for him, and tucked it in with him before going back to put everything away.

I nearly screamed when I stepped in the kitchen and Taylor was there, leaning against a counter with a pack of ice against his throat. “What the hell are you doing? You need to leave.”

He smiled. “I think I pegged you all wrong. Why don’t you give me a chance, Olive?”

“Do you want another punch to your throat?”

“You played hard to get the first time, too.” He walked up to me and dropped the bag of ice in my hands. “We all know how that turned out.”

I stood there, angry and shaking, until I heard him walk out the front door and close it. I immediately rushed to the door, locked it, and slid to the floor with a pit in my stomach growing deeper and deeper.

30

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*****Jack*****

I straightened when I saw Taylor walk out of Olive's apartment. Instead of leaving and going back home, the three of us had decided to make sure we were there in case Olive needed us. None of us had felt right leaving her shaking like a leaf.

Taylor was rubbing his throat and didn't notice us until he was right on top of us. He jerked to a stop and looked up with wide eyes. When he saw that it was us, he smirked and laughed. "This is just pathetic."

Caleb leaned in. "What happened to your voice? And your throat?"

Andrew pushed off of Taylor's truck and moved to stand in front of him. "You know she doesn't want you there, yet you keep showing up. What kind of man doesn't take no for an answer, Taylor?"

Taylor's smirk widened and he reached into his pocket. "One who knows what a woman really wants."

I saw red when he held up a pair of panties and twirled them around his finger. “Did you fucking steal her panties?”

Andrew shifted so he was slightly in front of me. “You’re a fucking joke.”

“She’s just as snug as I remember. No blood this time, though.” Taylor barely got the words out before Caleb’s fist slammed into his mouth and nose. He stumbled into his truck and smeared his own blood across the hood as he gripped it to pull himself upright.

Andrew growled at Caleb while holding me back. “Alright.”

“There’s your blood, asshole.” Caleb cracked his neck and lowered his voice. “If you touch her, your family will spend the rest of their lives looking for your body.”

Taylor shoved past us and climbed into his truck without another word. He pulled out recklessly and left twin streaks of burnt rubber as he sped away.

I looked over at Caleb and raised my eyebrows. “His family will spend the rest of their lives looking for his body? What the hell? That was dark, even for you.”

Andrew sighed. “I didn’t want to go into criminal law. With the two of you, I’m not going to have a choice. What are the chances that he isn’t going to the cops right now?”

Caleb shrugged. “I don’t care. Let him. And that line sounds crazy enough to be unbelievable, doesn’t it? And you guys didn’t hear it. So it’s my word against Taylor’s and last time I

checked, my rich father is best buds with a lot of the local law around here.”

“You play up the rich asshole thing too good sometimes.” I shook my head and looked over at Olive’s door. “Do we check on her or leave her alone tonight?”

Andrew shook his head. “We should go in case the cops do show up. She doesn’t need to see us being questioned by the cops.”

We walked towards our own vehicles and Caleb stopped suddenly. “Are we competing against Taylor now, too? Do you think he’s really trying to get back with her?”

Andrew grunted. “There’s no way she would ever consider him.”

I rubbed my jaw. “We’ve been keeping everything we do separate and doing our best to not step on each other’s toes with planning shit out. He’s not going to do the same thing.”

“Why do I feel like this is the beginning of a big speech?” Caleb studied my face and tilted his head. “What are you thinking?”

“If we weren’t so worried about crossing each other we’d be a lot more relaxed about just showing up to check on her.” I considered what I was saying and took a deep breath. “We all know he’s a piece of shit. She doesn’t want him near her but won’t stop him because of Jesse. Instead of competing against each other, what if we just joined forces?”

Andrew held up his hands. “Sorry, what? What the fuck does it mean to join forces when talking about pursuing a woman?”

Caleb moved closer. “Three against one instead of every man for himself. So, we date Olive as a unit?”

“I’m confused.” Still holding up his hands, Andrew shook his head. “A unit?”

“She obviously likes all three of us. Instead of having her decide which one of us she likes the most...what if she didn’t have to choose?” I was making it up as I went along, but it was starting to make sense. “We’re already basically dating her together. We know that we’re each sleeping with her.”

“You realize this is the woman I’ve wanted a chance with for years, right?” Andrew walked over to his truck and opened the door. “Why the fuck would I want to share her?”

“You’re already sharing her. With us. Your two best friends.” Caleb sighed when Andrew slammed his door shut. “Well.”

Andrew rolled his window down and ran his hands over his head. “What the fuck does it say about us that we would even consider this? Why would Olive ever consider it? It’s crazy.”

“It says that we care about her enough to put our greed aside to make sure we keep Taylor the hell away. And she’d consider it because we’re great.” I smirked at him to alleviate some of the tension. “I get that it’s crazy, but if we’re not tiptoeing around each other we can make sure Taylor keeps his hands to himself.”

“You make it sound noble when you say it like that. We’re setting greed aside.” Caleb puffed out his chest. “I like it.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed him away. “Let’s just go home and think about it. It’s only going to work if we’re all the way in.”

“You think she’s okay?” Caleb nodded towards Olive’s door and sighed. “Honestly, I think at this point, I’d do pretty much anything to not see that fear in her eyes again.”

Andrew let out a heavy sigh. “Unfortunately, I know Taylor well enough from when we were friends to know that he would’ve looked a lot fuckier if he’d done anything. Knowing that doesn’t make it any easier to drive away, though.”

“You had terrible taste in friends before us.” Backing away, Caleb held up his hand. “I need to go ice this if I have a chance at denying I hit that asshole.”

I snorted. “Pretty sure he’s going to have the shape of your knuckles imprinted on his face for life. You put your entire body into that punch.”

He nodded and wagged his eyebrows. “Fuck yeah, I did.”

Andrew started his truck and shot a look at Caleb. “Please don’t make me specialize in criminal law.”

31

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*****Olive*****

I'd known it wasn't going to be a good day when I dropped Jesse off at school that morning. He'd been quiet and withdrawn still and unwilling to talk to me. I had a big test in my first class that day, though, so I couldn't stop to make him open up to me. I had plans on doing it that night, but Ms. Emily called me as I was walking into my second class. As soon as I answered, I heard Jesse crying in the background.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Oakley, but Jesse is being sent home." She hesitated. "I called you directly because I wanted you to hear this from me. He got upset when I didn't call on him to lead the lunch line and he called me a very inappropriate name."

To say I was shocked would've been an understatement. I immediately turned around and started walking at a fast clip towards the school. "I am so sorry, Ms. Emily. I... I don't know what to say. I'm on my way."

"Is there something going on at home? Besides that one incident with Keaton, Jesse is a really great student. This was

shocking.” She sounded so concerned that my walk turned into a jog.

“He spent some time with his father last night but I was with them for most of the night. He was really upset afterwards, though. I am so sorry. I don’t know...” I frantically tried to think of what he would’ve called her. “I know that I shouldn’t, but I do sometimes curse in front of him.”

“I don’t think this is anything you would’ve said in front of Jesse, or even at any point, honestly.” Her voice grew quiet. “Rhymes with bore. A dirty rhymes with bore.”

I gasped. No other sound would leave my mouth. I was shocked and gutted to hear that had come from my son’s mouth.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Oakley.” She sighed. “I don’t know the story with his father, but it’s concerning.”

“I’ll be right there.” I hung up the phone and ran the rest of the way. I was gasping for breath by the time I got there, but I needed to see Jesse and try to make sense of everything.

I tried to catch my breath as I waited for a guest pass but I was still breathing hard when I got to Ms. Emily’s classroom. It was her planning period again and when I walked into the room, she was sitting at her desk, staring out at Jesse. Jesse was at a desk in the front row and he was scribbling on a piece of paper with enough force to rip the paper.

“Jesse?” I walked over to him and knelt in front of the desk. “What happened?”

He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “I want to go home. I hate it here.”

“Jesse. You love school. You were just telling Andrew all about it. What’s going on? Why are you so angry?”

He looked confused for a moment at the mention of Andrew. “Just leave me alone.”

I stood up and went to Ms. Emily. “I’m so sorry.”

She pulled me farther away from Jesse. “I was shocked when it happened, but I’m okay. I’ve never been called a dirty whore by a child before, but there’s always a first time for everything, I guess.”

I scrubbed my hands down my face and shook my head. “I’m... I don’t even know what to say. I was a teen mom. I went through a lot of years being called things like that by narrow-minded people. I’ve done my best to protect Jesse from it, but... I stepped away from them for two minutes last night.”

“Would his father say something like that?”

I let out a bitter laugh. “His father was the first one to call me that. I’m sure that’s where he heard it. I’m just shocked that Taylor managed to do that much damage in such a short period of time.”

She squeezed my hand. “I’m sorry. Jesse’s a good boy. It’s a rotten thing for a man to try to poison his son’s mind.”

I looked back at Jesse and saw that he’d put his head down on the desk. “Yeah... I’m going to take him home and have a

long talk with him. I'm really sorry about this, again."

Jesse pouted as I pulled him to his feet and had him walk out with me. He tried to slump to the ground multiple times, but I wouldn't let him. I pulled him up and we marched all the way home in silence. We were both deep in our emotions and I was fighting anger that didn't belong to Jesse. I needed to calm down before I spoke to him.

We were both sweaty when we got home so I poured us each a glass of ice water and pointed the box fan in the living room directly at the couch before sitting. I patted the seat next to me and watched as Jesse slowly climbed up to sit next to me.

"Where do you want to start, kid?"

He stared at where Taylor's gaming setup was still stretched across the floor. "Why doesn't Daddy like you?"

I leaned back. "Why do you say that?"

"He told me. He told me that you wouldn't let him see me. He said you're a bad word. He said Jack is bad. And Andrew and Caleb. He hates them."

My vision turned dark at the corners as I listened. Rage slowly coiled up from the bottom of my guts and wrapped itself around every part of me. "He said that."

Jesse sniffed. "I like Jack and Andrew and Caleb. I tried to tell Daddy and he said I was dumb. He called you bad names, Mommy. I didn't know how to make him stop."

I pulled him into my lap and held him to my chest. "You are not dumb. You're a smart boy. That's why Ms. Emily was so

shocked by what you did today. I'm so sorry your dad said those things to you, Jesse. I'm so, so sorry."

He cried into my chest and whimpered. "Why did he call you bad names, Mommy?"

I held him tighter because it was the only thing I knew to do. After a few minutes, I cleared my throat from the emotion clogging it. "Why did you call Ms. Emily a bad name today?"

"I got mad."

I sat him back so he could see my face. "I think your dad is mad, too. He's mad at me. It wasn't fair for you to say that to Ms. Emily and it wasn't fair for your dad to say that about me. Sometimes we say things we don't mean, though, and if we apologize, it helps."

"I am sorry. I don't think I like Daddy. I'm sad. I want a daddy but I want one like Keaton's." He blinked and two fat tears rolled down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Mommy."

I held him tight again and rubbed his back. "I love you, kid. Thank you for apologizing. I'm sorry that your dad is so mad."

"I love you, too, Mommy. I like Andrew. Or Jack. They could be my dads." He hesitated. "Caleb could, too, but he needs help."

I smiled into his hair. "Oh? Maybe we should help him, then."

32

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*****Caleb*****

I stared at the woman sitting next to me in the backseat of Andrew's truck and frowned. She looked nothing like Olive. She had dark hair and eyes and was willowy to Olive's curvy. They didn't have the same features or anything. The only thing that reminded me of Olive was when she cut her eyes at me and laughed. They had nearly identical laughs.

"Andrew, your friend is broken." Lydie Oakley had called Andrew, demanding a ride from the bus station to Olive's apartment. How she got his number? We didn't know. How she got the audacity to call and make demands of a man she hadn't seen in nearly five years? We didn't know.

"Are you sure we picked up the right woman?" I tilted my head to study her better. "Olive is going to be so weirded out if we just bring her a random woman home."

"Oh, I like the way you same home like that. Are you thinking about a home with my sister? What *are* your intentions?"

All the saliva in my mouth dried up and my voice cracked when I spoke. “Um. I want to date her.”

Lydie nodded. “Uh huh. And what about you, Jack? What’s your deal? I hear you want to be a professor. Are you and my sister playing that up in bed yet?”

Jack sprayed the water he was drinking all over Andrew’s dash. Turning to look back at Lydie, he gave her a wide-eyed stare. “What’s wrong with you? Keep that shit in your head.”

Andrew snorted. “Good to see some things haven’t changed.”

“So, what is this? Do you three always pick one woman to sleep with or is my sister just special?” She rolled her eyes. “Of course, my sister is special. That part of the question can be rhetorical.”

When none of us jumped to answer, the silence in the truck stretched on. Finally, Andrew cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “Olive is the first and only.”

“And what does that mean?” She wasn’t letting up.

I met her gaze and smiled. “It means your sister is fucking special but we’re all trying not to freak her out. She isn’t ready for dating right now.”

“Bullshit.” Lydie narrowed her eyes. “Did she say that? She did that whole thing where she pretends to be too busy for life, right? Yet, she’s still found time to screw each of you.”

I scowled. “Watch it.”

“Down, boy. She’s my sister and my best friend. I meant it with love and as a fact, not a statement about anything. She always says she’s too busy but I think it’s a safety net thing. Anyway. Brownie points for trying to stick up for her, though.” She reached over and roughly patted my cheek. “Are we almost there? I am in desperate need of Jesse cuddles.”

Andrew shuddered. “Pulling in now.”

I checked the lot but didn’t see Taylor’s truck. A part of me wanted to see Lydie set loose on *him*. That was the sadist in me, though.

Jack grabbed Lydie’s suitcase from the back of the truck when we parked and we all made our way to Olive’s door with the suitcase and Lydie behind us. Jack sighed as he looked back at Lydie. “Didn’t she buy the bus ticket? She knows you’re coming.”

“She thinks I’m coming tomorrow morning but I changed the ticket when an earlier bus opened up. Now shut up and knock.”

Andrew knocked and we all stood there, infected with the nervous energy of the woman bouncing behind us. When Olive pulled open the door and saw us, big tears welled up in her eyes. My stomach twisted painfully as we each reached out for her at the same time.

Too bad the pipsqueak of a woman behind us scented her sister’s tears in the air and damn near climbed over us to get to Olive. We were shoved out of the way in Lydie’s efforts. I even ended up stumbling and nearly eating dirt.

“What’s wrong?! Oh, Liv. Why are you crying? Do you need chocolate? A glass of tea? A margarita? An orgasm? I brought these three guys with me if you need to use one, or all of them.” Lydie wrapped Olive in her arms, somehow becoming larger and longer as she contorted herself to hold her sister. “Is it your period? You’re pregnant? Mom and Dad died and no one told me because I was traveling?”

Olive let out a shocked laugh and clung to her sister. “No, you monster! No to everything.”

I grunted. “Even the orgasms?”

Olive’s blush was adorable and her smile made my chest tighten. She reached a hand out to me but Lydie pulled it back.

“They get you all the time. This is my weekend. Until I pass out or find a hottie with a body, you’re mine.” Lydie looked back at us and rolled her eyes. “God, you three look pathetic. Go on. Hug my sister and rub yourself all over her. Do whatever it is that you men do. Then, I need to find out who made my sister cry so I can murder them.”

I wrapped my arms around Olive as soon as Lydie was out of reach. “Your sister scares the shit out of me.”

Olive held on tighter than usual and when she pulled back, there were tears in her eyes again. I stood there and bounced on my feet as I waited for Jack and Andrew to hug her. Then I pulled her with me to the couch and pulled her down on my lap. She curled into my chest and sighed. “It’s been a day.”

Lydie sat beside us and held Olive's hands. "Tell me everything."

Andrew sat on her other side and Jack pulled the coffee table close to sit on it. We all leaned in and waited, unsure of where she was going to go with her bad day.

"First, I'm so sorry, Lydie. This is a terrible reception. You came early." Olive sniffed. "I'm so glad you're here."

Lydie shrugged. "I'm family. I don't require a big reception."

"I had to pick Jesse up from school early today because he called his teacher a name."

Jack frowned. "Ms. Emily?"

"Yeah. He called her a dirty whore." Olive rested her head on my chest and blew out a shaky breath. "He was upset last night before Taylor left. He wouldn't tell me why until we got home today. Taylor called me names and told him I was the reason he didn't get to see his dad. He even brought y'all up and when Jesse said he liked y'all, Taylor called him dumb. Jesse wanted to know why his dad doesn't like me. I only left them alone together for that little bit of time I came outside to tell y'all you couldn't come in. It was less than two minutes, but I shouldn't have done it. I should've known that Taylor would do something so disgusting."

"I should've hit him harder." I pressed my face into her hair and inhaled in an effort to calm the rage brewing inside me.

"Hey, that's exactly what I keep thinking." She seemed to realize she let a secret slip and sighed. "He cornered me in the

kitchen last night and I punched him in the throat.”

Lydie was shaking and she’d gone completely red. “I want to cheer for that but I’m so furious right now that I think it would just come out as a neverending scream.”

Olive looked up at me. “You hit him, too?”

I nodded. “He stole a pair of your panties.”

She shuddered and pressed her face into my neck. “I hate that. I hate that so much.”

“I can probably focus on criminal law in prison if I get sent to the right prison.” Andrew unclenched his fists and stood up. “I need to destroy something.”

33

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*****Olive*****

“**T**his is the good life.” Lydie reached over and swatted my arm. “You’re one lucky bitch. All the other bullshit aside, look at this.”

I’d been looking. I couldn’t take my eyes off the scene before us. I fanned myself and sighed dreamily. “How is this the same day that I was told my son called his teacher a dirty whore?”

Andrew was sitting with Jesse on the floor, reading him a book and telling him all about the characters in fun voices. Jack was in the kitchen, putting away the leftovers from the dinner he’d cooked. He’d also cleaned everything in the house until it looked like a different place. Caleb had utilized his own special skills by ordering in dessert and a beautiful bouquet of flowers. He’d also brought in bags of other things that he hadn’t let me see.

They’d pampered me. They’d taken care of my son, fed my sister while she fought them every step of the way, and stopped to kiss me so many times that I felt good and truly

spoiled. I'd gone from crying to feeling like I'd won the lottery.

“If you don't give them anal, I'll denounce you as my sister.”

I'd just taken a drink of water and promptly choked on it. Coughing, I sat up and glared at Lydie. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

She pointed her finger at me. “I'm just saying. You'd better not be a prude. These men deserve anal if any man ever has.”

“Stop saying anal.”

“Anal, anal, anal!”

Jesse looked up and laughed at Lydie. “What's anal, Aunt Lydie?”

“Something your mom is going to give-”

I slapped my hand over her mouth and squeezed her cheeks. “Oh, Aunt Lydie is just a nut, isn't she? Why don't you go get into your pjs, bud?”

Andrew was staring at me with his mouth slightly ajar and his eyebrows creeping up his forehead. Jack had stopped what he was doing in the kitchen to poke his head out and stare. Caleb came running out of my bedroom with a giant grin on his face. He opened his mouth to say something and then froze when Jesse grabbed his hand.

“Will you help me pick out my pjs, Caleb?”

Caleb looked at me with wide eyes. “Um... Okay?”

Jesse was tired and after an emotional day, he regressed slightly. He held up his arms to Caleb. “Up.”

Again, Caleb looked at me and waited for my nod of approval.

Watching Caleb pick Jesse up like he was a bomb would’ve been hilarious enough but then Jesse wrapped himself around Caleb and yawned. “I farted.”

Caleb gagged and tried to pull Jesse away from him, but Jesse held on tight. Gagging harder, Caleb resorted to fanning himself. “Oh, god. Can kids not eat the stuff Jack made? It smells like he’s rotting. This can’t be right. Smell this. Smell it. I’m serious. Is he okay? Should we take him to the emergency room?”

Lydie and I were in tears we were laughing so hard. Jesse was giggling, too, as he tugged Caleb’s hair and reminded him of the pjs.

“I don’t know. I think there’s shit involved. Should someone check?” Caleb tucked his chin to his chest in an attempt to see Jesse’s face. “You okay, little dude? Did you poop? It’s no shame if you pooped. We just shouldn’t add pjs to the shit, you know? Sorry I keep saying shit.”

I clenched my thighs together as I howled with laughter. “Stop! I’m going to pee myself!”

“I didn’t shit, Caleb!” Jesse erupted in more giggles.

“Oh, no. Don’t say shit.” Caleb chuckled once and then he was laughing just as hard as me and Lydie. He wrapped his

arms around Jesse to hold him steady and even ruffled his hair. “Okay, maybe we say shit when your mom’s not around because it’s really funny.”

“Caleb!” I tried to look stern but I kept laughing. “Dammit. Don’t be a bad influence on a six-year-old.”

“Who’s Mommy giving anal to?” Jesse yawned with his mouth wide open in Caleb’s face.

Jack met my gaze and smirked. “If I’m lucky...”

I slapped Lydie’s arm. “This is all your fault.”

“What? I just think you reward good behavior and this is good behavior.” Lydie shrugged. “Plus, if you’re going to keep this up, eventually everyone will be horny at the same time. Don’t leave holes on the table.”

My mouth was hanging open and I knew that my entire body was the shade of the koolaid man. I couldn’t believe the words coming out of my sister’s mouth.

Andrew leaned back on his elbows on the floor and grinned. “No holes left behind?”

Lydie leaned over to high-five him. “Yes!”

“What the heck is happening?” I stood up and shook my head. “I’m going to help get Jesse changed. I expect better behavior when I get back.”

I caught Caleb’s hand and pulled him with me to Jesse’s room. I opened the pajama draw and moved close to rub

Jesse's back. He yawned again and it was obvious he was fighting sleep.

"Which pjs do you want, bud?"

"Caleb picks."

Caleb leaned over and studied the different sets. "Dude, you have so many cool pajamas. I pick...the spaceships."

"Will you tuck me in, Caleb? And Mommy." Jesse blinked his big eyes up at Caleb and I watched Caleb melt.

"Sure, little dude."

"Go change in the bathroom. And brush your teeth while you're in there. Caleb's going to do a sniff test, so no lying." I watched Caleb's lips turn down and grinned as he shook his head. "Oh, yeah. The really fun parts of parenting that no one tells you about. Having to sniff a little boy's mouth to see if he's lying about brushing his teeth. Some days I think he might be eating literal crap."

Caleb sat on the edge of Jesse's bed and pulled me close so I was standing between his thighs. "I'm horrified."

I nodded and reached down to hold his hand. His knuckles were swollen and red. I held my knuckles up next to his and smiled at the way they matched. "Worth it."

He wrapped his arm around my waist and buried his face into my chest. "Should've punched him twice for bruising your hand."

Jesse ran back in the room and leapt on his bed. “I’m all clean!”

I pulled away from Caleb and leaned over Jesse. “Sniff test.”

He giggled and blew his breath up my nose. “I brushed, Mommy!”

“Acceptable. Under the covers, kid.” I saw him look at Caleb and grinned. “Don’t worry. Caleb is going to get your other side.”

“Will you read me a book?” Jesse snuggled under his blanket and looked up at Caleb. “The one about Robert the robot?”

Caleb nodded. “Sure. I can do that.”

I tucked in my side and grabbed the book from the small bookshelf next to Jesse’s bed. Caleb shot me a look as I handed it to him but his eyes were bright as he sat next to Jesse and pretended to prepare himself for a big reading. He knew Robert the Robot reminded Jesse of him, but I think he could tell Jesse was smitten by him. If I wasn’t mistaken, the feeling was becoming mutual.

34

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*****Olive*****

The guys gave us tickets to the football game that put us right at the fifty-yard line. Lydie said they were great seats. I was just very aware of the mass of people around us. If anything were to happen, we were going to be trapped.

Lydie swatted me. “Stop worrying! This is amazing.”

Jesse was sitting between us, decked out in Oklahoma A&M gear that the guys had sent over. They hadn’t been able to stop by because of practice and game prep but getting a box of presents had been a great surprise. Lydie was even wearing some of the stuff, despite swearing that she was only loyal to the Arkansas Razorbacks.

“Look! It’s Jack!” Jesse swung his arm back and forth like mad to get Jack’s attention. “Jack!”

Lydie wasn’t one to miss a chance to embarrass me, so she stood up and whistled. “Hey! Number seventeen! Do fries come with that shake?”

Jack and the rest of the team had just come out of the tunnel and they were standing by their benches, directly in front of us. Jack somehow heard Lydie over the crowd and turned with a big smile on his face. He waved at Jesse and his smile faltered when he looked at me.

“I knew it!” Lydie leaned over and slapped my arm. “Look at his face!”

Jack rubbed his mouth and lifted his eyes from my cleavage to my eyes. His lips moved and I thought he mouthed the word ‘later’ before turning back to his coach.

I grinned over at Lydie. “Fine. You win. This outfit was better than my dress.”

“A fitted trash bag would be better than your dress. No offense.”

“Offense taken!” I looked down at the t-shirt she’d cut to hang off my shoulder and at the ridiculous skirt she’d made me wear. I felt naked and exposed, but seeing Jack’s shocked face made me feel better. His eyes had almost done the cartoon thing of springing out of his head.

Jesse screamed and waved his giant finger. “Caleb! Andrew!”

I couldn’t help the smile on my face as I watched Jesse come alive. He was so excited to see the guys and seeing them sent him into a tizzy. He jumped up and down and waved until another player on the team got their attention and pointed at Jesse.

Caleb, never one to follow the rules, came running over and jumped up on the railing so he could fist bump Jesse. “Little dude! We’ll definitely win with you here, cheering us on!”

I saw Andrew laugh and shake his head as the coach screamed for Caleb. “Go! You’re going to get in trouble!”

Caleb ran his eyes over my entire length and then bit his lip. “Wow.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed him away. “Go! Play your game and score lots of homeruns or whatever.”

Gasps went up all around us and Caleb pressed his hand to his chest dramatically. “There had to be a flaw, folks. She’s a ten but she thinks we’re scoring homeruns!”

I hid my face as everyone around us laughed. I tried to push him away again but he caught my hand and tugged me into his arms. “Caleb!”

“A kiss for good luck?”

Lydie led the pack of whooping people behind me, all cheering for me to kiss Caleb. I was going to murder my sister. Giving in, I cupped his face and kissed him, keeping it innocent since Jesse was watching.

Caleb pretended to float to the ground when I pulled back. He held both of his hands over his heart and batted his eyelashes at me. “I can’t lose now, not after a kiss from such a fair maiden.”

Then he turned and skipped back to his team and even curtsied once he got there. I watched Andrew and Jack shove

him back and forth a few times before they discreetly fist bumped. I swung my face around to Lydie and saw she was grinning with her eyebrows halfway up her head.

“They’re good.” She nodded and looked around us. “Show’s over, folks. However, if you’d like to help my foolish sister at any point of the game, feel free. I, too, am ashamed that she said the word homerun at a football game.”

Jesse put his palm to his head. “Even I know that’s not right, Mommy.”

I turned back to the field and my gaze crashed into Taylor’s. He was pulling his helmet on and before he opened his mouth to put his mouthguard in, he blew me a kiss. I looked away quickly and pretended he didn’t exist. I wasn’t there for him. He didn’t matter.

I didn’t know what was happening on the field as the other team kicked the ball down the field. I blinked and then Jack was running onto the field with a bunch of other guys and bending over on a line. I really had no clue what happened in football.

“Jack’s on the field, Mommy!” Jesse pressed himself to the railing and screamed for Jack. “Go, Jack!”

I eased him away from the edge and cheered with him. One player threw the ball down the field and I watched as Jack jumped up to catch it and was taken out by a player from the other team. I gasped and stood up, horrified to have seen Jack’s body tackled the way it was.

Lydie tugged me back down and laughed. “He’s fine. This is football, sis. It’s physical. Look at him.”

I found Jack jogging to bend over at another line like he hadn’t just been hit by a man the size of a train. My stomach stayed in knots as they threw the ball down the field. Sometimes the ball didn’t go to Jack and those times made me feel like I could breathe a little easier. Apparently, that was a bad thing, though.

“Taylor’s shutting him out. He threw him that first one but he’s avoiding him.” Lydie sat forward and glared at the field. “Jack’s the best guy out there. He can catch a ball covered by three giants like he’s playing catch with a baby and Taylor’s throwing to guys who keep dropping the damn ball.”

Jesse frowned and crossed his arms. “Daddy’s being mean.”

I shot a meaningful look at my sister to remind her to watch what she said in front of Jesse. “It’s just a game, bud. Okay? It’s fun. You just keep cheering for Jack.”

The crowd groaned and I heard someone a few rows up shouting at the coach. “Who’s calling these plays?! A monkey would make better calls! You didn’t even go for a field goal!”

Jesse looked up at me with wide eyes and giggled. “A monkey?”

On the field a guy I didn’t recognize from our team kicked the ball down the field. “Why isn’t Caleb kicking? He’s the kicker.”

Lydie leaned over. “That’s the punter. The kicker and the punter are different players typically. Different muscles and techniques used for both that could hurt a player if they tried to do both.”

“How do you know so much about football?”

She grinned and I knew I was going to regret asking. “Lost my virginity to a Razorback. He was a big football head and to spend more time with him, I got into it.”

“One of these days, we should tell Mom and Dad the real truth about our lives.” I laughed at the look of horror on her face. “What? You don’t want to be the black sheep?”

She pointed to the field. “Just watch the game.”

35

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*****Olive*****

We got to watch Andrew do something called sacking the other team's quarterback. It was apparently a huge deal and the crowd lost their minds. Even Lydie cheered like I've never seen her cheer. And each time Caleb kicked a field goal, we all screamed for him. The game was still feeling strained, despite us winning, so in the third quarter the coach pulled Taylor out and put a different quarterback in.

Even though I didn't like Taylor, I could tell the second guy wasn't as good. Still, when he got the ball to Jack, Jack made it count. It became clear to me even that Taylor had been refusing to throw to Jack in the first half. After listening to the people around us, I couldn't believe Taylor was that stupid. To hurt Jack, he'd chanced losing the game. I wanted to punch him again.

The game hadn't started until after seven and by the time it ended, Jesse was passed out in his chair. Curled up in a ball, he hadn't been able to handle the entire game. Not even the roar

of the crowd after the clock ran out in the fourth quarter had stirred him.

I knew I was going to have to carry him up the stadium stairs and I didn't want to try to do it with all the other people at the same time so I stayed still with Lydie. She was pumped after the win.

“What do you think about me going out to celebrate? When I went to the bathroom earlier, I met a girl who said her sorority is having a party.”

“What? When did you...?” I shook my head. “You're such a social butterfly, it's disgusting.”

She grinned. “I figured it's late for you and Jesse, so y'all won't miss me. I'll be good. I promise.”

I shrugged. “I'm not your parent, Lydie. We both had enough of that controlling shit. Or at least, I did. I'm starting to wonder about you. Do what you want, as long as you're careful.”

“I'm always careful. I can walk back with you, though, and meet up with Kacey later.

I shook my head. “Go on. Have fun for me, too.”

She hugged me tight. “I heard the football players always go out to celebrate at this sorority after a win. Want me to keep an eye on your guys?”

Shaking my head, I smiled. “They're single men. They can do what they want.”

“You don’t actually mean that.”

I shrugged. “It’s all I’m willing to say.”

“Idiot. Just tell them you want to go steady already.” She laughed and then waved at someone behind me. “I’ll see you later tonight. I took your extra key, so don’t wait up.”

I put my hands on my hips and watched her jog up the stairs to meet up with a pretty redhead. They both waved at me before disappearing into the crowd. I looked down at Jesse and wondered for a moment if I did use him as a shield, like Lydie loved to insinuate. She’d probably leave campus with more friends than me after only one weekend. I hadn’t made a single friend, besides the guys and the residents at Jolly Pines.

Someone grabbed me from behind and I yelped as I spun around. Smiling on the other side of the railing was Andrew. He climbed over and pulled me into his arms. “Did you have fun?”

He was sweaty and smelled like it, but I still hugged him tight and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “You did amazing! Everyone was cheering like crazy for you.”

His hair was sticking to his forehead and his cheeks were red from the heat, but his eyes were bright. It was clear that he enjoyed playing. “What time did the little dude pass out?”

I pulled back and reached down to brush Jesse’s hair out of his face. “Just after half time. He tried so hard. I’ve never seen him cheer so hard for anything. I think you guys created a huge football fan tonight.”

“Good. He can come to every game if he wants. As long as he brings his hot mom.” Andrew took my hand and made me spin around for him. “I don’t know if this is allowed. You’re going to need to come with me.”

I laughed and hooked my hands in the neck of his uniform. “Don’t you need to go shower and celebrate your win?”

“I do.”

“I’m going to carry Jesse home. I was just waiting on the crowd to clear out some.” I pulled his mouth down to mine so I could kiss him. “Lydie is going to a party, so Jesse and I are going to have an early night. I hope you have fun celebrating.”

He kissed me harder and wrapped his arm around me, resting his hand over my ass. “You didn’t ask me where I was going to celebrate.”

I wiped a smudge of dirt off his cheek. “Where are you going to celebrate?”

“Your apartment. Caleb and Jack, too.” He flashed a bright smile and pulled back so he could pick Jesse up. “So you and little dude are coming with me. If you’ll wait for us to shower and change, we’ll drive you. No way am I letting you carry Jesse all the way to your apartment this late at night. Especially when you look as sexy as you do.”

I watched as he held Jesse with one arm and climbed back over the railing. “Wait. You want to come to my apartment? Why?”

Andrew was already on the ground, looking up at me. “Can you climb over on your own?”

I could see the determination in his eyes and knew he wasn't taking no for an answer. I didn't want to say no to them coming over, either. So I gripped the railing and bit my lip as I swung one leg over and then the other. “Don't look up my skirt!”

“That ship has sailed, Olive. I'm looking and I'm dreaming.” He was waiting for me with a kiss as soon as my feet were on the ground again. “I'm a big fan of those panties.”

“Shut up.” I glanced up at him when he grabbed my hand and interlocked our fingers. “Did you decide to come to my place out of pity? I probably looked sad just standing there, but I was okay. If you want to go party, I'd be okay going home with Jesse. If you're that worried about me walking, you could just drop me off.”

He stopped walking and frowned down at me. “We decided we wanted to come over before the game. The parties are fun, but we have fun with you. The parties are also big meat markets where everyone finds someone to screw for the night. We already have-”

“If you finish that the way I think you're going to finish it, I'm going to kick your ass.”

“I was going to say we already have our eyes set on someone. I'm a gentleman, Olive. I can't believe you'd think the worst of me like that.” His words were accompanied by his hand slipping up my skirt, so I didn't take them too seriously.

Laughing, I batted his hand away. “You’re holding my son. If you drop him, I have to stop speaking to you.”

We walked into the tunnel and Andrew held my hand again. “I would never. Little dude is secure.”

At the top of the tunnel we turned right and I found myself outside of the locker room as it was the first time I stumbled across it. Women lined the walls, waiting on the guys to come out. It was intimidating to walk up and suddenly have all their eyes on you. I tried to stop at the end of the line, too embarrassed to walk in front of all of them.

Andrew looked back at me and shook his head. “Come on. You can wait up here. Jack and Caleb will probably be out soon and I want them to be able to find you.”

I let out a snort and lowered my voice as I clung to his hand and walked with him. “Pretty sure it’ll be easy, since I’ll be the one with the kid.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Was that a dig at yourself?”

Shrugging, I stopped in front of the locker room door and held out my hands for Jesse. Before Andrew budged, though, the door behind him opened and a group of men walked out. Caleb and Jack were at the back and their smiles stretched wide when they saw me.

Andrew turned to Jack and handed Jesse to him before turning back to me and cupping my face in his hands. Tilting my face up to his, he held my gaze. “No more bullshit digs at yourself. Understand me?”

I nodded, mainly to stop people from staring at us any longer. That failed, though, because he leaned down and kissed me like he was proving a point. He left me trembling when he finally pulled away.

“Want to wait in my truck instead of in here?” When I nodded aggressively, Andrew stroked his thumb over my cheek and groaned. “I’ll be out soon.”

Caleb wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. “If you really want to put on a show for everyone, you could let me carry you out of here over my shoulder. That *might* make them talk more than that kiss Andrew just laid on you.”

I grabbed a handful of his shirt and growled. “Get me out of here.”

36

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*****Olive*****

Once Jesse was tucked into bed, I walked into my living room to find Andrew, Jack, and Caleb on my couch with their heads together. I cleared my throat and watched them all sit back like they hadn't just been whispering to each other.

“What’s all the secrecy about? Do y’all want to leave? You don’t have to feel obligated to stay. You played a good game and deserve a celebration.”

Caleb frowned. “Who said anything about us feeling obligated to stay? We invited ourselves over and crashed your couch, sweetheart. We want to be here. We were debating about which movie we should watch.”

I tried to hide my smile but when Andrew laughed, I groaned and moved closer to them. “We’re having a movie night?”

Andrew caught my wrist and pulled me onto his lap. “Yep. You get to pick between horror, comedy, or comedy.”

I rolled my eyes at the selection but shrugged. I really didn't care. I was being held and spending time with the three guys I liked most in the world. No matter the movie, I was going to be happy. "Pick whatever."

Caleb pulled the coffee table close so they could all kick their feet up and then he stood up and smirked. "I hid a few gifts for you last night. Be right back."

"Did he say he hid gifts?"

Andrew wrapped his arms around my waist and held me tight. "Yeah, he does that. He once hid my birthday present in my truck and it was there for four months before he pointed it out. He takes joy in it for some reason. Maybe he's a serial killer. Is that one of the traits?"

I giggled and then sat up when Caleb came back in with a huge blanket in one hand and a bag of things in his other hand. I shook my head and opened and closed my mouth a few times as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. "Where the hell did you hide that blanket?!"

He shrugged. "I'll never tell. I kicked the AC down a few degrees so we can use the blanket without dying. I'll pay whatever it adds to your energy bill. I also put another blanket over Jesse so he won't catch a cold."

My heart hammered away in my chest as he rattled off things like they weren't incredibly thoughtful and kind. I grabbed his hand and tugged him down on the couch so I could kiss him. It wasn't until my tongue was in his mouth that I realized that sitting on Andrew's lap while kissing Caleb might not be okay.

I pulled away and laughed awkwardly, while pushing my hair behind my ears and looking anywhere but at them. “Sorry. I... Sorry.”

Andrew’s hand settled on my thigh and squeezed. “You don’t need to apologize.”

Caleb shook his head and moved on. He tossed the blanket over us haphazardly and then opened the bag. “Fuzzy socks. Movie candy. And a blindfold in case you get scared during the movie, since I hoped you would pick horror.”

I clutched the fuzzy socks to my chest. “This was so sweet of you. I don’t know how I got so lucky. All three of you are amazing. Thank you. For everything.”

Caleb took the socks and pulled the blanket up to expose my feet. He sat on the coffee table and pulled my feet into his lap so he could pull the new socks onto my feet. They were amazingly soft and I knew I’d never owned socks so nice. After making sure they were on my feet straight, he covered my legs again. “There. I’m going to grab a beer for us. Do you want one?”

I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

I cuddled into Andrew’s chest and sighed happily. Caleb was back and settled next to us just a second later and the three of them got comfortable with their feet kicked up on the table and a beer in their hands before starting the movie. I stretched my legs out over Andrew’s and picked up a box of lemonheads. Popping one in my mouth, I decided that they’d created happiness for me that night.

“What’s the movie about?”

Jack saw me eye his beer and held it out for me. “It’s some kind of haunted house movie. It’s supposed to be so scary that people left the theater crying when it came out. That’s most likely bullshit, though.”

I leaned forward and watched Jack’s face as he pressed the mouth of his bottle to my lips and tipped it so the cold liquid filled my mouth. Whatever sexiness he’d been feeling vanished when I gagged and stuck my tongue out. “Oh, god. That’s disgusting! Why do you drink that?”

Lifting the bottom of his shirt to my mouth, Jack laughed as I rubbed it over my tongue and pouted. “You’ve never had beer before?”

Shaking my head, I popped two more lemonheads into my mouth. “No, never. And now I’m glad. That was the most disgusting thing I’ve ever put into my mouth.”

“How does it taste like this?” Jack leaned forward and kissed me. Stroking his tongue past my lips, he let me taste him with shy strokes of my tongue over his.

I swallowed and leaned back after he pulled away. My cheeks were on fire and I was missing a lemonhead. Glancing up at Jack, I saw him rolling it around with his tongue. “Good. It tastes good like that.”

Andrew rested his hands over my stomach and ran his nose up my neck when I leaned into his chest. He kissed the shell of

my ear and moved his hand the slightest bit lower before settling in for the movie.

I could feel my heartbeat between my thighs and I was so wet that it was uncomfortable, but they seemed more than happy to watch the movie. I closed my eyes. It wasn't like anything could happen anyway. They were all there and...I just had to get over it. My first case of what Lydie called blue ovaries.

Caleb leaned forward and squeezed my inner thigh. "Need anything?"

I cleared my throat and shook my head. "No. No, I'm good."

He pulled his hand away slowly, letting it trail up my thigh and over my hip before he leaned back again. "Just let me know if that changes."

I stared at the TV but I wasn't seeing anything. I was so turned on and full of anticipation that I was shaking.

Jack reached over to pull the blanket higher and his hand brushed against my sensitive nipples as he adjusted and readjusted the blanket. "Warm enough?"

I squeaked out an affirmative and squeezed my thighs together. They were trying to kill me. I didn't know if anyone had ever died from blue ovaries, but I felt like there was a chance of it happening.

Andrew shifted under me and stretched his legs out. There was a gap between them that my legs nearly slipped through but he reached down and grabbed my thighs. Pushing them

apart, he grunted. “Hook your legs over mine so you don’t fall through.”

“Seriously?” He had to be joking. There was no way he was being serious. I looked up at him and he was watching the movie but glanced down at me quickly, like he didn’t want to look away from the movie for too long.

“Yeah, I just need to stretch out some after the game.”

I did as he said and sank my teeth into my bottom lip as my thighs were spread open and Andrew’s hand settled just over my panties. I could feel the heat from his fingertips seeping through the thin material of my clothes and I felt like I could cry.

I’d loved how tall the three of them were but with Andrew stretching around me and able to touch me basically anywhere with his long arms, I cursed their height in that moment. I needed some relief. I needed-

Fingers stroked over my panties and I froze.

37

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*****Olive*****

My brain malfunctioned as my desperate need slammed into my basic understanding of right and wrong. Either Jack or Caleb was touching me and just the lightest brush of fingers over my panties felt like heaven but I was sitting on Andrew's lap. If they kept touching me, I'd make a sound. The two men who weren't touching me would know what was happening and I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't want to make them uncomfortable or embarrassed. I... It just felt so good.

Both Jack and Caleb leaned forward at the same time, but neither of their eyes left the TV. The fingers brushing over my panties pressed over my clit and I gasped. They both glanced at me but neither of their faces gave anything away.

Andrew moved his hand lower and kissed the side of my neck. "That part wasn't even that scary. Think you'll be able to make it through the whole thing?"

Their fingers were so close to touching. I licked my suddenly bone dry lips. I needed to get up and stop them from ending up

upset, but my body was frozen in place. The fingers pressing into my clit had control over me while I was so lost in my need.

“Olive?”

“Huh?”

“Do you think you’ll last?” Andrew’s voice a growl against my ear.

I shook my head, answering a question he surely wasn’t asking. I didn’t know what he was talking about but I knew it wasn’t about the pleasure I was feeling.

Another hand brushed over my thigh closest to Caleb. It slowly moved towards my panties, heading for a collision with the other two hands already at the party. Andrew’s hand was slowly slipping lower, too. They were all-

They were all gone. Just like that, all three hands were gone and I was spread out on top of Andrew, panting and desperate. I let out a frustrated growl and kicked the blanket off my legs so I could stand up and spin around to face them.

“What the hell is going on?” I put my hands on my hips and glared down at the three of them. “I just had a traffic jam of hands near my panties and I’m a little unsure of the rules here. As horny as I am right now, I’m not going to let you three idiots end up in a fight because all three of you think you’re being original in the idea of touching me during a movie.”

Instead of looking angry at each other or shocked, they were each grinning. Andrew pulled me back onto his lap and

pressed his mouth to my ear. “We’re not going to fight, Olive.”

Caleb pulled the blanket over us again. “We can take care of you, if you let us.”

Jack leaned forward and spread my legs out over Andrew’s. “You can tell us to fuck off. Or...”

Andrew cupped me over my skirt and panties. “Or you can have what you need. It’s not a traffic jam when everyone’s moving in the same direction, with the same purpose, Olive.”

It took my brain a few seconds to work out what I was hearing. “All three of you want to...”

Caleb stroked my thigh. “Want is putting it lightly.”

Jack gripped my other thigh. “Say no and we’ll go back to watching the movie, Liv. You’re in control.”

I knew I was. Somehow I trusted each of them more than almost every other person in my life. My blue ovaries hadn’t budged. If anything, hearing them say they wanted to touch me together had made it even worse. I didn’t want to think. I just wanted to feel.

“Can we turn the light off?” My voice was quiet but the words were loud in their meaning. I wasn’t saying no.

Caleb got up to turn it off and when he sat back down, he put his hand right back on my thigh. “Better?”

I nodded and rested my head on Andrew’s chest. I didn’t know what to do next. I wasn’t sure if I needed to initiate something or if they would do it.

“We’re just watching a movie, Liv. Relax and enjoy it.” Jack leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss to my cheek. “We’ve never watched a movie this way before, either.”

Those words somehow took away some of my nerves. I turned my head to face him. “Never?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

I turned back to the TV and licked my lips. “Okay. We’re watching this movie this way for the first time.”

Silence settled between us as the movie played on. I waited anxiously for someone to move but they seemed set on torturing me. It was as I was gripping the blanket in my fisted hands that a thought occurred to me.

“Hey! Y’all planned this. The blanket and the movie and the moves. You talked this out, didn’t you?”

Andrew pushed his hand into my panties and lightly squeezed my sex. “Do you want to talk about it right now? Or do you want to experience it right now?”

I whimpered as he lifted his hand like he was taking it away. “We can talk later!”

Caleb and Jack hooked my panties and slowly dragged them down my legs. Jack pulled them out from under the blanket and pressed them to his nose as he inhaled deeply. His eyes grew sharp with hunger. “You’re fucking delicious, Liv.”

I let my head fall back on Andrew’s chest and rolled my hips in a silent plea to be touched. Andrew used his fingers to spread my sex open and the feeling of emptiness grew worse

until Caleb moved slightly and pressed one of his long fingers against my opening. I let out a quiet moan as he pushed into me.

Caleb pulled out and then I felt Jack slid his thick finger inside. They went back and forth like that until I was lifting my hips and hurting for more. Andrew wrapped his other arm under my chest to hold me down and growled against my neck as my wild movements had me rubbing all over his erection.

Jack pushed two fingers deep into me and Andrew lifted his hand and lightly slapped my clit. I opened my mouth to scream in pleasure but Caleb covered my mouth, cutting off any and all sounds I made. He and Jack took turns again until I felt both of their fingers pressing into me at the same time.

I arched my back and my eyes rolled as they stroked their fingers into me at the same time, filling and stretching me while Andrew's fingers danced over my clit faster. I was so close to coming that I could feel it starting in my fingers and toes and growing larger.

Caleb and Jack fingered me together, moving with synchronized intensity. Andrew's fingers flew over my clit. I couldn't catch my breath.

"Honey, I'm home!" Lydie's voice came from the hall outside of the living room. "Oh, this movie is supposed to be good."

We were all frozen but Andrew managed to make words. "Been good. Yep."

“That party was lame, by the way.” She yawned. “I’m going to go take a quick shower and then I’ll come back out. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

None of us moved as we listened to Lydie walk away. As soon as the bathroom door clicked shut, it was like the guys went into overdrive. I’d been so close before we were interrupted but in seconds they had me back there. They fucked me hard and fast, their fingers locked together inside me, while Andrew pinched my clit between his fingers and rubbed his finger directly over it.

Caleb’s hand tightened over my mouth as I flailed on Andrew’s lap and came like never before. I doubled over as wave after wave of pleasure surged through my veins. Gripping handfuls of blanket, I screamed into Caleb’s hand until I had no breath left and tears ran down my cheeks. When it became too much, I desperately twisted my hips and pressed my thighs together.

Their touch changed immediately from seeking and forcing pleasure to soothing and comforting. I stretched out as they stroked and massaged my legs and Andrew gently stroked my hair. They pulled my skirt back down and Jack even started to pull my panties back on me.

I pressed them into his hands and smiled a sleepy smile. “For you.”

He gripped them in a tight fist. “I’m going to do filthy things to them.”

Caleb groaned. “I’m rethinking this plan. I’m hearing things I don’t need to hear.”

I rolled my head in his direction. “So you admit there was a plan?”

“There was and is a plan. You’re just in phase one right now, sweetheart.”

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*****Olive*****

Since it seemed like Lydie was awake and eager to talk, we stopped the movie and I slipped into my bedroom to change into leggings so I didn't feel so exposed. I kept the shirt on, though, since it was obvious the guys liked it. We all sat around the coffee table on the floor and shared the movie candy while Lydie ranted.

“There were oodles of hotties, but they were all already paired off. So, then I'm standing next to a random guy and girl and they just asked if I wanted to find a room with them.”

I choked on a gummy bear and leaned into Caleb as he patted me on the back. When I could breathe again, I whisper yelled at my sister. “Are you freaking kidding me?”

She laughed and shook her head. “They weren't my type, so I said no. Don't have a fit.”

I held up my hands. “*They* weren't your type?”

Her grin was wicked because she knew she was blowing my mind. “They weren't. He wasn't my type of guy. She wasn't

my type of woman.”

I leaned forward. “If this is how you’re coming out to me right now, I’m going to punch you in the tit so hard.”

“Fine. I won’t come out as bi to you right now because I have better plans for my tits than you punching them.” She smirked at me. “But, yes. I am bi and if they had been my type, I would’ve become fucking Indiana Jones to find a room with them.”

Jack let out a shocked laugh that turned into a deep belly laugh. He shook his head when he could compose himself. “I’m just thinking about what I know from Andrew about your parents. They tried so hard to raise nuns. Fools.”

I crawled over to Lydie and knelt in front of her. “You know I love you no matter what. Obviously.”

She flashed me an uncharacteristically vulnerable smile. “Thanks, Liv.”

I wrapped her in a tight hug and squeezed. “But if you ever just go to a random town and meet a random couple and traipse off with them, I will kill you after they do. Have I not told you about enough true crime stories for you to be scared? Do I need to tell you more?”

She groaned and pushed me away. “No, please! I can only hear about so many body parts being cut off before I stop answering your calls.”

“Promise me you’ll always be careful? I don’t care if you sleep with an entire coed basketball team, as long as you’re

safe.” I crawled over to Jack and settled between his legs. “And yeah, it is hilarious to think that our parents did their best to shame us into fearing sex and pleasure when you look at us now.”

Lydie snorted. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t fear sex and pleasure until you got here and started seeing these three. You were practically a born again virgin when you left Blackfoot.”

Jack wrapped his arms around me and smiled into my hair. “Is your sister suggesting we corrupted you?”

Andrew nodded. “Are we the men your parents warned you about?”

I laughed and stretched my foot out to nudge him with it. “You’re a dork.”

“Anyway, back to the party.” Lydie sat up on her knees and started clearing the coffee table. “I have to show you the setup for this story. Give me the gummy bears and the Lifesavers.”

Caleb pushed them both to her. “I’m both nervous and intrigued.”

“So. Imagine the gummy bears are-”

Loud knocking on the door made me jump. I looked around at the guys and felt my stomach twist with nerves. “What time is it?”

Andrew and Caleb were already on their feet. Andrew looked at his watch and frowned. “Two in the morning. We all know who it is.”

Jack stood up and lifted me to my feet. He looked at Lydie and pointed at me. “You keep her back.”

I scowled. “It’s *my* apartment.”

“We all saw the way you shook after spending time with him. He scares you and that’s enough of a reason for me to want you away from him.” He gently pushed me towards Lydie and stalked towards the door as the knocking turned into banging.

Lydie wrapped her arms around me and held me close. “You’re very popular.”

I might’ve laughed if Taylor’s voice wasn’t suddenly filling my apartment. I was sure every apartment around could hear him shouting, too.

“What the fuck are you three doing here? Get out of my way. I need to see Olive.” His words were slurred and it was abundantly clear that he was wasted. “Olive! Come out here and talk to me!”

“You need to leave, Taylor.” Andrew’s low voice felt dangerously heavy with warning. “Right now.”

“Get out of my fucking way!” The sound of shuffling preceded a grunt from Taylor and then the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. “Who pushed me? Who fucking pushed me? I’ll kill you!”

“Go home, Taylor. You’re not wanted here.” Caleb spit out the words and I’d never heard him so serious.

“My fucking kid’s in there! Does he see his mother being a whore? Does he-” A loud *thud* shut him up for a few seconds but then he was louder than ever. “Hit me again! Hit me again! I dare you!”

I shrugged out of Lydie’s hold and rushed to the doorway to see Caleb bent over Taylor, holding him up by the front of his shirt. I saw Caleb’s future being ruined by Taylor, over me, and I couldn’t let it happen.

I ducked low and slipped between Jack and Andrew to wrap my arms around Caleb. “Stop. *Please*. I don’t want you to get in trouble, Caleb. Just let him go and come inside with me.”

Jack swore and wrapped his arm around my waist from behind. “Goddammit, Liv. Get back inside.”

I held onto Caleb tighter. “He’ll try to ruin you, Caleb. He’s not worth it. Just come inside with me, okay?”

“Listen to the whore, Caleb! I ruined her once and I’ll do it again. When I’m finished with her, I’ll ruin you and your bitch buddies.” Taylor laughed and wiped away the blood dripping from his nose. “Does she still cry when you fuck her?”

Caleb slammed another punch into Taylor’s face and then swung around and picked me up. “You get back inside right now.”

“Is your boyfriend afraid you’ll remember how good I was and leave him for me? Remember that time behind your parents’ house, Olive? Remember?”

Everything was spiraling so fast and I could feel Caleb giving into the anger and need to keep hitting Taylor. I clung to him even harder. “I don’t care what he says, Caleb. I just want you to come inside with me. Let’s just go inside and forget about this.”

“All the other girls made me pull out or wear a condom.” Taylor’s drunken voice had taken on a sing-song effect. “Not stupid little Olive Oakley. She let me come inside her while she was wearing her purity ring.”

“Stop it! I hate you, Dad! I hate you!” The world went still around me as I looked down and saw Jesse standing in his pajamas, screaming at his dad who was still on the ground, bleeding.

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*****Jack*****

Olive pulled away from me and Caleb to scoop Jesse into her arms. She cradled him to her chest even though he was nearly half her size and moved to take him back inside. “It’s okay, buddy. Mommy’s here. Mommy’s right here.”

“Tell the little bastard I hate him, too. I had a good thing going before he came along.” Taylor was losing steam and it was obvious he was hurting as he pulled himself to his feet. “I’m not a fucking dad. I’m going pro and you can bet I’m not going to be stopping by to see little Joey on my way to fame.”

Caleb shook his head. “You’re disgusting.”

Andrew scrubbed his hands down his face and scowled at Taylor. “What happened to you, man?”

A blur moved past us and in the blink of an eye, Olive was in front of Taylor, her body rigid as she ripped into him. “How dare you! How dare you say that to Jesse! He’s a little boy and you just told him you hated him, you piece of shit! I don’t know if your parents didn’t love you enough or if you were

just born a monster, but I'm done, Taylor. Jesse's better off without a father than with a man like you in his life. You're going to be a bad memory to him soon and if he's lucky, he won't remember you at all when he's older.

“But you, Taylor? You're going to wake up one day and remember you had a son. Not Joey, you asshole. *Jesse*. You're going to wake up and you're going to look around and see that everyone around you fucking hates you. If you do find fame, you'd better pray that no one ever shows up on my doorstep asking about the man you were before you were famous. Unless being a dirtbag who bullied a fourteen-year-old into losing her virginity is in style, I don't think it'll go over well. Jesse and I? We'll always be ghosts fucking haunting you. But you're going to be a smudge that we forget ever existed.”

Taylor stared down at Olive without moving or saying anything. He just stared at her.

“I hope you enjoyed that power you felt when you were here, cornering me in my own apartment and forcing me to deal with your presence. I hope it's enough to last you because it's over.” Shaking her head as she continued to stare him down, Olive raised her hand to point at the parking lot and Taylor visibly flinched. “Leave. Now. If I see you here again, I'll file for a restraining order.”

Taylor stumbled back a few steps and cleared his throat. “Whatever, Olive. You were a shitty lay, anyway.”

With a bitter laugh, Olive crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, I was a child. If you wanted skill, maybe you shouldn't

have preyed upon a little girl, Taylor.”

His face paled and then he turned and stumbled back to the parking lot. The sound of his truck starting and him speeding out of the lot was a piercing finish to what had been a vile and horrific situation.

Andrew stepped into crisis mode and barked out orders. “Caleb, call the cops and alert them of a drunk driver. He’s going to fucking hurt someone. Jack, get Olive inside and make sure Jesse and Lydie are okay. I’m going to trail behind him to make sure he doesn’t kill someone.”

Olive turned to face us and the sight of her haunted eyes was a punch to the gut. She stiffened her jaw and lifted her chin in an act of pure defiance against the emotions battling inside her. “I don’t want you on the road with him right now. Come inside with us, please.”

Andrew hesitated and then nodded. “I’ll call the cops myself and make sure they know where he was coming from and where he’s going.”

She swallowed and pushed her hair behind her ears. “I... I’m sorry that this is what’s happening on a night you should be celebrating. None of you deserve this. If you want to go, I wouldn’t blame you. I just... Wait for a bit before you leave.”

I swept her into my arms and held her tight. “We’re not going anywhere, Olive.”

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*****Olive*****

Kitty looked at me through rhinestone-tipped eyelashes and raised her eyebrows. “You look like shit.”

I yawned. “Thank you.”

Jerry stopped next to where the two of us were sitting on a bench in the sun and planted her hands on her hips. “Both of you look a little like shit, if I’m being honest. Big Kitty and Little Kitty both had a little too much fun last night, huh?”

Kitty pointed her finger at Jerry. “I’ve spanked you before and I’ll do it again. I am the spitting image of fucking beautiful right now. Do you see these eyelashes? These eyelashes were custom made by the woman who styles the wigs of the woman who cleans Dolly’s carpets. No one can look like shit with these eyelashes on.”

I nodded. “Facts.”

Kitty sighed. “But I did drink too much last night. I went with the Trashed Twins to James Barton’s ninetieth birthday

party and between the Jell-o shots and the tequila head shakes, I'm feeling a little green."

They both looked at me and I snorted. "I may have three boyfriends. They may want to touch me together. A little of that maybe happened last night and then all hell broke loose when my son's father showed up and tried to fight everyone. I spent the rest of the night consoling my son and sister while the guys hovered over me, watching me for any signs of damage. I *wish* I'd gone to James' party."

"No one under seventy is allowed at-" Kitty did a double take that would've made the gang from *Scooby-Doo* proud. "Three boyfriends?!"

Jerry sat on the ground in front of us and rested her chin in her hands. "It's story time, ma'am."

I pushed my hair behind my ears and bounced my foot. "I'm nervous that if I say it all, everyone will judge me."

"I told you about the time I slept with my ex-husband's brother to make a point! I think this is officially a judgment free zone." Jerry shook her head. "Might not've been so bad if he hadn't been hung like a seahorse."

Kitty nodded emphatically and then held her head and groaned. "Maybe I drank too much. But I told you about the time I got lobsters from that hippy in Panama City Beach. You didn't judge me for that."

I giggled. "Crabs, Kitty. You got *crabs* from a hippy in Panama City Beach. And you're right. I didn't judge you for

it. I was honestly impressed that you had sex with a hippy on a beach in Florida and *all* you got was crabs.”

Jerry cackled and high-fived me. “Amen. I knew a woman who slept with a guy in Florida and got twenty to life in prison. Of course, it was because she shot him to death when she caught him trying to steal her purse after he didn’t get her off.”

Kitty nodded. “I knew her. She was great.”

“A man who can’t make a woman come should always be a little concerned.” Jerry shook her head. “My ex is lucky that he left our marriage with all of his limbs and life.”

I stared at her and then looked over at Kitty. “Should I be concerned about bringing men around you two?”

Kitty shimmied her chest and winked. “Hell yes, but not for that reason.”

“That Caleb was a beauty. I heard from Jonas that he’s an Evers, so he’s also loaded.” Jerry wagged her eyebrows. “Bring him around again and you might lose him. There’s a lot of cougars in this place that would love a rich piece of arm candy.”

“No one’s taking him from me.” I covered my mouth and sat back as I heard the sharp tone to my voice. “Oh, no. I didn’t mean that to sound as possessive and crazy as it did.”

“Oh, hush up and just tell us about the three boyfriends already. Are they all as hot and rich as Caleb?” Leaning closer to me, Kitty wiggled her fingers at me. “I need details.”

“I don’t know how rich Caleb is, but they’re all so gorgeous. Not only that, they’re good men. They’re kind to me and so sweet with Jesse.” I blushed. “And they touched me together last night. That’s all I’m going to say. I will burst into flames if I go into detail, because I already feel like my face is on fire from saying that much.”

“They touched you together.” Kitty tilted her head at me. “Honey, that could mean anything from a healing at a revival to the three of them combing your hair for three hours. At least give me a *little* detail.”

“None of them would’ve been shot last night, if you get what I’m saying.” I covered my face in my hands when they just stared at me blankly. “They fingered me!”

“Good lord, Little Kitty! I didn’t know you were a freak. You’re always wearing those Sunday school dresses.” Barb strolled up to us with Brenda hanging on her arm. They were both missing their wigs and Barb had a boob hanging out of her tube top. “I love it. Tell us everything. After the night we had, we need to live vicariously through young sex.”

Brenda motioned for me to move and I hurried to get out of her way so they could sit on the bench. “I’m filing charges against that nutjob, Gary B. He took a Viagra last night and thought he was a young buck again. He couldn’t even find my vagina. He just humped at me for forty minutes and then passed out on top of me.”

“John tried to put it up my butt last night. I hit him with my purse and knocked him out. He’s still sleeping it off on my

floor. Or he's dead. I don't know." Barb shook her head. "Then, I go over to Brenda's room this morning and see she's pinned under Gary B's big, hairy ass."

"Some days I think the party life is getting old." Brenda sighed and leaned into Barb. "Gary B still had a stiffy this morning. That was interesting."

Jerry was already struggling to her feet and grabbing her walkie talkie. "If you two murdered two men last night while having sex, I'm putting a ban on your sex life!"

"Enough about these two killers. We already decided that if a man doesn't make a woman come, he's put himself in harm's way." Kitty rolled her eyes and pointed at me, where I was standing, looking horrified at the possibility of two dead men. "So, they fingered you together? How's that work?"

I turned to Jerry. "I can't answer that until someone clarifies that there aren't dead bodies just lying around here!"

Barb groaned. "God, you young people and your dramatics. I'm sure they're both fine."

Jerry held up her walkie talkie and walked a few feet away. "I need a wellness check in the Trashed Twins home."

"So, you're sleeping with multiple men at the same time? I'm surprised, but I like it. I spent an entire decade living with two men who loved gobbling me up." Brenda tipped her face up to the sky and sighed dreamily. "Oh, how I miss the sixties."

Kitty waved her hand under her nose. “One of you smells like farts.”

“They’re fine.” Jerry pointed at the twins. “You two are on my last nerve.”

“Wait. Why is Little Kitty telling us about her multiple partner sex? Did something exciting happen?” Barb cut her eyes at Kitty. “You’re the one who smells like a fart.”

I turned to Jerry as chaos erupted between the older women. “They don’t give a shit that I’m hooking up with three men at the same time.”

She shook her head and made a face. “Duh. Why would anyone?”

My smile became a permanent feature on my face after that.

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*****Olive*****

Terri watched me as I got out of her truck. “You haven’t stopped smiling since I picked you up. I’ve never seen anyone leave that place as happy as you.”

I laughed and held up my hands. “I love those ladies. They really know how to ease a woman’s fears.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen them create new fears in women and men alike.” She shook her head. “You really found your pack, girl.”

My phone beeped and I waved goodbye to Terri before pulling it out of my purse. It was a message from Lydie. She’d made it back to Blackfoot. I dialed her number as I walked towards my front door.

“You just can’t get enough of me, can you? Don’t tell me that you already miss me.” She sounded sad and the sarcasm in her words wasn’t as committed as usual.

“I do miss you. I’m sorry you had to go back today.” I took a deep breath and blew out a raspberry. “Do you think you

might want to come here next year? No pressure. I just have to ask.”

“Oh, Liv, I’ve already been looking at the different degree programs. This weekend made me realize just how much I hate being away from you and Jesse. So much is changing in your life and I want to be there. I’m your sister. I deserve to be there, dammit.” She sniffled. “And I hate it here. As soon as I walked into the house, Mom and Dad both just asked if you were pregnant again. They didn’t ask about me at all, or about Jesse. I’m going to transfer, Liv. Maybe I can live with you for a while, until I find my own place?”

“Yes! Lydie, yes! You’re always welcome here. I want you here. You deserve to be around people who see you, sis. I’ll do whatever I can to help. You know Jesse is going to freak out. Caleb sent me an SOS text this morning because Jesse cried after you left.” I stopped at my door and smiled. “Maybe we’ll both find happiness here.”

“Jesse cried? That’s it. I’m coming back right now.”

“No! You need to finish your semester, at least. I’m not your mom, but I am your big sister and I’m not going to let you throw a semester’s worth of tuition away.”

“You’re only my big sister by eleven months.” She groaned. “But okay. I’ll wait. I’m going to have to sleep around a lot to feel okay about still being here, though.”

I stammered until I heard her laughing. “That’s not funny. You’re going to explode my brain one day and then you’ll be sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah. I love you, Liv. I’m going to go tell Mom and Dad the good news.” She sounded like she was getting back to her normal self. “If they don’t want to bring the fight to me, I can bring it to them.”

Before I could tell her I loved her, she was gone. I was shaking my head and smiling when I walked into my apartment. The silence perplexed me because I’d left Jesse with the guys and they were rarely quiet. I walked past the kitchen and gasped. The kitchen was spotless, except for a large pot on the stove that smelled amazing. The floors even shined.

Dropping my purse to the ground, I turned and hurried to the living room and found it spotless, too. Taylor’s gaming system was nowhere to be seen but my shabby little entertainment center had been turned into something much more impressive with a huge TV and a bunch of things under it that all had matching controllers. A recliner had been added and against the far wall was a child’s table with two small chairs around it. A stack of children’s books were placed neatly on top. The coffee table held a huge vase of fresh flowers.

I hurried down the hall to find my guys, glancing in my room and then hurrying to Jesse’s. Inside, the four of them were standing in front of Jesse’s bed in suits. The guys were stunning in their well-fitted suits that highlighted their strong builds and they’d even styled their hair. They looked amazing. Standing in front of them, holding his hands together in front of him, was Jesse. In his own suit, he grinned up at me and I

saw they'd styled his hair, too. He was standing so proud, waiting on me to say something.

I dropped to my knees and held my arms open for him. When he ran into my arms, I held him and looked up at the guys with tears in my eyes. "This is amazing."

Andrew stepped forward and held his hand out for me to take. "There's one more thing."

Jesse bounced and grinned. "You're going to be so pretty, Mommy!"

I took Andrew's hand and let him lead me to my room. Hanging on the back of the closet door was a long garment bag. I touched the bag and looked down at Jesse. "And what's this?"

Jack smiled from the doorway. "He picked it out himself."

Caleb nodded. "Little dude has excellent taste."

I held the bag to my chest and hugged it. "No one's ever done anything like this for me before."

Andrew pulled me closer and kissed my forehead. "Get used to it. You've got as long as you need to get ready. We won't be rushing you. Dinner will be ready when you are. Afterwards, we're going to an ice cream shop on campus that Jesse saw today and desperately needs. Not wants. *Needs.*"

"There was a cow on the window, Mom!"

I nodded seriously. "I'd better hurry up then."

After they left the room, I closed the door and slowly unzipped the bag. I stared down at the dress in front of me and couldn't believe what I was seeing. When I pulled it out, I could see it in its full glory and covered my mouth with my trembling hand. Floor length, full, and the exact color green of my eyes, the dress was straight out of my dreams. The top was a fitted band of material with tiny straps holding it up. Just under my breasts, it flowed down and out with a floral embroidered overlay that made it fairy-like. It was delicate and beautiful.

I took a quick shower and skipped underwear after seeing how the top fit would close around my chest. A part of me also felt emboldened and brave after seeing how much effort the guys put into me. I put my hair in an updo with a few pieces hanging down, applied enough makeup to match the dress, and then tip-toed out of the bedroom barefoot. They were in the living room, waiting on me, and when I walked in, all four of them jumped to their feet.

My cheeks burned as I ducked my head and smiled. "I need help with the zipper."

Caleb nearly pushed Andrew and Jack over to get to my side first. He leaned in and let his knuckles drag up my spine as he slowly pulled the zipper up. "You look so fucking beautiful, sweetheart."

I turned into him and wrapped my arms around his neck for a tight hug. "Thank you. I've never felt more like a princess."

“You look like a princess, Mommy! And you have four princes!” Jesse touched the flowers on my dress and stared up at me with wide eyes. “You’re so pretty.”

“Thank you, Jesse. You’re very handsome.”

He looked around at the guys. “What about them, Mommy? Are they handsome?”

I bit my lip and nodded. “They are the most handsome men I’ve ever seen. Besides you, of course.”

He pumped his fist in the air and spun around. “We did it! Mommy’s so happy!”

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*****Andrew*****

Of course, Taylor hadn't brought Olive to our senior prom. I'd never seen any pictures online of her in a dress at her own, either. While attending dances over the years, I'd wondered what Olive would've looked like in one of the crazy dresses the other girls wore. She was so beautiful, but so hidden. I'd never even seen her shoulders until she'd stripped naked in front of me the day we'd had sex. I'd never been able to imagine Olive in a fancy dress, but after seeing it in real life, I knew my imagination would not have been able to hold a candle to the real thing.

She looked ethereal, like she was glowing. Her skin, her eyes, her smile, they all seemed to shine brighter. The dress highlighted her shape and made me want to rip it off of her while somehow preserving it so she could wear it every day. Her chest, shoulders, and arms were bare and when I hugged her, I could feel her silky skin warm under my touch. I wanted to give Jesse everything I owned for picking out the perfect dress for his mom.

Jack cleared his throat and I could tell he was struggling to keep it together, too. “Dinner is a pot of my mom’s famous jambalaya.”

“Don’t worry, Mommy. They bought bibs for everyone.”

Olive laughed and took Jesse’s hand. “Thank goodness. I would hate to ruin my new beautiful dress before I get to wear it to get ice cream. And the four of you all look so good. It would be a shame if anything happened to those crisp white shirts.”

We ate dinner at the dining room table we’d brought over from our house and the conversation flowed easily. Olive told us about her day in as much detail as she could with minor ears listening. We told her about shopping with Jesse and how fast we’d all gotten tired of it. She teased us for the recliner and we teased her for the box of cords we’d found shoved behind the TV. They looked important, but she had no idea where they went.

Dinner was amazing, since Jack was a great cook. As soon as the last bite was gone, Jesse was already waiting at the door, ready to go for ice cream. The moment he’d seen the ice cream shop earlier that day, he’d nearly yanked my arm off trying to get me to go that way. He’d only agreed to wait for Olive because we’d promised him to bring him back later, just the guys. I wasn’t saying the kid had an ice cream problem, but...

“Let me put shoes on and I’ll be ready.” Olive stood up and went to move towards her bedroom but Caleb pointed to the

floor under the table. She leaned down and gasped. “Stop it! Y’all got me shoes, too?”

We got the pleasure of watching her pull her dress up so she could slip her feet into the lacy green flats and tie them up to her calves. All the lacing and tying and my mind went straight to tying Olive up. I had no business walking into an ice cream shop with an erection, though, so I thought of sad things to get it under control.

“Come on, everybody!” Jesse practically vibrated with energy. “I’m going to get three scoops! No, four!”

Olive laughed and pulled him in for a hug. “How about we start with one? We can always go back.”

He looked up at us and then batted his eyelashes at her. “Just you and me, Mommy?”

Before she could answer, Caleb grunted. “Hey. Don’t start acting like a con artist, little dude. You made us promise to take you back already, as a guy’s trip.”

Jesse groaned. “Aw, Caleb!”

Olive laughed and pinched his cheeks. “You got your mom’s love of ice cream, didn’t you? It’s probably the massive amounts of ice cream I ate when I was pregnant with you. No one wanted me to have any so I snuck around and got it while no one knew. I guess I’m to blame for your sneaky ice cream ways.”

“So, it’s okay?”

She grinned. “Nope. One scoop for tonight and then you can go again later with all of us or some of us, but not multiple times while tricking us.”

“But I don’t know what flavor I want, Mom. I can’t just get one. What if I don’t like it?” Jesse hung his head and followed Olive out to my truck.

“So, that’s the secret. Most places will give you samples. You can eat so many samples that one scoop is enough.” Olive heard Caleb snort and swatted his arm. “Hush.”

We listened to Jesse talk about what flavors they might have as I drove. Jesse could buckle himself into his booster seat easily enough so it took a while for Olive to realize that he had a new seat.

“You... You guys bought him a new booster seat.” Her voice was watery as she spoke. “This one is the safest one they make.”

I glanced back at her in the rearview mirror and swallowed my feelings at seeing how grateful she was for something so small to us. “It seemed like it was time for an upgrade. I hope that was okay.”

“This one has *two* cup holders, Mommy. I can double-fist my juice boxes.”

Olive swung her face around to Caleb. “Don’t try to deny that it was you. I know you’re the one who thought it would be hilarious to teach him that.”

Caleb smirked. “It wasn’t me, sweetheart. I’m a fucking boy scout around the kid.”

“I wanna be a fucking boy scout!” Jesse cheered and waved his hands around over his head.

Caleb groaned. “That’s not fair. No one’s perfect.”

Jack looked back at them. “I may have accidentally taught him that. Sorry.”

“Jesse, you know that’s a big boy word.” Olive elbowed Caleb in the side and then leaned forward to pinch Jack. “Is Andrew the only one out of the three of you not teaching him things that can get him in trouble?”

The truck grew quiet and the guys seemingly debated whether or not it was worth it to throw me under the bus. Turns out they didn’t need to, though. Jesse did it for them.

“Andrew used to kiss the lady at the first dress shop we went to. And another one from the next one. They didn’t seem happy to see him, either.”

I cleared my throat. “Ah... I used to date around a lot. Some of the women didn’t take the ending too well.”

“Now he only wants to kiss Mommy.” Jesse giggled and made kissing noises.

I felt myself blushing and tried to keep my face turned away from everyone so they wouldn’t see. I parked on the street a block away from the popular ice cream shop and cleared my throat. “Well. We’re here. We should stop talking and start walking.”

“Jack wants to kiss Mommy and Caleb wants to kiss Mommy and Andrew wants to kiss Mommy.” Jesse was basically singing by that point and I knew there was no hiding how red I was so I just turned to face him.

“How do you feel about that?”

Olive watched Jesse closely and we all held our breath. If Jesse hated us being with Olive, she wouldn't be with us. She wouldn't put her son in a situation he wasn't comfortable with to make herself happy.

“Kissing is gross.” He looked up at his mother and shrugged. “But Mommy's happy now. And I'm happy. So I guess it's okay.”

“Alright then. Let's go get some ice cream.” Caleb laughed like he didn't have a care in the world. “Now that kissing has been covered, I'm starving for something sweet.”

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*****Olive*****

We were the only people dressed up in The Mooery so we drew quite a bit of attention when we walked in. The guys were used to it being positive attention, so they peacocked their way to the ice cream counter without issue. The attention I was used to getting was more along the tomato throwing kind, so I tried to make myself as small as possible. Thankfully, Jesse was oblivious. He just had eyes for ice cream.

Andrew reached back and pulled me forward so I was standing with my back pressed against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me as he looked at all the flavors. “What’s your favorite?”

I licked my dry lips and had to clear my throat to speak. “Moose tracks.”

The woman working behind the counter couldn’t take her eyes off of the guys. Not that I blamed her. In suits, they were dangerously handsome. She dropped an ice cream scoop on

the ground and giggled. “I think you’re in my business classes.”

Caleb looked up from the ice cream and pointed to himself. “Me?”

She nodded and smiled. “Yeah. We have Professor Donaldson and Professor Pauls together. I’m Sara.”

I was stuck. I wanted to tell her to get away and stay away from Caleb, even though she hadn’t done anything wrong and I had no claim over him. I couldn’t move, though. With the amount of people staring at us, I couldn’t make it obvious that I was all over Andrew first and then Caleb right after. The older rumors I’d escaped would come back again.

Caleb bent over and picked Jesse up. “Cool. I’m Caleb and this is my buddy, Jesse. We’re not sure what we want just yet. Could we have some samples?”

Andrew nodded happily. “Samples!”

I forced a smile up at Andrew and pointed to the bathroom. “I think I’m just going to...”

He gripped the back of my neck and kissed me, bending me back as he did. Almost in a complete dip, he held me steady and lifted his mouth so he could look at me. “No hiding. You think I don’t know what’s going through your head right now? I can feel your body and how stiff it gets when you’re uncomfortable.”

I let him slide me upright again and held onto the lapels of his jacket. “I don’t want to go through it again.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “You’re the most beautiful woman in here, Olive. You’ve got so much going for you. No matter what, people are going to look at you. They can’t help it. The same way I can’t help it. If you run and hide, I’m going to have to come find you and between classes and football and trying to date you, I’m a little busy.”

I smiled and cupped his cheek. “I told you I’m not dating right now.”

Jack poked his head into our little meeting and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “One. You’re definitely dating. Two. The nice lady behind the counter would like to know what you want. Jesse’s already two spoonfuls into his one scoop and if we’re not out of here by the time he’s done, I think he’s getting a second one.”

I pulled away and ordered a scoop of Moose Tracks while watching the woman continue to shoot interested looks at Caleb. Andrew ordered two scoops of vanilla and shrugged when I gave him a look over it.

“Um... Sorry, but do you think I could have you give Caleb my number? I would do it myself but I get embarrassed so easily...” The woman held out a slip of paper to me.

I found myself reaching for the paper, despite scorching it off the face of the earth in my mind. Before I could get it, though, Caleb pulled my arm down. I saw a flash of frustration in his gaze before he looked up at the woman and smiled.

“I have a girlfriend.” He saw her face fall and shot me another look. “It’s fine. Hey, you never know. The next guy

who comes in here might not have a girlfriend and he'll be ten times hotter than me. You have to shoot your shot."

My heart beat faster as I watched him make her smile like she hadn't looked like she was going to cry seconds before. He was such a good man, a fighter when he had to be and a gentle soul when he could be. They were each such good men that I wasn't sure why they wanted to be with me. I also wasn't sure why I was still pretending like what we were doing was somehow not a relationship. It was in every way but a name.

I was so lost in thought that I took my ice cream and ate it without even tasting it. I hadn't heard the way the guys and Jesse were joking or even noticed I was moving until we were back at the truck. Jack helped a very sluggish Jesse into his booster seat and then he walked me around to the other side where Andrew and Caleb were already standing. He tried to open the door for me but I held up my hand to stop him.

"When you said girlfriend... Did you mean me?"

Caleb scowled. "Do you think I meant someone else, Olive? And what were you thinking, trying to take a number a woman was trying to give me. You're not my secretary. You're my girlfriend."

A slow smile twisted my lips up and I nodded. "Okay."

He frowned. "Okay?"

"Okay." I looked down at my hands and glanced up at him through my lashes. "I'm your girlfriend."

They each froze and stared at me with shocked expressions. I pulled open the back door and climbed inside. I settled next to Jesse and buckled myself in before the guys quietly got in. Jesse was already nodding off so I knew he'd be out by the time we got home.

Caleb put his arm around me and grunted. "It was that easy? I just had to say it out loud for it to come true?"

Jack and Andrew both spoke at the same time from the front seat, saying the same thing. "You're my girlfriend."

I laughed and laid my head on Caleb's chest. "Okay. I'm your girlfriend. All three of you have me as a girlfriend. Congrats. Or sorry. I'm not sure which to say more emphatically."

"Is he asleep?" Jack looked back and met my eyes. When I nodded, he licked his lips. "How do you feel about us staying the night?"

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*****Olive*****

Caleb had gone to tuck Jesse in while Andrew and Jack picked up the kitchen after our dinner. I went straight to my bedroom and tried not to freak out while picking up my clothes and straightening my bed. I brushed my teeth and pulled my shoes off. I even thought about posing across the bed like I'd seen in movies but those movies were typically comedies, so I thought better of it.

Jack came in first, still drying his hands on a dish towel that definitely hadn't come from my kitchen drawers. He'd lost the suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up and while he stood there, watching me, he tugged his tie off and unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt.

I stood next to my bed and vibrated with need and nerves. When he moved to stand in front of me, I knew he could see the way I shook. He cupped both sides of my neck and gently ran his thumbs over my throat. My eyes fluttered shut as he rubbed my shoulders and the back of my neck.

“Who’s in control tonight, Liv?” His deep voice was like a tongue running down my spine.

“You.”

“No.” He pinched my chin and lifted my face to his. “*You*, Liv. You’re in control. Even if we’re deciding how to take you and how much you can take, you’re the one who’s in charge.”

I groaned. “That came off a little eager to please, huh?”

“One day, I’ll be in control.” His smile was full of dark promises when I jerked my gaze to his. “When you’re ready and trust me fully, I’ll show you what it feels like to turn yourself over to me completely.”

I melted into his chest and shuddered. “Wow.”

Andrew came in next and he’d already taken off his jacket, tie, and unbuttoned his shirt fully so he flashed glimpses of his strong stomach as he moved. “That’s going to be a tight fit.”

I saw him looking at the bed, but I couldn’t stop myself from breaking my nervous tension with a stupid joke. “That’s what *I* said.”

Jack shook his head and groaned. “Our girlfriend is a dork.”

The butterflies in my stomach turned into seagulls. I was their girlfriend and they seemed so happy about it. I looked around the room and decided that they deserved to be romanced, too. I was probably just proving to them that I was a bigger dork than they thought possible and I worried they’d run screaming, but I needed to do something.

“Jesse’s out cold. I turned the nightlight on for him and left the door cracked. I didn’t want him to be scared if he woke up all alone and in the dark.” Caleb stopped in the doorway when I held up my hands. “Oh, shit. Change of plans?”

I shook my head. “No, no. Just... Get out for a few seconds. I have to do something.”

They exchanged curious glances and started towards the door without questioning me.

“Wait!” I hurried over to Caleb and went up on my tiptoes to kiss him. “Thank you for taking care of Jesse and worrying about him. You’re going to be an amazing dad if you decide to be one.”

He looked shell shocked. “I... Thank you.”

I kissed him once more and then pushed him out. Pushing Jack and Andrew out after him, I shut the door and then rushed around the room, lighting the candles I’d made at a Jolly Pines craft day. Then I looked around and realized what else I was missing. I cracked open the door and slipped out of my room and into the living room. The guys were in the kitchen and I peeked in on them and saw that they were each standing still, waiting on me without even speaking to each other.

I wondered if they were as nervous as I was as I hurried back to the bedroom and scattered a handful of rose petals on the bed while keeping three deep red roses in my hand. Flipping the light off, my room was thrust into flickering mood lighting. The thought to take a picture to show the ladies and

Lydie crossed my mind and then I had a second thought that I might need to get a therapist.

I found a moody, sexy playlist on my phone and turned all other notifications off before putting the phone down and taking a deep breath. Music? Check. Lighting? Check. Clean body and teeth? Check. I pulled open the bedroom door and stood slightly behind it so I'd be hidden when the guys came in.

"Ready." I called out low enough that it wouldn't wake Jesse but I heard the guys moving in my direction immediately.

They walked in and I quietly shut the door behind them and locked it. The sound of the lock turning had them each turning to look at me. In the flickering light, they looked like three starving giants, set on ravishing me.

I flashed a nervous grin as I clutched my roses. "You three have been so good to me. You've been so sweet and romantic and thoughtful. I just thought you each deserved a little romance, too. And I thought you deserved to be asked if you wanted to be my boyfriends."

Jack's grin stretched wide as I dropped to my knees in front of them. When I held a rose out to him, he laughed and tried to pull me to my feet. "Get up, Liv. You don't need to do that."

I swatted his hand away. "Jack Roberts, Caleb Evers, and Andrew Walker. Will you be my boyfriends?"

Caleb took his rose and then picked me up like I weighed nothing. "Yes, sweetheart. For the love of god, yes."

I held my last rose out to Andrew and laughed. “Andrew?”

“Yes, Olive. Thank you for dropping to your knees to ask me that.” He took the rose and nodded at Jack. “Well? Jack?”

“Yes. Now, can we get to the part where I touch my girlfriend?”

Andrew motioned for Caleb to put me down between them and when he did, I stood there, watching as they each stripped down to just black boxer briefs. I bit my lip and pointed at their bottoms. “Did y’all plan that?”

Jack grunted. “Nope. Which makes me think we need to start shopping separately.”

My body heated as I took them in. There were so many muscles to appreciate and I felt my mind slipping into a place it’d never existed in before. There, in my tiny bedroom in my tiny apartment, I felt like I was standing on top of the world, completely free. Pleasure mattered and the four of us being happy mattered, for whatever time we were locked in my room, we were free.

As I let them strip me naked, I didn’t think about what they saw, but I just felt. I felt their hands dragging over my skin as they undressed me. I felt their breath ghosting over my neck and shoulders as they moved. I felt wanted and desired like never before as their hard lengths pressed into me from all around.

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*****Caleb*****

Olive's bed wasn't made for three large men to be in it with her but we stretched her out between us and made it work. She smiled up at me as I worked to take her hair down and then turned to nuzzle her cheek into my bare thigh. My dick jumped to connect with her.

Andrew knelt by her waist and Jack was between her knees, caressing and rubbing her feet and legs. Olive looked like a goddess spread out for us and the hungry look on her face made me want to give her whatever she wanted. We'd talked about how we were going to take things slow to make sure she was relaxed and okay with things every step of the way, but Olive twisted her hips back and forth on the bed like she couldn't wait much longer.

Andrew picked up the rose she'd given him and dragged it over her nipple. When she arched her back and moaned, he lowered his mouth to the same nipple and flicked his tongue over it. She slowly pushed her hand down the bed, like she was fighting what she needed and wanted. Jack bit her inner

thigh and we all watched as Olive pressed her fingers against her wetness to rub her clit.

I tugged harder on her hair than I'd meant to and blew out a rough breath. "Goddamn."

Andrew stroked the rose down her stomach and over her fingers. He ran it over her lower lips and we all moaned at the sight of her wetness clinging to rose petals.

"Move your hand, Liv." Jack pressed openmouthed kisses to her thighs. "I need a fucking taste."

I cupped her chin and tipped her face up towards mine. "Let Jack taste you, sweetheart. Move that hand."

Andrew and I both went still as we watched our best friend lower himself between our girl's thighs. He wrapped his arms under her legs and held them apart as he licked her from asshole to clit. Olive's moan was louder than we could have if we wanted to make sure Jesse stayed asleep so I reached down and pressed my finger to her lips.

Jack went in like a starving man, eating Olive's pussy with so much intensity that I felt ashamed of every other time I'd gone down on a woman. Watching him made me want to shove him out of the way so I could eat her like that. The sounds he made as he focused his mouth over her clit showed just how much he loved what he was doing. When Olive came on his tongue barely a minute after he started, Andrew and I both held out our fists for him to bump.

Olive pushed our hands away with a breathy laugh. “Do not fist bump over my naked body.”

I stroked my hand down her throat. “He deserves praise for that. I’m already thinking of ways to up my game, so you should doubly thank him.”

Jack crawled up her body and kissed her. The scent of her arousal made me groan in pain. I’d never been so hard in my life.

After secretly fist bumping us, Jack moved back down between her thighs. “Are you going to need help staying quiet?”

She nodded and stretched a hand out in each direction to grip both cocks that she could reach. Her shudder of pleasure had me pumping my hips against her hand. “I’ve only ever given one blow job, so please don’t expect perfection.”

I looked at Jack and then at Andrew. Judging by the grin on Andrew’s face, he’d received that one blow job. “Lucky bastard.”

Jack growled. “I’m only going to wait for a few more seconds before I fuck this pretty pussy with my mouth until you beg me to stop, Liv. Someone had better put something in your mouth by then.”

I shoved down my briefs and stroked her cheek. “This angle might be intense, sweetheart.”

Andrew moved to kneel on the other side of her. “All you have to do is tap our legs and we’ll pull out.”

She gripped both of our cocks and stroked Andrew's while pulling me closer. The second her tongue circled my tip, I knew I was fucked. When she closed her lips over me and sucked, hollowing out her cheeks and looking up at me as she did, I barely stopped myself from asking her to marry me right then. She was sucking her second dick ever and already she had a technique of moving her tongue around that made my fucking toes curl.

I knew the moment Jack touched her again because the suction increased and she made a constant *hum* sound at the back of her throat that vibrated my entire length. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt. I pulled out and looked at Andrew. "Holy fuck."

He turned her face towards him and ran his thumb over her pouty bottom lip. "Do you want more?"

She nodded and then her eyes fluttered over something Jack was doing. Andrew pushed a few inches past her lips and we both watched as she sucked at him eagerly. It was somehow both the most erotic thing I'd ever seen and the most beautiful. The way she was giving herself to us wasn't missed by us.

She took turns sucking one of us while stroking the other and made it through another four orgasms before she twisted her hips to get away from Jack's mouth. She shook her head and looked down at him. "No more. I can't, Jack. *Please.*"

His fingers pumped into her at the same fast pace as he looked up at her and smirked. "One more."

She gasped and her grip on my dick verged on painful.
“Jack!”

“You want me to stop?” He nodded to me and then Andrew.
“You want me to tell them where my finger is, Liv?”

“Sonofabitch.” Andrew stumbled off the bed and bent over with his hands braced on it. “I nearly just embarrassed myself.”

Jack bent down and sucked Olive’s inner thigh, leaving a mark. “I don’t hear anything, Liv. Do you like the way it feels? You’ve got my fingers in your pussy and your ass right now. Tell them how it feels.”

My vision blurred at the edges and I had to pull myself free from her grip. I went back to stroking her throat and leaned down to suck her nipple into my mouth. “Tell us, sweetheart.”

“It feels strange. I feel full but I like it. I... I like it.” Her face was bright red but she couldn’t hold in her moans so lying would’ve been pointless.

Jack nodded to me. “Over.”

Olive let out a spontaneous laugh as we flipped her onto her stomach and then lifted her onto her knees. With her ass in the air, there was nothing we couldn’t see.

Jack moved to kneel behind her and pressed the head of his dick against her core. He looked at us and we nodded. Watching my best friend thrust his dick into the woman I cared about was wild. I was jealous and I wanted to be the one fucking Olive, but I also felt a strange sense of pride in both of

them. It was also just really fucking hot. Seeing Olive being fucked from a different angle was stunning. Her body, her sounds, everything about her was so sexy.

I slid onto the bed in front of her and without prompting, Olive lowered her mouth over my cock. At that angle she had even more control and she took more of my length. I held her hair back in my fist and growled out her name. I was never going to last, but I knew that after watching Jack and Andrew fuck her, I'd be ready to go again.

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*****Jack*****

I held Olive's hips in my hands and watched as the candlelight danced across her body. I couldn't look away as she lowered her mouth on Caleb's dick and sucked him with vigor. She was excited to please us and fuck, that was hot. With my own dick fully buried in her tight sex, I knew what heaven felt like. I was a greedy bastard and I wanted more, though.

I gathered her juices on my finger and slowly eased back into her ass. I heard Caleb groan and knew she must've sucked especially hard. I fucked her ass gently, easing her into it and stretching her for another finger.

Andrew knelt next to us and reached under her to tease her clit. His eyes were glued to my finger in her ass and he swore when I pulled out and added a second.

"Her walls are vibrating around my dick right now. This virgin ass is a trigger for our girl." I pumped my fingers faster and the sounds she made around Caleb's dick were all

pleasure. “I think she was built just for us. Built to take us all at the same time.”

Caleb’s head shot up and he tried to pull out of Olive’s mouth, but she forced her mouth lower on him, until she gagged and was rewarded with Caleb coming in the back of her throat. He swore and still tried to pull out, thinking Olive hadn’t meant for him to come in her mouth, but she batted his hand away and took him deep again.

I had to force myself to breathe again after watching my girlfriend swallow my best friend’s load. I didn’t understand why it was so incredibly sexy to see, but it was. One look in Andrew’s direction told me that he felt the same way.

My control snapped in a big way and I gripped the back of Olive’s neck as I rode her. Seeing her finish Caleb made it all real. She was ours. I pulled my fingers out of her ass so I could fuck her the way I needed to. I pulled out until just the tip remained and then I thrust back in hard. Her body shook with force and within seconds, she was moaning loudly and coming on me.

Caleb covered her mouth and shook his head. “Quiet, sweetheart, or this is all going to be over way too fast.”

I drove into her faster, careening straight towards my own orgasm, but I couldn’t stop it. Being with her in the new way we were was going to make it hard to last for a long while. Gripping her hips, I fucked her hard and fast, filling the room with the sound of our bodies coming together. Even through Caleb’s hand, I could hear her crying out.

“Fuck, Liv!” I buried my full length in her and shot jet after jet of my come while her walls pulsed around me, milking me.

I eased out of her and watched as my come leaked out. Scooping it up, I used it to lube her asshole and worked two fingers into her again. She pressed her hips back into me so I slowly pushed a third finger into her ass and then fucked her until I knew she could take one of us in her ass without it hurting her.

Andrew took my position behind Olive and when I removed my fingers from her ass, he pushed the head of his cock against her tight little hole and used her hair to pull her head back so he could look at her face. “Is this too much?”

Olive shook her head immediately. “I want it. I want to give everything to you guys.”

Caleb was rock hard again and he went up on his knees so he could feed her his dick while watching Andrew take her ass for the first time. “I think we may have corrupted you, sweetheart. We’re blowing through firsts like old pros.”

Andrew slowly inched deeper into her ass, little by little. I could tell by the look on his face that her ass was strangling him. He wouldn’t last long, either. “You’ve always been such a sweet, innocent girl next door, Olive. Now, you’re ours. Still so sweet. Still so perfect. But ours.”

Caleb pulled out of her mouth and stroked her cheek. “Even with a dick stretching your perfect ass, you look like a fucking angel. We never stood a chance, Olive.”

I knelt beside her and brushed her hair from her face. “Everything you ever give us is a goddamn gift, Liv. We’re smart enough to know that you’re too good for us. But we’re greedy and we want all of you anyway.”

She gritted her teeth and I glanced back to see Andrew was as deep as he could get inside her. “You’re mine, too. I want to own you as much as you own me. I want... I want all of you. I want something no one else has given you.”

“And never will.” I nodded at Andrew. “It’ll only ever be you who gets us this way. Andrew’s going to lift you up so Caleb can slide under you, Liv.”

Once Caleb was under her, he and Andrew made eye contact and then together, they lowered Olive onto Caleb’s dick. He swore viscously and pressed his head into the bed hard as his face turned red. “Fuck.”

Olive’s nails were imbedded in his chest and her mouth was open in a perfect O as she slowly took both of them inside her to the hilt. I stroked her back and arms and every other part of her I could reach. I watched as a full body flush turned her red and listened to her take gasping breaths. She was as rigid as a board and I was seconds from calling the whole thing off when she shook violently with an orgasm. I barely managed to get my hand over her mouth before she screamed.

I was hard again from watching her pinned between Caleb and Andrew but when she sank her teeth into my hand to keep silent, my dick felt like steel. Her teeth dug into the fleshy part of my palm and her eyes met mine with a wild gleam to them.

I gripped her hair with my other hand and pulled her head back. “Open.”

She released my hand with a whine and ran her tongue over the deep teeth marks she'd left. I didn't give a shit about my hand, though. I balanced over her and pressed my cock past her lips. She licked me, tasting the mixture of our come, and held my gaze while I slowly used her mouth.

Andrew growled and I watched as he gripped her shoulders so he could fuck her. His movement forced Olive forward and deeper on my dick. It also forced her to grind on Caleb. They took it slow, finding a rhythm that worked and made Olive moan louder around me. When they found it and moved harder, her tits swayed in Caleb's face and he took turns sucking and nibbling on her nipples. The entire display was so intense that I could've come again that fast. I held back, though. We wanted to come together, to fill her with our come at the same time.

Olive's eyes watered as my tip played at the back of her throat for too long but she took a breath and then went still again, giving me the control to fuck her mouth. Her trust made me smile and I watched her eyes go soft for a moment as I stroked her cheek.

When Andrew and Caleb began thrusting faster, her eyes rolled and she moaned around my shaft like a fucking vibrator. The room filled with the sounds of skin slapping skin and heavy breathing. The smell of sex raised the hair at the back of my neck as I struggled to hold back. They thrust faster. Olive

arched her back like a bow and went rigid again. I pumped past her lips over and over.

It was her muffled scream around my dick that set me off. I gripped her hair tight and buried myself deep. “Coming, Olive!”

Andrew let out a ragged cry and slid deep into her ass once more. Caleb pumped his hips and filled her pussy with his dick, thrust hard and fast a few more times before freezing.

“Yes, Olive! Come for us, sweetheart. Goddamn come all over me.” Caleb reached up and wrapped his hand around her throat, holding her as he came.

Come surged from my balls down my dick and straight to the back of Olive’s throat. At the same time, I could hear my best friends coming deep inside Olive. She moaned and shook between us, coming harder than I’d ever seen her. Her body bucked and writhed as we filled her.

When I pulled my drained cock from her mouth, I watched her swallow my come and then go limp on top of Caleb. I fell back on the bed next to Caleb and watched Olive’s face as Andrew eased out of her ass. Her eyebrows pinched and she whimpered.

“Fucking beautiful.” Andrew stood at the foot of the bed, staring down at Olive’s body. “You’re stuffed so full of our come that it’s leaking out, Olive.”

She moaned when Caleb gently rolled them over and moved to stand next to Andrew. She tried to close her legs, but they

both caught one of her knees and kept her spread out. Tossing her arm over her eyes, she shook her head. “No more.”

I moved to the end of the bed and swore. Come pooled between her swollen lips and more leaked from her ass. Her sex was red and she looked sore already. Her nipples were swollen and red from Caleb’s attention. Her mouth was even swollen and a deep pink. She looked well-used and worn out, but I’d never found a woman more beautiful.

“You wanted to own us.” I lightly traced my fingers up from her ankle to her knee and then around to her hip. “Done.”

Her lips turned up in a smile and she peeked out from under her arm. “Yeah?”

Caleb crawled up the bed and settled next to her. “I’ve never experienced anything even close to that, sweetheart.”

Andrew moved to her other side. “I think you just sucked a part of my soul out of me.”

“We’ve got a problem.” Olive’s serious voice made us all go still. “Where’s Jack going to fit? There’s not enough room for all four of us.”

I grinned. “If we could all fit inside your tiny little body, we can fit in this bed.”

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*****Andrew*****

The morning after the best night of my life, I frowned when I saw Caleb and Jack sitting in front of the Dean's office. I'd gotten an email saying that I needed to report to her office immediately, but I hadn't assumed it was anything serious until I spotted them. Why would all three of us be called down together? We weren't on the same degree path and the only activity we did together was football. Dean Ardell didn't exactly handle football matters.

I took the empty seat next to them and leaned in. "What the hell is this?"

Jack bounced his foot, a sign that he was feeling stressed. "I don't know."

I sat up straighter and blew out a deep sigh. "Taylor?"

Caleb grunted. "What else could it be? I'm assuming we're about to be handed our asses and accused of assaulting the idiot."

“This is not happening.” Jack ran his hands down his face. “I have one semester left until I can graduate. If Taylor costs me-”

I squeezed his shoulder. “Stop. We don’t know what this is. If it comes down to it, we’ll make it clear that you didn’t do anything.”

“Neither of you did anything.” Caleb sat back and grinned, but we all knew it was forced. He flexed his bruised knuckles in front of him. “I’m the only one who hit him.”

“Not that you’re going to admit that. Obviously.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Caleb, come the fuck on. If I’m going to be your lawyer some day, you’ve got to be a better client.”

Jack snapped to attention when the door beside us opened and Dean Ardell’s assistant motioned for us to follow him. “Why do I feel like I should say it’s been nice knowing you boys?”

Caleb punched Jack in the arm. “Get out of your emo book brain. We’re not going to let anything happen. Remember? My daddy’s rich.”

I rolled my eyes. We all knew that Caleb wasn’t a typical rich boy who threw his father’s weight around. He loved to play the part, though.

Dean Ardell was sitting behind her desk and didn’t bother standing when we came in. She pointed at the chairs in front of her desk and then nodded at her assistant. “Jim will be joining us to take notes and act as a witness.”

I felt Jack stiffen up and forced myself to sit forward to shake Dean Ardell's hand. "I'm not sure what this is about, Dean Ardell, but it's always good to see you."

She scowled. "Cut the good old boy shit. I've gotten a report of a cheating ring on campus."

I sat back in my chair without a handshake. "Okay. I'm not--"

"This may not be OU or any Ivy, son, but I take my institution very seriously and when I hear that someone is making a mockery of our school, I get mad. It was reported that you three are running a business on campus. You're obtaining test keys and passing them out for a price. Cheating is an offense punishable with expulsion."

Jack laughed. He relaxed back in his chair and let out an honest to god laugh. "Dean, you scared the hell out of me. I thought you were being serious and I--"

Dean Ardell stood up from her chair and slammed her hand down on her desk. "Do I look like I'm making a joke? Cheating on any scale is unacceptable but helping dozens, if not more, students pass their classes without understanding the information is something I find repulsive. Nurses are sent out into the world every year from our nursing program. Have you been helping them pass their exams without knowing the course work? Have we been pushing nurses out who don't know what they're doing?!"

"You've got the wrong guys, Dean. This isn't us." I was shocked to even be accused of something so ridiculous but the seriousness of her accusations were real to me. I could see my

career crashing and burning before I'd ever taken on my first case. "You can't have any proof that this is happening since we aren't doing it. Accusing us without proof, based on the word of some anonymous student, and doing it with this level of vehemence is wrong."

Caleb sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "If you give us one guess about the complainant, I bet we could guess who it was."

"I'll be gathering evidence. In the meantime, you three are suspended from any and all activities on campus, outside of class." She cupped her hands in front of her and shook her head at us like she'd watched us kick puppies.

"What? No. I'm on a football scholarship, Dean Ardell. If I'm suspended from the team, what happens to my scholarship?" Jack ran his hand through his hair. "This is ridiculous. I'm sorry, but it's bullshit. You're going to chance ruining my chance to graduate because someone accused us of something, without any evidence?"

"Expulsion will surely ruin your chance at graduating, don't you think?"

I put my hand on his arm and motioned for him to stop talking. He couldn't afford to piss her off. Caleb, on the other hand, had no problem with it and before I could get his attention to tell him to relax, he was flashing Dean Ardell his best 'fuck you' grin.

"You know, Dean Ardell, the Evers Foundation has donated a significant amount of money to this institution that you're so

passionate about.” He pointed out her window at the fine arts building. “I do believe that building was built after a particularly large donation from my family. I’m going to point a few things out to you now.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. “Your money won’t protect you from the code of conduct.”

“First, allow me to point out once more that my family donated enough money to have a state of the art building constructed for this university. As nice as my father is, he’s a huge fan of money. He caps his donations fairly low compared to the amount of money he brings in. It’s honestly pretty greedy, if you ask me. Why the hell would I be wasting time running a cheating ring for a couple of bucks when I have pockets deep enough to buy you, this office, and the entirety of this school? It makes no sense.” He tapped two fingers on her desk. “Second? Can you imagine being the dean who falsely accused students of a crime and cost the school its biggest donor? What a legacy.”

I sighed. “As much as he sounded like a dick just now, he’s right. Calling us in here and accusing us without any evidence and threatening us was a mistake. In our personal lives, we’ve found ourselves at the center of one person’s hatred. Like Caleb said, we pretty much know who accused us. The next time something like this happens, there should be an attempt made to gather evidence before threats are made.”

“Do not tell me how to do my job.” Red faced and furious, Dean Ardell stood up and stared down at us. “Get out. I’ll

gather any and all evidence and we'll go from there.”

“So, we're not suspended from activities?” Jack wasn't budging.

“For now, your football is safe.”

I stood up and pulled Jack up with me. When Caleb didn't move, I grabbed him, too. Pushing them towards the door, I nodded at the assistant. “Have a good day.”

Once we were outside and walking towards the lot we'd all parked in, Jack growled. “We can't tell Olive about this. She'd just feel guilty about Taylor and feel like she needs to fix it.”

Caleb and I both nodded. “Agreed.”

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*****Olive*****

After a busy week of work, the residents making fun of my limp from sex with the guys, school, and spending every evening with Jesse and the guys, I was excited for their football game. After our first game, Jesse and I were both fans. We'd both woken up Saturday morning to a note and donuts from the guys. They'd gone ahead to the stadium to prep for the big game but still took the time to think of us.

Jesse had caught me holding the letter to my chest and dancing around the kitchen like a moron. He'd laughed and danced with me for a minute before stopping to ask me why I was so happy. It'd been hard to not tell him right then and there that I'd realized at some point between sleeping on my guys' chests every night and watching them treat Jesse like he mattered just as much as I did, I'd fallen in love with them.

I'd never been in love but I felt like characters I'd watched on TV. I was in a bubbly state of happiness, where the gooey feelings were too big to contain. I wanted to stop my neighbors and tell them I was in love. I did tell Kitty and Jerry

and they both accused me of being dick blind. While I admitted that I was dick visually impaired, maybe, I wasn't blind. As wild as it felt, I loved them.

That was what made sitting at the fifty-yard line at their game so much more exciting than the first. Even though it was just me and Jesse, we cheered just as loud and screamed for our guys when the team ran out of the tunnel. I held Jesse in my arms so he could get a better view and we both waved our foam fingers around.

The guys had told me about the game being against their rivals and I could feel the energy in the air. The crowd in the stadium just felt more alive. That energy seeped into my blood and I understood why people loved football so much. It thrummed through me just as strong as the beat of the chant the crowd was shouting.

I searched the ball of pads and helmets for our guys but I didn't see them. Even when that ball thinned out along the sidelines, I didn't see their numbers anywhere. Frowning, I went down the line of guys one at a time, but I couldn't spot the guys.

"Where are they, Mommy?" Jesse looked up at me and pouted. "I don't see them."

Glancing down the sideline again, my eyes caught on someone staring right back at me. I got a bad taste in my mouth when I recognized that it was Taylor. He wasn't just staring at me; he was leering. His mouth was stretched in a smile that a shark might wear seconds before it chomped down

on your head. My lizard brain recognized the threat and dread filled me.

He started to move towards us but the coach grabbed the back of his uniform and started pointing at the field while talking rapidly. Taylor didn't take his eyes off me until he was physically turned by the coach.

I sank into my seat with Jesse in my lap and tried to make sense of why the guys wouldn't be on the field. I was reaching for my phone when Jesse screamed happily.

“There they are!” He jumped off of me and hung off the railing while shouting their names. “Jack! Caleb! Andrew! Kick butt!”

The couple sitting next to us laughed as I held onto the back of Jesse's shirt to keep him from falling onto the field. The woman grinned at me. “Someone loves football, huh?”

Caleb jogged straight to us and climbed up on the railing to hug Jesse. He winked at me but I could see something in his expression that didn't fit the smile he was sending my way. He gripped the back of my neck when I leaned closer and kissed me. Cat-calls went up around us that made me blush, but I laughed them off.

I hugged him tight and spoke against his ear so he'd have a chance of hearing me. “You okay?”

He nodded without saying anything else and kissed my forehead before ruffling Jesse's hair and jumping down. He

jogged to the bench where Andrew and Jack were sitting and sat down next to them.

“No wonder he’s a football fan.” The woman next to me sent me a good-natured grin. “That was Caleb Evers, right?”

I looked back at the bench and nodded. I didn’t understand why they were sitting down. I didn’t know anything about football, but the rest of the team was standing around, getting ready to play. “Yeah. Um, sorry. Do you know why they’re sitting down?”

The guy next to her leaned over with a frown on his face. “It better not mean what I think it means. If Roberts is out, there goes the offense. Clarkson is good, but he isn’t one of the quarterbacks who can carry the team. Losing Walker on defense would open us up for Texas’ offense to run right through us. And I probably don’t need to tell you how many games Evers’ foot has won for us. If they’re not playing, we might as well leave now. I can’t stand the idea of watching Texas kill us.”

I shook my head. “Why would they be out?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

Jack sat forward with his helmet clutched in his hands in front of his legs. He glanced back at me and even from the distance we were apart, I could tell something was wrong.

As the sun beat down on us and the first quarter dragged on, I watched the guys with an increasing sense of panic over what could’ve happened. Taylor’s smile couldn’t have been a

coincidence. The crowd around me devolved into an angry mass when play after play was shut down. When the backup kicker missed a field goal to get our team on the scoreboard, I thought the crowd was going to jump onto the field and strangle the coach.

The guys were antsy on the bench, moving back and forth as they watched their team get behind by first one touchdown and then two. When Texas scored a third touchdown, Jack threw his helmet and grasped his head like he was in physical pain.

The woman next to me leaned closer when she saw Jesse pouting with tears welling up in his eyes. “He’s breaking my heart, honey. I’ve never seen a kid care so much about football before.”

Jesse stomped his feet and screamed. “I don’t want to lose! Why won’t they let Jack and Caleb and Andrew play? Let them play!”

The woman grinned. “What he said. Let them play!”

Someone in the row behind us roughly patted my shoulder. “Hell yeah, mom! Raising that boy up right! Let them play!”

Jesse, encouraged, shouted louder. “Let them play!”

And that was how my son started a chant that became so loud it drowned out everything in the stadium. We were all on our feet, shouting at anyone and everyone to let my guys play. The guys were so focused on the game that they didn’t notice at first but when they did, I watched their eyes find me. Jumping up and down, I pointed to Jesse, trying to let them

know he'd started the chant. They grinned and I felt a flash of heat. Fighting for our guys, as effective as it was or wasn't, made me want to tackle them. I wasn't sure if I wanted to kiss their frustration better or let them get out that frustration with my body.

Everyone gave up the chant when something on the field had them groaning and throwing their hands up in disgust. I looked at the woman next to me again but she and her partner were standing up to leave.

She shook her head at me. "After that interception, we don't have a chance."

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*****Olive*****

I felt crushed for the guys and for Jesse. Staring blankly at the field, I found myself watching a man in bright blue medical gloves sprinting down the sideline. He gave the guys a thumbs up and stopped right in front of the coach. Even from where we sat in the stands, the coach's words were clear.

“Thank fuck! Get in there, Walker!”

I sat forward and then jumped to my feet when I saw Andrew putting his helmet on and running onto the field. “Yeah, Andy!”

He glanced back at me and Jesse and blew a kiss our way. I laughed when Jesse pretended to catch it. Then he shocked me by slapping his butt with the same hand. On the field, I could tell Andrew was laughing even as he got to the line they were all standing at.

“We left too soon! It's like as soon as you go to the bathroom at a restaurant, they bring the food!” The woman held out her

hand and clasped mine. “Shelly. I’m not leaving again so we might as well become friends.”

I grinned and nodded. “My name is Olive. If y’all leaving did this, then thank you very much.”

“Holy shit. No way.” The guy with her leaned over and shook my hand roughly. “I’m pretty sure your guy is about to do something I’ve heard rumors about.”

Shelly rolled her eyes. “This is Max. He’s obsessed with our team, clearly.”

“I’m serious. It’s been an urban legend for years that Evers has an arm like a rocket and that the coach begs him every year to play quarterback.” Max pointed to the field. “Evers is warming up his arm.”

I found Caleb on the sidelines, throwing a football back and forth with Jack. I didn’t know anything about any urban legend arm. “There’s already a quarterback, though.”

“Yeah, one who’s thrown two interceptions.” Max shouted and pumped his arms in the air. “Fumble! It’s our ball!”

The crowd went crazy as the guys on the field traded places with the guys on the sidelines. I saw Jack run out and then I watched with a twisted feeling in my stomach as Taylor jogged onto the field, just to be called back by the coach. Caleb said something as he moved past him onto the field that set Taylor off. He yanked off his helmet and screamed in the coach’s face before throwing the helmet into a table of drinks.

He flipped the table and shoved past everyone as he charged down the field towards the tunnel.

“*Oof*. That was ugly.” Shelly saw the same thing I did and shifted nervously in her seat. “Why does it look like he’s coming right at us?”

I pushed Jesse behind me. “Earmuffs, baby.”

“You don’t even know what he just did to you!” Taylor climbed up the same way Caleb had but his face was so twisted in anger that it felt more like I was staring at an animal trying to escape its cage. Spit flew from his mouth as he jabbed his finger at me. “You fucking did this, didn’t you? What? You fuck him and he fucks me? That’s fine, Olive. Remember that it didn’t have to be this way when you’re crying later.”

I looked down at him and shook my head. “You’re making a fool of yourself.”

He reached for me but seemed to remember where he was at the last second. He dropped to the ground and glared at me. “You’re a fucking whore, Olive.”

I kept my head high and stared at the field as he disappeared into the tunnel. Everyone around had heard every word he said and I felt like crying, but I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

“Touchdown! Touchdown, Oklahoma!” The announcer’s shouting broke through the tension and everyone seemed to forget about Taylor.

I turned around and saw Jesse was sitting in my seat, eyes on his feet. He didn't have his earmuffs on and I knew he'd listened to Taylor screaming at me. I picked him up and held him tight with my heart pounding away.

“Girl! Is there a ball player you don't know?” Shelly tapped my arm and pointed at where Jack was running our way.

He climbed up the railing with a football in his hand and held it out to Jesse. “We got a touchdown, little dude!”

Jesse launched himself at Jack and thankfully Jack caught him. Jesse wrapped himself around Jack and still managed to clutch the football.

Jack looked at me and gave me a pointed look. “You okay?”

I nodded and gently pulled Jesse off of him. “We're good. Especially with this football now. If you're good, maybe you and the guys can toss the ball around tonight.”

Finally, that broke through Jesse's sadness. “Promise?”

Jack nodded. “Promise.”

I leaned closer to him. “Hey, Jack?”

He smiled up at me and my insides melted. “Yes, Liv?”

“Go win this game.”

“And if I do? What do I get?” He glanced at the field and then back at me. “Well?”

“Whatever you want. Just go win!” I laughed and pushed him away. “It's probably already your turn to go!”

He tilted his head as he slowly climbed down. “My turn to go?”

“Just go!” Shaking my head at him, I watched as he ran back to the sidelines and fist bumped Caleb. They both looked back at me and I could practically hear Jack telling him that I’d said he can have whatever he wants if he wins. As amazing as they truly were, sometimes they were immature boys who giddily bragged to each other about who got what during sex.

“Mommy, can we play ball inside tonight?”

I scrunched up my face. “Why would you want to play inside? You won’t have very much room.”

“If we’re inside, Daddy won’t find us.” He held the ball to his chest with both arms and moved on like he hadn’t just gutted me. “When I’m big, I’m going to play football, too.”

I sank into my seat and pressed my fist to my mouth. My son didn’t feel safe enough to play outside. Things had gotten so bad that I wasn’t even making him feel safe anymore. He was six and I was letting him down so much. Guilt and shame clogged my throat and made the backs of my nose and eyes burn.

“Another touchdown for Oklahoma after a complete shut down of Texas’ offense.” The crowd erupted around me and I forced myself to stand and cheer, too. My guys were playing their hearts out from the sound of things. They deserved my attention, too.

Jesse was fine as he screamed for the guys, all his heavy thoughts forgotten. For his sake, I forced my negative thoughts to the back of my mind and celebrated each touchdown with the rest of the crowd. By the time the game ended, our team was up by what Max called ‘basketball numbers’ and Caleb had made it clear that he was a better quarterback than Taylor would ever be.

When the whistle was called to signal the end, the student section swarmed the field and I watched as the guys were engulfed by adoring classmates and fans. It was amazing to watch the men I love be so celebrated. They were great and they deserved every bit of the support they received. Although, I did see one woman throw herself at Caleb and felt the need to rip her hair out. I looked away quickly to stop that feeling.

Shelly slipped her hand into mine and I looked down when I realized she’d pressed something into my palm. It was a business card. I expected her next words to be about me calling her to hang out since we’d hit it off, but what she said shocked me. “I work at a female advocacy center. We have services that could help you with Clarkson. He was scary, Olive, and I think you should take his threats seriously.”

I flapped my lips around for a bit and then cleared my throat and nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

She smiled down at Jesse and gave him a thumbs up. “You’ve got one cool mom, kid.”

Jesse looked up at me and giggled. “She’s a good mom.”

I hugged him tight and prayed that I really was.

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*****Andrew*****

“Where the hell is she?” My nerves were shot after the shit we’d gone through before the game. I felt paranoid. Taylor was coming at us from every angle and I needed to see Olive to make sure she was okay.

“She said she was going to wait for the crowd to clear before she headed this way.” Jack rubbed his temple and forced a smile when a passing group of guys congratulated us on the win.

Caleb looked down at his phone and swore. “She’s not answering.”

“Let’s head out to the field and see if she’s still there.” We bypassed people inviting us to parties later that night and hurried out of the tunnel. We were each feeling uneasy.

After having Taylor accuse us of cheating to the Dean and then accuse us of steroid use to Coach, I was worried about where his line was. What did he consider too far? We’d nearly lost our chance to play because of his bullshit.

The knot of anxiety unwound itself from around my chest as I took in the sight on the field in front of us. We froze where we were, content to just watch for a while.

Olive and Jesse were playing with his new football. He was running in circles around the endzone and she was chasing after him. They were both laughing and so lost in their game that they didn't notice they were being watched.

Olive's long blonde curls flew behind her as she spun around and her eyes were bright with happiness. She was wearing the same outfit she'd worn the week before and it hurt in the best way just as it had the week before. The skirt flew up around her thigh and the shirt hung off of her shoulder and was so thin that it showed every bounce of her breasts. She was so beautiful but when she was laughing and playing with Jesse like she was, she became magic. Magic that sucked me in and refused to let go.

"I love her." I didn't look away from Olive as I spoke quietly to the two men I trusted with my life. We knew each other so well, even more so after being with Olive. I figured they already knew I loved her, the same way I knew they loved her.

Jack made a sound at the back of his throat. "Are we just saying it now?"

Caleb moved forward a few feet and looked back at us. "Is it one of those things where we count to three and say it all at the same time? Or does one of us get to be first? I vote me."

I eased forward. "Maybe we work out the kinks before we just do it?"

Jack laughed suddenly and shoved us aside. “Or we just see who can do it first!”

I chased after him, shoving Caleb aside as I did. “No one likes a cheater!”

Caleb pushed me aside and then managed to get his foot in front of Jack. Jack hit the ground but he managed to catch Caleb’s ankles and take him down, too. I tried to run past them and secure my win but Caleb kicked his leg out and I went down just as hard as they did. Still, none of us were willing to give up. We crawled forward, climbing over each other and wrestling as we went.

“Dog pile!” Jesse’s excited voice was punctuated with the three of us getting a series of bony elbows and knees in our backs and sides as he jumped on top of us.

“Jesse!” Olive hesitated and then I felt more skinny elbows digging into my sore body. “Dog pile!”

I saw Caleb hoist Jesse over his head so I reached around and pulled Olive under me without worrying about crushing the little dude. Pinning Olive to the ground, I stared down at her happy face and felt the day roll off my back.

“You’ve got sharp elbows. You and the kid.” I pressed a quick kiss to her full lips. We were being careful not to show Jesse too much so I held myself back from kissing her the way I wanted to.

Her hands held onto my sides and she bit her lip. “I would feel bad for poking you with my sharp elbows, but I’m only

just now able to walk without the ladies at Jolly Pines pointing and laughing at me.”

My grin was wicked and instant. “That must mean you’re ready for another night with all three of us.”

She shrugged coyly. “Kitty says if I do it more often, I’ll get used to it and I won’t walk like that every time. Just the really vigorous times.”

I rolled off her and laid flat on my back. “Boner killer.”

She cackled and flopped on top of me. Slapping the ground three times, she jumped up and cheered. “I pinned the mighty Andrew Walker!”

Jesse was stretched out on top of Jack and Caleb. “Count, Mom!”

I laughed as they both pretended to try to get out from under him but failed each time. Olive counted to three and then scooped Jesse up and ran in a circle with him giggling like mad.

“The Oakley’s can’t be stopped! Who else wants a piece of this? We can take anyone down!” Olive threw her head back and delivered a dramatic laugh that could’ve won her a spot as a Marvel villain.

All her running in circles caught up with her and she tripped over her own feet and toppled over. She managed to keep Jesse off the ground until he jumped out of her arms and laid out next to Caleb. Olive stretched out in the grass and laughed quietly.

I crawled over to look down at her. “What’s so funny?”

She reached up and traced the lines of my face with the tip of her finger. “I’ve never been so happy in my whole life.”

I kissed her fingertip and nodded. “It’s the same for me, Olive. I-”

“Andrew!”

I looked up and saw one of our teammates, Danny, jogging over to me. The look on his face sent a spike of worry through me and I jumped to my feet to meet him halfway. “What’s up, Danny?”

“I’m assuming you weren’t included in the mass text that just went out. I thought you should see it.” He passed me his phone and shifted from foot to foot. “I’m sorry, man. That shit isn’t okay. Taylor’s taking this too far.”

As I read the message, my blood heated and I felt my scalp tingle with unbridled rage. Just under the block of text was a picture of Olive’s smiling face with a shakily written word over her forehead. *Whore*.

“What’s wrong, Andrew?” Olive looked around my arm to see the phone but I pushed it back to Danny, not wanting her to see it.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

Danny rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “I don’t know how many people got it but it looks like a lot, man.”

“What is it, Andrew?” Olive’s voice was strained and I hated that what I was going to say would just make it worse.

“She finds out from you or from everyone on campus who got the message, man. I’m just saying. If this was happening with my girl, I wouldn’t want her finding out on the street.” Danny offered his phone back to me and walked away a few feet when I took it.

“You’re scaring me. What is it?”

“Taylor sent out a mass message. It’s not from his number but it’s fucking clear it’s him.” I gritted my teeth and handed her the phone. “We’ll take care of it, Olive. Somehow.”

Jack walked up and looked from the phone to me and then back to the phone. “What is it?”

Olive’s voice was pure steel as she read the message out loud. “Have you ever wondered what the perfect whore looked like? Look no more. This is Olive Ruth Oakley. She’s an education major on our campus and the picture of purity. When she isn’t flirting with professors on campus she’s currently fucking three of our top footballers. What makes her the perfect whore? If you’re seen in public with her, no one would guess that she’s been come in more times than a sperm bank.”

“*Stop.*” Jack growled and reached for the phone but Olive twisted away from him.

“It does make me wonder where she puts her son when she’s spreading her legs all over the place. The poor boy has

probably seen things that'll turn him into Norman Bates in the future. A teen mom at fifteen, Olive proves that sometimes whores are born and not made. To our footballers, I'd recommend stopping the train and heading to the doctor for a few tests." Olive snorted. "And then there's a picture of me with the word whore over my face. It's a good picture of me, though."

Jack took the phone and threw it to Danny. "Olive. This is not okay. We need to go to the police and file a report. Maybe there's a way to trace the message."

She smiled and bent down to pick up Jesse as he ran to her. "I've been through this before. They won't do anything. It's best to just ignore it."

Caleb looked at us and frowned. "What'd I miss?"

"Nothing! Should we get ice cream on the way home?" Olive turned around and started walking towards the tunnel. "Two scoops for the growing boy who cheered his butt off today!"

Jesse wiggled in her arms as his excitement got the best of him. "Yay! You're the best mom ever!"

"What do we do?" Jack looked at me and clenched his jaw. "If someone other than her says nothing, I'm swinging."

"Hello? What the fuck did I miss? I played airplane with little dude for like two seconds and all of sudden the good vibes are deceased."

“Taylor struck again. This time it wasn’t us, though. I would take another hundred last minute steroid accusations over this.” I gave him the short and dirty version of the message and watched his face darken with anger. “And she’s just smiling and acting like everything’s fine.”

“What else is she going to do? Crumble in front of Jesse?” Caleb swore. “I want to kill Taylor. How did you watch her go through this the first time and not strangle him?”

Shame forced my eyes to the ground. “I was an asshole. I tried to talk to her and when she didn’t want to talk to me, I just gave up. I didn’t do anything to help her. Taylor might not have grown up since then, but I have. This isn’t happening again. No matter what it costs me.”

51

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*****Olive*****

The message that broke me came as Jesse finished his rocky road ice cream sample and moved on to birthday cake. When the name popped up on my phone, I knew Taylor was going to really punish me for his embarrassment. I went to the bathroom to open the message because my stomach was already rolling uncomfortably. I stood in a bathroom that smelled like bleach-soaked oranges and opened the message that felt like the beginning of the end.

We've been made aware of your current situation, Olive. It's bad enough that you're not allowing Taylor to see Jesse, but bringing multiple men into your home for illicit things while our grandson is present is our breaking point. We've always been understanding and never demanding when it comes to Jesse, but I think we've been too careless with you. Jim and I will be filing for custody of Jesse as soon as the courts open Monday morning. You're not fit to care for him while living the way you are.

Jim and Cynthia wanted my son. I bent over and hurled into the toilet. I felt like everything I'd ever eaten was being expelled as I retched and choked. My heart beat too fast and my vision went black at the edges. They wanted to take him from me. I grasped the wall next to me and slid to my knees. There, bent over the toilet, I prayed like I'd never prayed before. I bargained with whatever god would listen first. If they made everything go away, I'd go to church or work at a soup kitchen every Sunday. I'd do anything.

A knock on the bathroom sent me scrambling to my feet. "Just a minute!"

I flushed the toilet and splashed my face with cold water while avoiding eye contact with myself. I didn't want to see the accusations looking back at me, the ones that weren't my own thoughts, but the thoughts of the little girl I'd left behind in Blackfoot. Like... Had I done this to myself? Were they right? I was sleeping with three men at the same time. Was it wrong for Jesse to be around something like that? Was I fit to be his mother? Was I really still a stupid whore?

Gripping the sink, I shook my head hard to try to clear my mind. Another knock sounded at the door and I quickly washed my hands and pulled the door open. A woman around my age was on the other side, her smile apologetic as she visibly squeezed her legs together.

"Sorry." I forced a smile and stepped out of her way, but her eyes didn't leave my face. I glanced up at her again and saw that her smile had turned into a look of disgust.

“I think they should kick you out of the education program. A woman like you shouldn’t be allowed to be around kids, not after what you’re doing to your own son.” She walked into the bathroom and slammed the door shut, punctuating her brutal assessment.

I swallowed and looked down at my outfit. It was like I was seeing it for the first time. It was too short and my boobs were practically falling out. It was mortifying. I hurried out to the guys and held my hand out to Andrew. “Can I have the keys? I’m just going to wait in the truck.”

He frowned. “Why? What’s wrong?”

I gestured at my clothes. “I shouldn’t be out like this. I’m just going to hide in the truck and run inside as soon as we get to my apartment. The fewer people see me like this, the better.”

Caleb’s head whipped around. “Excuse me?”

I shook my hand at Andrew. “Please. I just want to get out of here. You guys can stay and finish your ice cream with Jesse.”

“Goddammit, Olive.” Andrew gripped my upper arm and pulled me with him to the truck. “Whose voice is that in your head? It’s sure as fuck not yours. There’s nothing wrong with your outfit and you knew that when you left your apartment this morning. The only thing that changed was that message.”

“It wasn’t the only message.” My lip wobbled as I looked up at him. “Taylor’s parents are filing for custody of Jesse.”

His explosion of anger made me feel calmer as I listened to him defend me. “This is bullshit, Olive! It’s not happening. You’re a great mother. Everyone who knows you knows that. We’ll fight it. They won’t win.”

“A woman going into the bathroom after me just suggested I be kicked out of the education program because I shouldn’t be allowed around children after what I’m doing to my son.” I took a deep breath and pressed my fingertips to my lips. “People read that message and believe I’m an unfit mother because of it. Would a judge agree? Jesse hasn’t even spent the night with them a single time. They’re nearly strangers to him. And they just want to take him from me? He needs his mother. They can’t do this. Look at the man they raised. I won’t let my son be raised into another abusive man who can’t take no for an answer.”

“It won’t happen. We’ll figure it out.” He looked up as the bell over the ice cream shop door rang. “Is that her? Is that the woman who said that shit to you?”

I looked back and saw a stranger staring back at us with fear in her eyes as Andrew yelled in her direction. I shook my head and held his arm. “Andy. That’s not her. Even if it was, you can’t fight everyone who thinks poorly of me. God. At this point in time, your knuckles would never heal.”

He cupped my face in his hands and lifted my face to his. “I don’t know what to do, Olive. I fucked up so bad the first time this happened and I’m terrified I’m going to do it again. I can’t do nothing. I won’t. Let me help you.”

I blinked faster to keep the tears from escaping. “I don’t know how you can help. I don’t know if there’s a way for anyone to do anything.”

“Deny it all. Tell everyone Taylor’s a jealous ex and that we’re just friends. Tell them whatever would help make this go away. I don’t care. We can love you in secret for now if we need to, Olive.”

His words washed over me and left me feeling dirtier. We weren’t doing anything wrong. Hiding and pretending like it wasn’t happening was affirming that what we were wrong. I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t lie and hide and pretend to be celibate to earn anyone’s respect. No matter how good I tried to be after getting pregnant, I was always a whore. Hiding them wouldn’t take back what triggered Taylor’s parents.

“No.” I stretched taller and pressed my lips to his. He pulled back almost immediately and put a few feet of distance between us. I tipped my head up to the sun and took a deep breath. “I won’t hide. We’re not doing anything wrong.”

The bell behind me rang and Jesse’s laugh filled the air. It soothed my ragged edges and I took a deep breath. I wasn’t going to lose my son. Blowing that breath out slowly, I felt my shoulders lower and my neck unclench. I’d been hurtled back to my teenage years for a bit, but I was back. I wasn’t going to let a little man like Taylor hurt me again.

“Get in the truck, little dude. We’re going to talk to your mom for just a second. You can have my phone and play that bubble game you love for some reason.” Caleb lifted Jesse into

his booster seat and then caught Andrew's keys so he could start the truck. "Buckle up, dude."

That was the man that people were making a big deal out of me allowing near my son. Caleb had gone from terrified of Jesse to being so kind and caring with him that I could see he loved Jesse. And Jesse loved him.

Andrew's voice was grim as he spoke. "We have to break up."

52

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*****Olive*****

Three heads jerked around to Andrew. Jack held up his hands and shook his head. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Taylor’s parents are filing for custody.” Andrew rubbed his hands together like it was cold out, his nerves getting the better of him.

“Of Taylor? Who the fuck do they think wants him?” Caleb paused. “You don’t mean they want custody of Taylor. You mean...”

I watched his eyes move to Jesse in the back seat and go wide. “It’s not going to happen.”

“No, it’s fucking not. No goddamn way are they taking him from us.” Caleb swallowed and cleared his throat. “From you. I know I can’t claim him, but I love him, Olive.”

“He would want to be claimed by you. By each of you. Which is why I’m not pretending to break up with y’all to appease whatever pearl clutchers that are watching. This is me.

I'm in a relationship with three amazing men who treat my son like he's *ours*." I wiped away the tears that managed to spill over. "I'll figure it out. I'm not losing Jesse. I'll do whatever I have to in order to prove-

"Everything but distance yourself from us." Andrew shook his head at me. "This is the kind of thing that a judge is going to look at and see a giant red flag. You welcomed three non-familial men into your son's life, Olive."

I recoiled like he'd slapped me. "Are you kidding me?"

He growled. "I don't feel that way. If you get a judge that does, you'll lose that little boy, Olive. We need to put distance between us. I can't be responsible for you losing him. He's your whole world. The way you light up for him... I won't be part of something that tears you away from him."

My heart dropped to my stomach. "You're not the only one in this relationship."

Caleb shook his head. "No. I can't leave Olive."

"It doesn't have to be forever." Andrew sounded desperate to make us see his side. "Jack?"

I turned to Jack and knew he'd disagree with Andrew. "Tell him, Jack."

He looked down at the ground and scrubbed his hands over his face. "I agree with Andrew."

I took a step back and shook my head. "What?"

“My mom lost custody of me for six months when I was a year younger than Jesse. Her own parents thought they were doing it for her own good in their fucked up thinking. That was the worst six months of my life. My mom’s, too.” He looked at Jesse and then at me. “I don’t want this, Olive. I just couldn’t live with myself if either of you went through that because of me.”

I pressed my fist against my stomach as it churned violently. “Don’t do this.”

“It’s not forever.” Andrew reached out and pulled me into a hug. “Come on, Olive. You have to know this is what’s necessary.”

I kept my arms at my sides and felt brittle. “If you’re letting me go, let me go.”

“It’s for your own good, Liv.” Jack blew out a harsh breath. “Please. Just... It’s for you and Jesse. You can’t hate us for that.”

I pushed away from Andrew and pushed my hair behind my ears. “Everyone seems to know what’s best for me. That must be nice. Caleb? You, too?”

He helplessly looked between Jack and Andrew and then stared at something down the street. “The only way this thing works is if we’re on the same page. We agreed from the beginning that we would stick together.”

I laughed. “Bros before hoes. Gotcha.”

“*Olive.*” Andrew tried to grab my hand but I pulled away from him. “Fuck. You’re killing me. I’m trying to do what’s right. I’m trying to protect you.”

“How come your two responses to me facing ridicule and trauma are to let it happen while you turn your head and to break up with me *for my own good?*” I held up my hands. “Fine. You guys know what’s best for me. I should consider myself lucky to have men in my life who are willing to make the hard choice to leave me when I need them most.”

“This is fucked.” Caleb tugged at his hair. “Why don’t we just fake it? We can be together without everyone knowing.”

The silence that met his bargaining told me everything I needed to know. I licked my bone-dry lips and squared my shoulders. “Could you drive us to my apartment?”

Andrew nodded. “Of course.”

I walked around the truck and steeled myself to face Jesse. Forcing a happy smile, I opened the back door and climbed in. I buckled myself in and squeezed my hands between my thighs.

“Look, Mom! I found a big boy word!” Jesse held Caleb’s phone up to my face and I saw a screen full of messages, most of them from other women. The word he was pointing to was fuck. It was posed as a question in the message. Simple and sweet.

I gently pulled the phone from him and passed it to my other side without looking at Caleb. “How’d you get so smart that

you can already spell big boy words? Huh?”

Caleb swore under his breath. “Those are old, Olive. I would never-”

In the lightest voice I could manage, I replied. “It doesn’t matter anymore, does it?”

The tension in the truck climbed higher and I just needed to be away from them. I couldn’t be near them with them looking at me like they cared about me and touching me like they wanted me while they told me they couldn’t be with me. The reason didn’t make it feel any better. I loved them and they were leaving me.

I shook my head as I remembered thinking about being in love with them that morning. My cup ranneth over and all that bullshit. Oh, how a couple of hours could change everything.

“Can we play Mario when we get home?”

I dug my nails into my thighs. “Actually, it’s just going to be me and you at home tonight, kid. You’re stuck with your lame mom.”

He frowned. “No, Jack said we’d play catch. Remember?”

Silence from the men removing themselves from my son’s life. I felt my nails break skin and took a deep breath. “I remember, Jesse, but plans change. Tonight it’s you and me.”

Of course, he’d been in the sun all day so he was worn out and he’d just eaten a ton of sugar so he was crashing. It was a great time to tell him he couldn’t play with his favorite people. “I want Jack.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Jack, we can play ball, right? Tell Mom we can play ball.”

Jack cleared his throat. “Um... I’m really sorry, little dude.”

“But you promised!” Jesse was heading straight for one of his rare tantrums. “You promised! You don’t promise unless you mean it! I don’t want to go home with Mom. I want you guys to come with us and play ball and tuck me in!”

“Jesse.” I reached over and put my hand over his leg. “It’s okay, buddy. Just breathe like we practiced. Remember?”

He screamed when he looked at my hand and then dissolved into sobs. I looked down and saw that I had blood coating the tips of my fingers. I yanked my hand back into my lap and squeezed my eyes shut. I was seconds from sobbing right alongside him.

“What the fuck happened?” Caleb grabbed at my hand and yanked it closer to him when I struggled. “What did you do?”

I wiped my hands on my shirt and shoved the bottom of the shirt between my legs. “Nothing.”

He gripped my knees and his fingers bit into my skin as he pushed them apart. “Jesus, Olive. What the fuck? Fuck. Sweetheart, no. You can’t do that.”

I pushed his hands away and choked back tears. “Don’t. Don’t call me that and don’t care.”

Jesse’s sobbing grew louder as Caleb grabbed my knees and pried them open again. “Fucking look at what we’re doing to

her, goddammit!”

Blood smeared my thighs but eight crescent shaped cuts were easy to make out. Jack paled as he lifted his eyes from my thighs to my face. “Olive...”

We’d just pulled into my apartment complex and when Andrew parked, he turned to look at my thighs but I shoved Caleb’s hands away and leaned over Jesse to open the door. With shaky movements and tears streaming down my face, I climbed over Jesse and stumbled out of the truck. I unbuckled him and pulled him to me, getting hit in the process and he flailed and screamed.

I struggled with him all the way to the front door and when I reached into my pocket to grab my keys, he fought his way out of my grip and ran back towards the truck. The guys sat there, watching. I wrapped my arms around Jesse again and pulled him back to the front door. I managed to get the door open and us inside before I broke down. I shut and locked the door and then sank to the floor with Jesse in my lap. He struggled for a few seconds and then clung to me as he sobbed.

I rocked him in my lap until he fell asleep and then I just sat there, holding him and crying. My heart, my pride, my dignity, all of it was broken. I couldn’t believe how things had turned so quickly.

I slept on the couch with Jesse that night and woke up to a single text on my phone.

Are you okay?

I deleted the contact and then deleted the other two. I took an ice-cold shower and got dressed in a haze. Jesse was quiet but he ate his breakfast next to me and leaned his head against me in the Uber on the way to his school. Before closing the door and running inside, he smiled at me. “It’s okay, Mommy. If you say you’re sorry, they’ll come back.”

53

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*****Olive*****

I sat in Jerry's office with her and Kitty as I explained what Taylor had done. I didn't tell them about the guys because I just couldn't. It hurt too much. Instead, I focused on Taylor and that anger grew larger and larger until I was pacing and ranting. It was a relief to feel something besides grief so I leaned all the way in.

“He's been a bully the entire time I've known him and he's pushed and pushed until I've broken before, but this time is different. I'm not breaking.” I shoved my hair out of my face and growled. “And to have his parents try to take my son. He doesn't want Jesse! He called him Joey! He just wants to hurt me.”

Kitty stood up and grabbed her purse. Jerry looked concerned, but didn't say anything. “Let's go.”

I stopped pacing. “What? Go where?”

Jerry sighed and motioned at Kitty from the oversize hair to her low-cut jean top and leather bell bottoms. Her boots were

sequined to stay true to her love. “Meet Captain Fights Everyone’s Battles. A completely useless superhero, but sometimes it’s funny.”

Kitty knocked a cup of pencils off Jerry’s desk and smirked. “Oops.”

“Dammit, Kitty.”

Kitty motioned for me to follow her. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to my first love on the way.”

I looked back at Jerry and held up my hands as I shrugged. “I guess I’m leaving?”

“Good luck. If you two get arrested, don’t call me.”

I caught up with Kitty and pointed back at Jerry. “She was joking, right? We’re not actually going to end up in jail, right? That would look really awful in a custody battle, is all.”

She pushed the front doors open and strode out like the superhero Jerry had accused her of being. “Relax. If the fuzz comes, blame it on me and I’ll pretend to be senile.”

I followed her to the end of the employee parking lot and around the side of the building. I’d never been to that side of the outer fence area and when I saw what was hidden away, I gasped. Multiple rows of cars were parked there and every single one of them was a classic car that I used to see in the nice car shows back home.

“Holy shit.” I trailed along behind Kitty, admiring each car we passed. “This is crazy. Whose cars are these?”

“The residents. We started a classic car club a few years ago and then Jerry got all pissy about some of us driving. Have a few little wrecks and that woman gets uppity. This is my baby.” She stopped in front of a pink Cadillac and ran her hand over the perfectly polished chrome that sat like classy earrings on a pretty woman. “This is Missy. Miss for short. I was watching a lot of *Gunsmoke* at the time and I thought the two of us being Miss Kitty was just too cute. She’s a 1950 Cadillac convertible. I had this color pink custom made from one of Dolly’s jumpsuits from way back.”

I was speechless. I’d never seen a car more beautiful or more perfect for Kitty.

“Come on. We’re riding in style, honey. Help me take this roof off.”

I was sweaty by the time we finished, but Kitty was still perfect. She slid behind the wheel and I sank into the pink leather bench seat. I looked around at all the pink and chrome accessories. “This is fucking amazing, Kitty.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “I know!”

She started the car and it roared to life. I reached up to tie my hair in a bun so the wind wouldn’t do so much damage but Kitty slapped my hand and pointed at the rearview mirror above me. I pulled it down and a silk scarf fell into my lap. My mouth hung open in shocked glee.

“Kitty! I want to be you when I grow up!” I watched how she tied her scarf and mimicked her the best I could. “You are so cool!”

She shrugged one shoulder and smirked. “Again. I know. Now, where do we find this little asshole?”

I pulled out my phone and went to Instagram. “When I was trying to hunt him down to make him spend time with Jesse I learned that he posted every second of his day to his Instagram.”

“Of course, he does.” She hesitated a moment and grinned. “What’s an Instagram?”

“Here!” I showed her the picture Taylor had just posted of himself at a coffee shop on campus. He’d tried to do a serious face while holding a book but he just looked pouty and like maybe the book had hurt his feelings. “He’s at a coffee shop on campus. It’s right next to the stadium.”

She leaned closer and unfolded a pair of sunglasses from her purse. “He’s got a stupid face.”

I laughed and nodded. “He does, doesn’t he?”

She slid her sunglasses on and tapped the radio power button. Immediately, Eminem filled the car. “Let’s ride.”

“Not Dolly?”

“We need fuck you music to get you in the mood. Have you heard the one about cleaning closets?” She backed out of the spot at Nascar speed and giggled. “Oopsie. I just have to get used to the pedals again. Don’t worry. I wasn’t the one crashing all the time when Jerry flipped her lid.”

I had a death grip on the seat. “Okay, great!”

We rocketed out of the parking lot and towards campus like bats out of pink hell. The wind whipped the ends of my hair around and the sun warmed my skin. I took deep breaths and closed my eyes, letting the ride take me someplace peaceful, someplace where the guys hadn't dumped me for my own good. Even Eminem shouting at me didn't break the peace.

A block away from the coffee shop, Kitty pulled over and looked over at me. "Okay, Little Kitty. This is your chance to be your own Big Kitty."

I blinked. "What?"

She swatted my hand. "You're going to get behind the wheel and drive down to that coffee shop. You're going to let him see you and come over. Invite him in. That part's important. The power play is getting him in the car, on your territory. Then you're going to rip his head off his neck and kick it down the street. Verbally, of course."

"Where are you going to be?"

"Strutting my ass down this street and hoping I find someone who wants to be handsy." She got out and I slid behind the wheel. "Alright, Little Kitty. Make that man confess to every shitty thing he did to you. Make him squirm."

I swallowed. "Okay. I've got this. How will I know where to find you when I'm done?"

She flicked the scarf from her hair gracefully and waved it in the air over her head. "With my bat signal, of course."

I just stared at her.

“Oh, boo, Little Kitty. I’m going to walk towards the coffee shop and then hide until you’re done.” She tied the scarf around her neck and bent over to fix her lipstick. “Remember. Head off.”

54

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*****Olive*****

I parked in front of the coffee shop and tried to whip my scarf off as cool as Kitty had. After nearly choking myself, I pulled it off normally and ran my fingers through my knotted hair.

“Olive?”

I channeled Kitty and looked up slowly, pretending to be unbothered and cool. “Oh. It’s you.”

“Where the hell did you get this car?” He opened the door and slid in without waiting for an invite. “Shit, this is a cool car.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned forward to fix the lipstick I wasn’t wearing. I had to stop channeling Kitty. It wasn’t working for me. “It is. Less cool now that you’re in it, though.”

“Come on, Liv. Don’t be like that. We go back and forth. That’s just what we do. Don’t hold onto grudges.”

I lost my chill. Turning to face him completely, I narrowed my eyes. “We go back and forth? Huh. What do you think the forth is for the back you gave me yesterday? That little mass text about me being a perfect whore?”

He laughed. “That wasn’t me.”

I stared at him past the point of comfort for either of us but I wasn’t breaking first.

“Jeez, Olive. What’s with the femme fatale thing you’ve got going on?” He shifted and smiled. “It’s kind of hot.”

I was going to barf. “I’m upset about that text, Taylor. Can you at least admit you did it so I can stop worrying that someone else hates me as much as you do?”

“Babe, I don’t hate you. I was just trying to teach you a lesson.” He tried to play with the ends of my hair but just got his fingers stuck. “When’s the last time you brushed your hair, babe?”

“It sure looked like you hated me yesterday when you told me you were going to make me pay for Caleb taking your position. You threatened me, Taylor, and then you sent out that text to hurt me.” I looked away, doing my best to sound hurt and not murderous.

“I was upset. You know how it is. We’ve both said mean shit to each other. Your boyfriend got me benched and I was so angry I couldn’t see straight. I shouldn’t have sent that message out. It was mean. Think you can forgive me?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” My heart gave a mighty ache that I had to fight against. “That text was the nail in our coffin.”

“I’m so sorry, Liv. You’re better off without him. Do you know why he was benched yesterday for the start of the game?” Taylor leaned closer. “Those three assholes have been doping. They’re all using steroids. When I found out, I had to tell Coach or every win we take could be ripped away from us later. The only reason they were let back into the game was Caleb’s daddy paid off whoever gave the test. That’s not even all, though, Liv.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “There’s more?”

“They’ve been accused of running a cheating ring on campus. They’ve been taking money for test keys and shit. Dean Ardell is trying to get them expelled.”

“What the fuck, Taylor?” I broke character and just decided I had enough of his confession to go ahead and rip his head off. Verbally. I didn’t need him to confess to everything to be able to curse him out for it. “You did both of those things, too, didn’t you? Why?”

“Because they got too cocky. They thought they were the big men on campus, all because they were fucking you. Even though I’ve already been there, done that, they still thought they were tough shit. They were even acting like Jesse was their son.” Taylor scowled. “So I started a few rumors. Who fucking cares? Caleb’s rich daddy will just fix it before it goes too far. Or, they’ll get expelled and my last year will feel great.”

“That’s sick. You’re sick.” I shook my head. “They did nothing wrong. All they did was try to protect me from you and helped me take care of Jesse when I needed help the most. I begged for you to help, Taylor. I chased you all over this campus. I tried so hard to get you to see Jesse and help me with him but you refused. You hid from me until you found out that I was hanging out with the guys.”

“Jesus, Olive, I’m twenty-three-years-old. I don’t want to raise a fucking kid. He’s weird. And too sensitive. I was just teasing and I called you a whore in front of him and he cried. He’s a baby. I mean, goddamn, I can’t tease a little?”

“You don’t want him in your life at all?”

“No. I don’t fucking like kids. They ruin shit. Look at us. We were having a great time before you got knocked up.” He slid closer to me. “You were my first virgin and I’ve still never felt anything as tight as you, Livie.”

I gritted my teeth. “Taylor, what you did to me back then wasn’t right. You know that, don’t you? Tell me you feel even a tiny bit guilty so I know there’s an ounce of humanity in you.”

“I don’t feel fucking guilty, Liv, because I had to put up with you for it. I had to listen to you talk about shit and listen to you sing in my car even though you sounded like a dying cat. So I had to push you a little.”

“I cried! I told you I didn’t want to. Taylor, I begged you to stop because it hurt and you wouldn’t. What would you call that?” I ached for the child I’d been and the way I’d lost that

innocence. “You tricked me to get me alone and you wouldn’t stop until you got what you wanted. How many times did you lie to me to get me alone? How many times did I tell you I didn’t want to have sex? How many times did I tell you that it hurt?”

Some of his facade fell away and the car grew silent. I thought he was going to get out and leave but he finally looked up at me and shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s just how shit happened. I didn’t care about you, Olive. I didn’t care when you cried. You weren’t even a human being to me. I just wanted to fuck you to see if I could.”

“And when you couldn’t, what? You just decided to make me?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He sighed. “Fuck, Liv. My head’s all turned around these days.”

I waited to see what he meant and I should’ve known better than to hope he meant anything about Jesse.

“I mean... I fucking hate Andrew and his do-gooder ways. Seeing him try to date you just pissed me off. I guess there’s no loyalty amongst ex-best friends. And Coach is always sucking Caleb’s ass because he’s rich. Like giving him my fucking game yesterday. That was fucked up. And I’m graduating this year. I’m not ready to leave. This place is nonstop partying and pussy. I’m supposed to be the number one draft pick, but with this shit with Caleb, I don’t know. If I’m not picked first, I don’t even know why I’m going.”

“Taylor?”

He looked up. “Yeah, babe?”

“Get out.”

“What?”

“Get out of the car, right now. I thought hearing you confess to everything would make me feel better, but you’re a loser, Taylor, and it’ll never matter if you’re sorry or not. You’re just a vapid manchild. Jesse is better off without you in his life, so I’m glad you agree that you don’t want him.”

He scowled. “You’re being a bitch.”

“And you just admitted that you forced me to have sex with you when I was fourteen, that you lied to get the guys kicked out of school, and that you don’t want anything to do with my son.”

“Don’t forget my text if you’re listing off all my sins. Have you seen the way people have been looking at you? It’s great.” He rolled his eyes and tugged at the end of my hair hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. “Sorry it didn’t work out with your boyfriends. Guess you’ll have to try to fuck a different stranger into being Jesse’s daddy.”

A flash of sparkles swung solidly against Taylor’s head and he stumbled back, holding his face that had been covered in tiny cuts from Kitty’s rhinestone purse. He screamed when he saw blood and Kitty gracefully got in the car and adjusted her scarf.

“This purse is made from real crystals. Looks like rhinestone, hits like a bitch.” She looked over at me and

grinned. “Let’s roll, Little Kitty.”

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*****Olive*****

“**L**ook at this clip of you trying to whip your scarf off. You nearly killed yourself.” Kitty tapped something on her phone and laughed. “I just sent that part to Jerry. She’s going to piss herself laughing.”

I’d pulled into a Sonic and ordered more food than anyone ever should and Route 44 sugar-filled drinks. I was shoving a feel-better mozzarella stick in my mouth when Kitty turned her phone around to me and I watched myself strangle myself with my scarf in perfect clarity. I choked on the stick and sucked down a mouthful of slush.

“How the hell do you have that?”

“Miss Kitty is playing chess while everyone else plays checkers, honey. I kept smelling fire and fish every time I got in my car so I paid a guy I know to install a security system. This little baby is how I caught Brenda and Barb screwing the devil in my car every chance they got. Why do you think I prepped you so much, Little Kitty? We’ve got every word out of that punk’s mouth and every dirty confession he made.”

“The devil?”

“Oh, he’s this guy who dresses up in a devil costume and brings around homemade chocolates and stuff. They’re sinfully good. Ha. Ha.” She rolled her eyes. “Did you hear what I said? His whole confession is on tape.”

The feeling of having control tingled from my feet up to my scalp. I shuddered and met her gaze. “Can you send that to me?”

She tapped another button and a few seconds later my phone beeped. “I’ll just be over here, minding my own business while you do with that what you will.”

I opened the message from Cynthia Clarkson and attached the video to a message. I pressed send and waited for her to call me after watching it like I’d asked. I didn’t know how long it’d take but I only had to wait five minutes for her to call.

“What do you want?” She sounded panicked.

“For you to forget about the custody battle you tried to start for your son.”

“Fine. If Taylor doesn’t want to be involved in Jesse’s life, that’s his choice. Consider the whole thing forgotten. What do I have to give you to make you erase that tape, Olive? Taylor has a bright life ahead of him. This can’t ruin it.”

“I don’t want anything else from you. I’m not erasing the tape, though. Taylor is a cockroach that just keeps popping up

in my life. This tape will be here to make sure you keep him the hell away from me and my son.”

“Fine.” She choked back a sob. “I didn’t know, Olive. I... I’m so sorry.”

I hung up and looked over at Kitty. She raised her eyebrows at me and that was all it took for me to burst into tears. “Thank you, Kitty. Thank you so much. It’s all over.”

She wrapped her arms around me and held my head against her cleavage. “It’s not over yet. You just got proof of a lot of shit. Is there anyone else who needs to see this?”

I sent it to my parents without any context and then closed my phone. “I’ll clip it so it’s just the stuff about him framing the guys and send it to the dean later.”

“And the guys? Are you going to call them to celebrate?” The look on her face said she already knew something was wrong.

“Oh, Kitty. I’m just so tired. You just helped me make happen what I wished would happen for so long now. Things aren’t just going to magically get better, though. People around campus still think I’m a whore because of that message Taylor sent.”

She stroked my hair and smiled. “Can you imagine if being a whore was the worst thing someone could be?”

I looked up at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve lived a long time on this earth and I’ve come across a lot of bad people along the way. Not a single one of

them was a whore.” She laughed at my shocked expression. “People call women whores like it’s the worst thing in the world. The whores I’ve met along the way have all been fabulous and full of life, amongst other things.”

A heavy corner of my heart lit up as I listened to her. “I’ve come a long way but that message was hard. You’re right, though. Even if I *was* a whore, I’m also a good person, a mother, a friend, and really good at hanging out with seniors.”

“You’re definitely not a whore. You’re a freak, but that’s different.” She grinned. “You’re in a monogamous relationship. It isn’t with the typical number of men, but who cares? You screw the same three men all the time and that’s it. If you were a whore, you’d be failing.”

“They broke up with me, Kitty.”

She pushed her sunglasses down her nose so she could look at me clearly. “What did you just say?”

“They broke up with me. The reason was noble, I guess, but they just did it. It was so easy for them to make the call. They didn’t even look into a plan b, c, d, or even e. They just went straight to dumping me.” I sniffled. “And Jesse doesn’t understand things like this. I don’t even understand them. He just wants them back.”

“Tell me the reason.”

I told her and watched her struggle. “Well?”

Her face went back and forth between furious and smitten too many times before she pushed her sunglasses back up her

nose. “That one isn’t for me to comment on. You need to decide how you feel all by yourself.”

“I feel angry!” I sat up and chomped down on a pickle fry. “I needed them and they bailed. They broke a promise to Jesse and that’s not okay. They left me after thinking about it for less than five minutes. I want to punch them and shake them and then kiss them. I’m miserable. I love them, Kitty. I thought they loved me, too. I... I’m just really hurt.”

She nodded. “I think we should head back to Jolly Pines. I know something that could help.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Kitty. I’m not helping you break into the pill room. You already tried that once.”

She sighed. “It was worth a shot.”

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*****Olive*****

Instead of Terri driving me home that afternoon, Kitty made me drive Missy. She said she liked the way I looked behind the wheel and thought I needed to experience the wind in my hair a little bit longer. Jesse was so amazed when I picked him up from school that he only mentioned seeing the guys three times. He'd gotten so used to seeing them every day that it could've been much worse.

In fact, it got much worse once the car was out of sight. Jesse melted down that night. He cried and begged me to see the guys. He asked if he'd done something wrong to make them leave. He asked if *I'd* done something wrong to make them leave. It was all he could think about and no amount of big screen TV time made him feel better.

The longer I held him and promised him that he hadn't done anything wrong, the angrier I got. They'd come into our life and made us feel loved, just to leave at the first sign of trouble. I had to accept that behavior, but Jesse didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve to be deserted by yet another man.

If I removed my feelings from the situation, I probably could've gotten to a point of understanding. They thought they knew best. Ignoring the fact that they were wrong and I fixed things in less than twenty-four hours with Kitty's help, they thought they were doing it for Jesse. In their blind attempt to help Jesse, though, they'd walked away from him without thinking about what that would do to him.

Anger built and built in me all through the night as I watched Jesse toss and turn in his sleep. I was only able to fall asleep after I decided I was going to find the guys and rip into them. They weren't going to flake on Jesse. I wouldn't allow it.

Getting Jesse to school the next morning was a beast. He was angry at me and lashing out. I gave Ms. Emily a heads up about it and then drove straight to Jolly Pines. I was running on fury and caffeine when I walked into Jerry's office.

She looked up at me and her eyes widened. "You look as crazy as Helen did when she found out Barb stole the mailman from her. Kitty told me everything. Do you need anything? A hug? The day off? Help burying the bodies?"

I took a deep breath and shook my head. "No, I don't need any of that. I'm going to go find the guys tonight and let them know just how much they fucked up. I'm hoping that helps some. I just need to get through the day."

Kitty walked in behind me in a floor length sequined gown. "Oh, Little Kitty. I've already heard from two different men that they're going into hiding for the day. They took one look at you and recognized that look in your eyes as male hatred

and they beat it. Since today is singles day, you can't have the men hiding."

I frowned. "I didn't even see anyone on my way in."

"They saw you." She looked me up and down. "You're going to confront your guys tonight, huh?"

I looked down at my dress and back at hers. "Yes."

"I still have my glam squad here, Little Kitty." She wrapped her arm around me. "Let's get you fixed up so those boys really feel it. Just a little hair and makeup and we'll burn this dress. Nothing crazy."

Jerry stood up and followed us as Kitty steered me by my shoulders. "Don't do anything too complicated. We all saw her with that scarf."

Kitty giggled under my narrowed gaze. "Well, what was I supposed to do? Not show everyone? We have to laugh when we can around here. We just had another one of us die yesterday."

I gasped. "No! Who?"

Jerry slapped Kitty's hand. "No, we didn't. No one died. Jesus, Kitty."

"What? It got her mind off of being angry at me." Kitty directed me into a conference room that was filled with clothes, makeup, and professionals milling about. There were a dozen salon chairs set up and half of them were filled. Kitty pushed me into the chair closest to us. "Monica, I need

revenge. I need ‘fuck you’ in just enough sweetness to break a man.”

A beautiful woman turned her gaze on me and put her hand up like she was covering everything below my neck. “Oh, that’ll be easy. Do you want to find the dress?”

“More than I want a crappy orgasm tonight.” Kitty sighed. “Which is a lot.”

Jerry shook her head. “If someone had told me ten years ago that my two best friends would be a crazy senior citizen who dresses like Dolly Parton and a baby-faced coed who dresses like a nun, I would’ve laughed my ass off. Now look at me.”

My heart felt like it’d stepped into a little ray of sunshine. “I’m your best friend?”

“Don’t think about it too much. Just get hot and go scream at your men.”

Monica whistled. “*Men?*”

“Oh, sure, it sounds great. Having three men who take care of your every need and look like gods is wonderful. Until they decide to *do what’s best for you* and you get triple dumped.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Let me tell you. Getting dumped by three men at the same time is rough.”

We were halfway into a conversation about breakups and stupid men when it occurred to me how easily I’d told a stranger that I’d been dating three men. I hadn’t had a moment of panic over what Monica might’ve thought of me.

It was confusing to be full of anger at the guys and so happy for myself at the same time. I *was* proud of myself, though. I'd lost it for a bit after that woman's mean comment at the ice cream shop, but having Taylor's dirty secrets outed to even one person set me free. Having that recording in my back pocket filled me with a confidence that he'd stolen. I wasn't a whore. Like Kitty said, though, even if I was, there were far worse things to be. If the people in my life didn't understand that, I didn't want to be around them.

I could tell by Kitty's face when I stood in front of a mirror at the end of my impromptu makeover that she thought I was going to panic and beg to change. I took my time looking at myself, really trying to see myself. The light pink dress Kitty picked matched Missy and had a sweetheart neckline and lace cap sleeves. It hugged my waist and then swung loosely around my hips. It made my body look sexy but there was still something playful about it.

My eyes looked more cat-like after whatever makeup magic Monica had performed. My mouth looked pouty and shiny in a pretty nude color. I felt strong and beautiful. She'd styled large waves into my hair and they hung down my back like golden silk. I swayed back and forth to watch the waves shine.

"What did you use? This is amazing." I looked up at Kitty and rested my hands on my hips. "Okay."

She threw her arms in the air and wiggled. "Yes! Little Kitty strikes back!"

I slipped my feet into the matching pink heels and after watching me take two steps, they were taken away and I was given a kitten heel in the same color. I glanced at myself one more time and smiled. "I'm going to find them and verbally throat punch them."

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*****Olive*****

I drove Kitty's car to the stadium and parked in the back parking lot where the guys always parked. I saw all three of their vehicles there and knew from following their schedules before that football practice would've been ending any minute. Taking off my scarf without any fancy moves, I glanced in the rearview mirror and nodded to myself. I had the power of professional makeup and hair, the support of a retirement community, and a bottomless pit of anger. I was ready.

One of the players was coming out of the back door just as I got there so I slipped inside and made my way to the locker room. It was the same as always. There were women waiting around and guys slowly making their way out as they finished. I didn't even consider waiting. I pushed my way into the locker room and strolled in the direction I'd found them the very first day.

“Woman in the locker room!”

I ignored the shout and stopped when I saw Caleb's head stick out from a row of lockers. Turning in his direction, I watched his eyes sweep down my body and his jaw go slack. It emboldened me to finish what I needed to do.

All three of them were standing in front of their lockers, just out of the shower. They were all still wet and only covered by towels. Low slung towels that threatened to tantalize me, but I averted my gaze and cocked my hip out while crossing my arms under my chest. The move pushed my breasts higher and I watched their eyes snap to the hint of cleavage showing.

"I've got something to say to the three of you."

Andrew took a step closer to me and I saw the bags under his eyes and the sheer exhaustion showing across his face. All three of them looked exhausted. For a second, I worried if Taylor had done something else to them but I forced myself to focus.

"You made your decision and you had your reasons. I'll accept it, even if you couldn't have tried less to come up with an alternative plan. I *have* accepted it." Lie. "But so much of my anger at Taylor was for being a deadbeat dad. He constantly let Jesse down and seeing my son hurt because of a man's shitty choice is infuriating. You three made Jesse feel loved and special. You treated him like he mattered. You made promises to him. And then you flaked."

Caleb swallowed so hard I watched his adam's apple bob up and down. "Olive,-"

I held up my hand. “No. I’m speaking. You hurt my son. You made choices no better than the ones Taylor made. He’s cried more over the three of you than he ever has over his father. He doesn’t understand what he did wrong and no matter how many times I tell him nothing, he doesn’t believe it. Then he wants to know what I did wrong.”

Jack shifted and looked like he was going to speak but I cut my eyes at him and he kept his lips sealed.

“I know one thing that I did wrong. Unfortunately, it’s too late for me to do anything about it. I trusted you with my son and for that, I’m a fool. That’s spilled milk at this point, though.” I looked at each of them for a beat. “You’re not going to hurt my son anymore than you already have. I’m not going to let you. He wants to see you and he’s going to see you. I’m not letting another man flake on him. You guys are going to come over and pick him up tonight. You’re going to do whatever he needs to feel better.”

They each perked up and I felt hope stabbing through my chest. Andrew nodded and stepped even closer. “We’ll be there, Olive. We-”

“That’s all I need to hear.” I backed up a step and then let out a humorless laugh. “I took care of everything. It took me less than twenty-four hours and I didn’t have to hurt anyone innocent for my plan to work. Dean Ardell should be contacting you guys, if she hasn’t already. Taylor confessed to setting you up.”

“How’d you-”

“How’d I know? How’d I fix things? How’d I get Taylor to confess?” I held myself straighter. “I had help from a friend. Instead of leaving me in the middle of a nightmare, she stepped in and helped me. It’s done now. That’s what matters.”

“We thought we were-” Andrew paled when I narrowed my eyes on him. “Olive...”

My chest felt like it was being crushed so I knew I had to get out of there. “What time are you picking Jesse up?”

“Could we pick him up from school?” Jack’s voice was quiet as he looked up at me. “Would that be okay?”

“I’ll let the school know.” I started to turn away and then swung back around. “If you leave my son sitting at his school, waiting for you, I’ll find a way to make you suffer.”

“Already there, sweetheart.”

Emotion clogged my throat and made my eyes burn. Instead of trying to think of something to say to hurt them, I just turned and walked away. Out of the locker room, out of the stadium, and then I drove out of the parking lot.

I held myself together until I was sitting in my apartment, staring at the stack of books waiting on me. It was like the apartment had grown used to being stuffed full of people and with only me sitting inside, it felt sad. It was too quiet. When I turned the TV on, it was too loud. I was uncomfortable in my own skin. I tried to change into my comfiest clothes, but I still felt wrong.

I didn't have anywhere I was supposed to be. Jerry told me to take the day off and Kitty told me to keep the car for the night. The guys were going to pick Jesse up. Still, I felt like there was something hanging over me.

I cracked and dialed Lydie after staring at the same page of my textbook for over an hour. I hadn't wanted to make her worry so I hadn't told her anything about the guys. I didn't even know if our parents had talked to her about the video I sent them. They hadn't said a thing to me.

"Big sis! I have been dying to talk to you! Get this. I was minding my own business yesterday, meeting perverts in chat rooms as one does, and then I heard Mom screaming." Lydie sounded like she was out of breath but it didn't slow her down. "I'm thinking that she's finally typed the wrong thing into google and been sent to a page of search results full of hairy balls. I go running out, eager to point out which balls looked like ones I've seen before."

"Lydie!"

"But no, Liv. Mom is screaming her head off at Dad. And you know what?" She hesitated. "I think you know why."

I couldn't tell if she was angry at me for not telling her. "I'm sorry for not calling you first."

"As much as I'd normally love to rub something in your face, this isn't the right time. You had a lot going on." She laughed. "Mom and Dad aren't speaking, by the way. Mom is blaming everything on Dad and Dad literally tried to say that we, as women, are cursed and it's not his fault."

I choked on the audacity. “No!”

“Mom threw her bible at him.” She was laughing so hard that I could just hear her wheezing in a silent laugh. “I swear to god, Liv, he still had the imprint of a cross on his forehead this morning. Hey! Whose badass car is this? It’s not one of those MLM cars, is it? I’ve always wanted a pink car.”

My heart jackhammered as I stood up and ran to my door just as someone knocked on it. Lydie had come for me.

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*****Andrew*****

“Come play ball with me!” Jesse had a death grip on my hand as he tugged me towards Olive’s front door. He looked back and saw that I was looking at the pink car parked next to us. “That’s Mommy’s new car. She picked me up from school yesterday and Ms. Emily said Mom looked like a movie star.”

I glanced over at Caleb and he shrugged. Jack did the same. The three of us weren’t in Olive’s inner circle anymore. We didn’t know what was going on in her life. It was my own fault, but it didn’t make it suck less.

“I bet your mommy did look like a movie star. She’s really pretty.” Jack ran his hand over the car and grunted. “This car was made for your mommy.”

“Someone made that car for Mommy?” Jesse tilted his head up at Jack.

Jack smiled and shook his head. “It’s just a saying.”

Olive's door cracked open and I steeled myself to see her. I just wanted to hold her. I wanted to make her understand how sorry I was and beg her to forget I'd ever done anything so fucking stupid. The breath I was holding sputtered out when it was Lydie standing in the doorway instead of Olive.

She was a force of anger as she blocked the door with her arms crossed and a deep scowl on her face. "You three have a lot of nerve. I see you're all coming to the door. Did you think she was going to let you inside?"

Olive appeared behind her sister, a vision in an oversized sweater and bare legs. Her face was what took my breath away, though. It was obvious she'd been crying. Her eyes were red and swollen and her nose was even redder than her eyes. She kept her face down, like that would keep up from seeing that she'd been crying.

She slid past Lydie and held out her arms for Jesse. "Aunt Lydie ruined the surprise, but she came to see us! Come on, buddy. She bought us ice cream. Buckets of it."

Jesse looked up at me and back at his mom. "Andrew and Caleb and Jack can help eat it?"

I watched pain shoot across Olive's face but she forced a smile and tried to hide it. "They have to go home."

"Why?"

"Because they're jerks." Lydie huffed. "Come on, Jesse."

Olive swung around to her sister and grabbed her arm. In a harsh whisper that carried to us because of the stillness of the

night, she snapped. “No. He loves them and it doesn’t matter how I feel if they’re good to him, Lydie. Go inside.”

Lydie’s cheeks darkened and she nodded. “Sorry. You’re right.”

“Alright. Inside with Aunt Lydie, Jesse. Now.”

Lydie shot me one last death glare. “Until next time.”

Jesse tugged on my hand and held his arms up for a hug. I picked him up and held him tight, until he giggled and pretended to choke. “You’re too big, Andy. You’re squishing me.”

Jack took him from me and hugged him just as tight. “I’m bigger than him. Look at these muscles, little dude. I could squish you like a booger.”

Jesse ran into Caleb’s arms last and they just held each other for a long moment. I knew Caleb was struggling so I gripped his shoulder and met his pained gaze. He nodded and let Jesse go. “See you later, little dude.”

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“Jesse.” Olive’s voice was thick with emotion that made me want to punch the brick exterior of her apartment until I could forget the sound.

“Go inside, Jesse. We’ll talk to your mom about when we can hang out again. Okay?” I ruffled his hair and eased him towards Olive. “Cuddle your seal for us.”

Olive bent down and pressed a kiss to the top of his head before gently pushing him into the apartment and closing the door. I could hear the shaky breath she took so clearly when she looked back at us. “I don’t expect you to take him every time he wants to go with you. You’d never be able to do anything else.”

“We want to see him. We’ll take everything you’ll give us.” Caleb looked away and wiped his eyes before moving closer. “Fuck, sweetheart. You’re hurting. Let us-”

“No.” She wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head. “It means a lot to me that you guys showed up for Jesse today. Thank you for that. It doesn’t mean that things between us are fixed.”

Jack growled. “We don’t want a magic solution. Just tell us what you need. Tell us how to make it better.”

She hugged herself tighter, causing the hoodie to ride up her thighs. I could see the line of angry red cuts from her nails and it sent pain and anger crashing through me. Covering my mouth, I turned away from her and told myself to let her set and keep her boundaries. The sound of another snuffle cracked my resolve right down the middle.

I was standing inches from her in two long strides. I gripped the back of her neck in one and ran my hand down her thigh, feeling the cuts. I heard the quick intake of breath from her and stared into her eyes as her pupils dilated. “You’re hurting. You hurt yourself, Olive. I don’t have enough time or words to

tell you how sorry I am. I was stupid. I fucked up. Give me a chance to fix it. Please.”

“I have a harder time throwing out expired condiments than you had throwing me away.” She gently pushed me away. “I want to matter. I want to be wanted. I want someone who needs me as much as I need them and someone who would do anything to be with me. I thought that was you three. I thought you loved me. You don’t leave the people you love, though.”

“Give us a chance.” I ran my hands through my hair and tugged at it to keep from grabbing her. “Give us one fucking chance to show you how we feel, Olive. I can’t walk away without a chance.”

“It’s a free country, Andrew. Do whatever you want.” She pushed the door open behind her and wouldn’t meet my eyes as she stepped inside. “When do you want to pick up Jesse again.”

“Tomorrow.” I took a step backwards and then another, a smile slowly tilting my mouth. “You didn’t say no, Olive.”

Her eyes shot up to mine and I watched as her lips parted. I held my breath, afraid the next word out of her mouth was going to crush me. She opened her mouth and snapped it shut a few more times before her cheeks burned red. “You can pick him up from school again.”

She pushed the door closed silently and I heard the lock turn before I turned to face Jack and Caleb. They both looked like they’d been through a battle. It was going to be better soon, though. That smile didn’t budge from my lips.

“She didn’t say no.”

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*****Olive*****

I glared at Lydie and angrily whisper-yelled at her. “You couldn’t think of a single other thing for us to do with them? Not one thing?”

She gestured to the field in front of us. “I couldn’t think of another thing with this kind of view and access. We’re trying to show them that your life is together and they’ve been wrong about you for your whole life. Seats this good tell a story of a good life, Liv.”

Jesse lost his mind screaming when the team came running out of the tunnel. “Heck yeah!”

Our mother leaned forward and removed her bright orange ear plugs. “Did he just say the h word?”

Jesse looked back at the woman who was no more familiar than Taylor’s mom. “I didn’t say hell.”

Lydie giggled and shared a secret fist bump with him. “You heard him, Mom. He didn’t say hell.”

“Oh, Lydie. Don’t be crass.” Mom looked at me and then down at Jesse. “Do you correct him when he says things like that?”

Because I’d just caught a glimpse of Caleb moving on the sidelines, I let out a bit of sass. “Only when he says the really bad ones.”

Joanne Oakley didn’t like sarcasm. She didn’t like loud noises, that our mascot was a devil, or me. I could tell that when she arrived with Dad, she’d had hope. She’d clearly thought that since I’d been a victim, maybe every other thing I ever did that she hated wasn’t real, either. Within five minutes, it was clear that she regretted fighting her husband to drive out to see me. Once he was near a football game, however, David Oakley wasn’t going to miss it. It was his one secular pleasure. Not that he’d ever admit it.

I shot another glare at Lydie. “This is torture.”

“Look. It was either this or sitting at your dining table staring at each other.” She shrugged. “Just try to enjoy the game, Liv. Look at how much fun Jesse’s having.”

“What did your sister say, Olive?”

I turned towards Mom and forced a smile. “She said Jesse looks like he’s having a blast.”

Her upper lip curled higher, just the slightest bit. “Does he always jump around like that? In public?”

I was going to lose my mind. “Pretty much. Sometimes he just starts mosh pits and I have to drag him away before he’s

arrested for disturbing the peace.”

She clutched her purse tighter on her lap. “Olive, that’s not necessary.”

I shrugged. “And your comments on my son aren’t necessary, either. Just try to enjoy yourself, Mom. This is supposed to be fun.”

“Fun.” She popped her ear plugs back in and faced straight forward, cutting off any conversation with me.

Unfortunately for me, Dad chose to lean over Mom’s lap and start a conversation. “That ex of yours is the quarterback, right?”

I barely resisted the urge to throw myself over the railing. “Nope. He was removed from the team after some allegations came out about him.”

“Don’t pop your letters like that.” Dad narrowed his eyes at me. “You didn’t start the allegations, did you? We’re supposed to turn the other cheek, not seek out revenge, Olive.”

“Nope.” I popped that letter out super hard. “I didn’t start any allegations. I did, however, catch him admitting trying to ruin the life of other people and I sent the pertinent information where it needed to go.”

“That’s not turning the other cheek.”

I was about to show him turning the other cheek. I was also going to murder Lydie for bringing me somewhere I would be forced to watch the guys play while listening to our parents disapprove of me at every turn. I don’t claim to be perfect,

Dad. I don't want to be. When people hurt the people I care about, I'd rather be vengeful than a coward."

"Oh, my god!" Sequins flashed in the corner of my eye and I looked up to see Kitty, Jerry, the Trashed Twins, and Helen all scooting into the seats directly behind us. "I thought we were going to be late!"

I gaped up at them even as my dad lectured me. His words were bouncing off my other cheek while I tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

Kitty glanced down and her eyes widened. "Little Kitty! What are you doing here?"

Lydie snorted. "Little Kitty?"

"What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here?" I shook my head to clear it of the fog seeing them outside of Jolly Pines caused. "Um. This is my sister, Lydie, and my son, Jesse. Guys, these are my friends from work. Kitty, Jerry, Barb, Brenda, and Helen."

Helen leaned forward. "I'm the one who doesn't look like a circus freak."

Lydie threw her head back and laughed. "This is the best day ever."

Jesse climbed up between me and Lydie to stare at Kitty. He'd finally found someone that pulled his attention more than the guys. His eyes were full of wonder as he smiled. "You look like Barbie."

Kitty was extra fabulous in hot pink sequins. The dress showed off a lot of cleavage and went all the way to the floor, where it was hemmed with pink feathers. She winked at Jesse. “And you look like my new best friend.”

Barb was scanning the crowd and stopped when her eyes moved just over my shoulder. “Oh, hello. Excuse me! Excuse me, sir.”

Lydie’s mouth hung open in shock as Brenda saw who Barb was yelling at and elbowed her in the boob. “You got an orgasm last night. I didn’t. This one’s mine.”

“What’s an orgasm?” Jesse couldn’t take his eyes off Kitty. “You’re so pretty.”

“I only got an orgasm because I talked Gerald through it like a toddler.” Barb looked at Jesse and winced. “No offense, kid.”

“Yoo-hoo! Sir!” Brenda was all but hanging over Jerry’s lap. “Yes, you! In the stiff shirt. You are a tall drink of water. Are you here with anyone?”

Lydie had tears leaking out of her eyes as she clutched her stomach from laughing so hard. “That’s our dad!”

I whipped around to see Dad sitting back, ramrod straight. I swore I saw him shaking when Brenda called to him again. Turning back to Kitty and Jerry, I shook my head. “What are y’all doing here?”

“We go out, Little Kitty. You don’t have to sound so shocked.” Kitty pulled a sparkling lipstick from her purse and

applied it perfectly.

Jerry rolled her eyes. “Even prisoners get yard time.”

“Would you be offended if I sat on your dad’s lap, Little Kitty?” Barb had a wig of bright red ringlets on and looked like Annie, if Annie had lived her entire life in the seventies.

I lifted a brow and considered it for a second before shaking my head. “That’s my mom right next to him.”

“Are they married?” She eyed Mom up and down. “Happily?”

Helen pulled a rolled up newspaper out of her bag and swatted both Barb and Brenda. “Leave her family alone.”

“My friend has a barbie. She’s always naked.”

“Your friend or the barbie?”

“The barbie!” Jesse climbed over the back of my seat and stood in front of Kitty. “I like your hair.”

Kitty scooped him up and held him in her lap. “I like your glasses.”

I shook my head at Lydie. “When’s the last time we got a compliment from this kid?”

She wiped her eyes and kept bursting out into giggles. “I’m moving here as soon as I can.”

“What did you just say, young lady?” Mom leaned over me, apparently ear plug free. “You are *not* moving here!”

Lydie, always ready to rise to a fight, leaned forward. “I am. I might not even finish this semester of school.”

“David! Did you just hear your daughter? She says she’s going to move here! Tell her she’s not.” Mom motioned at me and lowered her voice. She still made sure that I heard what she said next. “Do you want two children like Olive? Do something, David.”

“Yeah! Do something, David!” Barb and Brenda both teased my dad with pure joy in their voices. They were in their element.

“Can I have some of that pink lip stuff?” Jesse’s innocent question made Mom swing around to see who he was speaking to.

Mom’s eyes went comically wide when she saw Kitty. “Is that... Is that a *drag queen*?”

Jerry doubled over laughing. Barb and Brenda hissed at my mother like a couple of feral cats. Helen had turned her attention to a couple making out beside her. She was hitting them with the newspaper and shouting about getting a room.

Kitty pulled her lipstick out and met my gaze in a silent question. I nodded and watched with a widening grin when she took the lipstick and made football strips on Jesse’s cheeks before letting him have the tube. He immediately squished it into his lips and giggled.

“Look over there!” Kitty waited until Jesse was looking away to flip my mom off. “If I *was* a drag queen, I’d be sashaying all over your butt right now.”

I was so lost in the chaos surrounding me that I didn't notice we'd made it to half time. I'd barely glanced at the field, and it was only slightly on purpose to avoid the pain of seeing the guys.

“What are you doing?” Kitty looked at me with wide eyes and pointed to Jesse's back as it slipped past people's knees. “He just took off!”

My heart lunged into my throat and I jumped to my feet. “Jesse!”

I watched in horror as he climbed over the railing. I couldn't get to him fast enough. I screamed his name and watched him grin at me before disappearing.

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*****Olive*****

Jesse had managed to slide down the wall and land on his feet. He waved at me and then took off running towards the field. I climbed over the railing and jumped down without a second thought. I chased after him, calling his name all the while.

He'd never done anything so crazy. He sprinted onto the field and ran straight to the middle. There were no players on the field, thankfully, but I could hear the crowd laughing from every direction. I'd never been so embarrassed in my entire life.

Jesse stopped once he got to the middle and turned towards me with the biggest smile on his face. He pointed up at the giant screen where we were being displayed way too clearly for my liking. "Look, Mom!"

I stopped in front of him and picked him up as fast as I could, scared he'd make a run for it again. "You are in so much trouble, little boy. I can't believe you just did that."

He cupped my face in his hands and pressed my lips into a fishy face. I was acutely aware of the cameras casting my puckered lips at giant sizes. “You’re going to have boyfriends, Mom.”

I’d already started walking back towards the stands when the lights in the stadium went out. I froze and held Jesse tighter. “It’s okay, Jesse.”

“I know, Mommy. I’ve been practicing.”

“If everyone could pull out their cell phones for us, we’re trying to get some mood lighting going.” Caleb. His voice filled the stadium.

My body erupted in tingles and then Jesse’s words registered. “You’ve been practicing? What have you been practicing?”

As people raised their phones, my breath caught. In the dark arena the phones looked like flickering candles.

“Thanks, guys.” Caleb’s voice lowered and the effect was warmth filling my body. “So, I’m going to tell everyone a story.”

I spun around when the school band started playing a soft tune. I held Jesse like a protective layer when a spotlight lit up the ground all around us. I moved over and the light followed us.

“Nuh-uh, sweetheart. Mike Ford is working the spotlight and he’s been bribed handsomely to follow you to the end of the earth with that light if he has to.”

Jesse wiggled free and looked up at me. “I’ll be right back!”

I tried to catch him but he slipped away and I found myself all alone in a wash of light. I spun in a slow circle, looking for the guys.

“I’m going to have some help telling this story. He’ll be here in just a second. He’s got short legs so be patient.” Caleb laughed and then Jesse’s voice joined his.

“Hey, Mom!”

“Alright, little dude. You’ve got the beginning part.” Caleb’s voice shifted warmer when he spoke to Jesse, like he was just naturally gentler for my son.

“Mic check.” Jesse giggled. “Is this thing on?”

I covered my mouth with my hands and laughed.

“I taught him that. That laugh was mine, sweetheart.”

“Okay, I’m going to start so everybody be quiet.” Jesse didn’t react to everyone laughing if he noticed. “Once upon a time, a princess wanted to run away. The castle she lived in was cold and everyone around her was a dragon. Except Aunt Lydie. Aunt Lydie was probably a frog.”

Caleb cleared his throat to cover a laugh. “I didn’t write that.”

“Shh, Caleb. It’s not your turn.” Jesse’s teasing tone filled my heart. “I was there, too. I wasn’t a dragon, though. I was just a boy. I bet that would’ve been so scary. The princess didn’t like it, either. She packed her bags and ran away with

me. And sometimes Aunt Lydie. She brought us here and I did something bad.”

“What’d you do?”

“I ran into the boys shower and Mom had to come in and get me. We saw your ding dongs.”

Caleb’s voice climbed a few octaves. “Let’s stick to the script, dude.”

“What? We did. Mom stared. I saw her.”

I felt my face heat to a thousand degrees and shook my head. As if anyone would hear my denial.

“That’s when we met my favorite devils. Andy, Jack, and you.” The sound of rustling filled the air for a moment and then Jesse’s sweet voice came back. “I love you, Caleb. I hope Mommy lets you come back over.”

“I love you, too, little dude.” Caleb’s voice was suspiciously shaky and there were a few seconds of silence before he spoke again. “Alright, my buddy had to go take care of something. My turn to tell the story.

“The three devils had never met a princess so pretty before. Through a series of private details, the devils and the princess became close. The devils had never cared about anyone before but the princess and her son were different. For a chance at her love, they put aside their pride and greed. They decided to love her together.”

I couldn’t keep up with the tears streaking down my cheeks. I wanted to see the guys desperately. My heart was racing as I

pressed my hands over it.

“A dragon existed here, too. A dragon who wanted to hurt the princess. The devils thought that sacrificing themselves to stop the dragon was the only option. They didn’t know that the princess was smarter than them and could slay dragons by herself.” He chuckled quietly. “The princess taught the devils about love and they did what devils do. They were careless.”

It was Lydie’s voice that filled the stadium next. “Hey, sis. This is pretty cool, right? Back to the story. The devils may have messed up but they weren’t quitters. They spent time with the people who love the princess the most, planning a way to bring them all together so the princess could see how much she matters, not just to them, but to a whole mess of people. They wanted her to see that they want her more than anything and that anything they did wrong was because of stupidity and not a lack of care.”

I gasped as the field lit up in front of me and my four guys were standing there. Andrew, Jack, Caleb, and Jesse. Three of them were still in their uniforms, sweaty and nervous. Jesse was wearing a devil costume.

“I added that stupidity part. I mean, seriously? What kind of idiot breaks up with my sister? Have you seen her? She’s stunning. And brilliant.” Lydie trailed off and then cleared her throat. “Oh, yeah. Here we are. The devils are ready to prove their love to the princess. If she’ll just give them a chance.”

More light flooded the field and I saw the entire football team behind the guys, their hands full of roses.

“Everyone can see how much they love you, Liv. Your friends and family, your son, the whole football team, and now this whole stadium of people see that these lovesick fools would do anything for you. Including risking being turned down during halftime in front of everyone.” Lydie sighed dreamily. “If you don’t run into their arms, I’m going to lose my mind. I’m out here, throwing it at anyone who looks my way and I can’t catch a single orgasm, while you’ve got three great men begging you for a chance. And I know they’re giving you great or-”

I’d never been so glad to have someone cut a mic.

I watched the guys all take a knee and pull a single rose out from behind their backs. They were copying the way I’d asked them to be my boyfriends. I sprinted across to them and tried to grab them all at once, but I just ended up tackling them to the ground.

Jesse hovered over us as I peppered kisses all over their faces. I didn’t care that I was crawling all over them in the middle of a football field. I just felt so grateful and I wanted to show them.

“Will you be our girlfriend, sweetheart?” Caleb brushed his hand through my hair and smiled. “Please?”

I nodded. “I’ll be your girlfriend. Since you asked in such a calm and muted way.”

“She said yes!” Jesse ran around us, giving the crowd a thumbs up, and then he jumped on top of my back, all knees

and elbows. “I can’t wait until I go to school on Monday. I’m going to tell everyone that I’m going to have three dads now!”

Jack pulled him off me and lifted him onto his shoulders. He met my teary gaze and smiled. “What do you think about that?”

“If it’s what you want, I think it’s the best thing I’ve ever heard and it’s all I’ve ever wanted for Jesse.”

“You’ve got three dads, little dude!” Caleb fist bumped Jesse and lifted me into his arms. “And you’ve got three men who are going to show you how much you mean.”

Andrew grunted. “This is why we’ll have to pop out a few more kids later. I’m just standing here with no one to hold.”

Jesse gasped. “I’m going to have a little brother or sister? This is the best day ever!”

I bit my lip and leaned over so I could kiss Andrew. “You just started something. I’m just going to let you handle it.”

“Andy? Where do babies come from?”

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*****Jack*****

I stepped around another vase of roses and scowled at Caleb. “This was overkill.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t taking any chances. Olive said she’s sending most of them to the local hospitals, so I’ve done two good things with these flowers.”

“Where is she?” Andrew swore as he nearly knocked over a vase. “Holy shit. This place is a maze.”

I spotted a piece of paper tacked to her bedroom door and grabbed it. “If she’s not here, I’m throwing a fit. We didn’t get to see her after the game last night because of her parents and I’m dying here. I need to touch her.”

Andrew snatched the paper from me and opened it. I watched his eyes go wide as he read. “Three devils proved themselves worthy and wholly amazing last night. Today, the princess requests you do what devils really do. Corrupt your princess. The apartment is ours until this afternoon.”

Caleb knocked over a vase as he damn near flung himself through Olive's bedroom door. The scent of vanilla and coconut floated out of the room and I moaned at what I knew waited for us.

“Holy fuck.” Caleb stopped short and I had to push him out of the way to get inside.

I nearly came right then and there. Olive was stretched out across her bed completely naked. She was blindfolded and wearing headphones, completely unaware of us entering the room. She was rubbing her thighs together and I could see her wetness coating them.

Andrew made a pained sound and moved closer. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.”

As we watched, she slid her hand over her chest and pinched her nipple. The three of us moaned in unison like it was us she was grabbing. Her lips parted on a breathy sigh as she slowly stroked her other hand over her stomach and lower. For minutes we watched as she brushed her fingertips over the small patch of hair and tortured her nipples. We were entranced. When she spread her legs and we saw the surprise she'd been hiding, it was like the temperature in the room had gone up by a hundred degrees.

Fitted snugly in her ass was a bright pink plug. She'd gotten herself ready for us. Her breathy little sighs grew into moans when she ran her fingers over her lower lips and plunged two fingers into her dripping pussy. “Yes, please. Fuck me. I need it.”

I yanked my shirt over my head and breathed heavily as I tried to get control of myself. Andrew and Caleb stripped and moved closer but I held up my hand. Wait.

Olive pumped her fingers faster and panted. Her back arched and her moans became cries. “Yes! Andrew! Caleb! Oh, god, Jack! Don’t stop!”

My knees nearly buckled. I kicked off the rest of my clothes and the three of us framed the bed. Andrew tore his eyes away from her to motion at us. I shook my head and motioned at myself. Caleb hit me and pointed at his own chest. I hit him back and in the time it took for us to focus on each other, Andrew grabbed Olive’s ankles and yanked her to the end of the bed.

She screamed and reached up for the blindfold but I was there in a flash, gripping her wrists and pulling them over her head. Andrew spread her legs and paused just before sinking into her. He ran his fingertip over the faded marks from her nails.

“Never again.” Andrew growled out before thrusting deep. He held onto her hips and went straight into a relentless pace.

Olive screamed and flexed her hands in my grip. “Oh, god, yes. Oh, please. Fuck!”

Caleb leaned over the bed and caught her nipple between his teeth. Running his hand down her stomach, he settled his fingers over her clit and just held them there. Every rough thrust of Andrew’s forced her clit to move up and down his fingers.

“I’m going to come. I’m going to-” Her voice broke off when Andrew pulled out and Caleb moved away from her. “What...? No! Please, god. I’m so close!”

I watched as she twisted and writhed, desperate to come. “Think we should tell her this isn’t just makeup sex?”

Caleb took Andrew’s position and flipped Olive over with my help. With a firm slap to her ass, he sank deep inside her. “I think she’s going to figure it out.”

He reached up and gripped her hair. Tugging her head back, he fucked her just as hard as Andrew had, jarring her body back and forth. She screamed and her hands tightened where I still held them firmly. Caleb slapped her ass again and then pulled out with a rough growl.

“Fuck!” He stumbled away from the bed. “This is torture for us, too. Who wanted this?”

I gave a slight smile as I watched Olive’s body heaving as she tried to catch her breath and figure how to come at the same time. I could see the desperation and feel it as she pressed her hips back, searching for one of us. “She won’t forget.”

Andrew growled out his agreement. “Never fucking again.”

Olive whimpered. “*Please?*”

Andrew positioned himself behind her and took his time plunging a few inches of his cock into her at a maddening pace. He didn’t stop until Olive’s frustrated cries turned teary. Then he forced every inch as deep as it would go and fucked

her with the desperation we were all feeling. When she was close to coming again, he pulled out and spun away with his hands fisted in his hair. “Goddammit!”

“Why?!” Olive yanked against my hold and gasped when I dragged her up the bed and pinned her beneath me.

I rested my weight on her and ran my teeth over her throat. “Think that was enough?”

Caleb swore. “Yes! Fuck, yes.”

Kissing up her neck, I nudged the headphones off her ear and growled. “Remember this, Olive. You don’t fucking hurt yourself.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t.”

I reached down and gripped her inner thigh. “This. You get angry? Come find us. We’ll fuck it out of you. You get sad? We’ll hold you until it hurts less. No matter what, you don’t do this again.”

“I didn’t mean to.” Her lip wobbled. “I had to be strong for Jesse.”

“Not anymore. Not like that. We’re here. We’re not going anywhere. We’ll take care of you, Liv.” I kissed her jaw. “Remember how desperate you just felt to come. Remember the anger and frustration you felt. We’ve missed the hell out of you and are dying to make you come, but *this* comes first.”

“Okay!” She gasped when I gripped her thigh again. “Okay, Jack.”

“Hurt yourself again and you’ll find yourself tied up and begging to come for a lot longer, Liv. You matter to us. You wanted to know it, here it is. You fucking matter. If anything ever happened to you...” I swore and pulled back so I could thrust into her. “You’re ours and we’re going to take care of you.”

She locked her arms around my neck and blinked against the light in the room when I yanked the blindfold off. “You’ll make me come now?”

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*****Caleb*****

Jack rolled over so Olive was stretched out on top of him and I climbed up behind her. Stroking her back with one hand, I gently fucked her with the plug before pulled it out and tossing it aside. Her pretty little asshole stretched around my cock head and then fluttered around my dick as I sank every inch I had into her.

Olive cried out and tossed her hair to the side so she could look back at me. “Fuck me, Caleb.”

I gripped her ass tight and ground myself even deeper into her. “Such a dirty mouth.”

Jack grunted. “Think someone should clean it out?”

“Allow me.” Andrew knelt next to us and wrapped her hair around his fist. He pulled her mouth to him, making her twist and stretch to reach. “How the fuck do you manage to look like an angel even as you’re opening your mouth to let me fuck it?”

Olive moaned. “It’s because you love me.”

He didn't get a chance to reply before she lowered her mouth over his dick.

All the games were over then. It was pure fucking to fuck. We'd missed her desperately and having her between us again was something we hadn't been sure we'd get. It created a chaotic need in us. We fucked her harder, rutting into her until she came.

We didn't slow down. She screamed around Andrew's dick as Jack slammed his dick into her from below and I rode her hard from above. We found a rhythm that had us fucking into her at the same time and the sound she made pushed Andrew over the edge. He held her head down on his dick and shouted her name as he came.

Olive came again and then she just kept coming. We were hitting something special because her body milked us hard and it didn't stop. She screamed and tried to shift her body away but there was nowhere for her to go.

When Andrew pulled out of her mouth, she cried out for us and fisted the bedding. "I can't! It's too much!"

I lifted her so she was pressed to my chest. Holding her throat, I lost myself as she flooded our dicks with her come. "Come again, Liv. Come for us. One more big one and you can have our come."

Jack reached forward and stroked her clit hard and fast. "Fuck, Liv. That's it. Suck me dry."

She stiffened and her ass clamped down on me so hard I felt like I wouldn't get my dick back. Grunting, I knew it was over for me. I was coming, no matter what.

Thankfully, Olive let out a scream that would've woken the dead and came with the suction of a black hole. I came hard in her ass and nearly blacked out from how hard she was squeezing me. In the back of my consciousness, I heard Jack groaning as he came. It was the desperate words of Olive as she went limp in my arms that shattered me.

"I love you, I love you, I love you. I love you so much. I love you each. Don't ever leave me again. Please."

"We love you, Olive. You're safe. We're never leaving you."

We pulled out of her as gently as we could and I knew right away from looking at her puffy sex that she was going to be sore. I pressed kisses to her ass and up her spine before crawling out of the bed on shaky legs. "Getting aftercare."

When I came back from the kitchen, I found Jack and Andrew standing behind Olive, who was bent over with her ass in the air on the bed. From the red shade of her face, I assumed she wasn't happy about it.

"I don't need-"

"You could barely walk last time and we weren't anywhere near as rough. You either take the aftercare like a good girl or we fuck you like you're made of glass from now on. You're choice, Olive." Andrew took the warm rag from me and gently began cleaning her up.

“This is embarrassing.” She pouted and looked back at me. “No one’s cuddling me. You’re all just staring up my ass.”

I laughed. “Up your ass? What the hell do you think I did to your ass, sweetheart?”

“Kinda feels like you tried to climb inside.”

Andrew blew out a rough breath. “We’ll be gentler.”

“Shut up.” She grunted when he slapped her ass. “I’m fine. You guys can’t spend the rest of our lives hovering over me because I scratched myself.”

I knelt on the bed next to her and watched her eyes track my dick. “We’re not hovering because you scratched yourself. We’re hovering because we love you and want to fuck you more today and tonight and every day for the next five to ten years.”

“And because you have a very pretty pussy.” Andrew grinned at the sound Olive made. “Pretty ass, too.”

“You want to hear something that my parents used to say to me? I thought about it when I was falling asleep last night and I almost begged y’all to come over to see me right then.”

I stroked her hair out of her face and nodded. “I’m a little worried after what Andy just said.”

She smiled. “They used to tell me that I’d be the devil’s doll if I didn’t do what they said. I was afraid of dolls when I was young so they really wanted to drive home the fear. Thanks to your story last night, I now believe my parents were on to

something. I *didn't* listen to them and I *did* become the devils' doll. Okay, maybe not doll, but you get it."

Andrew leaned forward so he could look her in the eye. "The only thing your parents were ever right about is how bad the devils want you."

"I think it should be our Christmas card." She moaned when Andrew's cleaning became distracted stroking. "I think we should all dress up as devils and really make a thing of it."

"You're thinking about our Christmas cards?" I raised my eyebrows.

"No! I mean, yes. But not this year. That's too soon, I guess. I don't know." She giggled and then pulled away from Andrew so she could sit up on her knees and look at me. She'd noticed my dick getting hard again. "Is that about the Christmas card idea?"

I pulled her to my chest and held her. "No. No, it's not about the Christmas card. It's about you planning our future."

She rested her hands on my thighs and smiled. "Oh, you have no idea. The night was short but my imagination was long."

"Bet mine's longer." I winked and drank in the sound of her laughter.

Jack and Andrew moved onto the bed with us and Olive looked us dead in the face and said the worst thing she ever could've said. "So, hear me out. Barb and Brenda were telling

me about this sex thing they do... They even drew me a picture. I want to try it.”

I looked down at my erection and frowned at it. “You sick fuck, go down. I don’t want to connect sex with those women.”

Olive started stretching her neck from side to side. “You’re going to thank them.”

“Stop it.” I looked at Jack and Andrew and saw that they were just as helpless as I was. “This is mean.”

“When Barb did it, they were with a traveling circus and the men she was seeing were acrobats. You’ll need to just try to be limber.” She pulled her hair up and cracked her knuckles. Then, she looked up at me and her smile turned shit-eating. The moment she saw me realize she was messing with me, she lost it. “Gotcha.”

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Epilogue

* **Olive** *

Five Years Later

The second the clock hit four, I sprinted out of my classroom like it was on fire. All of my kindergarteners had been gone for an hour and not for the first time I was bitter about having to stay an hour after. Especially that day. It was Jesse's first dance. I was a nervous wreck for more than a few reasons, but mainly because my baby was growing up and I wasn't sure I was ready for that.

Kitty was parked outside in Missy, just like she'd promised she would be. It was a big day for her, too. She and Jesse had become so close that he called her Grandma Kitty. She'd taken some time getting used to that. Apparently, she didn't see Dolly as having a grandma vibe and she had to figure out a way to make it her own.

She had the windows down and the roof off and the moment she saw me she started honking the horn and cheering. "Our

baby's going to his first dance!"

I tossed my various bags of supplies into the backseat and got in. "I am as nervous as a cat in a room full of cucumbers."

Peeling away from the curb, she laughed as I struggled to put my bandana on with the wind already whipping my hair around. "I'm nervous, too. I can't believe you let the guys style him for his first dance. It's his first dance, Little Kitty. He needs to be fabulous and you know my team could've created fabulous with their eyes closed."

"It's a sixth grade dance, Kitty. If he shows up in full rhinestone, he's going to stand out."

"As he should."

"Plus, you know how excited the guys were. They've been talking about this for months. Jack canceled his classes and sent out an email to everyone about why, just so he could brag about Jesse. Andrew's working on a case with one of the senior partners at his firm and he's talked about it so much that Frank, the partner, sent flowers to the school for me today. For having to deal with Andrew. His words." I bit my lip as I thought about the way Caleb had expressed his excitement about the day during my lunch break. Thank god he'd bought a bigger car after becoming a family man.

"And Caleb?" Kitty saw my face and grinned. "Thatta boy, Caleb. He's always been my favorite. I love a man who focuses in times of panic."

I nodded along until I realized she'd said the word panic. "Panic? Why would there be panic?"

"Their son is going to his first dance and we've all been circling the drain for forever now about whether or not Jesse has a crush on his little friend, Daryl. Tragic name, but a true cutie, if you ask me." She glanced at me like I'd lost my mind. "How are you *not* freaking out? This could be Jesse's first crush! It's a big deal! I still remember my first crush. Harry. No, Jerry... Ronnie?"

I waved her off. "He's too young to have a crush. He's still my baby."

"The guys don't think so."

"What are you saying?" I narrowed my eyes at her. "Are ya'll in another group chat without me?"

"Well, yeah. But only because you get all uptight about some things." Shrugging, she swung the car around a turn and stepped on the gas.

"I'm dating three men, Kitty! I'm not uptight!" I realized how shrill my voice had gotten and took a calming breath. "I hate it when you guys group chat. Y'all scheme. If I could trust that you weren't scheming against me, I wouldn't say anything. Last time I caught you, though, you, Andrew, and Jack were trying to talk Caleb into renaming a portion of the company Olive's Loaf."

"It worked for Victoria!"

“I’m not arguing with you about this again.” I shook my head and tried not to laugh. I didn’t want to encourage her. “Back to the original point. There won’t be any panic. Even if the guys thought Jesse had a crush on Daryl, they wouldn’t panic. They’re not assholes.”

“Of course, not! They love Daryl and I’ve already seen Caleb eyeing my rhinestones and watching documentaries about growing up gay. They’re panicking because they’re helicopter dads, Little Kitty. They see their little boy growing up and they’re accepting that it’s happening, unlike you. They’re just not handling it all that well.”

“What do you know?” I turned to face her completely. “Tell me or I’ll call the Trashed Twins and give them your new address.”

She gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would.”

Kitty had met and married a great guy named Simon who was ten years younger and somehow had more money than her, something I didn’t think possible. After he visited Jolly Pines once, she’d vowed to never allow Barb and Brenda to be within a thousand feet of him. They’d traumatized the poor man. Kitty’s new address where she lived with Simon was top secret. Only Jerry and I knew it. The rest of the Jolly Pines gang wasn’t allowed that kind of clearance. So a threat like the one I was making was serious.

“Fine, you asshole. They’re freaking out because they think Jesse is going to grow away from them. Seeing him

blossoming has them all nervous. They aren't legally bound to him and I think sometimes they feel like boyfriends instead of dads. I don't know why. Jesse calls them dads! Jesse loves them like they birthed him themselves. I think they're pmsing or something."

I sank back in the seat and looked out at the road. "Why didn't they say anything to me?"

"They're men, honey. You can't expect them to make sense all the time. They know you've been busy with work and they didn't want to stress you out." She reached over and took my hand. "They love both of you so much that I think they just get scared sometimes."

"I'm just going to ask them to marry me." I jerked forward when she slammed on the brakes. "Shit! Kitty!"

She flipped off a driver who honked at us. "You can't propose to them!"

I scoffed. "Yes, I can. I've been waiting on them to do it and if they're scared because there's no legal binding, I'll marry them right now. We're living in modern times, Kitty. Get used to it."

"No, no, no. You have to let them do it in their own time. They're sensitive men, Little Kitty. Men! You know..."

"No. I don't know. I'm just going to do it. I can't stand the idea of them worrying about their bond with Jesse being fragile in any way. They've been the most amazing fathers in every way possible. The things they've done for him..." I

sniffled as my emotions got the best of me. “They are the best thing to ever happen to us. And before you get all pissy, without them, I never would’ve met you, Kitty. I never would’ve made it to Jolly Pines. I need them to be secure. So, I’m doing it. Give me some of your rings for now, please.”

She jerked her hand away from me. “No way! These were once worn by Dolly herself!”

“Fine.” I looked around. “Stop at that gas station, please.”

“No.”

“Kitty! What the hell?”

“We’re going to miss seeing Jesse off if we don’t hurry! I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to lose your mind but the car is picking the kids up before five.”

“*What?*” I looked at my phone and let out a frustrated growl. “Drive faster, Kitty. I’m not missing my baby being picked up for his first dance. I’ll just make do with what I have.”

I’d only ever seen Kitty nervous a few times and she looked positively out of sorts as she glanced over at me and then sped up.

I reached over and squeezed her arm. “Don’t worry. We’re not going to miss him. The guys won’t let them leave before we get home.”

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*****Olive*****

After the guys graduated, they decided they were going to put down roots locally. Mainly because they knew how much I loved Jolly Pines. Even after I'd started teaching, I still visited Jolly Pines as much as possible. I just didn't have to pull naked seniors off of each other anymore. Jerry had forced Terri into the assistant job and Terri had immediately implemented sex rules. They worked, too. Apparently, telling the horny old goats that they could have sex in zones they called...unloading zones...gave them enough freedom. They stuck to the limited areas and the cleaning services had gotten a lot cheaper.

They'd found a house just outside of campus in a neighborhood like the one they'd lived in, but bigger. The yards were all four or five acres large and the guys had insisted on a pool and the space to teach Jesse whatever sport he'd want to play. It was a lot of house for a family with one child, but we were unique in that the dads of our family came in a set of three and were each massive. They made twelve-foot

ceilings and an open space concept feel average sized. Caleb was shaping up to be just as large, so they loved to joke that we'd probably need to buy bigger later.

What I loved the most was the tree lined driveway and the huge windows at the front of the house that let me see when the guys were coming home from work. When I saw my driveway right then, I nearly screamed. Jack had been bullied at a PTA meeting I'd missed because of a doctor's appointment and he'd ended up agreeing to let the kids all meet at our house for pictures before the limos picked them up. Caleb had been cornered into providing the limos. And Andrew? He'd found himself at the buffet line alone during the pancake breakfast for dads a few weeks earlier. The president of the PTA had smelled blood in the water and pounced. I'd seen it happening but in the short time it took me to run over to them, he'd already agreed to not only provide drinks and snacks for the kids before the dance, but also drinks and dinner for the parents who wanted to wait at *our house* on the limos to drop their kids off.

My guys were suckers and because of them, the driveway was a traffic jam. People were parked everywhere, including in our yard. Not to be bested, Kitty drove straight onto the grass and parked us as close as she could get.

“Don't you say a word to me about the grass, Little Kitty. I didn't have another choice.” Kitty whipped her scarf off and when she saw my mouth drop open, she grinned and patted her hair into place. Her pink hair. “You like? Simon and I are doing a *Grease* thing. Frenchie was just too cute, wasn't she?”

I grinned, shocked enough that I could take a moment to just focus on her hair. “I actually love it. You look beautiful, Kitty. What kind of *Grease* thing? Is there a play or one of those movie events where everyone dresses up?”

“It’s a sex thing, honey. He’s going to be Frankie Avalon’s character, my guardian angel, and he’s going to take me straight up those beautyschool stairs to heaven!”

“Kitty... You’re my hero and I love you.” I fist bumped her when she held her hand out. “Now, let’s go watch our baby grow up a little bit.”

“Or a lot. Who knows what could happen in those limos!”

Cutting my eyes at her, I slammed Missy’s door shut. “Don’t even joke. He’s a little boy and he’s my baby. There are two chaperones to each limo and... Maybe I should go with him.”

“Oh, my god. You’ve got your panties in a bunch lately. You’ve been more emotionally all over the place than a swing-dancing therapist. Take your ass inside and tell your growing boy to have a fun night. No kissing. No pinching his cheeks. No crying and trying to hold him back.”

“I’ll do what I want.” I stomped towards the house. “Including propose to my boyfriends who are going to lose their group chat privileges if they don’t stop excluding me.”

She chased after me but she was wearing six inch glitter boots that sank into the grass as she moved. “Little Kitty! I’m not your mother but I swear, if you don’t stop right now, I’m going to bend you over my knee and spank you!”

The thing about getting older and growing through my trauma was that I'd become a little headstrong. I could admit it. I wasn't even ashamed of it eighty percent of the time. I'd grown a backbone of diamond and I was proud of being strong. Unfortunately, I was also experiencing an assault of hormones on my body that, when added to that headstrong streak, made me a loose cannon. Being told to not do something was like a challenge I couldn't let go of.

Kitty crossed herself when I looked back at her and that took away some of my insanity. "You're not Catholic! What are you doing?"

"I swear you just had the devil coming out of you." She snorted. "Instead of coming in you for a change."

I giggled. "You're terrible!"

Her eyes grew wide and she screamed. "Oh, my god!"

"What?" I jumped around like an idiot, terrified there was a bug on me.

"Oh, my god! Little Kitty! Oh, my god!"

I screamed back at her to get her to stop screaming at me and then we both just stood there, panting.

"You've been acting nuttier than a pecan pie lately. I saw you pick up a gummy bear from the floor and eat it. I thought you were just...going through a weird phase. I get it. I spent an entire decade going through packs and packs of markers because I liked the smell so much. But you aren't just being weird. That look you just gave me? That was the look of a

woman who knows her vagina is going to be ripped to shreds in the next nine months. You're fucking pregnant!"

I swung around to make sure no one was close. "Don't scream it, Kitty!"

For the first time in our entire relationship, Kitty's eyes filled with tears and there was no stopping them. Black mascara lines immediately ran down her cheeks. "Oh, no! I haven't cried since the eighties! Little Kitty! This isn't waterproof makeup!"

I smiled and wrapped her in a tight hug. "You're still beautiful. You have to keep this a secret, though. I want to figure out a way to surprise the guys with it. They always do the big, grande gestures. I want to do it for them for a change. Can you believe it, though? I'm *pregnant*."

Her eyes went wide again as she looked behind me. "Oh, shit."

I turned to see what she was looking at and saw nothing until my eyes moved lower. Standing a few feet away from us was our neighbor's kid. He was four and I hated him. I knew I wasn't supposed to, but he was a monster. Since his family moved in next door, he showed up at our house all the time. He broke things, tried to take Jesse's bike and whatever toys he left out, and he'd even gone into our house once and hid until his parents had searched their security cameras to see where he went. They'd stormed our house with cops in tow to find a kid we didn't know was in our home. The only reason the little shit didn't get us charged with kidnapping was he

didn't know the cops were there and jumped out to scare us, which had been his master plan all along.

I narrowed my eyes. "Ethan."

He hissed at me. "You've got a secret and I'm going to tell!"

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*****Olive*****

“**T**he hell you are! Your parents are about to meet my booted foot if they don’t keep you out of here. If people can do it with dogs, surely they can do it with you.” Kitty glared at Ethan. She wasn’t a fan, either. Not because of loyalty to me, but because Ethan sprayed her with the hose one time and she’d just gotten her hair permed.

“Ethan, I need you to go home.” I tried to take a calmer approach, like I was defusing a bomb. “It’s not nice to share people’s secrets.”

He hissed again and then took off towards the front door. “I’m going to tell on you!”

“Get him, Little Kitty! We can keep him in my trunk until you tell the guys!”

I chased after Ethan, with no plans to lock him in a trunk, but I was going to carry his little butt home and threaten to lock his parents in a trunk if they didn’t control their child. I grabbed at the back of Ethan’s shirt and just barely missed.

With Kitty chasing after us, Ethan led the charge up the steps to our front door and I was too afraid to make him fall on the concrete steps so I had to just hope I could grab him before he got inside.

Of course, those big front windows meant that people could see me sprinting after a child. One of those people opened the front door, probably to make sure I hadn't lost my mind, but it just let Ethan slip inside.

I charged in after him and made a panicked decision to not let my guys find out I was pregnant from a kid they hated, too. I froze and then screamed at the top of my lungs. "I'm pregnant and I want my boyfriends to marry me!"

Kitty stumbled in behind me, panting and swearing. "Well, sonofabitch."

"You're pregnant?!"

I looked around our front room and gasped. There were a lot of people standing around, but they weren't the people I expected to find. I didn't see any of the parents from Jesse's class. Instead, there was Lydie, who'd just screamed back at me, the guys' families, my Jolly Pines family, and so many of our friends. Standing in the center of the room were my guys.

Andrew, Caleb, and Jack were all wearing suits, holding big bouquets of roses, and staring at me in shock. Jesse was beside them, in a suit of his own, with his own bouquet of roses.

My brain was moving slower than it should've. I was confused about what was happening, but I was on a mission.

Ethan had disappeared in the crowd but he'd pushed me to act and I didn't want to take it back. I didn't want to wait. I wanted to go through every step of the pregnancy with them.

I looked back at Kitty and held out my hand. "Let me borrow the rings for the symbol, Kitty. Please."

She swore. "They were really from a Dolly impersonator and I stole them. Just keep them."

I took the three rings and hurried over to my guys. Dropping to a knee in front of them, I ignored the sound of everyone around us gasping. "Marry me. I want to be married to y'all and I'm tired of waiting. You've been Jesse's dads and such a huge part of my world for so long. I want to make it official. I want messy paperwork that would be a bitch to untangle. I want you three to feel how deeply you're ingrained in us. I haven't talked about this with Jesse but I know our son and I know his heart. I want you to adopt Jesse. Y'all are his fathers. Let us take...one of your last names? I hadn't thought about that part. Maybe we'll pick a new last name to take together. Whatever."

Jesse pumped his fist. "Yes!"

"And yeah, I'm pregnant. I was going to deliver the news in some special way but that little asshole Ethan overheard me and he was going to tell everyone. But now I'm glad. This baby is so lucky to get to come into this family with three dads like y'all. And they're going to have the best big brother. I don't want them hidden from their family for a second more."

Jack dropped his roses and pulled me off the floor and into his arms. He picked me up and pulled my mouth down to his in a fierce kiss. “You’re our perfect match, Liv.”

Jesse faked a gag. “Less kissing, please!”

Caleb blinked and looked away while wiping his eyes. “You’re pregnant.”

“Oh, fuck it.” Andrew dropped to his knee and pulled out a ring box. “Marry us, Olive.”

Jesse dropped to his knee next to Andrew and nodded. “Marry them, Mom!”

Jack put me down and laughed through tears of his own as he knelt and pulled out another ring box. “You always beat us to the punch. Even when we spend months planning your perfect proposal. Marry us, Liv. Make us the happiest men to ever walk this planet.”

Caleb was still frozen in place and the room grew silent as everyone stared at him, waiting for him to propose. When he let out a loud *whoop* and grabbed me up, it made me jump. “We’re having a baby? We’re having a baby!”

His arm was under my ass, holding me against him, and I braced my hands on his shoulders as I laughed. “Do you want to marry me, or not, Caleb Evers?”

He looked around and swore. Putting me down like I was a sheet of the most delicate glass, he knelt and had his own ring box. “Marry us. Marry us right now, sweetheart.”

My tears were inevitable so I didn't even try to stop them.
"Yes! A million times yes!"

I was swept up in their arms and kissed until Jesse tried to put a ban on kissing. My heart raced with excitement as I watched my guys slide their rings on my finger. I made a big deal of sliding Kitty's rings on their pinkies and then it was like the pregnancy news finally sank in. They guys lost their minds and danced around each other, fist bumping and immediately arguing about whose sperm had done the deed.

I got swept up in embracing everyone around us. Lydie didn't budge from my side, even as I leaned on Andrew's chest. Smiling at her, I held her hand. "Ready for round two of getting me through pregnancy?"

She leaned in and lowered her voice. "Ready for round one?"

I froze and stared down at her stomach. "No?!"

She nodded and held me just as tight as I held her. "We're going to do it together this time."

Andrew pulled me back into his chest and kissed the top of my head. "What are you doing together this time?"

Lydie pointed to her own stomach. "There's multiple buns in the ovens."

He shuddered. "No offense, Lydie, but...you're terrifying as a non-pregnant person. Add in pregnancy hormones and I'm not sure the world will survive."

Before she could threaten him like normal, Jesse whistled. “The limos are here!”

I gasped. “Oh no! Jesse! Come here! I need to hold you before you go off to your dance.”

Jack appeared in front of me and cupped my cheek. “The dance isn’t for him, Liv.”

“What do you mean? The PTA...” I frowned. “Who the hell’s the dance for if it’s not for Jesse?”

Andrew smiled. “You. We had a whole speech prepared, but here are the cliffnotes. We want to give you everything in the world. We weren’t always around, but we’ve heard you talk about missing out on things from highschool. We can’t fix the past, but we’re creating a future where you’ll never miss out again.”

“You didn’t get a prom.” Caleb walked closer. “We’ve all seen you look at the crazy big dresses longingly and we don’t accept that you didn’t get the prom experience.”

“We thought we’d propose at our prom. Surrounded by everyone who loves us most in the world. While you’re decked out in one of those dresses and slow dancing with us.” Jack shrugged. “We want to give you the world. You give us everything, Liv, and we want to give it back.”

“I ruined your proposal plans! I’m so sorry!” I slumped into his chest. “It’s all Kitty’s fault! She was really selling the dance thing. She said something about you guys feeling worried that Jesse would grow away from you and I just got it

in my mind that I was going to fix it. I just came in here and demanded you marry me.”

“Honestly, I’m so relieved.” Caleb stroked my hair back from my face. “These dicks left me with all the talking again and I was feeling more than a little nervous.”

“And we love you for you, Olive. We know who we’re marrying. You shocked us for a little bit there, but I think we were all more surprised that you hadn’t figured it out already.” Andrew kissed my head and then shifted back. “Everything about the dance plans still stands. Except it’s not Jesse’s and we don’t have to feed a bunch of little kids and their parents.”

“Little Kitty!” Barb waved at me from across the room. She was standing with Kitty, who looked ready to stomp on Barb’s feet. “Come on, honey! Kitty’s glam squad got a little tied up so Brenda and I are going to handle your makeup and hair.”

I sucked in a breath of air so fast that it choked me. Shaking my head, I tried to back away but just backed into Andrew. “Um. That’s okay! I don’t need makeup. Or hair!”

Kitty rolled her eyes. “She’s kidding. My people are waiting.”

Caleb shuddered and rubbed his arms like he had chills. “The damage they could do to your pretty face, sweetheart...”

Andrew patted my ass and eased me towards the front door. “You’re riding over with your girls and the glam squad. You’re riding home on us, though.”

I giggled and took my time kissing each of them. “I love each of you so much. I’m so happy. I’ve always dreamt of dressing up for the prom, as silly as it is. And, to keep true to my real highschool career, I’m knocked up again. I’m also so fucking glad it’s not time for Jesse’s first dance yet. I was freaking out.”

“Our boy’s growing up whether we like it or not.” Jack rubbed his hand over my stomach. “Maybe we’ll keep you knocked up so there’s always a little kid running around here.”

Kitty tapped her foot. “Come on, Little Kitty. The makeup needs to go somewhere.”

I looked back at my guys and couldn’t help wiggling in a little happy dance. “You want to marry me! And you called a group of seniors my girls. I have the best life.”

“Same, sweetheart.”

“Wait. The partner at your firm sent me flowers because of Jesse’s dance. And you told all of your students, Jack.” I saw them grin and gasped. “Everyone knew the truth?”

Jack nodded. “Yep. It was a big risk we took. If you’d said no, we would’ve had to move away.”

I kissed them each more and finally Kitty grabbed my arm and pulled me away from them. Right before she pulled me out of our front door, I gasped. “Ethan’s in our house!”

Jesse came from the back of the house with the little devil walking in front of him. Jesse had two handfuls of Ethan’s shirt and was marching him out while lecturing him. “You

need to learn some manners, dude. I had some pretty cool guys teach me stuff when I was around your age. Maybe I'll help you. You can't come back over here, though. My mom's pregnant and Grandma Kitty was already whispering about seeing the devil in Mom's eyes."

It was the sweetest thing I'd ever heard and I could tell the guys were just as touched by Jesse's words. Our boy really was growing up, dance or not.

For good measure, when Jesse walked Ethan past me and Ethan glanced up at me, I hissed and gave him a crazy look. When he screamed and ran towards his house, I clapped my hands together and nodded. "Now, to prom!"