

LOVE, KARMA &
~~POTATO~~ FRENCH
FRY



PLAYER PROBLEMS



LICK
SWALLOW
SUCK!



A WESTBROOK U NOVEL

SAMANTHA BEE

player problems

WESTBROOK WOLVES

BOOK 1

SAMANTHA BEE



Copyright © 2024 by Samantha Bee

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover by: Dream Echo Designs

Proofread by: Words of a Feather

✿ [Created with Vellum](#)

dedication

*For all the girls who have been tossed in a bush because a
boyfriend's crazy ex tried to run them over...*

Oh? Only me?

Okay then, to Alysha for always having my back.

Thanks for being the Potato to my Karma

contents

[Playlist](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Isla and Wells' Texts](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Isla and Wells' Texts](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Group Chat](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Group Chat](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Group Chat](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Group Chat](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Also by Samantha Bee](#)

[About the Author](#)

playlist

Player Problems

Players by Col Leroy

X by Kxlly

STRUT by EMELINE

Parents by Riley Roth

Keep Your Head Up Princess by Anson Seabra

Collide (feat. Tyga) by Justine Skye, Tyga

...Ready For It? By Taylor Swift

Teeth by 5 Seconds of Summer

House of Memories by Panic! At The Disco

Delicate by Taylor Swift

Nonsense by Sabrina Carpenter

You Are In Love by Taylor Swift

Falling Slowly by Vwillz
Safe in Your Love by Rose McClellan
Curls In The Wind by Mark Amber
So It Goes... by Taylor Swift
Breakfast by Dove Cameron
Sweetest Pie by Megan Thee Stallion, Due Lipa
I Think I'm In Love by Kat Dahlia
Endgame by Taylor Swift

foreword

If you've read me before, let me prepare you...this book is very different from my other series. Player Problems is a hockey standalone with a male/female couple in a monogamous relationship, though they may disagree about the relationship part.

I wrote this book because I wanted something fun and light-hearted and these two idiots and their band of friends is really all about that. I hope you giggle and roll your eyes and fall in love with these characters the same way I have.

However, we do touch on some dark topics so please be mindful if you do have any triggers. There are mentions of abuse, assault, domestic violence, sexual assault, and our fmc is being stalked. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to me or my team. Overall, this book stays very light.

This is the first book in an interconnected standalone and will end with no cliffhanger, but we will continue to see these characters throughout the Westbrook series.

Happy reading,

Xo Samantha Bee

Torryn 

I stare down at my phone in disbelief. He can not be serious.

JACK

Come outside

I'm here

TORRYN

Wtf do you mean you're here?

We need to talk

No

You can't just end it like that. Come out

I groan aloud, as I struggle to find my shoes. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to try and date a friend I'd known for over a decade?

Fuck it. Forget the shoes. I'll just go down there and tell Jack I'm not in a place to date.

JACK

I'm not leaving until I see you

I growl at my phone in disgust, stopping only to slip on shorts under my large sleep shirt. Why is he doing this? I've been trying all week to have this conversation. To go back to just friends. Now he finds time to see me after I finally gave up and ended it over text.

Slipping out of the house without anyone noticing is as easy as usual. I grumble to myself as I make my way down my grandparents' driveway. At least Jack had the common sense to not park in view of their bedroom. I can only imagine my grandfather's reaction if he saw him outside the house.

Passing the small garden we have in the front of our house, my eyes land on Jack pacing in front of his car, staring at his phone. I stop for a moment, watching the anxious look as the light from his phone illuminates his face. Why does he look so devastated?

He did this.

I shake off the thought, clearing my throat and making my presence known as I take the last few steps to the bottom of the driveway.

"Ryn," he says, relief and something else I don't understand lighting up his face. He locks his phone and tosses it on the front seat of his car before slamming the door shut. Running his hand through his hair, he tilts his head down and looks at me through his lashes, giving me a sheepish smile. "You came."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I cock my head at him. "Didn't seem like I had much of a choice."

His smile dips and he sighs. "How could I not fight for you?"

It's a struggle not to roll my eyes. "There's nothing to fight for, Jack. Let's just go back to being friends. We worked for years that way."

There's no sign of the smile that graced his face only moments ago. "How can you say that? I thought things were good with us these last couple months."

I squeeze my arms tighter over my chest. Maybe I should have taken the time to put on a bra. I feel too exposed, too vulnerable. "What part of you continuously picking your ex over me sounds good?"

"It's not like that," he huffs out dramatically.

I wave his words away, already knowing the spiel. "Right, right. You aren't picking her over me. She's just crazy. You're doing it to protect me." Why is it always the girls that are the crazy ones? Why are we always the ones painted in a bad light?

Unsurprisingly, he misses my sarcasm. "Exactly." He beams and I don't hold back the eyeroll this time. "You know I've never been happier than when you finally decided to give me a shot. Just give me a little longer and I promise I'll sort things out with Siri."

"I don't need you to sort things out with her. Not for me." I check my nails so I don't have to look at his face. "Maybe sort them out for yourself, because this is unhealthy."

Jack looks like I struck him. A small inkling of guilt flares in my gut, but I'm quick to smother it. I knew the toxic mess between him and his ex. All of our friends know about it. Fuck. At this point, I'm pretty sure the whole school knows about it and most of us have never even met Siri. Her reputation precedes her.

I'm starting to wonder how much of it is really on her though. From where I'm standing, Jack is not so innocent. He still goes with her to visit her grandparents. Continues to respond to her every time she texts. Doesn't talk to me when she's around, even after swearing to me she's aware the two of us are dating.

Being there for a friend after their latest falling out was easy. Being his shoulder to cry on is a spot I've occupied for the majority of our lives. Sitting at his kitchen table, talking

with his parents, keeping him out of trouble, and mitigating their disappointment in him. I'm used to taking care of him. Understanding and trusting him was easy. I never had big ideas about love and relationships anyway.

Comfort, a spark, fun. It was all I needed to believe in. We had that much. So when he looked at me with those soulful brown eyes one night, when he held his breath and leaned in, when the moment slowed and the tension built, I didn't break it. For the first time in our friendship, I didn't turn away. Didn't clear my throat and laugh awkwardly. I leaned in too.

I sigh as memories flash in my mind. "Don't give me that look. I know you better than anyone. You have no shot of finding your happiness until you cut ties with Siri and sort out the mess in your head that constantly self-sabotages."

His brown eyes weigh on me. "And will you still be there when I figure it out?"

I look away from him, clenching my fists. "I will always be here for you. As your friend."

He scoffs, rage bleeding into the sound unlike anything he's ever pointed in my direction before. "Of course. Back into the friend-zone. Isn't that always how it is with you, Torryn?"

Well, I'm not exactly known for my warm personality. I stay silent though, waiting for him to get whatever is brewing behind that rage off his chest.

"You give just enough. Just enough to garner interest. Just enough to tease that you might be willing to be something real. But as soon as shit gets too deep, you pull away. Erect your walls even higher than before. Go back to being a stone-cold bitch."

Each word cuts deeper than the last, but I'd never let it show. Instead, I click my tongue. "Are you done?" There's nothing else to say. I'm not going to defend why I am the way I am. He, of all people, should know. He was there. He got closer than almost anyone. He could have had everything he wanted so damn badly. If he had just chosen me. Plucked up the courage to tell Siri to fuck off once and for all. Stopped

this charade of being helpless against her and holding on to both of us.

His laugh is a bitter and chilling sound. “There she is.”

I tap my fingers against my arm. “What would you like me to say, Jack? That you’re right? You know you are. But if you don’t have anything new to add to the insults I’ve heard all through high school, save your breath and let’s end it here. Yeah?”

“Tor, please don’t.” His tone suddenly shifts to begging. Where did all his anger go?

I take a deep breath and prepare the speech I’ve been practicing all week. Despite what he, and everyone else seems to say about me, I don’t enjoy hurting someone. Especially not someone I’ve considered a close friend for most of my life. “You are stuck on a messy merry-go-round. You and Siri chase each other for a high I can’t even comprehend. You fight to one up the other. Never getting off the ride, just going faster and faster. You swore this time was different. That you were finally leaving the never ending cycle. All our friends thought this time was different. I thought this time was different. But we’ve all been lying to ourselves. Everyone thought we were going to be good. You’d get me to open up, and I’d keep you off the ride. But we were all wrong because you didn’t, Jack. You didn’t get off the merry-go-round, not even for a moment. You just dragged me onto it with you.” I smile sadly as I think about the hope in our friends’ eyes when they found out about us. Turns out it was too much pressure for me. Being the one to save someone who doesn’t want to be saved.

“I want off, Jack. I don’t want to be wrapped up in this mess any longer. Wondering if I’m enough. If I can compete with the high you get from fighting with her. I don’t compare myself to other girls, and I’m not starting now. Not for this. You want the adrenaline? You can have it, but I won’t be a part of it anymore. I’m too busy to compete for something that should never be a competition.”

His fists clench at his sides, but he looks struck. Lost. Heartbroken. It tugs at my heart.

“You’re always too busy, Torryn. Too busy to look in my direction for years. Too busy to go to parties together. Too busy to come to my house after school. Too busy to get high at lunch. You always have something better to do. Somewhere to go. Someone to take care of.”

I close my eyes against his anger.

“How was I supposed to get off the ride when you wouldn’t give me anything to hold on to instead?”

Why wouldn’t it be my fault? Why wouldn’t it come back to this? I never should have leaned in. I should have known better. I was never going to be enough.

“I think you should leave. We should both stop before we say something we can’t take back and ruin what little friendship we still have.”

His hands slam down against the hood of his car and I hug myself tighter, shifting on my feet as the wind picks up. “I don’t want your friendship, Ryn. I want you, all of you.”

I shake my head. “You had the chance and you blew it. I’m getting off the ride now.” I start to say something else when I notice his eyes widening. “I’ll still be your friend. Please just be happy with that,” I continue, weighing my words as I watch his expression shift into something I don’t understand. His hand lands on my bicep and squeezes, his eyes not on my face at all. I huff in exasperation. He’s not even listening anymore.

“Are you seriously just going to ignore me now?”

Still, he says nothing, his head now turned away from me and looking down my street. I turn to see what has captured his attention so thoroughly, but don’t see anything other than a car heading our way.

He’s murmuring something to himself and his hand tightens around my arm. “Ow, Jack. What the fuck?” I try to rip my arm from his grip, but he doesn’t release it, still watching the car headed for us. Shit.

It’s headed right for us.

Or me.

It's headed straight for me, faster than it should be going.

A yelp is torn from my throat as he curses, yanking me by my arm and throwing me out of the way just as the car comes to a screeching halt where I was just standing. I look up in a daze from where I landed in a bush. Thorns pierce my skin, making it sting. But I can barely spare a thought as I watch Jack throw himself against the door of the car that just tried to hit me.

The door slams shut before it even really has a chance to open against his heavy body. Screams reach me, but I can barely sort them as I watch the scene unfold before me. A girl I've never seen in person, but instantly recognize, howls as she scrambles over the center console of her car and climbs out the passenger side door, screaming my name.

I huff a shocked laugh as I disentangle myself from the bush. A bra and shoes would have definitely been a good idea after all. Jack moves faster than I've ever seen him move as he blocks her path to me, using his arm to halt her so abruptly her legs fly in the air as she tries to throw herself at me.

Ow, fuck. I cup my elbow and my hand comes away covered in blood. Lovely.

"Ryn, go inside!" Jack yells at me as he holds Siri's small body back.

I tilt my head to the side as I watch them. This all seems too familiar for the pair of them. The way he recognized her headlights, how quick he was to react. It's not the first time any of this has happened. I shake my head.

Okay, maybe she really did deserve to be called crazy. Bitch just tried to run me over and he's not even surprised.

How did she even have my address?

"My neighbors will call the cops if you guys don't stop yelling." I point out as she unleashes her rage on him.

"Torryn," he snaps. "Stop standing there and go inside."

She never stops screaming my name. Screaming about how he's hers and I'm just a bitch in the way. That I can fight

her if I want him so badly.

I blink slowly, holding my elbow to my chest, the blood making my hand slick. “Ask him why he’s here,” I say. Jack continues to yell at me to go inside. Nothing is going to come from continuing to stand here. I shake my head one last time.

“Shut the fuck up. My neighbors really will call the cops.”

I turn around and begin walking back up my driveway. How is any of this real? All of a sudden, a lot of his excuses and stories about her seem a little different. More real. A bit more terrifying. She actually is psychotic. But he’s allowed it. I can’t make him get off the ride if he doesn’t want to.

My phone starts vibrating in my hand as soon as I get back to my room. I don’t recognize the number, but I know who it is.

How does she have my number?



one

HOEDOWN

The story has me and several other people captivated as we stand around Isla and her best friend, Torryn.

“Was it really her?” Wells asks, disbelief coloring his tone.

Isla snorts, but Torryn just smirks silently as she has for the entirety of the story. “She’d stolen Tor’s number out of Jack’s phone one day when they were hanging out after finding out about her.”

This is fucking wild. Too wild, to possibly be the entire truth.

“You two have to be shitting us.” Beau, one of my roommates, stares at them incredulously. Apparently, I’m not the only one to think they must have exaggerated at least parts of it.

Isla mimes an X over her chest. “Cross my heart,” she promises, laughter in her eyes. “It wasn’t so funny back then though. We were a pretty close knit group and this blew us up. Tor could have been seriously injured because of their crazy asses and he never even checked on her, let alone gave her an apology.” She sounds miffed and I turn my attention to study the brunette, but she seems as unaffected now as she has for the entire time Isla was telling the story.

Zac shakes his head, half laughing, but his protective instincts flaring up. “How do you just act like something like that never happened?” My lips twitch. We don’t know Torryn or Isla all that well, but his older brother tendencies are showing.

Torryn shrugs, checking her nails and the dark red polish draws my attention. “He didn’t act like it never happened,” Isla snorts in annoyance, but Torryn clicks her tongue and adds the first thing she has commented. “He acted like he never even knew me.”

“You’re fucking kidding,” I deadpan. I’ve stayed mostly quiet, too preoccupied with observing my best friend, Wells, and the way he can’t take his eyes off Isla. But the words just slip out in astonishment.

She shrugs dismissively. “We never spoke again after that night. But Siri also stopped blowing up my phone so— win.” Her words are detached, even amused. A smug arrogance laced with humor is the best armor a person can have.

Wells finally draws his eyes away from Isla to stare at Torryn. I know that look. He wants to go all shrink on her. For the sake of the party, I really fucking hope he doesn’t. The atmosphere is light and fun, just like a party should be. No one wants to hear him dissect it further than that.

“So this is why you don’t date anymore?”

Oh, that’s right. That’s how we got onto this topic anyway. At least he left the theories I can see churning in his brain out of it.

Isla’s laughter rings throughout the room, making everyone smile, even her quiet counterpart. “Uh, yeah. No more bush escapades or anything else that comes with dating for me,” Torryn answers, nudging Isla’s shoulder with her knee.

Wells rolls his eyes. “Most relationships don’t end up with you ass up in a bush.”

“Wasn’t ass up,” she defends, brow raised. “I had the scratches to prove it was most definitely ass first.”

I chuckle at the picture that creates. I study her, my eyes lingering over the tight black top and ripped black jeans that show off more skin than they cover, her dark hair piled on her head, with sparkling blue eyes and an amused, almost jaded smirk. Everything about her spells trouble. She waves her

hand at him. “Either way, Jack was right about one thing, I am far too busy.”

Beau shakes his head at her. “Not too busy to get more ass than anyone I know.” He pauses as his eyes flick to me. “Well, more than almost anyone I know.”

I puff up my chest and wink in their direction. “Proud to defend my title of biggest hoe on campus.”

Wells snorts, “Of course you’d be proud of that.”

Torryn grabs the bottle of tequila off the table we’re all sitting around and lifts it to her lips, sipping on it like it’s nothing but water. A shiver races down my spine. “I can always make time for orgasms,” she says, and that word passing her full lips just before they wrap around the bottle, has me growing hard. I’ll have to remember to thank Wells for making us come to this party tonight. It’s not our usual scene but fuck if it’s starting to pay off. “At least they’re worth it,” she continues.

Protests come from every direction, defending the charms of dating. All but Isla who just stares at her best friend with a look of understanding on her face. A smile of amusement.

I roll my eyes as I get to my feet. I’ve heard of Torryn’s reputation, she’s almost as notorious as I am. She’s not a girl that wants flowers and romance. She wants to be fucked and then for you to fuck off. She owns that rep. Just like she should. No matter what any judgemental ass has to say. I flip our friends off. “Let the hoes live our hoe lifestyle in peace. You guys can have your happily ever afters, we just want our happy endings.” I smirk and everyone cracks up.

Wells rolls his eyes. “You’d know all about happy endings,” he taunts.

Isla’s eyes sparkle as she watches him talk. Oh yeah, there’s something there alright. She’s a pretty girl, the light and airy to her best friend’s dark and broody. No, not broody. She just can’t be fucked to care. An attitude I can respect.

Isla’s eyes flick in my direction, a mischievous smirk replacing the soft smile she’s been wearing. “It’s a wonder the

two of you have never hooked up with how much you've gotten around." I raise a brow, maybe she's not as shy as I thought at first glance. That's a challenge if I've heard one.

Torryn is already eyeing me up and down, an appreciative gleam in her eye. I stand up straighter, puffing my chest out as I wink at her, a slow smirk spreading across my face. "Maybe it's time we see if you live up to all the hype," she drawls.

Apparently, she's not the only one with a reputation.

She lifts the bottle of tequila to me in offering and my pulse races. "How did you know tequila is my favorite?"

Isla whoops and I may have misjudged her before tonight. She's not nearly as quiet or demure as I thought she was. As I start to walk towards her to accept the bottle of tequila, Isla rises to her knees. The room holds its breath, or maybe that's just me, as she swipes the salt and a lime off the table. I watch in rapture as she leans over where her best friend still sits. Torryn meets her halfway, tilting her head to the side. It doesn't click together until Isla swipes her tongue over Torryn's exposed cleavage.

I'm not the only one growing hard now. The groans around the room are testament enough to that.

Isla leans back and Torryn's eyes light up in challenge as she stares me down while Isla tips the salt over to stick to the wet trail her tongue left on Torryn's skin. Fuck me, that's hot.

I reach out and grab the bottle from her outstretched hand just as Isla slips the lime slice in those full lips that have been taunting me all night. I can just imagine how good they're going to feel wrapped around me.

My friends need to take lessons from this girl. This is how to be a wingman. She's got it down to a fucking art.

Torryn stays sitting in her chair and Isla falls back to her position on the floor where she's been sitting. I step between her legs, pushing them wider to accommodate my size. She leans back, pushing her chest out and my gaze locks on the salt sparkling over her tits. Fuck, she looks good.

I follow her lead, invading her space, wiping up the salt with my tongue before lifting the tequila to my mouth and swallowing down several gulps before taking the lime from her mouth with mine. Our lips brush, and the tease isn't enough.

I suck on the lime before spitting it out quickly, stealing a kiss from her.

Salt, tequila, lime, Torryn.

The only proper way to take a shot.



two

TITS & TEQUILA

The feeling of his lips pressed against mine lingers like the tequila on my tongue.

The perfect chaser for the bitter memories threatening to rise up at the story Isla told.

Jack and Siri are nothing more than an amusing story to me now. Hell, I sent them a wedding present when I heard they finally tied the knot. To each their own. But hope has a way of leaving a bitter aftertaste once shattered.

“I don’t know what tastes better,” Baylor whispers in my ear. “You or the tequila.”

Fire burns in my belly, a mix of the alcohol and the lust this man stirs in me. Wide shoulders and muscled arms that promise he could pick me up and fuck me against a wall if he was so inclined. Heat chases away the cold thoughts.

Baylor Levine. Right winger of the illustrious hockey team with a reputation for what he does off the ice just as attention-catching as for what he does on it. His messy dark blonde hair falls in waves over his face, softening the angles of his cheekbones and giving him a boyish charm that his size shouldn’t allow for.

“Yes, you do.” My voice sounds husky even to my own ears. His eyes darken and his tongue swipes over his lips.

“You’re right. I do.” His cocky smile spells trouble and I get lost in the playful warmth of his hazel eyes. “It’s definitely the tequila.”

A laugh spills out of me, taking me by surprise. But I'm not the only one, Isla practically cackles at my side.

Baylor's large hand claps down on my thigh, heat spreading through me at the touch. Why are his hands so goddamn hot? "Yup, I'm taking you home with me." Before I have a chance to respond, his hands slip under my ass and he's lifting me off my seat and throwing me over his shoulder. "Now." That damn spark turns to an inferno. Nothing like a man who's strong enough to toss you around.

Isla looks up at me, a wicked gleam in her eyes. Girl knows how to be a wingwoman better than anyone I know. She knows it too, leaning against Wells' leg, looking smug as fuck. Mhm, she's not hiding shit from me.

Chuckles follow us as he starts to carry me out of the room. My eyes drift over the group we've spent most of the night around. A mix of Isla's usual friends and a large sprinkling of hockey players, thanks to her crush. Don't think it's one-sided either. Maybe we will both have stories to share tomorrow.

"At least leave the tequila," Zac calls out. I flip him off at the same time Baylor says, "No." His hand smacks down on my ass. "I have plans for this tequila."

I can't help but laugh at the exclamations that follow us as he steps over people to carry me out of the room. I lift my head up, tearing my gaze away from his ass and meet a certain winger's eyes. "Wells, I'll kill you if she doesn't make it home in one piece."

His mouth parts open in shock but he lifts his hand in acknowledgement. "Promise to bring her home safe and sound."

Baylor slows his steps for me to finish this conversation. I cock my head as my eyes flick knowingly between the pair. "Maybe safe and disheveled, ya feel?" His body shakes under mine with his suppressed laughter and Isla's cheeks heat as she flips me off. Look at me, I can be a wingwoman too. I wink at her. Wells nods slowly, closing his mouth with a small smirk.

“I can do that.”

Isla swore we would have a good time with the hockey guys, turns out she was more than right. A girl could get used to this. Being carried out of the party like a drunk princess.

“Onward, Levine.”

His hand smacks down on my ass again, a little harder this time.

“Sorry, *Lefine*,” I taunt, using the pun I hear around campus. I’m not surprised this time when his hand hits my ass. Joke’s on him though, that shit turns me on.

The front door closes behind us and the tequila is starting to go to my head. I rest my head against his back and can feel how strong he is, his muscles flexing with each step. He walks down the street and I saw him take way too many shots for him to be heading to his car.

“You gonna put me down?”

His hand runs down my ass and thighs. “Nope. I like the way you feel against me.”

A lick of lust runs down my spine. “Our apartment is the blue one on the Mayfield corner of the square.” The square is a small business park that’s not actually a square. I don’t even know when or how it got the name, it just is. It’s almost like a courtyard with open grass areas, tables, and a fountain in the center. It’s surrounded on all sides by primarily college housing, making it a popular spot for people to hang out.

“You live in the Wild West?” There’s no judgment in his tone, but a fair note of shock. Our building doesn’t have a stellar history and might be known for having no rules or security and just so happens to be on the west side of the square, earning it the charming nickname. It’s a place where anything goes. Something college students seem to take as a challenge. But it’s close to campus, has good parking, and is part of the square, while still being much cheaper than any of the other options.

“We’re never bored,” I say, running my fingers over the hard muscles in his back. His body stiffens under my touch

and something that sounds suspiciously like a growl comes from him. My body slides against his as he brings me down his front and sets me back on my feet. “Thought you liked the way I felt?”

“Maybe a little too much,” he responds, reaching his hand down to adjust himself in his jeans. I bite my lip as I watch him. That’s not a small bulge. Maybe he will live up to the rumors.

By the time we make it to my front door, my skin feels like it’s on fire, my fingers itch to feel his corded muscles under my touch, and my panties have grown uncomfortably damp. The banter has been fun, but I’m ready for the night to move on to the bang. Literally.

I unlock the door and walk in first, taking a few steps to hit the light switch. His body backs me up against the wall the moment the door closes behind him, his lips finding my skin, trailing kisses up my neck to my ear. His teeth catch my earlobe between them and he gently tugs. A small gasp escapes me. How did he know that’s my weak spot?

“Hmm,” he hums. “I’m ready to see how you taste everywhere else.” He hands me the bottle of tequila. “Clothes off, first.” He doesn’t wait for me to respond, finding the button of my jeans with his hand and unbuttoning them. I tilt my hips away from the wall so he can slide them down easily. As soon as they hit the floor, I kick off my shoes and step out of the pants.

Baylor locks his eyes on mine while his fingers run up my thigh. I squirm under the teasing touch, but he’s quick to find my center. He hums his approval. “Already so wet for me, Torryn? I like that.” His voice has a distinctive growl to it that wasn’t there at the party. “I’m gonna make a mess of you,” he promises, snatching the tequila back out of my hands. Instantly, I miss his touch.

“Strip,” he demands, his eyes darkening as he steps back to watch me.

I smirk as I lift the shirt over my head and toss it somewhere in the direction of the couch. His gaze eats me up

and I love the way I can feel his desire even when he stands several feet away from me. I reach behind my back and unclip my bra, teasing him as I hold it to my chest when the straps fall off my shoulders. He arches one brow at me, daring me to taunt him. I slip one arm free, but keep my tits covered.

My teeth sink into my lower lip when he growls under his breath. He lifts the bottle of tequila to his lips and my mouth dries as I watch his lips wrap around it, the way his throat bobs as he swallows a long pull, his eyes never leaving my chest. The man is too hot for words. Finally, I drop the bra to the floor, exposing myself fully to him. The way his eyes flare as he takes me in was worth the delay.

More tequila is poured into his mouth. I lick my lips, wanting to taste it on his. He's in front of me before I can even finish the thought. One hand wrapped in the hair at the base of my neck, tightening and holding my head back. His lips are fused to mine, but instead of feeling his tongue against mine, tequila drips against my lips. I open for him and he spits the tequila being held in his mouth into mine.

“Show me how good you swallow.”

I clench around nothing, the dirty command doing things to my insides. I swallow and lick my lips, chasing the taste of the potent cocktail that is Baylor and tequila.

His hum of approval lights me up. “That’s right, sweetheart. Be my good little slut and I’ll give you something thicker to swallow.”

I shudder. Who knew a guy like Baylor could have this side to him?

“Stay just like that,” he commands, tugging on my hair until my head is tilted up, my bare chest pressed out. “Hmm, beautiful,” he murmurs, releasing his grip on my hair. I don’t move, holding my breath as his lips trail down my neck, across my collarbone, over the swells of my tits. He runs a finger over one of my erect nipples, teasing it until it aches, and pinches it.

A whimper escapes when he releases me, making him chuckle darkly. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ve got you,” he promises and drops to his knees in front of me and kisses the wet mark on my panties. Oh fuck. He makes his way back to my chest, running his nose along my stomach as he moves back to his feet.

The lip of the bottle touches my skin and my eyes flare wide as he starts pouring tequila over my tits. The cool liquid makes me shiver as I watch it drip down over my chest and down my stomach. He makes a sound of satisfaction, handing me the bottle. “Catch up, sweetheart,” he challenges. I grin as I wrap my lips around the bottle and take a long pull from it. He rewards me by lapping up the alcohol from my body with his skilled tongue.

The way his tongue flicks over my nipples should be illegal. The teasing was fun, but my cunt aches to be filled and he’s still wearing too many clothes. I tug on his shirt as he sucks on my tit. “Catch up, sweetheart,” I taunt.

He laughs against my chest, not moving away from where he is. “Well played,” he relents. “But I need one thing first.” He doesn’t expand any more than that, but I’m quick to understand when his fingers slip under my panties and find my clit. His mouth latches back on to my tit and he plays with me mercilessly.

Let it be known that Baylor fucking Levine knows how to multitask.

He drives two fingers into my cunt, finger fucking me until I’m crying out and clenching around him. He drops to his knees in front of me, moving my underwear out of his way and slides his fingers out of me. “Oh, Torryn. I knew you were going to be delicious.” He places an open-mouthed kiss over my cunt, licking up my come, before looking up at me. “And I was fucking right.”

I’m not even close to done with this man. I pant, trying to catch my breath before grabbing his shirt in my hand and marching out of the room. He can follow me or let his shirt rip. I’m done letting him lead. It’s my turn to have some fun.

He follows me silently, but I can practically hear the way he's preening behind me. I'll give him the satisfaction for now. It's been a long time since I've come that hard from foreplay. Been with a man who takes the lead as well as Baylor does.

Once we reach my bed, I push him down. His smirk should be infuriating, but I rather like it. The smug satisfaction painted on his lips because he knows how my come tastes. I can return the favor.

Pushing his shirt out of the way, I don't bother to take it all the way off. I'm after one thing and one thing only. My hands find the button of his jeans and it's only a moment later I wrap my hand around his erection as it bounces free from its confinement.

Damn.

He really does have a nice cock. Long and full, but not too thick, curved slightly to the left with prominent veins just begging to be licked. I can already imagine the way it'll stretch me out.

He watches me through hooded eyes. He's probably expecting me to tease him the way he teased me, but I like nothing more than surprising people. Opening my mouth, I slide him to the back of my throat in one move, making him choke.

I smile around him, laying my tongue flat to caress the underside of his dick as I bob my head up and down, taking him as far back as I can.

It's my turn to radiate smug satisfaction as he starts cursing, his hands finding my hair, but he doesn't try to guide me. I alternate between taking him deep, and licking up his shaft, paying special attention to the head of his cock. After a few minutes, I hollow out my cheeks and suck him down, pressing the head of his dick along the roof of my mouth.

"Oh, fucking hell, Tor. So, so, good."

I pop off his cock with a smirk. "Strip," I command. The struck expression on his face is as gorgeous as his cock, but I have more plans for us.

By the time I reach into my bedside table and turn back to him, he's laying back in the position I left him in but this time without a stitch of clothing on.

"Good boy," I praise, ripping open the condom packet and sliding it over his dick as it twitches in my palm. I push my underwear out of the way and climb on top of him. Baylor's hands find my hips and he guides me down until I sink down on his cock.

The mushroom head slides into me and I squeeze my cunt around him, pulsing as I sink down until I'm sitting in his lap. Fuck. He feels even bigger than he did in my mouth. There's a light burn in the stretch, but I don't let it stop me as I raise back up and sink down over and over again.

Baylor keeps one hand on my hip, the other reaching out to play with my boobs. He's definitely a boob man, I laugh to myself.

Using his chest to balance on, I lean forward and undulate my hips over him. He groans as our bodies slide together. "You're a fucking goddess," he praises. We find a rhythm, working together, fully in sync with each other's needs. The orgasm builds inside me quickly. His hand finds my clit and my movements start to lose the rhythm we found.

"I'm so close, Tor," he whispers, doubling his efforts to get me there. His hips thrust up off the bed and his thumb thrums over my clit. He picks up the pace, driving into me and I start to tighten, so close to release.

"That's right, sweetheart," he encourages. "Just like that." I throw my head back, my hair falling out of its messy bun. He hits me deep and it's on just this side of painful. "Come for me."

It crashes into me and my pussy clenches as the waves of my orgasm wash over me. Everything tightens and he curses, his dick twitching inside me as he comes with me.

Moments later, I fall to the bed at his side, panting and sweating. Fuck, that was good.

Nothing but heavy breathing fills the silence between us as we try to catch our breath. Finally, I pat his shoulder. “You’re not a bad lay.”

The bed shakes with the force of his laughter. I turn on my side to watch him, too lazy to get up and clean myself up.

“You know a lot about those?”

I arch a brow. “Bad lays? Fuck yeah. The horror stories I have.” I shudder as a yawn overtakes me.

He shrugs, moving up the bed to grab a pillow and make himself comfortable at my side. “The downside to being a hoe,” he says nonchalantly. “We all have our hookup horrors.”

I snort and roll my eyes. “At least you don’t have to worry about being kidnapped.”

He holds up a finger, leaving the room and coming back with the tequila. “That’s what you think,” he argues, picking up our conversation right where we left off. “You haven’t seen the crazies we have to deal with yet.”

I narrow my eyes at him and arch a brow, encouraging him to continue.

He nods emphatically. “You’ll see. We have more than a couple players that have already been drafted by the NHL. And it’s not just hockey, the sports here are some of the best of the best. Westbrook has churned out several first round draft picks across several sports. It makes it a campus with a lot of eyes on it.”

How are they playing in the NCAA after being drafted?

“It also means people interested in the fast track to a certain lifestyle are more enticed to show up here. To follow sports just enough to know who everyone is talking about. Who the best prospects are,” he continues before I get the chance to voice my question.

Understanding dawns on me. “You get girls in it for the money.”

He snorts. “There’s no money. Not yet. But yeah, basically. The chance for future fame and money. Lockdown a prospect

before they make it big, before everyone wants them. You could be set for life. Of course, some girls are just in it for a good time. The chance to one day see someone on the tv or billboard and be able to say they fucked that guy.”

At least that, I can respect.

“But others,” he hums. “More similar to the girl from your story.”

I give him a side-eye. “Do I need to worry about getting run down now? Or thrown into another bush?”

Baylor squeezes my thigh. “Nah, I’ve learned to recognize that crowd. Won’t be touching them with a ten foot pole. Too messy.” I feel that. But I’m still curious.

“You can’t play in college sports after being drafted.”

He grins at me, bopping me on the nose, making me scrunch it and give him a dirty look. “Wrong. You can’t play after *signing*. None of us sign.” I know more about college and professional sports than your average student, but I’m lost. Most sports you have to complete a certain amount of years in college before you’re eligible for the draft. “Hockey works a little differently,” he explains, seeing my confusion. “Most NHL prospects are drafted out of high school, but not signed until after a couple years playing at this level. They develop here and are signed when the team thinks they’ve outgrown the league. Or not signed and become free agents again.”

“Interesting,” I say, and mean it. I know the ins and outs for a couple of sports, but never had a reason to look into hockey. I don’t think there’s another sport that does it the same way. “Kinda genius,” I admit.

He nods. “It also makes it real clear which hockey players to keep your eyes on. We aren’t just prospects, we’ve already been drafted. Have a good idea of what team we are likely to end up with.”

We finish the bottle as he tells me some of his crazy hookup horrors, including one about a girl who tried to steal the condom they used. Baylor shudders and his eyes take on a haunted look as he laughs through the story, but a pang of

sympathy strikes me. “It’s too bad all hookups aren’t this easy,” I say absent-mindedly as another yawn breaks free. I shake it free and open my eyes to catch him looking at me curiously.

He shrugs. “Maybe they could be.”

“Mhm,” I hum, bumping his leg with my foot. Exhaustion from the long day and even longer week tugs at me, but I feel gross. I climb over him and head into my bathroom. It only takes me a few minutes to finish up and get ready for bed.

When I come back out, Baylor is sitting on my bed, fully clothed and putting his shoes on. Well that makes for one less awkward conversation. I smile as I climb into bed. “Avoid the walk of shame. Good call.”

He shakes his head at me. “More like a strut of success. I made you come twice.” He taps his chin. “Next time I think I’ll go for three.”

I fluff my pillows behind my head, getting comfortable. “Next time, huh?”

He’s already nodding. “Oh yeah, sweetheart. Next time. That was too good not to repeat.”

Fair enough. I climb under the covers, my eyes already growing heavy as he gets to his feet.

“All the hookups, none of the horrors,” I mumble as my eyes start to close.

He kisses my head. “Don’t get up, I’ll walk myself out.”

I flip him off as he chuckles.

He hums and I pop one eye open to find him leaning against my door frame. I recognize that growly sound. His fingers dance over the wood, waiting until he knows he has my attention. “I think I’ll fuck you from behind next time.”

With that, he walks out.



three

LOCKER ROOM LOWDOWN

There's an extra pep in my step—or I guess slide in my skate—as I easily glide across the ice at practice. The season hasn't started yet, but that doesn't mean Coach takes it easy on us. The very word isn't a part of his vocabulary. He's got one setting and one setting only and it's set to championships.

We made it to the Frozen Four last year, only to lose in the final minutes of the game. It was a disappointment like none of us had ever felt before. One I refuse to repeat this season.

Coach claps his hand down over my shoulder as I pass him to get off the ice. “You looked good out there today, kid. Whatever you're doing, keep it up.”

I smirk. Keep it up. I don't think that'll be a problem at all. But I don't let him see the dirty places my mind has wandered. “Yes, Coach.”

I shouldn't feel as good as I do after all the tequila last night, but it was balanced by something I never knew I needed. Torrynn fucking Gray. Her sweet cries and delicious body. The way she let me lead and squirmed under my touch, only to snatch the control right back from me.

Fuck, I never thought I'd like being under a woman so much. She made me want to be a good boy for her. I'm man enough to admit, I want her again. In every way she will take me.

James nudges my shoulder as we stand next to each other in the locker room and I start stripping off my pads and gear. “Torrynn Gray, huh?”

I roll my eyes. I may not hide my exploits, but I'm also not one to share details about them in the locker room. "That already making its way through the grapevine?" I really shouldn't be surprised.

He snorts, tugging his shirt over his head. "Of course it has. She's never hooked up with a hockey player before. A lot of the guys saw her as unattainable since she's never looked at any of us twice." There's a gleam in his eye I don't know that I like. It's one I recognize. James is one of the guys not scared of getting into a relationship, but he doesn't need to be in one to get his dick wet. He'd be the type of guy who would take whatever Torryn would give him, but could actually be the one to make her change her mind on dating.

I narrow my eyes on him. I can't claim the girl, don't even want to, but I sure as fuck am not done with her. He can charm someone else. Anyone else.

"Was she as good as the rumors say?" he asks, oblivious to the glare I'm pinning him with. A growl builds in my chest. She was better than the rumors say, but no way am I saying that aloud.

Thankfully, Wells breaks up our conversation before I have to respond. "She's Isla's best friend and roommate." There's a note of censure in his tone.

"Isla Hart?" James asks.

Wells nods, but James just looks more confused. I smirk. He hasn't been hanging out with us as much the last couple of weeks, hasn't seen our best friend slowly but surely falling for one Isla Hart.

"She's hot," one of the freshmen, Jayden, pipes up. I hold back my laugh as Wells turns sharply toward him, a thunderous expression on his face.

"She's my girlfriend, so shut the fuck up."

Jayden turns white as he nods quickly, tucking his tail and running to the showers.

The laugh I tried to hold back spills free as I shake my head. "Finally made it official, huh?"

James' eyes widen as his eyes dart back and forth between the two of us. "Check out for a couple weeks and I miss everything," he complains.

Wells rolls his eyes, but has a sheepish smile. "She's in my psych class. We were partners for a paper and hit it off." His hand runs through his hair. "But yeah, I asked her last night." A small smile plays on his lips and James and I trade incredulous looks. I've never seen Wells like this.

I clap my hand down on his shoulder. "Happy for you, man."

He nods his thanks, but is quick to turn his glare back on as he points to James and then me. "This means Torryn Gray is off limits. To both of you. To everyone in our group. Her and Isla are a package deal. You guys can't fuck that up."

I snort. Wells clearly hasn't gotten to know Tor yet. James is already nodding his agreement, though he looks slightly disappointed. Him being too nice works for me though. This is one time I won't push for him to stand his ground. "You know she would kill you if she knew about this, right?"

Wells doesn't laugh the way I expect him to. "I know she has a reputation, but the girl has been through some shit. You had your fun last night, now leave her be. If things go south, it makes it weird for everyone."

"Things aren't going to go south. And Torryn is a big girl. She can fight her own battles. Decide whose dick she wants to ride."

My answer doesn't appease Wells, but at least it doesn't piss him off. He has to see he is overstepping his bounds here. He's not suddenly in charge of Torryn just because Isla is his girlfriend.

"What does that mean, B?" he asks, eyeing me speculatively. "You're going to sleep with her again? Break your ban and date her?"

Leave it to my childhood best friend to be dramatic as fuck. "I'm not dating her and it's not a ban. I just don't see the point in limiting yourself to one person at our age. We're

young. We're hot. We're hockey players. What's wrong with enjoying the perks that come with it?"

James taps Wells on the shoulder in solidarity before heading to the showers. It's a conversation we've all had before. We view relationships and love differently. That's cool. I won't judge them for wanting to be wifed up. But that's just not me.

Wells sighs. "You know nothing is wrong with it. I just don't want to mess things up with Isla. Her best friend hating my best friend doesn't exactly spell happily ever after."

He really hasn't gotten to know Torryn at all yet. One night with her and I can confidently say no one is breaking that girl's heart, least of all me. "You don't have to worry about Torryn. You should be more concerned that she'll eat the other guys for breakfast and spit them out." The thought intrigues me. Maybe I should encourage James to shoot his shot. He's not used to missing the net. Could be good character building for him.

"But not you?" He arches a brow at me.

I give him my best cocky grin. "Of course not. I handled her just fine last night."

He watches me for a moment. "You're really going to sleep with her again?"

"Fuck yeah. Next chance I get."

He scoffs, stripping the last of his gear off. "And then what? A friends-with-bennies situation?"

I shrug, finishing getting naked myself and toss my shit into the hamper with a nod to the dude waiting for us to finish so he can do his job. "It's nothing. Just two people who like to see each other naked and want to do it again. Neither of us wants a relationship. We haven't exactly typed out a contract and signed it. It's just fun. Easy. A good fuck. For both of us."

Finally, he sighs. "Whatever you say, man. But if it goes bad, I'm kicking your ass."

I laugh as we head to the showers. “You worry too much. But feel free to warn the other guys. She really will break their hearts.”

I know a lot of things, but the most important thing I know right now, is I’m not close to being done with Torryn fucking Gray.



four
BITCH WITH A BAT

Something is off.

Growing up in a bar gives you a type of sixth sense for shit like this.

My knuckles wrap around the base of my very favorite possession I own. The black bat Isla decked out in glitter for my birthday after I started working at Tease 'Em & Please 'Em when I was sixteen.

Not exactly an ideal job for a young girl and my grandma would probably have a heart attack if she knew where the bulk of the money I was sending her was coming from. But when life gives you lemons, work at a titty bar. It's not like I'm on the stage stripping and I make way better tips bartending here than I would anywhere else. The black bikini top and short cut offs that show half my ass may have a good deal to do with that, but hey. I have no problem showing off my body. I've worked hard for it over the years, I should get to enjoy the perks of it. Especially when it comes in the form of cash.

My fingers twitch with the feel of the bat under them. Nothing has happened, but there's a rising tension that shouldn't be here. Tease is normally an overall chill place to work, but there are rare nights where the crowd gets too rowdy. Where a patron will get handsy with one of the girls.

Being behind the bar saves me from the majority of the uninvited touches, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten what it's like to be on the floor.

We get a lot of respectful regulars here, but not all of them are. My eyes trail over the crowd, trying to source out the

different energy I'm picking up on.

Marissa is on stage, dancing a slow, sensual number, her hips dipping as she walks slowly around the pole. Her fingers tease up and down the pole as she moves, sending winks and kisses into the crowd. It's not the pit that's causing this stone in my stomach. Everyone there is too entranced by the sexy way Marissa twists her body around the pole.

"Torryn, two shots!" A regular calls, tapping his fingers against the bar. I take my eyes off the crowd, leaving my bat tucked safely where it is as I sway over to Rick. He's a retired cop, lost his wife last year, and now spends most of his nights here.

He can be a bit of dick, but is never mean, and is a pretty generous tipper. I happen to like his no nonsense way of speaking, but when he gets too deep in a bottle, he can be annoying to handle. I pour two shots of vodka as I eye him up and down, evaluating how drunk he is.

"Everything good tonight?" he asks, tossing back the first shot like it's nothing.

I click my tongue in response, starting his tab with his card. "Something is off. Don't know what, yet."

He raises his hands in front of his chest. "Won't be me tonight, T. Promise. I remember your threats from last week."

I nod, letting my gaze drift to look over the tables. Most of them are full, but we've got three girls walking around the floor. No one looks irritated or too drunk or even like they're waiting for help. It's almost too calm of a night. The calm before the storm.

Rick goes back to his table in the pit and I start grabbing tickets to fill orders, keeping one eye on the floor as I work. In just a couple hours the seating at the bar will be as full as everywhere else in the club, but for now I have a bit of peace.

A few hours pass in the same way, slowly getting busier and louder as the night goes on. What else can you expect on a Saturday night?

The feeling of unease has yet to subside, but nothing has come of it. Rick slinks out of the bar, a definite stagger to his steps. He hands his keys to Reggie at the door before our security guard even has to say a word.

Lucy rushes up to the bar, dropping off a tray of empty shot glasses once she reaches me. Pieces of her blonde hair are falling free of her pigtail braids and she huffs an annoyed breath, trying to blow the hair off her face. She doesn't seem distressed, but definitely a bit frazzled.

"Eight tequila shots, please," she orders.

I nod and start pouring and she steps up to the tablet, inputting the order.

"You good?" I check in with her.

Her smile is small when she nods and gives a little shrug. She's not as seasoned as our other girls on the floor. Younger too. "It's busy tonight, but I can handle it."

My eyes flick over to the section she's running. She's got a large table of young guys. Early to mid-twenties probably. Been here almost as long as I have been and downing shots just about the whole time.

I finish pouring the last of the latest round. "If your big table starts giving you a hard time, you let me or Alysha know. We've got your back." Alysha has been here almost as long as I have been, she knows how to deal with rowdy crowds.

Her shoulders straighten as she lifts the tray up. "I've got it," she reassures me, but I don't miss the relief that floods her at my words, the confidence that slowly builds back up in her. Atta girl. I nod, before getting back to the line in front of my bar, getting lost once more in the chaos of mixing drinks and pouring beers.

The whole time, I keep one eye on Lucy and her table. They take the shots no problem, letting her leave without a fuss, but they're quick to call her back several more times in the span of only fifteen minutes. After the third time, I sigh, catching Alysha's eye to make sure she can man the bar alone. At her nod, I toss the rag I was using to clean up into the bin

and tap on the bar in front of the few men sitting on my side. “Be back, boys. Alysha will help you out, if you need anything.”

Two of the guys just nod their thanks, but my regular raises a brow before turning to see Lucy at the same table once more. He shakes his head in disapproval. “Must be new here,” he mutters. “Don’t cross a bitch with a bat.”

I snort as I lift the bar and come out on the other side. He’s not wrong, but we’ll leave Betty out of this conversation. For now.

Making my way over, I put an extra sway in my hips that draws their eyes away from Lucy and to me. She exhales a breath she was holding when her eyes land on mine. I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her to lean against my shoulder. “Hey, guys.” I smile. I can’t quite manage sweet even if I wanted to try, so we’ll have to settle with not bitchy. Let them lower their guards for me.

“Hey,” one of the drunk asses coos, making what I’m sure he thinks is a come hither look.

“Is my girl helping you with everything you need?” I ask, cutting to the chase.

One of the other drunk asses rolls his eyes. “She’s a bit of a prude for working in a strip club.”

Lucy flushes and I stand straighter, letting my smile fall and my eyes harden. “She’s a server not a stripper,” I say flatly, dropping any hint of niceties. “You want extra service?” I point to the tables in front of the stage. “Go to the pit. Otherwise, you treat my servers the way you would at any other restaurant. Got it?”

“Why even—” one starts but another one cuts him off. “Sorry, I’ll make sure they leave her alone.”

I tip my fingers in silent thanks and nudge Lucy until she starts moving. I hear more than one mutter of bitch. Too bad for them, I wear that like a badge of honor. Once we’re clear of the table I whisper, “Let Alysha takeover.”

She nods and slips back into work, an extra pep in her step without that table harassing her every two minutes.

It's less than twenty minutes later when they start making trouble again. I should have known better. The very first time Lucy has to walk by them, one of them lands a resounding smack on her ass. Now, I'm pissed. I shake my head, finally grabbing Betty. Derek, my regular from earlier, quickly moves his drink out of the way and gestures to the bartop in front of him. I smirk, as I climb up, bat in hand. Reggie gives his nod of approval, and begins to make his way to the table as well.

"Hey!" I shout, and everyone in the upper part of the club freezes. Even the pit slows down as eyes turn our way. Sasha, who is currently on the stage, slows in her routine as even she turns to watch me, a smirk on her face. I use Betty to point to the fucker who dared to lay a hand on one of my girls. "I thought I made myself clear. I'd love to give you assholes a second chance, but unfortunately for you, Betty here disagrees." I toss the bat back and forth in my hands and several people chuckle, familiar with my girl already. I point to the door. "Get the fuck out of my bar before Betty wins and I start swinging."

"Don't be a bitch!" The drunk asshole who slapped Lucy shouts back. "I ain't leaving."

I don't need a mirror to know my smile turns feral as I hop off the bartop. Derek makes the sign of the cross over his chest as I walk past him. "Don't cross a bitch with a bat. It's so easy," he mutters.

"Big mistake, buddy," I say as I reach their table. "You have 'til the count of three to clear the fuck out before I start breaking bones. Starting with your fucking hand."

He starts to stand up in an attempt to use his size over me as an intimidation tactic when I feel Reggie's presence behind me. He backs down real quick. That's too bad. I really would have loved to crush the fucking hand he used against Lucy.

The friend that promised to keep the others in line slaps his hand over the fucker's mouth, profusely apologizing again, a red flush rising on his face.

“I don’t care,” I cut off his rambling excuses. There’s nothing he could say that would make me change my mind. Betty rests on my shoulder and my knuckles tighten around the base, just wishing I could swing. “Get them out. Now.” His face turns white, but he begins nodding quickly. “Don’t let them come back until they learn to respect my girls.”

There’s a lot of shared muttering as the group makes quick work of gathering their shit and clearing out, but of course, they aren’t happy with just that. The last one to get up has an obnoxious look in his eye and a slick smirk. I sigh as he throws his arms out over the table, swiping all the glasses from their most recent round and sending them to the floor. Glass shatters against the concrete floors and gasps ring in the following silence.

“Fucking bitch,” he hisses as he straightens, proud of his little act of rebellion.

I chuckle. “Don’t you forget it.” It’s the only warning he gets before I step back, lifting Betty off my shoulder and coming back in a full swing until the bat meets his stomach, knocking the wind from him. Maybe bruising a rib or two. Give him a little something to remind him of me.

He collapses to his knees, wheezing with tears already springing to his eyes. I scoff. It’s not like I hit him as hard as I could. Just enough to make sure they never step foot in this bar again.

One of his dumbass friends steps in front of him, screaming that I can’t assault a patron. I check my nails as he rages on. It might be time to change up the color again. Maybe I’ll do black with some sparkles to match Betty. “We’re going to report you for assault with a deadly weapon,” he threatens.

“Oh, pretty boy,” I scold lightly. “You shouldn’t have come to this side of town if you didn’t know the rules.”

He huffs in anger. “Laws still apply to you even if you’re a fucking gutter whore.”

“Officer Derek?” I call out and grin when I hear his grumbling before he stands from the bar and walks over.

“Would you say throwing glasses at me would be enough to justify my use of a bat in fear?”

He rubs his chin, hiding his smirk behind his hand. “Looked like a classic case of self defense to me, Miss Torryn.”

“That is not what happened!” one of the other drunk pretty boys yells.

I tilt my head and stare at the disheveled group of boys so far out of their league. They must be newly twenty-one, if that. “Isn’t it?”

Rounds of agreements sound throughout the bar, making my smile grow wider. “Do you need another warning, or are you going to carry him out of here now?”

They don’t have much to say after that, finally realizing they’re outmatched and outnumbered. We might be from the gutter, as they so eloquently put it, but we know how to have each other’s backs.

Lucy rushes over to help me clean up the glass as everyone else wanders back to their seats. As soon as Reggie escorts the last of the pretty boys out, he’s shooing us both off the floor and takes over cleaning up the mess.

I pat Lucy on the shoulder. “Why don’t you take off early? I’ll close down tonight.”

Tears well in her eyes. “Thanks, Tor.” She’s rightfully worn down after her shift here. Girl needs a break. I pat her shoulder once more and fall back behind the bar, place Betty in her rightful spot, and find my rhythm. I had hoped the restless feeling would subside with that table gone, but it stays with me.

The club also falls back into the routine quickly as the scene disperses and everyone is quick to forget the drunken idiots and their mess. The music is turned up and Sasha picks up her dance routine as if she never stopped. A few minutes later a new patron takes the seat in front of me. He’s not someone I recognize, but has been here most of the night.

“That happen often here?” he asks, gesturing to where Reggie and one of the busboys are just now finishing cleaning up the mess.

“Not very,” I answer, wiping down a glass. “Can I get you anything?”

He eyes me warily before ordering an old fashioned. Something about him pricks at the back of my mind, but I can't lay a finger on it. “Often enough for you to name your bat,” he remarks, lifting his eyebrow as I make his drink.

I shrug as I set it down in front of him. “A girl's best friend deserves a name.”

His disapproval wafts off him in waves, but I don't give him the chance to say more, moving down the bar to help the next person waiting. The prickling sensation of his presence follows me. Something about him needling me in a way that says I should recognize the stranger even though I am almost positive he hasn't been here before.

It's impossible to recognize and remember every face I see through the nights. Lots of bodies that all become a blur, but that bite of awareness wouldn't be itching at me if it was just recognition from the crowd.

No. There's something else about him. I'll figure it out eventually, but for now I put him and his dour expression out of my mind and get back to work.

The night moves far too slowly for how busy we are. It should be flying by with the way I'm serving drinks and dealing with men ogling my tits. But no, each hour drags by as if someone took the batteries out of the clock.

Alysha makes a face as she drops off empty glasses and begins to load up her tray again.

“What's wrong?” I ask, still on edge from earlier.

She waves me off. “Weird night.” I nod my agreement. “Got another weirdo in the corner over there.” She tilts her head in the direction of the pit and I spot the table tucked away almost out of view. It's a great spot to get a view of the stage

without having to be in the pit. It's usually taken, but I can immediately see why Alysha has weird vibes.

The man is sitting alone, not unusual. But sitting with his back to the stage. Highly unusual.

Both his hands wrap around the half full pint of beer he has, his orange and gray beanie making him stand out even more.

“Any trouble?” I ask.

She shakes her head, lifting the tray of drinks. “No, just a lot of questions about Betty. Guess not everyone is accustomed to seeing a bitch with a bat.”

She hip bumps me and I snort.

Alysha walks off and my gaze lingers on her for a moment longer, but the man never moves or even glances in her direction. I just need tonight to be over.



five
PROMISES, PROMISES

The house vibrates with the energy of the crowd and all I can think is thank god we aren't throwing this rager at our house. The hockey houses are known for throwing the best parties, but practices have kicked my ass this week. Having to wake up and clean? Fuck no.

I lean back on the couch as Wells pulls a giggling Isla into his lap. No sign of Torryn tonight. I sip on my beer as my eyes roam over the growing crowd. Something is in the air tonight.

A reckless thrum that hums through the music, promising a wild night, and a huge ass mess for the morning. Sounds like Tate's problem. By the grumpy expression on his face as he glares at his younger brother, Zac, he's thinking the same thing.

This was supposed to be more of a kickback. It wasn't supposed to turn into a rager. Then again, the best parties never are.

James falls into the seat at my side, beer in hand. "Didn't expect to find you over here lurking."

I roll my eyes. "Clarissa is here," I grumble.

James' eyes widen. "Who let that psycho ass in?"

I give him a droll look and he groans. "Zac again?"

I laugh dryly. "You know the guy can't say no to women. One bat of their eye lashes and he caves."

He shakes his head. "We really gotta work with him on that. Not only did she want to turkey baste herself with your

come, dude, everything after?” He shudders as he says it and it makes me gag.

“Please. Don’t remind me.” I swallow down more beer, suddenly craving tequila. I drain the rest of my cup and drop it on the table next to me. It’s just not hitting right. My eyes are drawn back to Isla sitting in Wells’ lap, matching dopey grins plastered on both their faces as they ignore everyone else around them. Why did they even come?

“So, that’s really a thing?” he asks, gesturing to where I’m looking.

“Oh, yeah,” I laugh. “He’s been obsessed since the semester started. It was about time he locked it down.”

James’ gaze weighs heavily on me and I brace myself for whatever pseudo shrink shit he’s about to hit me with. Him and Wells really are too similar. He opens his mouth to start, but at the last second must change his mind, instead shaking his head. “Can’t believe I missed all that.”

I hum, waiting for him to continue. As roommates, James, Wells, Beau, and I tend to be honest with each other. We’ve lived together since our freshman year here, instantly clicking. We’ve only grown closer over the last two years and it’s been obvious James has been holding something back from us.

He huffs and crosses his arms over his chest. “I’ve been talking to Daniels,” he finally admits.

“I assumed.” Daniels will eventually be his agent once he’s ready to move up to the NHL and abandon his amateur status. For now, he’s considered an advisor and is the go between for James and the team that drafted him. There aren’t many other reasons James would be so distracted.

“The Panthers are nervous about this season with Vhalen out after that injury.”

I grimace, knowing the hit he’s talking about. “That bad?” They haven’t actually released how long he’ll be out of the season for yet. But for the team to be nervous and looking at their prospects, it can’t be good.

James nods. “They were already thinking about pulling me up at the end of the last season, but after our loss,” he hesitates, dropping his gaze from mine. My chest tightens. We were all a mess in that game. “They didn’t need me, they had a good roster of centers and they thought one more season would be good for me. Maybe even two. But looks like this really will be my last season here.”

Pride, excitement, and sadness all mingle inside me. James is on the younger side and didn’t get drafted until after his freshman year due to his late birthday. That’s the only reason he’s even made it to his junior year here. Otherwise, they would have already pulled him up.

Clapping my hand on his shoulder, I beam at him. “Proud of you, man. Might not be as good as orange and gray, but red and black will suit you.”

He chuckles, tension easing out of his shoulders. “It’s exciting and sad all at once. I love being a Wolf.”

It’s a part of sports. Not playing with the same people for long. An ever-evolving team as players move between divisions and cities. But it never gets any easier to say goodbye to a good linemate. “Just means we need that championship even more this season.” Our last one together.

James rolls his eyes. “As if we needed any more motivation.”

“Ah, fuck. She’s spotted me,” I curse as Clarissa walks into the room. “Maybe you should tell her your good news,” I tease James.

He flips me off. “Why do you think I’ve kept that shit so quiet? Last thing I need is a scandal right now. I’m on my best behavior.”

I snort. “Sounds boring.”

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, now would you?” He lifts his now empty cup in salute as he rises from the couch, patting my knee as he does. “Try not to make any babies while you’re out there avoiding the horrors of being boring.”

I shudder at his words. His chuckle as he walks away says he didn't miss it either. The fucker. He knows how traumatized I was by the whole thing. I've got nothing against kids, but I keep it wrapped for a reason. There are a million things I want to do before I get to that point in my life.

Clarissa's eyes flare with excitement as they land on me. Yup. It's time to blow this popsicle stand. Ain't no way I am being lured back into her bed, and I wouldn't put it past her to have extra tricks up her sleeves.

Hopping off the couch, I turn my back on her as I head towards the backyard. Beau bumps into me and catches his hand on my shoulder. "Where's the fire?" he asks, his gaze scanning over my shoulder. His eyes darken as soon as they find Clarissa. "Who the fuck invited her?" Real anger pulses through each one of his words.

I shrug, patting him on the back. "Not sure. Not sticking around to find out."

He gives me a disbelieving glare. "Zac?" He sighs, running his hands through his long hair. "Get out of here. I'll deal with it." He hesitates, "But it's time to tell the rest of the team what happened."

The thought almost gives me hives, but I nod reluctantly. If she isn't backing off, it's only a matter of time before she tries the same thing with someone else. Zac is only a freshman, so he wasn't here when the incident occurred last year. It's been a taboo subject for the guys who do know as it really threw me off my game. It wasn't something I ever thought I would have to be careful about.

I can't take credit for wins all on my own, and it's the same for losses, but it would be a lie to say the incident wasn't a major contributor to our loss in the Frozen Four last season. "I'll skip out on that team bonding exercise," I say and slip past him, not sticking around to watch him confront Clarissa.

My mood is much darker as I take shelter in the backyard. There aren't as many people back here and it's easy to fall into the shadows. Maybe I should just cut out early and head home. Checking the time, I scoff at myself. It isn't all that early

anyways. Time flies when you're having fun, and apparently it just disappears when you can't tear your eyes off a doorway, waiting for a feisty dark-haired vixen to walk through them.

I tap my phone against my lips. I got her number from Isla. She never would have handed it over if Torryn didn't want to see me again. Despite what Wells thinks, his girlfriend was amused by the whole thing. Although, she did threaten me not to leave such a mess in her living room next time. Torryn must have never cleaned up the spilled tequila. My lips twitch as memories wash over me.

Fuck it.

I did promise her a next time.

I can't help but grin as I pull up her contact and shoot her a text.

BAYLOR

Ready for me to make good on my promise?

TORRYN

Depends on who this is

Her response is quicker than I expected.

Someone who is ready to see how good you look from behind

Her response doesn't come through. My teeth sink into my lower lip as I debate what the problem is. A few minutes have passed, and still nothing. Too forward? Or does she not realize who the text is from. Fuck. How many guys promised to fuck her from behind the next time. It can't be that many, right?

Maybe I should send her another text.

Only horrors tonight over on hockey row?

My heart races and a grin stretches across my cheeks, my doubts evaporating instantly. Of course she knows exactly who's texting her.

The scariest

You gonna protect me?

You gonna make good on your promise?

Your place?

See you in twenty

Oh, fuck yeah. My night just got infinitely better and the dark mood vanishes as if all the gross feelings seeing Clarissa evoked never happened.

It won't take me twenty minutes to walk to her place, but I don't have anywhere else I want to be. I make a slight detour and pick up some much needed supplies. It's almost exactly fifteen minutes later when I knock on her door.

"One second!" she calls from the other side of the door.

I lean against the door frame with a practiced grin and wait. The door flies open, Torryn's clean, flushed face glares at me, her hair piled up on her head.

"You're early," she accuses.

I make a show of checking my watch. "By five minutes."

"I can get a lot done in five minutes."

I wink. "So can I."



six

LATE NIGHT SNACK

This smug bastard. I roll my lips to keep from smiling at him. He's already far too pleased with himself.

"You gonna brush my teeth and finish my bedtime routine for me?"

He leans forward, towering over me, and drops his voice to a whisper. "You can finish that while I finish something much more fun." I shiver at the dirty promises in his tone, backing away from the door and allowing him to follow me in. The door shuts behind him, but I don't turn back. Instead, I head straight for the bathroom.

The idiot caught me right in the middle of washing the makeup off my face. He clicks his tongue behind me and a shiver races down my back at his unexpected closeness. "You know, most girls put makeup on when they know I'm coming over, not take it off."

I roll my eyes and catch his smirk in the mirror as I turn the water back to the right temperature. "I'm hoping your promise includes fucking me right into a coma. Can't sleep with makeup on."

His smirk is gone, replaced by a dark and heady look. His hands find my hips and he squeezes them, pulling me ever so slightly away from the counter. I arch a brow, but ignore him as I grab some of my exfoliator and begin to gently scrub my face of the day's events. Exhaustion pulls at me and I'm more worn out than I had realized. I probably shouldn't have accepted Baylor's offer to come over, but it was too tempting to refuse.

My eyes fly open as Baylor's thumbs hook into the waistband of my sleep shorts and slowly pull them down, giving me enough time to stop him. He's watching me in the mirror. Soap bubbles cover my face as my mouth parts open in surprise.

"You do your bedtime routine," he says, his tone wicked. "I'll do mine. And mine just so happens to include a late night snack." There's nothing sweet or wholesome in the look he gives me or in the desire that pools low in my belly. "Don't get distracted," he challenges.

Determination pours through me even as he slides my shorts down my legs. I quickly step out of them, leaning forward to rinse my face. "Perfect," he murmurs. "Stay like that." Resting my elbows on the counter, I grab a towel and press it against my skin.

Baylor's hands roam over the curves of my ass, pressing and squeezing, but staying away from where I'm quickly beginning to crave him.

It's hard to move freely when I'm bent over the counter, but I manage to grab my face oil and put a few drops on the tips of my fingers and dab it over my forehead and cheeks.

"Oh fuck," I curse when I feel Baylor spreading my cheeks open and finding my center with his tongue. He swipes it over me leisurely, exploring my cunt like it was made for him. He squeezes my thighs and I can feel the silent reprimand in the gesture and focus back on my routine, massaging the oil into my skin.

Quickly, I follow it up with a serum and eye cream, my legs shaking as his tongue finds my clit and he drops the slow pace, attacking the sensitive bundle of nerves with a renewed sense of purpose. I knock over my moisturizer as I attempt to grab it and a moan is ripped from my throat.

Baylor lightly smacks my ass as I rise up on my tiptoes, begging for just a little more. "I thought you wouldn't get distracted," the asshole taunts.

I groan, picking up my moisturizer and squeeze a generous amount on my fingers before I start massaging it into my face and neck. He hums his approval, running his tongue along my slit. “That’s my girl.”

My belly flutters in excitement, but I temper down any reaction, staying focused on finishing my nighttime routine. Who knew such a mundane thing could ever be such a challenge? My pussy clenches as Baylor resumes the pace from before he scolded me. Waves of pleasure wash over me and I can feel my entire body tightening in desperation to reach that crest I know is just out of my reach.

I’ve been with a lot of guys, but I don’t think I’ve ever been eaten out this way. Like the first meal of a starving man. My hands tremble as I force myself to pick up my toothbrush and toothpaste.

Baylor doubles his efforts. “Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck,” I murmur, and his chuckles against my sensitive flesh only brings me that much closer. Wrapping one hand around the counter, I start to brush my teeth, almost biting down to keep from screaming out.

Just as I’m about to finish rinsing my mouth, Baylor slides a single finger into my tight channel and I’m spasming around it before I even know what’s happening. I cry out his name as pleasure floods my system.

Strong arms wrap around my midsection and Baylor is laughing as he picks me up and carries me out of the bathroom and tosses me on my bed, his large body following me down. He steals a kiss, his soft, full lips pressed against mine before I’ve even exhaled the breath I was holding.

“Mmm, minty.” He smiles against my lips, his tongue peeking out to trace the seam of my lips. I can taste the sweet and salty taste of myself on him. I’m already dripping down my inner thighs from his ministrations, but all it did was make me ready for more. Based on the hard length pressed against me, I’m not the only one.

I run my fingers through his hair, gently tugging. “I hope that was just an appetizer.”

A wicked glint enters his eyes and he doesn't bother responding with words, instead flipping me over and lifting me to my knees. "This what you want, Tor?" he asks, running his fingers through the mess he made of me.

"It's what you promised," I counter.

His chest rumbles behind me and the sound of foil ripping fills the silence. I grab a pillow and settle it under my chest, arching my back and shaking my ass for him. His hand lands a sharp smack a moment before I feel the tip of his cock press against my opening. I hold my breath as he drives all the way in in one long, hard thrust. I curse as his pelvis rests against my ass.

Baylor's lips brush over my shoulder as he gathers my hair in his fist. "Never say that I don't keep my promises." His grip tightens just enough to make me arch my back as he begins to drive in and out of me. The tingle that races over my scalp adds the edge I crave to every bit of pleasure his thick cock gives me as he hits me deep.

Fuck does he know how to make good on a promise. Baylor fucks me from behind ruthlessly, alternating between pulling my hair, playing with my tits, and wrapping his large hand around my throat and holding me up, my back against his chest until I'm crying out his name and coming all over his cock.

He slows his thrusts, squeezing the sides of my throat, making my orgasm drag out. "That's it, Tor. Just like that, soak my cock."

Just as my body begins to relax from one high, Baylor is flipping me over until I'm laying flat on my back. His smirk promises we aren't done yet. "I have one more promise to keep," he says, lifting one of my legs to rest on his shoulder as he taps his dick against my clit. "Can you keep up?"

I don't even bother to respond, instead shifting my hips until the head of his cock nudges against my entrance. His smile does something to my insides and makes me feel almost desperate for that third orgasm. Rather than fast and hard like he just took me, he changes the pace to slow and deep,

dragging out each thrust until each nerve ending feels like it's on fire.

Baylor's teeth sink into his full lower lip as he pushes my leg back closer to me and hits me even deeper. The need to make him as wild and desperate as I feel has me lifting my hips from the bed and squeezing around him. His groan of pleasure is music to my fucking ears.

He draws out only to immediately sink back in, increasing his pace as he fucks me into the bed. "Be a good boy for me, Baylor," I moan. "Come for me." His grip on my calf tightens as the control he was barely holding onto finally snaps. If I thought he was taking me hard and fast from behind, it's nothing like how he fucks me now. My name is a whimper on his lips and I'm just out of reach of that third orgasm, when he leans down and begins to suck on my nipple. Oh fuck.

It sends me over the edge, clamping down around him as he grows even harder inside me. He follows me only moments later, moaning my name as he comes.

Sweat slicks both our skin and part of me wants to get up to shower, but a bigger part of me wants to let the orgasm haze pull me under and worry about a shower in the morning.

Baylor pants at my side, running his fingers down my neck. "Your pulse is racing."

I hum, leaning into the soft touch. "I wonder why," I murmur sleepily. He yawns at my side and my eyes start to drift closed, my head finding a comfortable spot on his shoulder.

Baylor really does know how to keep his promises, or maybe it's that he knows how to rise to a challenge. Warmth wraps around me as I slowly fall asleep.

My alarm rings what feels like only minutes later, jarring me out of my peaceful sleep. I groan, reaching to shut the annoying sound off, but am halted when I can't move. My eyes fly open to find Baylor wrapped around me like I'm his favorite teddy bear. Shaking my head, I brush a lock of his shaggy hair off his face.

He's out cold. How can he even sleep that deeply?

Slowly, I disentangle myself from him and grab my phone, finally shutting off the alarm. My eyes burn at the bright light that shines from the stupid piece of technology. It should be criminal to have to wake up at four-thirty.

Stretching my arms above my head, I take a moment to decide about what to do with the bear in my bed. I check the time again and shrug off my worries. He'll wake up eventually. I've got other shit to do. I take my time in the shower, washing my hair and scrubbing my body until my skin feels almost raw. My shower last night didn't do enough to wash the day away. Drying off, I get dressed in biker shorts and a big t-shirt.

Another yawn stretches my mouth and I struggle to shake off the sleep. Coffee is my first priority. The smell soon fills our small apartment and I would be surprised when a rumped Isla comes sneaking out of her room, if this hadn't been our routine for the last year and a half we've lived together. Girl's got a nose on her like a damn bloodhound when it comes to coffee.

"Morning," she mumbles groggily as I hand her a mug, already made up just how she likes it. She inhales it and I'm amazed her tongue isn't screaming from the heat. "You're a goddess."

I lift my own cup, taking a long sip of the dark roast. It's already clearing some of the fog from my brain.

"Who let me take a 7:30 class?" she groans, taking another long gulp.

I arch a brow at her still rumped state. "Who told you fuckers to party so hard on a Sunday?"

Isla flips me off, rolling her eyes. "It wasn't a party like that." At my dubious expression, she relents. "Fine, not totally like that. It was mostly chill, until more people started showing up. Then it just got weird."

She waves it off, finishing her coffee and moving to the fridge as I pull out my laptop and set it on the bar and take a

seat. Our apartment isn't super large or luxurious, but the layout is perfect. Our shared space is small, but open. The kitchen is just a nook in the larger room with a dining area to the side and overlooks the living space. Our bedrooms are on opposite sides of the room, allowing for a bit of privacy.

Pulling up my schedule for the day, I make notes in my planner to account for the last minute changes in the tutoring sessions I have this evening in the library. There's a new student that I've never worked with before that was just added. Clicking on his notes, I see it's an athlete that is in danger of falling below the required gpa in order to play. At least his courses are all taught by professors I've worked with before. It shouldn't be too difficult to adjust other tools I've already created to fit his needs.

A bowl of yogurt with granola, fruit, and chia seeds is placed in front of me. Just how I like it. I look up and smile my thanks at Isla. She winks and takes her seat beside me, her own bowl in front of her.

"What's on the agenda today?" she asks, digging into her breakfast.

I briefly look over my schedule once more before answering her. "Homework, classes from ten to four, tutoring from four-thirty to eight-thirty, then closing shift at the bar. I won't be home until after midnight, so feel free to bring that boy toy over."

Her look of concern dissipates as it's replaced with embarrassment, her cheeks tinged a bright pink as she flips me off. "Don't try to distract me with Wells. It won't work."

I arch a brow. "It won't? Then why don't you tell me why you came home alone last night."

She sputters, her blonde hair flaring around her shoulders as she shakes her head. "I want to take things slow this time," she mutters quickly.

Guilt churns my stomach at the expression on her face. The unease and self-doubt she allows to creep in every once in

a while after her last relationship failed so spectacularly. I could kill the asshole who broke her heart.

“I’m sorry, Lala,” I say, using her childhood nickname, we rarely ever use anymore. “It’s not your fault Brad was a cheating and judgmental asshole. You couldn’t have done anything differently to make him stay loyal.”

She sighs, mixing her yogurt in her bowl without taking another bite. “I know, just maybe I would have realized before I gave myself over to him so completely. Maybe if I hadn’t told him—”

Patting her back, I lean my head against her shoulder, cutting her off. “You couldn’t have hid that part of yourself forever and it wasn’t fair of him to react the way he did. Asshole.” She smiles and leans closer to me and I continue. “Plus, it might be too late to hold your heart back from Wells,” I whisper. “I think he’s worth the risk.”

“I agree,” she says. “But I’m enjoying taking it slow. The newness of it all.” After a moment she huffs in annoyance. “But that doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten about you working yourself into an early grave.”

I roll my eyes at her dramatics. “Today is the only day this week I work both jobs. I’ll even be able to sleep in tomorrow.” It’s not a lie. At this point in time, I’m not on the schedule for the bar until the weekend when I don’t tutor. She doesn’t need to know I’ll most likely get called in on Thursday.

Isla opens her mouth to say something, but stops herself, the light in her eyes going out a little. She knows better than to argue, knows there is no other choice for me. For my family. Sometimes life deals you a tough hand and you have no choice but to let it defeat you, or survive.

“I’m fine. I promise,” I assure her before she worries herself into a fit. “As long as I get my homework done before class, I’ll have plenty of time to rest.”

She grunts her acknowledgment, taking several bites of her yogurt while I start in on my assignments. A few moments

later she nudges my side as she gets up to put her bowl in the sink. “What time are you at the club on Friday?”

“The closing shift,” I answer without much thought. Closing means I won’t be able to go to any parties with her, but her Chesire grin makes me think maybe I should have lied.

“Perfect, come to the game with me. It’s their first exhibition game and I promised Wells I’d go.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” I say, waving her off.

A throat clears from behind us. “It’s like a scrimmage. We play like a real game, but the score doesn’t affect the standings or our individual stats.” Baylor winks at Isla as her face once again turns scarlett, her eyes flashing back and forth between the two of us.

“You didn’t tell me you had company,” she hisses under her breath before giving him a shy smile.

I shrug, wave to Baylor and turn back to my laptop.

“You guys should come though,” he continues. “It’ll be fun. The game starts at seven.”

I hum under my breath. Seven might be cutting it close. “How long are the games?”

It’s Isla who answers. “Usually like 2.5-3 hours. It’ll be fine.” She gives me her best innocent look, wide green eyes shining up at me, pleading for me to say yes. I hate when she does that. She knows I can’t say no.

I groan, “Fine. I’ll go.” Baylor and Isla high five over my head and I roll my eyes. I’ll just have to be ready to leave straight from the arena to work. “It’s here, right?”

Isla nods eagerly and claps her hands together in excitement. “It’s going to be so fun!” She smacks a loud kiss against my cheek, making Baylor chuckle. I shake my head as Isla excuses herself to her room to get ready for her class.

Baylor drops into the seat at my side. “Why are you awake so early?” he asks, a yawn stretching his mouth open. I shove his shoulder, pushing him and his morning breath away from

me. “I thought I was going to get the chance to wake you up with your favorite thing.”

“Coffee?”

He snorts, shoving me back. “An orgasm.”

Fair. That definitely is on my list of top favorite things. Alas, there’s no rest for the wicked, or the broke. “Sorry, I couldn’t just wait around for you to get up.”

He flips me off, taking note of my empty bowl, coffee cup, and the homework already started in front of me. He catches a piece of my damp hair between his fingers. “Exactly how early did you wake up?”

“Four-thirty,” I answer, turning away from him and focusing on where I left off reading in my textbook.

He whistles, dropping the lock of hair. “And I thought we woke up early.” Checking his phone, he pushes back and stands. “I gotta meet some of the guys for our morning run.”

I hum in response, annotating the paragraph I just read. He laughs, flicking my hair in front of my face. “See you around, Tor.”

“See ya, B,” I respond, not drawing my eyes away from the textbook. I have more work to get done today if I’m going to go to the game with Isla. He doesn’t make any jokes about me walking him out this time, nor any promises about a next time. But I think we both know, there will be.

Just as I start to zone out, Baylor sticks his head back inside our front door, clearing his throat. “Umm, you have flowers out here.”

My eyes don’t leave my computer screen even in my confusion. “What?”

I hear the creak of the door being pushed open and finally like my gaze just as Baylor carries in a giant bouquet of daisies and white lilies in a large glass vase. “Flowers,” he repeats.

“They must be from Wells,” I say, perplexed why he didn’t just knock.

Baylor shakes his head. “Not unless you think Wells thinks your beauty is as delicate as these flowers and your temper should be too.” His nose scrunches in disgust, lifting the note that says my name in long, bold strokes.

“Is that really what it says?” I can’t help but ask.

He nods, still scrunching his nose. “Pretty much. Not signed by anyone.” He turns the card over in his hand, looking it over closely. “Yup, no name.”

Weird. I turn my eyes back to my assignment on the screen. “You can have them.”

“What am I going to do with your flowers?”

“Whatever you want.”

He scoffs. But doesn’t argue as he leaves, the door clicking shut behind him. I look up to find he did take the flowers with him. Guess even big, tough guys like Baylor like flowers.

I’ll have to remember that.



seven

BUSH: 2

Flowers?

And not just any flowers. The softest, most innocent looking flowers? An all white bouquet. Pft. I shake my head and scoff as I head out of the Wild West. Torryn is so not a flower girl, and if she was, *delicate* is the last way to go.

Whoever sent these is an idiot in more than one way. I grumble to myself as I head across the square and towards the hockey houses. My phone starts to vibrate in my pocket, but with the vase in my hand, I can't quite reach it. Whatever. Wells can wait.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Is how he greets me when I do make it back to the house.

"Relax, I'm not even late," I say, double checking the time to make sure I'm not. But nope. We run at 6:30 and it's still only 6:15.

"That's not what I meant," he huffs.

James walks into the kitchen as I set the ridiculous flowers on the counter. "Didn't take you for a flower guy, Levine."

"Fuck off," I curse half-heartedly. I should have known they were going to give me a hard time about the fucking flowers. Why didn't I just throw them out? It's not like I want the stupid flowers meant for Torryn either. "Someone sent them to Torryn."

"Dude," Wells says, exasperation making his voice rise. "You can't steal a girl's flowers just because you fucked her."

James turns back from the fridge, protein shake in hand. “You fucked Torryn again?”

Memories of the night before flash through my mind and my cock twitches in my pants as images of a disheveled Tor take over my train of thought. Yeah, I definitely fucked her.

Wells snorts. “That stupid ass grin says that’s exactly where he disappeared to last night.” He flicks a flower petal. “You still can’t steal her flowers.”

“I didn’t steal them,” I defend. “She didn’t want them. Whoever sent them doesn’t know her at all. I mean white?” I scoff and Wells pauses from taking a sip of his shake. “What?” I ask, grabbing my own shake.

He shakes his head, attempting to hide his smirk behind his cup. “I didn’t say anything.”

I take a couple sips, staring at the flowers with a disdain I don’t understand. They rub me the wrong way. “The note was weird,” I finally say, attempting to put my finger on what’s bothering me.

“Note?” James asks as Beau makes his appearance, ignoring us as he heads straight to the fridge.

“Yeah, the note with the flowers.”

Beau sleepily scoffs. “What? Clarissa heard you banned her from hockey houses and sent flowers as a way to get back in your pants?”

My mouth drops open in shock. “How the fuck did you land on that conclusion?” I sputter.

He shrugs, but Wells rolls his eyes. “Because stealing flowers from your fuck buddy is more reasonable?”

Beau blinks slowly. “What the fuck, Levine? You stole a girl’s flowers?”

“Oh my fuck,” I groan. “I didn’t steal her flowers. She thought Wells was sending them to Isla.”

“Isla prefers peonies,” Wells interrupts. “Colorful ones,” he adds unhelpfully.

“Good to know for when I send your girl flowers.” His eyes harden and his smile drops as he glares at me. Serves him right for not paying attention. “Anyways,” I drawl in annoyance. “They weren’t for Isla. They had Tor’s name on them with a note. Didn’t say from who and she told me to take them.”

“And the note was weird?” James asks, getting us back on topic.

“Yeah.” I toss my empty cup in the sink and run my fingers through my hair. “It basically said she was pretty but she needed to fix her personality.”

Silence weighs heavily in the room.

“No, it didn’t,” Beau deadpans.

“Yes, it fucking did,” I argue. “Just more poetically.” I reach into my pocket, pulling out the crumpled note and place it into Wells’ outstretched hand.

Torryn, these flowers are a reminder of what every good woman should be. Beautiful and delicate. Meant to be appreciated for their perfectly curated petals, free of the thorns that hinder their elegance. It is better to be loved for your softness than known for your temper. Lose your thorns, Torryn, before they become your undoing.

“Okay, yeah.” James shivers, his lip curling up in distaste. “That’s pretty creepy.”

“She doesn’t know who they’re from?” Beau asks just as the doorbell rings. Fuck, that must be the freshmen and I still need to change out of yesterday’s clothes.

“She didn’t seem to care,” I say, stopping only to nod to the guys walking in. “Give me a minute,” I call, turning to run

up the stairs. I shove the note in the drawer next to my bed. For some reason, I think it would be a mistake to throw it away. Torryn seemed unbothered, but then again, I didn't actually show her the note. Maybe I should text her. Who even sends anonymous flowers? Creeps and stalkers. That's who.

Rushing back downstairs, the guys are all still standing in our kitchen, talking about the flowers. I swear to god, I'm throwing those fuckers away as soon as we get back to the house.

"Don't even fucking say it," I warn, raising my hand as Zac opens his mouth when he spots me. He snickers, but follows James as he leads the group out of the house.

Beau, James, Wells, and I have been doing this morning run every weekday since we all moved in together as a way to keep each other accountable, even during the off season. It was only at the start of this semester that some of the freshmen that live down the street decided to start joining us. I can't prove it, but I'm almost positive Zac's older brother, Tate, was behind the suggestion. As our team captain, he saw the freshmen for exactly what they were. Rowdy and wild.

I wasn't overly fond of the idea at first. Our runs have always been a way for us to bond in a quieter, more low key way. Adding annoying, loud ass freshmen is neither quiet, nor calm. But it hasn't been all bad. It's helped our team unity on the ice, strengthened the bonds between the younger players and us. Especially with the likelihood of some of these guys moving up the lines sooner rather than later.

Wells nudges me as we settle into a steady pace, heading down the street, away from the square. "So this thing with Torryn?"

I roll my eyes, popping one headphone into my ear. "It's not a thing, Wells. Isla doesn't care, Tor doesn't care, I don't care. You're the only one who cares I fucked your girlfriend's roommate."

He huffs. "Fine, I'll drop it."

No he won't.

“No, you won’t,” James says. “Not until he stops fucking Torryn.”

Jayden, another freshman, moves up to my side. “You hooked up with Torryn? Torryn Gray?”

I shoot James and Wells a glare, but they’re already smirking. Fucking assholes. I grunt in answer, not willing to continue this conversation. Who I fuck is no one’s business. Especially not a smart ass defenseman with a big mouth.

One of Zac’s housemates laughs. “Nice, she’s hot. Heard she’s a bitch, but hot is hot.”

“Shut up, Wilder,” I warn.

Jayden shrugs, his breath catching as he forces himself to keep at my pace. “Heard she’s easy.”

Annoyance flickers into rage. My arm is moving before I even have a chance to think about it, snapping out to shove his shoulder. Hard. He trips over his feet and the force behind my move makes him topple over into a bush. I don’t even break stride as I call out, “Talk about a woman like that again and you won’t be able to skate for the rest of the season.”

Fucking jack ass. Was I really just thinking the freshmen weren’t so bad?

The remaining two, snicker as Jayden curses, fighting to get his ass out of the bush. That’ll teach him a lesson. He’s lucky the bush was there to break his fall cause he was going down either way. My anger still doesn’t abate in the slightest.

I pop my other headphone into my ear, turning the volume all the way up and drowning out the sounds of our pounding feet, the idle chatter, and everything else besides the rapid beat of my heart.

Easy?

Torryn is anything but fucking easy. She’s confident and fierce. Has no shame about her sexuality or owning who she is. She just knows what she wants and fucking takes it.

Pft. Easy.

As if she would ever look twice at a little fucker like Jayden. The thought itself is too absurd to even entertain. Torryn likes sex, but she likes good sex. Needs a man who won't just let her walk all over him. Someone who knows when to take charge and when to give up control. Someone who can give her multiple orgasms in a night.

What's easy about that?

Fucking nothing.

Though, it's not a hardship. Oh fuck. My dick makes itself known in my basketball shorts and I shake off the wayward thoughts and lock in on the run. On pushing my body. Feeling my feet hit the ground with each step, the way my lungs stretch and burn with every inhale and the relief with each exhale.

Gradually I pick up the pace until even the sweet memories of last night have no hold on my brain. I push myself until no thought has any chance of sticking as all my focus is needed on breathing, on staying on my feet, on going just a little faster as the square comes into view.

Sweat drips down my back and face, my breathing labored in a way I don't usually get to during our morning runs. The point isn't normally to push ourselves. It's the routine. The commitment. But I needed the burn today. The quiet that usually only comes when I'm on the ice.

It's only when I begin to slow down as I reach my street that I realize I'm alone. Oops. I guess no one wanted to keep up with the brutal pace I set after pushing Jayden into the bush. Or maybe it doesn't have anything to do with the bush and everything to do with the pace.

Either way, it means I don't have to fight with Wells on who gets the first shower in our bathroom. Maybe I should leave his ass in the dust more often.

Walking through the front door, my eyes are immediately drawn to those damn flowers. No. I can't do this. Can't have a reminder of this whole weird ass day be the first thing I see

when I walk into the house. It's bad juju. We do not do bad juju.

My phone rings as I pick up the vase to throw the whole damn thing in the trash can. Out of sight, out of mind.

"Hey, Mom," I answer. Dropping the fuckers into the bin and smiling at the sound of shattering glass. There's too much to do today to waste my time being haunted by the weird ass flowers.

I look up to see my mom giving me a concerned look through the phone. "What?"

She scrunches her nose. "Why are you throwing away those flowers? They look lovely." A wild look enters her gaze and her tone turns suspicious. "Why do you have flowers? Is there a girl? Baylor, did you buy flowers for a girl?" The questions are asked rapidly one after another and I groan when I hear another, but deeper voice.

"Baby Bay bought a girl flowers?" My older brother, Dylan, pokes his head around my mom's shoulder with an evil grin, his messy blonde hair falling to his shoulders in waves. My mom smacks his stomach lightly, pulling the phone away from him until he's out of view. Except, he only follows her.

"Tell me about her," my mom sighs, making me roll my eyes.

"There's no girl," I say instinctually before hesitating. That's a lie. "Not the way you're thinking."

Dylan snorts. "If you're buying her flowers, then it's not what you're thinking either," he quips.

I groan, heading up to my room. I didn't know it was possible to regret something so simple this much, but fuck do I wish I had just walked away and never picked up those damn flowers.

My mom chides him for his insinuations, but he's closer to the target. Not that I would ever admit it to her. "Mom," I cut off her tirade. "I'm not dating anyone. The flowers were sent to a friend, *by someone else*," I emphasize, "but she didn't want them. I simply took them to toss them for her."

Her eyes narrow in suspicion. “It’s quite early—”

“Stop.” I put my hand up and run it over my face before she can even ask the question I know is on the tip of her tongue. “Please don’t ask questions we both really don’t want you to know the answers to.”

Her cheeks turn rosy and her smile turns down as Dylan cackles behind her. “I can’t wait to tell Jackson about mom catching you coming home from a one night stand.”

My mom clears her throat and I groan, changing the topic. “Yes, Mom. Hockey is going really well. I just got back from my run with some of the guys and we are gearing up for the first preseason game. How are you?”

My brother laughs all the harder and I already know the group with all five of my older brothers is going to be blowing up as soon as I’m off the phone with our mom.

Amusement dances in my mom’s soft brown eyes and the slight wrinkles on her face deepen as she smiles. “We are doing well here. I was actually calling because we all want to come down for the first game coming up.”

Excitement is quickly replaced by waryness as her words sink in. “All of you?” I ask hesitantly.

Dylan beams, taking the phone from my mom. “All. Of. Us. It sounds like we have lots to talk about.”

Ah fuck. I’m never going to live down these fucking flowers.

ISLA

Found the missing hockey player

WELLS

He was seriously with Torryn all night after disappearing?

Just left

I'm calling that fucker. We were worried all night

I know, sorry. Tor never lets guys spend the night so I didn't think he'd be here

You're good babe. Don't apologize for that asshole

One sec, he just got here

heart

I think he's actually jealous over whoever sent Torryn those flowers

What flowers?

Wtf Wells? What flowers

Sorry babe! We were running

I think Baylor might like Torryn

He pushed one of the freshman into a bush for talking shit

Good. But back to the flowers. What flowers?



eight

CAN'T TAKE HER ANYWHERE

Sweet, sweet freedom.

Shutting my laptop and slipping it into my bag has never felt so damn good. Despite what I told Isla at the beginning of the week, I didn't get very much rest after all. My new athlete turned out to be one of Baylor's teammates and for only being a handful of weeks into the semester, he's already significantly behind. More than I thought possible.

Between making his study schedule and organizing resources for him, my schedule was already more jam packed than I thought it would. Not to mention one of my own professors veering off the syllabus and adding yet another unexpected student to my tutoring roster—not that he's bothered to show up yet. This week has dragged on and I'm already exhausted.

I hurry out of the class, pulling out my phone to check the time. Perfect. I should have enough time to add in a little power nap before I have to start getting ready to go to the game with Isla. After this hellish week, I have major regrets about even agreeing to go to the stupid thing. But Isla would have my head if she knew I had even contemplated ditching her.

My phone lights up with a familiar face and my exhaustion is forgotten as I answer the Facetime. "Hey, babes. How's my favorite baby sister?"

Rayne giggles. "I'm your only baby sister."

"Are you sure?" I tease. "I thought we had a middle sister too."

The groan I expected comes from somewhere off screen and I hear my grandma chuckle at my brother's annoyance. "Don't be a—" Kanyon cuts himself off, popping up behind Rayne and giving me a death stare through the screen before looking at her pointedly. "You know exactly what I was going to call you if we didn't have little ears listening."

My grandma smacks his shoulder, but there's no real heat behind it as she steers the conversation back to the phone call and distracts Rayne from her questions about what name Kanyon was going to use. We don't have much longer before her innocence is gone and she's just as wild as the rest of us. Lord help my grandma.

"How are you, sweetheart?" The warmth of her voice soothes even the most exhausted parts of my body.

"I'm good, Grandma. Busy now that the semester is really underway. Classes and tutoring are really picking up."

"Oh, that's wonderful, sweetie. I'm so proud of you. Are you making time to have some fun for yourself as well?"

Rayne perks up, giggling and bouncing in her seat. "Oo, oo. Tor! Do you have a boyfriend?"

Kanyon gags behind her and I can't help but laugh at the difference in their reactions. "No boyfriend," I answer honestly. "But I am going to the hockey game tonight with Isla to watch her boyfriend."

Rayne jumps in her seat. "Lala has a boyfriend?"

I nod at her excitement. I didn't think it was possible for Kanyon to look more disgusted than he did only a moment ago, but I was wrong. "She does. His name is Wells and he is very handsome and kind." I add the last bit for my grandma's benefit, though I know the first bit already intrigued her. She's always said kindness is the most important virtue to look for in a person after you make sure they're easy to look at.

My grandma beams as Rayne bursts into the kind of laughter that could only come from a little girl. "And he plays hockey," my grandma coos. "How splendid for her. Bet he's

strong.” Kanyon gags again behind her. “Lala deserves a good man.”

A wistful look crosses her face and I know she’s thinking of my grandpa. They were the happiest couple I have ever known. My heart pangs with loss and I miss him. The ache never really goes away, but in moments like these, it almost steals my breath away.

“You know, you should really try putting yourself out there more,” she scolds, focusing back on me.

It’s hard not to smirk at the familiar lecture. Putting myself out there isn’t the problem. It’s probably the opposite, I’m putting out a little too much. I wave her off before she has the chance to read my thoughts and take us down a path best left unexplored. “Maybe when I’m done with school,” I say instead. “My focus is on other things.”

She sighs, putting her head in her hands. “You work too much.” Guilt lines her face and I give her a soft smile.

“I love my life, Grandma. School is going well, work is great. I enjoy tutoring and love being a server. I have friends there and we have a good time. You don’t need to worry about me.”

I turn my attention to my little brother who shifts uncomfortably behind my grandma. “How’s football, Kanyon?” I ask before he has the chance to offer up himself to help with bills. I don’t want him to sacrifice anything to ease my burdens.

His whole face brightens as my grandma hands him the phone. “It’s really good! I moved up to varsity and I got to keep my starting position.” That’s impressive for his age and pride blooms in my chest and I’m even more convinced I’ve got everything under control. He’s got too much talent to walk away from it now.

We chat for a few more minutes as he updates me about all things school related before asking if I’ll be able to make it to his homecoming game. I haven’t been able to make it to the first few games yet.

“Of course, buddy. Text me the date and time and Isla and I will be there.”

I reach my car and lean against the side to talk to Rayne for a couple more minutes and listen to all her fifth grader woes. Who’s friends and who’s not anymore. Who has a crush on who. And all about the science fair she gets to participate in for the first time this year.

I promise to see them soon and remind Kanyon to text me the details about his game before saying goodbye. Throwing my phone in my bag, I unlock my car and pause as something on the windshield catches my eye.

A folded up white piece of paper is stuck under the windshield wiper. I grab it and throw it into my bag as my phone starts ringing again.

“Where are you?” Isla asks, a note of accusation in her tone as her eyes narrow on me through the screen.

I roll my eyes. “Just getting into my car now,” I answer.

“You’re late.”

I scoff. “We have hours before the game starts.”

Her grin turns lascivious. “We gotta get there early. Just trust me.”



“Shit.” I fan myself as Isla sits down next to me. “Why the fuck have we not come to the hockey games early before?”

The teams are already on the ice, stretching and warming up. There are no words for what is even happening on the ice right now. Isla giggles at my side, her eyes locked on one particular winger as he stretches out his muscles. “Groin injuries are really common in hockey,” she defends lightly. “It’s important for them to warm up properly.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “Told you to trust me.”

I hum in acknowledgement, but my eyes are drawn to number 89. Baylor is in a similar position to Wells, on his

knees. I lick my lips as I watch the way his hips move up and down in a gentle bouncing movement. I know exactly how it feels when he does that.

Isla slaps my arm, breaking my daze. “You look like a creep,” she scolds.

The corners of my lips twitch and I wink at her. “I feel like a creep.” Who knew hockey warm ups were better than porn?

I turn back to the ice, ignoring her eyes rolling and my own eyes widen as they catch on Tate in full gear doing his own stretches. My mouth parts open in shock as he drops into the splits. “Tate has never looked so hot in my life.”

Isla burst out laughing at my side. “Oh my god! I can’t take you anywhere!”

My brows waggle and I give her a flirtatious look. “Think I can take Tate home with me?”

She snorts, throwing a handful of popcorn at my face. “Tate doesn’t go home with anyone.”

That can’t possibly be true. The man is far too attractive and flexible to not make use of those magnificent thrusting skills. “What do you mean?”

She shrugs, popping some popcorn in her mouth. “He doesn’t hookup. Doesn’t take girls home. Doesn’t go home with girls. Don’t know how many other ways I can say it.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Maybe he’s just discreet.”

Isla pats my knee. “Then you wouldn’t be his first choice, hmm?” I flip her off but she just smiles. “Plus, I think you’ll be too busy to spare Tate much thought.”

It doesn’t take me long to figure out what she means when my gaze drifts back to Baylor. His helmet is off as he squirts water in his mouth, his eyes heated as they lock on me. Tingles rush down my spine, his gaze a hot caress over my skin. And when he winks? I think I might spontaneously combust.

Who said ice rinks were chilly?



nine

READY FOR IT

Energy thrums in my veins and adrenaline courses through my body.

It's just an exhibition game. Doesn't even count as the first game of the season. But it is the first time this team will be on the ice together.

New lines. New captain. New dynamics.

This is our first real test to see how we play together. How we hold up under pressure. A real chance to scope out our weaknesses and fortify our strengths. This game may not count, but it definitely matters. It sets the tone for the rest of the season and I'm determined we start it on a high.

It's the only remedy for the brutal loss we took last season and we are hungry for the W.

I pour water into my mouth and feel the weight of an intense gaze on my face. Turning to the crowd, I spot Torryn almost instantly. She looks good in orange and gray. I wink at her, making a cocky smile spread across her face. She gives me a little finger wave. A new type of determination floods through me at her acting unaffected by my attention. We both know that isn't true.

I've never lost my focus in a game, well, that's not a hundred percent true. I shake the thought off. I've only ever lost focus once and it cost us dearly. I won't let it happen again, but I also know Torryn won't be able to tear her eyes off me while I play. I'll make sure of it.

Coach's whistle draws my attention back to the ice and away from the stands. The team exits the ice and heads back into the locker room. Tate skates just behind me, always making sure he's the last one off the ice. I stop just before stepping off and reach back to bump my fist with his. He smirks as our knuckles touch and I hop off the ice and follow the rest of the team to the locker room.

Coach intercepts Tate and walks with him. The fifteen minutes between on-ice warm ups and pre-game introductions are integral for getting my head in the right space. We're a superstitious bunch, and any variation from our routines is likely to throw us off. My desire for consistency tends to follow me outside of hockey as well. But game days are where it's not just a want, it's a need. A need that seems more intense than ever before after the failure of last season.

Slipping my headphones into my ears, I turn up the volume on my game day playlist, drowning out the chatter of my teammates. Coach has already gone over the goals of this game, the strategies he wants to implement, and the plays he wants us to practice. Five minutes before game time, I'll lock back into my surroundings, not a second before.

Music blasts in my ears as I concentrate on my breathing, slow and deep breaths, while I check and fix the tape around my stick. My head bobs to the beat of the song as I re-lace my skates, first the left and then the right, tightening them even further. Rolling my ankles, I check to see how they feel, only stopping once I'm assured they feel secure.

These ten minutes are the only time I prefer the silence, the isolation. Normally, I find my peace in the middle of a crowd, being with friends, having conversations and laughing. It's how I recharge, where I feel just about my best, the most at home. Being alone, stuck in my head, is boring. A mindfuck waiting to happen. A recipe for disaster in most cases. Wells always likes to joke he can't leave me alone for too long or I'll get myself into trouble. It's not really a joke.

But for these ten minutes, being alone is exactly what I need. It gets my head in the game, keeps my focus centered. Pumps me up. I lean my head back against my locker and

close my eyes. Visualizing the opposing team, their strengths from last season, running through the roster of who's no longer on the team. I can feel my time running out and know Coach is about to call our attention for one last speech before we head back out on the ice.

I pull out my phone, scrolling through my playlist and find the song I'm looking for. The corners of my lips twitch as I see the familiar song title. My teammates can make fun of me as much as they like for my choice in music or that it has to be the same song I listen to right before we go back out there. Nothing pumps me up quite like ...Ready For It? by Taylor Swift. Superstitions or not, what works works. And my girl, Taylor, always has my back.

The familiar thumping bass line reverberates through my body, making adrenaline rise as my heartbeat races. This is where I am the very best version of myself. On the ice, in the game, no doubts, no fears, just victories. Music keeps me centered, keeps my mind from wandering, helps my body prepare for the brutality and speed I need out there on the ice.

The song comes to an end as a hand falls on my shoulder. I don't have to look up to know it's Wells. As the final note sounds, I pull my headphones out and toss them and my phone into my locker. My eyes flash to Coach where he stands by the doors, one hand in the air. The boisterous locker room simmers down faster than should be possible for twenty-something college men. All eyes lock on Coach Wilson.

He nods his approval, dropping his hand to his side. "Alright, boys. You know what you're supposed to do out there. Every game, every play, every possession. They matter. Each one counts, whether it's an exhibition game or the championship game. We leave it all out there on the ice. Show me your best." He claps his hands together, making a booming sound that echoes through the locker room. "Bring it in."

As soon as the pregame intros are done Tate takes the goal and James leads us all past him, knocking helmets for luck before taking our places. James in the center, I take his right side while Wells takes his left. Beau closes out the line, knocking his helmet with Tate's before hugging him and

taking up his position on the blueline. Our entire team is in position before the other team's skates have even hit the ice. They don't want this the way we do. Aren't in the game the way we are. They're writing this off as a practice.

They'll regret that.

I tap my stick against the ice, anxious for the game to get started so I can have somewhere to pour all this built up tension into. Like a too tightly wound coil, I'm ready to spring. To feel my skates glide across the ice, the bite of chill against my cheeks, the burn in my lungs as I push myself faster to reach the puck first.

James turns to look at me, I can just barely make out his manic grin around his mouth guard. He gives me a slight nod before turning to Wells who shrugs back. By the time the exchange has finished the other team is finally in their positions. It's almost disappointing how out of shape they appear.

The referee blows his whistle and the puck drops. Fully trusting James to earn the possession, I don't wait around to watch it happen, taking off across the ice to open our space and field of opportunity.

James cuts across the opposing player, opening up room for him to take the puck down the center. One of the defenseman rushes him, but he's quick to pass the puck to Wells on his other side. I keep skating, dodging around their players, waiting for the pass I know is coming. Wells gets it off just as he's slammed against the boards.

I shoot forward, grabbing the puck with my stick before the other defenseman has a chance to box me out. As soon as I have full control, I launch a shot at their goal and hold my breath.

Damn.

The puck finds his glove and the possession is turned over to the Bulldogs. Theo and Beau rush to the defense and I catch Coach hitting the boards from where he stands. Shifting my direction, I hop off the ice and Zac rushes past me, taking

position. Wells and James are just moments behind me as the rest of the third line takes over.

Everything about this is unusual and feels weird. To be pulled so quickly, and replaced by the third line, but it's all for a purpose. Get the younger players more minutes in the game, give them the chance to show us what they're made of. A team is only as strong as our weakest link and there's no better practice than playing.

I fall on the bench, Wells on one side and James on the other. I pour Gatorade into my mouth and let my eyes flick over the ice, following the moves and plays. It isn't long before Beau and Theo are also pulled to be replaced. Even our third line is outmaneuvering their defense. They move up on the goal and the right winger snaps a pass to Zac at center forward, but he's already ahead of where he sends the puck.

The second line goes out and replaces them and I focus on how they play together, the way our offense reads each other and passes the puck between them. They're good, in sync for the most part, but something is off. It isn't coming to them naturally. Having to work on holding back or pushing harder to keep up. It's not enough to disrupt the plays and they still take control of the game for the majority of their time on the ice until Coach calls for another line change. I hop up, patting the second line on their helmets as we pass each other.

Wells gets the puck almost instantly when he hits the ice, moving it up to create space and give James and I the time to get where we need to be. The plays between the three of us come with an ease that feels second nature. With a single look we can tell what the others are thinking, what they're expecting, and what move they are about to make.

A familiar and addictive hum charges through my body as the first play of the game almost repeats itself. The game slows in my mind as Wells' stick lifts off the ice as a Bulldog faces off with him. The puck flies in my direction as Wells is once again slammed against the boards. The moment I take control of the puck, I know this play will be different. Know the goalie won't be able to match our speed. He's expecting me to take the open shot, to once again be able to slap it away

from his net. The rest of the Bulldogs may still be on summer vacation, but their goalie showed up to fucking play. He's been a force in the net.

Not this time.



ten

MAJOR DECISIONS

I hold my breath, Isla still wincing at my side after the hit Wells just took. The whole board surrounding the rink shook with the force of the hit.

Baylor carries the puck with ease, faster than I can really process as my mind is still latched onto Wells' hit and Isla at my side. The arena swells with expectation, a growing bubble of anticipation as the puck travels faster than my eyes can track towards the opposing net. The goalie drops, bending his knees in so the large pads on his legs cover the bottom of the net, his entire focus on Baylor. The small black puck is hard to see as fast as Baylor moves with it, lifting his stick back, my teeth sink into my lower lip as I wait for him to take the shot. The other goalie tenses.

I should really learn the other team's name.

Isla grips my hand tighter as Baylor lines up his shot and his stick slaps against the puck. I lose sight of it, the goalie tenses but doesn't react.

I exhale, confused at the lack of a buzzer, the players still moving with frightening speed. Where did the puck go?

Number sixteen, should probably learn his name too, lifts his stick and I realize Baylor didn't take a shot at all. He passed, distracted the goalie just enough for sixteen to have the perfect shot at the high left corner of the net. He takes the shot and the puck hits the back of the net with force. The horn I expected to hear moments before finally sounds and the crowd collectively relaxes, before jumping to their feet and cheering for the Wolves.

“Was not expecting the game to be so fast paced,” I admit, still feeling breathless from the intensity of the play. My eyes still can barely track the players as they fly across the ice, ramming into each other, and chasing the smallest target. I have a newfound respect for the game.

“It’s not your first hockey game,” Isla says.

Shrugging, I take another sip of my drink. “Guess I never really paid attention before.”

Sixteen, Wells, and Baylor come off the ice as three others take their places. I cock my head as the game continues without hesitation. “Why are they already switching? Didn’t they just come on?” I have only a vague idea of how hockey lines and substitutions work, but this seems awfully quick to be changing them.

Isla nods. She’s not much more of a hockey expert than I am, but at least she has Wells to fill her in. “Wells said he wouldn’t play as much tonight because it’s a chance for the younger players to get good ice time. Test their mettle and all that.” She waves her hand dismissively and we continue to watch the game. It moves fast, the three periods disappearing a lot faster than the time on my phone says. I can’t believe it’s been almost three hours.

The consistent changing of players, the fast plays, and near constant back and forth of the puck in the rink really made the time fly. Made it next to impossible to tear my eyes away from the game. The few games I’ve been to before have never been like this and this wasn’t even one that really counted. I wonder what the energy is like in here during the playoffs. Or a championship. I bet it’s insanity.

“You must be a proud girlfriend after that win,” I tease Isla as we grab our stuff and head up the stairs to the exit.

She blushes, her cute side coming out. It happens a lot with Wells but had been ages since I’d seen it before he was in the picture. “I’m always a proud girlfriend,” she stammers, making my grin grow wider.

“He scored two of the four points for the Wolves.”

Her head bobs, but she can't hide her grin from me. "He was pretty amazing out there, wasn't he?"

"Very cool," I tease.

She smacks me. "Are you coming with me to meet them by the lockers?"

I hesitate, not liking the idea of her waiting for Wells alone, but also knowing I need to get a move on it if I'm going to make it to work on time. I check the time again and bite my lip. "Where are you meeting him?"

She checks the time and frowns. "Tor, you have to go."

The downfalls of having a best friend who actually keeps up with your schedule. "Where are you meeting him?" I repeat.

She sighs. "I'll be fine. Some of the other guys' girlfriends will be waiting for them too. I won't be alone."

We stop near the exit and I rock on my feet. "I don't like it. I'll walk you there and make sure you aren't alone."

She stomps her foot. "I'm not a child."

I arch a brow. Her little display says otherwise. I hook my arm around hers and start dragging. "I've made up my mind. Better tell me where to head or I'll drag you around in circles."

Isla caves, knowing it's the only thing that'll get me out of here faster. I won't wait for Wells, just make sure she's in good hands before I take off. "The locker room is this way." Following her lead, we head around a bend and down some stairs. It doesn't take long to see a small crowd of people waiting by doors that must lead to the locker room. There are students, but also adults that must be family members. My eyes run over the group. Isla will be safe here. At least I'm not ditching her in the dark corner of a parking lot or something.

"Wells said he'd take me home. He parks in the back lot," she explains, easing my worries when she points to another set of doors that must lead outside. Convenient.

I kiss the top of her head to tease her and she rolls her eyes. "Be safe at work. Text me if you want to meet up

afterwards.”

I laugh, pulling away from her. “I’ll be dead on my feet. See you tomorrow.” I wink before heading back in the direction we came from. An extra rush in each step. I may be able to get to work on time if I hurry.



My body aches as I roll over to shut my alarm off.

Not today.

There’s plenty I should be forcing myself awake to get started on, but I also know how to listen to my body. If I keep pushing this hard on so little sleep, I’ll be getting sick before I know it. My entire being is screaming for rest, and dammit, I’m caving to the sweet allure of sleep.

It’s hours later when I finally climb from bed, stretching my arms above my head. I still have time to shower and dress before my scheduled meeting with the academic advisor. A meeting I’ve been putting off and dreading, but at least I feel a bit more sure in my path forward now.

I talk myself through all the mantras I’ve repeated a million times now while trying to make this decision. It’s not the end of the line, just the beginning of a new path. I can always change paths if it ends up not working. But when I’m alone and being totally honest with myself, a spark of excitement and thrill enters my veins at the prospect of studying what I really want to learn about. Of moving away from general ed and taking more specific courses for a degree I want to actually use.

The prospect of getting it wrong? Of changing my mind? Terrifying. Not that I will ever admit to anyone outside my own head.

By the time the leather toe of my combat boot pushes open the door to the administration building, my mind is settled, my expression is flat, and there’s no trace of any anxiety left. I walk down the hallway to where the advisor offices are located, the rubber soles of my boots silent against the

linoleum floors. Stopping outside the door that reads Dr. Paler, I knock softly and wait for a deep masculine voice to call out for me to come in.

An older man sits behind a large dark wooden desk. “Ms. Gray, have a seat.” He points to the seat across from him and my eyes narrow as I observe him. Wrinkles line his face in deep grooves as he frowns, removing his glasses and placing them on top of an open folder on his desk. Familiarity tugs at me as his cold blue eyes look me up and down, lingering on my chest in my tight tank top for longer than comfortable, let alone appropriate.

Clearing my throat, I raise a brow. Unamused by the meeting that hasn’t even started. “You may call me Torryn.”

“Ms. Gray,” he repeats, the disapproval heavy in his tone, his eyes flicking back to my cleavage, making my ire rise. “You’re here to declare your major. Are you prepared for that and what that choice means?” Before I have time to respond his gaze hardens. “Or are you too busy with your frivolous and unbecoming hobbies?”

Confusion over his words is the only reason I don’t immediately rise to my feet and leave the office at his words. Thirty seconds in and not only has he been blatantly checking out my tits, he’s also dismissive of everything but them.

“No answer?” He cocks his head to the side, disgust and disapproval warring with desire in his gaze. He begins flipping through the pages of the file in front of him, but it’s obvious he isn’t reading anything on them. He’s decided to hate me from the moment his lecherous eyes landed on me. It clicks. As he drones on about the integrity of the school and the importance of dignity when representing ourselves, it clicks.

A slow grin spreads across my face. Now I know why he has that look in his eyes.

He’s the man from the bar not too long ago. The old fashioned who didn’t like my use of Betty. How interesting for him to lecture me about frivolous hobbies. Tease is my job, it was just a Sunday night for him.

I lean forward, tapping the folder on his desk, clearly seeing the label with my name. “You must not have read this.”

He stops mid sentence to glare at me. “You see, Dr. Paler. I don’t have much time for these frivolities you seem to know so much about. But I also don’t see the need to defend myself to a man who spent a recent Sunday night staring at my tits almost as much as he has been in this office. My GPA and tutor success rate says enough, don’t you think?”

His face pales at the acknowledgement that I know exactly who he is and how he likes to spend his free time. Shouldn’t throw stones in a glass house and all.

“Update my major to Economics, no counseling needed.” With that, I rise from my seat before he has a chance to string together a coherent sentence and leave the office.

Pulling out my phone I send a text to Isla to tell her about the abhorrent man who is my advisor and pray she doesn’t have the same one. I stop at the administrative office and see what I can do about applying for a new one. I wasn’t going to sit in that office for a moment longer, but I did actually want someone to walk me through the career options and what courses would be the most beneficial to pursue.

Fucking Dr. Dickhead.



Sweat drips from my eyebrow and burns my eyes as I skate up next to Tate still standing by the net. Everyone else slips off the ice, heading to the showers. Tate is always the last off the ice. Every practice, warm-up, game, every single time. If he's on the ice, he's the last one off. It's one of his weird quirks that makes him such a good goalie and an even better captain.

His head cocks to the side as he studies me. A heavy perusal that makes me shift uncomfortably, causing me to blurt out my thoughts in a way I hadn't intended. "The lines are wrong."

Slick, Levine. Real subtle.

Tate arches a brow, unfazed as he polishes a puck with his practice jersey. Why is he polishing— no, not the point right now. "Not what I thought was going to have you rattled today."

"In the game, Zac—" I cut off, his words sinking in. "Rattled? You expected me to be rattled today?"

My day flashes in my mind as Tate studies me again, dropping the puck into the bucket. The day has been odd now that I look back on it. The locker room more subdued before our practice, more eyes on me than usual, less banter being thrown between the guys. None of it registered as I ran through the game over and over again, working out what cogs in the machine weren't working to the best of their ability. Then, how I wanted to bring it up. Tate's a fair captain. He hears others opinions, but mine not only had to do with the

team, but his little brother. I wanted it to come out right, not step on any toes. That was blown to hell the second I opened my mouth.

“What about Zac?” He attempts to steer me back to the conversation I started, but I can’t stop thinking about the one he inadvertently did.

“He’s too fast,” I mumble, trying to decide which topic to focus on first. “He outskates the rest of the third line. It’s not balanced,” I explain. One conversation at a time. The lines and then everyone’s weird moods and what it has to do with me.

“Zac has a lot of potential,” Tate agrees. “But he’s young, wild, can be a showboat.” It should sound like an argument, but for some reason it feels like a test.

“So is Wilder,” I say, deciding to go for it. “He controlled the second line, not Ezra.” I put my hands up before he can open his mouth. “I know, I know. It’s not a hard and fast rule that the center has to be the one to control the line. James, Wells, and I pass off the role with ease. Sometimes taking the back seat when one of the others steps up. It’s something we’ve worked out over the last couple seasons here and is rooted in our ability to read each other. That isn’t what’s happening in the second line. Wilder is taking charge, whether Ezra has stepped down or not. He’s a showboat too. Young and wild like you said. Ezra is floundering, even though he’s a great player. He doesn’t mesh with Wilder. Zac has been killing it in practice.” An appreciative light enters Tate’s eyes, but I’m on a roll now. “He showed up this season, ready to play. He’s even better than he was his last season in high school. You know how rare that is.”

Tate nods. “He worked hard all summer. Took only rest days when his body demanded it. You’re right, he’s worked incredibly hard.”

I wait with bated breath, but he says no more. “So?” I finally ask.

He shrugs. “It’s up to Coach. It was one of the goals of the exhibition game to see how the lines were meshing. I’ll pass along your thoughts to him.”

I breathe a sigh of relief at being listened to. For having my opinion heard.

Tate hands his practice jersey and the bucket of pucks to one of the guys that works in the locker room. “Thanks, Bill,” he says with a nod of appreciation. It’s another thing I really respect Tate for. He always knows every person that helps on the ice and in the locker room, no matter the role. He greets them by name, and constantly gives his gratitude. I repeat the sentiment as we leave the ice and Tate gives me an appraising look full of approval. My chest puffs up with pride to be looked at that way from a captain I have so much respect for. But the feeling doesn’t last long as I remember the concern in them only minutes ago.

“Why did you think I would be rattled today?”

Silence hangs between us and odd moments suddenly start to paint a picture. Everything clicks, my face drops, a riotous feeling stirring somewhere deep inside me.

“Beau said he warned you.” Tate’s hand falls on my shoulder.

I nod without a thought. “He did.” I just pushed it out because I didn’t want to think about it. It was days ago, but this was the first time we were all together as a team since. “Thanks, Tate,” I say absently, heading to the locker room with my head down and already ripping off my pads.

I undress quicker than I ever have, skipping the shower altogether.

Discontent and shame roils in my gut as I flee the locker room. Something that has never happened before.

The new experience is both jarring and alarming. Not to mention, sending my good mood straight to hell. Eyes weigh on me as I tuck tail and run. I feel their presence all the way until the door slams shut behind me, but the feeling they left lingers as I curse to myself.

James and Beau followed through. They had the talk with the whole team. Warning them about what Clarissa is actually

capable of. Those who already had pieces were easily able to string them together and turn their gazes towards me.

No judgment or condemnation. But the pity and confusion was almost worse.

Wells calls my name behind me, but even my best friend isn't going to help this god awful mood.

I turn away from the parking lot and head to the trail. Even after the practice we just endured, my body craves a workout to drown out the thoughts turning into demons haunting me.

My mind buzzes all the way through my run. I push my body in ways I know I'm going to regret tomorrow. It takes the edge off the worst of my mood, but doesn't uproot the problem. Resting my hands on my knees, I force myself to take deep breaths. Fuck. I can't go back to the house like this. James and Wells are going to want to talk out why I reacted the way I did. The only thing is I have no idea why or even what I'm feeling. The whole thing with Clarissa has just always twisted me up inside in ways I don't understand. It's something I should have been able to shake off by now, something that never should have impacted me in the first place.

A girl did something a bit creepy and I was a little too drunk to fully understand what was happening. So what? It happens. We move on. We don't lose games over shit like that and we sure as hell shouldn't be running out of locker rooms just because more people know about it.

I hesitate, not knowing what to do. My lungs burn and my legs feel wobbly after all the exertion of the day. Nothing sounds quite as good as crawling into bed, but I'm still not ready to go home, but there's no way I can go anywhere else unless I wash the sweat and grime off me.

Sneaking back into the locker room, I use the showers in there and change into some of the clothes I always keep in my locker. Thank fuck for small favors. But now what?

As if on cue, my phone chimes with a reminder of a paper due soon. A perfect way to avoid the guys for the rest of the

day. By tomorrow, they'll have taken a hint that I don't want to talk about it and I won't still be feeling this way. It'll be easy to blow them off if they do bring it up. End of story. No more worries.

I head in the opposite direction of the house to the library. If I'm avoiding everyone, might as well get some homework done. I walk slowly until I reach the imposing glass dome at the center of the campus. Walking in through the doors, I veer to the right where the study rooms are. I don't have my laptop, but I at least had my backpack in my locker. I can probably find resources and take notes for the research paper I have to do while I'm here. Not the most productive study session, but beats any other options I have.

I don't see the person exiting one of the private study rooms until it's too late and I crash into him. Jerking back, the apology dies on my lips as I meet surprised but familiar blue eyes. A rock drops in my stomach, twisting up my insides as Wilder's gaze melts from puzzled to pitying. A harsh retort almost escapes but I'm quickly distracted by the person following Wilder out of the study room.

"Tor- you, Wild," I trip over my words, sputtering in an effort to make them make sense.

She arches one dark brow at me, the corners of her lips twitching. Even Wilder's expression has morphed into bemusement.

I shake my head, starting over. "How do you two even know each other?" There. A perfectly normal and coherent question. Perfect.

Wilder cocks his head, a smirk spreading across the cocky bastard's face. I don't know what there is to smirk about, but the harsh words I swallowed only moments ago rise to my lips again as I remember how he thought she was hot.

"Torryn is my tutor," he explains with a shrug. I flinch, not because of his answer, but because of the sudden shift in his attitude. We've raced through surprise, pity, amusement, arrogance, and now bashful? Wtf is wrong with the freshman?

He shrugs, tipping his chin down. “Gotta keep my grades up if I’m going to stay on second line,” he explains.

I nod in understanding. “Coach doesn’t fuck around with grades.”

His gaze flickers back and forth between Tor and I, his lips tilting in a smile he’s trying to hide. “I thought you said you didn’t work with any other hockey guys?”

Torryn leans against the door. “I don’t.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but a wide smile like I’ve never seen from the guy stretches across his face instead. What an erratic kid. I follow his gaze to find a petite girl with reddish hair clutching her books to her chest as she approaches us. Her cheeks flame red at my perusal and Wilder is quick to smack my shoulder.

“Colby, you’re here.” His entire face lights up at the small smile she gives him.

“You said you’d be done at three.” One shoulder just barely lifts but her sweater slips off with the motion as she chuckles awkwardly. “It’s three.” She doesn’t move to fix it.

I flick Wilder’s ear. “Come on, Valentine. With a last name like that, you’d think you’d know better than to make a lady wait.” Her wide hazel eyes grow even wider.

“Oh no,” she stammers. “It’s not like that,” she rushes to explain. I like her. She’s like a little pixie in sparkly cowboy boots.

Wilder laughs as he throws an arm over her shoulders. “You wound me, North. Like dating me would be such a bad thing.” If she had her hair in pigtails he would pull one, but his teasing tone works on her. Immediately, her posture relaxes as she shakes her head at him. He continues to tease her as he steers her away from us. My eyes trail after them and the comfortable ease only born from the years of friendship he’s teasing her over.

The distraction gone, my somber mood creeps back up on me like a dark fog, clouding my expression and mind. Fuck. All that running for nothing. A sharp stab to my back makes

me jump and it's quite possible a small sound escapes in my panic. A very small one.

Torryn's expression says it all. Smug little brat. My eyes rove over her athletic figure on display today in biker shorts and a sports bra with only a zip up hoodie covering her. I wet my lips with my tongue as I catch the flare of heat in her eyes.

“Are you crashing my tutoring sessions now, Levine?”

Running didn't work, but who's to say a different type of exercise wouldn't help?

A rumble in my chest builds as I stalk into the study room, she steps back, but not in fear. Oh no, never in fear. Not even in defense. She might not be making the first move, but every step she retreats is just an invitation for me to.

“Crashing into you sounds quite fun.” I swing the door shut behind me, giving us some semblance of privacy. There are still windows looking into the library, but we're tucked away in the corner. They're small windows. It'll be fine.

She smirks as her ass hits the table. “What if I have another student coming in?”

“At least they'll have something interesting to watch while they wait for you.”

The way she hums makes it sound like she more than likes that idea. My hands fall to her hips and squeeze before rounding to cup her ass and pull her against my rapidly hardening length. “How serendipitous that they already canceled on me.” There's a husk in her voice that makes me desperate for the distraction she can provide. Better than any other thought that's crashed through my brain since my conversation with Tate.

Using my grip on her ass, I lift her and turn us both around until her back is against the wall. Torryn tilts her head back as I use my tongue and teeth to explore her neck, stopping to bite her ear and hear that delicious exhale of breath she always releases when I do it. I hum in appreciation, dropping her to yank her shorts down. It's too bad she wasn't wearing a dress.

She doesn't stop me, seemingly unconcerned about her partially nude state in an academic building. I knew this girl was just about perfect. She moans as I push her panties out of my way and run my fingers through her slit.

"Fuck, Tor," I groan, finding her clit and massaging it. "Were you getting wet for Wilder? Is that why you're practically dripping?" There's an unfamiliar growl in my tone and an edge to my feelings I can't place or understand. I want to be the reason she drips down her thighs, the guy behind her dirty thoughts. My fingers slide down to her entrance and thrust in, making her cry out as she shakes her head.

"No?" I ask. "You're not getting turned on while you tutor him?" With each sentence, I push into her a little faster, a little rougher. "Leaning in closer until your bodies touch as you walk him through his studies." Torryn pants and continues to shake her head, her hands squeezing my shoulders as her teeth sink into that full lower lip of hers that drives me mad. "Imagining how it would feel to climb into his lap and sink down on his cock. Risking anyone walking by and seeing what a slut you are as you ride him." Her pussy clenches around my fingers at the last thought and I almost stop before realization hits. A wide smirk plays across my face and I use my thumb to press her sensitive clit.

A low moan escapes her and I tsk. "Shh now, wouldn't want anyone to come and investigate what we're doing in here. I didn't lock the door." Another pulse in her cunt. "Or is that why you're so wet? The thought of someone watching me fuck you into the wall?"

"Oh, fuck off. Don't slow down now," she complains, gripping my shoulders tighter.

I slow my pace even more. "Then tell me. What made you so wet? Wilder?"

She slams a hand down on my shoulder, cutting me off. "You and your stupid words," she growls.

I beam, picking up the pace of my fingers again. Scissoring them the way I know always gets her going. "Kinky little thing aren't you? Wanting someone to see how well you

take me. How perfect your wet pussy slides down my cock. Hear your breathless moans as I drive into you.” Her cunt tightens around me until her teeth are sinking into my shoulder a rush of warmth spills down my fingers as her orgasm races through her.

I give her a moment to ride her release before pulling out of her and yanking down my own shorts, freeing my erection. I barely have the sense to slip a condom down my length with my desperate need to feel her wrapped around me.

“You are such an asshole,” she pants.

I arch a brow, cupping her ass in my hands. “How was I supposed to know exhibitionism did it for you?” I ask innocently, using my grip to lift her and press her against the wall.

“News to me too,” she admits, placing her hands back on my shoulders to balance herself. I move my hands to grip her thighs, spreading them open so I can drive my hard cock up and feel the perfection of sliding through her cunt. Torryn gasps and arches her back as I bottom out in her.

Every thought is driven from my mind as her pussy spasms and clenches around me while she tries to adjust to my length. I can’t wait for her to catch up and take her small moans as permission to lift her higher and slam her back down.

Over and over and over again.

Each thrust makes my mind clear more until she is all I can see, taste, hear, and think about. It’s me and her and the way her cunt feels sliding against me. The way I control each and every sensation she feels, the pleasure it brings her. The way my cock drives into her and takes her to new and higher heights until her teeth are sinking into my shoulder again to suppress her scream and her cunt is tightening around me so much I can’t help but follow her over the edge.

Sweat beads across my temples as I pull out of her and gently set her back on her feet. Torryn doesn’t let go of her hold on me, her eyes closed as she attempts to get her breathing back to normal. The moment freezes as I watch her,

her blue eyes slowly becoming visible as she opens them and blinks up at me. Nothing matters but the satisfaction I put in her gaze.

“Aroused and freshly fucked really is your best look,” I tease, pulling the condom off and knotting it before tossing it in the wastebasket under the desk.

She watches me with a raised brow but doesn't comment. “Caveman is really your best fuck,” she bites back. Her chest still slightly heaves, her cleavage with a new shine under that zip-up. I ran my thumbs over the swell of her breast.

“It's really a crime I didn't pay more attention to these,” I say, sliding my fingers under her sports bra to find her beaded nipples. I roll one between my fingers, pulling her sports bra away from where it's suffocating her perfect tits. “This thing barely even contains them.”

“I thought you were here to study.” She points out but doesn't pull away from my ministrations or make any move to discourage me. Every other plan for the rest of my day went out the window as soon as I found her here.

I hum in response, barely even acknowledging her words, too entranced by the idea of fucking her tits in this bra. My cock twitches at the idea, but it's still a little too soon to start getting hard again. Instead, I yank her sports bra up, letting her heavy tits fall free.

“Baylor.” The sound of my name is both a sigh of pleasure and exasperation.

I cup her breasts and bend forward to lave one side with my tongue. “I came to distract myself,” I admit as I move to the other breast and suck her rosy little bud into my mouth. I wonder if I could make her come just from playing with her tits. Wouldn't that be a hell of an accomplishment?

“I found a much better distraction,” I continue, using both hands to cup her tits and kiss the swells it creates.

She huffs but still doesn't push me away. Her fingers thread through my hair, gently tugging on it. Ripples of pleasure wrack through her body when I hit her nipples just

right and I work to memorize every single reaction and just what causes it. She stays quiet for only a few moments. "I'm not even going to ask," she starts.

"Good," I interrupt her. "That wouldn't be very good distraction of you." I circle her tight nipple with my tongue and a small moan slips free from her lips as she scrunches her face. Suddenly her grip in my hair tightens and she pulls me. My scalp screams until I rise and give her a dirty look. Pinching the sensitive buds makes a haze enter her eyes and I just know her pussy is crying for a round two.

"As fun as having my tits out for any passersby to see, we've pushed our luck enough." She pushes me away and pulls her sports bra back down to cover her tits. I can't help the pout she then rolls her eyes at. "Find a different distraction."

She steps away to find her discarded shorts and I get a view of the wet patch on her panties. Immense satisfaction fills me and my dick reminds me of its presence as it stirs again. "Like this?" I ask, running my fingers over the fabric as she bends down to pick her shorts up.

"Fuck," she curses. "You're going to be the death of me."

I grin, pushing my fingers in again. "You want me again."

She flips me off, pulling her shorts up her legs. "Of course I do. You've been winding me all the way back up by sucking on my tits like you're desperate for them."

"I am," I tease.

She wags a finger at me. "Maybe when your dick is actually hard again."

I give her a look that tells her to just wait and she rolls her eyes again. Give me just a few more minutes and I should be able to fuck her the way she likes.

"Want to sit in my lap this time? Ride my dick right in view of those little windows?"

Torryn shoves me, but her lips curve up just enough. "You can't hide your intrigue," I sing, pulling her into my chest and

sliding my fingers into her hair to lift her face to mine. I capture her lips for a searing kiss.

Fuck.

I forgot how good she tastes. How good her tongue feels wrapped around mine. So sweet, so sensual. And definitely stirring my dick back up again. Even kissing her is enough to deter my thoughts from going down any unwanted paths of my past. She allows me to lead, not taking control and not kissing me with a crazed lust like the kisses we've shared before. She kisses me like she knows I need it and is letting me take it. The thought twists something in my insides and I release her.

Torryn peruses my face with an analytical gleam in her eye.

"You said you wouldn't ask," I accuse.

Her lips twitch, but her gaze doesn't falter. "Didn't ask."

"You want to though."

She shrugs. "You're just acting more needy than usual is all."

Doubt starts to creep in. Did I overstep with her? Take advantage in my desperation to not think about my team and their reactions? My own failures? Did I make her feel uncomfortable? We aren't even really friends. Just people who have hooked up a couple of times but I stormed in here to get lost in her body without a thought to how she would feel about it. Just assuming orgasms would be all she wanted anyways.

"It's kinda fun," she continues, and relief washes through me. "But we are going to get caught if we continue." Disappointment is quick to rush in alongside it. Being inside her has been the closest thing I've had to peace since Tate gave me that damned look of sympathy.

I use my phone to check the time and ignore the twenty unread text messages before slipping it back in my pocket. "I need to kill a few more hours and I don't have my laptop." It comes out as more of a whine than I intended, but now that she's here with me, I really don't want to be alone with my

thoughts again. It's not like there's anyone else I can call when it's all my friends I'm avoiding.

She gives me a skeptical look. "You came to the library without your laptop?" I open my mouth to respond but she's already raising her hands to shake me off. "Nope, not asking," she says instead. My chest tightens at the thought of her leaving.

"Your place is private," I point out. "Can't get in trouble for riding my dick there."

Torryn snorts and shakes her head, but there's something in her expression that makes me uneasy. Like all at once she's seeing too much of me. "Still not asking," she starts warily. "But Wells is at my place with Isla and I'm getting the feeling you don't want to see him."

"How—" I start to ask, but cut myself off. Nope. Maybe it's better if I don't know how she deduced that. "Well, not answering then, but you have amazing insight."

She purses her lips and it makes me want to suck on them, but I don't want to push my luck when she's already pumped the brakes. She seems to be struggling with something as she stays silent but keeps her attention on me. Finally she sighs, turning her back on me to pack up her own laptop and study supplies. "The student that canceled on me was my last for the day."

There's a thread of annoyance in her voice, but I don't think it's about me. "Okay," I respond, almost sounding like more of a question.

She huffs. "Don't make me regret this, but you have sad puppy eyes."

I stand up taller, smirking. "You're gonna hang out with me even when I'm not giving you orgasms?" I tease.

Her blue eyes narrow. "I said don't make me regret it."

My hands move up in front of my chest in a placating gesture. "Wouldn't dream of it." The dark gloom plaguing my mind recedes even further away. Barely even a lingering

thought as I take her hand in mine. She glares as she smacks it away. “What are we going to go and do, bestie?”

She rubs her temples and gives me a look that says she’s already regretting agreeing to this. “You’re the sad one. Whatever you want.”

My stomach growls and an idea sparks as my body reminds me of the lack of food we’ve enjoyed today. “There’s a new cafe close to campus that I’ve been wanting to try.”

She shrugs her agreement and excitement threads through me, putting an extra bounce in my step as I lead her out of the library. “I just know you’re going to love it,” I say, possibly too excitedly based on the look of suspicion she gives me.



twelve

PO-TA-TO, PO-TAH-TO

The very last place I ever thought Baylor would drag me off to would be a cat cafe.

I didn't even know cat cafes were a thing, let alone that we had one so close by.

Why did I even offer to hang out with the idiot? I was excited when Jason canceled again. Okay, well I was annoyed at first. Why seek me out and request my services if you aren't going to show up even once? I had to pull all the tools for this kid for exactly no reason. But after that frustration, I was relieved I'd be able to get my run in earlier and sleep at a decent hour tonight.

Both of those plans have now been shot to hell thanks to the sad and dazed look that kept entering Baylor's eyes. It would disappear with his lust, only to reappear in silent moments. I can't explain the tug I felt in my chest to ease his burdens.

Maybe it's because that damn look of his is so very similar to Isla's. Somehow it reminded me of my best friend post Brad, where she was questioning everything about herself and her relationship. His rejection of her sexuality caused more doubts than I ever thought my effervescent friend could succumb to. Her happiness seemed untouchable until that homophobic dick had made her hesitate in being open anymore. I hated that he was able to rock her to her core, and I didn't much like that it seemed Baylor was also being shook to the depth of who he is.

But cats? "Why would you think I'd love this?"

Baylor gives me an exasperated look that says he simply can't fathom my confusion over this absurd turn of events. "We can eat sandwiches and then go play with cats. What's not to love?"

"It's the specific to me part I'm struggling with," I mutter, but he just looks more amused. I feel like I'm missing something, but can't begin to guess what. We never had any pets growing up so I can't really say if I'm a cat or a dog person, but neither one has ever offended me. Isla always had dogs growing up and they're cute. I've had other friends with cats, and they're soft. Nice to pet, I guess.

Baylor chuckles as he holds the door open for me and ushers me in. "Come on, we can eat first and then go play with the cats. I think you'll find them quite relatable."

What does that even mean?

I don't bother asking since at least the point of this ridiculous adventure seems to have been resolved. For now at least, the dark cloud that was hanging over him seems to have disappeared.

Our food is served quickly and our waitress runs us through what to expect when we go in with the cats once we're done eating. It's nothing fancy, but it's delicious and the perfect thing to hold me over until I get home. The whole time Baylor bounces in his seat like a little kid and it's hard to keep my demeanor calm and not smile at his antics. He's even got me slightly excited by the time we finish our sandwiches and get up to wash our hands. He pushes me out of the way to pay for not only our meals, but our entrance to hanging out with the cats in their little room.

I roll my eyes, but his grin is enough to make me keep my mouth shut and just let him enjoy it. As we dry our hands and one of the employees leads us over to the screen door that leads to the playroom, a kitten as excitable as Baylor launches up the metal screen door and climbs its way up until he is at eye level and gives a soft meow full of curiosity.

My mouth parts open in surprise as a small laugh escapes at the energetic kitten's antics. The employee apologizes and

she and Baylor banter lightheartedly about the cat who apparently just learned that trick this week. What a clever little one. She slowly pushes the door open and I hold my breath, hoping the kitten doesn't fall off.

The worry was unfounded, and I relax as the employee gently lifts him off the door and sets him back on his paws as Baylor closes the door behind us. The little climber rubs against my legs, weaving in and out of them and I look up to Baylor in confusion.

“What are we supposed to do now?” I whisper.

He chuckles, but leans down to scoop up our adventurous buddy and puts him in my hands. My eyes widen in surprise but the kitten curls into my chest, rubbing his head against my chin. “You just pet and play with them. Don't let them scare you, Tor,” he teases. “They only use their claws when they need to. Kind of like someone else I know.”

I'm not even listening to him anymore as the little ball of white and orange fur in my hands starts to purr so hard he's practically vibrating in my hands.

“That's Potato,” the employee says. “He's our youngest.”

I scratch behind his ears and he preens, his gray-blue eyes lifting up to look at me and blink slowly. Something in my chest melts and it's not an exaggeration to say I think I would die for this little baby.

Large hands fall to my shoulders making me flinch and the little babe hisses in response. Baylor laughs and steers me away from the door that leads back to the café and further into the cat playroom. I tear my eyes away from Potato and look around the rest of the room for the first time. It's a clean and open space and a lot larger than I had initially thought from the way it looks outside. The biggest cat post I've ever seen takes up the center of the room, but calling it a cat castle might be more accurate. Along the walls are plenty of chairs and small tables for the handful of other customers here, but more impressively there are even more cat posts, beams on the walls, and plenty of toys.

There must be close to twenty cats of all different colors and sizes all doing their own thing. Some lounging, others running, a few of them already with other customers. “We can sit down and meet all the other cats,” Baylor explains, his excitement even more prominent now as he scratches Potato’s head. The kitten must have forgotten the scare he gave both of us only moments ago or he’s quick to forgive with the promise of head scratches. He preens under Baylor’s touch.

I nod my head, surprised by how much I like the small weight of warmth in my hands, cradled against my chest. Some of the other cats are now coming over to inspect the newcomers. I look around and shrug when I notice the employee has drifted away from us, and sit where we’re standing.

Baylor snorts. “Sure, I mean why use chairs anyway?” I don’t see him pulling up a chair though. Nope. He plops his big ass right next to me. Potato settles in my lap, stretching his long, thin body out and resting his head over my thigh and promptly falls asleep. It takes no time at all for other cats to come and investigate and before I know it, Baylor has four cats climbing all over him and he’s laughing like it’s the best day of his life.

Potato stays asleep through the whole ordeal, not even stirring when other cats come and check me out. A few even start playing with my hair as it swishes around my back, making Baylor cackle. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man smile so openly and freely as Baylor is surrounded by these little fur balls. He almost reminds me of Isla with the way his excitement infuses my own and my lips tilt up despite themselves.

The employee wanders back our way and hands Baylor a little photo book. “Here’s our catalogue of all the kitties we have here right now. It should be mostly up to date with photos and details so you can put names to some of these little guys.” Baylor thanks her and she nods, batting her eyes under his attention. “I can also walk you through the adoption process if you’re interested,” she starts, her eyes flicking over to me where Potato still sleeps soundly in my lap. “Seems you’ve

made a friend, Potato.” The kitten stretches out his paws, showing his all white belly, just begging for scratches, but doesn’t open his eyes. She meets my eyes with a smile. “He always is curious and very friendly with everyone who walks in,” she starts, her words making me sad for some reason, before she continues, “but he usually loses interest quickly and moves on. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him stay with one person for so long.”

“How long has he been here?” The question pops out before I even have a chance to think about it.

I catch sight of her name tag that says Jules as she leans forward to rub his belly. “We’ve had him since he was a newborn, but he’s only been available for adoption for a week or so. He was still too young before.” She laughs a little. “Some of us may have been a little attached as well. He’s a sweet kitty, but he deserves a forever home.”

Baylor drifts away from me as Jules tells me more about the café and her time working here. Potato perks up when I run my fingers along his back until he flips around and begins to attack my fingers with his paws.

“He’s a very playful one,” Jules says. “Great with people and other pets.”

I shake my head, half playing with the kitten, and half watching Baylor as he walks around the room, checking out all the less social cats. “Oh, I don’t have any pets.”

“Are you considering adoption today?” she asks, and I watch Baylor lean down, putting himself face to face with a black cat across the room.

“No, not today.” But even as the words pass my lips, my grip on the kitten tightens.

She smiles but doesn’t comment as Baylor makes his way back to us, the black cat cradled in his large arms. Jules mouth parts open as he approaches.

“What’s this one’s name?” he asks as he falls back to my side. “I didn’t see a black one in the little book.” Of course he would have the book memorized.

Jules runs her fingers through her hair. “Oh, umm. She doesn’t have a name yet,” she admits, slightly embarrassed. “She only just got back from the vet a few days ago and hasn’t really let any of us near her. We were trying to give her time to adjust.”

The cat she’s describing is nothing like the cat in Baylor’s arms as she purrs in contentment while his fingers slide through her black fur.

She gives us both a speculative look. “You guys have catnip in your pockets or something?” Baylor laughs but waves me off when I give him a perplexed look. Another cat comes over, walking between Baylor and I. He frees one hand and the black cat immediately hisses at the newcomer, her dark fur standing on end. Yeah, that’s more like the cat Jules was describing. Not that it fazes Baylor in the slightest as he hushes the anxious cat in his lap and kisses her head. She slowly calms down as he keeps his attention on her. What a needy little thing. She may not like a lot of people, but when she chooses her person, she sure is fierce.

The tabby that came over is quick to turn away from Baylor and this feisty little miss, trying her luck with me. I reach my hand out to pet her and Jules smiles. “Potato is fine with other cats,” she encourages, but as soon as the tabby is in range, Potato smacks her in the face with his paw, batting her away from my leg. I lift the little kitten away from his prey and Jules clicks her tongue. “Well, he’s usually not quite so possessive,” she corrects.

Baylor and I end up tucking ourselves and our little hellions in a corner. A few other cats try their luck, but both of the kittens are persistent with their need for our full, undivided attention. Minutes turn into hours as Baylor and I start to talk mindlessly. He explains more of the ins and outs of hockey to me and I admit to him how much fun Isla and I had at the game. He asks me about tutoring and I admit that I enjoy it, but wouldn’t want to teach full time. That conversation leads to what we both would like to do one day. His answer is of course the NHL, but he also admits he’s getting his bachelor’s in sports science as a backup and won’t enter the draft until he

gets his degree per his mom's request. I tell him I just decided on my major and am thinking about becoming a financial analyst. He had no idea what they did and once I explained to him, he grinned and said he'd trust me with all his money once he made it big. His unwavering trust, though hypothetical, made heat rush to my cheeks and I had to turn away from him so he wouldn't notice.

The whole time our cats sleep or play peacefully in our laps like it's the most natural thing in the world. The worry lines that marred his face earlier today are no longer there creating the tension that made me offer to hang out with him. The weight that obviously was heavy on his shoulders has dissipated thanks to the furry little creatures and especially his little black bundle that refuses to leave his side. She has the cutest little white paws that she lets me pet as long as she stays with Baylor. We tried to switch at one point and neither kitten was having it, making us both smile as we passed them back. Soon enough I realize we moved past small talk and left pillow talk somewhere in the distant past. He studies my expression and his features soften. "I think this means we're officially friends now, Torryn Gray."

I huff, but I can't deny it. There aren't many people I can sit and just talk to for hours. The conveniently cute distractions aside. "I guess we are, Baylor Levine."

He drops his voice to a gruff whisper. "I still get to fuck you, right?"

I snort. "I sure hope so."

He beams and the moment swells with something unfamiliar. Something that makes it feel okay to ask. "Still not asking," I whisper, nuzzling Potato in an attempt to avoid meeting Baylor's eyes. "But are you feeling better?"

"Yeah," he admits, the corners of his lips lifting so slightly, I couldn't even really call it a smile. "I feel like maybe I wouldn't mind you asking after all."

I hesitate, trying to read the emotions in his eyes. "Do you want me to ask?"

He shrugs. “I don’t know if I have an answer, but the idea of you asking is no longer sending me into a panic.”

“Well, that’s something,” I say with a slight laugh and he beams at me.

His hand squeezes my knee and his kitten meows, but doesn’t hiss. We’ve learned she’s okay with him giving me attention, as long as he doesn’t also stop petting her. After being so independent it’s cute how attached she already is. “It’s not nothing.”

I kiss Potato’s soft head. “It’s not,” I agree. “I’m probably not the best person to talk to, but I’m here.” The moment feels heavy, uncomfortable. “We are friends after all,” I tease, shattering it before it has the chance to grow into anything.

Baylor chuckles, clearly not offended, if he even noticed my tension. “Have you ever not understood why you felt what you were feeling? Like you logically understand what happened and how easy it would be to just put it behind you, but for some reason it hangs around you like a bad stench.”

I scoff at the imagery. “Not a very pretty metaphor, but I get it.” I chew on my lip, taking a piece of my hair to play with Potato. “I’m not an expert or anything, but I guess I would say when it’s happened to me or Isla, it’s always because there’s some part of it we aren’t accepting or actually understanding.”

He studies me carefully and I can practically see the thoughts racing behind his eyes. “So you think I’m missing something?”

I shrug, pulling my knees to my chest and resting Potato atop them. He meows, probably annoyed with how much I keep moving him. “Maybe you need to look at whatever is plaguing you in a different light.”

He stays silent for a few moments and I focus on Potato, tracing the large orange spots that take up most of his back and half his head. “I don’t know how to look at it differently, but I’ll try.” Baylor takes a deep breath, maybe about to tell me more but suddenly stops as Jules comes back into our corner, a knowing gleam in her eye.

“I hate to ruin this cuddle fest,” she teases, “but we are getting ready to close.”

Immediately, I clutch Potato to my chest. I’m not ready to say goodbye and leave him behind. What if he isn’t here the next time I come back? I’m not even sure when I’ll be able to make time to come hang out like this again. I’m going to have to pull more than a couple long nights to catch up on the hours I wasted today.

Jules attempts to smother a snicker. Unsuccessfully. A quick glance and I see Baylor mimicking my stricken expression as he holds the little black hellcat. “I had a feeling we may not be ready to say goodbye, so I brought some information on our adoption options. We do have a foster to adopt option, if you want to take the kittens home with you for a couple weeks to make sure you’re compatible.”

“Of course we are,” Baylor declares.

I arch a brow. “Are you adopting her?”

He scrunches his nose. “Are you adopting the little spud?”

My eyes narrow even as tears prickle the back of my eyes at the thought of leaving him behind but... “I’m out of the apartment a lot.”

Jules scratches his head. “Cats are very independent. They aren’t as needy as dogs. As long as they have food, water, and a litter box, they’ll be okay alone. Though these two will definitely be expecting all the cuddles when you are home apparently.”

Baylor and I trade looks. Neither one of us walked in here with the intention of spending half the day here or walking out with a new responsibility. A new mouth to feed.

“I want her,” he sighs.

“I want him,” I agree, a note of whining in my tone. Jules laughs patting us both on the shoulder and hands us a tablet to share.

“Look at the options,” she encourages. “You have twenty more minutes.”

As she walks away, Baylor takes the tablet. “What would Isla say?” he asks.

Oh, I can only imagine how ecstatic she would be to meet this little guy. My little Potato. “We’d be in more danger of her coming here and adopting the rest than her being upset by him.”

His throaty chuckle draws the attention of one of the other girls sitting at a table nearby. “Lease?” he continues.

I give him a pointed look. “It’s the Wild West.”

“Fair,” he concedes. “I don’t think any of the guys would be mad. I’m not sure about the lease though.” He rolls his lips back and forth, thinking.

“Who do you live with?” I know there are several hockey houses on the other side of the square and he lives with Wells, but there are typically four to five players to each house.

“Wells, James, and Beau,” he answers.

Hmm, don’t know who James is but I get the feeling I should. “Bet Beau would know.” Dude is smart as fuck. Not that he makes it apparent in any way, but we’ve shared a couple of classes over the semesters. We always agree to be partners on projects now ever since we realized how well our styles work together.

“You have a point,” he agrees, already pulling out his phone to dial his roommate. I think I’ll surprise Isla.

Wait.

When did I decide to actually do this? I look down at the small kitten. Fuck it.

I’ll figure it out.

Isla really will love him.

“Hey, bro. Yeah, whatever,” Baylor blows off whatever Beau must have said. I think he forgot he was avoiding his friends all day. “What’s the pet clause on our lease?”

He nods along to whatever Beau says. “Cool, I can do that. Thanks, bro.” He grins as he hangs up and he looks so happy, I

don't even point out that Beau was still yelling at him or that his phone is lighting up with another call.

“Are we adopting kittens?” I ask.

“Fuck yeah, we are,” he exclaims and we both laugh. This is probably the single most ridiculous thing I've ever done, but it feels right. Potato is already a part of me.

“You have to give her a name then,” I tell him and based on the smirk he tosses my way, I can only assume he's spent all afternoon thinking over options.

“Torryn, meet Karma.” He holds her up proudly and I kiss her white spots and she paws my nose lazily.

“I like that. Karma—” My smile drops and I click my tongue, pinning him with a disbelieving stare. “Karma is a cat? Are you fucking kidding me?”

He rolls his lips and tilts his head, obviously proud of himself. “No comment.”

I smack his shoulder. “You, Baylor Levine, are a secret Swiftie?”

“It's not a secret, baby.”

ISLA

He's with Torryn

WELLS

Again?

She just texted me. Said it seems like he's upset and avoiding you guys but wanted you to know he was okay

Are they going to your place?

I already told her you were coming over

Leave him be for a bit. Tor will watch out for him

Does she like him?

idk

She is hanging out with him of her own free will

And she let him spend the night

Not normal Tor behavior

Does he like her?

He does keep running to her every time he's upset

I'm on my way now



thirteen

KARMA IS A CAT

I hold both cat carriers as Torryn struggles to get her apartment door open with her arms laden of all the other stuff bought.

“Here, let me help,” I interject.

She waves me off. “Your hands are full.”

Dramatically, I lower the carriers to rest on the floor and swipe the keys from her hands. “So are yours.” Pushing the key into the lock, I open the door, pointedly ignoring the creepy guy down the hall with his eyes glued to Torryn’s ass. I usher her inside and flip him off before picking the kittens back up and carrying them into her apartment.

“You stay with them,” I say, pointing to the cats. “And I’ll go back down to the truck and grab the rest of the shit.” There was too much to try and carry it all up in one trip. Maybe if I wasn’t worried about jostling the kittens, but fuck. Didn’t expect kitten litter to be so damn heavy.

Torrbyn opens her mouth to argue, but I’m already turning my back on her and leaving. She huffs as the door shuts behind me, and I grin a little. By the time I make it back up to the apartment, Potato and Karma are laying on opposite ends of the couch, their eyes lazily following Torryn as she moves around the apartment, mumbling to herself about where to put things.

“Are you going to put the litter box in your bathroom?” I ask, lifting the box and litter in my hands.

She doesn't answer right away, her eyes roving over the apartment while she thinks. "I guess?"

I chuckle at the indecision in her eyes. "Try it there and if it doesn't work out, we can always move it."

She nods and I move past her, bumping her hip with mine as I do, before making my way into her bathroom and setting it up for her. She follows behind me a few moments later, both kittens in her hands. Karma meows, disgruntled, but doesn't move to take a swipe at Tor. She rolls her eyes at my cat and mumbles, "Told you I was bringing you to your dad."

Karma settles in my hands as Torryn thrusts her my way. "They need to know where it is," she explains, plopping Potato down into the box and crouching as she watches him. He sniffs and walks around the box before hopping out and climbing back into her lap. I follow her lead, placing Karma down too. She eyes me disdainfully. I didn't know cats could be so expressive until this little one. I like how temperamental she is. After a few seconds, she peruses the box before hopping out, walking out of the bathroom and finding her way back to the couch.

I shrug, turning to Torryn. "Want me to order pizza?"

Her eyes widen in surprise before she covers the expression. "You were gonna stay?"

Rolling my lips, I debate how to answer. I hadn't thought about leaving. I've been ignoring the texts and incoming calls—now that are questions about pets and not if I'm okay. I could probably go home and Karma would steal all the focus. I wouldn't have to worry about conversations I don't want to have. There's no reason to really avoid it anymore. But...

But I don't want to.

Potato squirms and she puts him on the floor and he traces Karma's path back to the couch. I shrug. "The kittens like each other," I say in explanation.

Some type of hesitation flashes in her eyes, but I can't figure out why. Sliding my hands around her waist, I pull her closer to me and dip my fingers in her waistband. "The library

was also a long time ago, and your ass has been teasing me in these little shorts ever since.”

Her lips twitch, her hesitation gone, replaced by a glimmer of something else. “I guess we can order pizza.”

I cup her ass, kneading the fullness, before pulling back and smacking it. “I’ll order the pizza,” I correct, releasing her and pulling out my phone before she has a chance to argue. “What do you like?” She rolls her eyes but still tells me. At least we have similar tastes.

While I order us a large pepperoni and jalapeño pizza, Torryn finishes setting up the things we bought. After filling a bowl with food and water, she cleans all the bags and trash up and falls back to the couch. I toss my phone on the coffee and table and pick her up, carrying her to her room.

“We have forty-five minutes before the pizza gets here.” I shut the door behind us, not wanting the babies to follow us. “I can do a lot in forty-five minutes.”



Torryn sits up, the sheets pooling around her waist when I come back in with the pizza box in hand. Potato meows angrily at being locked out, hot on my trail, jumping into her bed and finding a spot on her pillows. She smiles softly watching him. I sit next to her, careful not to jostle him.

“Karma?”

“She’s still on the couch.” Opening the box I put two large slices on a paper plate and place it in front of her. I offered to eat in the living room, but she didn’t want to. Not that I’m complaining with the view.

Her perky tits sway with every small movement, making my dick twitch in my shorts. She hums when she bites and I swallow thickly. I burn the image into my mind, knowing there will never be a day where it doesn’t get me off.

“A picture lasts longer,” she taunts as she swallows.

I cock a brow, challenging her by raising my phone and pulling up the camera, a dare in my eyes. She doesn't react except a flare in her eyes, lifting the pizza to take another bite. I snap a photo as she's about to bite.

Fuck.

A picture definitely will last longer and it's on a whole new level of erotic. I turn my phone around to show her and she just shrugs. I take it back and create a locked folder to put it in, staring at it for another moment. "I'd make this my wallpaper if I could," I murmur, almost to myself.

"You could," she says.

My head swings back up to her in surprise.

"I mean don't send it around," she continues, shrugging. "But tits aren't really that big of a deal. No skin off my back if a few people see mine."

I consider it for a moment. I don't want just anyone to be able to see it, but I do like the idea of opening my phone to see it every day. I got it. Changing my lock screen to a photo of Karma, I make the photo of Torryn my wallpaper. I turn to show her and heat flares in her eyes. Maybe that little exhibition kink kicking back in.

My phone starts ringing in my hand again and I silence it. Torryn arches a brow. "Still avoiding your friends?"

Not exactly. Not anymore.

But I'll deal with the consequences of my impulsive decisions later. Not when I'm here with a naked Torryn.

"They want to know why I wanted to know about the pet clause in our lease," I say instead of really answering her.

"Beau has a big mouth."

I snort. "That, he does."

Grabbing my own slice, I fall back into the pillows and stare at her tits as she chews. She smacks me with a pillow, but I barely even notice. "Joke's on you," I tease. "All I saw was the way your tits jiggled when you smacked me."

She laughs, a sharp, abrupt sound like she didn't mean to laugh.

As I'm finishing my second slice of pizza, Karma pokes her head in the doorway, strutting in slowly. Torryn and I trade looks as we watch my kitten take in the space, pointedly ignoring us. She finds Potato's bed in the corner and lays in it, glaring our way. Potato is still sprawled out over the pillow behind Torryn, sleeping soundly.

"Is she-pouting?"

I can't help but smile, amused by the little kitten. "I think so," I admit, making Tor shake her head. "The guys are gonna love her."

"If they're even awake when you get home."

I check the time and realize it is getting late. "If I sleep here will I be able to wake you up with an orgasm?"

Her lips twitch. "Tomorrow was supposed to be my day to sleep in."

"Perfect," I cut her off, cleaning up our mess in her bed. "Sounds like a plan to me. They can meet her tomorrow."

She shakes her head. "But," she emphasizes. "That was before I spent half the day with you and not all the things I was supposed to do."

I groan dramatically, making her blue eyes dance with amusement. "Okay, fine. What's on the to-do list then?" I climb out of bed, making quick work of cleaning up our trash and the rest of the pizza.

She raises her voice to answer me as I walk back out to the kitchen telling me about her class times and when her tutoring hours are. The way she runs through it makes it feel like it's something she's used to doing. As I walk back into the room, Karma lifts her head to watch me and Torryn continues. "I was supposed to do homework after tutoring and go on a run this evening. So I'll have to do that in the morning before my first class."

I perk up. "I run."

“Okay?” She pushes her sheets down and struts into the bathroom. Okay. She walks. But “walk” is not an adequate description for her naked body being put on display for me. The way her long legs move and make her full ass slightly jiggle with each step.

“Orgasms, run, homework, class, tutoring. Boom, a productive and mutually beneficial day.”

She laughs, turning on the shower. She says something, but I don’t catch it over the shower. Seems like an invitation to me. As soon as she spots me, she narrows her eyes. “You are insufferable.”

“You don’t mean that,” I tease, stripping out of my shorts. “You would have closed the door if you didn’t want me to join you.” As fucking hot as she is, my dick can only stand so much. We keep our shower to actually washing and enjoying each other with soft touches.

By the end of it, she’s agreed to my version of her schedule for tomorrow. Possibly with some persuasion of the heavy petting variety. Don’t let it be said that I don’t know how to get what I want.

We both fall into bed, Potato cuddling up with Torryn as soon as her head hits the pillow. I try to call for Karma, but she ignores me, staying in the little tater tot’s cat bed. Leaving her to it, we fall asleep before I even realize sleep is pulling me under, excitement for tomorrow running through me.

Torryn’s alarm goes off too early. I groan, attempting to move to turn it off, when a meow stops me. My eyes crack open to find Karma and Potato squeezed into the spots between mine and Torryn’s intertwined legs. I laugh when sparkling blue eyes meet mine.

“I tried to wake up, but they weren’t having it.”

I squeeze her waist where my arm is wrapped around her. Apparently, I’m a cuddler in my sleep. That’s news to me. Pulling away from her, I pick up the unhappy kittens and take them into the kitchen to feed them.

And more importantly, to lock them out.

Torryn is sitting up, going through her phone when I come back into the room. Her body shakes when I jump onto the bed, grabbing her knees and spreading them wide. “I was promised breakfast.”



fourteen
A RUN WITH A VIEW

My eyes narrow as Baylor opens my front door, all too comfortable with being in my space now. Is he always so quick to adapt? To take up all the space in every room he walks into?

It should be suffocating, he should be suffocating. But it's...not.

He is annoying, irritating even. Definitely insufferable at times. Yet, I'm not mad he's forced his way into my bed and now my run. It's almost entertaining the way every turn continues to work in his favor.

I need to go on a run? He wants to run with me. He unexpectedly spent the night and doesn't have a change of clothes? He always keeps a set in his truck. No running shoes? Guess what else is in his truck.

“Are we sure you aren't living out of that thing?”

The grin he gives me is wry and his eyes dance with mirth. I blow on my coffee and take a sip as he strips in my living room, putting his well defined muscles on display for me. He winks when he catches me staring.

“Karma would not live in a truck.”

I hum, still not convinced and turn back to my yogurt, scrolling through my emails as I take a bite. The pace of my morning is slower than what I'm accustomed to. I almost don't know what to do with myself, but it's nice to not be rushing. Even if I know I should be. Maybe it's all the orgasms in the last twenty-four hours, or maybe it's just how well I slept last

night, but either way, there's a languidness in my movements today I am unfamiliar with.

Baylor sits at the counter by my side, a protein bar in hand, studying me with that same playful aura he seems to always have. He pinches the oversized shirt I threw on in lieu of getting ready between his fingers, gently tugging. "Are you going to be able to keep up with me on this run?" he taunts.

Pulling my shirt back, I flip him off. "The better question is will you be able to keep up with me?"

He snorts, taking another bite of his bar and talking with a full mouth. "I'm an athlete. Remember? I run every morning." He chews, tilting his head to the side with a small lift of his shoulder. "Almost every morning," he corrects.

Finishing my yogurt, I get up and put the bowl and my now emptied coffee mug in the sink before heading to my room with a shrug. "I was an athlete," I say. "And I still run." Maybe not every day, but at least four times a week. More when I can make the time. Just because it stopped being a priority, doesn't mean it ever stopped being a passion.

Surprise flickers over his face. "You were?"

It's not surprising when he follows me back into my room, nor is it surprising when Potato hops off his spot on the couch to trail after me as well. I shrug, stripping out of the shirt and pulling out a sports bra and some running shorts. "Volleyball in highschool," I explain when he doesn't stop staring.

His eyes wander over my body, lingering on my thighs. "Makes sense," he says, scooping up Potato and petting his belly. "The cutest little french fry I've ever seen," he coos, and I throw my shirt at him.

"Don't call him that."

The only promise his grin sends my way is that he will absolutely be calling him french fry again. "His name is Potato," I grumble, making him laugh.

As soon as I tie my running shoes, Baylor releases Potato and the kitten goes and curls up with Karma in his bed. I grab

my keys and Baylor follows me out of the apartment and I lock the door behind us.

I set out at my normal pace, heading for the loop that will take us through the park and lead back to the business square. Baylor falls into step behind me, but before we even hit the trail, falls a few steps behind me. Rolling my eyes, I pick up speed as the cement under my feet turns into dirt. Without the normal music I run to, the crunch of the gravel and dirt under my shoes with each step seems even louder. My breathing the only other sound I can focus on, forcing me to take deeper breaths and exhale with intention.

After a few minutes where Baylor doesn't catch up with me, I turn my head to roast him, only to catch his eyes glued to my ass. I snort, shaking my head. "Is checking out my ass more important than showing off how athletic you are?"

His chuckle is deep and masculine as he responds, "It is a good fucking view."

"Mhm," I hum, "I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact that you can't actually keep up."

A growl sounds behind me, sending excited tingles down my spine. But Baylor doesn't reach out for me as I expected, instead jogging past me and turning around to run backwards. "Look at that, the view is just as good from up here," he teases, his eyes glued to my tits. "Maybe even better and I get to prove my athletic prowess."

I can't help but shake my head, as he continues to run backwards and I spot the divet in the dirt coming up behind him. His foot hits it, knocking him off balance and his large body rolls in the dirt.

"You know what they say about playing stupid games," I taunt, not even slowing a step as I pass him.

I can hear the brush of fabric as he dusts himself off and quickly catches up to me, setting his pace at my side this time. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the dirt still covering his shirt and some streaked across his neck and smirk.

He laughs at himself, still attempting to brush the dirt off himself. “Still worth it when I get to see you in another sports bra.”

Heat flares in my midsection. Even after all the orgasms he’s given me recently, my body still craves more.

“I can’t even tell you how many times I imagined fucking your tits in one of these yesterday.”

I bump him with my shoulder, ignoring the rising desire pulsing in my veins. I refuse to be further sidetracked by dragging him behind a tree. There’s a long to-do list and very little time to get it done. “You are insatiable.”

Even his hum of agreement makes my desire burn hotter. “But I don’t think I’m the only one.”

Instead of answering him, I pick up speed. He chuckles but matches me step for step for the rest of the run. We both begin to slow as the trail leads back to the sidewalk and I can make out the faded blue of the Wild West building. Deciding to cut through the parking lot, I make a sharp right with Baylor on my heels.

My breath comes out in short pants as sweat drips down my temples. We slow to a brisk walk as a cool down and I push the small hairs that have fallen from my ponytail out of my face.

Exhilaration and the kind of content that only comes from exercising my body and pushing myself, fills me as we cross the parking lot. Baylor’s breath is almost as labored as my own. I smirk, about to taunt him about it when something catches my eye.

I stop, dead in my tracks as all the good feelings from my morning are quickly replaced by horror and dread. Baylor turns, confusion on his face as he sees the blood drained from my own.

“What the fuck?” I whisper, my voice scratchy and harsh as I start to walk towards my car.

Baylor starts to ask what’s wrong, but his gaze follows mine and quickly cuts himself off with his own slew of curses.

He catches up to my side as we approach my car that's been completely trashed.

The longer I look, the more damage I see. All four tires have been slashed, the windows smashed in, trash and dirt, and who knows what else has been thrown into the broken windows. Insults like slut and whore have been carved into the doors, hood, and trunk. How did someone cause this much damage without alerting the entire block?

In a state of shock, I don't even realize Baylor pacing behind me, his phone pressed to his ear until his hand lands on my back and he thanks whoever was on the other side and tucks his phone back into his pocket.

"The police and campus security are on their way."

"This isn't on campus," I murmur like it's the most relevant thing to be worried about. Every inch of my car has been destroyed. There's no way I'll be able to drive it. Fuck. How much will this even be to fix?

I rub my hand over my face, trying not to let Baylor see just how much I'm freaking out.

The next hour passes quickly with cops showing up and taking photos of my car and telling me whoever did this, also fucked with things under the hood. The car won't even start. A headache starts to build behind my left eye and I know it's only a matter of time before my whole head is throbbing. Baylor never leaves my side, giving his own statement to a cop about our run and finding the car. How we heard nothing last night. Not that we would have. My apartment is clear across the building from the parking lot. Something that has always driven Isla and I insane.

A flicker of relief passes through me when a familiar face pushes through the crowd and taps the officer talking to me on the shoulder. "I can finish up here," Officer Derek says to his coworker, giving me an empathetic look. The other cop, who I never caught his name, nods and moves back towards my car.

"Not the circumstances I like to see you under, Miss Torryn," he greets, giving me a soft smile.

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest and balling my hands into fists. “It’s definitely not a vodka tonic and good music.” He laughs as Baylor gives me and the older cop a bewildered look, but I ignore him as Derek pulls out his notepad.

“Any idea who could have done it?”

I shake my head, lifting my shoulder in a partial shrug. “I’m not exactly known for making friends everywhere I go.”

Both Baylor and Derek chuckle. “But I can’t really say I make enemies either,” I continue. “Maybe someone from the bar?” I meet Derek’s eyes and can tell he was thinking the same thing.

“If you make enemies anywhere, it’s definitely there,” he agrees, amusement lining his face, despite the situation.

I huff a laugh, waving at my car. “The message they left sure fits the bar as well.”

Derek nods his head, making a few notes. “Anyone specific stand out?”

I shake my head. “Anyone who’s met Betty?”

He snorts and Baylor chews on his lip as he watches the interaction, but doesn’t say anything. Surprisingly, I appreciate his presence. “Reggie would know more about dates and names. He’s pretty good about keeping track of all that for our safety.”

Derek nods and flips his notepad closed. “I’m real sorry this happened, Miss Torryn. I’ll follow up with Reggie and some of your neighbors. See if anyone saw or heard anything and keep you updated.”

I nod my thanks, not having much hope they’ll catch the person behind trashing my car. There are a lot of disgruntled assholes who’ve passed through the bar. “Could I get a copy of the police report for insurance?” I ask.

“Of course,” he agrees. “Stop by the station tomorrow afternoon and I’ll make sure it’s ready for you.”

“Thanks again, Derek. Your next drink is on me.”

He pats my shoulder, handing both Baylor and I his card before he walks away, leaving me alone with Baylor. He opens his mouth to say something, probably ask about Derek, but is cut off by a high-pitched shriek. “What the fuck happened?”

Isla jumps out of Wells’ Jeep and runs towards where Baylor and I now stand alone in the parking lot. “Pissed off the wrong person, I guess.”

“Fucking hell,” she cruses, making my lips twitch at her anger on my behalf.

“You just missed the cops,” I explain as Wells joins us staring at my car that’s now being loaded onto the back of a tow truck. “They’re gonna look into it.”

Isla shakes her hands in front of her, immediately going into planning mode. “Okay, okay, okay. It’s fine. It’s all fine. We can figure this out.” Her words come out rushed and high-pitched, obviously rattled and stressed for me. Her anxiety instantly soothes mine. One of us has to be the calm one. “I’ll just look at your schedule and we can share my car. It’ll totally be fine. We’re together most of the time anyway.”

I arch a brow at her. We have very different schedules actually. “The biggest thing is work,” I say instead. “And I can just take the bus there.”

Her shriek is so loud, if my car windows weren’t already busted, they sure as fuck would be now. “No, you will not! You can’t take the bus across town. At night. When you’ve obviously managed to piss off someone with very clear anger issues. I’ll drop you off and pick you up. It’ll be fine. I can move things around.”

I roll my eyes. “No, you can’t. And I’ll be fine. I took the bus to work before I got my car. I know my way around public transportation.”

She’s already shaking her head. “It was just as dangerous back then, but I had no options to help you. Now, I sure as fuck do and I’m not letting you do this.”

I sigh in exasperation, trying to find the right words to diffuse her worry. If I could rent a car, it would be problem

solved, but there's no way my insurance is covering this in total. I'll barely be able to feed myself let alone rent a car.

Baylor raises his hand, his eyes flicking back and forth between Isla and me. "Umm, you could take my truck?" My eyes flash to his, but not before I catch the shocked look on Wells' face, but Baylor just waves away all our disbelief. "I have a bike to get around with. It actually won't inconvenience me at all and Isla won't have to worry about you."

A surprised snort escapes me. "Sorry, sorry," I laugh. "I was just imagining you riding your bike across campus or showing up to a game with your gear on your handle bars."

Wells and Isla also burst out laughing but Baylor just rolls his eyes and smacks my ass. "Not that kind of bike," he growls. "A motorcycle, you smart ass."

At least that makes more sense and also puts another picture in my head. This one a whole lot more sexy than comical. "Come on." Baylor smacks my ass again to get me moving. "My keys are upstairs, I just need to grab some things from my truck and then Wells can take me home and she's all yours."

Wells snorts from behind us. "Yeah, sure. I had no other plans today."

Baylor flips him off, but otherwise ignores him, grabbing my hand to drag me up to my apartment. Isla and Wells trail behind us, sharing whispers and pointed glances in our direction, but my mind is still spinning too fast to really comprehend why.

We open the front door to rather loud and expectant meows as Potato rushes to our feet and Karma lazes on the counter, her green eyes pointed in our direction.

"You got kittens?" Isla exclaims, pushing Baylor out of her way to scoop up Potato in her hands and cradles him to her chest. "Aren't you just the cutest little thing ever?"

Wells laughs before it cuts off sharply and he glares at Baylor. "You got a cat?"

Baylor smiles wickedly, pointing to where Karma still glares at us. “That’s our new team mascot, Karma,” he says, making Wells roll his eyes in a way that I know he recognizes where Baylor got the name from. “Isla, you’re holding your new roomie, Hash Brown.”

I smack him in the chest. “His name is fucking Potato.”



Wells' eyes drill into the side of my head, but Karma and I both pointedly ignore him.

“You love your truck.”

I scratch behind Karma's ears, making her purr. “And?”

He shakes his head as he pulls into our driveway. “What do you mean *and*? You don't even let me drive your truck and we've been friends since we were in diapers.”

I scoff, hopping out of his Jeep and gathering Karma's stuff. She hisses at being jostled, but I blame Wells instead. “See, even Karma thinks you're being overdramatic. You've never needed to drive my truck.” I slam the door between us and begin to walk up the driveway. “Also, you've never sucked my dick.”

“That's all this is? She sucked your dick a couple times and now you've forgotten that you don't let anyone drive your truck?”

I open the door, ignoring him. A friend had a problem, I helped solve that problem. Not sure what the whole fuss is about. “Honey, I'm home,” I call out into the house, expecting James and Beau to be around.

“There you fucking are,” James says as soon as he walks into the living room and sees me.

Followed closely by Beau who huffs in disbelief. “You really fucking brought a cat home?”

I grin, lifting Karma up like she's Simba in the Lion King. "Meet Karma, our cutest little housemate."

In only a matter of seconds, both guys are already wrapped around her little furry paws. Cooing at her and attempting to pet her, though she doesn't let them.

"You storm off, disappear for an entire day, miss our morning run, and come home with a kitten? What the fuck, Levine?" James asks, still trying to pet Karma as she swats his hand away from her.

I sigh, falling to the couch and lifting my feet to the coffee table. "I didn't want to talk about it yesterday, and I still don't want to talk about it today." Wells takes a seat beside me, a solemn expression on his face.

"Fine," he agrees, surprising me. "We will agree not to talk about it, if you agree not to disappear again. We were worried about you, man. If Tor hadn't texted Isla that you were with her, we were gonna send out a search party."

She did? "Yes, Mother," I say instead of acknowledging that. A part of me does feel like a dick for worrying them, a bigger part of me is thinking about my day yesterday.

Clapping his hands together, Wells nods his head. "Okay then, we're in agreement. Now, can we talk about you and Torryn?"

I look over at him, puzzled at what he means. "What's there to talk about?"

The three of them exchange looks, but it's James who speaks up first. "You avoided your friends all day and ran to her for comfort. That seems like more than just someone you hooked up with a couple times."

"You also pushed Jayden into a bush for insulting her," Beau adds.

Wells smirks. "And let her borrow your truck."

Whoever said girls were the more dramatic gender never met my housemates. I shake my head, laughing in amusement and disbelief. "You guys are being so weird about this. First of

all, I didn't run *to* her. I ran *into* her. More accurately, I ran into Wilder who she happened to be tutoring. She was free, I was free, we were both horny, and the rest is history. And Jayden was being a prick, he shouldn't talk about any woman like that." I turn my attention to Wells. "As for your obsession with my truck, I'm sorry I've never let you drive it before. The next time someone smashes your Jeep to bits, I'll be sure to volunteer my help for you as well. That's all it was. A friend had a problem, and I had a solution. Easy."

James and Beau's eyes both widen and James leans over to whisper in his ear. "I don't think he actually would though." I flip him off.

"Tor is a friend. A friend with a great ass and even better tits. A friend who needed help. End of story."

Beau raises his hand and I arch a brow. "Can we backtrack to the smashed car? I have questions."

I sigh as I tell them about Torryn's car, something nagging in my gut that it wasn't just a random act of vandalism or as simple as someone being pissed for getting kicked out of the bar. The damage to the car was intentional, almost methodical in causing the worst damage with the least effort. None of the guys can believe just how bad it was as I tell them and my gut continues to twist.

"Do you guys think it could be related to those flowers and creepy note?" I ask, suddenly recalling the bad feeling they gave me.

The guys all hum as they think about it. "Maybe?" Wells finally answers. "It was a weird ass note."

I nod in agreement. "I forgot about it until now. I'm gonna message the responding officer to let him know about it. Just in case."

They let me go in peace, and I pull out my phone to first text Torryn.

BAYLOR

fyi my truck is my first baby

try not to crash her

TORRYN

so no kissing curbs?

if you're that desperate for kisses I can always come back

When she doesn't respond after a few moments, I exit out of our conversation and pull up the phone app and dial the number on the card. It goes to voicemail so I leave a message explaining the note and flowers to him and let him know Torryn and I can drop the note off at the station when she picks up the police report. I'm not sure how to bring up to her that I kept the note, but I can't help but wonder if her car wasn't an isolated incident.

I hang up the phone and sigh just as it buzzes in my hand. Looking down, I expect it to be the officer calling me back but instead see Torryn's name as she responds.

I promise to take good care of your girl

I debate how to respond, but eventually decide to just go for it.

Remember those weird flowers and creepy note you got?

yeah?

What if it was the same person who trashed your car?

The gray bubble with three dots appears several times, disappearing every few seconds as I watch the screen. I jump when it starts vibrating in my hand and Torryn's name flashes across the screen.

"Hello?"

She doesn't bother with a greeting. "Going from flowers to trashing my car is kind of a big jump. Don't you think?"

I hear Isla saying something in the background but don't understand what it is.

I scratch my chin as I think about it. "The note was pretty creepy. What if they were mad you didn't listen and change your attitude?"

She must have put me on speaker because a smack sounds from their end of the line as Isla scolds Torryn for leaving important details out. "Ow, back off," she hisses. "I don't even remember what the note said."

Finding the note in the drawer, I read it aloud to both of them.

"Ugh, that is creepy," Isla agrees, while Torryn snorts. "Did you keep the note or just memorize it?"

"I'm flipping you off in my head," I tell her. "I threw it in my drawer 'cause it was weird." I shrug even though she can't see me. "It just felt like a mistake to toss it. I did toss those ugly ass flowers you made me take though." After everyone and their mother gave me shit for them. Not that I would ever admit that to Torryn.

She starts to taunt me back when she suddenly stops, cursing. "Oh, shit. Where's my school bag?"

"What?" Isla snaps. "Why?"

Shuffling and murmured conversations are all I hear for several drawn out moments before Tor exclaims she's found it.

“It should still be in here,” she murmurs, more to herself than either Isla or me. “Hah! Got it. Okay, let’s see.”

“What is it?” I ask, unable to hold back any longer. “I can’t see you assholes. Well, not you Isla. You’re not an asshole.”

“Ha ha,” Torryn retorts. “It’s another note. It was left on my car—uh, maybe a couple weeks ago now? I can’t remember when. But I never read it, just threw it in my bag and forgot about it.”

“Well, what does it say?” I demand.

Isla hushes me and Torryn curses. “Fuck, I think my water spilled on it or something. Hold on.” The two continue to bicker and I debate just going over to their place to see this note for my fucking self.

“Ow, Isla!” Torryn snaps. “Knock it off, I’m trying.” The phone is jostled and I groan as nothing but muffled sounds filter through the speaker. “Okay, okay. I can make out some of the words,” Torryn finally says. “That’s definitely my name. Something about being raised and that might say good?”

“I think that part says girl. Good girl?” Isla asks.

“Is he telling you to be a good girl?” I ask, wishing I could see it. “Send me a picture.”

She sighs but only a few moments later I get the image on my phone. As soon as I open it I recognize why they were spending so much time bickering. The ink on the page has bled together, making it nearly impossible to distinguish words clearly.

“I agree with Isla, I think it’s something about being a good girl.”

Torryn gags on her end of the line. Isla huffs her agreement before continuing. “It looks like maybe this part was bullet points.” I can’t see where she’s pointing, but looking at the note I can see lines that are indented. Maybe we should have just Facetimed.

I can make out an r clearly and the following letters are a little harder, but... “Do you think they were rules?”

Torryn clicks her tongue and I can tell she's considering it. "This here looks like it might say consequences."

"Rules and consequences?" I ask.

"I think so," Isla agrees. "Can you make out any of the rules?"

We spend some time debating, trying to decode the blotches on crinkled paper, but the only words we were confident in that could be potentially helpful were slut, men, presents, bar, clothes, and secret.

"Do you think he saw me leaving your apartment with the flowers?" I ask when neither Tor nor Isla say anything else.

"Why do you think that?" Isla asks.

Torryn answers before I have the chance to. "If this part says presents, it might be about the fact I didn't keep what he sent me. Could be what set him off to leave the rules."

"So you broke another rule and that's why he trashed your car?" Isla asks.

Torryn's responding chuckle is dry and caustic, grating over my nerves and making me even more anxious. "We aren't even certain of what the rules are, but I am quite positive I've broken a few."

"Pick me up in the morning and we'll take both notes to that cop in the morning."

She argues that she can go by herself or with Isla, but I don't like it. Can't agree to it. "Not when we know he has to have eyes on you in order to know you've broken his rules."

She sighs again and Isla murmurs something to her softly that I can't hear. Eventually Tor huffs her agreement and tells me she will see me in the morning, but still adds, "It's probably just a prank you know? Pissed off some psycho at the bar. They've gotten their kicks now. I'm sure we won't hear from them again."

I wish I could have the same attitude as her about it, but no matter how blasé she is, I'm worried for her.



My phone vibrates in my pocket as Wells hands me a plate piled high with spaghetti and meatballs. I nod my thanks, smirking as I pull out my phone and see I was right about who was texting me.

The last week flew by. After the drama with Torryn's car and having to take both of the notes to the cops and having to give another statement about when I found the flowers and what I did with them, it's gone back to surprisingly normal. Minus not having my truck, it's like the incident never even happened. It's setting my teeth on edge waiting to hear what's next.

TORRYN

image attached

I chuckle around a mouthful of spaghetti as I open the picture and find my truck parked outside Torryn's building. Safe and sound.

She survived another day in the line of duty

I almost regret telling Torryn not to crash my truck because she thinks she's funny and now I get texts like these after every single time she drives it.

BAYLOR

You're a goon

A goon you gave your precious baby to

That says more about you than me buddy

Neither the cops or her insurance have really gotten back to her about her car yet. At least not that she's told me, but I've barely seen her. My mom told me it can take a bit of time to decide the value of a car and if it's as damaged as it seemed, they may deem it totaled rather than trying to fix it.

At least it hasn't gotten too cold to ride my bike around yet. The fall nip is quickly getting harsher with each passing week though. It won't be much longer before I have to store my bike away for the winter. There's still time though, and in the meantime, it isn't hard to bum a ride with any of the guys.

Karma jumps up on the counter and hisses at Beau when he tries to pet her, making him laugh. It's a half-assed hiss if I ever heard one. Her version of warming up to people. She stretches herself out next to my plate and I pick her up, settling her in my lap instead. Snapping a photo, I send it back to Torryn instead of responding to her last message. She sends a photo of Potato and I grin as I type out my reply.

The cutest spud I've ever seen

I chuckle when she sends back three middle finger emojis.

"Baylor," Wells snaps, drawing my eyes up to everyone staring at me.

"What?" I ask, raising a brow. "When did you guys get here?" Tate, Zac, Theo, and Wilder are standing in our kitchen, serving themselves their own plates of Wells' pasta.

"Like five minutes ago, dude," Wilder answers, looking perplexed.

Wells sighs, his exasperation with me growing each day. "Were you listening to anything we said?"

"Yeah, no," I admit, running my fingers through my hair.

A few of the guys chuckle, knowing looks of amusement passing between them. Not even going to try and dissect that.

"So, what's up?" I finally ask when no one picks back up the conversation.

"The Halloween party," Beau explains.

I had totally forgotten that was tomorrow. I look around the house with raised brows. “The place isn’t very festive to kick off the Hockey Halloween parties.” Every year each hockey house takes a weekend leading up to Halloween to throw their own themed party.

Wells smacks me upside the head. “That’s what we’re planning, jackass.”

The good news is, with ours being the first weekend, it does tend to be the most laxed. Doesn’t mean we can slack off. It sets the mood for October on campus. I rub the back of my head and try to remember what we had been planning for the backyard. “Isn’t everything supposed to be delivered in the morning?”

His sigh this time makes me feel just slightly guilty. “Yes, and someone needs to be here to accept the delivery. So will you be here?”

I salute him. “Got you covered as long as I don’t have to do the decorating alone.”

James slaps his hand against my shoulder. “Promise not to leave you hanging, Levine. We couldn’t trust you alone anyways.”

Those assholes absolutely did leave me on my own. I had no idea where to have half this shit setup in the backyard and ended up having to move everything again after the very helpful delivery men and their even more helpful tools had left.

“I hate all you,” I declare as they stroll in with bags full of sandwiches and chips. “If there’s not a turkey avocado in there with my name on it you will all be dead to me.”

Beau smirks. “Well now I want to tell you there’s not.”

Not funny, dude. “I will bury you in that graveyard I just spent hours painstakingly setting up.”

Wells hands me a large sandwich from our favorite sub shop near the school and a bag of bbq chips. “I told you we would be here at noon to help. I also told you not to worry about setting up until we got here.”

“Should listen more often,” James snarks around a huge bite of his meatball sub.

“Speaking of,” Wells drawls. “Do you have your costume ready for tonight?”

I swear this guy is going to get a hernia worrying about me when he doesn’t have to. “Yes, Mother. My costume is ready.”

The look he gives me is unimpressed at best, which only makes my grin spread wider.

“And it’s on theme?”

I don’t hold back the eye roll this time as the other guys chuckle watching our interaction. As if they don’t go through the same thing with Wells on at least a weekly basis. “I stuck with the theme, promise.” I devour the last few bites of my sandwich and get up to clean up my trash. “You guys can finish setup on your own though. I have other shit to get done before the party.”

BAYLOR

You coming through tonight?

TORRYN

The Hockey Halloween party?

ya

Wasn’t planning on it

Ouch. I’ve barely seen the woman all week and she’s not even planning on wearing a sexy costume to come to my party. I thought my night was going to be locked and loaded. A perfect balance and end with just the right type of happy endings.

that's rude

Wasn't invited

Her response would worry me if it was any other person. But Torryn? I don't even know if she has feelings capable of being hurt. She just enjoys trying to fuck with me. Still. I kind of like she knows she can tease me. I hope she realizes I can give as good as I get.

Please accept our formal apology for your invitation not making it to you. Please keep an eye out for a carrier pigeon I'm sending your way to cordially invite you to our esteemed event.

Oh no, was that the bird Potato just ate?

my French Fry would never

see you at 9

the theme is classics

That's not his name

Girl is full of shit. The second she didn't respond with her typical, "I'm working," I knew she was going to come. Isla was always planning on making it and she can talk Tor into anything. I wonder if they're dressing up together. I didn't think to ask Wells if the two of them were doing a couple's costume or not.

I can't wait for Torryn to see my costume tonight and maybe even more importantly see hers. What will she be? A sexy cat maybe? I could see her with cute ass whiskers.

The rest of the day flies by as I picture other things Torryn might dress up as. Each new idea makes it a little more uncomfortable to walk. Staring at my phone wallpaper sure as

fuck doesn't help, not that I am ever able to draw my eyes away from it whenever I unlock my phone.

It's a good thing we planned for everything ahead of time or the guys would be calling me out for how distracted I've been since lunch.

I look over myself in the mirror, adjusting my hat and grinning. It really ties the whole costume together. I can't wait to see Torryn's reaction.



sixteen

TWENTY MINUTES & A COSTUME
CHANGE

Wilder waves his goodbyes after extracting his promise I would see him and his friend, Colby, at the party later. I shut my laptop as I watch their backs. My last appointment of the day is the illusive Jason Locke. Once again.

This will be the fourth session he's made he doesn't show up for and at this point, I'm not sure how to handle it. I've already told the tutoring head, but she waved me off. Told me to keep inputting my reports the way I have been, but Jason's sessions weren't mandated and were scheduled at his request. Nothing more we can do.

At least, I'll have a little bit of extra time to figure out my costume for this party tonight. Just as I'm finishing packing my stuff up, a soft knock sounds at my door. I pause, looking up to find a student poking his head in. His wide eyes meet mine and a flash of panic is quickly followed by determination.

"Jason?" I ask, ready to pull my laptop back out of my bag. I've already refreshed myself on his file plenty of times that I almost know it by heart. An average leaning toward mediocre student. Not close to failing any classes, but not thriving or even really succeeding in any either.

His face flushes red as he opens the door and comes into the study room. "Umm, yes ma'am."

My eyes narrow on him and I pull my laptop back out and open it to the notes and plans I'd made for his schedule this semester. "Call me, Torryn."

He hesitates as he falls into the seat across from me but nods his head in agreement. I tap my pen on my desk and lean back, observing him as he pulls out a couple notebooks, a planner, and a small binder. At least the kid is organized. Tension blooms as we sit in silence for several long moments, the only sound the tap, tap, tap of my pen against the desk as I continue to study him.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out and I hum in acknowledgement, nodding. “I was nervous to come see you,” he admits, but I just give him a look. I’ve already figured out exactly why he requested me and why he’s been skipping, and especially why he’s still nervous enough to barely look me in the eye.

I click my tongue, dropping my pen. “How’d you get into my bar?” I finally ask, leaning forward. It took me a second to connect the pieces, but he was part of the rowdy group that harassed Lucy not too long ago.

His smile turns sheepish. “Fake I.D.” He turns to look behind him, checking to see if the door is still closed. “Are you going to take it?”

I snort, relaxing back into my seat. “I’m not a cop.”

He nods his understanding. I know from his file he’s only nineteen, making him the same age as I am. No one has ever claimed Tease is on the up and up. “I was only there for my brother,” he mutters. He looks up to directly look me in my eyes. “I owe you an apology for that night as well. I didn’t think him and his friends would act that way.”

Deciding to let him off the hook, I snap out of Tease Torryn and back into tutor mode. “Don’t stress yourself. Now, did you actually want help in your classes or was this a ploy?”

“A ploy,” he admits, not surprisingly. “But, umm, I’ve watched some of your sessions. Or at least bits and pieces that I could catch.” Surprise and a flicker of something else catches me off guard. A flash of my car and it’s busted— well— everything. Before the thought can even fully settle, I wave it off, waiting for him to continue. “I think maybe I could really use your help. It would be nice to actually understand what I’m learning.”

Alright, he may not be my favorite student, but this will work. I hand him a packet I created to get to know my students strengths and weaknesses. “Complete this and bring it to your next session. Don’t just bullshit it. It’ll help save both of us time and energy. Got it?” He nods sharply, taking the packet and slips it into his binder. “Do you have any assignments completed that don’t need to be turned in yet?”

He shakes his head, eyes dropping to the table. “I’m more of a do it at the last minute type of guy.” Not surprising. Most students are. I can still work with that. “Any assignments that have been returned to you?”

His face scrunches as he thinks about it. “I think so.” He digs through his notebooks and pulls out an assignment marked with a C-. Perfect.

I grab it from him, tossing it into my own bag and review his schedule. “Great. You have no tests coming up next week, nor major assignments due.” I use my pen and circle several upcoming assignments in his classes. “You are going to do that packet and start on these projects so I can get a better idea of what we’re working with. I’ll see you next week.”

Jason nods along with my words but seems confused. “Okay. But, umm, is that it?”

“Yup,” I pop the p, packing my shit up again. “You wasted several sessions a we’re not in dire straits. I’m not wasting my breath until I see what I’m working with.”

“Okay,” he says emphatically.

“Great, now fuck off.” I have a costume I need to go figure out.



Fog machines, spooky decorations, and flashing lights have transformed the hockey house into something out of a movie.

“I’m actually impressed,” I admit to Isla as we walk through the front yard. My fingers tracing over the gravelly texture of a fake tombstone.

“Can you even see?” she asks back. It could be snarky, except for the note of worry that causes her voice to pitch higher. She grabs hold of my arm and clings to me as if she would really be able to catch me if I fell.

I might be wearing heels, but the chunky rubber heels of my black combat boots hardly feel unstable. It’s not like I’m sinking into the grass as some other girls are. I hope the guys knew better and prepared the back of the house a little better. “There are eye holes for a reason, babe,” I tease her.

She huffs, clinging to me tighter. “You covered up the eyeholes.”

“With sunglasses,” I retort.

“At nighttime,” she says through gritted teeth. Okay, fair enough. But there are enough flashing lights to keep everything illuminated while still creating shadows to play tricks on your mind. I might actually have to give the boys props.

Isla leads me through the front door and the white of both our costumes glows under the black lights. I’ll never admit it aloud, but it is a little harder to see inside. It’s a good thing I don’t plan on staying very long anyway. She doesn’t hesitate as she pulls me through the crowd and leads us into the kitchen, barely letting me stop and get a good look around. I’ve never actually been to their place before.

Her whole face brightens when Wells, dressed as Frosted Flakes, comes into view. I recognize Beau at his side, or should I say Lucky Charms tonight, and I’m almost positive the Cheerios is James. Maybe I’ll actually be able to put a face to the name now.

“Ahh,” I say. “The milk makes more sense now.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Leave it to Wells to figure out a way to match both his housemates and me while making sure we all stay on theme.”

We come up behind whoever Wells is talking to just as he smacks the guy in the shoulder. “You said your costume was ready.”

A familiar voice responds, “What’s more classic than McDonald’s french fries?”

I roll my eyes even as Isla giggles at my side by the frustrated sigh Wells expels. James and Beau trade amused looks at both Baylor and Wells’ expense. “We agreed classic cereals, you dickhead!” Wells flicks Baylor in the forehead and I catch Baylor’s sheepish shrug as we join their circle.

“I eat fries for breakfast?”

Wells pulls Isla into his side as soon as she’s within touching distance and I smirk at how adorable they look together. His face brightens as everyone laughs when they notice the black “Got Milk?” written across her white slip dress.

“You two almost make me want to give up my single lifestyle,” Beau teases, making Isla blush.

“You’re a dickhead,” I whisper to Baylor as everyone turns their attention to Isla and Wells. “And his name is Potato, not french fries.”

His delighted grin when he faces me tells me everything I need to know about his costume. “Did you intentionally ignore your house’s outfit to fuck with me or was that just a happy accident?”

Baylor’s eyes rove over my costume and a guilty expression takes away some of his satisfaction. “That part was an accident.” He points at Wells. “He nags a lot and I tune out half of what he says.” Wells flips him off, not even drawing his eyes away from Isla for a second as he does. “I just heard breakfast and thought I could make fries work. Two birds, ya know?”

I can’t help but laugh as his eyes linger on my legs. “You really are a dickhead.”

He raises a brow at me. “Surprised you went with ghost,” he drawls slowly. “I had pictured something a little sexier.”

“The fishnets and boots make it sexy,” I argue, showing off my leg under the sheet I cut up in my very classic ghost costume. “Plus, I’m not just any ghost.” I’m thankful Baylor

can't see my face under my costume or there's no way he would take the bait.

Just my tone is enough to make him suspicious, but he still asks, "Oh, you're not?"

"Of course, not." I lift my arms, spreading the sheet out for him to get a good view. "I'm the kind that haunts your dreams." I turn on my heel for him to see what's written on the back.

His responding cackle makes heat spread through my belly and down my limbs. Once again, I'm thankful no one can see the no doubt, ridiculous looking grin spreading across my own face. Baylor's hand lands on my ass in a resounding smack as he pulls me back into his chest.

"Hey," I protest, rubbing my ass. "That kind of hurt." And made me horny.

"Want me to kiss it better, my little whorror?" His hands slide under my sheet, playing with the fishnet leggings as he moves up my thighs. "No shorts?" he asks, surprised. "You are a little whorror."

I step into his body, relaxing against the toned muscles of his chest and abs, warmth suffusing me the closer I get. His fingers continue to play with the holes in my tights, gently tugging as his fingertips brush against my skin. "You like it."

Baylor moves his hand a little higher, making me shift on my legs. "Your clever pun?" His fingers stroke over the front of my panties, enough pressure to let me know he's there, but not enough to really feel. "Or the easy access?"

Glancing around us, I notice all of our friends have dispersed. Baylor and I are in our own little bubble, hidden not by solitude, but by the anonymity that can only be found at the center of a crowd of nameless faces. I push my ass back into him, feeling him harden against me. "Obviously both." I wasn't about to waste a rare Friday night off. Especially not when I know the crazy schedule I have ahead of me next week in order to make Kanyon's game.

“If this sheet wasn’t covering your face, I’d kiss you right now.” Lust sends rapid rolls of pleasure through my body, making my stomach feel like my ovaries are doing a little victory dance inside of me.

I tilt my head up and Baylor leans down for me to whisper in his ear. “I can’t take it off,” I admit, my delight creeping into my voice. This time, I don’t wait for him to take the bait and continue on my own. “It’s not only shorts I forgot to put on.”

Laughter slips past my lips at the way Baylor’s whole body twitches, his hand abandoning my thigh to creep higher, seemingly uncaring that he’s about to give anyone looking a nice view. A moan reverberates through his chest and makes my body vibrate with excitement as he finds what he’s looking for. My nipples peak and his hand cups one breast and squeezes before quickly releasing me and pulling his hand away from me. Before disappointment can even begin to form, his other hand clutches mine and begins to drag me behind him.

We slip past a group of people as he pulls me into a bathroom and slams the door behind us, locking it in one smooth move. “Couldn’t even take me to your room?”

“Hell no.” His dark voice, full of his desire, makes my own flare higher. “Are you going to be a good girl?”

My body tenses. I’ve never liked being called that and it’s even more disgusting to me now after that note. I don’t find anything about it sweet or sexy. “I’m not known for being good.” I force myself to respond with the air of casualness expected from me.

Baylor doesn’t notice, or expected me to not be fond of the name, because he doesn’t hesitate in gripping my hips to pull me against him before putting force on my back to make me bend over. “Of course you’re not, because you’re not a good girl,” he agrees, his hands gripping my fishnet tights and ripping them. “That’s why I’m going to bend you over in a bathroom and fuck you like a whore.”

The lust his words create surpass my annoyance at him ripping my fishnets, but I make a mental note to make him buy me new ones at a later date. A cool breeze blows over my ass as he lifts the sheet to expose me at the same time as he yanks my panties down. Baylor wastes no time, quickly meeting his promise by plunging two fingers in my cunt. My back arches as I make a sound somewhere between a gasp and moan.

He hums his approval, thrusting his fingers in and out of me. “Already so wet for me, Torryn.”

“Just fuck me, Levine,” I snap, but it suspiciously sounds more like a beg. “And take off that stupid hat,” I add, a small note of amusement in the demand. The yellow hat made to look like French fries hits the floor a moment before the sound of his zipper being undone fills the small bathroom.

Baylor’s large hands grip my ass cheeks and spread them. “God, you’re so perfect,” he murmurs, and slams into me. I moan as he takes me in one hard thrust, bottoming out almost immediately and slowly pulling back.

“Fuck,” he curses. “You feel even better than usual, Tor. So hot and wet.” My pussy tightens around him, loving his words and needing to be fucked exactly the way he promised. Fast, hard, and dirty. A desperate need for it rising higher with every moment since his fingers started teasing my thighs.

“Oh shit.” He freezes. “Oh, fucking shit.” I look up in the mirror to find equal doses of lust and panic on his face. “I don’t have a condom.”

My mouth drops open in surprise. I hadn’t even stopped to think about it. I’ve never done that before.

“I swear on my life, I’m clean, Torryn.” Never in a million years would I take a guy at his word, especially when he’s already balls deep inside me. But, I have this nagging sensation that I can trust Baylor. “I haven’t gone bareback with anyone since I was a stupid kid in high school and thought I was invincible,” he rambles. “One pregnancy scare and that thought was smashed to pieces.” He laughs nervously, and groans as we both feel him move inside me. His voice drops to

a whisper. “We get tested pretty often and you’re the only person I’ve been with since our last test.”

I nod my acceptance. “I’m clean too,” I promise. “And on birth control.” I hesitate. I know women who’ve gotten pregnant even while on the pill. How good have I been about taking it lately? Pretty good... Is *pretty good* good enough though? I chew on my lip. “But pull and pray, yeah?” There is no room in my life for babies right now. Not for a long ass time.

His body relaxes, his dick twitching inside of me, making me clamp down on him. “Just this once,” he says, pulling out almost all the way.

“Just this once,” I agree, my fingers wrapping around the edge of the counter to keep me balanced. His cock drives back into me, stealing the breath from my lungs and my sunglasses fall from my face and into the sink. Baylor laughs as he does it again.

“I like fucking you with the reminder of what you are painted across your back,” he says, just before gripping the sheet and ripping it from my body. My flushed face stares back at me in the mirror, my long dark hair more mussed than the worst case of bed head I’ve ever seen. “But I want to see your face and those pretty tits as I fuck your pussy raw with no barrier between us for the first time,” he growls in my ear, punctuating each word with a sharp thrust of his hips.

One hand grips my breast almost to the point of pain and I come damn near to screaming his name when he plucks and twists my nipple to the same tempo of his snapping hips. His hard cock stretching me in the most delicious of ways and hitting that point inside me that sends all my nerve endings into a frenzy.

“So close,” I groan and his hand leaves my breast and travels down to my clit, teasing the sensitive bundle.

“Come for me, baby,” he whispers, his warm hazel eyes usually more golden than brown darkening as he meets mine in the mirror. The edge in his voice lets me know he’s just as close as I am. “Don’t look away,” he says and it almost sounds

like a plea. I keep my eyes open, locked on his, watching the pleasure and satisfaction over his face as I cry out, my pussy pulsing with each wave of my orgasm.

Baylor fucks me through it, drawing my orgasm out until my body is shaking and my body finally relaxes. He thrusts one more time before cursing and pulling out. Warm jets of come hit my ass and back and his moan makes me smile as I pant, trying to catch my breath.

“Fuck, you look good like this.”

I smirk looking over my shoulder at him. “You better clean your mess up.” His hand smacks down against my almost bare ass, reminding me about how he tore my tights even as I hiss. “And buy me new fishnets too.” I wear these to work pretty often.

He chuckles, massaging the sting out of my ass. “Only if you promise I can rip them again.” I shudder, but just flip him off.

Baylor’s eyes drop and a guilty expression passes his face as he picks up my sheet. “May have missed a bit,” he admits and I see what he’s talking about.

“Dammit, Baylor. There was one place to keep your come away from.” He rolls his lips, fighting a smile and I roll my eyes. “Fine, two places.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Well, technically, you could argue it makes your costume more authentic.”

I slam my hand against his chest. “I’m not walking around with your jizz on my costume.” Fucking caveman. He lifts his shoulder in another shrug, but bunches the ripped up sheet in his hands and uses it to clean up the rest of the mess he made before tossing it in the trash. I watch it unamused, crossing my arms in front of my chest in a way that pushes my bare tits together. “Just fuck clothes then?”

Baylor scoffs, but I’m not sure if it’s because he doesn’t think I’d walk out of here this way, or because he would never let me. He doesn’t stop to explain, just pulls off his red shirt with the giant M on the front and pulls it over my head. I slip

my arms through the sleeves and adjust over my frame and take a look in the mirror. By the time I glance up, Baylor is smirking and standing at my side, that stupid French fry hat back on his head.

“Now we’re twins.” He grins at me in the mirror and I can’t help but chuckle at the turns of events.

We both turn to walk out of the bathroom and find a line of people waiting just outside, making Baylor laugh a little harder. I can’t quite hide the way my lips curl up into a smug smile either. There’s no way they didn’t hear us, but if I was unsure, the knowing looks and eyes tracing over my costume change and Baylor’s lack of shirt sure as fuck would give it away.

“Are you kidding me?” Isla drawls exasperated. “We’ve been here like twenty minutes.” Wells shakes his head behind her and his lips twitch as he meets his best friend’s eyes. “That might be a record for you, Tor.”

We follow the two of them back into the kitchen where Isla pours us both drinks and hands them over while she catches us up on what all the other hockey guys have dressed up as. Baylor and I trade looks. We definitely didn’t miss much, but neither of us says anything and I hide my smile behind my cup.

Leaning against the counter, Baylor tugs me into his side, his hand tugging on the hem of his shirt that only hits a couple inches below my ass. “You know the best part about this costume change?” he whispers in my ear.

I don’t respond, just tilt my head in question as a new group walks into the house, causing a commotion. His hand slips under the shirt and I shift on my feet, spreading my legs to give him more room as his fingers find my opening. “Still has easy access,” he growls, teasing me with his fingertips. The laughter that explodes in the kitchen as the hockey freshmen walk in tall and proud in their Disney Princess outfits covers up the small moan that slips free when Baylor brushes against my clit. No one hears it except my best friend with a knowing look and familiar gleam in her eye as she

follows to the place where Baylor's hand disappears, and Wells whose eyes are locked on her.

I wink and sigh as Baylor withdraws just in time for the princesses to come and enter our circle, each one rocking their costume even better than the last.

I'll give it to them, hockey guys sure do know how to party.



seventeen

DOMESTICATED & MOTIVATED

Practice and classes seemed harder than usual today. Longer.

Stretching my arms over my head, I arch my back as I yawn. This last class really could not finish fast enough. I start tossing my shit in my bag, thankful I'm finally done. I wait for Wells to finish as we both head out of the lecture hall.

"Plans with Isla tonight?" I ask.

He nods, pulling out his phone. "She's gone Friday, so I'm taking her out tonight since there's no afternoon practice."

A rare light day could not have come at a better time for me, because I am feeling the effects of the last few sessions. Booking a massage is the only thing I should really be doing today. He fucks around on his phone and I pull my own out, my gaze lingering on the picture of Torryn until I forget what I was even going to look up.

If Isla's busy... she probably doesn't have anything going on tonight. She doesn't typically work at the bar in the middle of the week, and tutoring only goes so late. Abandoning my original plan, I pull up my text thread with her and shoot her a message.

BAYLOR

plans today?

Her response comes quicker than usual.

TORRYN

Meeting with my advisor right now

after?

Fuck it. When she doesn't respond right away, I say bye to Wells and head to the administration office. I'm sure I can convince her to hang out with me if she's not working. Wells gives me a strange look, but I ignore him.

It doesn't take me long to cut across campus to the administrative building, but she still hasn't responded by the time I pull the doors open. Maybe she's already in the meeting with her advisor. I thought she had already declared her major, but maybe she had to meet with them for another reason.

My heart almost stops in my chest when I turn the corner and find Torryn being cornered by some old man. Her chin is lifted as she gives him a defiant look, her arms crossed over her chest in a way that dares him to keep wasting her time. I can't see his face, but the way he tries to intimidate her with his size by leaning into her personal space pisses me off.

I'm moving before I even have a chance to think it through. Gotta give Tor credit, even as he attempts to get in her face, she never backs down. Doesn't cower or even shift away from him. But enough is enough.

"Is there a problem here?" I ask, wrapping my hand around Torryn's arm and pulling her into my side. Surprise flashes in her eyes, but she maintains a neutral look as she arches one brow at the man I now recognize to be an advisor. Paler, if I remember correctly. He was the advisor that helped Wells' last year. Apparently, he's a big hockey fan and was disappointed Wells had no intention of going into the NHL.

"Levine," he greets, his face lighting up with a smile as he steps back from Torryn and rearranges his expression into something I'm sure he thinks is more pleasant. "Great first exhibition," he compliments, making Tor roll her eyes.

“Did you need Torryn for anything else, sir?”

Rage flickers in his eyes as he glares at her at my side, but attempts to cover it up. “No, I think we covered everything.” His words are laced with a warning towards her that makes my spine snap even straighter and I roll my neck until it cracks.

“Great,” Torryn says saccharinely. “Then next time you approach me, I will be filing a complaint with the school for harassment and retaliation.” My eyebrows lift in surprise as I stare down at her. Paler pales and I smirk, leading her away from him. Girl can fight her own battles, that’s for damn sure.

“You good?” I ask, as soon as we’re out of the admin building.

She huffs, pulling away from me as she searches in her bag for her phone. “Fine. Dr. Dickhead was bent out of shape that I requested a new advisor.”

“Did he threaten you?” I ask, thinking about her smashed up car.

She shakes her head, finding her phone and sending out a text.

I grab her elbow, stopping her and turn her to face me. “Do you think he’s behind the notes?”

Torryn doesn’t answer right away, but it makes me feel better that she’s actually considering it rather than just blowing it off. “I guess it would make sense he knew where I lived since he had my file.”

“Maybe you should call that officer,” I suggest. It couldn’t hurt for them to have a lead.

She shrugs, sending a quick text. When I look over her shoulder to read it I snort.

TORRYN

Dr. Paler from the college is a real dick with a hard on for harassing me. He was at the bar the week I first received flowers

At least they'll have a new lead to pursue at the very least. She puts her phone away. "If it's him, he'll probably stop now."

I give her an exasperated look. "Or escalate."

She hums, tilting her head back and forth. "Didn't get that vibe."

I sigh, if she wants to be nonchalant about it, who am I to call her out? At least she sent the information along to the right people. "What are you up to now?"

She checks the time. "Groceries and homework."

I wink at her. "What a coincidence, I also had groceries and homework on my todo list today."

She eyes me skeptically, before shaking her head. "No, you didn't."

I throw my arm over her shoulders and pull her back into my side, leading her to where I can see my truck is parked. "Now, I do."

It's surprising how easy she caves, though she doesn't hand me the keys when I put my hand out for them. Instead, climbing behind the wheel of my truck with a smirk.

"I've always wanted to be a passenger princess," I say, as I climb in on the other side. Her lips twitch and I know she thinks I'm funny. She can act exasperated all she likes. I see the way her eyes dance with amusement at my charm.

"Glad I can make your dreams come true," she retorts.

I lean over the middle console, brushing a piece of hair behind her ear and whispering, "Now that you mention it, I did have this dream where you did this thing—" She shoves me, shaking her head and I laugh as I sit up straight and she pulls out of the parking lot.

Grocery shopping with Torryn is more fun than I thought any errand could ever be. In fact, I should only ever do my errands with her now. It takes twice as long as it should and she grumbles about me acting like a child the entire time, but I see her smiles when she thinks I'm not looking.

Despite her protests, I help carry all of her bags up to her apartment and bump into Isla as she's on her way out. One blonde brow lifts in question, but it doesn't have the same effect as when Torryn does it.

"How domesticated," she teases, walking back into the apartment after us.

Torryn just starts unpacking the groceries and putting things away. "We needed groceries."

Isla hums, not even attempting to hide the way she's staring at me. "And did Baylor need groceries too?"

I wink at her. "Hockey players eat a lot."

She clicks her tongue and pulls out her phone.

"Weren't you leaving?" Torryn asks, making Isla scoff.

"Why? Need me to leave so you can fuck in the kitchen again?"

Well, now that she mentions it. My gaze dips to Torryn's cleavage. She does look fine as hell in sweatpants and a tank top that shows off the fullness of her tits. She catches me checking her out and heat flares in her eyes even as she turns away from me.

"If you want to stick around and watch, be my guest," she taunts her best friend, making Isla's cheeks heat. "But I thought you had a hot date."

I snag one of the bananas as Torryn puts them away, peeling it as I use it to point at Isla. "Wells is excited." Her cheeks turn even redder and she can't keep down the smile.

"Okay, okay. Fine. I'm leaving." She points to both of us as she backs out of the kitchen and heads to the door. "But I swear, you better not make a mess again."

"No promises," I answer with a grin and hold up a bottle of whipped cream, making her groan and mumble something before finally leaving.

Torryn stares at me with one raised brow and I'm already putting the whipped cream down with a sheepish expression.

“Thought that was for the hockey house.”

“I came up with a much better use for it.”

She’s already shaking her head. “I have homework and studying to do.”

I grip her hips in my hands, stroking my thumbs over the skin that’s exposed between her shirt and pants. “The promise of a reward will make all the work go by even faster.”

She studies me slowly, debating how to answer. “Only if you behave.”

I fist pump at her answer. A win is a win after all.

I’ve never been more motivated to get my homework done.

Wells changes group chat name to Hockey House

WELLS

Isla said Baylor just went grocery shopping with Torryn

BEAU

You can't name the chat hockey house when Baylor isn't in it

What if I text the wrong chat?

Isla changes group chat name to Rom Com Watch Party

WELLS

Whatever

Can we talk about the grocery shopping? Baylor never does the shopping

JAMES

Because none of us would trust him not to come home with junk only

ISLA

He did buy whipped cream

WELLS

That's not the point. It's the fact he's doing it because Tor had to go

BEAU

He's smitten

ISLA

Very domesticated of them

JAMES

Did you just say smitten?

Adopting cats together was enough to convince me they're two conversations and a good round of sex away from moving in together



eighteen

MEET THE AUTHOR
HOMECOMING SURPRISES

Isla hops out of Baylor's truck, waving down my grandma and sister with a huge smile on her face. My lips twitch and they turn, spotting my effervescent best friend in the crowd. Wide, excited smiles on both their faces.

My grandma's smile fades as her eyes land on me in Baylor's black truck. I wave with a small grimace. I should have given her a warning that my car was in the shop, but I was hoping she wouldn't see me driving the truck.

Confusion and worry mar the lines on her face as the corners of her lips turn down. She turns away from me, looking over her shoulder and scanning the crowd around us.

Rayne spots us and shouts my name, her little hand waving wildly in the air. I wave back and exit the truck, locking it behind me and looking over my shoulder as I drop the keys in my bag.

My grandma catches Rayne's hand before she can take off in the crowd to reach me and Isla. We trade looks as my grandma pulls Rayne back into her side and hurry our steps to reach them where they are.

"Hi, Grandma," I greet, leaning down to press a kiss against her cheek. "And if it isn't my favorite sister," I tease, rubbing my hand through Rayne's hair as she bands her arms around my waist.

"Where's your car?" my grandma adds, an odd lilt in her voice.

I'm glad I warned Isla that I wasn't planning on telling my family the truth as she pulls Rayne's attention to her, dodging my grandma's. Isla sucks at lying, and one look from my grandma and she'll be spilling the whole sordid tale. Stress my grandma and siblings really don't need.

"Someone hit my car in the parking lot," I tell her, guiding our crew to the entrance of the game. "At least they weren't di—" I cough, catching myself and my grandma raises a brow. "Disrespectful," I amend, making Isla and Rayne giggle. "They left a note and their insurance has it covered."

My grandma raised me for most of my life and knows all my tricks and tells. The way she's studying me and weighing my words reminds me a little too much of high school and I'm one heavy sigh away from trauma flashbacks of being grounded after getting caught in a lie.

She shifts her gaze to Isla and it takes everything in me not to curse. Isla twirls my sister's hair in her fingers, pointedly not meeting my grandma's stare.

"Isla," she drawls, forcing my best friend to lift her eyes. "Is she working too much?" I sigh, part in exasperation and part in relief. She wasn't suspicious about the car, just if insurance is really covering it. Unfortunately, I still don't have a good answer for that.

Isla's responding smile is a little sad, but still genuine. "She works hard, but she's happy." My love for my best friend grows a little more with her words. Her understanding of what my grandma needs to hear and what I need her to not know.

I order and pay for the four of our tickets as my grandma sighs in relief, admitting, "I worry about you girls."

Isla bumps her shoulder. "You don't have to, we have big strong hockey players around to protect us now."

I shake my head as the three most important women in my life giggle together and Isla tells my family about Wells. Even getting my grandma to agree to come to a hockey game this season.

We pass the entrance and find seats in the bleachers near the fifty yard line, half way up to the top. In the middle of the crowd where my grandma likes to be. Used to the noise and chaos.

She nudges me with her elbow. “Does that truck belong to one of these sexy hockey boys?” she asks, the excited curiosity only a grandma can have when she thinks she smells love in the air. And when did they become sexy hockey boys?

“It does, in fact,” Isla answers, taking far too much joy in egging on my grandma.

I groan and Rayne laughs, moving to sit closer to me. “Can I meet your boyfriend, Ryn?” I glare at Isla who just smirks back. Look at what she’s done now. Gotten sweet, love-sick-with-the-idea-of-love, Rayne all excited for something that doesn’t exist.

“Oh, yes,” my grandma agrees, cutting off any of my protests. I’m going to get Isla back so hard for this. My grandma pats my thigh. “You deserve someone who will take care of you. Who will show you what real love looks like. What it feels like.” A wistful, mournful note enters her voice and I lean against her shoulder, grabbing her hand with mine. Her eyes look misty and far away as if remembering something unpleasant.

“I already have that, Grandma.” She focuses back on my face, but the moisture only grows. “You and Grandpa taught me what love really is. The way you sacrificed so much for me and the kids. How you both always put us first and found a way to soothe our fragile hearts after losing Mom. You’ve shown us more love than most people experience in their lifetimes.”

Her smile is soft and sad, heartbroken at the mention of my mom. “I do love you, my sweet Ryn. But that’s not the love I mean.” Of course, it always comes back to romance with this one.

I scrunch my face in protest, but huff a laugh at her persistence. “You and Grandpa also showed me what true love looks like romantically.” How they would go from fighting to

laughing in the span of minutes and they shined brighter when the other walked into the room. It was the two of them against the world, no matter what problems they faced. Once upon a time, I wanted that. I wanted it desperately when I saw how they clung to each other in their grief and stress. I wanted someone to hold my hand, kiss my tears away, and tell me it was going to be okay. That I was going to be okay because they had me. That desperate desire turned into a broken heart and a ruined friendship. Left only the familiar feeling of failing to be good enough. I no longer had the time to wait around for someone else to hold me together, to make me feel better. Not when we lost my grandpa too and I became the one to hold this family together. “One day, I’ll find it,” I promise her. “But right now, I have more important things to focus on.”

She sighs in defeat. “So it’s not a cute hockey boy’s truck?”

“Oh,” Isla giggles, “Baylor is most certainly cute. Want to see a picture? You’ll love him.” She pulls out her phone and shows a picture of Baylor and Wells together as she tells my grandma about both guys and explains to her how they play on the same line.

My grandma hums her approval at both of them before dropping her voice to a whisper. “Have any shirtless pics?” she asks and winks at Isla, making her giggle. She holds up her phone again and I roll my eyes when I see she actually does have a shirtless pic of both of them. When did she even take that?

“Wow.” My grandma fans herself with a smirk. “Why haven’t you made him yours yet, Ryn? He’s already letting you drive his truck.”

Dear lord. “Baylor is just a good friend who happened to be there when we found my car.” Not a lie. Key to a good story is sticking to the truth as often as possible. “He didn’t need the truck, so he let me borrow it for a little bit.”

The bleachers around us have filled up while we were debating my relationship status and the game is just about to start. I grab a blanket and throw it over our laps and Rayne

cuddles deeper into my side. She's still so small, even as she grows taller every time I see her. I don't think she'll get the same height Kanyon and I got. "And what about you, my little ray of sunshine?" I ask her. "How's the fifth grade treating you?"

"It's the same," she answers. "I can't wait until I'm older like you guys and I can be in high school and play sports."

"Oh yeah?" I ask, surprised. Rayne has always been more about reading, coloring, playing dress up with her barbies than wanting to get sweaty or be outside. "What sport do you want to play?"

She taps her little chin as she thinks about it. "Maybe cheer," she says, pointing to where the cheerleaders are running out with their pom poms. "I like their skirts and pom poms," she admits, making me and my grandma chuckle. "But maybe volleyball too. Did you know Grandma watches old videos of you from when you were in high school?"

The admission earns her a harsh hush from my grandma and a tug on my heart. There are times I miss the sport, the camaraderie with my teammates, the adrenaline of a match, but not enough to have regrets. "Hmm," I hum as if I'm thinking. "Maybe we could get you on a team or some dance classes and see which one you like more before you make a choice."

Her eyes light up in excitement. "I can do that?"

I nod and Isla gives me an unsure look over my grandma's shoulder, but I wave her away. I wouldn't have offered it to Rayne if I wasn't positive it was something I can pull off. "Let me look into it and find some good programs."

She bounces in her seat, wrapping her arms around my waist and squeezing tightly. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. You're the best, Ryn."

I kiss the top of her head. "So cheer and volleyball, huh?" I'll dedicate some time this weekend to looking at some options for her age range. Finding a good cheer program that worked on dance and tumbling would be the best bet for her.

And maybe starting her off in a non-competitive league for volleyball. She might not like it so much when there are balls flying at her face.

“Oh, look,” I say, drawing her attention back to the field where the cheerleaders are now stretching out a banner with a flying eagle around the word homecoming. “The players are going to start coming out.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, the crowd is on their feet, cheering for the Eagles as the football team breaks through the banner and makes their way to the sideline.

My pride for my little brother grows with every play on the field I watch. I haven’t seen him play since the end of last season and I can’t believe how much he’s grown. You would never guess he’s one of the youngest players on the field as he leads his team with each play, keeping a cool head and throwing great passes to drive the ball down the field. By half time, the Eagles are up by six points, and my chest feels almost painful at how much progress I’ve missed.

Isla leans over my grandma to reiterate my thoughts. “I can’t believe how good he is now.” My grandma nods, her own pride shining in her eyes.

“He practiced all summer,” she tells us. “Emailed coaches about what drills to work on, studied playbooks. He really loves it and couldn’t wait to get back on the field.”

“Our little Kan is growing up,” Isla coos, and Rayne giggles.

“I’m going to tell him you said that.”

The homecoming halftime show starts and I mostly tune it out until a familiar name is called. “That little shit,” I exclaim as Kanyon accepts the rose from the ASB president as the sophomore homecoming prince. The smirk I can see from all the way over here tells me everything I need to know.

Rayne bursts into giggles. “He was so excited to surprise you.”

That punk. I can’t help but laugh, jumping to my feet to cheer for my stupid ass little brother. He looks so odd up there

with the rest of the homecoming court. The majority of them are all dressed up in suits and simple dresses. All except one of the senior boys, who is also on the football team, two cheerleaders, and the freshman who wears the band uniform. Kanyon and the senior boy are covered in sweat and dirt that just doesn't match the glitz and glamor of the others.

The girl at his side squeals and pushes him away when he tries to hug her, making him laugh. He looks younger, happier, lighter. A weight lifts off my chest, making every long day worth it. For him to have this.

As he and the other player leave back to meet their team, I pat my grandma on the shoulder, no longer caring about the rest of the presentation. "I'm going to go to the restroom. I'll be right back," I explain, sliding past her.

Her hand catches mine, her wide eyes looking around the crowd before releasing my hand and shaking her head. I pause, waiting for her to say whatever was on her mind but she seems to have talked herself out of it. "We'll be here," she says with a tight smile that pronounces the wrinkles on her warm face. Her normally lively blue eyes looking abnormally dim despite the festive occasion.

I shake off the weird feeling and rush to the bathroom, not wanting to miss the start of the second half. Thankfully, the line is short with most people still watching the homecoming procession. Checking the time, I walk out of the bathroom and realize the game should be starting back up soon. In my haste, I don't see the body walking past me until too late. My steps stutter as our bodies collide and hands wrap around my shoulders to keep me from falling.

"My bad," I apologize, looking up before taking an abrupt step back.

His cheeks flush as he runs his hand over the back of his neck.

"Jason?" I ask, surprised to see him here. We aren't far from campus, but far enough for this to be weird. I don't recall any Lockes in my grade and I have a pretty good memory.

He coughs, clearing his throat and slipping his hands into his pockets. “My friend’s sister is on the court. He—umm—asked for me to come with him.”

“Small world,” I respond, looking at the crowd around us and he shuffles on his feet.

“Yeah, we actually sat behind you,” he admits and I cross my arms over my chest. “I didn’t realize you and Baylor Levine were dating.” His laugh is tight and awkward.

I give him a tight smile. “I don’t date.”

He nods, his cheeks flaming red. “Right, of course not.” His voice pitches higher and he coughs again. “Of course you wouldn’t date,” he mutters more to himself than to me. I wait for him to say something relevant but when he doesn’t, I give him a small tilt of my head and start to walk back to my seat.

“Fuck,” I hear him cursing behind me, murmuring more shit I don’t catch. What a weird fucking kid. Hopefully, he doesn’t start being even weirder in our sessions.

The rest of the game flies by, the opposing team coming in hard in an attempt to gain the lead. They close the gap but still lose by three points. By the end my throat is sore and my nose is almost frozen off.

We wait for some of the crowd to clear and I look around to notice Jason isn’t anywhere around us. I haven’t seen him since we ran into each other. Maybe he left the game early after all. I grab my grandma’s arm and guide her down the bleacher steps. We walk slowly, the long night taking a toll on her now. It’s not like we’re in a rush anyways, having to wait for Kanyon to finish with the team and change to meet us outside the locker room.

Kanyon’s whole face lights up when he sees me and Isla waiting for him with my grandma. That smile was worth the extra wait and the shifts I had to trade for to make sure I could be here for his moment. I’d love to say I pull my little brother into my arms and kiss the top of his head, but unfortunately I can’t reach it anymore. Instead, he pulls me into him and I

lightly smack his cheeks with my hands. “I’m so proud of you, buddy.”

His nose scrunches but his eyes so similar to my own shine brighter. Pleased by my praise and affection, even if he’s too cool for that now. “Did I surprise you?”

Isla and I both snort. “She called you a little shit,” Rayne reports happily, making all of us laugh.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” I scold, smacking his shoulder.

He shrugs, looking over his shoulder. “I wasn’t allowed to have my family on the field anyway since I had to leave after the intros. Thought a surprise would be more fun.”

Isla shakes her head, stealing her own hug from him. “It wouldn’t have been a surprise if we had realized what a star quarterback you are. You been eating your veggies or something?”

He smirks at her. “I told you one day I’d be bigger than you. You and Ryn are lucky I’m forgiving and don’t feel the need for revenge,” he taunts.

“Baby brother, I don’t care how tall you get. I will always be able to kick your ass.”

My grandma settles us down before we can get too rowdy and ushers us into our goodbyes. I take an extra moment to study her. She looks more exhausted than usual. Trading looks with Kanyon, he shrugs but gives a slight nod agreeing to text me later. Isla and I give the three of them another round of hugs and when I reach Kanyon, I pull him in extra tight. “I really am so fucking proud of you, kid. Watching you play and smile and thrive tonight just became the best damn night of my life.”

His eyes water as he pulls away from me. “I love you, Ryn,” he whispers. Life is never easy, but ours has taken a lot of devastating turns. Rayne has been saved from so much of the heart ache, but Kanyon remembers enough for those scars to still ache with pain.

“I love you too, kid.” I reach up to pat the top of his head, before turning to Rayne and running my fingers through her auburn hair. “And you too, my ray of sunshine.”

Isla and I head back to where we parked Baylor’s truck. The forty-five minute drive passes quickly but I’m yawning by the time we pull up to the Wild West and Isla is already half asleep.

“I’m not carrying you up those steps,” I joke, shaking her leg to wake her up.

“Wasn’t sleeping,” she slurs sleepily.

I hum and grab both our bags from the back. We’re quiet as we walk into the building, but none of our neighbors are. There’s always something going on in this building. I swear.

She leans against my shoulder and I curse her. My whole body is already being dragged down in exhaustion. The elevator doors ding as they slide open and I pull out my keys to open the door. My mouth drops as I realize the door is sitting slightly askew in the doorway, our knob completely busted.

Adrenaline crashes through my system, energy zapping through my limbs as I push Isla behind me.

“Call Wells.”



nineteen

OR SO HELP ME

Wells curses as I take the lead when he's distracted by his phone ringing.

"It's Isla," James tells him, picking it up off the coffee table.

"Answer it," he says, attempting to cut a corner in the game but I'm able to box him out, smirking when he curses again.

Instead of answering like a normal person and telling Isla that Wells is getting his ass kicked, he swipes to answer and puts the phone to Wells' ear.

"Ahh," Wells groans. "Baylor, you prick. Uh, hey baby. Can I call you back?"

The guys snicker as his voice goes softer when talking to her. But they don't last. Wells drops the game controller, the color draining from his face as he rips the phone from James' hand and jumps to his feet. "What?" he exclaims.

Without thought, I follow his lead and toss my controller down, already looking for his keys.

"What do you mean? Are you okay?" he asks. "Is Torryn okay?"

We all stare at Wells, waiting for an explanation, gesturing for him to put his phone on speaker. I find his keys, and toss them towards him, already walking out the front door.

"No, I'm coming. Don't go in that fucking apartment, Isla."

His panic is starting to freak me out and I debate texting Tor to make sure she's okay.

Isla's small, frazzled voice fills the room as she whisper-shouts. "Just wait, Tor! Wells is coming."

"My fucking cat is in there," Torryn yells back, though she sounds fainter. My heart spasms in my chest as all four of us pile into Wells' Jeep. Wells doesn't worry over anything, but the fear in his face tells me we need to be there too. Even if we don't know what's going on.

We hear Isla yell for Torryn one more time before soft cries and sounds I can't place fill the line.

"It's bad," Isla whispers. "She went in and—" a muffled cry cuts off her words.

I clench my fists at my side, cursing Torryn for not being more patient. Wells' grip on the steering wheel tightens and my body hits the door with the speed he takes the turn.

"We're coming, baby," he promises. "Just hold on. Can you hear anyone still there?"

Isla sniffles. "Just Torryn looking for Potato. I think whoever broke in is gone."

Beau curses in the backseat and it feels like my heart stops beating for a second.

"The whole living room is destroyed," Isla whispers. "Probably the whole place."

"We'll figure it out, baby," he tries to assure her. He slams on the brakes, parking the car at the curb and I'm already halfway out of the Jeep before the car has even fully stopped.

Not bothering to wait for the elevator, I take the stairs two at a time, rushing to the fourth floor. My heart races, running through the possibilities of what I'm about to find. The sound of Isla's cries and pleas for Torryn not to go into the apartment echoing in my mind.

A small tendril of relief washes through me when I spot both women waiting for us in the hall. A pile of white and

orange fur bundled in Torryn's arms as she attempts to soothe Isla.

They spot us at the same moment and Isla launches herself past me and into Wells' arms. I grab Torryn's shoulders, holding her straight and roving my eyes over her to check for any injuries. Once I'm assured she's unharmed, I lift my eyes to the busted door and catch a glimpse of the completely trashed inside.

"Why the fuck would you go in there, Tor?" I ask, the fear of what could have been waiting for her on the other side of the door making my voice strained.

She cuddles the kitten in her arms. "I wasn't leaving Potato."

I shake my head. "You're such an idiot," I scold without any heat. "What if someone was still here?"

She shrugs, petting Potato behind his ears. "I would have bashed their head in."

Beau snorts behind me and I turn around to glare at him. "It's not funny."

He shrugs. "It's a little funny." His eyes focus on the door. "Not the apartment," he clarifies. "But Tor is absolutely capable of bashing heads in and that would be fun to see."

"Have you guys called the cops?" Wells asks, getting us back on topic. The girls shake their heads and I take a step closer to the door and peer in. The couch cushions are ripped apart and shredded, stuffing thrown all on the floor. The tv is smashed on the floor, the coffee table overturned with a leg broken off.

For as far as I can see, things are demolished or vandalized. "I don't think we should enter until they get here."

Torryn nods and sighs. "It's only worse the further in you get." She runs her fingers through Potato's fur, holding him close to her chest as if she needs the reassurance that he's okay.

James already has his phone pressed to his ear. “Hi, I’d like to report a break in.” He gives a brief description of the situation after telling them the address. He nods his head as he hangs up the phone. “Officers are only a minute away. They asked us not to enter the scene.”

Isla murmurs a thanks to James while Torryn just nods in acknowledgement. While Isla doesn’t shy away from showing her emotions, Torryn shuts down. A hard look in her eyes I don’t think I’ve ever seen before. The feeling of an insurmountable wall being erected not only between me and her but her and the rest of her world. Even her best friend. She shows no sign of stress or fear. Putting all her focus on Potato while Wells takes care of Isla.

My mind races with the implications of this latest attack. Torryn has a stalker. A stalker who wants to cause her harm. Maybe not physically yet, but how long will that be true? “Why don’t you guys take the Jeep back home and get the spare bedroom cleaned out? We’ll use the truck to pack what we can salvage here and meet you back there once the cops are done.”

Before either of them can respond, Torryn’s head snaps up from where she was ignoring us. “I’m not moving into your place.”

Anger and frustration burn in my gut in a volatile mix I don’t really understand. Forcing myself to keep calm, I meet her eyes. “You’re sure as fuck not staying here.” Okay, so that wasn’t very calm. But I didn’t scream the words and I can give myself props for that. I haven’t picked her up and tried to shove her in my pocket either. More kudos to me. “We have an empty spare room you can use and Isla can move into Wells’ room.”

“It will be fine once we clean up,” she argues back, drawing her shoulders back as she tenses. Isla’s eyes widen as they volley back and forth between us. Wells whispers in her ear, stopping whatever she was about to say, but I don’t have the space in my mind to spare them a moment.

I cross my arms in front of my chest, lifting myself to my full height. “I swear on my life, Torryn, I will throw your fine ass over my shoulder and carry you out of this apartment if I have to.” Her eyes narrow and her lips turn down but I’m done letting her blow this shit off as just a prank. “You are coming home with me. You will let me move you into the house. You’re going to start taking this stalker shit seriously and take serious precautions to keep yourself safe or so help me, I will put you over my knee and spank your ass raw. Do you understand?”

She rolls her lips back but something other than anger and defiance flashes in her eyes at my words.

“This is the strangest foreplay I’ve ever seen,” Beau whispers, earning him a smack from James. Still, I don’t tear my eyes away from the stubborn girl in front of me.

It’s not until Isla calls her name in a plea that she finally caves. “Okay, fine,” she huffs, but I don’t miss the way some of the tension in her shoulders bleeds out at her acquiescence. My whole body slumps in relief. The need to pull her into my arms is almost impossible to ignore, but I know I’ve pushed her as far as I’m going to get tonight.

The cops’ arrival breaks our awkward standoff and James and Beau take Wells’ keys and head out, nodding to the cops as they pass. I recognize one of the officers as the one who gave us his card and we called about the notes.

“Miss Torryn,” he greets, dipping his head as he approaches us. “Miss Isla.” He shakes his head, a frown forming on his face. “Not the circumstances I wanted to see you lovely ladies in again.” Isla wipes the tears from her face, giving him an appreciative smile, a small one, but still a smile. Wells squeezes her closer into his side.

“Thanks for coming,” Torryn says, gesturing to their front door. “I’m the only one that has been inside since it happened,” she begins to explain, telling them how they noticed the busted door as soon as they got home from her brother’s football game.

I find out more about Torryn in the short time it takes to give her statement to the officers than in the whole time I've known her. As she finishes her statement, the other officer begins to question Isla and Torryn pauses. "Wait, there's more," she says and my spine snaps straight.

"This was definitely targeted at me."

Officer Derek nods and writes something on his pad. "It's safe to assume with the other incidents, that yes, you were likely the intended target. But we still need to cover all of our bases in case it was your roommate they were targeting this time. The incidents may not even be connected." No one believes that for a moment, but I guess it doesn't hurt to be safe rather than sorry.

"No," Torryn answers, shaking her head. "It's not an assumption. Isla's room and bathroom were hardly touched and there's a message on my bathroom mirror."

"Why didn't you say anything?" I ask, turning towards her. She shrugs off my question and I have to force myself to take deep breaths and not snap at her. It doesn't change anything. We already believed the incidents were connected without proof. The proof only helps speed things along for the cops. Right?

Officer Derek steps in when Torryn doesn't respond to the question. "Let the team survey the apartment, take our photos, and grab what evidence we can, and then we can discuss next steps."

As the girls were giving their statements, other officers had showed up and already started going through the apartment. Isla nods her thanks to the officers as they go into the apartment before catching Torryn's hand and gently squeezing. Tor pulls her into her arms and Isla wraps her arms around her waist as they cling to each other. "I'm so sorry, Isles," she whispers.

Wells and I exchange helpless looks. I've never felt more incompetent in my life. Neither one of us knows what the right thing to say or do next is. I almost wish I had gone with Beau

and James to help set the house up for the girls. At least then I would feel like I'm doing something productive.

"It's not your fault, Tor. Please don't say that," Isla pleads, tears making her voice hoarse as she holds Torryn tighter. Some of the ice in Torryn's gaze seems to melt at her words, her features softening and that seemingly impenetrable wall lowers just a little bit. Enough to let Isla in.

What would it be like to be someone like that for her? To be someone she can let her guard down with? To see her worry and fear and insecurities and the scars they come from?

I've seen Torryn naked many times. Know the little scar she has on her elbow from falling off her bike and the bigger one on her thigh from a car accident, and even the tiny one on her chin that you can only see if you're looking up at her from the same car accident. I know where they are and what they look like, how they feel and taste, even where they come from. But never have I seen her more vulnerable than now with Isla in her arms, the two of them holding each other together. I don't know if her scars still ache, or if they hold bad memories. All I have is little facts, little details, all delivered with a casual ease and no emotion.

"What did the message say?" Isla finally asks the question that's been on everyone's mind. I couldn't bring myself to be the one to ask, but I'm more than thankful she finally did.

Torryn takes a deep breath and her shield comes back up as she stares between Wells and I before focusing back on Isla. "No one loves a whore."

My full body twitches with the need to pull Torryn into my arms and assure her, but of what? That I love her? That's not what we are. That's not what either of us wants to be. We don't trade sweet words of love and affection, we tease and taunt and fuck. The way we both like it. We may have become friends and more than just fuck buddies, but that isn't love. Anger and confusion and even a little bit of guilt makes me snap my mouth closed when I realize I have no idea what to say. It's not often I'm speechless, but it shouldn't even surprise me that it's Torryn that's making me so.

“That—” Isla stops, shaking her head, her own face twisted in rage. She takes a deep breath, looking at me before trading looks with Wells. Something I don’t understand passes between them and whatever it is, it seems to help Isla make up her mind. “That’s quite different from the other notes they’ve left.” Her entire tone and demeanor has shifted into problem solving, letting go of her anger at the implication her best friend might be unlovable.

Torryn shrugs. “I guess it was shorter.”

It’s not funny, it’s not funny, it’s not funny. But fuck me if I didn’t just snort a little bit at her response. The corners of her lips twitch in amusement as she looks up at me, before dropping her gaze at whatever else she must see on my face. “Why do you seem so bothered?” she asks, making me sigh.

What a great question. Why am I just as bothered about the message left for the girl I’m fucking as her best friend is? I might not love her, but that doesn’t mean I think she’s unlovable. I just happen to love that she is a whore. Especially when she’s being my whore. “I don’t like the word whore,” I answer instead.

Torryn snorts in disbelief. “Potato and I both know that’s a damn lie.”

I scoff, annoyed by her bringing the cat into it. “Don’t bring root vegetable into this.”

Her blue eyes dance in a familiar way that I haven’t seen since we got here. “Don’t lie,” she quips back, as she covers Potato’s ears. “And don’t call him that. Where the fuck did you even get that one from?”

I smirk, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

She clicks her tongue. “You googled it, didn’t you?”

Of course I would never waste my time looking up alternative ways to say potato when I started running out of common options. What kind of idiot would do that? She laughs, the sound easing something in my chest that has only gotten tighter since that phone call. “You did! You’re such a dick.” Okay, fine. Guilty. But it made her laugh and smile

when she was refusing to give any sign of emotion. It was well worth it to see her eyes shine in amusement.

Officer Derek comes back out into the hallway. “You ladies can come in now and check to see if there’s anything missing.” We all jump in surprise at the deep timbre of his voice. For just a second I had forgotten why we were here. Why we are talking about the word whore. Why Torryn needed the push to smile. Reality is a cruel bitch and she just came crashing back into our little bubble.

The previous tension descends on us once more and we follow the girls into their trashed apartment. It’s even worse than what I expected.

“While it may seem like chaos,” Officer Derek explains, “this job was actually quite methodical. Whoever did this, wanted to cause the most damage in the most efficient way they could. They went room by room and destroyed whatever they could without drawing too much attention.”

Everywhere my eyes rove over the scene in front of me, I spot more and more damage. With each step, Torryn withdraws further and further into herself.

“The only rooms that were untouched were the bedroom and bathroom on the left side of the house, like you mentioned, Torryn. Though it did appear someone rummaged through it. Most likely to determine the occupant of the room.”

Torryn mutters something under her breath, but waves me and Isla off when we turn to look at her.

The kitchen probably took the least of the damage other than Isla’s portion of the house. None of their glassware is broken. Maybe this was what Officer Derek meant about destruction without causing attention to be pulled this way. Even in the Wild West, people would be concerned if a bunch of glass shattered. Food, however, doesn’t make any noise when you dump it on the floor and counters. All that food we had just bought for their place. Such a waste.

“Are they free to take stuff with us?” I ask as Torryn and Isla walk around the kitchen and living room areas to see if

they can spot anything missing.

The officer nods. “We’re done grabbing anything we’ll need. The apartment won’t be locked down, but with that door, they shouldn’t stay here tonight.”

Or ever again. “We’re gonna move them into our house,” Wells answers. “We have extra room.”

The officer nods once again. “That’s good. Whoever is doing this really has a bone to pick with Torryn.” He sighs, rubbing his hand over his chin. “Her room is even worse. Not sure how much she’ll really be able to salvage from there. Poor thing. She’s rough around the edges, but she’s a good girl. You boys keep an eye out for her for me, will ya?”

“Of course, sir,” Wells answers when I don’t. I’m still stuck on his comment about Torryn’s rough edges. She doesn’t have rough edges, people just see what she wants them to see. They don’t pay close enough attention to realize how soft she really is. I mean shit, the girl was ready to face a potential intruder with nothing more than her grit because she was worried about her cat.

He walks away to talk to the girls one last time and I turn to Wells. “Let’s clean up the kitchen? He said they’re done in here.”

His eyes follow Isla as she walks around the room, whispering with Torryn and answering the officer’s questions as they go. “Good idea,” he responds, tearing his eyes away from her to glance back at the kitchen, wincing when he sees the mess it is.

“It’ll be one less thing for them to worry about,” I say in an attempt to make the job not seem as bad. But it’s foul no matter how you look at it.

“Better us than them,” he agrees begrudgingly.



twenty

I'M NOT ASKING

My entire body aches and each thought has to dredge through the thick sludge of my mind before it can even begin to truly form by the time we are done at the apartment. I take one last look around my room and feel a presence behind me.

“It’s going to be okay, Tor. We’ll figure it out.” I close my eyes and let Baylor’s warmth soak into me without even touching him. I’m surprised he’s still here even hours later. I’m surprised he even showed up, let alone Beau and James as well.

“It’ll be fine,” I agree. My room was next to hopeless. Almost nothing worth even attempting to pack as almost everything was torn to shreds. My eyes catch on the scraps of photos scattered over the mess like confetti and I force myself to push them out of my mind. “At least I took a page out of your book,” I tease, trying to find something lighthearted to hang on to.

His hands land on my shoulders. The first time he’s touched me since they got here. His fingers begin to work into the taut muscles, rubbing the knots of them in a way that almost makes me moan. “Hmm,” he hums. “In what way?”

“Been living out of your truck,” I joke, but it is partially true. Almost all of my textbooks and schoolwork were in his truck tonight. I’ve made a habit of leaving it in there with how often I’ve been tutoring. It’s actually a huge relief for my most expensive items to have been safe and out of the apartment.

“You got any clothes in there?” he asks, still rubbing my shoulders. I shake my head. Maybe I should have taken a little more after him.

Every article of clothing was taken out of my closet and drawers and shredded beyond anything that could ever be considered wearable. Even my dirty clothes were cut up into pieces and left in a pile on the floor. “I did have a load of my laundry in the dryer that survived though.”

“Damn,” he curses. “And here I thought you were going to be walking around our place naked.”

I laugh, leaning into his touch and closing my eyes as I forget some of the stress of the day. “You would like that.” I don’t know how he does that. Make the situation seem not so bad. Find something to laugh about when my life is quite literally in tatters at our feet.

“Is there anything else you want to grab?” he asks and I sigh, opening my eyes to look around.

I have a small bag full of my toiletries and make up that thankfully wasn’t destroyed and the laundry basket of clean laundry and that’s it. In comparison to Isla’s bags and suitcases, it looks even more pitiful. “There’s nothing left,” I whisper. Even Potato’s bed was shredded, his litter dumped in the bathtub, and his food poured over the kitchen floor. Baylor already assured me he had everything Potato would need.

Isla and I agreed it was hard to tell if there was anything missing but nothing obvious seemed to be. All except the one thing I had that I really treasured. The one thing that was worth any money in my room. The one thing in this whole horrid affair that nearly brought me to tears. My mother’s jewelry box. The thought of never seeing it again nearly tears my soul in half. But I can’t break down. Not yet. Not here. Not in front of anyone. I told Derek when no one else was around. I don’t want them to worry even more than they already are.

Baylor doesn’t push. It’s something I like about him. He knows when to back off. When to just give me space. He makes it easy to be around him. Without any expectations or stress. He picks up Potato from the feathers on my bed and

hands him to me. His soft fur under my fingertips soothes me as I cuddle him to my chest.

Baylor grabs the bag from my hand and tosses it into the laundry basket before picking it up and leading me back into the living room. Wells has already made a couple trips down to the truck with Isla's stuff and all she has with her now is her computer bag and a suitcase.

"That's all?" she asks in a small and broken voice when she sees what Baylor is carrying.

I smile, but I know it doesn't reach my eyes. "It's enough." It has to be. There's no money to replace everything. Not without telling my grandma and cutting back on the bills I pay for them. That's something I won't consider and Isla knows better than to ask me to. I have enough for school. I'll have to buy a few essentials for work. Those outfits seemed to take the brunt of the anger, reinforcing my thought it's some dick I pissed off at Tease. But I'll be able to use my tip money from last week to replace that stuff.

She clears her throat, wiping the pity from her expression. She knows better than anyone that I don't need it. I've picked myself up from worse. I always figure it out. "None of the food was worth taking," she says instead. "A lot from the living room is okay, but Wells said we didn't need anything," she pauses. "Unless there's anything you want?"

I shake my head. It's not like either one of us are emotionally attached to anything in the living room. It was mostly random things we've thrifted over the years of us being friends. They have memories but none that we need to carry into our temporary home. "We can always come back and grab things if we realize we need something." I huff a laugh. "We'll have to come back and clean anyway." We got some of the mess cleaned, but after the cops left and released the scene to us, we focused on grabbing what we could.

A yawn stretches across my face, breaking my train of thought. Wells walks back into the apartment looking at us. "Ready?" he asks, grabbing Isla's last suitcase.

“Let’s go,” Baylor answers, wrapping his arm over my shoulders and leading me out. We leave without looking back.

It’s after 3 in the morning when we finally get settled into the hockey house, but all I can think about is showering before crawling into bed. I say goodnight to everyone and slip into the bathroom, wishing it was an en suite like my own.

As the hot water pours over my tired and sore body, I finally drop the mask I’ve been wearing. The emotions battering against me spill free as tears stream down my cheeks, mixing with the water until I can pretend the tears never happened. Sobs wrack my body as I do my best to stay quiet as I mourn everything I lost today, and most especially the last threads I had to my mom.

I barely remember her, only flashes of memories here and there. The sound of her laugh, the blue of her eyes, the smell of medicine, and the white walls of her hospital room. I remember warmth, and fear of leaving her arms, but nothing really tangible. No full memories. Can’t remember her singing me lullabies or tucking me into bed at night.

At the bottom of the jewelry box was a letter she wrote to me. Long swoops of cursive that told me how much she loved and cherished me. How she was proud of me and knew how strong I was. How beautiful I would grow up to be, inside and out. On the hard days, when the days were longer and the weeks felt never ending, when my body and mind felt like they were at the end of the rope, I’d pull that letter out and read it until the words blurred together. It carried me through the hardest days since she’s been gone.

Even worse, there were unopened letters to both Kanyon and Rayne, meant to be given to them on the day of their graduations. I’ve lost the last piece that not only I had, but what they could have too. Without them ever knowing.

Cold air hits me at almost the same moment arms band around me. It isn’t until I’m being lifted in the air that I even realize I was curled in the fetal position at the bottom of the shower floor.

“I’m fine,” I say, trying and failing to wipe the water off my face.

Baylor turns off the water and wraps a towel around me. “I’m not asking, Tor,” he says softly. “You don’t have to tell me what’s wrong and I’ll pretend your face is only wet from the shower,” he continues in a soothing voice, drying me off and wringing the water from my hair. “You are just as strong and kickass as you ever are, but I’m not leaving you alone. Not tonight. Please don’t ask me to.”

His near silent beg is what breaks me. I don’t have the strength anymore to resist the comfort of not being so alone. I nod, and tuck my face into the crook of his neck. The tears stream down my face and stain his skin, but the sobs subside and my body relaxes into his. He carries me out of the bathroom, turning off the light behind us. The darkness encompasses us, making me feel even safer in his arms as I let go of everything I’ve held back for not only tonight, but the entire semester.

His head slightly shakes just before he pushes the door open to his room. I hadn’t realized it was right next to the bathroom. No wonder he came in to check in on me. It was probably impossible for him to miss the sobs that I couldn’t manage to stifle.

“I’ve got you, Torryn,” Baylor whispers. He pulls one of his shirts over my head and helps me push my arms through the arm holes and then tucks me into his bed. I should protest. I should go back to my room. I shouldn’t let myself lean on him like this. But I’m so tired. “I’m still not asking, but that doesn’t mean I’m not here,” he reassures me.

Baylor crawls into bed with me and I let myself be weak. My body melts into his and I fit perfectly against him. Sleep takes me before the tears even dry on my cheeks.

My dreams bring fragments of thoughts and feelings that don’t fit together quite right. The message written on the mirror popping up along with lines from the other notes. A voice yelling them at me while someone else cries. Baylor covering my ears and hiding me in his truck. Someone calling

me a good girl and the cries getting louder. Another scream that comes from down a long hallway. Glass shattering and a disembodied voice whispering in my ear.

Waking up doesn't bring me the strength and restfulness I had hoped it would. Checking the time I realize I've slept far past when I normally would. I curse and sit up quickly, disoriented as I look around and don't recognize where I am.

"Nope," a growly timbre says behind me. I squeak as arms pull me back and I flop back into bed, Baylor's arms wrap around me and he snuggles into my side. "Go back to sleep, Tor. It's too early."

I smack his hand where it's wrapped around my waist but he only tightens his hold. "It's after eight," I scold.

He groans, rubbing his nose in my hair. "And we didn't go to bed until like 4. Go back to sleep, maybe you'll wake up less cranky."

I huff, but my eyes are still heavy with exhaustion and my body aches when I haven't even climbed out of bed yet. I don't hear anyone else in the house up and about either. "I have a class at 9," I argue half-heartedly.

"It's Saturday," he corrects, his hand dragging over my face. "Now, snooze."

I sigh, but we both know I'm going to cave. I let him hold me closer and close my eyes, drifting back to sleep almost instantly. This time without any of the broken and haunting pieces of my dreams to follow. I sleep deeper than I have in years.

The next time I wake up, I actually feel better. Good enough to slip out of bed and go search for Isla. Maybe Baylor had a point. Last night was hell on earth and I still have hours until my shift at Tease tonight. If there's any day to take a rest day, it's today.

Finding Isla isn't hard when I just follow the scent of coffee in the air. She sits at their island, a mug wrapped tightly in her hands as steam from it curls around her face.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she teases.

I roll my eyes. “You’re one to talk.” Her eyes are still swollen with sleep and the evidence of her tears. I didn’t bother looking in the mirror because I don’t even want to imagine what my own face looks like. There are some things that I just don’t need to know.

“Baylor still asleep?” Wells asks as he puts another mug full of coffee in front of me.

I nod to answer him, taking a long sip of the burning liquid that still tastes like heaven. “Thanks.”

Turning my attention to Isla, I lean my head on her shoulder. “How are you feeling today?”

“Less overwhelmed,” she answers. “A little angrier. You?”

I shrug, sitting up straight and drinking more coffee to buy myself time before I answer her. “Same, I guess.” My voice stays even but with one look she knows I’m full of shit. I’m probably even more overwhelmed today than I was last night as I think of all the ramifications of this. I can’t guess what the goal this fucker might have, but if it’s seriously denting my bank account than he’s on a winning streak. “Want to go to the grocery store and make lunch?”

It’s just after 11, so we should have plenty of time to make something easy for the guys as a thank you for letting us stay here.

Wells puts a credit card in front of me. “This is the house card. If you’re buying anything for the house, use this. At the end of the month we all split it evenly. But be warned, if it goes in this fridge, it’s fair game for anyone. You want to save something for yourself? Put it in the fridge in the garage. We won’t touch it if it’s out there.”

Isla giggles at whatever look I must have made. “She’s impressed,” she faux whispers to Wells.

Flipping her off, I shrug. “It’s a good system.”

Wells beams at the praise as if it really was a huge compliment. “We like to keep it fair and easy.”

I finish my coffee and rinse out the mug before placing it in the dishwasher. “I’ll get dressed and we’ll go?”

Isla smirks. “Pants would be good for the public,” she agrees. She looks at Wells before turning to look over her shoulder and then back at my bare legs, chewing her lip. “Maybe you shouldn’t walk around here pantsless?” she asks hesitantly, looking at Wells for an answer. “There are other people here.”

“Oh come on, Isla,” Beau chastises as he walks into the room. “I’m a fan of the new view. In fact, I think we should all follow Torryn’s lead.” A paper towel roll bounces off his face and Wells glares at him.

“Torryn can do whatever she’s most comfortable doing, but don’t be a horn dog about it. And keep your pervy eyes off my girlfriend,” Wells growls. It’s kind of sweet he won’t tell me what to do but will throw objects at his friends.

Not that Beau is at all deterred. “Pft,” he scoffs. “Torryn knows there is a difference between being a horndog and appreciating art that is being put in front of my eyeballs. Right, Tor?”

I snort and raise a brow. “I haven’t shaved my legs in a week.” His responding laugh helps me relax even as I turn around to find James red-faced and staring at my legs. “I can put pants on.”

He shakes his head, making Beau cackle behind me. “Don’t worry, T. He likes the view too.”

James flips him off as Baylor walks into the kitchen, his hair a ruffled mess that makes him look younger and more boyish. “Don’t mind me,” James says. “We want you to be comfortable here.”

Baylor’s eyes flick between all of us before heat flashes in them when they catch on my legs and slowly work their way up to the hem of his shirt. “Is it too soon to say I’m happy most of your clothes got destroyed?”

I roll my eyes and flip him off, but my lips twitch in amusement.

“Amen,” Beau agrees. “In fact, I think we should throw all of our clothes out in solidarity.”

A muffled thunk followed by a grunt tells me Wells threw something else at Beau, but I don't turn around to see what it was. Instead, I make my way up to my new room where we dropped my remaining stuff on the floor. I sigh as I stand in the doorway and look over the bare and mostly empty room. It's nothing like the room at my place. Bare walls, bare floor, but hey, at least there are bed sheets and a comforter on the bed. They might be a boring navy blue, but at least they're there. It's not like I have anything left to make it feel more like mine anyway.

A problem for another day.



twenty-one

SPARKLES WHERE THE SUN DON'T
SHINE

I knock lightly on her door before pushing it open.

She was her usual smiles and snark downstairs, but something still urged me to follow her to her room after everything that happened last night. It would be impossible for her to not still be reeling from it all. She was there for me when I needed her and I want to be able to do the same for her now.

Torryn turns around, a brow already raised in her signature way of asking a question. Currently, that singular brow is saying, “Why the fuck are you in my room?” Her hands pause where they were buttoning up her jeans and I catch a glimpse of black underwear before she drops my shirt back down, covering it.

Shutting the door behind, I fall onto her bed and put my arms behind my head and lean back. “Why are you getting dressed?” Looking around her room, she hasn’t made any moves to unpack the little she brought with her. Not like she’s had the time, but I would have helped her if she needed it. Especially if she did it only dressed in my shirt. Maybe I could have even convinced her to ditch that too.

She rolls her eyes, pulling my shirt over her head and tossing it at me. My dick twitches at the sight of her tits. “It’s what one does before they go in public,” she snarks as she bends over to dig into her laundry basket. “Fuck,” she mutters, coming up empty and wiping her hands over her face in frustration.

I sit up straight, snapping to attention. “What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head, sighing as she begins to dig through the laundry basket again. “None of my bras made it,” she explains. She lifts up a sweater and examines it before pulling it on over her head. It’s a dark brown with thick material, but as she turns to look in the mirror, I can still see her beaded nipples through it.

My dick twitches. “It’s a good look.” I grin, beckoning her to me. “You should give me a better look.”

She doesn’t ever bother to give me a response, turning back to the mirror to check her appearance once more, sighing as she shrugs. “It’ll have to work.”

“Could you borrow one from Isla?” I ask, only because she doesn’t seem thrilled, but more like resigned.

Torryn glances down at her chest before giving me a bewildered look. “She’s like two cup sizes smaller than me.”

I scoff, why would I know that? “It’s not like I stare at her tits,” I defend.

She doesn’t respond, pulling a jacket over the sweater and grabbing her wallet out of her backpack. The more I watch her, the more I realize how much she really lost. No purses, or bags that girls always seem to take everywhere with them. Barely any clothes options. My eyes take in the room in a new light and I almost cringe at how sterile it is. How unlike Torryn it is.

I hate it.

“See you later,” she says, interrupting my thoughts. She waves and heads out of the room, leaving me behind in her room that feels nothing like her.

How can I fix that?

I still don’t have my answer after the girls get back and start cooking us all lunch.

It’s even better than Wells, and he’s not a half bad cook. While we all insisted they didn’t need to do anything as thanks, I get the feeling they’ll be in our kitchen a lot more often now after all our reactions.

“You ready for the party tonight?” Beau asks, knocking on my door before pushing it open.

I give him an unamused look. “I don’t know. Am I?” After hosting our Halloween party, the guys took away my right to pick my own costume. Tonight Beau is in charge of preparing both of ours.

His grin is far too delighted to be anything other than trouble. I groan. “What have you done?”

Now that I think about it, I don’t even know what the theme is for tonight. We had classics, there was a horror themed one, but I’m pretty sure that’s the one on Halloween. What were the others? Ah got it. “Is it devils and angels tonight or celebrity couples?”

Beau smirks. “Couples.” He tosses a bag my way and I catch it just as something black and way too sparkly falls out. “You and I are the hottest couple around.” The asshole laughs at my shocked expression. “I picked it just for you, my favorite Swiftie.”

I groan, cursing as I pull out the black sequined outfit and blonde wig. “How did you even find this in my size?”

He cackles. “It wasn’t easy, I promise. But it was definitely worth it.”

Flipping him off, I put the outfit back into the bag and toss it on my bed. “I’m still going to look hotter than you.”

His responding smirk is infuriating. “Sure, if you ever stop sulking about Tor going to work and let Isla do your makeup.”

Torryn left almost immediately after we finished eating lunch. “I’m not sulking,” I protest. I just came to my room to rest before the party tonight. Was I disappointed Tor wasn’t going to be there? Of course. Who wouldn’t be after all the fun we had last weekend at the party? It’s not sulking.

“Sure, big guy. Isla said she’s ready whenever you are.”

I look back at the sparkly outfit. Well, if I’m going to do it, might as well full send it.

There are only small regrets a couple of hours later as I walk down the stairs and have to pick a wedgie out with almost every step. I glare at Isla who isn't even trying to stifle her giggles anymore. "How the fuck do you wear shit like this every day?" The soft material of the shorts is getting way too comfortable making its home up my ass.

Wells snorts as he turns to look at me. A smack lands on my ass making me hiss as Beau laughs from behind me. "Looking good, Levine." I am going to get this fucker back so good first chance I get.

"Next time just buy me a dress. These shorts are going to have to be surgically removed."

"Drinking will make you forget about them," Isla says, but her amusement doesn't do much to boost my confidence. "Or you could always ask Torryn to help you." Girl has a wicked grin when she drops her guard.

I point at her. "You are full of brilliant ideas." Tequila and Torryn are quickly becoming my two favorite things. Too bad she won't be at the party.

Beau throws his arm over my shoulder, and pulls me into his side as Wells takes a picture. At least he also looks ridiculous with a fake beard that looks nothing like Jason Kelce. Isla on the other hand, looks cute and comfy dressed as his wife, Kylie. Something I'm sure Wells has been preening about since she agreed to this. Disgustingly cute fuckers.

James comes down dressed as another football player. Why did they all get to be athletes? "Where's your couple?" I ask him, annoyed I'm the only one not in football gear.

He grins while his eyes rake over me. Perv. "My Gisele is meeting me at the party."

I shake my head. Conspiring fuckers. "You all are the worst."

Wells pats my shoulder. "But you make such a pretty Taylor."

James huffs a laugh. "Next time don't piss off Wells."

At least I look better than the princesses from last weekend. We leave the house and instantly the cold air hits my bare legs, making me curse and Isla cackle. Her innocent giggles apparently a thing of the past.

“The alcohol will help,” she promises, handing me a water bottle full of clear liquid. Fuck it. Can’t make it worse. Taking several gulps, my throat burns with the liquor, but it doesn’t do much to warm up my legs. My dick is still trying to crawl back inside me to get away from how cold it is out here.

“You’d think those hairy ass legs would keep you warm,” Beau taunts.

I snort. “You’re one to talk, Chewbacca.”

He doesn’t get the chance to respond as we walk up the walkway to the front door of the hockey house some of the juniors live in. Wells clicks his tongue. “Not as impressive as ours,” he notes. Isla pats his arm, nodding her agreement.

I almost wish I could tell him he’s wrong, but their decorations definitely don’t compare. They aren’t bad, just not impressive. We walk into the house and it’s much warmer in here than out there. The inside at least looks better with fake spider webs, fog machines, and lights going off to match the songs blaring through the house. Instantly, I decide not to go back outside. Too fucking cold.

We head straight for the kitchen, grabbing warm beers while Isla grips her water bottle a little tighter, eyeing our cups distastefully. Taking a sip, I shake my head. Should have followed her lead and brought my own bottle. Chugging the rest of the warm beer, I fill my cup back up as Tate and a guy I don’t recognize right away comes over.

Tate eyes me with a look of disbelief. “I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am,” he huffs. I don’t recognize who he is dressed up as, but before I get the chance to ask, he’s introducing his friend. “Guys, this is Xander. He goes to Everleigh.”

Recognition dawns at me. “Number twenty-three,” I say, reaching my hand out to shake his. The corners of his lips

twitch as he nods his hello back before pulling away and nodding to the others. He's a beast of a defender at one of the best schools on the other side of the country. I've also heard he can be a bit of a dick. I didn't know him and Tate knew each other.

"Lost a bet?" Xander asks as stares at the sparkly shorts showing off my legs. I should really work on my tan more.

"Not exactly," I hedge.

Beau snorts. "This is what happens when you can't follow simple directions. You don't get to pick your own costumes anymore."

Xander nods like it makes perfect sense to him, making me roll my eyes. New guy isn't going to be on my side. Not that I need him. "It was a good joke," I defend. It was still worth it despite the chaffing. Torryn thought the French fries were funny, and I got to see her in my costume. It was a win all around.

"It was a joke only you and Torryn understood," Wells retorts.

Tate's brows raise. "You guys a thing now?"

"No," I answer at the same time as Wells, Beau, and James all say, "Yes." Isla just laughs, sipping on her vodka with wide green eyes, trying to look innocent. She's not fooling me anymore.

"We're not a thing," I clarify, looking straight at Isla. Last thing I want is for Torryn to think I'm saying shit like that behind her back.

"Of course you're not," she appeases, but something about her tone makes me narrow my eyes.

"We're not a thing," I repeat.

Tate and Xander's eyes volley between our small group and Tate mutters something about regretting asking. But James snorts, not letting the conversation die. "How many times have you guys fucked now?"

I scratch my chin. “Like just how many times we’ve fucked? Or how many different occasions? ‘Cause those are pretty different answers.” I smirk. “Or how many times she’s come, ‘cause that number is even higher.”

Wells smacks me upside the head as James rolls his eyes. “So a lot,” James says.

“Never known Tor to hookup with the same guy more than a couple times,” Beau muses and I wonder again how long they’ve known each other and how close they actually are. He always talks like he knows her well. She does too, now that I think about it. “Not really known to stay around long enough to fuck more than once each time either.”

“It’s good sex. Worth hanging around for round two.” Isla smirks, stifling her laugh and I wink at her. “And round three.” Wells smacks me again.

“Uh huh,” James huffs. “And she moved in for good sex too?”

Tate’s eyes widen. “Torryn moved in with you?” I can feel his disapproval wafting off him in waves.

“Woah, woah, woah,” I say, putting my hands up in defense. “Let’s not be dramatic now. Isla moved in too.”

“What?” Tate snaps, his eyes flashing to Isla and Wells.

She shakes her head. “Hate to agree with Baylor here, but isn’t that kind of an extenuating circumstances thing?”

James and Beau trade looks as if debating the validity of her point.

“Their apartment was broken into and ransacked,” I remind them in exasperation. “Were we supposed to leave them there?” Isla nods along with my words. Handing me her water bottle as I drain another cup of beer. I take it, grateful for her in more than one way now.

Tate looks to Xander for help, his hand running through his hair. “I am missing so much context.”

Xander pats him on the shoulder. “Don’t think we’re needed for this conversation, but it is entertaining.”

Beau and James continue their silent conversation but finally James nods. “We concede that point,” he declares. “Either one of us would have also insisted they both move in.” At least they aren’t asses to women, good to know. “But that doesn’t explain the truck,” he continues.

“A solid point,” Wells pipes up. Fucking asshole. I didn’t realize letting her borrow my truck was going to cause so much bitterness in my housemates.

“You guys would let her bus across town alone? At night?”

Doubt passes their faces but they seem determined to keep this conversation going. Why can’t they just drop it? Warmth buzzes in my veins as the alcohol starts to work its magic.

“Fine, fine, fine,” Beau relents. “I guess sleeping in your shirt, in your bed is also totally just fuck buddy territory then.”

I point my water bottle in Isla’s direction. “Extenuating circumstances, like she said.” She rolls her lips, hiding her smile. It’s not like I’m going to air out Tor’s dirty laundry just to make myself look better though. She already had a hell of a night last night, she doesn’t need everyone to know how much it hit her. She would hate that. Wells saw the state she was in. She needed someone. It didn’t have to be me, but I was there so it was.

He must sense the conversation veering into territory that Tor would be uncomfortable with because he finally steps up, putting his hands up to wave their questions away. Both James and Beau shut their mouths as they wait. “The real question is,” he starts, meeting my eyes and pausing. “Would you care if she fucked another guy?”

Xander raises his hand. “I’ll fuck her. She sounds fun,” he taunts, earning a smack to the chest from Tate.

Ignoring him, I wave Wells off. “When would she even have the time to? That’s why we both like our situation. We don’t have to go looking for ass.” Simple and makes perfect sense. It’s not a relationship. It’s convenience. Vodka burns my throat as I take another generous sip, scrunching my nose as it goes down.

Beau snorts. “You know she works at a strip club, right?” he asks, astonished. “She could get ass any time she wants.”

My mouth parts open in shock. “She’s a bartender,” I argue.

He nods slowly, a grin spreading across his stupid face. “At a titty bar.”

“It’s not like she strips,” Isla defends.

Xander curses, whispering something to Tate that sounds suspiciously like he wants to meet Tor now.

“Where?” I demand.

Isla hesitates, but Beau and James are both grinning, far too pleased with themselves to keep the information quiet now. She sighs, “Tease ‘Em and Please ‘Em.”

“Ah, fuck,” I curse. I’ve never been to Tease, but who hasn’t heard of it? Even the bartenders and servers wear next to nothing and it’s as dive bar as places like that come. Not necessarily seedy, but definitely not by the book either. “No wonder she always leaves in a sweatshirt.”

“Sure you’re not jealous?” James taunts.

I huff, flipping him off. “Of course not.” Why would I be? I’m the one who has her tits on my phone, my cock down her throat, her pussy on my face. This tightness in my chest is just worry. Worry for her. I didn’t realize where she was working when she said it was possibly just a pissed off dude from the bar. What if the creep has eyes on her now?

Isla’s gaze narrows on my chest and I don’t realize I’m rubbing it until I drop my gaze to look at it. “We should go visit her,” Isla suggests with a growing smile, her eyes following my hand even as I drop it back to my side as she picks up her phone.

“Good idea,” I agree. “The stalker might have eyes on her there.”

James nods, trading looks with Wells and Beau. “A very sensible reason to go.”

“We are not missing this,” Xander mutters to Tate.

ISLA

sooooo, that was definitely jealousy right?

Beau changes group chat name to Denial isn't only a river

JAMES

I didn't think it was possible to be so clueless

Also...sorry Isla. Didn't mean to jinx you guys about moving

Unless you're stalking my best friend, not your fault

WELLS

How does Torryn feel about him, you think?

BEAU

She isn't bored of him yet. That's something

She wouldn't sleep in his bed if she wasn't comfortable around him

Especially after last night

BEAU

Do we try to make him jealous again?

WELLS

Should we really be interfering?

BEAU

You think those idiots are going to figure it out themselves?



twenty-two

WORTH A GRAND

Tease is loud and chaotic tonight. But for once it's in the best way possible.

Energy pulses through the place as lights flicker around the stage and the music reverberates up through the soles of my feet and through my body. Marissa and Tiffany work the pit while Sasha dances on the stage, blowing kisses in my directions every chance she gets. I'm not convinced she's sober, but fuck if it's my business as long as she keeps her shit together.

Alysha bumps her hip against mine as she passes by. "We missed you last night. Did not run smoothly."

I chuckle, mixing a sex on the beach and pouring the colorful mixture over ice. "Won't be missing me much anymore," I tell her. "I'll be closing almost every night the next couple months."

Her eyebrows crease with worry. "Any reason?" she asks, treading lightly.

I hum, pouring three tequila shots to add to the mixed drink order. "Just some expenses coming up. Staying on top of it." I haven't told the staff here what happened, but whispers have passed through all of them. The cops did come by to ask them some questions about any concerning patrons after all. They have an idea something happened, but none of them have asked.

She sighs, but doesn't say anything, moving back down the bar. We're two women cut from the same cloth, fucked over by circumstance. She won't call me out for working too much,

the same way I won't mention the blank application to Westbrook's nursing program still sitting in her cubby. We all do what we have to do. We all have hard decisions to make. Sometimes we don't need the push, we just need someone to respect our decision.

A low whistle draws my attention back to the bar as Nat picks up the shots and mixed drinks for her table. I smile at the newcomer I don't recognize as he takes a seat at the bar, his eyes glued to my practically exposed tits. Courtesy of Isla's two sizes too small bikini top. At least she had a simple black triangle top. Can't complain. The tips tonight have already been better than usual. Might have to steal this top from her.

My eyes flick down the bar to where Officer Derek is nursing a beer. He cut back when he saw me show up, his eyes wandering over the bar every few minutes. I hate to admit it, but it does make me feel just a tad safer.

"What can I get for you?" I ask. His eyes briefly flick away from my chest to meet my eyes and his features soften.

"Whatever you have on tap," he responds.

"Coors?" I ask and at his nod, turn around to pour his beer. Placing it on the bar in front of him I ask, "Tab or close you out?"

His eyes flicker with interest as they weigh on me heavily. "You can close me out," he decides. I print a receipt and lay it next to him, but as I go to turn away, I stop when he clears his throat. He has his wallet in his hands and pulls out a twenty, laying it on top of the receipt. "I don't need any change."

I flash a quick smile, grabbing the twenty and the receipt. "Thanks."

He hums, sipping on his beer. I move down the bar, taking more orders and pouring drinks as I move. Alysha and I bump back into each other in the middle and I turn back to work my way back to the far side of the bar. It's been a consistent rush of people and orders since I got here and shows no sign of slowing down.

I grab a rag and start wiping down behind the bar making my way back to the register. The man from earlier is nursing his beer, his eyes following me as I move. As soon as I'm close enough, he grins. "You ever get on stage?" he asks, nodding to the stage where Marissa has taken over on the stage and Sasha is now in the pits.

"Just a bartender," I say, accustomed to answering this question. The regulars know better than to even ask.

"There a number that changes that answer?"

I cock my head, taking him in with a new appreciation. He's young, but not college aged. Probably late twenties, maybe early thirties. He dresses nice but casual, nothing worth noting at first glance, but on my second run through it's obvious he comes from money. The clothes aren't just off the rack. They're good quality, fitting his frame perfectly. His watch looks familiar and expensive but I'm not good enough with brand names to tell which one it is.

"What? You gonna pay \$500 just to see me swing around a pole?"

He smirks, his eyes dropping down to my tits. "Yeah, I definitely would," he answers, pulling out his wallet for emphasis.

I roll my eyes, checking the rest of my bar to make sure no one else needs my immediate attention. "Sorry, I still don't strip."

"A grand," he counters. "Clothes can stay on."

I arch a brow, trying to get a read on this guy. Sure, I have great tits and it doesn't hurt to look at me. But all three girls working the floor tonight are just as, if not more, blessed in both those departments.

"I like you," he says as if he can read the questions in my gaze. "And your tits," he adds when he catches my skepticism.

I chuckle dryly. "Nah." I wave him away, picking up another order Nat dropped off. When he's still waiting for an answer, I sigh. "You don't like me. If you did, you would have

asked for my number. Maybe my name. Not just for me to shake my ass for you.”

He laughs, and it’s not as grating of a sound as it should be. He seems like an arrogant dick, but somehow it works for him. Even if it’s not working on me. Though an extra grand sure as fuck doesn’t sound bad. “You got me there, but does that mean a lap dance is off the table?”

“Was never on the table,” I counter.

He clutches at his chest, just as Nat comes to pick up her order. I hand her the drinks, just as he says, “You wound a guy. Not even one spin around the pole?”

I rest my elbows against the bar as I take my time studying him. “Is it a kink thing?” I finally ask, making Nat, who’s paused to watch the interaction, laugh. “Controlling women with money, I mean.”

Rather than being offended, he looks amused. “Could be my way of ensuring no one gets too close,” he drops to a conspiratorial whisper, leaning closer. “Or I’m just used to getting what I want and don’t mind spending money to get it.”

Rolling my eyes, I nod for Nat to get a move on it and turn my back on the stranger with apparently too much money on his hands and not enough to do with it. A pity. There’s a lot of good money can accomplish in this world. Unfortunately for both of us, getting me on that stage is not one of them. Not that I never have danced up there before, but not at the request of an entitled dick.

The song playing ends, and Sasha begins to climb off stage as her set ends. The pause between her set and Tiffany’s is slightly longer than usual, drawing my attention that way to see what the problem is. Tease doesn’t have the same vibe as a nightclub, but not quite like a bar either. It’s somewhere in the middle with music and energy that evolves throughout the night depending on our moods and the crowd.

Tonight has been leaning more and more into the club atmosphere, with the lights dimming and the music growing louder. Something about the crowd tonight is feeding into it.

The sudden pause is drawing more and more looks from the tables as their gazes search the pit for the next dancer.

When Tiffany finally makes her appearance, she has a microphone in hand and a wicked smile that spells trouble. My eyes narrow, and sure enough I find Nat preening as she smiles in my direction. I can't help but laugh at their antics, even if I already know stranger boy is about to get exactly what he asked for.

Rather than allowing Reggie, who is managing the pit tonight, to announce her, Tiffany introduces herself. The mischievous glint in her eye grows as she flourishes her hand in my direction, daring me to join her for her first dance. She laughs as she waits for my response, Nat and Alysha grinning from ear to ear. Even Reggie's lip twitch as he raises a brow in challenge.

I shake my head at the lot of them.

Brats. Every single one of them.

I hop over the bar and make my way to the pit where I can climb onto the stage where Tiff is waiting for me. She takes my hand with hers as the crowd cheers, some of the regulars whistling. This hardly feels sensual, more entertaining than anything. At least I'm familiar with all of the girls' routines.

Tiffany kisses my cheek and I take a small bow before we take center stage. Where she's usually a couple inches shorter than me, her heels give her enough lift for her to gain the advantage as she spins me around and the music slowly starts. I recognize the beginning notes of Collide by Justine Skye and Tyga, the same song Tiffany always starts with. She prefers to start slow and sensual before working up into a faster tempo.

Letting her take the lead, I follow a step behind her. She adjusts her routine to keep the pole work to a minimum, choosing instead to dance against my body, gripping my hips in her hands and grinding my hips in beat with her.

She pushes every step of the way, trying to make me the center of attention even as I do the bare minimum, making her work all the harder. I laugh as she runs her hand down my arm,

catching my hand with hers and leading it to the tie of her cropped top. I pull the string, swaying my body to the rhythm to the music while Tiffany throws her head back and shakes her hair out. Girl is a performer through and through.

I gently ease the top off her shoulders, exposing her top that covers even less than my own. She spins around, pushing her ass into me as she shakes her tits to the crowd. It's only another beat of the song before she's turning back to me, wrapping her arms around my neck and dancing against my body, moving down until her ass hits the stage. Her tongue dances against the exposed skin on my thigh and I shake my head when she grins up at me. Her rise is just as slow as her drop was and when her hands find the tie for my bikini top, I click my tongue. "Don't even think about it, Tiff. You know the rules."

She sticks her tongue out at me, settling for caressing my chest over my top. Moving behind me, she attempts to push it again, pushing my tits together for the crowd before teasing the edges of the top as if she's going to pull the small triangle to the side and expose my nipples. I tug on her hair and she laughs, dropping her hands and leading me to the pole instead. I should have known better than to think she was going to just let it go so easily. I didn't give her what she wanted. Like I said. Brat.

Flipping her off, I wrap my hand around the pole and take a couple of steps before climbing the pole and doing the one pole move I do know. Tiff drops into the splits in front of me as I do the extended firemen spin right as the song comes to an end.

As soon as the last note rings out, I drop off the pole, take a bow and point the attention back to Tiffany who beams at me. "Thanks for the dance," she teases, wrapping her hand around the pole and taking over the stage.

Reggie helps me off the stage, chuckling. "Been a while since I've seen you up there."

I roll my eyes. "They know my weaknesses."

He hums his agreement. “Your inability to back down from a challenge.” His eyes flick back to the stage. “You controlled her well though, she wanted to take it much further.” Oh, I know. Tiff is all about pushing boundaries and she’s far more into women than she is men. She would have turned it into a bad porno if she had her choice.

Nodding my acknowledgement, I gesture back to the bar where Alysha is suddenly being swamped. I move around the pit, heading back to my usual station, waving to regulars as they call me out and ignoring the catcalls and whistles from the brief dance.

As I slip behind the bar, and get to work on taking orders, I stop in my tracks and do a double take. “Isla?” I call out, my eyes moving to the crowd of football players around her. Well football players and a huge dude in sparkly shorts and a blonde wig. She spins, giving me a huge grin.

“Tor! We came to visit you.” Her eyes are glazed with that look she only gets when she’s been drinking. What the fuck is happening? And where the hell is Wells? How could he leave her?

My eyes flash back to the football players and understanding dawns on me. The party. Wells wraps his arm around Isla and pulls her into his side, leading her closer to the bar. I start to recognize the other guys with them, noticing Beau first as he winks at me, then James. Oh no. My lips twitch as I focus on the guy in the bad blonde wig.

Baylor.

His hazel eyes burn fiercely as he meets my gaze. “Isla said you don’t dance,” he says, his words running into each other just enough to give away he’s had just as much as Isla, if not more, but not quite enough to be considered a slur.

I cock my head trying to decipher the emotion behind those words. It’s not anger.

“She told me the same thing,” the stranger from earlier says, but he’s wearing a smug smile as he raises a brow in my direction. “Apparently it’s not money that gets her on the

stage.” His smirk is starting to edge into annoying and I click my tongue. “Just a dare,” he finishes.

Confusion passes over Isla’s face as she looks to Wells. “I never said that,” she whispers, making me chuckle as I begin pouring beers for everyone except for Isla. She gets a water.

The guys around her all stifle their laughs as Wells runs his hand through her hair. “Not you, babe. Tor said that.”

Isla nods as she understands, turning to face the stranger again. “Who are you?”

The smile he gives her is much softer and less smug than any he’s given to me tonight. “Matteo Alvarado,” he answers, sticking his hand out to shake hers. My drunk friend easily grips his and shakes it. “Isla,” she responds. Wells shakes his head at the offered beer and I pass it on to James instead.

“As I gathered.” His amusement rings through me and something about that spells danger. Not sure why, but I don’t like his attention on my naive best friend.

“So you dance?” Baylor asks again, pushing a lock of blonde hair out of his face. I stare at him again, baffled by his costume until Beau pushes past Wells and throws an arm around his shoulders. “Aren’t we a cute couple?” he asks, poking Baylor in the cheek.

It clicks, and I snort, handing Beau a beer and he blows a kiss as thanks. “I didn’t realize your obsession ran quite this deep,” I tease Baylor, passing him a water as well.

Baylor rolls his eyes, looking at the water distastefully, but not arguing. “Beau picked it. I think I would have looked better in a dress.” His eyes drop to my chest and his smile is salacious. “Not as good as you look in that top though.”

Somehow the group has engulfed Matteo in the center of them and he raises his glass in agreement to Baylor’s words. He must have switched to whiskey while I was on stage and the amber liquid swirls in his glass, the ice clinking. The other beers I poured go to the remaining guys they brought with them, one who I recognize as the goalie, but the other is a stranger who stands on Matteo’s other side.

“You danced.” Baylor’s eyes flick between me and the stage.

I cock my head at him. Why is he so fixated on that? “We’ve established that.”

“She looked good too,” Matteo taunts, watching Baylor over the rim of his glass. “A natural. Though she should have let the other have her way.”

Baylor nods. “She does have great tits,” he agrees, before cutting himself off and looking back at me, his eyes dazed with alcohol. The water was definitely a good call. “But they look best on my phone.”

What the fuck is happening?

I stare at Baylor bewildered while the entire group cackles. Even Matteo chuckles, patting his shoulder. Beau squeezes his shoulder on the other side. “I told you she could throw a pebble in this place and hit someone who wants to fuck her.”

I don’t have time for this. I grab one of the tickets and begin to fill the drinks, placing them on trays but staying close to the group as I work. As the next hour passes quickly, I’m not sure which gaze is more unsettling, Baylor as his eyes follow me down the bar, growing with lust every time my breasts sway, or Matteo as his dark eyes flick back and forth between me and Baylor. Or if it’s the weight of Beau’s words that echo in my mind.

The rush begins to slow, the bar dwindling down to only our group and a few others. I didn’t notice the hot stranger—Matteo—leave, but I wasn’t paying close enough attention. Nodding to Alysha, I decide to take a quick break to run to the bathroom while I have the chance. It’s too early to start closing, but with luck, we won’t have another rush in the next hour and a half. Though it’s been known to happen on nights like this.

Turning the corner, I walk into the private bathroom meant for staff only. Someone catches the door a moment before it slams behind me, making me freeze. Spinning around, I relax

as I realize it's only Baylor. He grins at me sheepishly, slowly pushing the door shut behind him and locking it.

“You torture me, Torryn.”

I laugh, not able to take him seriously in his Taylor outfit. Even with the husky growl in his voice that always does things to my insides. “What are you doing, B?”

He grins, stalking across the small bathroom to back me against the counter. “How was I supposed to resist these?” He asks, pinching my pebbled nipples through the bikini top, eliciting a low moan of pleasure from my lips. “They're begging to be tasted.” His large hands cup my breasts, pushing them together and kissing the tops of the swells it creates.

As good as it feels, every time I catch sight of the cheap blonde wig, I can't help but chuckle. “I can't take you seriously in that wig,” I tell him.

He drops his hold on my chest, pressing his erection against my thigh instead. “I've been hard for you since I saw you on that stage. I'm not too much of a man to beg, Torryn.”

Fuck it.

I've done shadier things at work.

Gripping the stupid wig, I yank it off his head and toss it in the trash. “Fine. But if you're going to fuck me, fuck me as yourself.”

He growls, ripping the triangles apart to expose my breasts to his hungry gaze. “Thank fuck. I need to feel you.”

“Just make it fast,” I warn as he sucks on my nipple, pushing my shorts down and finding my slick center with his finger.

“I can do that,” he agrees, spinning me around and pushing my back to bend me in half. “Brace yourself,” he warns, lust making his voice drop. I balance myself with my hands against the wall just in time to feel his hard dick nudging at my entrance. He teases me, gripping my hair at the base of my neck and pulling back to whisper in my ear. “Do you know how many times I've dreamed about how good you felt around

my bare cock? How messy I want to make your cunt? Come inside you and make you wear me for the rest of the night.” His laugh is bitter, scraping against my nerve endings in the best way possible. “Feel me dripping down your thighs while all those bastards out there stare at your chest wondering how good you taste, wishing they could get just a piece of you that I already stole.” He drives into me in one long hard thrust, drawing out a low moan. “Claimed.”

I clamp around him even as he withdraws and I hear the sound of foil tearing. We swore the last time we met in the bathroom would be the last time, but I completely forgot about it. Desperate for him to make good on his promise. “We kept our promise,” he says, chuckling darkly while he presses the tip of his cock back to my entrance. “I’ll be good for you since you don’t know how to be.”

“Bastard,” I whisper, but the pleasure leaking from every syllable does little to add any heat to the insult.

He hums, pulling my hair and picking up his pace as he drives into me. “You can call me anything you like, as long as you clench around me like that again.”

I do as he asks and he curses, making me grin. His fingers slide around to my front, searching for my clit and as he brushes over it, I mimic his curse. He tightens his grip in my hair and I tilt my head to the side, giving him a better grip.

My entire body freezes as my eyes land on what I thought was the empty hallway to the employee break room around the corner. No one should be back here. None of the girls. None of the security. And certainly not a hot stranger that had been sitting at my bar nursing drinks for most of the night.

Matteo winks at me as he leans against the far wall, lifting his finger to his lips. Fuck.

“God, Tor, it feels so fucking good when you squeeze me like that.”

The man hiding in the shadows’ grin grows smug as he palms his obvious erection in his dress slacks. The bathroom stalls block Baylor from seeing him where he stands behind

me, still pumping in and out in a way that makes it hard to think. But Matteo shouldn't be able to see much from where he is either. My chest and face, maybe?

Fuck. That shouldn't be as hot as it is. I can feel my arousal making my cunt slicker with each thrust of Baylor's cock into me. My orgasm rises and Baylor moans behind me. "I'm close, baby. So close." His voice low and deep, trembling with his pleasure in a way that makes his words feel like a guilty confession.

A shiver races down my spine, my pulse racing as I rise to the precipice of pleasure. The blinding ecstasy at the tip of my fingers but just out of reach. Baylor's breath stutters as he drives into me, pulling my hair as he does and sending me spiraling in my orgasm as it crashes through me and washes every thought except for Baylor behind me, holding me to his chest.

I huff a laugh as he pulls out of me, tying off the condom and tossing it in the trash. I think I blacked out for a second. The smirk playing across his full lips is more than enough to tell me that he most definitely noticed it too. Rolling my eyes, I pull my shorts back up and button them up while Baylor grabs my phone off the floor where it fell at some point. Couldn't tell you when.

He spins us around, pulling me back against his chest as we face the mirror. Both our faces are flushed, my hair in a complete disarray. Baylor looks as smug as ever, whispering his lips over my exposed shoulder and neck, his fingers finding my nipples. It almost seems like his calling card now. Soft touches and affection laced with lust every time when we both finish. Leaning my head back against his chest, I can't lie and say I hate it.

His arm bands around my chest and a moment later his teeth sink into the sensitive skin at the base of my neck and he begins to suck, making me whimper. At the sound of his chuckle, my eyes pop open as he releases me, messing around on my phone. I don't think anything of it, focusing on righting my top to at least partially cover my tits and get to work on

attempting to contain my hair into something that doesn't scream I just got fucked in the bar bathroom.

Baylor hands me my phone back, not even bothering to hide his boyish grin. "Now we're twins."

I raise a brow, starting to put my phone back into my back pocket. The flick of his eyes down and the twitch of his lips stop me and I pull it back, unlocking it. His laugh is full and boisterous as I stare down at a photo he must have snapped when I had my eyes closed. My new background is Baylor and I in the mirror, his arm the only thing covering my chest, his lips pressed against my neck, my eyes closed and a small smile twisting my lips.

"We both have your nudes as our backgrounds."

A shocked laugh eddies out of me and I shake my head, ignoring the racing of my pulse at his words and putting my phone back in my pocket. "I can't believe you still have it set as that."

His thumb wipes over the mark he left on my neck. No way am I hiding that one in this top, or maybe any other top I still own. "Bastard," I accuse.

"You keep saying that." He grins, not at all perturbed by my insults. Kissing the top of my head, he moves away from me. "I'll see you back out there?"

Nodding, I get back to work on fixing my hair and makeup to look slightly more presentable. The door clicks behind him as he leaves and I can't help but smile as I reapply my lipstick, cleaning up the smudged edges.

A throat clears behind me and I jump. "Jesus, fuck."

The dark haired stranger lets his eyes wander over the mess of my hair, down my body, and back up, with a gleam of something I don't understand in his eyes. It's lust and desire, but not. "Not Jesus," he teases. "Matteo."

I readjust my top just for something to do. I forgot he was there. Forgot he offered to pay to see me dance and ended up getting a much more intimate and private show. One I didn't mean to share with him. One Baylor doesn't know about...yet.

One that I liked probably more than I should have. I didn't think there were still things for me to learn about myself and my desire, but apparently Baylor brings out new things in me.

"I forgot you were here." His expression looks like he doesn't quite believe me, but I don't care either way. "What are you even doing back here?" I ask, realizing once more that he shouldn't be.

He hums, tapping his knuckles against the bathroom stall. "I wouldn't have asked for you to dance on stage if I had known it would make your boyfriend jealous."

I narrow my eyes on him. Something about him puts my nerves on edge. Not in a good way. As much as he smiles and teases, there's a threat that permeates the air surrounding him. "He isn't and he wasn't," I respond, crossing my arms over my chest.

He arches a brow and scoffs, "So he marked you just for fun?"

I click my tongue. "It was fun."

His laugh surprises me and sends chills down my spine, so different from the way Baylor's laughter made me feel lighter only minutes ago. "You remind me of someone," he admits, pulling something out of his pocket. "That's why I wanted to see you dance, but I realize now you're just as unattainable as she always was."

I cock my head in confusion, studying him as he pulls several crisp bills out of the wallet and folds them in half. Rather than leaning into my space to hand them to me, he leans forward to place them on the other side of the counter. I freeze in place, my eyes tracking every small movement.

"I don't hand these out lightly, but I like you, Torryn Gray." I flinch at the use of my full name. I don't think I want to know how he learned it. "We can all use a friend sometimes." He places a black business card on top of the cash. "Use it if you ever need anything or anybody..." he pauses, eyes flicking up to meet mine and holding them. I hold

my breath. "Taken care of." The glimmer in his eye tells me exactly what he means and I have no idea how to respond.

I give him a clipped nod and his smile grows. He whistles as he exits the bathroom and I finally exhale when the door shuts behind him. Taking several deep breaths, I rub my hands over my arms covered in goosebumps from the encounter. It takes me a few moments to gather myself and finally pick up the card he left behind but there's not much on it. Only the name he freely gave and a phone number with a New York area code. Nothing else.

Should I even keep it?

I hesitate but eventually slip it into my pocket before picking up the cash. My eyes widen as I realize it's a stack of hundred dollar bills, equaling a lot more than what he promised. More than twice as much.

What the fuck just happened?



twenty-three

A TEAM SPORT

“**Y**ou guys have a problem,” Beau taunts as he climbs into the back of my truck.

Torryn ignores him, climbing behind the wheel as the only sober one in our group. I can barely take my eyes off her, especially where the hickey seems to glow in the lighting, calling for me to leave another, or a half dozen more.

“Fuck off,” I respond to Beau who hasn’t stopped since I came back sans a wig.

“You guys can’t get within thirty feet of a bathroom without sneaking off.” Torryn continues to ignore him, and the rest of the backseat as she backs the truck out of her parking space.

Isla snorts from the backseat, “It’s not exclusive to bathrooms.” She lifts her fingers and stops ticking places off her fingers, “Kitchens, showers, libraries, cars...”

“Okay, okay, they get it,” I say, putting my hands up. “No need to be jealous,” I tease. “I can give Wells some tips if you like.” The taillights of Wells’ jeep shine in front of us as Torryn lets James pull out in front of her.

Isla rolls her eyes and Wells smacks the back of my head, but his lips curve up, giving away his amusement. Isla is getting more comfortable with us, letting her guard down enough to give as good as she gets.

She pats my shoulder. “He’s more than capable, don’t you worry. But if you have concerns, I can tell you what Tor likes.”

I shake my head at her. “She tells you way too much.” My eyes stray back to where she sits, driving my truck like it was made for her, waiting for her to react to my words, but she just smirks.

“What are best friends for?” Isla asks. Wells whispers something in her ear that makes her giggle and she falls back into her seat, leaning into his arms and yawning. Wells was going to drive, but Isla wanted to be with Torryn and he’s incapable of telling her no. I’m guessing whatever that whisper was about, it had something to do with reminding her who’s bed she’s sleeping in tonight. At least that’s a battle he can win against Torryn.

“Must be hard to watch your girl with her soulmate and know it’s not you,” I taunt him. Payback for all the shit he’s been giving me lately.

Torryn laughs, making me smile and drawing all eyes to her in surprise. “At least someone knows what’s what.” She shrugs.

“Bastard,” Wells murmurs, but it only reminds me of the way Torryn called me the same thing only a short while ago.

Torryn hums, pulling onto our street. “A bastard,” she agrees. “But a correct bastard.”

Wells huffs when Isla just giggles, obviously not going to take his side. James drives past our house and stops half a block down to let out the rest of the crew that came with us. Torryn pulls into the driveway and hops out. Pulling my key out, I rush to follow her only to find her frozen on the bottom of the steps leading to our front door.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, stepping up to her and wrapping my arm around her waist. But I spot it before she can answer. “Fucking hell.”

I pull her closer into my side, and grab my phone to take a picture of the white envelope taped to the door. Her name written in a familiar scrawl with a thick black marker across the front. She shakes her head and pulls away from me,

reaching for it and ripping it off the door, ignoring me when I call her name.

Something inside the envelope clinks and I hurry to unlock the door as everyone else catches up to us, slowing when they spot us still at the door. I usher Torryn through the front door while she clutches the envelope in her hands. Worry mars her face as whatever is in the envelope clinks together again.

Everyone crowds around her confused, and still drunk, while her fingers trace over the edge of the envelope. She slides one long nail under the flap and opens it, holding her breath as she tips it into the palm of her hand. Small pieces of warped metal and other tiny bits of debris fall into her hand. Her confusion grows as she lifts the pieces closer to her eyes to study them. It only takes a moment before her breath stutters, a flash of pain etching across her features, before she locks it all down. A blank mask taking over the expression.

“Tor?” Isla whispers, fear and pain lining each word.

She coughs, clearing her throat. “Just trash,” she answers, her voice detached as she pours the pieces back into the envelope. “I’m going to bed,” she says before any of us have a chance to say anything. The light and jovial atmosphere we built in the ride home is shattered as she walks away, dropping the envelope on the counter like she can no longer even bear to hold onto it.

I look to Isla, the only one who may possibly have answers, but she looks as lost as I feel as her eyes follow her best friend until we can no longer see her.

The front door opens again and James walks in only to stop abruptly at the morose atmosphere.

“What happened?”

“Another note,” Beau answers, heat in his voice that gives away his anger and frustration.

Wells runs his hands through his hair. “Was it a note though?” No one answers as we all trade looks. His eyes rove over to the envelope in question. “Should we?”

Still, no one answers. Silently debating the pros and cons of looking. If it would be considered a breach of privacy. If it's a step too far. Isla finally nods, swallowing thickly, seemingly already sober from the turn of events crashing over us like a bucket full of ice water. "Yes, that wasn't trash."

She's the one who moves first, breaking free of our group and grabbing the envelope before flopping down on the couch, clutching it in her hands. She looks more nervous than even Torryn was as she stares at it like it's a snake about to jump up and bite her. I think we all collectively hold our breath as she opens the envelope one more time, dumping the pieces onto the coffee table for us all to study. Instead of focusing on the pieces first, she looks in the envelope again, this time pulling out a single piece of paper folded up.

"Fuck," Beau curses, pacing in front of the coffee table.

Isla unfolds the paper, holding it where we can all see it as she reads the single line written on it.

I warned you there would be consequences.

"Fuck is right," James agrees, dropping in front of the coffee table and nudging the pieces with the tip of finger. He picks up one of the bigger pieces, rolling it between his finger and thumb. "Is this the back of an earring?"

Isla hands the paper to Wells and takes the piece James has in his hand. "It is," she confirms, looking more closely at the other pieces. There's another piece that looks the same, along with a couple of other metal pieces that look like they could be a part of an earring. The rest is white bits of shiny rock.

The color drains from Isla's face as she picks up one of the bigger pieces of jagged white rock. "Baylor," she asks hesitantly. I meet her eyes and wait. "When you helped Torryn pack, did you see a jewelry box?"

I try to think back on the things I saw Torryn grab, and nothing stands out. "I don't think so," I answer.

She gestures with her hands about how big it is. “It would have been an ornate white ceramic box with intricate flowers molded on the top. She wouldn’t have wanted to talk about it, but she would not have left it behind. You would know if you saw it.”

I’m already shaking my head. I know the box she’s talking about. She kept it in her closet, not hidden, but safe. Cherished. “She didn’t have it.” There’s no way she would have been able to bring it without me noticing it.

Tears spill down Isla’s face and my chest constricts. “Fuck,” she murmurs, aggressively wiping the tears from her cheeks. “Why didn’t she say anything?” Wells wraps her in his arms, pulling her into his lap.

I collect the pieces and the note and put them back in the envelope to keep them safe, giving Isla a moment to process her thoughts before I demand for her to explain. Thankfully I don’t have to, as she takes the envelope from me and answers all of my unspoken questions.

“I think they’re her mom’s,” she explains, leaving me with only more questions. She looks at all of us nervously. “I don’t know if I should be telling you guys this, but she never will.” She sighs, and she’s like a different person from the bubbly girl I’ve been getting to know. “Her mom died when we were younger. All she had left of her was that jewelry box.” If I thought my chest was already hurting, it’s nothing compared to the way it seizes in my chest at the implications of her jewelry box being gone. “I think these are pearl earrings her mom used to wear,” she finishes in a whisper, holding the envelope to her chest.

“Are you sure?” I can’t help but ask.

She shakes her head. “It’s not like they’re recognizable, but it makes sense.”

“So we can all agree it was the stalker?” James asks. Everyone slowly nods as we exchange glances. It’s the same creepy note, promises of consequences, and I even recognize the handwriting at this point.

Wells rubs his hand over his chin, glancing at Isla. “This means whoever he is, he is aware the girls are staying here. He has to be keeping a fairly close eye on Torryn.”

Isla shrinks back into him. “Do you think that’s what the consequence is for?”

I debate the answer to that. I guess it could be, but he seemed to have a lot of demands for her that we still aren’t clear on. “Maybe? It could also be the shift she worked at Tease, the bikini top she wore, that she danced on stage.”

“Fucking in bathrooms,” James adds, but without the teasing from earlier.

Dread twists my stomach. Could I have unintentionally made the situation worse? Put her in bigger danger than she already was in?

“Why aren’t the cops doing shit?” Beau asks, his tone brimming with the frustration we all feel.

I can’t help but agree. As nice as they’ve been and as prompt as they’ve shown up, what do we have to show for it? No leads. No safety. And this sick fuck has already figured out where she is staying. He knew where she worked. Is probably aware that she’s been driving my truck. I hate all of it and none of us have been taking this seriously enough.

“I think it’s time we take it into our own hands,” I say with resolve, an idea slowly forming about how we can protect her. “It’s obvious this fuck has too much access to her and regardless of what she does, he’s going to find fault with it.”

“What are you thinking?” James asks but Beau is already staring at me and nodding his head, understanding exactly where my head is at.

“We make sure she is never alone. Work out how to keep someone watching her back at all times. It’ll be tricky but I think we can figure it out.” My eyes rove over to Beau again. “Do you think—”

He’s already waving his hand and cuts me off. “I’ll call my dad.” Relief floods through my system. As confident as I am

in my ability to protect Torryn, I can't be with her every second of every day. She'd strangle me if I tried.

Isla looks confused, but Wells quickly explains that Beau's dad is the CEO of one of the largest security companies in the country. You'd never realize it with the way Beau acts, but he's by far the wealthiest guy on the team, and that's saying something. He walks out of the room, his phone pressed to his ear as he calls his dad, not even hesitating that it's the middle of the night.

When he walks back into the room, his jaw is set, but there's a look of relief that wasn't there before. "A team will be here in the morning to set cameras, motion detectors, and a new security system up and make sure we know how to use it. There's also going to be guys doing rounds on the street to keep an eye out for suspicious activity. My dad said he could put a guard on Tor, but I didn't think she would go for that."

She absolutely would not go for that, but we can always keep it as an option if this shit continues to escalate. Even if she hates it, her safety has to come first. I wonder how many of our classes lineup close together?

"But he did stress that she shouldn't be alone."

She's going to hate this. Like loathe it, but that doesn't stop me from suggesting, "Let's work out a schedule between us."

Isla snuffles, repeating my thoughts on Tor's reaction out loud, but no one is surprised. We all already knew it was going to be tough to get her to agree. "I think you guys underestimate how busy she is."

I contemplate that for a second before trading looks with the guys. Isla knows her schedule better than anyone. "What if we get the whole team to keep an eye out?" There has to be enough of us to cover her entire schedule. The fact she lives here makes it even easier.

"They could stay close enough to protect her without being with her, maybe?" James picks up Tater Tot from where he's meowing on the floor and pets the top of his head to calm him

down. Tor must not have realized she locked him out of her room.

“Maybe the guard wouldn’t be a bad idea,” Wells says, but I shake my head.

“She’d notice random men following her. She might think they’re the stalker. She may not notice that hockey players just seem to always be around her.”

We all think about the possibility of it working. There’s a good chance she wouldn’t even recognize more than half of the team anyways. So I feel like we have a good shot of pulling it off. Until Isla brings up another very point. “What about when you guys are at practices and games?” She steals French Fry from James and snuggles him into her chest, burying her face into his fur. “And late nights at the bar? You guys can’t stay out all night when you have games.”

The silence grows heavy with all our rampant thoughts and ideas on how to make this situation better. When no one speaks up with any new ideas, I clap my hands together. The sound almost echoing in the living room. “Let’s start with what we can do, and work on plugging the holes after.” Nods of agreement encourage me to continue, turning to focus on Isla. “You have her class schedule?” At her affirmation, I continue, “We can start there and see who can match her classes and tutoring schedule. I already know Wilder is one of her students so we can tag him in for some of those sessions as well.”

Isla hands me her phone with Torryn’s schedule already pulled up. At a quick glance I realize we both take mostly morning classes. She starts a little earlier than me which works out in my favor as I can drop her off and still be able to make it to my classes. “I can walk her to all of her morning classes except on Wednesdays,” I say just as Beau grabs the phone out of my hand.

“I’ve got that class with her anyway,” he says. “But what about morning skate and lifting? We usually finish just before her start time.”

I curse, I had forgotten about that. How accommodating would Coach be if I asked to leave early to pick up my roommate who has a stalker? Probably not very. “She’s an early riser,” I start, watching to see how Isla reacts. “Maybe we could convince her to come to morning workouts with us?”

“And just watch?” James asks with a fair amount of skepticism.

Spud meows in dissatisfaction when Isla puts him down and immediately jumps into my lap, making Karma lift her head from where she was sleeping on her bed in the corner. Isla gets up and walks into the kitchen, her features twisted into a grimace full of fear and apprehension, but a determination to push it all. “She’d probably go for it if I told her I wanted to watch the workouts.”

The plan has merit. Isla can convince Torryn of just about anything it seems. Karma draws my attention away when she pounces in my lap, cuddling in next to the Potato Chip. Both of them stay curled up in my lap as we spend the next hour breaking down Torryn’s schedule and setting up shifts for everyone to take over. We’re able to cover all of her classes with just us four, but we’ll need the other guys to take on some of the tutoring sessions and getting her home. I’ll talk to Wilder and Tate tomorrow. Her shifts at Tease are going to be the hardest thing to figure out, but it will work out. It has to.

Finally satisfied that we at least have a plan for the next few days covered, I pick up both kittens and we all say our goodnights. It’s been hours since we all got back, and I’m more than sober. On my way to my room, I stop at Torryn’s door and press my ear against it but don’t hear anything. French Fry meows in my arms and attempts to paw at the door. Torryn is gonna regret locking him out once she realizes in the morning that she did. I only hesitate for a moment, before I knock on her door softly. When she doesn’t answer, I twist the knob and slowly press open the door. The darkness of the room almost conceals the lump in the bed, except the light from her phone illuminates her silhouette buried under blankets. She doesn’t react when I walk into the room and it isn’t until I get closer I notice the headphones in her ears as

she stares at a picture on her phone. A little girl with dark hair and vibrant blue eyes has a big smile on her face, her two front teeth missing and a beautiful woman that looks stunningly similar to Torryn sits behind her, braiding her long dark hair.

In an attempt not to startle her, I move slowly, putting both kittens on the bed with her. Karma immediately goes to the foot of the bed and curls up in a ball, while Ruffles buries himself under the blanket to tuck himself against Torryn's stomach.

She doesn't turn to look at me, but softly whispers a thank you.

Should I stay? Should I go? I can hear the despair and longing in her voice and can only imagine the pain of losing the last ties she had with her mom, let alone getting one of them back only for it to be shattered into pieces. It's a sick and twisted mind game this stalker is playing with her. One that makes my blood boil with rage and aggression. I hope he one day does get the balls to show his face so I can have the chance to show him what pain really is.

Torryn's small snuffle is the only answer I need.

I strip out of the remaining pieces of my Taylor costume, having almost forgotten I was even wearing it, until I'm down to only my briefs. Pulling her covers up, I slide under the blanket with her and pull her against my chest. She still doesn't say anything, but her body relaxes into mine. The light from her phone reflects the stream of tears flowing down her cheeks and my heart breaks a little more.

Not once did I think coming in here would lead to her turning in my arms and opening up to me. Neither of us are really built for that. But we're both more than okay with that too. I don't need to hear about her mother from her lips. I'll be here if she needs to talk about it, but I won't push her.

I can't.

It's the worst feeling to be forced to open up about something you weren't ready to talk about. Even if it's being done with the best of intentions.

But when Torryn turns in my arms and tucks her face into my chest, there's just a small moment where something blooms inside me that I might just be her safe space. That maybe she can lean on me for more than sex or a good time. A flashing moment that reminds me of the day we spent at the cat cafe. Where it was just us, in a bubble with no pressure or stress.

“You know when we were in the bathroom?”

My brows furrow as her question catches me off guard, but I huff a laugh all the same. “Hard to forget.” I press my hardening length against her thigh to emphasize my point, making her snicker.

“We weren't alone.”

Silence rings in the air between us and I realize she's holding her breath as she waits for me to process.

“Huh.” It's not much of a response, but it's all I can come up with. “Who?”

She shifts in my arms but I still can't see her face. “That guy that was sitting at the bar.”

My eyes roll of their own volition at the reminder of the guy that was obviously hitting on her all night. A wave of satisfaction rolls through me at the thought of him watching me take her. Marking her. Claiming her. “Did he enjoy the show?”

Her body shakes in my arms and I know she's trying not to show her amusement at how pleased I sound over the whole thing. It doesn't bother me. Hell, I'd take her in front of my whole team if I didn't think it would just make the lot of them double down on trying to steal her.

Her face lifts as she looks up at me. “Enough to pay me for it.”

I open my mouth to respond, quickly closing it again, unsure of how to feel about that. “Yeah,” I drawl, “I have no idea how to respond to that.” She laughs, and I run my fingers over her stomach and across her hips. “You do fuck like a whore though.”

I gasp in shock and pain when she pinches my nipple and twists in response. “Hey!” I scold, rubbing the sore spot. “It was a compliment.”

“Yeah, well you fuck like a whore too,” she says, but I can hear the smile in her voice as she settles back in my arms.

“Thank you.”

It’s quiet for a few moments before she shifts again and asks, “You really aren’t bothered?”

I shrug as much as I can with my arms still wrapped around her. “Not really. As long as he wasn’t a creep to you after I left.”

She hums and it spreads discontent through me.

“He wasn’t, was he?”

She shakes her head, but hesitates to respond. I wait her out until she finally relents. “It was weird though. He also gave me his card.”

I wait for her to say more but when she doesn’t I can’t help but point out the obvious. “I would also give you my number if I saw you naked. It would be weirder if he didn’t even try after hearing how well you take me.”

She snorts. “Not like that. Never mind, it sounds crazy.”

I pinch her side, making her squirm and sigh, but she caves. “He said he left it for if I ever need anything or *anyone* taken care of.”

Bewildered, I huff. “Weird.” Not what I was expecting. “Do you think he was the stalker?” He definitely had an aura about him, not that I took him for a creep. It wasn’t protective I felt over Torryn when he had his eyes locked on her. But it is a weird thing to say.

She hesitates, but shakes her head. We don’t talk more than that, but my mind continues to spin even after minutes have passed and her breathing shifts into the slow deep breaths of sleep.

There’s a lot to do before Monday.



twenty-four

PUT ME IN COACH

There are many things I expected to wake up to the next day after finding yet another note. A shirtless Baylor? Obviously. I remember the heat of his skin as he pulled me against him and pretended he couldn't see my tears. A disgruntled Potato and Karma? Of course. They never let it be forgotten if they feel ignored. An almost cracked out Isla who probably got no sleep from her fear and anxiety? You bet. Possibly some awkward moments with the rest of the house? Wouldn't be surprised.

But never in a million years did I think I would be coming downstairs to random men in all black, installing sensors and cameras throughout and around the house with Beau taking charge.

Blinking slowly, I feel my forehead with the back of my head to see if I'm having fever hallucinations. Maybe I'm still asleep?

Beau's eyes land on me and widen. "Morning." His gaze travels down to my bare legs before flicking back up to my eyes. "Glad some things don't change."

"The fuck is happening?" I ask, rubbing the exhaustion from my eyes.

"Security," Baylor answers from behind me. Wasn't he just snoring thirty seconds ago? "I'm not messing around with this shit anymore, Tor." His voice has the rough edge of sleep still coating every word, assuring me I wasn't imagining the hulking man still asleep just moments ago. "It's not a prank and whoever is doing this is obviously out to hurt you." His

words jar me out of my surprise at his appearance as I take in the deadly serious look in his eyes. No trace of the playful playboy. “We should have taken it more seriously from the beginning.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks and I drop Beau’s gaze, feeling properly chastised. Baylor has always wanted me to pay more attention to the notes and gifts and I kept blowing them off. It still feels unreal that someone is going so far out of their way to interfere with my life. I can’t even begin to understand why or who would be motivated to do any of this.

“We’ve got your back.” Beau squeezes my shoulder before turning away and directing one of the security guys to my bedroom.

Baylor wraps his arm over my shoulder, leading me around the men working their way through the house and into the kitchen. “Want eggs for breakfast?”

Sleep still clings to my every word, movement, and blink. I wake up early habitually because I have to. Not because I am a morning person. His ease in snapping awake and being fully present is starting to piss me off. I arch a brow at him. “You gonna cook for me, Baylor Levine?”

“Will I get a reward?” The smirk he gives me settles some of the raucous emotions writhing in my chest since we got home last night. A dose of lighthearted playfulness even if he’s seen the most vulnerable parts of myself. Moments I’m determined to pretend never happened. The longer he goes along with that, the longer I don’t have to avoid him.

My eyes trail over his body, lingering on the waistband of his gray sweatpants. It would be a lie to say he didn’t look good enough to eat. Maybe I don’t need breakfast after all.

“Company is still here,” Wells scolds as he comes into the kitchen, a bleary-eyed Isla two steps behind him, dragging her feet. He moves into the kitchen, taking the pan out of Baylor’s hands and shoulder checking him out of his way.

Baylor only smiles, sitting on my other side at the kitchen island after Isla slumps into the seat on my other side. “Don’t

mind if I do.” His hand finds my thigh and begins to trace patterns on my bare skin as I turn to check in with Isla.

The pain and regret in her eyes is enough to tell me everything I need to know. She recognized the smashed pieces as my mother’s pearl earrings. They weren’t her favorites or anything, but they were hers. Seeing the mangled pieces be all that were left damn near tore me apart. But I just...can’t.

Can’t go there. Can’t think about it. Definitely can’t talk about it. Not today, maybe not ever.

Isla knocks her knee against mine and settles her head against my shoulder. Everything that needed to be said in that one small gesture. She gets it. She always gets it. Knows when to push and knows when to just be.

The kitchen grows louder as the other guys join us, heckling Wells about his cooking. Beau leads the security guys out with a promise to call if we have any questions and that he’ll be able to walk us through the set up. When it’s just the six of us left, I tense expecting the questions, the conversations, the demands, but none of it happens. The conversations continue as Wells serves six plates while Baylor, James, and Beau argue heatedly about the merits of scrambled eggs versus sunny side up.

Tears prick the back of my eyes with gratitude for my best friend, her boyfriend, and this weird little crew that has seemingly adopted us. I take a bite of the toast Isla put on my plate and shake my head at the antics I’m secretly quite grateful for.

With each passing moment, the weight on my shoulders lifts just a little bit. Makes it easier to focus on the patterns still being drawn on my thigh, the pressure of Isla’s head on my shoulder, the laughter that rings through the room as loudly and surely as the insults that preceded it.

After we eat, Beau does explain the new system to us. We won’t be able to open our windows at night anymore, but it’ll soon be too cold to do so anyways. Even this doesn’t feel as strained as it should. As if this level of security is fully normal

for a bunch of college kids. It does make me feel slightly more at ease. Like I could actually be safe here.

The exhale full of relief Isla releases makes guilt bloom in my stomach, turning it. Of course she's been just as impacted as I've been by this whole thing. Had her space and privacy invaded upon, her sense of peace and safety disrupted. I should have been a better friend and checked on her more.

Nothing to stop me from making it up to her from here on out.



Who knew I would regret vowing to be a better friend almost immediately?

Taking a long sip of my coffee from my thermos I glare at Isla over my notes. “Remind me why we’re freezing our asses off here at the ass crack of dawn again?”

Her hands wrap tightly around her coffee, shivering under her blanket as she watches the hockey team skate around the rink. “Look how cute he is.”

I don’t even bother to turn and look, rolling my eyes. I can’t believe she’s convinced me to stalk her boyfriend with her. I thought I was the one with the stalker, but here I am, acting like one. “Not cute enough to be up this early for.”

She flips me off from under her blanket. “You’re up this early anyways.”

Sure. To run. Or work. Or get ahead on my homework. Or even to laze about in my pajamas in the warmth of the kitchen or Baylor’s bed. All infinitely better options than being at the ice rink. “Just explain it to me again,” I say. “Why are we following your boyfriend to his early morning activities? He’s already yours.”

It’s been almost two weeks since she extracted this stupid promise from me, but I’m still just as confused as to why she would even want to watch them warm up. And fucking hell

when she drags me to watch them lift weights. Then again, at least the gym isn't as fucking cold as the arena.

She shifts in her seat, not meeting my eyes. "The gym the other day wasn't so bad," she counters, deflecting from my question.

Only because I decided to wear my own workout clothes and get a good workout in since I was there anyways. The only reason it wasn't a total waste of my time. I arch a brow and let my face say it all for me.

She huffs and points to my books. "You're productive here."

"And freezing," I scoff. Guilt flashes over her features, instantly making me feel bad. I sigh. "Not that I mind subzero temps at six o'clock in the morning. If I could just understand why." Dammit. I'm too soft. Everyone gives Wells crap for not being able to say no to Isla, but fuck if I'm one to talk.

She puts off answering me by taking another long sip of her coffee, rolling her lips when she's done and just briefly meeting my eyes before looking back to the ice. "I just want to understand hockey more before the first game."

I sigh and drop the conversation. She's said that before, but for the life of me I can't understand how watching them skate in circles or lifting weights helps her understand hockey more. Maybe if it was their actual practices. But these are just like warmups. I never imagined I would end up spending the majority of my mornings with rowdy hockey players, but low and behold, here we are.

Baylor had already convinced me to just run with them on the days that they run in the morning. The days they don't? Isla has us following them around anyways. "Maybe I should just join the team," I mutter under my breath. At least the first official hockey game of the season is this weekend. Hopefully she chills the fuck out after it's over. She's more stressed than any of the guys are.

I spend the rest of their morning skate trying to finish up edits on a paper that's due next week. I'm so engrossed in the

task that I jump when a large hand lands on my shoulder.

“Ready?” If I could smack the smirk right off Baylor’s handsome face, I would. However, it would only amuse him more. I look past him to realize the team is already done and now trickling out of the locker room. Isla stands next to me, but is too lost in whatever Wells is saying to her.

I sigh, packing up my stuff and getting to my feet. Saying goodbye to Isla and Wells, I let Baylor guide me out of the arena and towards his truck. Yet another aspect of my life that has become the norm over the last two weeks, much to my chagrin.

But guilt still prickles the back of my mind that I’ve brought this on everyone around me. The worry in their eyes. The way everyone that lives in the house seems to look over their shoulders a bit more often than rational. Maybe if I had taken it a bit more seriously. Done things a little differently. Reacted more to the threats, instead of just blowing it off as a prank.

I’m still unsure of what to make of the whole situation. But if it makes Baylor feel better to drop me off at my morning classes, the least I could do is allow it after dragging him and his housemates into this situation.

The stalker has been quiet since he left my mom’s earrings in pieces on our door. Who knows? Maybe the security and Baylor’s near constant proximity has made whoever it was lose interest. Perhaps the fear of being caught was enough to deter them from making any other moves with so many more eyes looking now.

Baylor parks the truck and I wrap my thin jacket more tightly around myself as I jump out of the passenger side. Unsurprisingly, his long legs allow him to catch up to me in just a few steps. He tugs on my bag, but when I turn to tell him to knock it off, he pulls it out of my grip and throws an oversized hoodie at me.

“It’s fifty fucking degrees out, Tor. Wear a real damn jacket.”

I'd roll my eyes at him, but he wouldn't even see it as I pull the sweatshirt over me. It hits me mid thigh and I have to roll the sleeves, but the inside is soft and I'm instantly warmer, surrounded by his scent. "I haven't had time to buy any new ones," I grumble. No time and no money. I did finally get word back on my car, but unfortunately they've decided to total it. I should be getting a check soon, but it will barely be enough for a down payment on a new one.

Baylor sighs, shaking his head when I try to take my bag back from him. Stubborn bastard. "Keep the hoodie then."

I eye him suspiciously but don't argue. The temperatures really have dropped over the last couple of days and are only going to get colder from here on out. He hands me back my bag when we reach the door to the lecture hall. "I'll see you at home after tutoring?"

I shake my head, taking my bag from him. "I'm at Tease tonight."

There's something heavy in his gaze as he watches me. Something I don't recognize or understand. It almost reminds me of Isla. "You gonna make it to the game?"

He hasn't asked me yet. I know how much this season means to all the guys, especially James. I know how hard they've been working to prepare for it. I've been right there, watching it in real time for the last two weeks. I nod. "I'll have to cut out for the celebration."

His eyes dance with pride and amusement at my assumption they'll be celebrating. He leans against the wall next to the door, pulling me out of the way of other students. "We'll just have to celebrate at Tease." Hunger grows in his gaze as his eyes lock on the hem of his sweatshirt. "Maybe a private dance this time for your favorite hockey player."

It's too easy. I can't resist. "Tate's coming?" I ask deadpan.

He uses his sweatshirt to tug me against him, growling in my ear, "You think you're cute?"

I pat him on the shoulder before pulling out of his grasp. "I know I am."



twenty-five

IT'S NOT THAT WEIRD

Torryn is definitely getting suspicious.

I'm not sure how she couldn't be at this point to be fair. She was immediately on guard when I started walking her to her morning classes but gave in quicker than I thought she would. She studies me with a glimmer of defeat and something else every time I walk her to class. As if she's agreeing for my sake.

It dawns on me and I can only blame too many hits against the board for it taking so long. It feels that way because it is that way. I really shouldn't be surprised she knows exactly why I've taken up walking her to class. The only question is how much else has she put together? But more importantly, how long will she continue to allow it?

Checking my phone as I walk off to class, I confirm once again with Xander that he has her work schedule and will be at Tease tonight until she gets off. As much as it sucks what he's going through, it's worked out in my favor. Never expected one of the best defensemen in college to be axed from Everleigh. Their loss is our gain. Even without the whole story, or really any of it, Xander isn't a bad dude. There had to have been more at play than what meets the eye, but he won't talk about it. Or about the fact he won't be able to play at all this season, even if his transfer to our school is approved.

He's quick to respond, confirming her weekend shifts. I had already known she had cut her shift for Saturday night before I asked if she'd be at the game, but she hadn't said anything to me. The girl works more than can possibly be

healthy. If we weren't forcing her into our morning routines and following her like lovesick puppies, I'd never see her.

I thank Xander again for helping out. We would have been pretty screwed if his life hadn't taken a total nosedive. I feel guilty about being grateful he's around, when I know it has to be one of the worst things that's ever happened to him. I vow to do whatever I can to help him in the future. Extra skate time, a favor, a good word.

Wilder's message comes in just as I'm exiting out of the thread with Xander. He has his mandatory tutoring session today with Torryn. She's got two students before him and one more after him, but he's going to hang out under the guise of getting more work done. Maybe we should switch out who's watching her in the library. Torryn is sure to start doubting why Wilder has suddenly become such a good student. That's more suspicious than even all the early morning sessions we've been dragging her too.

I start to text Tate before changing my mind and texting one of the other freshmen instead to be at the library today for her first two students. At least we won't have to worry about this tomorrow. We'll all be preoccupied with prepping for the game, Tor included.

The rest of the day isn't remotely as eventful or exciting with our schedules not overlapping anymore. Knowing people I trust have their eyes on her eases some of the anxiety, but nothing is better than when I'm the one at her side. Keeping her safe myself.

"Stop pouting," Wells scolds, throwing a dish towel at me where I sit at the island.

Karma glares at him so I don't have to while I check the time again. Still no messages from Xander and it's only been three minutes since the last time I checked. "I'm just bored," I say, though I'm definitely not pouting when I say it. It's just a statement. A fact. A simple utterance of words that happen to be true. Not at all a whine.

The look Wells throws my way is enough to tell me he disagrees, but Karma has my back, hissing at him when he

tries to move her off the counter. Okay, well maybe she's just looking out for herself, but I can lie to myself.

The sound of the front door opening jars me out of my thoughts as I glance up, knowing damn well Torryn is still in class yet disappointment flares when it's only Beau who walks into the kitchen.

"Why is this fucker so morose?" Beau asks Wells, throwing his backpack on the counter and taking the seat next to me.

Flipping him off, I deny the accusation at the same time Wells tells him it's because Torryn has work tonight. I roll my eyes as Beau snickers and Wells grins. "If it makes you feel better," he teases, "she's the one who cooked dinner tonight."

"Well, her cooking *is* better than yours," I taunt back, satisfied with being able to get my own jab at him.

I ignore their responses as my phone starts ringing and I look down to see my mom's face. I nod to the guys and head to my room to answer the call. Thankfully this time it's only my mom and none of my brothers around to heckle me as almost every phone call recently has been. We only chat for a couple of minutes while I confirm with her that I'll be able to meet with them for lunch before the game. While she does ask questions about my relationship status, she's much quicker to drop it than any of my brothers would be, making me grateful that we agreed to meet at a local restaurant and not at the house. None of them are aware about our newest roommates and I'd like to keep it that way. There are enough taunts from the guys on the team, let alone my family getting to know Torryn.

The day before a game always seems to drag on forever. The anticipation and adrenaline not quite building, yet it's so close you can't help but feel ready for it to be game day already. Today is no exception, in fact, today is much worse than normal.

No amount of film, homework, or bullshitting with the guys is able to shake off the ansty feeling that's been slowly growing through the week.

“What’s wrong with him?” Isla whispers to Wells at the dinner table while we are all eating.

Wells looks over at me but just chuckles. “Just pregame jitters, babe. You can ignore him.”

Beau nudges me with his elbow, speaking around a mouthful of food. “Don’t worry. He’ll be back to his annoying ways tomorrow.”

I don’t even bother flipping them off or rolling my eyes. They’re right. The first game of the season is always the worst for me. The anxiety about everything coming together, of the team working well together, and everything we’ve practiced so hard paying off.

Isla nods and attempts to change the subject. “What was the package you got?”

The reminder of what I ordered weeks ago finally arriving is enough to make a small smile break through my anxiety. “You’ll see,” I promise, not ready to spoil the surprise yet. Not that it’s a surprise for her, or anyone else at this table. But I don’t trust their loud mouths or their inability to pass up the chance to tease me. This will only be fuel to that fire, but it’ll be worth it all the same.

Eventually, I’ll enlist Isla’s help, but not yet.

After helping clean up the kitchen, I grab my package and make little kissy noises to catch Karma’s attention. She dutifully ignores me but root veggie is quick to heed my call, wrapping his little body around my ankles as he circles them. I scoff, scooping him into my hands before walking across the room and grabbing Karma too, ignoring her half-hearted meow of discontent.

Heading to my room, I pause just after passing Torryn’s door. Backtracking a couple of steps I linger outside of the closed doors, looking down at the cats in my arms. “Would it be weird?” I whisper to them and wait as if they’ll actually respond. Karma gives me a blank stare, unamused with me as usual. Potato just stares up at me with his wide eyes. I sigh. “You’re right. It would definitely be weird.”

We can act like the thought never crossed my mind. I continue to my room and drop the cats on the bed before shucking off my shirt and tossing it into the hamper in the corner before falling on my mattress. Turning over the package in my hands, I start to open it. It only takes me a few minutes to figure it out and just like I expected, the kittens are cooperating perfectly already.

French fry lays across the pillow, stretching his belly with his little paws lazily sticking in the air while Karma is curled up next to him, two of her paws resting over his exposed belly. I've never seen anything cuter in my whole damn life.

I lift the new camera to my eye, and I'm man enough to admit it's an awkward hold, but if I can skate circles around opponents on the ice, chasing down a three inch disk, surely I can manage to take photos using a polaroid camera.

The small white rectangle slowly feeds up from the top, the photo still completely white and a childish excitement distracts me from my nerves over the game tomorrow. I lay the photo flat and wait for the image to come through, hoping I didn't fuck it up.

Realistically, not more than a minute must have passed. But as colors slowly start to develop, each second drags on making it feel three times as long by the time I can finally make it the furry bodies cuddling in bed.

Torryn won't be able to help but smile every time her eyes land on it. Step one of the plan to make her room more homey is complete. Putting the camera on my bedside table, I lay back on the free pillow and watch as more of the image becomes clear. My smile grows partially over how cute our little fur babies really are, but also imagining Torryn's reaction. Nothing softens her up quite like the kittens do.

I place the photo next to the camera and turn off the lights before shifting under the covers and running through not only the day, but everything I have to do tomorrow. The night before a game is arguably the night I need the best sleep, yet it's always the nights I have the hardest time falling asleep.

Attempting to strategize and predict every play and rotation the Blackstone Bears may try to pull out for our season opener. They're known for being an aggressive team that isn't afraid to play dirty if they can get away with it. But will that really be the way they choose to start their season? Stupid question. It's what they're known best for for a reason. It's the only way they win.

We can handle aggression. Well. Wilder and Zac are players to be concerned about. Their tempers run hotter than anyone on the team and their youth puts them at a disadvantage. They haven't learned how to temper their responses. Fights in hockey may be an expected part of the game, something we all know growing up in the sport, but the penalties for fighting in college are much harsher. Something our wildest two freshmen may not fully grasp until their asses are glued to the bench without being able to play.

I flop back and forth, my body reflecting the state of my mind as I bounce from worries of the game to stressing about Torryn. The stalker has been silent but does he have eyes on her right now? Are there more perverted men harassing her even as I lie here thinking about hockey? Is it weird that I kind of miss her? I haven't seen her since this morning, making this the longest amount of time without my eyes on her since we started making sure she was never alone. How much longer until she's going to be home and I know she's safe?

It must be bad, because even Potato is starting to meow in protest as I roll over again. Maybe I should let him into Tor's room to wait for her.

Fuck it. I can't resist it any longer. I need to hear that she's okay. That nothing out of the ordinary is happening. That it's just another boring night at Tease and Xander is doing nothing but nursing beers and lurking in the corner. I see the time on my phone and curse. She still has hours left in her shift.

At least Xander is quick to respond, even if I can hear the snark through his texts. A photo of Torryn behind the bar follows his message. Her dark hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, making it easy to see the way her lips are rolled as if she's having to hold back from saying whatever is running her

mind. And of course, she's wearing that way too tiny bikini top that doesn't leave much to the imagination.

Fuck she looks good. And safe. If not a little annoyed.

I thank him again and ignore him when he responds asking why he's sitting at the bar with her if I was going to be up this late anyways. I can't decide if the guy is nice or a total dick. Somehow he's both, and yet it doesn't diminish my gratitude for him in the slightest.

Shutting my eyes I try once again attempt to slow down the spinning thoughts that race through my mind, making my heart beat faster. The exact opposite of what it's supposed to be doing. Groaning, I roll over once more, making Karma hiss at me. I turn on the light and pick the photo back up. The thought that stopped me in my tracks earlier creeping back up on me.

"It would be weird, right?" I sit up running my hands through my already tousled hair. "But maybe, if I just go put the picture up first, it's not that weird. I mean that is why I bought the camera in the first place. To decorate." Throwing the blanket off, I climb out of bed and grab both the polaroid picture and some tape after rifling through my desk to find some.

Spud cocks his head to the side, now laying at the foot of the bed watching me. "Exactly, Cheeto Puff. Your mom would be surprised if she couldn't find you when she got home. You're a genius. It isn't weird at all."

Great, now I'm not only talking to a cat, but letting him convince me to do things I know I shouldn't be doing.

It's not like I was sleeping anyway.

Not letting myself focus on the whys or what her reaction might be, I go with my gut. As disgruntled as they may act, both kittens follow me out of my room as I sneak down the hall and slip into Torryn's room. Turning on the light, the starkness of the room hits me all over again. Nothing about it feeling like it's hers.

Time to change that.

It's only a small start, but taping the polaroid of our fur babies close to her bed where she will be able to see it every morning, makes the room already feel a bit warmer. Soon enough, I'll be able to add more and make her room here feel a little more like the one that was ruined.

Tater jumps up on her bed, meowing and looking at me expectantly. It would be rude to leave him here all alone.

"Come on, Karma." Hopefully, Torryn won't kick my ass out of bed as soon as she gets home. Now, I won't be helplessly wondering when she's going to be getting home. Straining to listen for the front door. I'll know as soon as she's home. Even if it is a bit weird. It's worth it.

Laying in her bed without her isn't as nearly satisfying, but something about being surrounded by her scent is enough to calm me enough and let sleep claim me. Maybe it tricks me into thinking there's nothing to worry about, almost as if she's right here with me.

Even my dreams are better, being in her space. The smell of her perfume even stronger than it was when I fell asleep. A tickle of pleasure races down my spine, nearly overwhelming. I'm slower to wake up than I should be, wanting to linger in the space where I can feel Torryn at my side, the waves of her hair, brushing over my thighs, her heat engulfing me. But something even hotter and sweeter draws me to the surface and I wake up with a groan.

Torryn smirks when her bright blue eyes meet mine and she leans over me, one hand resting on my thigh, her fingers digging into the flesh, with her other hand wrapped around the base of my dick, her tongue stroking over the tip, making it harder in her grip.

"Oh, fucking hell," I curse.

Her tongue laps at me, teasing me, her eyes dancing with amusement. I lean up on my arms and catch sight of her tits swaying in that bikini top. Fuck me. She hasn't even changed out of her work clothes yet. I instantly grow harder and her chuckle vibrates through my cock.

Before she even gives me a chance to react, she opens her mouth and slides my cock down her throat, gliding easily along the roof of her mouth. My balls tighten and I can tell she's been working me over for some time because I'm already so close.

Her tongue strokes me as the tip of my dick hits the back of her throat and her name comes out in a moan, long and slow. She hollows her cheeks, sucking me down, and I whimper, my hips bucking off the bed of their own volition and I fist the sheets as I come down her throat.

So much pleasure wracks through me that I swear I black out for a second and when I do come to it's to find Torryn still hovering over me, her tongue chasing the taste of me from her lips and my dick is already twitching.

Fuck. She has no idea what she does to me.

"Nice of you to join me," she teases.

A growl reverberates through me as I sit up straight and catch her hips in my hands, already tugging off the plain black shorts she wore tonight. "I'm the one who has been waiting hours for you."

She doesn't argue or push my hands away, letting me strip her as bare as I am. "I figured you were offering yourself up when I found you in my bed." There's a question in her words, but no annoyance. I'll take it.

"I'm always yours for the taking."

Her breath catches and I'm not sure if it's because of my words or because my fingers found her wet center, sliding through her folds to find her sensitive clit. Her legs tremble above me and it's my turn to smirk. My girl is already so turned on just from giving me head. She really is something fucking else.

"You can take me, use me, fuck me exactly how you like, Torryn. I don't think there is anything I wouldn't do for you." I move my fingers down to her entrance and insert two fingers, crooking them to hit her g-spot as she begins to ride my

fingers. I hold my hand steady, encouraging her to do exactly as I said. To take. To use.

Her hips buck and her tits sway, pleasure written in the lines around her eyes as she squeezes them shut, and the way her teeth sink into her full lower lip. “That’s right, baby. Take exactly what you need.” Her back arches and I feel her inner walls begin to clench. Goddamn, she is so fucking gorgeous. “Come for me.” And she does, looking so damn perfect it almost makes me ache.

Her body begins to relax and her eyes slowly open, a small grin on her lips as she looks down to where my hand is still in between her thighs. Even knowing I should be falling back asleep, I can’t help but fall into her temptation.

Slowly I pump my fingers in and out of her, making that teasing smile drop off her face. It’s my turn to smirk now. “I know my girl is never satisfied with just one.” Her mouth parts open in shock, but I don’t give her the chance to say anything.

I pull free from her, instead cupping her ass cheeks with my hands and pulling her higher over me until her pussy hovers just below my mouth. Looking up at her just about takes my damn breath away with how gorgeous she is. That tiny black triangle top barely managing to contain her breasts. The underswells exposed and just begging to be kissed, sucked, marked. I know firsthand how crazy it makes her, but I’ll have to save that for later. I’m still focused a bit more south.

Her eyes look down at me, slowly roving over my face until they come to my mouth and linger there. She wants it. Wants me. Of course she does. But there’s hesitation I don’t understand.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” she asks and I finally understand why she isn’t already sitting on my face.

I roll my eyes. She’s sweet. But while I always love the little peeks of Torryn’s softer side, this is one moment they have no place in. “You know how I love a midnight snack.”

“It’s past midnight,” she snarks, but her pelvis sways a bit closer to me. I knead her ass cheeks in my hands and her soft gasp is enough to tell me we are both going to get exactly what we want.

“A predawn snack then,” I tease, lifting my head from the bed just enough to run my tongue up her wet slit in one long swipe. “Now come on, baby. Use me. Just one more time and then I’ll be a good boy and go to sleep.”

She eyes me doubtfully, flicking a look behind her. “You’re already getting hard again.”

“Okay, two more times,” I concede, a cheeky smile spreading across my face. “Better hurry so I can get my beauty sleep.”

She rolls her eyes, but her hands find my hair, running through the length and gently tugging on the strands. “You talk too much.”

“You have the perfect way to shut–” Before I can finish the sentence she moves her hips forward, lowering herself to finally sit on my face. I’ve never been so goddamn happy to be cut off mid-sentence. Tightening my grip on her ass, I encourage her to rock on my face, riding my tongue.

She’s already so fucking wet, the come from her last orgasm dripping down her thighs to soak onto my cheeks and chin. Torryn doesn’t need any more encouragement after that, easily taking control. Her gentle, almost playful tugs of my hair become harder, more demanding. She uses her grip to move my head the way she wants it, letting me know exactly what feels good for her as I redouble my efforts to have more of her come soaking my face.

I keep my eyes locked on her, entranced by the way her tits bounce with every thrust of her hips, how she closes her eyes and tilts her head back, her long hair tickling my stomach as she does. I suck her clit into my mouth, making her hips buck. “Yes, Baylor. Just like that. More.”

Torryn is so close, her body winds up just begging for another release. My cock aches with the need to be inside her,

but I refuse until she comes from my mouth, just like this. Demanding her pleasure and owning it in a way that is almost too sexy for words. I lick and suck and scrape my teeth against her as she tells me exactly what it is she likes. Her grip in my hair becomes so forceful, moisture gathers in the back of my eyes and to my surprise, it only heightens my need for her. My need to please her.

“Faster,” she begs as I flick my tongue against her clit, lathering it with attention, following her instructions. Her body tightens over me, her mouth dropping open as a slow moan passes her lips. “Good boy,” she praises in a husky tone a moment before her entire body writhes, her orgasm crashing through her and soaking my face.

A bolt of desire and something else rushes through me at her words. At the fact I made her feel good enough to not only make her come, or to tell me how good she feels, but for her to praise me, compliment me.

Before her orgasm has even finished, my arms wrap around her waist and I flip her under me. Sinking into her in one hard thrust, I stop once I’m fully embedded in her. She laughs, shifting under me and brushing the hair off my forehead. My cock twitches inside of her at the small gesture and I bury my face in between her tits. Her top barely even impedes my access to them and I don’t think I’ve ever been happier than I am in this moment. Buried in Torryn to the hilt, my arms wrapped around her body, feeling her erratic heartbeat against my cheek.

“That might have been the best orgasm I’ve ever had,” she says after a few silent moments.

I rub my face against her chest, attempting to hide my smile. “Consider my face your personal seat from now on.”

She chuckles, making us both groan as we feel the movement all the way down to where we are connected. “You’re too good to me,” she whispers.

Pride beats in my chest and I shift between her legs. Not even feeling the need to move, to drive into her and make both

of us come again. Just happy, content, to feel her warmth all around me. To know I have her this way, in this moment.

“You feel so damn good, Tor,” I admit, leaning up to look at her. Her flushed cheeks and glassy eyes from her first two orgasms. Her fingers lightly run over my shoulders, her eyes eating me up the same way I’m looking at her. Trying to memorize every little detail about her. Appreciate how her chest rises and falls with every breath, the slight sheen to her skin, and the way her dark hair falls in messy waves all around her fair skin. Our eyes lock, but neither of us moves, frozen in this moment where I’ve never felt this level of closeness or comfort with another person.

The last thing I want to do is shatter it. I want it to last forever. Sleep begins to pull at me again. The fact it’s the middle of the night finally starting to catch up to me. A yawn escapes Tor and I know her day is starting to wear on her as well. Lowering my head back to her chest, I cuddle into her, tightening my grip on her and holding her as close to me as I can manage.

She sighs, her entire body relaxing beneath me as her fingers find my hair and gently start running through the long locks. It’s the longest I’ve ever had it, but Torryn’s fingers always seem to end up tangled in them, keeping me from wanting to cut it.

“So damn good I wish I could just sleep like this,” I admit. The urgency to take her has passed even with my dick still hard and throbbing inside of her. It feels perfect to just sit and hold her.

“Then sleep,” she says. I jerk my head up, looking at her confused but she just shrugs. “I like the feeling of you inside me.”

Not wanting her to change her mind, I don’t ask anymore questions, but there is one problem. I can’t sleep holding my weight off of her the way I am. As tall and strong as Tor is, I doubt she would be happy sleeping with my entire body weight crushing her into the mattress.

Something flutters in my stomach and unravels in my chest when I see her little pout as I pull out of her, but she has no time to protest before I'm moving us both into a better position. Starting off first with untying her stupid top and tossing it across the room.

"What?" she starts to ask but I shush her, laying on my side and pulling her back to my front, curling around her. She presses her ass into me, spreading her thighs and arching her back as I slide back into her slowly, savoring each bit of feeling as my cock finds his home in her cunt. The warmth of her surrounding me calms me and my eyes are fluttering shut before I realize it.

No tension lines Torryn's body as she sags in my arms when I wrap them back around her. My thumbs graze her hardened nipples but neither of us take it any further than that. I kiss the junction between her neck and shoulder and slip back off into sleep.

Her alarm clock wakes us both up way too early, but she's quick to shut it off, not even having to leave my embrace to find her phone. Her movement stirs me up and I realize I'm still partially inside of her and my dick is quickly waking up, eager to finish what we didn't last night. Without much thought, my hands find her breasts, my thumbs stroking over her nipples. A small sound escapes her as she pushes her ass in my direction, taking me further inside her.

"Torryn," I moan, gripping her hips and slowly rocking my pelvis, teasing both of us with the shallow thrusts.

"You know you want to," she whispers, her voice full of sleep and desire. Of course I want to. Is she crazy? Can she not feel how badly I need her? How in just seconds of waking up, I'm already so close? But one of us has to keep our wits about us, and it clearly won't be her.

The thought makes me smile even as I have to pull out of her and roll the opposite direction. Her angry hiss of disappointment makes the smile stretch further. I reach into her bedside table and grab a condom out of the box I threw in

there, ripping it open and sheathing my cock as quickly as humanly possible.

This time when I grab her, she swats my hands away, still pouting I didn't give her what she wanted. She must still be half asleep to not realize what I grabbed. I scatter kisses over her neck, back and shoulders as a peace offering for making her wait, appeasing her long enough to grip her thigh and pull it back over my legs so I can slide back into her cunt.

She's still wet. Not as wet as last night when we fell asleep, but enough to accommodate half my length before I pull back and build up with slow, shallow thrusts. I don't rush to take her, enjoying these moments between wake and slumber. My tongue traces up her neck until I find her ear with my teeth and gently tug on it, making her moan my name breathlessly.

"Of course I want you," I whisper. "I always want you." She rocks her hips back, taking more of me inside her. "But one of us had to remember a condom."

Her back arches and her breath stutters as she takes me to the hilt. "My good boy," she murmurs, clenching around me. And there's that warmth spreading through my chest again. I hold Torryn close, fucking her slowly from behind. My hands explore her body as she whispers broken praises and pleas. Tiny bruises will cover her neck and shoulders when we wake up, but the thought only brings me further satisfaction. I want those little marks to cover her body. Her breasts and thighs and stomach. One day I'll mark every inch of her and listen to her calling me her good boy as I do.

Both of our climaxes are slow to build but all consuming when they crash over us. Taking both our breath away as I come only moments after she does. I hardly have the strength to tie the condom off and toss it in the trash can before I'm falling back asleep, this time Torryn curled into my side, her head resting on my chest.

The next time I wake up, she's gone.

WELLS

He's sleeping in her bed

ISLA

It's kind of cute

Beau adds Xander to the chat

XANDER

Is he sleeping?

He finally stopped blowing up my phone about Tor

JAMES

He was more anxious today than normal

He missed her

Xander changes chat name to Simp Support

BEAU

He is a simp

XANDER

He's annoying is what he is

WELLS

It's the first time he's liked a girl

XANDER

Go to sleep dickheads. I've got his girl



twenty-six

BABY BAY

My body is deliciously sore in a new way as I disentangle mine and Baylor's limbs in order to climb out of my bed. He looks so peaceful as he sleeps in my bed that is honestly too small for his large frame. I have no idea what possessed him to actually sleep in here last night.

Not even bothering to dig through my bare-bones closet, I put on Baylor's boxers and grab a pair of clean panties and dart across the hall to Baylor's room to steal one of his shirts too. He could have at least brought one with him last night if he was going to camp out in my room, but no. I found him in only his boxers.

Carrying it into the bathroom, I put it and my clean underwear on the counter before taking the hottest shower I can tolerate to try and ease some of the soreness from my muscles. Working extra shifts during the week are really starting to take a toll on my body.

There's nothing to do about the pressure in between my thighs from Baylor's size, but by the end of the shower, at least my back, shoulders, and neck feel slightly better. I wish I had the time to soak with some epsom salts, but there's too much on my to-list for the day before the game. I promised Isla I would be all hers, which means I need to get all my shit done before lunch time. Starting with making the guys' breakfast.

No matter how often they swear they don't have any issue with us staying here, they're doing us a huge favor by being so

cool about it. Not a lot of people would be so willing to go as far as they have.

Today is a big day for all of them. Thanks to Isla, I've firsthand seen how much work the whole team has been putting into preparing for the season and know they want it to start off right. With a win. It'd be a lie to say I don't want that for them too. It would also be a lie to say I'm not excited to watch them play in a real game. The exhibition was fun, but you could tell they were working out kinks, trying new things. Some of their practices have been more intense than that game. I can't imagine how today will play out.

Doing my best to dry my hair with just the towel, I give up after a few minutes and braid it to the side. At least that'll keep it out of my way. Checking the time, I realize it's getting close to when most of the guys normally start waking up. Do they sleep in longer on game days? It's not like the game is early in the day so they could. Maybe I should have asked.

I head to the kitchen, deciding it won't be that big of a deal. Even if they do sleep in, I can keep breakfast sandwiches warm in the oven. They can eat them as they wake up. The smell of coffee and sausage may be enough to wake them up on their own. They usually are.

Starting with the coffee so I can start to feel more than the half dead zombie I still feel like after my shower, I'm a little surprised no one has joined me by the time I finish my first cup. Not even Isla.

Maybe she and Wells had their own pregame last night.

A pulse sets off between my thighs as hazy memories flicker in my mind's eye. God, I've never felt so full. So good. It was probably the best night of sleep I've gotten in months, maybe ever.

Grabbing my second cup of coffee, I start making the breakfast sandwiches. With no sign of anyone being awake yet, I make the avocado spread first. Keeping it simple I smash it and add salt and pepper with just a touch of lime. I toast the bread next and grab the cheese to put on. The sausage patties go on next, and soon as the scent and sizzle fills the kitchen, I

grin to myself as the house starts to come alive. I should have known it would be the meat that woke these boys up.

The rest of the process is quick and easy. I make a huge batch of eggs, cracking more eggs in one sitting than I think I ever have before. They cook fairly quickly and I begin to assemble the sandwiches before anyone comes into the kitchen.

I'm about halfway through when I hear a familiar voice. "Half-naked girl cooking breakfast in my kitchen? This might just be my wet dream. Never leave us, Tor."

I turn around to find Beau walking into the kitchen in only his boxers, lines from his pillow still creased in his face. He grins at me, but his eyes don't even linger on my exposed legs, too busy latched onto the baking sheet full of sandwiches on the counter. He snaps out of the trance, throwing a quick look over his shoulder and I chuckle, knowing he was waiting for something to come flying across the room at his head.

"You're the first one awake," I tell him.

His grin turns salacious. "Does that mean I get the first pick of those sandwiches?"

I shrug, turning back to the stove to finish breakfast. Now that one of them is awake, it'll be only moments before the rest follow. Barely a moment has passed when the doorbell rings. A zap of fear rings through me before I force myself to shake it off. But when I turn to look at Beau, he has the same hesitant look in his eyes.

"I'll get it," he assures me. "You stay here."

I hate the tingling sensation of fear as it zips down my spine, but at least it's quick to disappear when I hear Beau's laughter from the entryway. I heave out a huge sigh of relief at the same time I hear footsteps from the side of the house Baylor and my rooms are.

The fear is all but forgotten when I feel his presence behind me. Not even having to turn to look, I know it's Baylor before his hands find my thighs under his shirt and his fingers

trace patterns edging higher and higher until I can feel a cool breeze against my ass cheeks.

“You know,” he whispers, leaning down to speak directly in my ear, “when we win tonight, I’m going to have a new superstition to add to my pregame routine.” His words echo through my body, the promise of reliving last night every night before a game does not seem a hardship in the slightest.

“Breakfast sandwich?” I ask, enjoying the way his chest rumbles behind me. One hand reaches behind me, turning off the burner of the stove. I’d protest, but everything is already done cooking.

“I can give you a reminder if you’ve already forgotten,” his voice drops into that low timbre I’m secretly just a bit obsessed with. Dark promises coating every word as he lifts me, turning me in his arms and putting me down on the counter. The cold marble sends a chill through me even as Baylor spreads my legs open and drops to his knees between, kissing and biting his way from my knee to my inner thigh. “Also,” he teases, “if you wanted me naked, you could have just asked. You didn’t have to steal my boxers.”

A laugh eddies out of me. I had forgotten about that. I guess he wouldn’t have had anything to wear after I stole them. The laughter dies on my lips when his fingers slip under my underwear at the same time he sucks a mark into my inner thigh, turning it into a surprised gasp.

“Beau’s already awake,” I say, forcing myself to not forget that we’re in the middle of the kitchen where Beau will be walking back into at any moment. Baylor pulls my underwear to the side, stroking my slit with his thumb, his kisses edging higher and higher.

“He can watch,” he growls, his nose bumping against my clit. Fuck this man for knowing exactly how to unravel every bit of sense I possess.

A throat clears behind him. “While I would actually love that,” Beau says, his voice dancing with amusement. “Your brother might have a different opinion.”

My eyes fly open at the same time Baylor jumps to his feet, attempting to shield me with his body as he turns to look at the newcomers. “The fuck are you here for?” he shouts. I peek my head over his shoulder to find a man standing just a step behind Beau, a large, familiar smile on his face as he stares at Baylor. He’s almost as tall as Baylor, with the same light hazel eyes that seem to sparkle with mirth, but he’s leaner, not as imposing. His hair is longer, falling to his shoulders, a shade or two lighter than Baylor’s dirty blonde, but styled in the same messy fashion that screams he just rolled out of bed.

“Don’t tell me you forgot we were coming, Baby Bay.” The newcomer lifts his hand to his chest as if he’s been wounded by Baylor’s reaction.

My lips twitch as I poke B in the back. “Baby Bay?” I can’t help it. I will absolutely be calling him that in the future.

“Don’t you start,” he whispers, moving again to try and block me from his brother’s view. Or is he blocking my view of his brother? “No one said you were showing up at my house at the crack of fucking dawn.”

I’m not the only one to roll my eyes. “I don’t think anyone considers 8:30 anywhere near dawn,” his brother drawls slowly, amusement dancing over his features as he focuses on where I’m sticking my head out from behind Baylor to observe him. “But I’d be mad too if me and my girl were interrupted. This must be the girl you bought flowers for?”

“You bought a girl flowers?” I ask, side-eyeing Baylor. When? Considering what we spent most of the night doing, that’s kind fucked up if he’s trying to impress another girl.

Beau’s laughter immediately eases my suspicions and Baylor’s groan of frustration brings back my own amusement. “Yes, they were Torryn’s flowers,” he admits, confusing me for a second. “But I already told all of you idiots. I didn’t buy them for her.”

Beau nods emphatically. “Right, you stole them from her.”

I snort, finally catching on to the flowers they're talking about. "Those flowers?" I ask, disbelief that they've become so infamous. Never would I have thought they'd still be haunting Baylor.

"Yes, those stupid fucking flowers," he growls, glaring at Beau, "that I did not fucking steal."

"Touchy subject," his brother drawls, raising his hands in front of his chest. "Anyway," his eyes lock on mine, his smile softening in a way that reminds me of Baylor. They really do look quite a lot alike. "I'm Dylan, Baylor's favorite older brother."

Baylor snorts again. "You can ignore him, Tor." I ignore Baylor instead, sliding off the counter and bumping him with my hip to push him out of my way.

I walk up to his brother and stick out my hand. "I'm Torryn. It's nice to meet you even if your brother is a Neanderthal."

Dylan's eyes rove over me, but not in a flirty way. Only curiosity and intrigue spark in his eyes as they linger on the neckline of my shirt, or should I say Baylor's shirt? "I don't think I can blame my brother for that," he says with a genuine smile. "But I would definitely buy you flowers if you were my girl," he whispers, mischief coating every syllable.

Large arms band around my waist, and I'm lifted from behind only to be deposited back on the floor, but this time with a wall of a man once again blocking me from Dylan's sight. "Don't flirt with her," Baylor scolds, which I'm sure is only going to encourage his brother more.

"Thought she wasn't your girl?" Beau asks, a knowing smile on his face, even while he barely spares a glance for Baylor, his eyes locked on his phone. Yup. Baylor did it. They're never going to stop giving him a hard time now, as if our friends haven't already been giving us enough shit.

Baylor puts his hand to his chest. "I never said she was," he defends. "But my brother still can't flirt with her."

I roll my eyes, turning back to the stove to finish the sandwiches. I can hear more footsteps throughout the house. It's only a matter of time before they start trickling in to see what the commotion is.

“Then can I flirt with her?” Beau asks and I shake my head at the ridiculousness of this morning.

Baylor scoffs, “You do flirt with her. Every day as a matter of fact.”

Fair enough. Beau is a notorious flirt. Even he can't argue Baylor's point and concedes, which only makes Dylan huff in annoyance. “So he can, but I can't?” I grab three sandwiches and put them in front of all three of the guys as they continue to bicker. Thank fuck I made a ton of extra. I had no idea how much these guys would eat on game days.

Dylan smiles and it's almost impossible not to smile back at him when he focuses it on me. It's infectious just like his brother's. “I think I'm going to steal you from my brother.” I don't bother with a response, knowing Baylor will intervene before I even have the chance to say anything.

Look at that, I'm being lifted again. I smack Baylor's hand this time. “Would you stop that?”

His eyes narrow on mine. “No.” His lips turn down into a soft pout and I can't even bear to continue to scold him when he looks like a sad puppy. I huff out a sigh and give him my back.

The kitchen gets louder as the rest of the house finally joins us, Wells and Dylan take the attention off of me and Baylor while Isla and him are introduced. Dylan doesn't give quite as much shit to Wells, but enough to make Isla blush when she shakes his hand.

I plate up a few more sandwiches and hand them out, nodding in acknowledgement to their chorus of thanks. After all the guys are settled, I go back into the fridge and grab the granola parfaits I made for Isla and myself. Neither one of us has ever been huge on a heavy breakfast, preferring to fill up on coffee.

All of the seats at the island are taken, so I stand on the end, leaning my elbows against the counter to eat my breakfast. James starts to offer me his seat, but before I can wave him away, or he can even finish his sentence, Baylor grabs me around the waist and settles me in his lap. “She’s fine,” he says, cutting off James and making the entire kitchen trade looks.

Whatever. They were gonna talk anyway. Neither Baylor nor I can do or say anything nowadays without them side-eyeing each other and trying not to smile. I’ve taken to just ignoring them. Not sure if Baylor has even picked up on it.

I lean back into his chest, scooping a bite of yogurt and granola into my mouth. He nudges me with his shoulder and opens his mouth silently. Who knew such a big hockey player could act like such a child? I grab a large bite, making sure to get a little bit of all the good stuff and deposit it in his waiting mouth.

His grin practically spells satisfaction as he swallows it down. He’s so easy to please. He lifts his half-eaten sandwich and holds it in front of me in offering. I shrug, taking a small bite, curious how it actually turned out. I would normally use bacon, but Baylor leans toward sausage on hockey heavy days.

Hmm, it is pretty good. The added avocado really ties it all together. I lean back, giving B a small smile of thanks and he responds by taking a huge bite, grinning around the food and making me roll my eyes.

Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of Dylan opening his mouth, but Wells pats him on the shoulder, cutting him off. “Don’t bother.”

Isla nods next to him. “They’re in their own world.” I flip her off, but Baylor continues to ignore them, eating one-handed while his free hand roams every bit of exposed skin he can reach.

Dylan clears his throat. “Well, Mom and everyone will be here in a couple hours for lunch.”

Baylor stiffens behind me and his grip tightens on my thigh. “I thought I was meeting you guys for lunch?”

His brother doesn’t bother to hide his amusement. “She wanted to see all the guys.” His eyes never leave mine and I have a feeling I might be the reason for the change of plans. “She promised to cook lunch.”

“Everyone?” Baylor asks, but he already knows the answer.

“Everyone,” Dylan confirms, making the entire table, save for me and Isla, laugh.

I turn around, arching a brow at Baylor and waiting for an explanation. He sighs, resuming tracing patterns into my skin where no one can see him. “I’m the youngest of six boys.”

Ah. That is explanation enough. My lips twitch and even Isla giggles. Baylor’s head lands on my shoulder and he presses his face into the curve of my neck. “Dylan isn’t even the worst of the bunch.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. Baylor is in for a rough day of teasing if that’s true, but it’s nice to see how loved he is. How close his family must be to have the comfort and ease in their relationship.

Isla pokes my side, her cheeks flushed as she whispers, “Do you have a turtleneck?”

I scrunch my nose in confusion, turning away from Baylor to give her my full attention. “No?” My eyes rove over her but she’s already dressed for the day and looks fine. “Why?”

She clears her throat, dropping her eyes from mine. “It’s just,” she hesitates. “You’re going to meet Baylor’s mom.”

I give her a moment, waiting for an explanation to follow but when it doesn’t I ask, “And?”

Beau’s cackle draws my attention to him and I notice everyone in the kitchen has gone silent, watching mine and Isla’s conversation.

James scratches his neck, looking as embarrassed as Isla. “I think what she’s trying to say,” he starts, clearing his throat.

The fuck is wrong with all of them? “Maybe you wouldn’t want to meet Baylor’s family with, you know?” he finishes, gesturing to his neck.

I cock my head in confusion. Baylor is absolutely no help as he devours the rest of his breakfast.

Beau shakes his head in exasperation. “Your hickeys, Tor. Your neck is covered in fucking hickeys.”

My hand flies to my neck and I turn to glare at Baylor. I haven’t actually looked at myself in the mirror today. I got dressed while the mirror was still covered in steam. “You gave me hickeys?” Baylor finally looks up at me, confusion marring his face.

“Huh?”

I groan, smacking him in the chest. “You gave me hickeys when your mom is going to be here?”

His eyes flick down to my exposed neck and his lips twitch in satisfaction. “Sorry I wasn’t thinking about my mom when I was buried inside you?” Beau snorts and Baylor looks awfully proud of himself.

“I find them charming,” Dylan pipes up. “But if you’re determined to cover all the marks up,” he starts and something his tone makes me close my eyes in exasperation, just waiting for the taunt. “You should probably start with pants.”

Ah there it is.

“You left hickeys on her legs?” James asks, looking between all of us. Baylor laughs but it’s Beau who responds. “We walked in on him leaving them this morning, right under that very nice and not at all familiar shirt Torryn is wearing today.”

I flip him off. But it doesn’t stop him. “Speaking of, I feel like we should circle back to Baylor’s promise from this morning.”

“Fuck off, Beau,” Baylor says.

“As long as I can get another show while I do,” he taunts back. And with that, I pat Baylor on the shoulder and climb

out of his lap.

“You guys can clean up the kitchen.”

Another chorus of thanks starts and I wave my hand as I head back to my room. I’m sure I have something to help cover all the marks so his mom doesn’t think I’m a total whore.

My room still smells like sex and Baylor and it makes me smile just a little bit. We definitely made a mess last night. I start to strip the bedding and sheets when a meow shocks me.

“Shit. That’s where you two are.” Karma and Potato both stretch their little bodies out as they jump off my bed. I know for a fact neither one of them was in bed with us last night. Potato follows Karma as she walks out of the room and I huff a laugh and finish pulling off the sheets.

I stop once more when I catch a small rectangle on the wall next to my side of the bed that definitely wasn’t there before. Climbing over the bed, I lean in to see it’s a polaroid picture of the kittens curled up together in Baylor’s bed, fast asleep.

Is this why he was in here last night?

Something flutters in my chest and I can’t help the shy smile as I run my finger over the edge of the photo. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at it without smiling now.



twenty-seven

PRE-WORK NAP

All eyes fall on me as soon as she leaves the room.

“What?” I ask as they all trade looks but it’s Dylan who shakes his head, his eyes darting back to the hallway Tor just disappeared down. I wonder if she’s found the picture yet.

“That’s not your girl?” he asks, clearly confused, but I can’t figure out why. Haven’t we already exhausted this conversation?

“Yeah.”

Wells shakes his head. “I told you not to bother.”

Dylan looks at him with exasperation. “I don’t think I can let it go,” he admits before turning his attention back to me. “She cooks for you, you cuddle, you mark her, don’t want me to flirt with her, but she’s not your girl?”

I look around at all the faces in the room. “I’m not sure why that’s so hard to understand.”

Isla giggles, watching the whole conversation unfold. “It’s a lot easier when you just accept they’re both idiots.”

Okay, rude. “I’m going to tell Tor you said that.” She gives me an unamused look like she dares me to try. I cross my arms in front of my chest and meet her look of challenge with one of my own.

“Stop threatening my girlfriend because she’s calling you out on your bullshit.” Wells smacks me upside the head. It’s not even threatening, and I’m still telling Tor.

Dylan points at Wells. “See! It’s not that hard to call the girl you sleep with your girlfriend.”

I give him a confused look. Obviously it’s not hard to say a word. It’s just a word. “And if she was my girlfriend, I would call her that. But she’s not.”

Dylan groans and I don’t know if I have ever seen him so frustrated. “You got jealous.”

“Did not,” I defend. “It was weird because it was you.”

“So I could fuck her?” Beau asks, tilting his head to the side.

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to gauge how serious he’s actually being. “You’ve been friends for years and you’ve never been able to so I don’t see how that would change now.” Over the conversation, I grab mine and Torryn’s dishes and deposit them in the sink before walking out of the kitchen, ignoring the hushed whispers that follow my departure.

I rub my chest as I think about Beau’s question. Pft. He can try. Torryn has never been interested in being more than friends with him. Why would that change now? It wouldn’t. There’s no reason for it to.

Torryn’s door is closed when I walk by it to go to my room. She’s probably doing homework and prepping for the week before the game tonight. Wells let it slip that Isla extracted a promise from her that she would be around for just about the whole day until the end of the game.

My phone vibrates in my hand as I collapse onto my bed. It’s a text from my brother telling me he’s leaving but he will be back with the rest of the fam in a couple hours. Hopefully, he will have calmed down from seeing Torryn this morning.

Maybe I should keep my hands more to myself in front of my brothers so they have less ammunition. That’s it. That’s what I’ll do. I can always make up for it later when she’s off work. Have our own private celebration.

Another text comes through, this one in our house chat. Dammit, they’re right. I check the time and we should be leaving for the ring for our morning skate. I grab my bag to

head back downstairs but pause at Torryn's door, knocking and waiting for her reply. Once I get it, I pop my head in to find her exactly where I expected her to be. In the corner at the desk I set up for her the other day so she had a quiet place to study.

"We're heading off to our morning skate," I tell her. "We'll be back before my family gets here." At least I really hope we will be. Dylan said a few hours, and morning skate never takes long. Just enough to warm up our muscles.

"I'll be here," she promises and something about it makes me smile.

"Thanks," I respond. I hesitate, not wanting to walk away for some reason. I hear my name being called from downstairs, the guys getting impatient. Ignoring them, I notice she's not in my shirt anymore. "Did you find something to wear tonight?"

She nods, her lips curving up on one side in a way I know spells trouble. "I found a shirt." She turns to show me and I'm a little disappointed to find it does cover the majority of the marks I left on her last night. Her hair should be able to camouflage the rest that are peeking out.

"It's not orange," I can't help but point out.

She gestures to a bag sitting in the corner of her room I hadn't noticed before. "I bought a jersey from the student store."

An unexplainable thrill rushes through me at her words. She's barely bought anything to replace everything she lost, but she bought a jersey to support my team. "I'm excited to see you in it." What guy doesn't enjoy a gorgeous girl like Torryn in his number?

My name is called again, more irritation in Wells' voice this time. "I'll see you later," I say, turning out of her room and rushing down the hall.

The rest of the day feels exactly like a game day should. My energy and mood are high, the team is moving with efficiency and synchronicity, the air around us buzzing with

anticipation. The guys and I make our way back home, ready to eat again only to find several unfamiliar cars parked on our street.

“Torryn wasn’t leaving today, right?” Beau asks, moving to my side. Panic creeps down my spine as I let my gaze wander around the street, trying to find anyone out of place or anything that looks sketchy.

“She was doing homework and tutor prep all morning, or she was supposed to.” We didn’t ask Xander to keep an eye on her because we didn’t think she’d be leaving the safety of the house. I turn to Wells, but he already has his phone in his hands.

“Isla would have said something if they left,” he attempts to console, but he can’t hide the note of concern in his voice.

“Could be the neighbors,” James points out. “Game day parties.” Okay fair. But all of our steps are just a little bit faster as we hurry to the door.

Thankfully nothing looks out of place as we let ourselves in, but the relief is short lived as there’s no beep of the alarm going off with the door.

“I set the alarm,” Wells whispers in a rush. “Isla?”

“Tor?” We call out their names at the same moment, dropping our bags at the entryway, practically tripping over them as we run in the house, nearly mowing down Torryn in the process.

She arches a brow at the sight of our frazzled states. “You’re home.”

Relief crashes through me feeling almost as good as last night did, but the panic doesn’t just disappear, rather turning into another heated emotion. “Why the fuck did you turn off the alarm?” I demand.

She clicks her tongue, eyeing me over my tone, but the fear I had for her is far greater than any fear I have over pissing her off.

“You promised to take it more seriously,” I accuse.

“Now, I know I raised you better than to take that tone with a woman,” another angry voice comes from behind Torryn and my heart seizes in my chest.

My eyes lift from Tor’s arms crossed over her chest, a small smirk on her face, to find my mom with disbelief and disappointment in her eyes as she points a wooden spoon in my direction. “Mom?”

That explains the alarm. My cheeks flush as my mom continues. “And where do you think you boys are dropping your bags? Is that where they belong?”

A chorus of, “No ma’am. Sorry ma’am,” sounds behind me, and I duck my head sheepishly, tucking tail with the rest of the guys to pick up our shit and put it where it does belong.

“That’s what I thought,” my mom says, and Torryn chuckles as she follows her back into the kitchen.

“Isla really should have given us a heads-up,” Beau grumbles.

“I hate when Mama Levine is mad at us,” James agrees.

Even Wells huffs his agreement. “Brat probably thought it was funny.” His eyes lock on mine. “You know they’ve been waiting to get ahold of embarrassing stories of both of us out of your family?”

I groan and Wells nods. “I was hoping to avoid it, but it’s probably too late.”

Beau snorts. “Did you not see Torryn’s satisfied smirk? She’s definitely heard some shit on both of you.”

I glare at him. “You think my mom doesn’t have embarrassing stories about you?”

Color drains from his face as I’m sure memories of times at my house flash through his mind. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Leading the way into the kitchen, I’m amazed we didn’t hear how loud my family is from outside. Even the noise from our Halloween party didn’t compare to the noise echoing

through our house. Especially when eight sets of eyes land directly on me.

My mom rushes me further into the kitchen, dropping her spoon on the counter and attempting to pat my cheeks, her irritation with me evaporating. “Oh, it’s so good to see you, Baylor.” Her arms wrap around my waist as she squeezes me and even if I do tower over her, there’s nothing quite as comforting as a hug from my mom.

“I’ve missed you too, Mom.” Dropping a kiss on the top of her head, I turn towards my dad as his large hand slaps down on my shoulder, before pulling me out of my mom’s arms and into his. “You’re looking pretty good, Dad. Been working out?” I ask, patting his stomach, making his signature raucous laugh burst free from his lips.

“Gotta keep up with my boys,” he teases.

Greeting the rest of my family takes several long minutes with even more barbs and taunts circulating. Every so often, I can’t help but glance in Torryn’s direction as she watches the scene unfold in front of her. The guys are used to my family. Have all met them several times over the years we’ve played together. They even sometimes come home to stay with us during breaks. It’s a lot to have every Levine in the same room, but she seems to be holding her own. Amusement sparkling in her eyes every time one of my brothers chirps in my direction.

By the time we all are seated for lunch, I’m already looking forward to my pregame nap and plotting how to convince Torryn she needs one too. I love my family. I do. But as the game time creeps closer and closer, I hardly have the energy to save for them.

We all serve ourselves and my mom leads the conversation effortlessly, focusing a few minutes on each person sitting around us. There were too many bodies to all fit at the table. Not that my heathen brothers mind eating while standing. As my mom focuses on Isla and Wells, I tug Torryn’s seat closer to me.

“Overwhelmed yet?”

Her eyes flick over my family before landing on mine, there's something in her expression I can't understand. It's heavy and almost tinged with sadness, but the corner of her lips twist up in a sort of smile. "I see where you get it from."

I lift my hands to my chest in mock-horror. "You wound me."

Her smile turns more real, one of the ones I wish I could collect and hold onto as my most treasured possessions. "They're fun." She shrugs, her eyes roving over my brothers again. Dropping her voice to a whisper to confess, "But besides Dylan, I have no idea which brother is which."

Laughter eddies out of me, drawing my mom's attention and I know I'm in trouble when I see that gleam in her eyes. I'm not the only one to catch on as my brothers all start nudging each other and nodding in Torryn's direction. I'd flip them off, but I'm in my mom's direct line of sight while they are all behind her. Bastards.

Wells attempts to draw my mom's attention back to him and Isla and I'm grateful for the moment of reprieve. I owe him for that.

"Knowing Dylan already gives you a head start," I tell her, leaning into her space. "The dipshit next to him is his twin, Jackson. He used to have hair the same length as Dylan, but cut it when he started working with kids. Secretly, we were all thankful cause no one could tell them apart." She slaps my chest as if she doesn't believe me and I grin back at her before pointing to the next brother in the lineup. "The quiet one with the darkest hair is Mason. He's just finishing his residency and is going to work in a private practice as a pediatrician. And that's really the only interesting thing about him." My brother hears me and flips me off, but doesn't say anything back.

Torryn's eyes flash back and forth between us and tries not to smile. I continue, "Liam is the oldest and is a carbon copy of our dad. You can tell him apart because he's always bossing someone around and perpetually has his phone glued to his hand." Dylan snorts and I roll my eyes at him openly eavesdropping now. "And that just leaves Beckett. He's the

closest in age to me and also the tallest of my brothers. They're all very bitter that the two youngest are the tallest."

"Oh fuck off," Jackson says, rolling his eyes.

"It's okay, J," Beckett says. "Short kings are very popular nowadays."

Jackson shoulder chucks him back. "You're such a jackass. I'm 6'1, you guys are just mutants."

Beckett stares him down. "I'm 6'1."

No he's not. My lips twitch but I force them back into a blank expression. He's at least 6'2 maybe 6'3 and I'm just a hair shorter than him still. Before they can really rile each other up though, my mom steps in and redirects the conversation to Torryn.

Oh shit. Maybe I shouldn't have stirred up shit 'cause I'm about to get my share of karma for it.

"Torryn," my mom coos. "Tell us more about yourself. Do you also come from a big family? You seem to be handling the chaos of my boys very well." I shake my head, putting it in my hands. No one pries quite like a mom can pry.

Torryn doesn't even miss a beat, meeting my mom's eyes as she answers. "Both my siblings are younger than me. My brother is a sophomore and plays football. My little sister is in sixth grade and is getting into volleyball and cheer." Huh. With one question my mom was able to get something out of Torryn that even I didn't know about her. I'd heard about her brother before. She went to his game. But I didn't know she also had a baby sister. I bet she's a good big sister. I can just see it. Maybe letting my mom continue this interrogation isn't the worst thing to happen.

My mom claps her hands together laughing. "Oh I bet your parents just had their hands full with you guys. Sports make life quite hectic."

Torryn's smile doesn't drop, but something shifts in her expression. I don't think anyone else notices it except maybe Isla. But something is off. "It was actually my grandparents

that raised us,” she says. “But yes, they definitely had their hands full,” she adds with a chuckle.

My dad places his hand in my mom’s lap, a not so subtle warning to tread carefully. I love the woman dearly, but she does often have the grace of a bull in a china shop. Especially when her curiosity is piqued. “I’m sorry,” she apologizes. “I didn’t mean to bring up a hard topic.” I trade looks with my brothers and not for a second are any of us fooled. She’s going to dig. I get ready to save Torryn, but she squeezes my thigh and smiles at my mom.

“No apologies needed,” she assures her. “My mom passed away when I was young. I don’t have very many memories of her. My grandparents have always been more than enough.” I’m surprised she gave the information so easily, based on the look on Isla’s face, I’m not the only one. Maybe my mom should look into joining the FBI.

“How tragic,” my mom laments, chewing on her lower lip. Oh no. “But if you don’t mind me asking, how old were you when she passed?”

“Mom,” I cut her off. “I’m sure Torryn doesn’t want to talk about this.”

She sighs dramatically. “I was just wondering,” she defends. “It must be so hard to not have any memories, but her sister must be ten or eleven. So I’m assuming her mom must have still been around when she was seven or eight. It seems like you should have some memories from that age.”

“Mom!” I exclaim again, but this time I’m not the only one. My brothers and my dad jump in to try and cut her off. Already apologizing to Torryn, but she only chuckles again.

“I was eight,” she answers my mom with a shrug. “I guess it is odd, but only a few scattered details remain.” Isla clears her throat but Torryn gives a subtle shake of her head, assuring her best friend that she’s okay. “My mom was sick. Maybe that’s why the memories blur together. The smell of antiseptic, the white walls of hospitals. A half sung lullaby. But my grandma more than makes up for it. She’s always been an amazing woman and has raised us well.”

My mom nods. “I can only imagine how proud she is to have a granddaughter like you.” At least she’s dropped that line of questioning. “What are you studying?”

I sigh, squeezing Torryn’s thigh in apology. My family can be more than a little overbearing, but she doesn’t let it trip her up. Answering all of my mom’s questions. It’s probably the most I’ve ever heard Torryn speak in one sitting. Based on the looks being traded between the guys, it’s the same for all of them. But my mom has quickly fallen under Torryn’s unique charm, laughing at her dry wit, and hanging on her every word, prying for more information out of her.

“Oh, Baylor?” My mom calls, drawing me out of my reverie as I finish my lunch. Looking up, I meet her eyes in silent acknowledgement. “What are your plans before the game?”

I trade looks with the guys, before checking the time on my phone. “Uh, probably a nap before we have to meet at the rink.”

She claps her hands together, far too excitedly, making me narrow my eyes in her direction. “Perfect! Torryn and Isla can come shopping with me.”

Finally, something trips up the woman at my side as her face blanches before she can cover it up. Even without her reaction, I’m already shaking my head though. “Torryn is also taking a nap.”

I ignore the way she turns to look at me skeptically, or the way my mom arches one brow. “Torryn needs a pregame nap?”

I scoff, “Of course not. Don’t be silly.”

“Great, then—”

I interrupt her, “She needs a pre-work nap.”

Torryn snorts and my mom looks at me dumbfounded. “A pre-work nap?”

I nod my head vigorously, purposefully avoiding eye contact with everyone else in the room, knowing what I’ll find

there. “Yup. She works late tonight and she didn’t get enough sleep last night.” Snickers sound throughout the room, Dylan and Jackson slapping each other’s chests and whispering amongst themselves. My cheeks flush. “She just needs a nap. Trust me.”

My mom still looks baffled as she stares at me before flicking her attention to Torryn. “You have work tonight?”

Tor nods and a look of disappointment flashes over my mom’s face. “I thought we would be able to sit together at the game.” A pink hue spreads over Torryn’s cheeks and it’s a look I’ve never seen on her. She almost looks embarrassed.

“I’ll be at the game,” she assures my mom in almost a whisper. My mom beams at her, the look of disappointment completely gone.

“Oh perfect, then we can sit together.”

Torryn shares a smile with my mom and something in my stomach flips. “I’d like that,” she says.

“There, mom. You can have her then, but no shopping.”

She sighs but concedes. “I understand. You must work late if you’re starting after the game. Where is it you work, dear? Maybe we’ll come visit you.”

“No!” Wells and I shout at the same time, making Torryn laugh.

“She’s a bartender,” I hurriedly interject, before she has a chance to say anything. “Oh and look at the time, nap time. Thanks for lunch, mom!” I grab Torryn’s hand and pull her out of her chair, rushing out of the room as I finish saying goodbye to my family. “See you later!”

She pokes me in my stomach when we finally reach my room. “That was so rude.”

I hush her, pulling her down into my bed with me. “It was necessary.”

She shakes her head, attempting to pull away from me. “I was going to do homework.”

I hold onto her tighter, not letting her go. “And now you’re napping.” She starts to protest but I cut her off with my lips. After I feel her body relaxing in mine, I lean back, placing a soft kiss on the tip of her nose. “You really do need to rest. It’s going to be a long day and you’re working late.” I can see the desire to argue, but I don’t give her the chance, using my lips to keep hers busy.

The more she relaxes in my arms, the greater chance I have to keep her in my bed with me. I place one more kiss against her lips, yawning when I pull away and tuck her against my chest. She stays still, but I can feel the tension building back in her shoulders. I swear this girl doesn’t know how to relax.

“Give yourself a break, Tor,” I whisper. “You’ve been working your ass off. Take a nap with me. You’re allowed to not be always doing something.”

As if all she really needed was permission, her body once again relaxes in my hold as she softly whispers her acquiescence. I stroke my hands over her back, liking the way she fits against me. There haven’t been many changes to my pregame routine over the years, but I’m thinking I should officially change the pregame nap to a pregame nap *with Torryn*.

Only a few moments have passed when I hear her breathing even out. I close my own eyes and fall asleep with a smile on my face and the taste of Torryn on my tongue. She was right all those weeks ago. She is so much sweeter than tequila.



twenty-eight

DAMN HE'S FINE

The energy in the arena alone is enough to show me how different this game is compared to the one I went to before. The closer we got to the start time, the louder and more raucous the seats around us have gotten.

Sitting between Isla and Baylor's mom is a whole new experience in and of itself. I may have chosen a different jersey to wear had I known how much time I would end up spending with his mom. I could see the confusion in her eyes when she saw me, but at least she didn't ask. I have a feeling I have Baylor's dad to thank for that. He's a much more soft-spoken man who easily blends into the background of his chaotic family, allowing his wife and children to take center stage, but he is excellent at redirecting his wife or silencing his boys with a single look. It's a trick I should really learn to use on Baylor.

His brothers on the other hand, were all amused and told me they couldn't wait for Baylor's reaction when he'd see me after the game. Isla, who is used to my antics, just rolled her eyes and told them not to encourage me. Not that I need any. Seeing Baylor's flustered reaction is enough to spur me on. Not to mention the ways he'll attempt to get back at me.

"He deserves it for all the names he calls Potato," I defend.

Xander turns around from where he's sitting in front of me, a confused expression on his face. "Who's Potato?" he asks.

I arch a brow at him. He's been hanging around more and more frequently and I know there's a story there, but not one anyone wants to openly talk about. Either way, I've started to

get to know him and he's not one to participate in most conversations, let alone interjecting into one he wasn't a part of.

"When did you even get here?" I ask, surprised to see his face.

His gaze roves over me and a huge grin spreads over his face as he sees the number on my arm. "You're a shit stirrer."

I shrug. "Takes one to know one."

His smile drops into a smirk as he nods his agreement. "I can't wait to see Tate's reaction."

I click my tongue, studying him. This is kind of our first real conversation, but I've gotten so accustomed to seeing his face, it feels like I know him more than I actually do. "Not Baylor's?"

He shrugs, turning his body more towards me while both teams finish up their warmups on the ice. "He'll think it's funny because he knows you're fucking with him on purpose." Okay, yeah. Fair enough. It's not like I actually expected Baylor to be mad about it. "Tate, on the other hand," he continues, "won't expect it and that man has been known to blush."

My mouth parts open in shock. "Really? That's kind of hot."

Baylor's mom nudges me with her elbow. "Baylor is quite the blusher as well."

Isla snorts at my side and Dylan and his twin—not Beckett, fuck. What was his name again? Ah, got it. Jackson. Dylan and Jackson whoop with laughter behind me. Beckett leans forward to press his face between me and his mom, nodding his agreement. "Baby Bay is definitely known to blush. Especially if you tell him he looks pretty in a dress."

A wicked smile comes over my face and I open my mouth to say something about when he's called a good boy, but a hand wraps around my mouth quickly before I have the chance to. "Ah, no!" Isla yells. "Don't even think about it, Ryn. That's his mother!"

Oh right. I forgot what is and isn't appropriate to say in front of parental figures. My grandma is kind of a raunchy old lady. Probably all those bodice ripper romance novels she loves to read. When she heard about Baylor, she only cared about seeing shirtless pictures of him.

Baylor's mom probably doesn't want to hear about that. I nod, closing my mouth and Isla slowly releases me. "Baylor owes me so much for this," she silently curses.

"So who's Potato?" Xander asks again as a girl pushes him out of her way and drops into the seat beside him with a groan.

"I can not believe you're forcing me to sit here with you like I need to be babysat." She huffs out an irritated sigh, adjusting in her seat before giving him a bewildered look. "And why are you talking about potatoes?"

Xander turns slightly toward the little blonde bombshell with one dark brow arched. "I wasn't," he answers almost coldly, looking over her. "And take it up with your brothers if you're that upset about it."

"Damn, Xander," I whistle. "No need to be such a dick."

The girl turns to look at me with the most shocking wide blue-green eyes I've ever seen, framed by long lashes that give her an innocent doe-eyed look. "Right?" she laments. "It's like it's a part of his DNA." She shakes her head. "You'd think after not seeing me for two years, you'd be a little nicer, but no." The way she drags out the last word makes my lip twitch, but the way Xander shifts uncomfortably in his seat makes me want to pull out my phone and take a video to show Baylor later. "God forbid you be nice to your best friend's baby sister or she may get the wrong idea and start to annoy you."

"You do have a history of being annoying," he argues, making her wide eyes narrow at him. She kind of reminds me of Karma and I almost expect her to start hissing at him.

"And you have a history of being rude."

He groans, muttering something to himself under his breath before looking back at me. "Will you just tell me who Potato is?"

“My cat,” I finally answer, not that it’s really my fault it took so long to give an answer. Xander has a hard time sticking to one topic apparently.

“I thought his name was Ruffles?”

Fucking Baylor.

Dylan leans forward again. “The orange one I was playing with today?” he asks. “I thought his name was French Fry.”

“I’m going to fucking shove a potato down Baylor’s throat next time he forgets his name,” I mutter to myself.

Jackson cackles behind me but Dylan pats my shoulder in solidarity. “Violent. I like it.”

Their mom clears her throat at my side and I grimace. Fuck. Forgot she was here too. Why do I keep forgetting that?

The girl with Xander smiles and effortlessly takes over the conversation, asking to see photos of Potato—using his correct name—and the awkward tension evaporates. I learn her name is Emery, she’s still in highschool, but comes to all the home games because Tate and Zac are her older brothers. She complains about being stuck with Xander, who continues to be a dick to her, but she’s too sweet to really say anything he deserves.

I’m not though.

“So how much do you charge hourly?” I ask him, after he reminds her once again to complain to her brothers and stop whining to him.

“What?” he asks.

“For babysitting?” I answer, checking my nails. “You seem to spend most of your time doing that. I hope you’re getting paid for it.”

His jaw tightens as understanding dawns on him. “You knew?”

I roll my eyes. “You’re in my bar every night. You were either stalking me on Baylor’s orders, or you have a serious drinking problem.”

He curses under his breath and Isla tenses at my side. Of course she was in on it too. I sigh. Can't even be mad about it, really. I thought about it once I realized how Xander was always around, but I decided to let them have this one.

"They said you were going to be a pain in the ass about this," Xander accuses.

I shrug. I almost was, but... "It's not like you bother me."

"Must be nice," Emery scoffs and Xander bumps her with his shoulder, but before the conversation can continue the lights dim and the music is turned up. Baylor's mom grabs onto my arm as a sudden hush falls over the crowd.

"This is always my favorite part," she whispers. And damn does she have taste. There wasn't much fanfare for the other team, but the music pounds through the speakers, lights flash, and anticipation hums through my veins as the announcer introduces the Westbrook Wolves with a booming voice. With each name and number of the starting lineup called, the cheers grow louder and louder until finally Tate steps on the ice and the entire arena must be on their feet.

Isla and I trade shocked looks, no words even needed to describe just how unreal this is. How did we make it a whole year without realizing how big hockey is at Westbrook? Sure, we had heard about it in passing, but this is more exciting than any other college related event I've ever been to. Shit. This feels like something out of a movie.

The rest of the game continues to shock the shit out of me. At least this time around, I know a hell of a lot more about hockey than the last game we watched thanks to all the practices and drills I've been forced to endure. I understand the periods and positions now. Though every time they switch lines, it still amazes me how effortlessly they do it. Just falling into play easily as if they never even stepped off the ice.

Baylor's mom also spends a lot of time explaining plays and different calls to Isla and I and it's like having our own hockey encyclopedia at our side. She pats me on the knee when I thank her for the fiftieth time as the boys once again all leave the ice in between periods and the zamboni comes out to

resurface the ice again. “Baylor was the only one of our boys who played hockey,” she starts. “Even though we lived in the midwest, I had no idea what we were getting into when he came home one day and asked to play.” There’s a smile on her face as she looks back at what must be a fond memory. “George was always such a fan of hockey, he was ecstatic that one of our boys wanted to play, but I didn’t understand the sport much.” She sighs, patting my knee again. “It’s hard not to fall in love with though. That rush is quite addicting.”

I can’t help but agree with her. I’ve always loved sports, going to games, the thrill of competition. There isn’t much time for me to enjoy it anymore, but I can appreciate it all the same. But there really is something special about hockey.

Isla leans over me. “What made Baylor want to play then?”

His mom points to Wells on the ice. “Your boyfriend, dear.” She chuckles at our surprised expressions. “Those two have been attached at the hip since they were in diapers. Grew up closer than brothers. The Davis family were always huge hockey fanatics, all their kids played. Even Wells’ little sister. And well, if Wells was doing it, you could bet Baylor was right there at his side.” When she catches Isla smiling at me and my nose crinkles back she laughs. “You girls must have been the same way,” she guesses correctly. “I can see the same bond between you two that those boys have. It’s so important to have relationships like that in your life. I’m glad you girls have each other.”

Something tugs in my chest as warmth spreads over my cheeks. Isla grips my hand in hers and squeezes. My throat feels tight as I nod. “I am very lucky to have Isla,” I agree and she snuffles, leaning in closer to me. Always the emotional one, I squeeze her hand back.

Baylor’s mom gets that look in her eye as she watches us. It’s one I’m starting to recognize when her curiosity gets the best of her and I prepare myself for what it is she’s going to ask. “You know, you haven’t said anything about your father. Did he pass away when you were young as well?”

Huh. I guess I haven't. I run my fingers through my hair, readjusting it as I think about it. "I guess I just sometimes forget that I have one," I admit. Isla stares at me in awe. We never talk about my father. Not that we really talk about my mom, but I don't know if I've ever really had a conversation about him at all.

Baylor's mom looks taken aback as she rests her hand on her chest, but I just shrug. "I don't really remember the man." I know the pieces are all there, but even as I try to see them in my mind's eye, they don't fit together quite right. "He left," I say, still trying to work through the timeline. "I'm not really sure when. Before my mom passed?" I shake my head. "No, maybe it was after." I shrug again, defeated but more apathetic to it than anything. "I don't know, but I don't think it really matters. He's not around. Hasn't been for a long time."

"Oh, wow." Baylor's mom sigh is heavy with empathy, but she really shouldn't feel bad. I don't. "I just seem to keep making you talk about difficult things. I'm so sorry."

I wave off her concern, even as Isla clings to me tighter. "It doesn't bother me."

Her look is skeptical, especially when her eyes glance down at where Isla holds me tightly, the question in her eyes, but who knows if she'll ask it?

Apparently, she doesn't have to. My best friend lifts her head from my shoulder and sighs. "Torryn doesn't talk about these things usually," she starts to explain and I look down at her in confusion, wondering where she's going with this. "But it's not because it's hard for her, she just doesn't have much to say about it."

At least she gets me. I shrug again and I'm starting to worry I may end up giving myself back problems from how much I keep doing it. Can you even do that? "It happened a long time ago," I defend. It's not like my heart is still breaking for a father I don't even remember. I wouldn't even recognize the man if he was in front of my face. "Oh look, the boys are coming back out." At last the focus drifts away from me and back to the ice as the game resumes in the second period.

The score is still 0-0, but our guys have possession of the puck and there's something extra in the way they move coming back out. As fast as they were before, they seem to be skating circles around the other team, rarely ever giving up possession. Wells is the first to take a shot, but the Blackstone goalie is able to deflect his shot and pass it back to their defense. The player barely has any time to hand it off to his offense before James is stealing it back. Baylor turns on a dime and drives up the ice, ready for the pass just as James sets it up perfectly. The burly defender from Blackstone moves to interfere, but rather than going for the puck, he slams Baylor up against the boards. The resounding crash rattles the boards so intensely, I feel it in my bones and fear races through me.

Baylor's body bounces back as he crashes into the ice and rolls. I don't even realize the grip I have on Isla's arm until she jumps up, cheering as red lights flash and a horn blares. James skates over to where Baylor is still on the ice, helping him up.

"What the fuck just happened?" I ask, not able to tear my eyes away from where Baylor was just laying only a second ago.

Isla looks at me confused. "Baylor just had a great assist and Wells scored. Were you not watching?"

I was watching Baylor be fucking assaulted, is what I was watching. I scour over the players patting each other on their helmets until I find number 89. Him and Wells are bumping knuckles as they fall back onto the bench as a couple other players I'm starting to recognize take their places.

I shake my head, trying to catch my breath and convince myself he's totally fine. "Was that not just a really hard hit?" I ask. I've seen it happen to other players, but I don't think I've seen a hit that hard. Definitely not Baylor taking one.

Dylan leans forward. "Definitely a dirty hit," he agrees.

Jackson scoffs at his side. "What do you expect from BSU?"

Their mom pats my knee. “He’s fine, dear. He saw him coming and got the pass off just in time.”

How did I miss that? I run back through the memory, but all I can see is the defender slamming into Baylor and his body hitting the wall with full force. It was like everything else in that moment ceased to exist. Fucking hell. Hockey is not for the faint of heart.

“You get used to it,” she whispers in my ear. I have no idea how you get used to it. My heart still feels like it’s about to race right out of my chest and take a vacation on the beach. I force my hands to unclench and ignore the way they slightly tremble as I rub my hands over my jeans.

I excuse myself for a bathroom break, just as our boys take the ice again. Everyone around us is too locked in to the game to really pay any attention to me getting up and squeezing out of our row. I just need a second to catch my breath. I can’t explain just what made me feel so rattled, as if I had been the one to take that hit.

Sure, it was definitely the worst hit I’ve seen any player take in the whole two games I’ve watched. But I can’t seem to stop seeing it repeat in my head. Baylor could have really been hurt. I guess that’s why they wear so many pads.

Washing my hands, I take a couple of deep breaths and shake the thought from my head. It was just a surprise, but everyone is fine. There’s no reason to be stuck on one little play. I wish I could splash water on my face, but it would totally fuck up my makeup and I worked way too hard and look far too good to even risk it.

Sighing, I turn off the water and dry my hands, a new determination to put these feelings aside and enjoy the rest of the game. How many more will I really be able to go to this season? I can’t take off every weekend.

Just as I’m walking out of the bathroom, I’m nearly run down. A hand reaches out to grab my arm in order to steady me, but the grip tightens after I get my feet back under me. “Thanks,” I say, gently tugging my arm away and looking up to find an older man in an orange beanie staring at me.

“You okay?” he asks in a gravelly tone that sounds like he’s a two pack a day type of smoker. At my nod, he smiles. “Should be more careful.” I tug on my arm again, and he loosens his grip but keeps his hand cupped around it. “Never know—”

He’s cut off when Xander rushes up to us, wrapping his arms around me and physically lifting me away from the stranger. “There you are, T! We couldn’t find you, but Baylor just scored.” His voice is louder and far more excited than I’ve ever heard from him before, making my guard raise even higher.

“Oh, yeah?”

He nods, putting me down and holding my hand to tug me in the opposite direction of our seats. “Cheryl is looking for you.”

“Cheryl?” I ask, following behind him even as I glance back, but I can’t see the stranger anywhere.

“Baylor’s mom,” he responds, heavy with skepticism. “Don’t tell me you’ve spent practically the entire day with her and never even learned her name.”

I tear my eyes away from the crowd to face him, but I can’t actually argue that. As soon as we turn the corner, he drops my hand and pushes me into a corner. His voice drops the fake friendly tone as he practically growls at me. “I can’t believe you just took off alone!”

“It was just to the bathroom,” I defend.

He scoffs, shaking his head. “And yet, you had some creep feeling you up in the middle of the arena.”

I roll my eyes at his dramatics. Sure, the old guy was definitely a weirdo. I mean who just holds someone’s arm like that? “I feel sorry for your girlfriend if you think a bicep is where you feel a girl up.”

His lips turn even further down and I didn’t know it was possible to frown that intensely. He should get that checked. “Hilarious,” he deadpans. “But if I had a girlfriend, there are

plenty of things you should feel bad for her about, but my sexual prowess is not one. Got it?”

“Rawr,” I deadpan right back, making a claw with my hand.

He groans, finally heading in the right direction for our seats. “Why does Baylor even like you?”

“I have great tits.”

His dark eyes flick down before he rolls them. “I hate that I can’t argue that.” He takes a deep breath. “But seriously, don’t disappear again. What if that dude was your stalker, huh?”

It’s not that he doesn’t have a point, but really? What are the chances? “And he just so happened to be walking by the bathroom right as I exited?”

He gives me a baffled look. “Maybe you’re unclear of what a stalker does,” he starts, but I flip him off, walking past him and taking the lead.

When we get back to our seat, Baylor’s mom beams at me. “There you are! You missed Baylor’s goal.” I do feel a little guilty about that. It would have been nice to see. She nudges my shoulder as I sit down. “Maybe he’ll make another one just for you.” My cheeks flush and I can’t even begin to explain why.

Apparently I missed more than just the one goal, because the score is now 1-2, but Baylor is just taking the ice again as Tate blocks a goal and passes the puck to a player whose name I can never remember even though I can picture his face. He goes wide before sending the puck down to Wells who takes off across the ice like a bat out of hell. Rather than Baylor getting open for a pass, he seems focused on something else. Or someone.

Just as Wells sends the puck across the ice to a waiting James, the player that laid out Baylor earlier charges toward him. Before he ever has a chance to reach him, Baylor blocks his path, shoving against him and taking him down. Just as hard as the hit he took.

The opposing player hits the ice hard and all of Baylor's brothers shoot to their feet as they cheer in unison. James takes a shot that is deflected and the game continues, but I can't help but chuckle. "That was hot," I admit to Isla, making Cheryl laugh.

"It was about time he got payback," Dylan mutters, but I catch the oldest brother, Liam—I think— shaking his head.

"He was waiting for the right time."

Their dad nods his agreement. "That's my boy." Something about the pride and fondness in his voice makes me smile. Baylor really does have so many people cheering for him, loving him. No wonder he's turned out to be such a good person when he comes from a family like this.

The rest of the game is just as exciting. The second period ends shortly after the block Baylor made. Isla convinces me to go with her to get nachos and I kick Xander in the back before leaving, making him throw me a dirty look. But he and Emery both get up to walk with us, Emery claiming nachos sound good to her too.

I decide that I love her when she orders enough food for a small army and then looks at Xander expectantly, waiting for him to pay. He grumbles and grouches, but does it. My kind of girl.

Once the third period starts, the score is still 1-2 with us in the lead. The ferocity the other team comes back out with is on a new level. More hits, more bodies hitting the ice. It's practically a bloodbath out there.

Tate holds strong. Blocking every single shot that comes his way, which I do think is more than our defense should really be allowing. Not that I'm an expert. Based on the times Xander has cursed out the defensemen and how Beau is starting to lose his sanity on the ice, I'm probably right. Beau seems to be the only one on defense that's actually awake out there, but he can't be everywhere at once. A lot more shots are taken on Tate than we're getting off on their goalie. But the way Tate uses his whole body to deflect shots is another level of impressiveness. When I say this to Emery she beams at me,

telling me how he used to make her throw rocks at him in the warm months to help his reflex skills.

Xander chuckles at the memory, filling in, “He didn’t want to ask me or Zac and risk it being a hard throw.”

“You’re so rude,” she grumbles.

I lean forward to whisper in her ear. “Call him a dickhead. You’ll feel better, I promise.”

Her ears turn a cute shade of red and I consider taking her home with me to keep. She’s so fun to tease. She almost reminds me of Rayne, even though she’s not that much younger than me.

“Tate will never forgive you if you corrupt her,” Xander warns, but I shrug. I bet an angry Tate would be hot. Plus, Baylor would protect me. Which is even hotter. Sounds like a fun social experiment.

“Go, go, go,” Isla starts chanting, drawing my eyes back to the ice. Baylor just stole the puck from their center, not even giving the defense a chance. He skates up the sideline, breaking away from their defense, and cutting across the ice. No one is even near him as he makes it in front of their net and he slaps the puck. Before it even makes it to goalie I know it’s going in. High and in the corner of the net, their goalie has no shot of getting his gloves up in time.

The red lights flash and the horn blares just as a defender in black goes crashing through the net. Too late to do anything. I jump and cheer for Baylor. A smile stretching across my face in a way that I know is going to make my cheeks ache and I can’t even begin to care as I join the whistles and chants of the crowd for number 89.

He skates around the arena, pumping his hands up to encourage the cheers louder. Showboating like a mother fucking rockstar.

“Eighty-nine. Damn he’s fine. Give it to them one more time.”

I collapse into my seat, laughing as I realize what everyone is chanting. “That has to be the stupidest cheer I’ve ever

heard.”

“It’s cute,” Isla argues.

“There’s another one that rhymes with our last name,” Beckett tells me, making me laugh all the harder.

Cheryl pats my knee in what I’m now associating as her signature move when she wants to say something. “Now you know where all that confidence comes from.”

Dylan and Jackson snort behind us. “The last thing that kid needs is anything more to feed his ego.”

My whole body warms as I search for him back out on the ice. I can only imagine how big of a smile he’s wearing under that helmet right now. He wanted to show up and show out for his family. “I don’t know,” I disagree. “I think he’s earned a little praise.”



twenty-nine

DUCK, DUCK, CHICKEN

A adrenaline crashes through me and I toss my helmet on the bench.

“Holy fuck,” Beau says, slamming his hand down on my shoulder. “You were on fire out there man.”

I wink at him, wiping sweat from my face as I drink water and plop my ass down on the bench. I’m almost too exhausted to even get my pads and shit off. But I just know I reek and am in desperate need of a shower. I’m pretending to be nonchalant, but that may have been the best game of my life.

“I’ve never seen you play like that,” James agrees, taking a seat at my side.

“We were all on tonight,” I argue, not wanting to discount how well the whole team played.

Beau shakes his head, scoffing and tossing his jersey into a hamper across the way from our lockers. “The defense will be running drills into the ground this week.”

I cringe, not able to disagree. “It did fall apart a little bit there in the middle.”

Beau snorts, not accepting the generous observation. I’m not sure what happened to them because it was like a different team than what we’ve seen in practice. He sighs, sitting next to me. “The chirping and aggressive play started weighing on them,” he explains. “Even I got messy as I got frustrated. It wasn’t a good look for any of us.” He shakes his head in disappointment and it’s obvious where Beau will be spending the next few weeks. It’ll be hard to pry him off the ice until he

feels like he's at the top of his game again. "Thank fuck we have Tate."

The man of the hour walks into the locker room at that moment and pats Beau on the shoulder as he walks by. "You did good," he praises. "The other guys are still young, cut them some slack. It's hard to keep your head in the game against BSU." His eyes lift as they connect with mine. "Now, whatever's got you feeling good, keep doing it. You were a beast."

My chest puffs up in pride at my captain's praise. Torryn's face flashes in my mind and I give him and the guys an arrogant smile, not wanting them to know where my mind just went.

I did feel good tonight. It felt like I was flying across the ice. Like I could anticipate where the puck was going to be and how the other team was going to move and my body was just there. Ready. It was like I had something to prove and I was desperate to succeed. Nothing was going to stop me.

One assist and two goals, not a bad way to start off the season. I hope Torryn is ready to become a part of my pregame routine permanently.

Tate gives out encouragement to every player as he walks past them. It's part of what makes him such a good captain, what keeps the whole team so tight-knit. I've learned a lot playing under a guy like him.

Forcing myself to stand back up, I groan, making the guys laugh. "Bet you're feeling that hit now," James says with a wince. He's fucking right.

"Nothing some hot water and a good night's sleep won't fix." I shrug it off, knowing there's no point in lamenting about it. Dirty hits are a part of the game.

I make quick work of shedding the rest of my gear and thanking Bill as I hand it off to him. I set my shower to as hot as I can stand but don't linger. My movements become more rushed as I remember Torryn only has so much time before she

has to be at work. After the exhibition game, she had already left for work by the time I left the locker room.

By the time I'm redressed and ready to leave, some of the guys are just barely getting out of the shower. Wells gives me an unimpressed look. But Beau nudges his shoulder. "Don't give him that look, his girl is waiting for him." He looks over at him where he's still pulling on his pants. "Maybe you should follow his lead." He clicks his tongue. "Making Isla wait. Shame."

"Yeah. Shame," I echo. "See ya."

Wells curses under his breath. "Just wait, you prick. I'm almost ready."

I start counting down from ten, making Beau cackle and even James smile. Once Wells is ready, with a second to spare, he punches me in the shoulder. "I'm going to tell Torryn you're falling in love with her."

The other two are only a step behind us as we head out. I give him a baffled look. "Okay?" I try to imagine Tor's reaction, but all I can see is her confusion mirroring my own. "If you want your girl's best friend to think you're delusional, be my guest."

James and Beau laugh behind us and Wells shakes his head, muttering something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like something about idiots.

The four of us instantly draw attention from the crowd of family and friends waiting outside the locker room doors, but my mom's voice is somehow louder than the collective and the whole crew is easy to spot.

My gaze lands on Torryn where she stands between Xander and Isla. In dark blue jeans and an oversized orange and gray jersey, she's never looked so damn good. Xander taps her shoulder and points in my direction, drawing her eyes my way. As soon as they hit me, a mischievous smile spreads over her lips.

Oh no.

What the fuck did she do?

It isn't only Tor that gives away she has something special planned for me. My brothers all wear matching expressions of anticipation. Even my mother is trying hard to suppress her amusement. It takes me a second and we're just in front of the group when I finally catch sight of the number on her arm where there should be an 89.

Disbelieving laughter eddies out of me, making me shake my head as I push past my brothers and catch her hips with my hands, pulling her into me. "You're a goddamn troublemaker," I whisper in her ear, only for her to hear.

She beams at me, satisfaction oozing from every pore. Little brat. "You like trouble."

Well fuck, she isn't wrong. "I like payback too," I promise her, but the intrigue in her expression only heightens. Damn sexy brat is what she is.

She goes up on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. "Good game, Baby Bay." My cheek heats where her lips pressed against it and my fingers move of their own accord to touch where she left her mark. "But I've got to run." She nods in the direction of my family and my mom hugs her goodbye, making Tor smile.

"You have the truck?" I ask, needing to make sure she's good. She lifts my keys in response. "Your phone?" She arches a brow but relents quickly, showing me her phone as well. I sigh, not having anything else to keep her here. "Alright, be safe. We'll see you later," I promise.

"I'll be on stage." She winks and I glower at her but she ignores me. She taps Xander. "Come on, grouchy. Might as well drive together if you're gonna stalk me." She flashes me a knowing look at the exact moment I cringe. Looks like she is on to us more than I thought. I wonder if she knows the stalking has extended to the whole team?

Xander nods, tapping Wells and pointing to Tate's baby sister at his side, leaving only once we've acknowledged that we've got her until her brothers come out.

As soon as they're out of my line of sight I turn to find my family all watching me with matching dopey expressions. "What?"

Isla leans into my mom. "Idiots, Cheryl. I swear." My mom giggles and shakes her head. What the fuck is happening here? Why does everyone keep calling me an idiot? I do just fine in school, thank you very much.

"She's a cute girl," Beckett says.

"Torryn?" I can't help but ask in disbelief.

Beau snorts. "Cute is not the word I would use." Me either. I nod my agreement.

Mason narrows his eyes. "What else are we supposed to say? Your girl is hot?"

My mom smacks him in the chest, but it's too late. Dylan raises his hand. "You could tell him she's a girl worth buying flowers for?"

Jackson gives him a disgusted look. "Is that a Mulan reference?"

"No," Dylan pauses, "well maybe. But she's the girl Baby Bay stole flowers from." He shakes his head in disapproval. "Hasn't even bought her any to replace them."

"Torryn doesn't even like flowers," I argue.

My mom scoffs. "Every girl likes flowers," she says in exasperation. "Even if they don't really like flowers, they like knowing someone is thinking about them."

I put my face in my hands, looking to my dad for help but he's useless. "Your mother isn't wrong."

Speaking of. "Did you do what I asked?" I ask my mom, but she's already beaming at me, holding out my polaroid camera and a handful of photos. A lot more than I was expecting. "How many did you take?" I ask, starting to flick through them.

My mom shrugs. "It's not like I could do it secretly. Once I started, everyone wanted theirs taken." Torryn is in a lot of

them, but not all of them. The point was to have more photos to use to put up in her room and at least I have that now. There are several of her and Isla, some of them hugging and posing obviously, but others I don't think she realized they were taken. A couple of them eating nachos, one where Isla is blushing and Torryn is smirking.

I stop when I get to one of just Torryn. She is sitting in her seat as everyone around her is standing and cheering, but she's frozen. One hand over her mouth while the other is on Isla's arm next to her. Fear and panic visible in her wide eyes, her skin looking paler than it should. Chills sweep down my back as I study the photo.

My mom leans over, looking to see what photo made me pause and gives me a knowing smile. "Your father took that one expecting to catch her celebrating at the first goal of the game."

My eyebrows pinch together as I look at the photo again. "She didn't celebrate?"

My mom shakes her head. "She was too worried about the hit you took right before."

My chest grows tight and heat flushes through my whole body. I don't say anything, I don't know what to say. So I start flipping through the rest of the photos. At least she had a good time. There are so many moments with all her different smiles. Her small ones, her shy ones, her snarky ones. I love that she was able to be comfortable around my family. I stop at another one and chuckle.

It's just Torryn again, this time with a look of pride on her face. Her mouth opens in a cheer as her arms are raised above her head. "That was when you scored the second time," she explains. "Look at the next one." I laugh as I look at how my mom captured her shocked and slightly disgusted expression so perfectly.

"Let me guess," I say. "When she heard the chant?"

"Bingo, Baby Bay," Beckett says, taking the photos out of my hand and flipping to a new one. "And I hate to be the one

to tell you this, but she has a new favorite Levine.” He turns it around to show me one of him lifting Torryn out of her seat.

“Dick,” I mutter, taking them back and slipping them into my pocket. I can look at the rest of them later.

Jackson rolls his eyes, shoving Beckett. “Doubtful. Or did you not see the photo she has her background set to?”

Oh fuck. I give him a panicked look, making him cackle. Please for the love of god, tell me my mother didn’t see that photo.

“Mom didn’t see it,” Mason assures me. And I heave a sigh of relief. Shit stirs all of them. “She’s cool though,” he says, patting me on the shoulder. “We had a good time getting to know your girl.”

I rub the back of my neck. “She’s not really my girl.” It feels weirder to have this conversation with my older brother. Dylan is a fuckhead even if he is older than me. It’s not the same with Mason or Liam. I’ve always looked up to them even if I give them a hard time.

My whole family trades looks, and it’s a feeling I’m starting to get used to.

“That must be why she was wearing Moore’s jersey,” Jackson taunts.

“Who was wearing my jersey?” Tate asks, as he joins us. What a slow ass.

“Torryn was,” Dylan helpfully supplies.

Emery steps up as Tate gives me a panicked look, his cheeks turning a vibrant red. “She was? I haven’t— umm. B, I swear—” he trips over his words, not really ever getting a coherent thought out.

Emery bursts out laughing. “Xander is going to be so mad he missed that.”

Tate glares at her, but I nudge him with my shoulder. “Tor was just fucking with me.”

My mom tilts her head with a familiar gleam in her eye. “But why would you care if she’s not yours?”

I clear my throat, trying to figure out a way to explain this to my mom without offending her. Everyone is now looking at me, including my dumbass teammates and even Isla. She should really have Torryn’s back better than this. “Well, Mom,” I start, scratching my chin to buy time. “Romantic relationships are not the only type of—um—arrangements?”

My mom cuts me off with a scowl. “I know you’ve had *relations* with that girl.” I start to choke on the emphasis she puts on relations and we all know damn well what she means. “I’d have to be blind not to see the marks you left on that poor girl’s neck.”

Kill me now.

I may not survive this conversation.

“You should see the ones he left on her—” Dylan is cut off when Liam wraps his hand over his mouth, nodding my direction. Thank fuck someone is on my side here. The last thing I need my mom picturing is me between Torryn’s legs.

“Okay, well just because we do that—”

“Baylor Levine,” my mom scolds, and I don’t know how much more embarrassment I can handle. “If you are not mature enough to say the word sex, you are not mature enough to be having it.”

Even my dad is laughing now. Traitor. My only saving grace is that Torryn isn’t also here to witness this horror show. “Fine,” I mutter. “Just because Torryn and I have sex,” I emphasize the word, “doesn’t mean we are a couple. We’re just friends.”

My mom doesn’t look at all satisfied even as she says, “Yes, of course, honey.” She pats my shoulder and here it comes. “I’m just saying, if it looks like a duck. And it quacks like a duck. One should consider that it’s probably a duck, even if the duck keeps saying it’s a chicken.”

Silence follows her statement, though Beau is practically hanging on James’ arm with his fist in his mouth to keep quiet.

I scratch my head, brushing my hair out of my face, waiting for understanding to dawn on me. Finally I heave a sigh. “Mom, I genuinely have no idea what ducks or chickens have to do with Torryn.”

My mom stares at me stupefied, but for once I think she’s actually speechless. Don’t know that I’ve ever seen that happen before. She turns to Isla. “Is she as bad as him?”

Isla tilts her head to the side, giving the answer some thought before responding. “She might be worse, actually.”

“Impossible,” Wells scoffs.

“Well,” James draws out the word skeptically.

Beau squints his eyes, looking off in the distance. “Baylor is more vocal in his denial but Torryn is actually more clueless.”

Everyone seems to agree to that collectively. Even my dad and oldest brothers throw in their two cents about how they could see that.

“We have a support chat,” Isla says.

“You have a what?” I ask, dumbfounded. I’m not a particularly dense person. I usually have no trouble following conversations and while I can’t say school has come easily to me, I get good grades. Not just average or okay, but good. I’m not a total idiot as seems to be thrown in my direction often enough these days.

Beau shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it, bro.”

I huff in frustration but finally just focus on my dad. “Are we going out to eat?” I ask him, ignoring everyone else. He gives me a bemused smile before nodding.

“Come on, son. Let’s talk about the game.”

Fucking finally something I can understand.



I'm still riding the high from the win as we roll up to Tease and James parks next to my truck.

Dinner with my family wasn't as rowdy as the conversation outside of the locker room was. They finally dropped Torryn as the main subject. Though Jackson nearly had soda coming out of his nose when he caught sight of her photo as my background.

Of course, that made Dylan look and catch sight of it too. At least those two dickheads didn't call greater attention to it. I'm still trying to recover from my mom talking about Tor and I being sex friends, or ducks, or whatever. I don't want to imagine her finding out I have Tor's nude set to my background.

Neither of the twins could believe she didn't mind that I had it, but they just don't get Torryn. I had to point out to Dylan how she had not one single ounce of shame after he walked in on us, which made Jackson jealous and then we had to shut down the conversation when they asked to see the photo again. I'm not above beating up my older brothers.

I put my family out of my mind as we walk into Tease, my gaze instantly going to the bar at the back in search of Torryn. It's pretty busy in here, but most of the people are hanging out in what Torryn calls the pits, near the dancers. Her bar has plenty of seats open for us to take the same corner we took last time.

Instead of sulking in corners like I've imagined Xander has been doing, he's already at the corner, a beer in front of him. I take a seat next to him grinning at Torryn as I watch her work. There's something inherently sexy about a girl with a bottle in her hand.

"How's it been?" I ask, checking the time only to realize it's a lot later than I thought. We usually would be plastered by this time after a win, but being with my family changed things. We took a celebratory shot and had a couple of drinks with my brothers, but I always feel my mom's eyes weighing on me when I drink.

"Not bad," Xander answers.

Beau claps his hands together, waving to Torryn. “Alright, boys, and Isla. How are we celebrating?”

At that moment, Torryn comes over with a stack of shot glasses. “With tequila,” she answers, her eyes meeting mine. “Obviously.”

She sets out six shot glasses, but Xander coughs, looking behind him. “Four more and give them thirty seconds.” Torryn doesn’t even bat an eyelash, setting out four more.

“Who else is coming?” I ask but wave him off when I see Tate, Zac, Wilder, and a girl I recognize but don’t know walk in. “Nevermind.”

As they approach us Xander asks, “Took Em home?”

Tate looks offended he would even ask. “As if I would bring her here?”

Torryn snorts, shoving a shot in his hand. “We’re a classy establishment here.”

Tate’s cheeks heat as he catches sight of, well, I’m not exactly sure what about her makes him blush. The small bruises all over her chest and neck that are no longer covered. The way her tits are barely being held in by that top, still a huge fan of that one myself. Or if he’s remembering that she wore his jersey today.

“Nothing screams class like being covered in hickeys,” Xander taunts.

Torryn hands him a shot. “Don’t be bitter because your dick is dryer than the Sahara desert.”

Tate snorts and I volley between Xander and Torryn. “Maybe this friendship is something we shouldn’t encourage,” I whisper to him. He nods his agreement, but Zac is already sitting down and taking a shot for himself.

“I think they’re fun together,” he says and salutes Tor with his shot.

She passes out the rest of the shots and flicks Wilder between the eyes when he doesn’t break contact with her tits.

“Sorry,” he murmurs. “Just didn’t realize in all those hours of torture together you had such a great rack.”

The little redhead with him looks horrified. “Wilder!” she scolds. “You can’t just say that to people.”

Torryn smirks. “Yeah, Wilder.” She hands the girl a shot and winks at her. “For you? It’s on the house.”

She blushes and I realize where I recognize her from. She’s Wilder’s best friend and I swear I know her name. He talks about her nonstop and they’re practically inseparable. Except for when he’s at a party. Guess he convinced her to join him this time.

Colby!

Got it. I knew that I knew it.

“Not for me?” I ask, pushing my bottom lip out in a pout and she doesn’t even roll her eyes.

“No,” she deadpans, making all of our friends laugh.

Isla slides in next to Colby. “I’m so glad you’re here! It gets to be a lot being the only girl around all the guys, especially when Torryn is working.”

The smile she gives to Isla is shy, but it’s there. Wilder beams at the both of them like a proud mom. What a weird dynamic.

We all grab our tequila and Tate makes the toast, “To the Wolves!”

Everyone cheers as we all throw back our shots. It’s not nearly as good as when I was able to follow it with Torryn. As I turn to her, I realize she didn’t take one. When I point this out to her, she points to the bar. “I’m working?”

I lean over the bar. “Does that mean I get a private celebration later?”

Her lips press against my ear as she leans in to meet me. “I’ll even wear my new jersey for you.”

I snort. “Trouble.”

She smirks and supplies more shots with rounds of beer in between. Every couple of drinks she also forces Isla, Colby, and me to drink water. When I ask why she isn't forcing everyone she asks if she looks like their mother. It makes me laugh, but it also makes me feel nice that I'm on her short list for people she takes care of. That she looks out for.

The bar section gets rowdier and rowdier. With more people in orange and gray showing up, and a younger crowd trickling in. Someone must have told people we were here tonight.

The whole crew is pretty buzzed. Isla and Colby are giggling and braiding each other's hair as Wilder watches them with a lovesick expression on his face. Even the guys have all lightened up, talking about the plays where we killed it and celebrating an amazing start to the season. We all feel as if we're on top of cloud nine. Even Torryn seems to indulge in some of our revelry. Allowing us to monopolize her section of the bar the way we are. The night must have been going a little too well for me, because of course it just had to come crashing down around me.

Tate is the first one to tense and shift in front of me, but Beau and James are quick to follow suit. Their attitudes dropping into glacier level cold as they glare at someone I can't see. My stomach turns, and suddenly I wish I hadn't drank as much as I did.

Shame makes the hair on my arms stand on end, and for the first time all night, I feel the urge to puke.

Why the fuck is Clarissa here?



thirty

MAYBE WE SHOULD

The sudden shift in the atmosphere is impossible to miss.

All of the hockey guys begin to form a tight knit circle around Baylor and my fingers instinctively wrap around Betty as I sense trouble.

Alysha has been getting a kick out of the different crowd we're drawing in because of their presence, but I should have been prepared for the fallout that would be likely to come with it. It was only a matter of time before shit hit the fan. It's not like it isn't anything I'm not used to. But Baylor being seemingly at the middle of whatever is brewing has me gripping Betty just a little tighter than usual.

I grab her out of her spot from below the bar and walk back over to them. Not a single one of them stayed sober, save for maybe Xander. He only took the one shot as far as I'm aware. But I have no clue how these idiots were planning on getting home. They can't all fit in Baylor's truck. Not legally anyway.

Baylor is frozen in place, staring somewhere in the crowd. An expression on his face that I really hate. With my free hand, I place it on his arm, drawing his attention to me. I hate the lost and confused look I find. Nothing like the usual playful and carefree Baylor I've gotten to know.

I hate it.

I hate whoever made him look that way even more.

Nothing in his expression softens or eases, even as he grabs my hand with his and holds it tightly. His neediness, the

caginess, it reminds me of the day he bumped into me in the library. Whatever it is, I know it's something that hurts him. That makes him run and hide.

"I've got you, Baylor," I promise, leaning into him and pressing a kiss to his cheek like I did earlier.

"Yeah?" The broken edge to that single word has me ready to raze down the whole bar if that's what he needs.

"Yeah." I nod, pressing another kiss to his temple and I can smell the liquor on his breath.

Beau hands me his credit card before Baylor says anything else. "Put everyone's drinks on this. We're gonna head out." He seems far more sober than he did only a moment ago, so I don't ask any questions, and do as he says.

"Who's driving?" I ask him as I hand him back his card and he grimaces.

"Guess we're taking Ubers?"

I sigh, checking the time. There's another hour until close and no way I can cut out early tonight. It would help if I could figure out what the problem is, but the rest of the guys are being as cagey as Baylor. Pushing for an answer doesn't seem like the right call.

"Xander can drive," I offer. "Maybe the others can hang around until close and I'll take them home?" He looks back at our friends, probably counting heads before agreeing.

Whatever has them all on edge, Baylor is at the center of it and they just want to get him home. As much as I've seen him throw drinks back tonight, I can't argue that it isn't a good idea.

I walk back over to Baylor and grab his hand with mine again. "You good, B?"

His eyes still look so damn dazed that it breaks my heart. "Can I say no?" he asks in a whisper.

I kiss each of his knuckles. "You can always say no. With me, you don't have to pretend."

He nods and tears swell in his eyes. “Come home with me.” His words slur together and my heart aches a little more that I can’t go with him now.

“I’ll be just a little behind you,” I promise.

Alysha comes up behind me, obviously sensing the energy shift. “Take off, T,” she says.

Guilt eats at me. For leaving, for staying. I don’t think there’s a right answer. “Go,” she encourages. “When they leave, so will half the bar. I think he needs you and I’ve got this.”

I sigh, wanting to tell her everything is fine, but when I look back at Baylor I know it’s not. He’s not fine and I can’t even begin to guess what happened that made it that way. “Okay,” I relent. “I’ll take you home.”

A small smile breaks his broken expression and I know I made the right call.



I run my fingers over his chest and stomach, tracing the contours of his muscles as he flexes for me. He’s been quiet ever since he dragged me away from the rest of the guys and into his bed, but he still finds little ways to try and make me smile.

I trail back up from his stomach to tweak his nipple, making him huff out a small laugh. Smaller than a reaction he would normally give me. He hasn’t even tried to get in my pants yet. Something practically unheard of for the two of us.

He began to sober up after we picked up food and I forced an absurd amount of water down his throat. He was never plastered, but he was definitely drunk. It had been a good drunk, a fun one that should have led to wild and crazy sex tonight. Until it wasn’t.

But now he’s near silent and almost pensive. Keeping me close, but not talking about what happened. About what plummeted his high from winning.

Rolling over, I lay on his stomach and cross my arms over his chest and look down at him. The corners of his lips turn up as his hands land on my back, running over me soothingly. I cock my head as I study him, debating if I should ask. We've always had this silent agreement to never push each other. To just be there when the other needs us.

The way I went with him to the cat cafe, or like the time he carried me out of the shower and just held me. We don't ask, and I haven't. But maybe we should. Maybe I should.

"Your friends are really protective over you," I start, watching him closely to judge his reaction. I picture the way they circled around him, not letting anyone but me get close to him. How quick they were to cut off access to him when they noticed something was wrong. And I have to hand it to the guys, the way they got the entire group of drunken idiots on the same page so quickly without any tears and yelling deserves some type of medal.

"They are," he agrees, not tensing, or ever stopping the strokes over my skin.

We lay there for several long, silent minutes. So much unsaid hanging in the air around us.

Finally I break. "I want to ask," I whisper.

His hazel eyes fill with emotion, with confusion, but never does he tear them away from mine. As if I'm the source of his strength, his comfort. Something about that thought heats my blood in an unfamiliar way that has nothing to do with lust.

"I want you to ask," he admits, nearly as quiet as I was.

"You do?" I can't help but ask to make sure I'm not totally fucking this bubble of ours up. We've had more fun together than I ever thought was possible and I don't want to ruin that. Somehow we became each others' safe space when everything else seemed to be slipping into chaos. I never thought this arrangement would end up leading to one of the greatest friendships I've ever had, save for Isla. And even the two of them don't feel comparable.

His head just slightly tilts forward and I take a deep breath, entangling my fingers in his hair. I love the way the silky strands feel against my fingers.

“What happened at the bar, Baylor?” I finally ask softly.

He doesn't answer right away, closing his eyes and leaning into my touch. He almost reminds me of Potato begging for scratches. I continue to run my nails over his scalp, waiting patiently for him to tell me what happened. When he does finally answer, his words are soft. “Clarissa was there.”

Clarissa, Clarissa, Clarissa.

He says it like I should know the name, but I really don't think I do. I wrack my brain, trying to find any conversation we've had about a Clarissa but even after a few seconds, I'm coming up empty. He must realize that I have no clue who he's talking about because he huffs out a laugh full of mockery. It's a broken and bitter thing. I don't even care what she did to him, I hate her. I hate her for taking this guy who is normally larger than life and making him feel so small.

“You wouldn't know who she is,” he sighs. “I avoid saying her name or even talking about her.” The self-loathing in his tone makes me grip his hair tighter and his eyes fly open.

“You don't have to tell me, B,” I say again. “She hurt you and that's all I need to know. I hate her and I'll kick her ass if you want me to.”

He chuckles and holds me tighter, feeling more like himself. Sounding more like himself. “You really are trouble,” he whispers against my cheek. I lean back and kiss his forehead. For him? I think I could be a lot of things. He sighs again, his arms banding around my waist to keep me close now. “Do you remember the turkey baster girl?”

I cringe. How could I forget? The image haunts me. “That was Clarissa?”

He nods, slipping his fingers under my t-shirt as he continues to hold me. “Yeah, but there's a little more to the story.”

I wait for him to collect his thoughts, not wanting to rush him even though I have so many questions. I want him to tell me only because he's ready to talk about it, because he wants me to know. Not because he feels pressured. I just want to be there for him.

"That happened early on in the season," he starts. "I started avoiding the hell out of her after that. The guys too because I told them about it. None of us want to be dads yet, you know? And even if we did, not like that. If we do make it big, that's a child we may not be able to see often with a mother who likely sees them only as a tool. And if we don't make it, she'd probably resent us and the child for not being the cash cow she took a bet on. That's no life for a kid, you know?"

My heart flips in my chest at the way he looks at it. The way he's talking about this fictional child of his not having a good enough life. Most guys—fuck, most people— would be more outraged over trying to be taken advantage of. Or what something like that would do to their own life. I don't think I've ever met someone as genuinely good as Baylor Levine.

"Anyways, I didn't want to risk it. Avoided her and her friends and everything seemed to be fine. Went back to hookups at parties and killing it on the ice." He sighs, loosening his hold on me and repositioning us so we're both lying on our sides, facing each other. One of his hands rests on my hip under my shirt, while the other reaches up to caress my cheek. "I know you weren't following our season last year," he teases and I scrunch my nose because I most certainly was not. "But we dominated. We were expected to go all the way and bring the championship home. We made it to the Frozen Four." He hushes me before I can even ask. "The semi-finals," he clarifies. "But we lost."

I nod, trying to wrap my head around what that has to do with a girl trying to steal his come to impregnate herself at the beginning of the season. I don't ask though, giving him the space to tell his story however he needs to.

"We were on a high after winning the playoff game that sent us to the Frozen Four. An adrenaline rush far greater than what you saw tonight. It was the furthest any of us had ever

made it into the playoffs. Westbrook has won before but not in the last few years. We get a little closer each year, and last season we were so close we could taste it.”

I run one hand down his chest, feeling the evidence of how much work he puts into this sport. The hours of exercise and discipline. All the practices and training I’ve watched them do. And how fucking good it felt to watch it all pay off tonight on the ice. I can only imagine how elated they must have been to finally be so close to achieving that goal.

“We celebrated,” he continues. “And we celebrated hard. Probably too hard.” His sigh is heavy and I feel his entire body deflate as he goes back to that night. “I drank a lot. Probably more than I ever have before and I don’t really remember how everything happened.”

It’s several long moments while he gathers his thoughts and all I can think about is how strong I think Baylor is. Maybe stronger than any guy I’ve met before. No matter how hard this is on him, he’s not giving up. He’s measuring his words and purging them from himself. Hopefully by the end, he feels just a little bit lighter.

“At some point, Clarissa approached me after the game. I was already drunk and I don’t really remember this part clearly.” His tone almost gets defensive, and I run my hand along his cheek in an attempt to soothe him. There’s nothing he could say that would make me judge him, or think less of him. “Next thing I really remember is being in a bed, Clarissa on top of me.”

My chest tightens at the pain and confusion in his expression and in his voice. “Baylor, you don’t have to talk about it,” I say, not able to hold back. It’s killing me to see how badly he’s hurting.

He takes several deep breaths, gathering me in his arms and curling me into his chest as close as we can get. His nose is buried in my hair as he continues. “Wells must have seen her drag me out of the party and thought I was making a drunken mistake. He knew I didn’t want anything to do with her.” Tears begin to soak my neck, and my own tears spring to

my eyes. I swear to god, I'll fucking kill her. I will. "I was so out of it, Tor. She had her hands wrapped around my dick and was trying to get me hard, and I kept batting her hands away. I knew I didn't want to be with her, but I didn't say anything. I didn't just throw her off of me. I don't know why. I'm so much stronger than her, but I just laid there. Even though I didn't want it. Even though I knew I didn't want her."

"Baylor." His name passes my lips in a desperate plea for him to listen as tears stream down my face. I've never seen another person in so much goddamn pain before. "It isn't your fault," I promise. "You were drunk and she took advantage of that. You can't blame yourself."

His body shakes around me as he cries and I hold him as tightly as I can, whispering soothing words to him. Saying anything to make him listen. I finally understand why he was so desperate for me back in the library, why he froze tonight the way he did. Why his friends are all so protective over him.

His breath shudders. "Wells pulled her off of me and threw her out of the room. I felt like such an idiot. The next day I felt even worse. I was embarrassed Wells had to handle my shit for me and I couldn't understand the shame I was feeling. I was stuck in my head and it was a new hell like I've never experienced before. It followed me into the game and I was a total mess on the ice. It was actually an embarrassment. Wells was also beating himself up and I'd pushed everyone away, especially him. The whole team fell apart and we were obliterated by the other team. The loss only made me feel worse about everything that happened. I just want to be over it. Nothing really happened, so why can't I just put it behind me?"

I pull out of his arms and sit up, taking a hold of his cheeks with both my hands. "Baylor Levine," I say, commanding his full attention. "This isn't something you just get over."

"But—"

"No," I cut him off. "If our roles were reversed and I told you the same story, how would you be reacting?"

He starts to respond and I can tell he's going to wave me off, so I grip his cheeks tighter. "No. Think about it. I'm drunk enough to be nearly passed out. A guy is on top of me, pinning me down, shoving his hand in my pants and stroking my clit. No matter how many times I push his hand away, he just brings it back."

Baylor's face turns red and his body shakes with anger at my side.

"Exactly," I say to him. "It's a horrid and fucked up thing she did."

He shakes his head. "It's different. If it was a guy pinning you down, you'd have no chance of fighting him off. I could have, no, I should have pushed her away."

I press my forehead to his. "No, Baylor. You were drunk and barely conscious. We don't victim blame," I say softly, kissing the tears from his cheeks. "Even when the victim is ourself."

"I'm not—" he starts to argue, and I kiss his lips, silencing him.

"It's not a dirty word, B."

He shakes his head, so much confusion in his eyes. "I'm a man, Tor."

I nod my head in agreement. "You are. One of the strongest men I know. You are kind and good. Playful and quick-witted. You give as good as you get and I'm so happy I met you this year. You're a great friend and an incredibly talented hockey player. There's nothing small or not manly about you, Baylor. Sometimes you seem larger than life and you make everyone around you feel like they can take on the world. You are an amazing person. An amazing man. And she's a wretched whore that tried to take advantage of you, that assaulted you. But you survived. And you're still here. You're with me. And we're going to be okay, even on hard days. You will always have people who have your back."

"She assaulted me?" The wonder in his tone makes me realize he never really saw it that way. That maybe this whole

time he saw it as a stupid mistake that cost them the championship last season.

I nod my head. “She did. That’s assault and it would have been rape if Wells hadn’t intervened.” It’s important to call it what it was. To put a name to it and start to process the emotions that come with it. He pulls me back into his chest, and his body shakes with his cries. I hold him the best I can. “I’m so sorry, Baylor. You didn’t deserve that to happen to you. No one deserves that.”

I don’t know how much time passes with us laying like that in his bed. Me holding him, and him letting out all of the emotions he’s suppressed about the whole thing. I cry with him as he breaks and hope I’ll be able to help him put the pieces back together again.

He whispers my name some time later. “Torryn.”

“Hm?” I ask, running my fingers through his hair soothingly.

He flips me over on my back, hovering over me. “I’m still a man,” he whispers. His eyes seem lighter, even when rimmed with red. I don’t think I’ve noticed just how fucking pretty Baylor is. Sharp nose and a strong jawline, but just enough fullness in his cheeks to give him a boyish look. His disheveled hair is getting longer and almost reaches his chin now, softening the angles of his face.

“I’ve never stopped seeing you as one,” I tell him.

His eyes search my face as if looking for a lie, but he won’t find one. I think Baylor is pretty when he cries and it’s fucking hot when a man can show his emotions. “Sometimes that night makes me feel like less of one,” he admits, still searching my face.

“It doesn’t,” I say matter of factly. “But those feelings won’t just disappear with a few words,” I acknowledge, brushing his hair out of his face. “We can work on it together.”

“I want you to see me as a man.”

“I do,” I promise, knowing he’s going to need to keep hearing it.

“Even though I cried?”

This time I give him a small smirk. “Especially because you cried.”

His responding smile eases something in my chest. He’s going to be okay. Maybe not tonight, and maybe not tomorrow, but he will be. One day, he’ll be able to sort out all of his emotions about Clarissa and he’s going to be okay. It’s quick to deflate though, fear entering back into his gaze. “Even though that happened to me?”

I cup his cheek with one hand. “I wish it had never happened to you, Baylor. I wish I could take away the memory and the pain. But it doesn’t change how I look at you. You’re still the man that leaves his mark on me every time we fuck. The man that makes sure I can still feel him the day after. The man that makes me cry out his name and beg for more.”

“I want to feel like that man,” he admits.

I nod in understanding. “Then take what you need, Baylor. You told me I could take from you, fuck you, and use you how I please. So do the same to me. Fuck me, use me, however you need to. I can promise I’ll love every second of it.”

Heat flashes in his hazel eyes as lust replaces the fear there. My body instantly starts responding to his presence. “Being inside of you makes me feel like a man.”

I don’t say anything in response, just open my legs wider to accommodate his size. He smiles salaciously and heat pulses at my center in response. I expect him to be rough, to be demanding and to take. Instead he moves slowly down my body, dropping kisses over my stomach and thighs as he settles in between my legs.

He pulls my underwear down and tosses them off the bed, spreading my thighs wider as he just looks at my pussy. Something about his transfixed stare is enough to start getting me hot and I shift under his gaze.

“So damn pretty, Tor,” he murmurs, pressing kisses to my inner thighs as he uses his thumb to spread me open. “Such a perfect pussy,” he praises. He’s slow and languid as he teases

me. Flicking his tongue against my clit only to move away again and kiss my stomach. He builds me up at a torturously slow pace, taking his time to kiss every inch of my cunt until I'm begging for him to make me come.

"Almost," he promises, swiping his tongue from my ass to my clit. He sucks me into his mouth and finally, finally, stays there, lathering my clit with attention. After such a long and slow climb, the orgasm crashes through me almost instantly. When he lifts his head, his lips and cheeks are gleaming with my come and he gives me a satisfied smirk.

Once again he doesn't do as I expect. Instead of crawling back up my body and burying himself in me, he dives back in for round two. Licking, sucking, and biting until he brings me to another screaming orgasm. Only after a third one, when my legs are shaking and my body is slick with sweat, does he move up my body to kiss me.

He slides a condom on and enters me slowly. His long, thick length filling me as I arch my back to take him deeper. Baylor's eyes shine with satisfaction as he rocks his hips against mine, dragging his dick in and out of me, making me beg and plead for him to go faster. But he drags out and savors every single thrust.

Nothing about it has been expected and as Baylor moves in and out of me, whispering words of praise about how fucking well I take him, how wet I am for him, how much he loves to see me drip for him, it dawns on me.

Baylor doesn't need to dominate a woman to feel like a man. He just needs to feel my pleasure. To know he owns it.

So I tell him how good he feels. How he hits places no one has ever hit before. How he's the hottest man I've ever been with and always makes me desperate for more. The more I talk, the faster he pumps his hips, the more he loses control.

"You're fucking perfect, Baylor," I moan as he bottoms out inside me. "So good for me." He pistons his hips, changing the angle to hit me in a way that nearly makes me black out.

“Tell me, Tor,” he demands, his voice a tight growl as he pounds into me. “Tell me how much you need me, how much you love my cock inside of you.”

I nod my head, as he bends his head down and takes my nipple into his mouth. “I do, Baylor. Fuck I need you. Nothing feels as good as you do inside of me.”

He moans and I feel his movements growing more erratic. As sensitive as my pussy is, I can feel I’m so close to another orgasm. So fucking close. “Yes, baby,” he murmurs. “I can feel you tightening all around me.”

I clench and love the pleasure that washes over his face. “So close,” I whisper. “Come inside me, Baylor. I’m going to come.”

He groans and I’m so close, I can taste it. His thumb finds my clit and with one stroke I’m crashing over into my fourth orgasm and taking him with me. He moans my name as he comes and my body shakes with the strength of the pleasure crashing through me.

We lay silently panting, attempting to catch our breath as he stays inside me. I think he likes just the comfort of being so close. Eventually he pulls out and discards the condom, but as I shift in his bed, I scrunch my nose. “Your sheets are soaked.”

His laughter is a balm to my soul. He’s not healed, but at least for tonight, I made him feel better. “Come on, Trouble,” he calls, lifting me out of bed. I wrap my legs around his waist and my slick center is sure to leave a mark on his stomach. “Let’s go clean you up and sleep in your bed.”

As soon as our heads hit my pillows, we’re both out. His huge body wrapped around me and I sleep better than I can remember. I don’t even realize he put the polaroids from the game all over my walls until the next morning.

BEAU

Is Tor being as insufferable as Baylor is being?

XANDER

Yes

ISLA

She is not!

She slept in his shirt last night

She sleeps in his shirt every night

JAMES

He's waiting for her to text him back

She's doing her makeup

Xander adds Tate to the chat

BEAU

So Isla? What are you doing for Thanksgiving?

WELLS

You asshole. I told you I'd talk to her

BEAU

This could be a perfect opportunity for simp support at lunch

TATE

How and why am I here?

I spend it with Tor's family. What are you thinking Beau?

BEAU

None of us are going home

Mission bring Bay home for Thanksgiving?

Leave it to me



thirty-one

SHE'S GOT ME & MY HONOR

“Why are you staring at your phone like that?” James asks as he takes a seat next to me on the bus. Away games have never felt as long as they have this season.

“He’s waiting for Torryn to text him back,” Wells answers for me.

I flip him off, ignoring the both of them as I wait for her response. They can’t blame me for being anxious. The last away game we had, Torryn’s stalker left another note on her new car, which she was finally able to get when her insurance check came through.

While we’re gone, it’s only really Xander and Isla that are keeping an eye on her. Some of the guys that don’t travel with us are helping where they can, but mostly it’s just the two of them. I hate that the stalker hasn’t given up yet. I was almost starting to think that he had.

But now, she’s also getting calls from blocked numbers and cryptic texts. The thought alone makes my skin crawl, even if she’s brushing it off as whatever. Every moment we’re away from her is another moment where the stalker has a better chance of getting to her.

We even asked Xander to start staying in the house while we’re gone, but it only makes me feel marginally better.

“It’s been a day, dude,” Beau taunts.

I give him an unamused look. “Right. Remind me, who called their dad and ordered more security cameras around the property after our last away game?”

He puts his hands up in defense. “Hey, I didn’t say I wasn’t worried about her. But we just talked to her.” I roll my eyes, but when my phone buzzes in my hand and her name pops up on the screen, the anxiety in my chest eases.

She laments with me about the tough loss last night but still finds ways to praise me. It was a hard game last night and only the second loss we’ve experienced as a team this season for a record of 5-2. It’s not a bad start, but we could be doing better. We will do better at the next game.

“Are you guys doing anything for Thanksgiving?” James asks.

“We have a game on Friday,” Beau points out but James waves him off.

“I’m aware. But is any of your family coming in?”

I shake my head. “My parents thought about it, but it’s hard for everyone to get time off to come down. I’ll see them for Christmas. Jackson may or may not show up since he’ll have the whole week off.”

Wells’ parents will be coming down on Friday to watch the game, but no one else’s parents are going to make it this weekend. Not that I blame them. Who wants to travel this time of year? And the weather isn’t supposed to be great next weekend either.

“What about Isla and Tor?”

Wells and I trade looks, but I don’t really know. She’s talked about her family to me a bit. I know her mom passed and her dad isn’t around. Her grandma is her mom’s mom and she sounds like a hoot. I’m hoping to meet her one day, along with Torryn’s younger siblings. I want to see how she is as a big sister.

“Probably going home,” I assume, but Wells doesn’t seem to know either.

James gives us an incredulous look. “You haven’t talked about it?”

I shake my head, rubbing the back of my neck. “I mean their families don’t live that far. They’re probably going home.”

“You don’t want to spend it with them?” Beau prods.

I look expectantly at Wells. That particular question seems to be more directed at him. Why would I expect to spend a holiday with Tor? I’ll admit, it does sound nice. But that’s out of our wheelhouse.

He sighs, but can’t argue. “She’s not that close to her parents,” he says in a half-hearted defense. As her boyfriend, they probably should have talked about it already. “I’ll figure it out and let you guys know,” he answers.

I check my phone again and respond to Torryn letting her know we’re only about twenty minutes away.

“Aren’t we meeting them for lunch?” Beau asks. “Ask her then.”

Torryn responds and says she and Isla are almost ready and wants to know if they should go ahead and get a table or if they should wait and meet us at the house. I don’t even bother asking the guys for their opinion and tell her to wait. I like the idea of coming home and seeing her face.

The guys continue to chatter about what we could do with our one day off, but none of their ideas sound particularly interesting to me. None of us can cook all that well. We’d be better off ordering Chinese food than attempting to pull together a whole Thanksgiving meal.

Except for the Mac and cheese. Wells does make a mean Mac and cheese. Hm. Maybe we could just eat that for the holiday and call it a day. I’d be more than happy with that.

We get off the bus at the school and say our goodbyes to the team. Tate tells us he’ll see us in a bit at Barney’s and I assume Xander was the one who told him. At least Tor isn’t trying to ditch him and go off on her own.

The other guys climb into my truck, and man. It is nice to have my baby back, but sometimes I miss watching Torryn

drive her. She looked sexy behind the wheel. We head back to the house to pick up the girls and Xander.

The three of them are already waiting outside, but when we pull up Xander salutes us and heads down the street towards Tate's place. Fair enough. We wouldn't have all fit anyway.

Wells and Beau hop out of the truck to trade places. Tor climbs into the front and sits in the middle while Isla climbs in the back to sit behind her. Her arm brushes against mine and I can't help the tingle that spreads over where she touched.

"Hey," I greet, grinning at her. She looks so cute bundled up in my sweatshirt with a beanie. She scrunches her nose back at me, but nods in greeting, bumping her elbow against me.

"We were just talking about Thanksgiving," Beau says before the door is even closed behind.

Isla pokes her head between him and Tor with a smile I've learned not to trust. "Oh, yeah? What about it?"

Wells pulls her back against him, scolding her that it isn't safe to sit like that, especially when it's pouring rain. I take offense at his lack of trust in my driving skills, but let it go, instead answering her, "What we're going to do."

"We were wondering if you guys had any plans?" Wells asks. I give him a look in the rearview mirror. I thought he was trying to figure out if he could spend the holiday with his girl. Not all of us.

"We always go to Torryn's grandma's. Right, Tor?"

Torryn nods her head at my side. "Yeah, she's expecting us. You guys?"

When no one answers her right away, she looks up from her phone and cocks her head at me. "We're still trying to figure it out," I explain.

"None of you are going home for break?" Isla asks, looking at Wells curiously. Maybe it never occurred to either of them that we would still be around.

“We have a game on Friday,” James explains.

Torryn scrunches her nose again. “Ew.”

I elbow her in protest. “I thought you’d come around to hockey,” I argue. It sure seems that way when she’s totally fine being a part of my pregame routine now. In fact, I would even say she looks forward to game days for that very reason. Sleeping inside her has become the best part about the night before any game. Even better than the head and way she rides my face before it.

She shrugs, a salacious smirk that tells me her mind went to the exact same place as mine did. “Sure, but skating after eating Thanksgiving food? No thanks.”

Fair enough. “I was thinking of just ordering Chinese food this year.”

“You were?” Beau looks past her to stare at me.

I pull into a parking lot at Barney’s as I respond. “Yeah, I mean it’s not like any of us can really cook.”

We all climb out of the truck and Wells protests but when we all give him the same look he grumbles his agreement that a turkey is out of his area of expertise. Isla frowns at the four of us. “That’s so sad.”

Not really. Thanksgiving is a holiday dominated by sports. If you’re an athlete, you’re ready to give up most of your breaks and a good chunk of your holidays too. We’re all used to it. And it’s why the team is like family.

“I’m surprised your parents aren’t coming down again,” Torryn says. My mom still asks about her every time we’re on the phone. They’ve even had several conversations where they’ve both forgotten I was even an original participant of it.

“Not a good weekend to travel,” I explain, knowing she and my mom will probably end up talking about it this week when my mom calls me.

We find a table in the corner big enough for all of us plus the other guys that should be right behind us. Wells and Isla slide into the corner and Torryn guides me to slide in after

Beau, while James takes the other side so she can sit at the edge. I give her a look at manhandling me, but she already looks smug. “Trouble,” I mutter.

The waitress comes over and after giving our drink orders, Isla continues the conversation. “Let me get this straight, you’re all just going to stay at the house and eat cold Chinese food on Thanksgiving?”

Beau looks at her with the same bafflement I’m feeling. “Who says it’s going to be cold?”

“That’s just so sad,” she says again, looking at Torryn. “Isn’t that just so sad, T?”

Torryn hums as she checks her phone again. “A real tragedy,” she deadpans.

“No one said it was going to be cold,” I argue. “We are capable of getting hot take out.”

Torryn pats my knee. “I believe in you.” She’s praising me, but it sounds so damn condescending. When did our ability to order food for ourselves get called into question? And why? “But my grandma invited you guys to dinner on Thursday if you’d like to come.”

“She did?” James asks at the same time Beau confirms, “All of us?”

“Yes and yes.”

Isla beams at her best friend as Torryn slips her phone back into her pocket. I was wondering what had her so entranced on it. She’s not one to usually get hung up on it. More often than not, she forgets it exists.

“When did you ask her?” I can’t help but want to know when she decided to invite us.

The waitress comes back with our drinks at the same time Tate and the other guys walk in. The girl, Colby, is with them again and Isla tells James to move so she can sit across from her. The interaction makes Wilder smile as he slides in after her. I’m pretty sure they’re just friends though. When he flirts

with the waitress and Colby doesn't even bat an eye, I'm sure of it.

"In the truck," Torryn answers.

Beau places his hand on his chest and stares at her. "That is actually so sweet of you, Torryn. I didn't know you could be so kind."

She gives him an absolutely disgusted look. "Don't." He cracks up laughing and the guys that just got here look over at us confused.

"Torryn's being nice and Beau's being a dick," I explain, making Xander scoff in disbelief.

"Didn't know you knew how to be nice," he snarks to her, but she just arches a brow, sipping on her coke.

"That's why you weren't invited."

His mouth parts open in shock and his narrows on her. "Invited where?"

I shake my head at her antics. Especially when she refuses to answer him after that. James ends up asking what their plans all are and to no big surprise, they're all celebrating at Tate's dad's house. They also don't live very far from the college, growing up less than forty-five minutes away in one of the smaller suburbs outside of the city. Colby is the only one who tells us she'll be with her own family.

"Until Zac and I jailbreak you," Wilder teases.

"They aren't that bad," Colby defends quietly, a slight flush to her cheeks.

Zac looks like he wants to scoff his disagreement, but holds back. Wilder nudges her playfully. "Of course not, we're just that much more fun, North," he teases.

"Hell yeah we are," Zac agrees.

Tate shakes his head, but makes eye contact with her. "You're always welcome to join when you're done with your family. Emery would probably appreciate the company. She always gets tired of being the only girl around."

We fall into more casual conversations after ordering our food. I'm starving after the long bus ride home. One of the reasons I love Barney's is that they serve fries how other places serve bread or Mexican restaurants serve chips. I like having them to snack on while we wait for our burgers to arrive.

I place my hand on Torryn's thigh, missing the warm weather when she still wore shorts almost every day. She leans into my touch as we listen to Zac and Wilder tell us some story about a party they went to last weekend. It's almost like I can see Tate's blonde hair turning gray before my eyes. I nudge her and lift my brows as I subtly nod in his direction where he's smashing a French fry in his fingers.

Torryn snorts before nodding her agreement. They really are going to give him an aneurysm.

Another group walks into Barney's and heads towards the pool tables near us. I don't think anything of them at first until I hear a familiar and chilling tinkle of laughter. I'm not the only one that tenses at the sound. Wells and James do as well, their eyes flashing to mine.

I give them a tight smile, my hand gripping Tor's thigh a little tighter. She's so damn quick to pick up on these things. Immediately, she's holding my hand in hers, reassuring me with her presence alone. Her eyes scan over the crowd that just settled across the way from us.

"That's her?" Tor's tone is clipped and sharp, making a few heads at our table turn our way. I swallow thickly and laugh nervously, running my hand through my hair, as I grip her hand tighter.

"Yeah, that's Clarissa." My stomach twists at the sound of her laugh and I really hope she has the common sense to not come over here. I haven't seen her since the night at the bar where the boys had to physically intervene to keep her away. I don't know what it is about me that makes her want to come back. I feel like I've humiliated her more than enough times. Got her banned from hockey events. Publicly rejected her.

What else could I possibly do to get the word no through her head?

Torryn's hand tightens around mine. "Hmm."

My head snaps to the side, studying her. I don't know that hmm. But I know that was not a good hmm. The less syllables she uses, the more pissed she is.

She releases my hand, patting the back of it before she stands. "What are you doing?" I ask, worried as I try to catch her hand back in mine. She pats me on the shoulder and I look to Isla for help but her face is already in her hands as she shakes her head. She makes no attempt to stop her best friend. Stop her from what? I'm not exactly sure yet. But I have the very distinct feeling I should be trying to stop whatever is about to happen.

"I'll be right back," she says instead of answering me.

"Trouble," I warn, but it's too late. She's already walking away, an extra sway to her hips and I can't help but let my eyes drift to her ass as she walks. Dammit. She did that on purpose to distract me.

"Where is she going?" Beau asks around a mouthful of fries.

Isla snickers, making the rest of us turn to her. "She really does not like that Clarissa chick," she explains.

I groan. I had hoped I was wrong, but as my eyes flick back to Torryn, she is in fact walking up to the group Clarissa just walked in with.

"What is she going to do?" Wells whispers as Tor taps Clarissa on the shoulder and takes a step back.

All eyes are glued on the interaction and Isla just giggles. Not helpful, woman. Not helpful at all. Clarissa's blonde hair flows around her as she turns toward Torryn, her lips already turned down in a sneer. There's no chance to see anything else before Tor pulls her arm back and punches Clarissa in the face hard enough for her body to crumple where she stands.

My mouth drops open in shock, and I'm not the only one as the entire room holds their breath. Torryn leans down, grabbing her by the hair and lifting her to say something in the crying girl's ear that we have no chance of hearing from across the room. Before anyone in her group has a chance to react, Torryn drops her grip and spins on her heel, heading back toward our table, a smug and satisfied smile in place.

Isla's giggles make more sense now as she bursts out into laughter, wiping tears from her eyes. She knew exactly what was coming. "I told you, she really doesn't like her."

"Why?" Wells asks, finally shutting his mouth from where it was gaping at the scene that just unfolded. He looks at me with questions in his eyes as if he can't quite believe I would have told her the truth.

I run my fingers through my hair one more time. "I may have told her about that night," I confess.

Wells looks shocked, but doesn't have a chance to say anything. "I think I'm in love with your girl," Beau breathes, his mouth parted softly as we all watch Torryn walk our way.

"She's not my girl," I respond on instinct more than anything.

He arches a brow and gives a pointed look to the screaming girl across the room, now surrounded by her friends. "Then why is she defending your honor?"



thirty-two

FRIENDS LIKE THESE

Please don't let me regret this.

The entire drive to my grandma's house, that's all I can think. With a healthy dose of questioning my sanity. What was I thinking inviting the guys home with us? I feel like a single mother of five kids.

Five.

Because even Isla has abandoned me for the chaos of the guys. Does that make her the absentee father that isn't actually absent but only knows how to be the fun-time parent? Because she's only encouraging their antics. The endless questions about where I grew up and what my grandma is like and what the kids like to do on top of all the jokes made at Baylor's expense. The teasing about a relationship that doesn't actually exist. For once, Baylor is actually the most calm one. Something I never thought I would see. But his sudden change of character is only fuel to the frenzy that is his best friends ragging on him, and by proxy, me.

I'm about to initiate the quiet game just to get a moment of peace. This damn drive has never taken so long. We're almost there though. Just a few more minutes.

"Why are you stopping?" I ask as Baylor pulls into a parking lot. "If you tell me you have to pee again—"

He cuts me off with a flustered huff. "I'm buying your grandma flowers."

That's actually kind of sweet, but I refuse to let it show in my expression.

“She’d rather you all walk in shirtless,” Isla pipes up from the back, getting them started all over again.

“Is that really an option?” Beau asks, far too much excitement in his voice. “I’m game. Your grandma will love my abs.”

She probably would. “There are children at the house,” I remind all of them for the umpteenth time.

“Kids like my—” he pauses, “actually never mind. I heard it and that’s just weird. My abs are rated G for grandmas.”

Baylor squeezes my knee with a promise that he’ll be right back and is gone before I even have a chance to protest.

I rub my fingers over my temples as James argues, “Rated G is for general audiences, you nitwit.”

“Torryn, what’s your grandma’s name?” Beau asks and I shake my head. I’m not telling him just so he can flirt with her. He’s going to give her a heart attack. It’s not good for her health.

“Millie,” Isla answers happily.

That asshole. I turn to her astounded at the audacity. “The betrayal.”

She smacks my shoulder, giggling in the way she does when she wants me to forgive her. Not today. They are all dancing on my very last nerve. “Come on, Tor. You know she’s going to love it.”

Of course she is. My grandma is a cougar. Unabashedly so. I miss my grandpa for many, many things, but his ability to reign in her crazier side is probably at the top of that list. “Beau, if you send my grandma into heart failure, I will castrate you.”

He smirks, shimmying his shoulders and pretends to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear. “You think my looks could kill? Thanks.”

I catch sight of Baylor heading his way back to the truck and breathe a sigh of relief. When he opens the door he hands me a gorgeous bouquet of sunflowers, baby’s breath, with

white and orange roses. I look back at the grocery store he came out of. “They had these?” They seem so nice and bigger than the pre-wrapped bouquets you can usually get.

He scratches his chin as he backs out of the parking space. A sure sign he doesn’t want to answer. I stay silent, staring at him and waiting him out until he finally caves. He always does. “I might have called and ordered them ahead.”

I blink rapidly. “When?”

“Right after you invited us,” he mutters, the tips of ears turning red.

I don’t have anything to say to that. It’s...thoughtful. More so than just picking up any flowers he saw. My chest feels a little weird as I study his profile.

Beau nudges me from the other side. “He wanted to impress your grandma,” he says in a sing-song voice.

“It’s harder to do when he has to keep his shirt on.” I scoff, turning back to look at James shocked.

“You too? Really?” And here I thought he was the mature one. If this car ride has taught me anything, it’s that none of them are the mature one. Not a single one.

He gives me a sheepish smile. “Look how nervous he is,” he defends. “He’s begging to be teased.”

Wells nods his agreement from the back. “He even asked what I thought about his outfit today.”

“You already said that,” I snap, before sighing when it just makes them laugh harder. I’ve already heard about how Baylor changed his outfit three times and kept asking Wells what he thought about each one. For the record, he looks great in the dark jeans and gray henley he chose. Though, as the guys keep pointing out thanks to Isla, my grandma would in fact, prefer the shirtless option.

Unfortunately, for all of us, as fun as his abs are to stare at, I’m not explaining the bite sized bruises over his chest and stomach to my baby sister or my little brother. I also really don’t want to have to endure my grandma catcalling him.

I run my hand down Baylor's arm, feeling how tense he is. "Are you really that nervous?"

He scoffs, shaking his head. "Of course not. Why would I be?" His hands tighten around the steering wheel as he turns down the street I grew up on. "Just meeting a friend's family. What's weird about that? Nothing. Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing to be nervous about. Just Thanksgiving with a friend. And her not weird family. I'm fine. It's going to be totally fine." He finishes the very convincing argument that he's not nervous with an awkward laugh.

Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

Beau is wheezing at my side and I'm pretty sure Wells is wiping tears from his eyes as he repeats, "Her not weird family," before cackling like a loon.

Baylor parks the truck outside my house and I don't think he's even aware of his friends anymore. He looks at me with panic in his eyes. I lean up and kiss his cheek in reassurance. "If you get nervous, just hold my hand. Okay?"

He nods and I turn back to glare at Wells where he's still laughing. "Just so you know," I start and wait until he stops laughing. "My grandma practically raised Isla as well." I flick my eyes down to his button up shirt. "And she thinks button ups are pretentious and only men who don't know how to fuck wear them."

His mouth drops open as he stares at Isla. Now who's panicking, bitch? "Is that true?"

Isla nods, her own sheepish expression on her face as Wells turns pale.

"Savage," Beau says with a nod of approval.

I make eye contact with both him and James. "Remember that before you walk into that house. Stop trying to piss me off."

Beau nudges me with his arm. "Come on, Tor. We weren't trying to piss you off." When I arch a brow he huffs. "Just annoy you a little."

“Same thing.”

James mutters his apology and a promise to be on his best behavior. Wells and Isla are too busy bickering about his shirt now, and Baylor finally takes a deep breath and turns off the truck. “Okay, I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

Contrary to how they’ve been behaving all morning, all four guys are on their best behavior when I introduce them to my grandma, mostly. Baylor only stumbles over his words a little bit when he hands her the flowers and thanks her for having them.

My grandma is smitten with him from the first second her eyes land on him. Though she does have a little judgment in her gaze when her eyes land on Wells, making even Baylor laugh. Beau opens his arms wide as he catches sight of her, greeting her with a grin. “Grandma!”

That idiot. Of course my grandma loves it, and she might even feel him up a little bit while she hugs him back. James follows with his own hug, blushing the whole time as he apologizes for how loud the house will be over the next few hours. “I brought a bottle of wine though. Torryn said you prefer reds and this is one of my mom’s favorites.”

I don’t think my grandma knows what to do with the overflowing attention and noise. Even with three kids growing up in this house, we were a relatively quiet crew. The age gap between each of us was large enough that we didn’t have very many sibling squabbles.

I hand her the pies Isla and I made and steer her into the kitchen to have a moment alone while Isla leads the guys to the living room to get comfortable. “Where are the kids?” I ask to distract her from the conversation currently happening where Wells is trying to decide if he should take his shirt off or not. Must be miffed he didn’t get a hug.

Before she can answer Beau is calling my name. “Oh my gosh, is this you as a baby?” I catch sight of him holding up a picture frame and examining it closely.

“No, you idiot. That’s my sister. Now put it down.”

“Yeah, you idiot,” Baylor echoes. “Torryn’s eyes are more blue than that.”

My grandma raises her brow in question but I’m not touching that topic with a ten-foot pole. She’s already asked me if I was dating any of the guys when I asked if they could join us. Of course she remembered our conversation from the football game and asked about Baylor again. I told her no then. It’s still a no now. I have a feeling I’m not the only one she asked though, and apparently Isla can no longer be trusted. “Where are the kids?” I ask again, attempting to drown out the sound of Beau making fun of Wells and Baylor. “I’m dying for some mature company.”

She snorts and points upstairs. “I’m surprised they aren’t down here yet, they were waiting for you to get here to take them to drop off the cookies to the neighbors.”

“They didn’t have to wait for me.” They haven’t waited for me since I left the house. They’re both old enough to walk around the cul de sac alone. It’s not like we haven’t all done it together every year since we moved in with my grandparents. Even before that actually. For as long as I can remember, every Thanksgiving we helped drop off cookies my grandma made for all the neighbors.

She gets a cagey look in her eyes as she drops them from mine, studying the pies we brought instead. “They’ve missed doing it with you.”

Guilt makes my stomach turn for even asking. “I’ll go find them,” I say instead, not wanting her to know how badly those words hurt. I’ve done my best to still always be there for my family, but with all the extra shifts I’ve been picking up, there hasn’t been as much time to make it out this way as I normally do. I haven’t even seen them since the homecoming game and phone calls just aren’t the same.

Before I even make it out of the kitchen, I hear a commotion on the stairs and sure enough it’s Rayne and Kanyon pushing each other to try and get to the bottom first. “Don’t run on the stairs,” I scold both of them.

Their eyes light up when they hear my voice, completely ignoring what I told them as they continue to rush down. “Ryn!” Rayne yells, jumping down the last few and launching herself at me as soon as I’m within distance. I catch her, just barely, and am almost knocked backwards when Baylor catches me by the hips and steadies me.

“Rayne Gray!” I chastise. “You damn near killed me.”

She giggles, pushing her dark hair out of her face and squeezing me tighter, her little arms wrapped around my neck while her legs wrap around my waist. I kiss the top of her head, unable to stay mad at her. “You’re getting too big for this.”

“No, I’m not,” she denies.

You’d think she was still five and not almost eleven years old the way she’s clinging to me. I love that she still feels like a little girl, but the growth spurt she had over the summer does not agree. “Alright, get down before I drop you.” I give her an extra squeeze to lessen the comment and she finally stands on her own two feet. I chuckle as I look her over. Her hair is nearly to the middle of the back now and hangs in loose waves. I can tell my grandma tried to style it this morning, but whatever ties or bows she put in it are long gone. She’s in a new burgundy dress and a black sweater but at least she also has tights on since she would have just flashed a room full of people she’s still ignoring.

Kanyon, on the other hand, froze in his tracks when he saw all the guys in the living room watching them. He’s wearing black jeans and a plain black tee and I just know this was his compromise for whatever sweater my grandma tried to get him in. He looks older, taller, not nearly scrawny enough. When did he actually start gaining muscle?

I trade looks with Isla and she has the same frown on her face. We agree. We don’t like it.

Kanyon makes it to the bottom of the stairs and gives me a one-armed hug and I have to stifle a laugh at how awkward he’s being with the guys here. “Good to see you, Ryn,” he says so formally.

It takes a lot of willpower not to tease him, but I hold it in. Isla does not. She shoves his shoulder when he tries to give her the same, weird, half hug. “That is not how you say hi to us, Kan!”

He groans, wiping his hands over his face. “I’m sorry. You’re right.” He drops his voice to a whisper, meant just of the three of us. “It was just weird seeing a bunch of men I don’t know in my living room.”

I run my hand over his dark hair, messing up the perfect swoosh he had it styled in. He bats my hand away in annoyance. “You’re never embarrassed of us in front of your friends.” The guys all stand back, watching the interaction unfold as if it’s the most riveting thing they’ve ever witnessed.

“I’m not embarrassed,” he defends, attempting to fix his wavy hair. All three of us take after our mom. Dark wavy hair with light eyes against warm ivory skin. We all look like copy and paste versions of her with only slight differences. I have the bluest eyes, while Kanyon’s lean more towards gray, and Rayne has green mixed in. He gives me a better hug, wrapping his arms around me and lifting me until my feet are off the ground.

“We’ve missed you, Ryn,” he says. He sticks his tongue out at Isla. “You too, Lala.” He turns his gaze towards Baylor, eyeing him up and down slowly, before he sticks his hand out, his face set in a serious expression. “Hi, I’m Kanyon.” His tone, posture, and attitude completely different from the way he spoke to me and Isla just now.

Baylor nods, gripping my little brother’s hand firmly and giving it a good shake. “Baylor Levine. It’s nice to meet you.” He gives Kanyon his full attention, holding his gaze even when Kanyon glares at him.

“I know who you are. You’re trying to fuck my sister.”

My mouth drops open as I yell his name, covering Rayne’s ears with my hands even though it’s far too late and she’s already giggling just as much as Isla and the guys are. Baylor sputters, not knowing what to say, but I can tell he wants to laugh.

“What?” Kanyon defends. “Rayne told me he let you drive his truck. Guys don’t let girls drive their trucks unless they’re trying to get in their pants.”

“He’s got a good point,” Beau points out, not at all helpfully.

Baylor goes to respond and I hush him before he says anything. “He’s a child,” I remind him, not wanting him to snark back that he got in my pants way before he ever let me borrow his truck.

Baylor gives me an exasperated look. “I’m not an idiot. Just let me talk to him for a minute.”

“What a good idea!” my grandma calls from the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. I have no idea when she even got there or how much of that whole thing she heard. “Why don’t you help Kanyon deliver these for me, Baylor?” She lifts baskets of cookies.

I arch a brow at her which she conveniently misses. Thought they missed doing it with me all this time, now I’m chopped liver.

Kanyon clears his throat, looking over the other guys and standing taller. “Wells should come with us too.”

Isla and I trade looks and both have to turn away from him so he doesn’t see our reactions. He really is growing up too fast. He shouldn’t feel like he has to protect not only me, but even Isla. I’m torn between pride for the man he’s becoming, and guilt that he’s growing up too fast.

My grandma beams at him. “What a good idea.”

Wells looks to Isla for help but when she just shrugs he smiles, walking up to Kanyon and sticking his hand out. “It’s nice to meet you, Kanyon. Isla and Tor talk a lot about you. I’m Wells Davis.”

Kanyon perks up. “They do?”

All of the guys nod and Baylor says, “We’ve heard you’re a pretty phenomenal football player. You can tell us about your season so far while we go run those?”

Just like that, Kanyon drops the tough guy act and his grin stretches over his face, making his dimples pop. My grandma hands Wells the cookies and Baylor leans down to whisper in my ear, “See? No need to stress. I’ve got this.” His lips brush over my ear as he pulls away and a shiver races down my spine. He gives me that feeling more often than not nowadays. But I’m thankful for his willingness to entertain my little brother who wants to grow up too fast.

After they walk out the door, I introduce Rayne to James and Beau. They both instantly win her over when they compliment how pretty she is and how nice her dress is. Apparently, both my siblings are easy to win over.

“Quick, while they’re gone,” my grandma calls, “tell me everything I need to know about those two handsome boys that just left.”

Beau and James trade matching maniacal smiles and I’m not even going to try. “First of all,” Beau starts, “let it be known, I have way better abs than either of those two.” Just like that she’s got both boys on her hook and they follow her into the kitchen without protest. A moment later I hear her oohing about his abs.

I run my fingers through Rayne’s hair, trying my best to detangle it. “Come on, my little ray of sunshine. Let those boys help Grandma in the kitchen. How about you tell me and Isla all about your dance and tumbling classes?”

By the time Kanyon is back with Baylor and Wells, the three of them are thick as thieves, my grandma is very well contemplating how to start her own harem of hockey players, and Rayne has regaled Isla and I with stories about all the things she’s learning and promised to show us her back walkover after dinner.

I finish braiding her hair and she bounces up from her seat between my legs and runs over to Kanyon to show it to him. He kisses the top of her head. “It looks beautiful, dew drop.”

My grandma calls us all for dinner and I stand to help her set everything out, but the guys wave me off and Baylor pushes me toward the table. Kanyon, Rayne, Isla, and I all

watch with wide eyes as they push my grandma out of the kitchen and towards a chair with promises that they've got it handled. Beau and James are even in my grandma's favorite frilly aprons. I really hope Baylor snags a photo of them like that. I know he has his polaroid somewhere around here.

We sit at the table and I focus on my grandma as her eyes get misty. She reaches out and grabs mine and Isla's hands with hers. "I'm so glad you girls have found men like them. Friends like that become family."

Isla's eyes swell with emotion and even my chest feels full in a way that it hasn't in a very long time. We could all use a little more family. "They're good people," she promises and my grandma gives our hands another squeeze.

The guys set out all the food and sit to join us. Baylor sits at my side, the pink polaroid camera in his hand, because of course it is. When he sees me eyeing it he winks. "I had to get one of them in their aprons," he explains.

"I wasn't going to let you come home with us if you didn't," I respond.

He smirks and I just know they did something while we were all out here. "We got plenty of new material to decorate your room," he promises. I should be worried. Somehow, I'm mostly just excited to see what new ways he has planned to fuck with me.

"As long as it's not your bare ass again," I say under my breath, thankful my grandma and siblings are currently distracted by James.

He scoffs. "I know you sleep with that one under your pillow."

I roll my eyes, but don't respond to him when Kanyon calls my attention. "Baylor and Wells said you and Isla go to their games?"

"I've been to one," I tell him. I knew it would be hard for me to take many nights off, but I do feel a little bad I haven't made it back to any other ones. Thankfully, Isla has become

pretty close with Emery and Colby and they've been to all the home games together.

"He invited us to come watch one," he continues in a rush of excitement. "He even said he can get us on the ice before the game."

I arch a brow at Baylor who gives me a sheepish grin. "Coach allows it if you get permission." The other guys nod and Wells tells us about how his little sister came out last year.

I meet my grandma's eyes and at her nod I say, "Grandma and I will plan a date, okay?"

Rayne and Kanyon both cheer, making the guys join in. I catch sight of my grandma wiping under her eyes as she smiles, looking at them. They need more of this. The laughter, the chaos, the affection. Maybe my grandma does too. I can't imagine how lonely it is to lose your soulmate and be raising kids alone.

I need to be better about making the trip home.

Once they settle down, Kanyon clears his throat, looking at Baylor for permission. At his nod, Kanyon looks back at me, a slight blush on his cheeks. "Baylor also promised he'd come to one of my games this season."

"What?" Beau demands. "I want to come too."

Kanyon can't help the shy smile or look of surprise when he asks, "You do?"

Beau widens his eyes. "Of course! Your sister is a badass, I bet you're a beast on the field."

"I'm not bad." Ah, yes a good old humble brag. It's good to see Kanyon getting acknowledged. It's hard when you love a sport as much as he does and the people you want to share it with most can't always be there.

My grandma's eyes shine with pride. "He's the varsity starting quarterback of an undefeated team." There's nothing humble about her brag. "And at only fifteen too." If Kanyon wasn't blushing before, he damn sure is now.

All of the guys sans Baylor stare at him with their mouths hanging open. “Not bad, huh?” Baylor teases and Kanyon looks at him with surprise.

“You already knew?”

This time it’s my cheeks that begin to heat. “I meant it when I said your sister talks a lot about you. I’ve even seen some of your footage. I sent some of it to my dad and brothers. One of my older brothers played at Alabama and we all agree. You’re the real deal, kid.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” James stammers. “Do you go to Dayton High?” When Kanyon nods, he curses. “Damn, dude. I’ve seen some of your highlights on ESPN.” The guys trade incredulous looks as they realize they’ve all heard of my brother before.

“Oh, we have to take him to a football game,” Beau says excitedly. “Are you going to come to Westbrook?”

He shrugs, glancing at me but not for help, rather as if checking my reaction. “It depends, I guess. I’m only a sophomore.”

“Damn,” Wells curses. “We’ll all be graduated before you play for the Wolves. We’ll come watch you play wherever you end up though.”

Isla stares at her boyfriend and I swear, if I didn’t already know she was head over heels in love with him, I would have just watched it happen in that second. This is exactly what my grandma meant when she said friends like these become family.



thirty-three

DINNER WITH NUDES

We just might be in trouble tomorrow.

The food was so damn good and I ate way too much of it. By the amount of groaning and hands on stomachs, I'm not the only one. The only hope we have left is that the opposing team also pigged out today.

I wasn't expecting for the food to be that damn good. Now I know where Torryn learned her skills in the kitchen. She's practically fast food compared to her grandma. An observation I'm choosing not to share with her out of fear she'll punish all of us by never cooking again.

Resting my arm over the back of Torryn's chair, I play with a piece of her hair while Rayne talks excitedly about the classes she's been taking. Torryn is completely enamored by each and every story, even when some of them take so many twists and turns that it becomes slightly nonsensical.

I took several pictures throughout dinner, and her grandma took one of me and her. The collection on her walls has been growing with each passing day. My own personal stash of favorites has also been steadily growing, and I'm starting to wonder at what point it treads into creepy territory.

After everyone is done eating, I help Torryn clear the table and start cleaning up. As soon as she drops off the dishes in the sink she spins on her heel, her hand already out. "Let me see them."

Impatient little brat.

I deposit the dishes I carried before grabbing the stack of photos from my pocket and hand them to her with a smile. The guys trickle in a minute later as she's flipping through them. She pauses at just the right moment and Beau leans over her shoulder to see what she's looking at.

"Oh, that one's for Grandma."

Torryn stares at him dumbfounded just as her grandma walks into the room. "What's for me?"

"These photos," Beau answers, grabbing them from Torryn, separating out five or six photos and handing them to her. I cover my mouth with my hand. He actually had the balls to give them to her. I did not think he did.

Tor's grandma flips through them, her smile growing wider and wider with each one as the poses get wilder and wilder, until she throws her head back in laughter.

"What did you guys do?" Tor whispers, horrified but unable to hide her amusement. The only photo she saw was the most tame by far. One of James and Beau holding up the turkey and posing shirtless.

"She couldn't just have shirtless pics of those two idiots."

She looks up at me with disbelief before shaking her head and moving to her grandma's side to look at them over her shoulder. "This one's my favorite," her grandma says, showing one of the photos to Torryn. When Torryn snorts and gives me a look of disbelief, I have a feeling I know which one it is.

She turns it around to show me and Beau and we both grin proudly. It's one of all four of us, shirtless of course, nothing less for Grandma, all flexing in different dramatic poses like something you'd see out of a muscle man competition.

"We thought about taking our pants off," Beau adds, "but then we thought what would happen if Rayne or Kanyon walked in."

"Whoa," I argue. "You thought about taking your pants off. Don't include me in that." Some of us have at least a little social awareness.

“Thank you for not taking nudes in my kitchen for my grandmother,” Torryn deadpans.

Her grandma smacks Torryn on the arm. “When did you become such a prude?”

Beau winks at her and promises to bring a new photo next time he comes over, making Tor put her face in her hands while her grandma beams. The two of them could not be any more different. It makes me wonder what her grandpa was like. Is he where Torryn got her more serious demeanor?

Girl knows how to have a good time, but nothing seems to hold her grandma back. I bet she was a riot when she was younger. I can’t ever imagine Torryn being as outgoing and loud as her grandma. But I prefer her exactly how she is. It makes each and every smile that much more special because she doesn’t hand them out to just anyone. When she teases or taunts me, I know I’m special to her. She doesn’t waste words on the people who don’t matter.

“I’m going to put these in the book,” her grandma declares, holding the shirtless photos to her chest.

“Of course you are,” Torryn sighs, but leads us back out to the living room. Her grandma takes a seat on the couch while Torryn moves to a bookshelf and pulls out a thick book before walking back to her grandma. As soon as I realize it’s a photo album, I snag a seat next to her before Tor has even handed her the book. Beau is quick to take the other side and the other two stand behind the couch.

Her grandma beams at our interest while Isla and Torryn exchange looks. Oh, I just know, there’s going to be some good pictures of them in here. She flips through pages, stopping to tell stories about some of her favorite pictures.

Isla is in almost as many pictures as Torryn is and we all get a good laugh at some of their more awkward phases. It’s also weird to see more than a couple familiar faces and realize just how small the world really is.

Her grandma points to one photo with a young Tor and Isla where they have their hair in matching braids and missing

front teeth, holding up blue first place ribbons. “This is one of my favorites,” her grandma says fondly. “They were so proud of their science experiment that won the fair.”

“You guys were so cute.” James leans over the couch to point at the experiment behind them in the photo. “Was this colored water to dye white flowers?”

Isla nods, but Beau pushes his hand out of the way. “Look at those smiles. You guys were little babies,” he coos, obviously not caring about the fair.

Isla blushes but Torryn just flips him off. “We didn’t come out of the womb as adults, dumbass.”

Her grandma laughs, handing us the book and getting up off the couch. “You guys can finish going through this while Torryn and I get the pies.” They walk out of the room and we go through a couple more photos, stopping for Isla to explain some of them. As she stops on another page, I point out another familiar face from someone in the background. We started counting how many people we recognized as soon as we realized there were so many.

“Do you know this guy?” I ask Isla, but she shakes her head. He’s not really in the photo with Torryn, rather just in the background, so I’m not surprised.

“Who is he?” Beau asks.

I wrack my brain but I can’t actually place his face, but he feels so familiar to me. “Not sure, but I swear I know him. Maybe we’ve played against his son.”

James and Wells look closer. “I think you’re right,” Wells agrees and James nods. “Maybe one of the Fairview players. I feel like we played someone who looks like him recently.”

“Hockey was pretty big in our high school,” Isla points out. One of the reasons we do recognize so many faces.

Wells tsks at her. “And yet neither you or Torryn were fans.” She shrugs, unaffected by the teasing. They had their doubts about the sport, but they’ve seen the light of day. She can’t argue that it’s boring any longer.

“That makes nine,” Beau counts. “Knocking Baylor out of the running and making Kanyon the closest.” The kid grins, puffing up his chest with pride.

“We still have a lot of book left,” Isla warns. She bet we’d find twelve familiar faces and Kanyon guessed ten. The pool only adds up to less than twenty bucks. But the honor of being right is priceless.

Through the rest of the book, we only find one more person we recognize, one of the librarians who works at Westbrook is apparently one of the Gray’s neighbors and how Torryn got into tutoring. The more you know. Kanyon fist pumps as he wins and I high-five him.

As we sit back and eat the pie Torryn and her grandma served, Rayne entertains us with the new gymnastic skills she’s learned. No one cheers louder for her than Torryn, making the little girl burst with joy. I snap another photo when she wraps her little arms around Torryn’s neck and kisses her cheek, thanking her for signing her up for her classes.

My brow raises, but Torryn brushes past it and it’s clear she doesn’t want to talk about it. Changing the topic, I compliment how impressive her back walkover was and she excitedly tells me about the recital she’s going to have for one of her dance classes this year.

The guys overhear and instantly start pumping her up just as much, if not more than they did for Kanyon and football. And just like that we have another event to add to our social calendars. Torryn leans into my side and I wrap my arm over her shoulders, settling her against me more comfortably.

Someone’s phone starts vibrating on the coffee table and Rayne picks it up. “Is this yours, Ryn?” I haven’t said anything, but I really love the way her family shortens her name. The little smile she gets every time they use it. I may have to steal it. Rayne holds up the phone and the back of the clear case has the first polaroid I ever put up in her room of both the kittens.

Torryn grabs it out of her hand with a thanks and I see it’s a private caller again. I crack my neck in irritation, wishing it

was possible to reach through a phone and punch someone. Whoever it is has taken to calling her multiple times every day. Every fucking day. As if he hadn't stolen enough of her peace of mind, now he's even harassing her on Thanksgiving.

She silences the phone, slipping it back into her pocket without answering it. She did the first few times, but all that could be heard was heavy breathing. He never spoke. "Who was that?" her grandma asks, a sharper note in her tone than I've heard this whole time.

Torryn waves her off. "Just spam." I know she's not telling them about the stalker, and I even understand why, but at what point does she no longer have a choice? He's already caused her to have to move and get a new car. What's next? Does she also need to get a new phone number? Transfer schools?

As nice as the cops were, they have no evidence, no trails. They've been next to useless since the whole thing started. When they couldn't find any suspects for the break-in or vandalizing her car, they essentially gave up. Even the lead Tor gave them about the advisor led exactly nowhere. A part of me really thinks the stalker got smart after he saw their reactions. That he figured out he can cause Torryn to lose sleep, to invade her safety and harass her in ways the cops really don't care about. In ways they pretty much ignore.

"Spam doesn't call from a private number," her grandma accuses, making Torryn rear back in surprise.

The way Torryn lifts her brows as she stares her grandma down makes me nervous and they aren't even pointed in my direction. "Would you like me to call them back and verify for you?"

Oh my fuck.

I'd be popped in the mouth. If not by my mom, surely by one of my brothers.

"Don't you sass me, Torryn Elaine Gray."

Not the middle name coming out. How did I not know her middle name was Elaine though? That's so cute. It fits her so well. Elaine.

“Well, Grandma,” Torryn snarks. Damn girl. What is it like to have that level of confidence? I’m not the only one captivated by the exchange, everyone in the room is following the conversation as if it were a tennis rally. “I didn’t answer the call. How am I supposed to know who it was?”

“Is she always like this?” Beau whispers to Kanyon and I’m glad someone asked because I want to know too. As she bickers with her grandma, Isla and Tor’s siblings don’t seem fazed at all by it. Though Kanyon watches it with the anticipation only a younger brother could, waiting to see if Torryn is about to get in trouble.

Rayne nods her head dramatically. “Grandma always says Ryn is the incarnation of all her good karma and all of her bad karma at the same time.”

I snort at the description, but it’s easy to see why her grandma would say it. Though we can all agree it’s definitely more good karma than bad that made Torryn. Even if her grandma looks like she wants to smack her upside the head at the moment.

Her grandma finally huffs her defeat, throwing her hands up and muttering about where Torryn gets her bullheaded attitude from under her breath. Torryn, on the hand, leans back against my chest with a satisfied smirk.

“Trouble,” I murmur and she pinches my side where no one can see her. This is exactly how she earned the nickname. Rayne moves closer and I catch sight of a necklace hanging from her neck. Torryn still looks like she’s about to stir up more trouble any second, so I take the lifeline and change topics. “That’s a cool necklace.”

Rayne beams as her fingers reach up to wrap around the gold pendant in the shape of a knot. “Thank you,” she whispers, her cheeks turning red, but Torryn stiffens at my side. What the fuck happened? What’s wrong with complimenting her sister?

Their grandma also smiles warmly, her eyes looking misty and I can’t even begin to understand where it is that I fucked up. “She’s worn it every day since you sent it to her, Ryn.”

Torryn smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes, her whole body is rigid next to mine even as she tries not to let her family take notice. "I'm glad you like it, Sunshine." It isn't even a full minute later that she's rising from her seat and making excuses for us to leave.

If Torryn's reaction to the necklace wasn't enough of a giveaway, the panic and fear in Isla's eyes would be.

Torryn didn't send Rayne that necklace.



The drive home is almost unbearably long.

Isla attempted to get Torryn to talk about it, but other than confirming the necklace was one her mother owned, she hasn't said a word since. One look was all it took for Isla to back down, but I can feel Torryn vibrating in her rage as she sits next to me.

She is a live wire ready to blow at any second. I worry about how much damage she'll do to herself in the process.

Even when we pull up to the house and I park, she doesn't move. I nod to Isla as she stares at her best friend. "Will you take care of the kittens?" She gives me a worried look as she agrees, but I think Torryn needs everyone to disappear so she can break. She'll never do it in front of them.

None of us have said it, but we're all thinking it. There's only one person who could have sent that necklace to Rayne.

It's a terrifying and humbling thing to realize how much access he has gained into Tor's life.

As the others walk up the driveway, Torryn's fists ball in her lap. She stares straight ahead, almost refusing to even acknowledge me as she asks, "Can I borrow your truck?"

I can't help but study her. All the laughter from the day has vanished. The looseness in her shoulders and easiness in her smile are all but forgotten. I could say a million things. Try and make it seem like it isn't a big deal. Make promises I have no way of knowing I can keep. But none of those things are

going to make Torryn feel better. None of them will mean anything at all when a crazed stalker knows where her baby sister lives. “Where are we going?”

She shakes her head and crosses her arms over her chest, but I don’t miss the way her bottom lip trembles. “I need to go to the apartment.”

I turn the key and start the truck once more. “I can go—”

“I’m not asking,” I cut her off. “You’re not going alone.” For so many reasons I can’t walk away from her right now. The only concession I get is her silence and we spend the next couple minutes sitting in it as I make our way to the Wild West.

It’s just as loud and shady as I remember it being. More like a frat house than any sense of a real apartment building with people milling in the halls, music pounding from behind closed doors, and peeling paint as we make our way to her apartment.

Nothing seems out of place at first glance, the front door fixed and locked as we left it the last time we were here. It’s been weeks since we stopped by to make sure everything was locked up after they fixed the door.

Torryn goes to put her keys on the counter when she freezes. There on the kitchen counter is a stack of mail that definitely wasn’t there when we were last here and next to it is a new note.

If you don't want to be my good girl, maybe someone else will.

Chills tingle down my spine, making my hair rise on end and goosebumps crawl over my skin. What the actual fuck is wrong with this person?

Torryn grips the note in her hand, almost shredding it in her rage.

“It’s my fault.” Three simple words. Guilt-ridden and defeated. Completely and totally unlike I’ve ever heard Torryn

sound before.

“It’s not—,” I start, but suddenly stop when her fist slams into my chest. Tears gather in her eyes as she stares up at me with a forlorn expression I wish I could erase.

“It is. He’s been in here. In my apartment.” She gestures wildly around the room, the tears spilling over as the entire situation crashes into her, overwhelming and drowning her with remorse all at once. “He found their address here. He found out about Rayne because of me. If she gets dragged into this—fuck—if she gets hurt, it’ll be my fault.” Her body shakes as she furiously wipes the tears from her cheeks.

Her fists hit my chest, and I let her take out her anger, fear, and frustration on me. It’s the only thing I can even do and I fucking hate that.

There’s nothing more for her to find here. She already got all the answers she needed. Her stalker has been here, going through her mail, finding even more personal details on her and figuring out exactly how to weaponize them against her. Maybe she hasn’t been giving him a big enough reaction, maybe he just wants to know he’s hitting her where it hurts. I have no fucking clue. I can’t even begin to try and fathom what runs through the mind of a sick pervert. My frustration only builds with hers.

The cops have been next to useless. They’ve pretty much written her off and said there’s not much more they can do until something happens. Why does she have to be hurt for them to care? Why didn’t we think of installing cameras in her apartment too? We could have at least had a better idea of who the fuck we’re dealing with.

Maybe it isn’t too late. I check the time and while it’s getting late, Beau should still be awake.

“We should go home,” I start, but before I can even finish my thought, Torryn is turning her anger on me.

“If it’s getting late then go,” she spits, stepping away from me.

Shaking my head, I grab her forearm, stopping her. “I’m not leaving without you.”

Her anger is too overwhelming for her to listen, for her to hear what I’m trying to say. That I’m not leaving her, that I’m not worried about it being too late, that I’m just worried about her. She doesn’t want to hear it. She just needs someone to be mad at because she can’t be mad at the shadow that’s haunting her. So when she starts yelling at me, I can’t even be mad. Or hurt.

“I don’t give a fuck about your hockey superstitions, Baylor. I don’t want to go home with you and give you head or ride your face or whatever the fuck it is you think you need to do to win. I don’t fucking care about any of it. I don’t fucking care about what you think you need. I need to do something to protect my sister. That’s the only fucking thing I care about.”

The tears she tried so hard to push back, to not let anymore fall, stream down her face as her last words are broken with a sob that escapes. I pull her against my chest, wrapping my arms around her and let her cry.

Kanyon’s words from earlier come back to me. He’s just a kid who is so eager to grow up so he can protect his family. So he can take some of the weight off of his sister’s shoulders. He’s a kid who shouldn’t have to be thinking about shit like that, but she’s sacrificed so much for her family. She works harder than any other college student I know, all so that her siblings can have the childhood she missed out on. It’s easy to understand why he worries about her. Why he felt the need to call me out and attempt to intimidate me to make sure I wasn’t fucking with his sister. All he wants is for her to have someone to ease her burdens, to have her back. To protect her like she spends so much of her time protecting them.

“If you need a punching bag, I’ll be your punching bag. Okay? You’re scared and pissed and you know what? I am too. I’m not trying to take you home just so I can fuck you, Ryn. I want to take you home so I can take care of you. So we can talk to Beau and figure out what we can do. If we can get security at your grandma’s house. Or if maybe we should put a camera here if the stalker might come back again.” Her body

trembles as more sobs consume her, but her fists drop from my chest as they wrap around my waist instead. “You have so many people on your side, baby. And we’re going to figure this shit out. Together. We’re going to protect Rayne and Kanyon and your grandma, and you fucking too. We’ve got you, just lean on me a little.”

She stops holding back the tears, letting every bit of feeling out with her sobs. It reminds me of the way I held her after I found her crying in the shower. She holds so much in and my chest physically aches at seeing her in pain. I’m starting to realize that maybe the best thing I could do for this girl is give her the time and space to break down. To hold her while she falls apart. To be the person her baby brother wants her to have. And maybe I want that too.

When her sobs subside and her tears slow, she tilts her head back to look at me with a curious look in her expression. “You called me Ryn.”

I wipe a tear off her cheek and smile. She’s so goddamn beautiful, even with red and puffy eyes and black mascara smeared down her face. “I did.”

She cocks her head to the side and I can’t tell if she likes that I did, or hates it. “That’s what my family calls me.”

“They do,” I agree. I liked it. I wanted to try it myself and it tasted as good as tequila passing my lips. Made me feel like I’m as close to her as her family. “Did you hate it?”

Torryn takes a moment to respond, but eventually presses her face into my chest as she shakes her head. “I liked it.”

Good. ‘Cause I like being closer to her than anyone. I love that she likes it too.

Maybe I do want to be more than just friends with the girl whose sadness breaks my heart.

“Let’s go home, Ryn.”



thirty-four

DON'T FORGET THE POLAROIDS

Everyone is still awake and waiting for us when we get home.

Baylor buys me time while I rush down the hall to wash my face clear of evidence from my breakdown. It's one thing for Baylor to see me make such a mess of myself and a complete other for the whole house to bear witness to it.

When I do make it back to the living room, I stop in my tracks as everyone turns in unison to check on me. Except there's an extra face that shouldn't be here right now. "Why are you here?"

"It's not because I missed your attitude," Xander fires back. At least he's not a sensitive bitch who gets offended by me getting straight to the point. He sighs, his smirk falling off his face as I take a seat on the couch next to Baylor. "I actually do need to talk to you." His voice drops into a more somber tone. "Levine was catching us all up at what you found at your apartment."

Isla wipes at her cheeks furiously and I know she's trying to hold it together for me. But she's just as protective over the kids as I am. Just as affected by this whole twisted mind game as I am. Wells pulls her into his side. "I think you guys should just get rid of the apartment," he declares. "Move in here permanently. Save some money. It's a win-win."

My first instinct is to be outraged, to argue and fight back. To not lean on them anymore than we already have. But I bite my tongue and let the feeling wash over me. Attempt at not responding with emotion and take a moment to think it over. "I

agree,” Beau adds. “Are you really ever going to feel safe in that apartment again?”

Probably not. I can’t bring myself to say the words, but I know he’s right. It hurts to think the little space Isla and I made for ourselves there, the home we built, no longer feels like ours. Will probably never feel like ours again.

“I won’t,” Isla whispers, looking directly at me with a plea in her eye. I’m not surprised. I can’t ask her to go back there. It was hard enough when the place was trashed and our once safe bubble was burst. But now? Who knows how many times he’s let himself in? How many times he sat on our couch or laid in our beds? There was no trace of a break-in like last time, and yet clear signs he had been there.

Baylor runs his finger over my lower back, a silent reminder that he’s there. His words from my apartment come back to me. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and lean my head on his shoulder. As I exhale, I agree. “Okay.” Some of the weight eases off my shoulders and Baylor tightens his hold on me just hard enough to feel him.

“Good. Now about the new note,” Beau continues. “We can have security assigned to your grandma’s house and specifically to follow Rayne. You just need to tell me if we’re breaking the news to Grandma, or if the team is staying out of sight and watching from afar.”

More weight eases, but maybe this is too much? How can I accept even more than what they’re already doing for us? “I don’t think I could pay for something like that,” I admit.

I’ve never seen Beau so blank-faced as he stares back at me. “Beau,” I argue. “I can’t ask for more free shit than what you’ve already done.”

He rolls his eyes. “My dad’s a millionaire. He has so much money it’s actually obscene. Trust me, he can afford this.”

“But,” I don’t really have an argument back to that, but it feels like I should.

“No, but,” he counters. “You’re helping my dad’s karma. So are we telling Grandma, or no?”

I should, I really really should. At this point it's a matter of their safety as well. Having them be more vigilant and aware of their surroundings is a good thing. But... But what will the stress do to them? It could shatter Rayne's innocence. Kanyon is already so eager to grow up and this will only cement that desire in him. The need for him to be an adult already when all I want is for him to enjoy the last few years of high school. And my grandma? Fuck. She's already old and so stressed. Her health is deteriorating every year and I can't risk pushing her even further down that path with the stress of this news.

"How good are they?" I can't help but find myself asking. Anything to justify keeping my family in the dark a little while longer.

"Good enough to keep them safe even if you aren't ready to tell them what's going on."

Words aren't enough to describe the relief and gratitude I feel towards Beau when he says that. My body sags and I have to close my eyes to try and stop the tears from spilling over again. I've cried enough for one night. Given enough of my emotions to this stranger that's lurking in the shadows. No more. "Okay, let's do that." I take a deep breath, opening my eyes to search out Beau's gaze. "Thank you."

He nods, but Baylor whispers in my ear. "Told you we've got you." I let him shift me into his lap and fully hold me in his arms without protest. Somewhere along the way, Baylor has started to feel like my safe space. I lost the bubble Isla and I had created in our apartment, but I gained something that might be so much more.

"Could we also get someone to stick to Torryn?" Xander asks, rubbing the back of his neck in an awkward tone that doesn't fit his usual personality.

"Tired of babysitting?" I taunt.

He drops his hand, giving me an unamused look back that isn't fooling anyone. "Actually, I heard back from the committee about the exception I filed. I wasn't supposed to be able to play for the entirety of this season, but they voted in

my favor. After winter break, I'll officially be a Wolf and able to play on the ice."

"Oh shit." Baylor stands up, almost knocking me off his lap before lifting me to stand with him. "Congrats, dude. Fuck knows we could use you on the ice."

I never got the full story as to why Xander spent more time here than at his own university or what happened to get him kicked off the team. But I knew there was a story there based on how cagey he always was about it. Even the other guys would change the conversation any time it came up. I'm not one to pry, but I can't say I'm not curious.

Beau gives him one of those dude hugs, slapping his hand on his back giving him his own congratulations. "It'll be nice to have you behind the blue line with me. Eh?"

Xander smacks him back, taunting, "You do need the help."

As everyone else takes their turn to congratulate Xander, we all settle back down. The atmosphere a lot lighter than it was before. "I have no problem sticking to Tor's side until we go on break," he says. We only have a couple more weeks until then. "But after that, I'll be with you guys for practices and games, leaving her vulnerable for a good chunk of time."

I hate that his good news has to be marred by the ugliness of the truth. Even if it goes against my nature, I'm the only one that can make this easier on everyone. "You can call the hockey team off," I sigh. "I'll take the security if this isn't sorted by winter break." At this point, I don't have much hope in it being sorted at all, let alone with only a couple weeks to go.

Baylor's hands slide under my shirt in a comforting gesture that feels a little bit like he's praising me for giving in.

Xander sighs and I know he was worried I wouldn't accept a stranger following me around, but at this point I think I would do anything to make the situation more bearable for all of us. "Okay good. I can stick around for most of the time until break then. But I will have to go home and grab the rest of my

stuff, and I have to find a place to live here. Tate's couch is getting a little old."

"Why don't you just move in here?" James asks.

"Are you moving out before break?" Baylor asks, swinging his head in James' direction so fast, I have to readjust the way I'm sitting.

James scoffs, "I wouldn't tell you this way." He points to me, "He can have Torryn's room."

The room is silent as everyone exchanges glances. "I thought you were going to say the apartment," I say, confused as to why my room is up for grabs.

Xanders snorts. "I don't want your stalker apartment."

Wells nods his head in agreement. "No-one wants your stalker apartment."

Okay, kind of rude. "Then why is my room the one up for grabs?"

Baylor nods his agreement. "You guys just asked them to move in officially and you're kicking Tor out? The fuck?" At least he has my back.

"Just move her into your room, obviously," James retorts.

What?

Instead of arguing though, Baylor seems to give it some thought. "Oh. Okay then."

I turn to give him an incredulous look. What the actual fuck is happening? "Not okay then," I disagree. "That's a weird thing to suggest," I argue. It was one thing for Isla to move into Wells' room, they're an actual couple. Baylor and I are not.

"Your argument would hold more validity if you weren't snuggled into his lap," Beau snarks.

"Or if you didn't sleep together every night anyways," Isla adds. I give her a shocked expression at the betrayal, but she just shrugs, giving a helpless look.

“Or if you didn’t spend every free second together.” Now even Xander is getting in on this? Are you kidding me?

“Do we even need to bring up the whole getting cats together thing?” Wells asks.

I turn to James, before I remember he was the reason this whole asinine conversation even started. “You literally come down in his shirt every morning, Tor. When was the last night you guys didn’t sleep together?”

Fuck. “Last weekend?”

“Mhm,” James hums. “You mean when we were away and he FaceTimed you before going to bed?”

Alright fine then. They may have a point. Not that I’ll admit it. “I guess,” I huff, “you can have the room, Xander.”

Baylor checks the time, and announces loudly that they should all head to bed before anyone has a chance to taunt us about my compliance. He knows our friends well. “Let us know when you’re going home and we’ll have the room cleared for you when you get back.” Then without another word, he lifts me, throwing me over his shoulder and walks us out of the room.

He sets me on his bed gently, kissing my forehead before pulling away. “Are you really good with moving in here?” he asks in a gentle tone. I could tell by the way he reacted downstairs that he’s not against it. I can’t really say that I am either.

“We have to move all the polaroids in here.” The smile he gives me before kissing me is worth any of the shit the others may give us.

“Of course, Ryn,” he agrees, stripping off his jeans and shirt and climbing into bed in only his boxers. I follow suit, turning away from him so he can’t see the small smile I can’t seem to hold back at him using my nickname.

He pulls the covers over us, and wraps himself around me. When I go to grip his length, he holds me still. “I really meant what I said earlier. I don’t need anything from you tonight, just let me hold you.”

I can't remember anyone in my life before Baylor who just wanted to hold me with nothing in return. To just be. To be together. In every way, Baylor has been different from what I ever could have anticipated. It's with that thought that I drift off into sleep.



Baylor snores softly and it's kinda cute in a strange way.

I watch his chest rise and fall with deep and even breaths. After all the mess of today, I should let him sleep. We got to bed later than he normally sleeps on the nights before games. But they do have their hockey superstitions for a reason.

Pulling the blanket over me, I slide down his body to find Baylor's cock. It barely takes a few strokes before he's rapidly hardening in my palm. All those weeks ago, when I found him waiting for me in my bed, listening to what I've now learned is his bedtime playlist, full of Folklore, he was already semi-hard. Just like back then, he's slow to wake, but quick to respond.

His hips thrust softly and his snores turn into groans as I swallow him down, his length hitting the back of my throat. With each sound he makes, every small movement, the heat in between my legs grows hotter. I can feel he's getting closer when his hand finds my hair and grips it in his fist. Baylor wakes up, sitting up and cursing my name, "Torryn, oh fuck."

I love when I get him this close to coming without him waking up. It makes it all the better when he loses control before he's even fully awake, pulling my hair as he fucks my face and comes down my throat.

"Goddamit, Trouble," he sighs, falling back on the pillows as I swallow all of him and crawl out from under the blankets. "You are too damn good." He flips me under him, kissing my bare shoulders. "So good, I don't want you to take tonight." My breath catches when his lips brush over my nipples as he moves down my body. "I want to give," he continues, his fingers reaching down between my legs to find how wet I

already am for him. “I want to give you everything you can handle, and then some.” I clench around nothing, desperately wishing he was already inside me. He hums, his voice dropping what feels like an octave as his thumb finds my clit and brushes over it. “You liked that?” I nod and grin. “Then you’ll love this.”

And fuck, I do. Without any more taunting or teasing, he drives two fingers inside me, moving them in and out at a ruthless pace that has me crying out his name within only minutes. His mouth never leaves my chest, biting and kissing and licking my nipples in a way that has me soaking the sheets beneath us. Not that Baylor would ever mind. The more mess we make when we fuck, the prouder he is the next day.

I cry out as the orgasm sneaks up on me, stealing my breath away as every nerve in my body becomes attuned to Baylor and pleasure turns my mind blank.

Just as soon as my orgasm passes and my breathing begins to return to normal, Baylor gives me a cheeky grin before descending down my body.

“You know my rule about only one.”



thirty-five
SHOWERS & BRAINSTORMS

From the moment ...Ready For It? blasted through my headphones, I could feel the magic in the air.

It was there when we did our chant, when we first got out there on the ice, when we all tapped Tate's helmet before the game started, and all the way through when I scored the first goal in the game in the first three minutes of the first period.

The entire arena was explosive in their energy, creating this buzz of electricity that sparked through not only me, but the whole team. It made this win against the Ashland Aces our most dominant win yet. There's nothing quite like getting that W at home.

Not even all the chirping could come close to bringing our high down. I was worried that gorging ourselves on so much food last night would be our downfall, but I never should have worried. Even our defense showed up and performed tonight, and didn't have to rely on Tate and Beau to pick up all the slack.

There's a ton of back thumping and butt slapping as we all make our way into the locker room. Even Coach gets in on the cheers for the best game of our season and another shut-out for Tate this season.

"What a fucking game," Beau exclaims, slamming his hand against the locker in his excitement.

"Don't hurt your hand, you dumbass," Tate scolds as he walks by.

“Yes, Father,” Beau snarks, making Tate’s ears heat even as he shakes his head and rolls his eyes. He ignores Beau, giving out praise and encouragement to every player whose skates hit the ice, like he does after every game. At least this week it isn’t hard for him to come up with those positive remarks. Everyone was on fire.

“What are we doing to celebrate?” James asks, ripping his jersey off over his head.

I run my hand over my face, covering my mouth as I stay quiet. There’s really only one way I want to celebrate and it isn’t in the spirit of teamwork. The guys will never go for it. They’ll never let me live it down, especially with how this week has already played out.

“Any specific parties we want to hit up?” Beau asks, looking at me and Wells.

Wells shrugs and everyone’s attention turns towards me. I can hem and haw all I like to try and get out of answering, but they’ll never let me. “I was thinking about maybe not partying,” I answer, a weird inflection in my voice that makes me cringe.

That grabs their attention.

“Any reason?” Wells pries. Of course it’s fucking Wells. It’s always him.

“Nope,” I deny.

Not that it works. It’s easy to recognize the exchanged glances now. They’re all having a silent conversation with just a few head nods and brow raises. Irritating bastards. It’s Beau that finally speaks up. “Your girl finally has a night off and we just had our best win of the season and you don’t want to go out with us?”

I swallow thickly. “Well,” I hedge. “I’m thinking Torryn might also want to just stay home. It’s been a long week,” I start defending. “There’ve been high emotions. We’re all still a little freaked about the stalker still finding new ways to make moves. Maybe staying out of the public is the smart way to

play this. Not letting him catch her out and about, drinking and partying.”

Eyes narrow in my direction, but I can't see where they can find fault in that argument. It's a solid and valid reason Tor and I should stay in the house. When they trade looks again I inwardly groan.

“You didn't deny Torryn being your girl,” James says with shock.

I pull my jersey over my head and catch sight of the guy who always collects our jerseys working his way down the bench towards us. “Thanks,” I mumble as I toss my jersey into the bag and he collects the guys' as well.

“Good game out there,” he praises. “You really dominated.”

The guys all add their thanks and acknowledgements while he continues to pass through us. Thank fuck for Bill and his perfect timing, giving me a chance to figure out what I want to say.

“I didn't deny it,” I agree. Not intentionally, if I'm being honest. I might have if I had been thinking about it. But it just feels natural to think of Torryn as mine. I can't pinpoint when it started, or if it happened all at once or was a slow and gradual thing. All I know is after these last few days, I can't deny it anymore. Don't want to. Torryn is mine, even if she doesn't realize it yet. “Because it would feel wrong to say she's not my girl now.”

Beau goes to open his mouth, no doubt to say something stupid, but Wells smacks him in the stomach and shakes his head. Oh no. He's got that serious, I'm going to dig into your psyche, look in his eyes. “Why would it feel wrong?” he probes, rather than commenting on what I said.

I sigh, throwing my head back and looking at the ceiling above us. “After our conversations with Kanyon, I just started thinking about a lot of shit, I guess.”

“He wanted to know about our intentions with the girls,” Wells explains since the other two don't know what we talked

about yesterday on our walk to deliver cookies. “He put a lot of emphasis on what Torryn deserves in life.”

“She deserves the world, man,” I say, putting my head into my hands. “Her brother loves her so much and hearing him talk about her, I just. I don’t know.” I sigh and shake my head. Bill lurks near us and I realize we’re the last ones who haven’t hit the shower yet. He’s probably anxious for us to get the hell out of his way so he can do his job. But I’m sorry, Bill, I am having a crisis. “I realized I want the same things for her that he wants. And after going to her apartment and everything that happened there, I just. I thought maybe I could be that everything. You know?” I look at them, nervous to see their reactions. A part of me worried I’ll see something in their expressions I won’t be able to unsee. Something that validates the little part of myself that I want to disappear that says I’m not enough to be Torryn’s everything. “That maybe I’m already becoming that for her.”

Three jaws hang open, three astonished sets of eyes locked in on me. The silence weighs heavily between us.

“No,” Beau exclaims suddenly, making me rear back.

“No?” I question in disbelief.

He nods his head. “Yeah, fuck no. It can not be possible that after months of us trying to get through your thick head that you and Torryn are already a couple—whether you call it that or not—it was the fucking fifteen year old that actually made you stop and fucking take notice.”

James steps in front of Beau, putting his hands on his chest to calm him down. “All that matters is that we got here,” James reassures.

“No the fuck not,” Beau still argues. “Even his mother couldn’t get through to him. But the fifteen year old? Really?” He sits down, sighing dramatically. “I don’t think I can accept this.”

I scratch my head, not sure how to respond. This isn’t where I thought this conversation was going to go. Maybe some disbelief. Shock that I want to settle down. Maybe

concern about Torryn and I not working out in the long run and messing up house dynamics. But umm, not whatever this is.

“Like me and Torryn? You can’t accept me and her?” I have to ask, because I am genuinely confused about what is wrong with him.

“No,” all three of them shout and Wells smacks Beau again. But I think I’m too far lost for this conversation now. No they can’t accept it? Or no, that’s not what they can’t accept.

“We think you and Torryn together are perfect,” Wells pacifies.

“Fantastic, even,” James adds.

Beau rolls his eyes when they both look to him and I start to doubt some of the jokes he’s made about her in the past. Does Beau actually have feelings for Torryn? “Some would even say expected,” he snarks. “Or that it’s about damn time.”

I watch him warily. “So you’re not mad?”

He sighs, taking a deep breath. “We’re happy for you, man. I’m just wrapping my head around the fact that you listened to a fifteen year old more than your best friends.”

“Right,” I say, still skeptical. “We need to hit the showers, but I want to talk to Tor tonight. Make it official I think. I just don’t know what to say yet.”

James claps his hands together, making a booming sound that echoes in the locker room. “Showers and brainstorming. Let’s do it.”

By the time we all finish and make it back to our lockers sans pads and sweat, the area is cleared up and most of the guys are making their ways out of the locker room. I start to rush getting dressed, realizing the girls have been waiting on us this whole time.

“So how are you going to do it?” Beau asks, coming to sit at my side.

I push his hand off my arm. “Just do it, I guess? But hurry up, man. They’re waiting on us.”

He grumbles but starts to dry off. “You can’t just do it,” he argues. “Tor is even more dense than you are.”

I flip him off before throwing my towel into the hamper left next to our lockers. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean.”

Wells sighs. “Are you going to ask her to be your girlfriend? Is she going to feel like it came out of nowhere? What are you thinking, man?”

I shrug, pulling on my pants as I think about it. “I already told her I wanted to be there for her. Be the person she leans on. Isn’t that kind of like a boyfriend anyways?”

They share baffled looks and Beau pinches the bridge of his nose. “It’s exactly like that,” he agrees, but I don’t understand the frustration in his tone. “Almost like we’ve been trying to point out to you two idiots for months,” he grumbles. I choose to ignore the second half of that.

“So there,” I gesture towards Beau. “I just say that. I want her in my bed. I want her in my life. I want her as my wife.”

I grin at the little rhyme but James yells, “No! Do not propose to her.”

I roll my eyes. I swear they’re a bunch of idiots. “It was a joke. Calm down. I just don’t think it’ll be as big of a deal as you’re making it.”

This time, I don’t even bother to watch their silent exchanges, tying up my shoes so I can go find my girl already.

“Right,” Wells finally says evenly. “So you’re going to talk to Torryn tonight?”

I nod, grabbing my bag and throwing it over my shoulder. “Yeah.” After I bury myself between her thighs. Maybe while I’m buried in between her thighs. That is not a bad idea. A celebration for multiple reasons.

James shrugs, rolling his lip between his teeth. “Alright, we’ll give you the house.”

I nod my thanks and lead the guys out of the locker room. We're the last ones to leave, but there's still a crowd of players, family, and friends hanging around by the exit. I catch sight of Tate talking to Emery and Isla. I look around them but don't catch sight of Tor.

"Where did Torryn go?" I ask, still looking over all the faces in the crowd to make sure I didn't miss her. Unease creeps up my spine, making my voice come out rougher.

"I thought she didn't have work," James adds.

Isla looks up at me, fear and doubt mixing in her eyes. "She doesn't." She shakes her head, looking at Emery at her side before her wide eyes land back on mine. "You didn't see her in there?" She points to the locker room, but we were the last ones out. There was no one left inside.

I don't even bother responding, pulling out my phone to search up her location. Everyone huddles around me trying to look.

"She hasn't left the arena," I say, zooming in closer on the map. She should be right here, so where the fuck did Torryn go?



thirty-six
NOT YOUR GOOD GIRL

Holy shit.

My ass barely touched my seat the entire game. We were up on our feet cheering so much. It was a massive mistake not to go to the restroom before the third period though, because my bladder is really feeling those three cokes now.

Before the game even ended I was squirming in my seat, but I'm so glad I didn't miss Baylor's last goal of the game. They were phenomenal, and it was one of the most incredible crowds I had ever been a part of. I didn't want to miss a second of him on the ice.

Now, as we walk past the restrooms and I see the long ass lines, I'm questioning if it was worth it. We have a whole little crew with Colby, Emery, Isla, and the lucky duck, Xander himself. Who wouldn't want to hang out with four pretty girls?

The entirety of the game I teased him about it, and he may actually be considering calling my stalker up himself to hand deliver me to him.

I keep hoping that the closer we get to the locker room, the lines for the restrooms we pass will grow smaller, but they seem to only be getting longer. "Fuck my life," I mutter. "Did everyone and their mother come to this game? Why are there so many people here? Shouldn't they be at home celebrating with their families?"

Xander gives me a droll look. "You're bitter."

“I have to pee.” And to my shame, it comes out a little bit like a whine. At least Colby is a sweetheart and pats my arm.

“I can wait in line with you while they go meet the team?”

She’s so goddamn cute. I almost don’t understand how she and Wilder are even friends. I just want to wrap her up and stick her in my pocket.

“No,” Xander barks, and Colby’s smile falls. I glare at him and Emery smacks his arm. At least he has the grace to look guilty.

I don’t know how much Colby actually knows about the whole stalker situation, but I don’t think much if she was offering to be my bodyguard. I don’t know how much damage she could really do, though those heels on her glittery cowboy boots probably do pack quite a punch. Could probably break some toes if she stomped hard enough. “It’s not you,” I soothe Colby. “Xander just has attachment issues.”

Emery laughs and Xander glares at the both of us. “Baylor will kick my ass if I leave you when there are so many people around.”

Isla cocks her head to the side. “Isn’t it better that there are so many people around? Less chance of anything happening.”

He raises a brow in her direction. “You want to risk it?”

That shuts her up. Of course it does. “I’ll just hold it,” I grumble. I really should have fucking gone before the third period. Won’t make that mistake again.

There’s already a crowd of family and friends waiting outside the doors that lead into the locker rooms. I sigh as we lean against the wall and wait for our hockey idiots. Hopefully they don’t take forever tonight.

“Okay, what the fuck?” I exclaim a few minutes later, making everyone chuckle. Hockey players have started drifting out of the locker room but not a single one of our idiots. What is the hold up?

Xander looks a little too smug as he watches me shift uncomfortably. “Never seen you so impatient,” he taunts.

“They are taking longer than usual,” Isla defends. We all look up when the door opens again but it’s only Wilder and Zac.

When they start walking towards us, Xander shifts away from Emery, nodding to the freshmen as they get close. “Where are the others?” he asks, but I stare at him curiously.

“Tate will only be another couple minutes,” Zac explains. Makes sense. Baylor has told me he always talks to every player before he starts getting undressed himself. He’s usually one of the last ones out.

“The other four were just hitting the showers,” Wilder adds.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I snap. A little too harshly, I can admit.

Wilder rears back, a shocked expression on his face, but everyone else laughs. Assholes. I huff, feeling a little bad that I took out my frustration on him. Not enough to apologize, but enough to explain. “I have to pee.”

Wilder and Zac trade looks before looking around the area that’s only gotten more full while we’ve waited. “Just sneak into the locker room,” Wilder says. “There are toilets like the second or third door on the right.” Xander and Zac give him an incredulous look. “What?” he defends. “The showers and hockey lockers are on the left and almost everyone is out here anyway. Coach is probably in his office. If she’s quick, no one will even see her.”

My bladder screams at me. “Yeah, I’m doing that.”

Xander curses my name but I wave him off. “Oh fuck off. I’ll probably bump into Baylor in there anyways. I’m not technically alone.”

“I should still go with you,” he argues. While we argue, I almost miss Wilder, Zac, and Colby saying their goodbyes and heading off.

I watch as they walk away, idiots, then look pointedly at Emery and Isla. The possibility of something happening to

them out here alone is higher than me in the locker room where Baylor and the others are.

“Oh fucking hell,” Xander curses. “Where did that shithead go?” he asks, looking around for Zac.

Emery blinks innocently, shrugging. “His brother senses were probably tingling,” she jokes. “He knew you were about to pass babysitting duties off to him and took off before you had the chance too.”

I snort, shaking my head as Xander looks back and forth between me and Emery. “Yeah, no. I’m going to pee. Watch them.” Not giving him a chance to further argue, I head towards the locker room doors. As I reach them another player I vaguely recognize comes out and I grab the door and slip in behind him.

The locker room doesn’t look how I would expect it to look at all. Or I guess, behind the doors isn’t what I expected because I’m not actually in what I would call a locker room. It’s more of a wide hallway with several doors on both sides.

Another player comes out of one of the doors on the right. That must be the boys’ locker room. I might just go straight in there after peeing so I can yell at Baylor for making me wait. I find the restroom on the right like Wilder said. The player nods to me as he passes, as if it isn’t all that odd for someone to be back here. There are few people milling near the door he just came out of, but other than a passing glance, no one seems to be paying all that much attention to me.

Thank fuck. Knew it wasn’t going to be that big of a deal.

There’s nothing quite like relieving your bladder after holding it for so long. I honestly think it may have been the best pee of my damn life. I really don’t know if I would have been able to hold it any longer. Baylor is going to pay for taking so damn long. Of all the days to lag.

After washing my hands, I head back to the exit, debating if I should go into the locker room or back out to where the rest of family and friends wait. I hesitate in the hallway outside the bathroom for just a second. Just one moment. But

before I can even make a decision, a hand wraps around my mouth and pulls me back into a large and unfamiliar frame.

“Look who finally decided to be a good girl and come find me.”

The stench of cigarettes engulfs me, nearly choking me as his grip on my face tightens. Smothering the sounds I make. His words ring in my ears.

Good girl. Good girl. Good girl.

It tugs on memories buried deep in my psyche. All but forgotten as years and years have passed since I've heard those words in that tone. Since my senses have been overwhelmed by the scent of ash and smoke.

You're going to be my good girl, aren't you Torryn? Your mother just doesn't get it, but you do. Don't you, Ryn? You're always my good girl. Why did you have to mess everything up for us? You broke the rules and now there are consequences. You never should have told your mother. Why did you have to stop being Daddy's good girl?

Glass shatters, tires screech, my mother screams my name and then I'm weightless, everything turning black. Confusion and fear paralyze me as my brain tries to catch up to what is happening. The flashes of memories I'm still trying to comprehend.

“I've been waiting years to get my hands on you again,” he growls behind me. The sound of his voice sending goosebumps over my skin. “You've been smart playing your games, using those boys to hide behind.” He scoffs in disgust and my eyes glaze over with tears as his nails dig into my cheek. “You were always my good girl, so why did you turn into such a whore like your mother?” He shakes my face. “Huh?” he demands.

My feet scuffle under me and it hits me that we're no longer in the hallway. He's dragged me off into another room, but I can't even begin to guess where. Fuck. Every nerve is screaming, my brain working faster than I can keep up with. Bits and pieces coming together to try and create a picture I

still don't understand. I try to take a deep breath. Anything to get my brain working again, but it's almost impossible with the way he's holding me.

"But you finally came to me on your own. Maybe there's hope for you yet."

No.

There's still so much confusion. So much fear. My body is not going into fight or flight but the very worst option, freeze. Familiar panic makes my heart race. Why is this all so fucking familiar?

Nothing makes sense in this moment, but all I do know is I need to get away.

My gaze flies wildly around the room, trying to figure out where it is he's dragged me off to. There are pucks, hockey sticks, random boxes filled to the brim, some water coolers. This must be some kind of storage room. I keep my eyes locked on the hockey stick, just something to keep me grounded. I do my best to block out his words, to erase the smell from my mind, and put all my focus into reaching that hockey stick. It isn't far, only a few steps away.

He's stopped dragging me, but that's almost worse because I think I know what happens next. What always happened behind closed doors, in dark rooms, when no one else was around. But I'm not a child anymore. Not helpless and naive any longer. I don't need to be scared of a father I forgot I had. I can fight back.

I will fight back.

His grip loosens as he begins to readjust his hold on me. It's the exact opportunity I need, opening my mouth, I bite down, catching one of his fingers. I sink my teeth in deeper and don't release even as he shouts and tries to pull away, not until I taste the coppery tang of blood on my tongue.

Instinctively he shoves me away from him as soon as I release his hand. I turn to face the man that haunted my nightmares as a child. I still can barely wrap my head around the fragments that have come back to me, but I don't need to

remember to know this man in front of me is evil. That he made my life and my mother's life a living hell.

Gray streaks his brown hair, but he's still just as tall as I remember him. Towering over me even more than Baylor does. His frame somehow seems even wider, not an ounce of body fat anywhere on him.

It takes less than a second for me to take all of him in. To accept the man in front of me, the man who has been stalking me, harassing me, who stole my mother's jewelry box is right here in front of me. Is my father.

His hand flies up out of nowhere, back handing me across the face and sending me stumbling a few feet to the left. Fuck. Pain explodes in my cheek, making my head pound and my eyes water. But it snaps me out of my daze.

The hockey stick. Just focus on the hockey stick.

He lunges after me, just barely missing me as I aim for the hockey stick. I get my fingers wrapped around it just as my father grabs ahold of my hair and yanks me back. I bring the hockey stick with me, turning and swinging it as I aim for the side of his head. It collides with him, the force I hit him with makes my hands vibrate as the hockey stick breaks in half.

He stumbles backward, blood dripping from his temple. I tighten the grip I have on the broken hockey stick and scream as loud as I can. The force, making my throat ache, but I refuse to stop even as my father lunges at me again.

I swing the fragment I have like a bat, but he takes the hit with his forearm, knocking it away and tackling me to the ground. Sweat slides down my back as fear pulses through me. I attempt to roll away from him, but he grabs a fistful of my hair, pulling me back so hard my head bounces off the hard floors. His large body presses me into the flooring, pinning me with his weight as I struggle to catch my breath.

He holds my arms pinned at my sides, useless even with the broken hockey stick back in my grip. I'm unable to move, to buck him off, or get another shot at swinging it at him. His grin as he stares down at me screams his victory.

No.

I close my eyes, trying to block out the sight of the twisted glee I can see in his gaze. The ghosts of memories drifting across my mind whispering it'll be over quick, to just close my eyes and go to a corner of my mind I had forgotten even existed.

Don't give up, Torryn. Dammit, don't give up.

"You should have remembered the consequences, Torryn." He lifts me by my arms only to slam me back into the ground, making black spots dance in my vision. Fuck. I'm stronger than this.

With little options, I wiggle under him, trying to get my knee up to hit his balls, but he just shifts his weight, pinning my legs down as well. His laughter at my weak attempt is acid on my nerves. I scream again only for it to be abruptly cut off when he slaps me across the face.

"I let you have your fun, but your defiance ends here," he yells in my face, his cheeks turning red in his anger. "You will listen. You will comply and you will endure your punishments."

Each new demand comes with a more and more violent shake, making my thoughts swim, but I refuse to give in.

"I'm not your fucking good girl," I spit, rearing my head up and forward with as much momentum as I can build in the small space. His nose cracks as my head connects with it. Blood gushes and he releases me to grip his face and finally, fucking finally, I'm able to shuffle out from under him. I kick out, hitting his face again, screaming as loud as I can as I try to put distance between us.

Stumbling to my feet, I race to the door that I hope leads back towards the hallway, but a hand wraps around my throat, cutting off my air supply just as I reach it.

"I was wrong," he hisses in my ear, closing his fist tighter. "You're not my good girl anymore." My nails dig into his hand as I try and stomp on his feet, but his anger is a visceral beast behind me, making him numb to the pain as he continues

to choke me. “You take after your whore of a mother too much.” My chest aches as my vision begins to blur, my lungs screaming for air. “You should have died in that car accident with her.”

Car accident? Even desperate for air, his words stick out. Making no sense to me as I cling to the stubbornness everyone always laments about. I can’t let him fucking win.

A bang sounds somewhere behind me, but it’s almost too much to even comprehend. My thoughts are moving slower with every passing second. Fear and panic consuming them as his words repeat in my mind. I should have died with my mother.

I should have died with my mother.

My vision begins to turn black, my grip on his hand loosening as my strength drains out of me.

I should have died with my mother.

But she didn’t die in a car accident?



thirty-seven

CHASING CARS

She's okay.

She has to be okay.

I ignore the others as they sort out who's coming with me and who is going to grab security. All I heard was that she was last seen coming through these doors so she could pee.

Mother fucker.

It's all my fault. If we hadn't taken so fucking long in the locker room, she never would have come in here in the first place.

No. Maybe she just got turned around. Maybe she went into the wrong door and got lost. This area can be like a maze with rooms that have more than one exit and lead into other rooms off of the hallway. It makes certain things more efficient, but can be confusing if you've never been back here.

I can hear the guys splitting up behind me, but I'm locked in on my phone, trying to pinpoint how close she is to the restroom she was supposed to be in, but it's nearly impossible to figure out exactly where she could have ended up other than she's in this part of the building.

If she came out of the restroom, the doors to exit are right in front of her. Would she have thought to come into the locker room to find us? Knowing her, yeah she would. She'd come to tell us to hurry the fuck up. But she never made it that far. We would have heard her.

Then I spot it. Please, fuck no. I rush over to the door by the laundry room and see a familiar phone on the ground

partially behind the trash can. Picking it up, my heart drops into my stomach as I see the cracked screen and turn it over to see the polaroid of the kittens.

I shout for the guys, but don't wait as I push through the doors, just as a scream pierces through the air and hits me right in the chest before it abruptly cuts off. Torryn.

The sound of the washers and dryers already going at full speed almost drowns out the sound of a scuffle, but I follow the sounds, exiting through the back of the laundry and into one of the equipment rooms. There's no sign of her and the sounds all but disappear. I backtrack through the laundry room just and Xander and Tate burst into the room. I point them towards the door that leads to our locker room and I head through the other one that leads to another storage room.

My heart stops beating at the sight in front of me. Rage and fear like I've never experienced rushes through me as Bill has his hands wrapped around Torryn's throat in front of the door that leads to the back way to get to the ice.

I'm moving across the room, before I have a chance to even process what I'm seeing or what I'm going to do. All I know is I can see Torryn struggling to breathe as a man towers over her, choking the life out of her as he grins maniacally.

My fist connects to his temple where I already see blood dripping. His grip on Torryn loosens and she falls to the ground, gasping for breath and he turns to face me, his eyes glazed. Torryn has already fucked his face up, but somehow this fucker is still on his feet. He turns to lunge at me, but his steps wobble—no doubt feeling the effects of multiple hits to the head. I pull my fist back, landing another punch square across his jaw. This time he stumbles back, hitting the floor with his eyes closed.

"Torryn," I whisper, dropping to my knees as I cradle her into my arms. Bruises are already beginning to mottle the sensitive skin on her neck. The entire thing will no doubt be black and blue by tomorrow. Tears fill her eyes as her body shakes as she lets me hold her. She opens her mouth to say something but I shake my head. "Don't talk." Tears gather in

my own eyes at the sight of her pain and confusion. She looks years younger suddenly. Nothing like the girl she normally is. “We don’t know how badly he hurt you. Don’t make it worse.”

She nods but even that small movement seems to send pain radiating through her, her eyelids flutter and start to close. “You can’t fall asleep, baby. You gotta stay with me.”

Xander and Tate curse behind me as they walk into the room. Tate already has his phone pressed to his ear, making a police report. Xander pulls out his own phone to make his call, probably to everyone else looking for her.

The two of them stand guard in between us and Torryn’s stalker. Just in case he wakes up. I want to get her out of this room, but a part of me is scared to move her. When aren’t you supposed to move someone? When you’re worried about their head? Or is it just their neck?

Fuck.

I’ve already picked her up in my arms. Maybe it would be okay. “I’m going to take her to the locker room.” My voice sounds hoarse, but when neither of the guys argue, I carry Torryn back through the laundry room and into our locker room. At least here I can sit on the bench and hold her to me until the cops and EMTs get here.

“You’re going to be okay,” I promise her, my whole body shaking with the need for it to be true. Her right eye is swelling and her lower lip is puffy and bleeding. I wipe a droplet of blood from her forehead and see a small cut just under her hairline as well. There’s more blood in her hair, but I don’t think it’s hers. I can’t find any other cuts and neither of the two I did find can explain the amount in her hair.

The corner of her lips twist up in what I’m sure she intends to be a reassuring smile, but the way I can see it drains her, the rapidly growing heaviness in her eyes, it just sets me even more on edge. “I’m so fucking sorry, Ryn. I should have been there to protect you.”

“Sh.” It’s such a small sound, but fuck it nearly guts me. I nod, holding her closer to me even as I try to be as gentle as

possible, not knowing where else she might be hurting.

Isla is the first to find us in the locker room, Emery and a man I don't know behind her. I almost turn away from him before I notice the bag he's carrying and realize he's an EMT. He can help Torryn more than anyone else can.

He sets his stuff down next to us and introduces himself, but I barely even hear him. My entire focus is on monitoring Torryn and making sure she's okay with this guy in her space. Even if he's the one who can help her, she needs to feel safe too.

“Alright, I'm going to quickly look you over, Miss Gray, and then my partner is going to come in here with a stretcher so we can get you loaded up into the ambulance and get you to the hospital. Is that okay?”

Torryn looks up at me, a question in her eyes as her hand lifts to touch her neck.

“Is it okay for her to talk? He had his hand wrapped around her throat really hard.”

He nods in understanding, and asks Torryn if it's okay to touch her. I like that he asks and is moving slowly, it seems to ease Torryn's mind as well. After he examines her neck, he asks her to swallow. When she's able to do so with only a little discomfort he tells her it's okay to speak, but not to overuse her voice until she can be further examined at the hospital.

After that, the rest of his examination goes pretty quickly. Her voice is husky with a much rougher quality than it normally has, but he assures both of us it's to be expected after strangulation and often a full recovery is possible.

More people join us in the locker room and by the time the stretcher is brought in, I think there are more people in here than there are during game days. Some of the officers from the last couple of scenes linger by the door, restricting who else can come in, but they had no luck trying to get anyone to leave. Everyone wanted to be here to make sure Torryn was going to be okay.

The paramedics do a good job at keeping the officers at bay as well, shutting them down when they try to get a statement from her. Officer Derek gets there and soothes the ruffled feathers, promising he'll follow us to the hospital and get both of our statements while the others focus on the rest of the group left here.

As they load Torryn up, I have to let go of her and the loss of her in my arms makes my entire body feel hollow. I haven't even begun to get over the fear of losing her. As soon as she's settled on the stretcher, her hand lifts, reaching for me. I'm by her side, holding her hand in mine as they begin to walk out of the room.

The paramedic that first came in, I'm starting to feel bad I didn't pay attention to his name, opens his mouth to say something to me, but I don't want to hear that I can't come. "I'm staying with her," I insist. "I'm her boyfriend," I add in a rush, worried they're not going to allow me to stay with them.

Even after everything she's experienced, she gives me her signature eyebrow lift with her little smirk. She won't let that one go, but I can't bring myself to care.

"That is not what we discussed," Beau protests. That fucking idiot. At least Wells and James have me covered, smacking him and covering his mouth simultaneously.

The paramedic chuckles. "Right, Casanova. You can ride with us, but the rest will have to meet you there." His dry tone makes Torryn smile and I really should learn the guy's name. "We're heading to Westbrook Medical."

Tate nods that he heard and that he'll get the rest of the crew there. As they wheel Torryn out of the room, I hear Beau mumble, "We had a plan and it wasn't that." Torryn gives me a curious look and I swear the next time Beau has a crush, I'm making it my mission in life to embarrass him.



Torryn has been poked, prodded, scanned, had photos taken, her nails clipped and the evidence bagged. She has a

concussion, but neither of her cuts need stitches, and her vocal cords won't have lasting damage. She has orders to take it easy, something I know she has no idea how to do, and to rest her voice. They expect her voice to sound back to normal within a few days.

The bruising has gotten worse, and her right eye is almost swollen shut by the time the doctors finally tell her she'll spend the night here tonight for observation because of the concussion. She started to protest, but I shut it down. If she goes home, there's no doubt in mind she'll try to do something crazy like email her professors about upcoming finals.

Once we're alone in the room, I move my chair closer to her side and hold her hand with both of mine. "You good?"

She smiles, but it's sad. "No," she admits, and that more than anything makes me worry more about her. "It was my dad," she confesses, her voice breaking.

I don't understand. Not even a little bit. I thought she didn't even know who her dad was. That she had no memories of him. I want to ask, but she seems as lost and confused as I am. I brush the hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear. "I'm here, Ryn. For anything you need."

"I don't understand," she confesses. She sounds so young.

"I don't either, baby." I kiss her temple, hesitating to tell her this next part. "But I know who might have answers for you."

She closes her eyes and I know she doesn't want to tell her grandma. But it's too late. For a lot of reasons. "She's your emergency contact." She doesn't open her eyes, only taking deep breaths, no doubt trying to calm her racing thoughts.

"Is she on her way?"

I squeeze her hand in mine. "She'll be here any minute." When she opens her eyes I can see how much that news breaks her heart and my chest aches for her. "You wouldn't have been able to hide this from her. Reporters are already calling for a comment. There's likely going to be a trial. You need your

family's support. Let them be there for you the way you are there for them."

She turns her face away from me, but I catch her chin with my finger and gently tilt her face back towards, pressing a feather light kiss over her bruised lips. "Don't hide from me."

"I'm not," she croaks, and I hush her, telling her to save her voice for her grandma and when the officers come in. The doctors have locked them out, telling them she needs rest and treatment, but our grace period is rapidly dwindling down.

Only a few minutes later, her grandma rushes into the room, her eyes wild with fear and red with tears. "Oh, Ryn," she sobs as she spots her lying in the bed. Torryn's eyes fly open at the sound of her grandma's voice and her tears are quick to rise as she breaks down in her grandma's arms. I stay at her side, but step back to give the two of them room. Sometimes all you need is a hug from the person who raised you. It's something I can't give to her.

They both cry and I hand them both tissues as I guide her grandma to the seat I was sitting in. "What happened?" her grandma finally asks as both their tears slow.

I put my hand on Torryn's leg and gently squeeze. "Want me to grab Officer Derek so you only have to say it once?" At her consent, I go into the hallway and grab him. He's been posted at her door for a while now, but at least he respects the need to put her well being first. I already gave him my statement when I wasn't able to go with her for her scans, so I'm able to stay with her when he comes inside.

Torryn's voice grows smaller and more hoarse the longer she tells her story, until by the end it's barely above a whisper. Her grandma pales as she listens, cursing under her breath.

"Oh, Torryn. This is all my fault."

Officer Derek took notes while Torryn talked, but didn't interrupt her, not even to ask her questions for clarity. Her voice was barely able to handle what she was able to share, let alone answer anything more. But at her grandma's words, all attention turns to her.

“I should have told you sooner,” she cries. “I wish you would have trusted me enough to tell me that you had a stalker. A stalker, Ryn?”

Guilt lines Tor’s face, but there’s a healthy level of defiance still in her eyes. She won’t ever regret not putting more burdens on her grandma’s plate, but she hates that her decision hurt the woman. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, but it barely makes it past her lips.

Her grandma shakes her head. “No, no. This is my fault. Your father was never a good person,” she starts. “Somehow, you’ve blocked all the memories and made up your own story to fit the details you couldn’t deny.”

Officer Derek, takes his notebook out, adding notes to what he already has. “That’s a common defense mechanism from trauma, especially in children. Can I have you expand on how her father wasn’t a good person? Was there abuse before today’s incident?”

Torryn lays shell shocked in bed, staring at her grandma as if she’s speaking a language she’s never heard before. I move closer to her side and she grabs my hand. Maybe this isn’t a good idea. I know concussion protocol, and part of it is not stressing her mental health. I don’t know if she can handle reliving any more trauma than she’s already been forced to.

She tugs on my hand and I lean down close enough for her lips to brush against my ear as she whispers, “It’ll be worse to wonder.”

I press a kiss to her temple, wishing I could hold her in my arms, but I don’t think the hospital bed is big enough. “Whatever it is, I’ve got you.”

Her grandma takes a deep breath, clutching the necklace hanging around her neck. “Your mother wasn’t sick, Torryn.” Torryn pales and her hand begins to tremble in mine. Even I’m shocked and it’s something I’ve only believed for a couple months, not years of my life. Her grandma turns to Officer Derek. “If you pull the medical records for Ivy Elaine Myers, you’ll find evidence that shows a history of domestic violence and abuse.”

The hospital trips she remembered, but never fully. Just the smell and the wall and the cold rooms that seeped into her bones. Her mom was never sick. Torryn's eyes glaze over and I once again wonder if this is really okay for her right now. Her hand moves to her chin and caresses the scar she once told me about.

Her eyebrows scrunch as she stares at her grandma. "The accident?"

At her nod, Torryn closes her eyes, turning away from everyone and facing me. Pain etches over her grandma's face, but she looks at Officer Derek once more, steel entering her voice. "Her father's name is William Dane Myers. He was just released from prison after causing a fatal car accident while under the influence that resulted in two deaths. Including my daughter and his wife, Ivy. We believed the crash was intentional and meant to kill himself, my daughter, and my granddaughter, but Torryn survived. He took a plea deal and was sentenced ten years for an aggravated DUI in Illinois. He was released earlier this year on good behavior, but missed his most recent parole check in." She gets choked up. "I thought I was doing the right thing letting her believe the story she made up. I didn't think he'd come find us. He hated being a father. We moved states, and changed the kids' last name. I thought we did everything right."

Officer Derek pats her on the back. "You couldn't have forced her to remember. You made the best decisions with the information you had. With this, we'll be able to get him back where he belongs. Behind bars."

Torryn's body shakes with her cries and fuck it. I lift her up, easing her IVs around until I can sit on the bed, holding her against my chest. She needs to be held after this fucking nightmare come to life.

She buries her face in my chest. "It's all my fault." I can barely make out the words, but I'm already shaking my head.

"I don't know what's running through your head, Ryn, and I don't care. I don't need to know to say that none of what happened is your fault. Not today, and not back then."

Her grandma rushes over, grabbing Torryn's hand. "Baylor's right," she soothes. "Nothing is your fault. I should have protected you better."

"I told my mom," she whispers in her hoarse and broken voice. "I wasn't supposed to. He killed her because I told."

New tears stream down her grandma's face and she apologizes again, but I think Torryn finally hit the end of her rope. She closes her eyes and this time I don't think she has the strength or energy to open them back up.



thirty-eight
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT CATS

When I wake up, the first thing I notice is that I'm not as warm as I was throughout the night.

It takes only a moment to realize Baylor no longer has his body wrapped around mine. All night, every time I woke up, he was there. Holding me together. It really did make me feel safer, more protected. Like the temperature in the hospital room couldn't touch me with him here.

I lay silently, with my eyes closed. Not wanting to face the nightmare I left behind. Not wanting to be alone.

My mind is still reeling from everything my grandma told me. Years of repressed trauma and lies I have to disentangle and a fuzz around even my most simple thoughts that makes it hard to think about any of it.

"It's only us here, baby," Baylor whispers with an edge of amusement and I feel him grab my hand. I scrunch my face and he laughs.

I open my eyes slowly, worried the light is going to feel like it's piercing my skull. A sigh of relief escapes me as I crack them open to find the blinds drawn and the lights dimmed. I blink slowly, adjusting until I can keep my eyes open with no pain and find him sitting at the side of my bed in the chair my grandma was in yesterday.

Clearing my throat, I try to speak but only a croak comes out. Baylor reaches to the side and grabs a cup of water and lifts the straw to my lips. "How'd you sleep?" he asks after I take several small swallows. The cool liquid is soothing on my

aching throat. It hurts. But not as much as I was worried it would.

“Okay,” I answer honestly. There was a lot of in and out. A lot of waking me up and checking my vitals. But at least there were no nightmares. “You stayed.”

His fingers trace patterns up and down my arm. “Of course I stayed.” His smile eases some of the pain from yesterday, soothes the jagged edges caused by loneliness. He stayed. My lips twitch, choosing to push away the heavy stuff. I can’t focus on it today. Can’t bear anymore bombshells or having to dissect how I feel about any of it.

“Cause you’re my boyfriend?” I tease. There’s been no chance to bring it up in the chaos, but he had to know I wasn’t just going to let it go.

His cheeks heat and he holds my hand firmly, his expression serious when he answers. “Yeah.” He nods to himself, as if he needs the encouragement. “Yeah, I am your boyfriend. And I’m not asking you, I’m telling you because you’re stuck with me, Ryn. I’m not giving you the chance to say no or to push me away, because I haven’t fucking recovered from almost losing you yesterday. I have never felt such fear in my life and it made me realize I don’t know how to live without you anymore. And I don’t ever want to find out. So yeah, I am your fucking boyfriend and you are just going to have to get used to that.” Warmth grows in my chest with every word. I can’t imagine my life without Baylor either. I don’t know if I would have been able to make it through the last twenty-four hours without him at my side.

The door bursts open before I can even respond, a disheveled Beau staring at us in shock and disappointment. “Baylor Levine,” he laments. “You had the chance to fix what you blew yesterday and you say that?” he asks, gesturing to where I’m laying in the bed. “We had a plan, man. A damn good plan. And instead you just tell her? Just demand that you’re her boyfriend.” He shakes his head in disappointment and disgust.

For the first time, I notice the others that came in behind Beau. This time they don't stop him but let him rant. "Where is the romance?" he continues, glaring at Baylor. "The class? The rizz? Where is the fucking plan, man?"

Baylor looks bored as he stares at James and Wells at Beau's sides. "No one's going to gag him today?"

They both shrug. "He kind of has a point," Wells agrees.

Isla pushes past him. "Okay he cried about it, now get out of my way. It's my turn." Her eyes are red and puffy, her hair unwashed and thrown up into a messy bun, and I just know she was in the waiting room probably all night waiting to see me. She carries her purse carefully to the side of my bed, before gently placing it in my lap.

Confused, I pick it up, but then I hear it. "You didn't," I laugh, just as Potato sticks his little head out of her purse, meowing when he sees me. For some reason, seeing his little pink nose and whiskers bring fresh tears to my eyes. "Come here, baby." He meows again as I pick him up out of her purse and cuddle him to my chest. He vibrates so loud, it makes everyone laugh. He's louder than some of these machines.

Baylor scratches behind his ear. "Root Veggie, my mans. I bet Karma is just pissed."

Isla looks around, wiping under her eyes in an attempt to hide her tears from me. "Where'd Emery go?"

Beau turns to look around and sees it's just the four of them that came in here. He holds up a finger and sticks his head out the door. I can't hear what he says, but only a moment later more people fill the room. Emery comes in first with another oversized purse being carried too close to her chest to seem natural and I can't hide the smirk. Tate and Xander come in behind her with flowers and balloons.

"She's a feisty one," Emery jokes as she hands the purse to Baylor, her eyes flashing with amusement as she glances back at Xander. I study him again and notice scratch marks on his arms that won't be there tomorrow.

I arch a brow at him. “Guess I wasn’t the only one who got my ass kicked this week.”

Isla puts her face in her hands, shaking her head at me. Beau and Baylor snort, while James and Wells look horrified that they actually laughed at that. Tate rolls his eyes and Emery tries to suppress her smile as she waits for Xander’s response.

He points at me. “Sick and twisted.”

“Don’t be bitter because I put up a better fight than you did.”

His hand flies to his chest. “Have you met that thing?” Karma hisses as if she can understand the blasphemy coming from his mouth. “You were attacked by a janitor, I was attacked by a demon.”

“Oh my god, Xander!” Emery scolds, slapping his chest. But my body shakes with laughter and oh fuck, that hurts. That hurts more than I expected. My laugh is cut off as I descend into a coughing fit, making tears stream down my face. The more I try to calm myself down, the worse the cough gets, and the more Xander gets scolded by everyone in the room.

Baylor rubs my back gently, bringing the cup back to my lips so I can take a sip and try to settle the ache and dryness in my throat. It takes a few minutes before I can even speak again and when I do, my voice is husky and fading in and out again.

“Thank you for bringing them,” I croak out, making everyone exchange worried glances. I gesture for Baylor to explain to them and he reassures them I’m okay, but I’ll sound like I smoke a pack a day for the next week or so.

Just as he finishes, a nurse knocks on the door before letting herself in. Not giving us the time to hide the kittens. I give her a sheepish smile when Isla bursts out, “They’re emotional support cats!”

I close my eyes, sinking my teeth into my bottom lip to hold back the laugh I know will only dissolve into more pain.

The nurse rolls her lips to hide her smile as she comes over to check my vitals. “I saw nothing,” she says. After she’s done

and writes something down in my chart, she squeezes my arm. “It’s good to see you smiling.”

I give her a tight smile back. No doubt the entire floor has heard about what happened yesterday. It’s something I can’t let myself think about. A tension fills the air as she excuses herself and I know everyone is thinking the same thing I am. They all probably have a million questions, but I’m not ready to answer them. I don’t know if I ever will be.

Isla sniffles at my side and I look to find her crying. As soon as our eyes meet, she begins to sob, apologizing. “I promised not to cry in front of you.”

I move over in the bed, tucking Potato into the crook of my arm and pat the empty space next to me. She wastes no time crawling in next to me and cuddling into my side as she cries. “I’m okay,” I promise, but those words only seem to make her cry all the harder. Helplessly I look up to everyone in the room, specifically her boyfriend, but they all just shrug. I pat her arm, letting her get it out.

“Alright,” I drawl, changing the topic. “So about this plan?”



A week later

Bacon sizzles as I sip on my coffee and lean against the counter.

My throat no longer aches when I talk, and only cracks like a fourteen-year-old boy in the throes of puberty every once in a while. The smell of bacon and coffee wafting through the house lures Isla to the kitchen in just a few short minutes. I hide my smile behind my mug as I pass her her own.

“Bacon and eggs will be ready in a minute.”

She hums her response, wiping the sleep from her eyes as she takes a seat at the island. “Aren’t you tired from moving all your stuff into Baylor’s room yesterday?”

I cock my head at her, removing some of the bacon on to a plate. “Don’t have that much stuff,” I remind her. “And like Xander or Baylor let me do anything.” Xander officially moves in today, just in time for the last week of the semester. “Baylor even folded my laundry.”

“That’s sweet,” she says, but her amused smile gives all her thoughts away.

I roll my eyes, ignoring her and serve a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, putting it in front of her. “What about you? Ready for your finals today?”

She hums noncommittally, giving a slight shrug. “I hope so.” I pat her on the back, sitting down next to her with my own plate. Potato jumps in my lap the second I’m sitting, and I run my fingers through his fur, smiling when he begins to purr. The rest of the guys will surely start to trickle in any second now and we don’t get a lot of time just the two of us anymore.

“You’ll do great,” I reassure her, making her grumble.

“Do you know when you’re going to make yours up yet?”

I shake my head. “I just took the incomplete and I’ll schedule a makeup time after I’m cleared.” Sometimes my thoughts are still a little fuzzy and I’ll lose my train of thought if I’m focusing on something too hard. The doctor said it’s all to be expected and we’ll continue to monitor the concussion. At least all of my professors and my academic advisor were all understanding about it and able to accommodate the change so I don’t have to stress about it.

There’s probably never a good time for a brain injury, but the end of a semester was definitely the worst time for me. At least all of my assignments were already done and I’d made the study packets for my tutoring students ahead of time. There was no way I would have been able to make it through a tutoring session without just confusing them more.

Isla leans her head on my shoulder. “I’m proud of you for taking it easy,” she whispers. They were all so concerned I was going to go against doctor’s orders. I can’t really blame them, but they overestimated my stubbornness. Or maybe

underestimated how sore my body was and how thick the fog in my brain was. I'm still so exhausted.

"Thanks, babe," I whisper back. I haven't told her everything about my father. Haven't told her everything my grandma told me or all the little memories that have started coming back. Not a lot. My childhood is still very blank, but I'm thinking it's probably for the best.

She taps her fingers against the counter. I put my coffee down and turn toward her, giving her my full attention so she will just ask already. She sighs, something she's been doing a lot when she can't hold back her feelings or questions even when she's trying not to push me. I just also need her to remember that I'm not fragile. I won't shatter like I'm made of glass. "Have you heard anything about a sentencing or trial?"

My lips twitch but I shake my head. "Charges have been filed and he's still in jail, but an arraignment hasn't been scheduled yet." The cops have filled in a lot more of the blanks for all of us on my father and the entire situation. He had missed his last check in with his parole officer because he had moved here. How exactly he found us is a mystery, but I don't think my grandparents tried that hard to make us disappear. Sure, our last names were changed, but to my mother's maiden name. I think they counted on the fact that my father would forget about us by the time he was released.

He had an apartment in the Wild West, on the floor below us. While it is mostly college aged students, there are definitely families and single adults living there which is how he was able to get in and out without seeming out of place. How he was able to keep such a close eye on what I was doing and with who. The fact he was on the janitorial staff specifically in the hockey arena was just luck on his part. When he realized who Baylor was, he used his presence in the locker room as an advantage to find out about our plans, our security, even my phone number which he got from Baylor's phone.

We broke our lease and the guys will be moving the rest of our stuff out by the end of the month, though we are unsure if we want to stay in the hockey house or find a new place just

for the two of us. Through this whole thing, it's really proven my grandma's sentiment that sometimes friends turn into family, and these guys really are turning into that. But I miss our girl time, miss having our own space to get away from all the testosterone. But we still have time to make a decision.

Beau saunters into the kitchen shirtless, eyeing my legs and winking at me. "Glad girlfriend mode didn't mean you suddenly owned pants."

I get up and grab mine and Isla's empty plates to put in the sink and nearly trip over Karma when I don't realize she's at my feet. I huff out a breath and ignore Beau and start to serve up more plates.

A nap when they all leave is sounding better and better. Potato and even Karma haven't wanted to leave my side either since I got back home. I'm starting to feel like a mother duck with my three little ducklings trailing behind me.

Xander is the next one to walk into the kitchen, cursing when he sees me and covering his eyes. "Dammit, woman. Where are your pants?"

"You get used to it," James says as he walks in from the other side of the house.

Before I can flip either of them off, noise from our side of the house makes me cringe. That was way too loud for Baylor to simply just be getting out of bed.

James laughs. "You didn't tell him you were coming downstairs, did you?"

No. "He was sleeping," I grumble. Like a fucking dead man. Why would I wake him up? He's going to have to let me out of his sight at some point. Today in fact. When he has to go in for finals.

I close my eyes, bracing myself for impact when I hear him yelling my name.

"I'm right here," I call back, holding up a plate of food for him when he turns the corner and comes into the kitchen. Panic lines his face and his mouth drops open in shock, his sole focus on me as he ignores everyone else in the room. His

eyes scan over me from head to toe, making sure there's been no new damage in the last hour since I came downstairs.

"You scared me," he shouts, running his hand over his face. "Fucking hell, Ryn. Don't do that to me. I woke up and had no idea where you were."

I feel a little bad. But if it was anyone else I would have told them to fuck off days ago. Even Isla who cries when I get a paper cut has not been as paranoid and clingy as Baylor this past week. Granted, Isla didn't witness me almost dying, but I've given as much grace as I think I can. "Why are you yelling at me?" I try to shout back, but that damn crack gets me every time. Fucking hell.

Baylor rears back like I slapped him, his mouth dropping open in disbelief. I ignore the way our friends pretend to grab popcorn. Dicks. "Because you almost died," he defends. "Because I watched you almost die and I love you, you stupid asshole."

"Oh," Isla squeaks and Beau curses at her side. But I don't have the capacity to tell them to fuck off.

"What?" I stammer. "You love me?"

He scoffs. "Don't be an idiot. Of course I fucking love you, Ryn. How could I not? I've been obsessed with you from the very first tequila shot." He walks into the kitchen, grabbing the plate from my hand and setting it down on the counter. He cups my cheeks in his hand, brushing his thumbs over my skin. "Almost losing you was the very worst thing that has ever happened in my life and it terrifies me that one day you'll need me, but this time I'll be too late. That you'll be gone and I won't be able to look across the room and have a hundred words exchanged with a single lift of your brow. That I'll lose the only person that has ever made me feel like this. Like there's always been invisible strings tying us together because you've always been my end game."

His lips twitch and I laugh through my tears, groaning as I bump my forehead against his chest. "You are not really sneaking in Taylor Swift song titles right now, are you?"

His body shakes as he lifts my chin to meet his eyes. “I know you love it, you secret Swiftie. And I know you love me too.” His lips press against mine and nothing has ever felt better. Even with my body feeling like it’s been through war, Baylor takes all the pain away. He calms the overwhelming urge to run that used to beat at me any time someone new got too close.

“You know that, huh?” I can’t help but tease him, wanting to know what he’ll say next.

The grin he gives me tells me he knows exactly what I’m doing. “Yeah, I do.” The way he’s so confident, so damn smug, it should be annoying but it’s so damn hot. And if that isn’t exactly how it’s been from shot number one. “I know because of the way your eyes light up every time they meet mine. The way your body instantly relaxes when I pull you into my arms. I know because you are the strongest, most stubborn, and most independent woman I have ever met, and yet you allow me to support you. To hold you and protect you. You even let me call your cat anything but his name even though it annoys you because it also makes you smile. Because it’s me and I can make you smile. You’ve loved me for a damn long time, Torryn Elaine. It just took us a while to realize it.”

He kisses me again, stealing my breath as our friends cheer behind us like fucking idiots. Shouting Amens and Hallelujahs like they’ve been waiting for this moment longer than anyone. I get lost in his kiss until even their jokes fall on deaf ears.

When he finally releases me, I steal one more peck. “I do love you, Baylor Levine.” His grin is so wide and full of adoration, I’ve never felt more loved than I do in this moment. “But his name is fucking Potato.”

Bayon

epilogue

COVER YOUR EYES

*S*ome time later

“We’re going to be late, Ryn,” I argue halfheartedly.

“We’ll be fine,” she promises, kissing down my stomach, tracing her tongue around my belly button. Fuck. This girl is going to be the death of me. She wraps her hand around my hard cock, teasing me with only soft touches as she slides a condom down my hard length.

“Nope.” I flip her under me, lifting one of her legs as I settle between them. “We don’t have time for your teasing. I’m in charge now.”

“You,” she starts but the words die on her lips, turning into a moan as I drive into her in one long hard thrust. Her arms wrap around my neck as I pump into her. She pulses around me, clenching around my cock with every movement.

“What was that, baby?” I tease her, lifting her leg higher and hitting her deeper.

She mumbles something but it’s lost as I increase the pace. Her words become a jumbled mess of broken praises and encouragements, but each one makes me just a little more wild for her. Her tits sway with her movement as she lifts her hips to meet me thrust for thrust. “That’s my girl,” I moan. “You take me so fucking good.”

Her head tilts back and her back arches as she begs for more. God she’s fucking perfect. “I’m so close, B.” My alarm begins to go off, reminding us that we need to be getting ready

to leave, but Torryn's nails dig into my biceps, her voice rising as she tells me to ignore it.

I hum in response, feeling my own climax getting closer as pleasure races down my spine. I press my thumb against her clit, rubbing circles until she cries out my name and her cunt soaks my cock while she pulses around me.

"Oh fuck, Tor, I love you," I groan as I come. She laughs under me, but joke's on her, it only makes me feel that much better while I'm still buried inside her.

She opens her mouth to tease me but the door bursting open behind us cuts her off. A high-pitched screech that can only be described as deafening fills the room before we have a chance to react. "Ah, why is your ass so fucking white?"

I lower Torryn's leg, still catching my breath when I turn around to find Xander standing shirtless in the open doorway with his hand over his eyes. I sigh, pulling out of Torryn and disposing of the condom as she climbs out of bed.

"Stop being so dramatic," she taunts, reaching for one of my shirts. "What do you want?"

Xander must assume that her asking was giving him the okay to uncover his eyes. He screams again, "Clothes, Tor! Fucking hell."

I snicker behind them, pulling on a pair of jeans. "That was your fault," I tell him, making him glare my way.

"Don't you care that I can now picture your girlfriend naked?"

I shrug, but Torryn rolls her eyes, putting the shirt on. It hits her mid-thigh, plenty of coverage for our delicate roommate. "You should learn to knock if you care so much."

"What she said," I agree, pointing to her. "But really, what's up?"

His face slightly pales as he breaks eye contact, running his hand over his thigh. "Right," he sighs. "Tor, there's a cop here, asking to speak with you."

Shutters fall over her eyes as she gives him a clipped nod. All of the laughter and pleasure that was in the room only moments ago disappearing. “We’ll be down in a sec.” Fuck. Just when we were finally having a good day. There wasn’t supposed to be anything to ruin it.

I’m already handing her a pair of shorts to throw on under the shirt to go see what it is they want. Torryn has had to give countless interviews and answer a million questions about everything that happened with her father after the bastard pleaded not guilty.

She won’t really talk about it, her worries and fears about having to face him again. About the possibility of having to get on the stand and tell her story. But she doesn’t have to. I can see the way it weighs on her. The nightmares she has after every new step to the never-ending process. We both started therapy after everything happened, and it’s helped me realize that sometimes talking about something can make you feel better, but it can also make it worse. We have to relive that horrible fucking day over and over and over again every time someone comes here to ask more questions. To gather more evidence.

I throw my arm over her shoulders and pull her into my side. “No matter what, I’ve got you.” She nods, leaning into me and letting me lead her down to the living room where a familiar face waits for us.

Her body eases the moment she sees that the cop is one of her regulars, Officer Derek, but she doesn’t pull away from me, even as she greets him. He gives a tight smile and a nod to both of us, his eyes staying respectfully above Tor’s shoulders.

“We got some news today,” he explains, running his hand over his thinning hair. Torryn tenses but Officer Derek pushes forward. “I wanted to be the one to come and tell you.” He takes a deep breath and I can feel Torryn holding her breath at my side. “William Myers received a fatal injury during an altercation with another inmate early this morning.” I inhale sharply. Does this mean what I think it means? He focuses on Torryn. “He’s dead, Torryn. He’s gone.” He says each word slowly, making sure she hears it. She’s a statue at my side and

I can almost feel her mind reeling. Officer Derek smiles. “You’re free, kid. No trial, no more discovery process, no more testimony. It’s finally done. You’re safe now.”

Tor’s body begins to tremble and I pull her into my arms as the first tear falls. Months of stress and fear bleed out of her body as she wraps her arms around my waist and squeezes tightly. Another tear slips free as she begins to laugh. A fully-bodied, belly laugh even as more tears pour. Her blue eyes look up at me, shining with so many emotions. “It’s really over,” she whispers.

“It is, baby,” I promise her, kissing her forehead.

Officer Derek smiles. “I have one more thing for you, kid. The rest of the stuff will be released from evidence but I was able to grab this for you early.” He holds out a bag I hadn’t noticed at first. Torryn takes it and when she opens it, more tears fill her eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispers, lifting out an ornate white ceramic jewelry box. I take it from her so she’s able to open it and run her fingers over all the pieces still in there. Each one a connection to her mother. She lifts up a latch and I see three envelopes with each of the kids’ names scrawled in a pretty cursive. “Thank you so much, Derek,” she repeats. I lean over, kissing the tears from her cheeks as she closes the jewelry box and sets it down, taking a deep breath.

“He had it in his apartment. I’m glad we could get it returned to you, Tor.” He nods and we both thank him before showing him the way out. He gives Torryn a hug before saying goodbye and taking his leave. After the door closes, we spend several moments just beaming at each other. I gently wipe the tears from her cheeks. Never did I think I would be so goddamn relieved and fucking happy to hear about someone dying. But it’s finally over.

We can close this chapter of our lives and turn the page to find what’s next.

“You can come out now,” Torryn says, not even trying to hide her smile.

Of course all of our nosy friends were within hearing distance to figure out what the latest news was. Isla's face is just as tear-stained as Torryn's and I step back as the two women embrace each other. Isla begins to sob in her relief and Torryn chuckles, rubbing her back.

"We're fucking celebrating tonight," Beau exclaims and everyone cheers their agreement. Each of my friends taking a second to hug and whisper something to Torryn. Each moment makes the sensation in my chest grow a little warmer, a little stronger.

Wells releases Torryn and then looks down at what she's wearing, before flicking his gaze to my attire. "You two," he sighs, shaking his head and pressing his fingers to his temples. "We're going to be late."

Isla giggles as Xander tattles on us. "They were fucking when I went in there."

"Oh my god," Beau laughs. "Was that you screaming? I thought you stepped on Karma's tail again."

Torryn snorts. "Rayne's recital isn't for another three hours."

All of the guys look offended. "We promised to see her before," James reminds Torryn.

"Yeah, we have to tell her to break a leg," Beau adds.

Xander crosses his arms over his chest. "It was a promise."

Torryn shakes her head at them, but she can't hide the delight sparkling in her eyes. She loves that they love her siblings as much as she does. Rayne may not have everything other kids do, but she sure as hell will have the loudest section in the audience to cheer her on.

How could she not when half the hockey team is coming?

The end for now....

See you all in [*Blueliner Betrayals...*](#)



afterword

We made it to the end. Isn't it nice to not be ending on a cliffy or with you yelling at me?

What a change of pace? It's quite refreshing. Though I do so love when you yell at me. But for real, these characters and this book was a much needed step away from dark romance that I needed. I had so much writing these idiots and their friends and I truly hope you all loved it as much as I did.

Of course there is more to this world. How could there not be? I already have several more books plotted (and possibly started) but I hope you're ready to get into Xander's head next and find out just what happened to get him kicked off the Everleigh team?

As fun as Player Problems and the Wolves have been to write, this book would not have happened without all the people supporting me in the background. All readers should be extra thankful for my girl, Alysha, because not only is she the one who talks me off a lot of ledges, she's always yelling for more spice and for me to go back and finish the scenes I've

skipped over. This book really is as special as it is thanks to her.

A huge thank you to V, Jamie, and Zoe for helping with things behind the scenes, helping keep this book clean and giving me all your feedback. For working with me and being so flexible, even when I'm being a chaotic mess. I appreciate you all so much.

My OC girlies? Are you here? Did y'all really pick up this book and make it to the end? Are you looking at me differently? I love you all for the support and encouragement you give in real life. For having my back when you're not even a part of book world, and for wanting to read my books even if reading hasn't been your thing. Who needs friends with co-workers like you guys? You make every day at our soul-sucking job a little more bearable. And if you're my boss reading this... I never said that last part.

And finally, of course, could it even be a Samantha Bee note without the obligatory acknowledgement of my day one? My bestie, and obvious soulmate (even if her husband is still in denial) Gabby. Thank you for being such a cunt at all times. I don't know what I would do without your head pats and support. Thanks for pushing me to make this a hockey romance when I was trying to decide what sport to lean into.

And dear reader, if you made it this far, you really are such a doll face. I hope you enjoyed the hockey house and all their shenanigans. If you've never read one of my books before, thank you for taking a chance on me. If you have read my other series, thanks for trusting me with a new genre. Thank you to every reader and reviewer who picked this book up. Every day, whether you loved or hated this book, you're making my dreams come true. And that's pretty damn cool.

We'll be back soon!

Xo,

Samantha Bee

also by samantha bee

A WORLD OF CHAOS BOOKS

STEEL ROSES SERIES (SCAR RH)

[Shattered Chaos](#)

[Deadly Chaos](#)

[Vicious Chaos](#)

Beautiful Chaos

BROKEN ROSES (JADE POLY)

[Damaged & Deadly](#)

Bruised & Battered

BLEEDING ROSES (LENNOX RH)

Tears of A Fighter



MF SERIES

A SINGLE MOMENT DUET

[The Kiss of Goodbye](#)

WESTBROOK WOLVES INTERCONNECTED STANDALONES

Player Problems

[Blueliner Betrayals](#)



CO-WRITES W/ G.N. WRIGHT

DEADLY GAMES AT BSU (RH)

[All Bets Are Off](#)

[The Rules Have Changed](#)

about the author

Samantha Bee is a single mom who lives in Southern California. For as much as she's called a wordy bitch, she sure never knows wtf to say when someone asks her about herself. She likes chaos, coffee, and character banter. And that's all we've got folks. Her kid is much cuter and much more interesting. Maybe he will write books one day too.

Join her readers group for the most up to date announcements and to continue enjoying her sparkling personality.

[SAMANTHA BEE'S STEEL ROSES](#)

