



DANCE
BUTTERFLY
DANCE

REESE RIVERS

Reese Rivers Presents

Dance
Butterfly
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Ebook Edition
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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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This book is dedicated to all the women who live life behind a mask, never showing the world who you truly are.

May you have the courage to rip it off, spread your wings and fly free.

SAVY

“Feel free to grab a shower before you go if you want. I’ll call you,” he says as he walks out the door with barely a glance back.

I stare at the empty doorway in hurt disbelief and then quickly drag the sheet up to cover my trembling, naked body. Hot tears of humiliation burn my eyes. That’s it? That’s sex? My eyes slam closed and I squeeze my eyelids tightly to hold back the tears. I can’t believe I waited for so long. I was probably the only twenty-year-old on campus who was still a virgin. But it only gets worse. The guy I had been desperately crushing on for the last two years, the one I followed all over campus with my eyes and wished he’d notice me - just spent barely ten minutes...deflowering me...and wrapped it up with an “I’ll call you.”

I know exactly what that means. It means he won’t. He won’t call and he won’t look at me again or even spare what should have been a huge moment in my life a second thought.

I don’t even know why I thought it would be some magical experience. Life isn’t like romance novels. I bet the majority of girls’ first sexual experience is awful, painful, and maybe even boring. Only a lucky few, and every girl in a fictional novel, hits that first-time jackpot. I know better. I know the books I read aren’t realistic. I know a shy, unpopular girl like me doesn’t get the guy everyone stares at on campus and wishes he would look their way. But for just a few minutes there, I believed. Being a realist doesn’t make the pain of this experience any better though.

I lay there for a few minutes burning with shame, humiliation, and disappointment until I hear male voices from somewhere in the

house and that's enough to make me roll off of the bed and dive for my clothes. I've never dressed so fast in my life but as I'm pulling on my boots I lean over and spot the red bloodstain on his sheets and freeze. I stare at it as those tears threaten again and a half-choked sob falls from my lips. That stain is like a flashing neon sign screaming what a loser I am and I just can't take it anymore.

My fingers turn into claws and I tear the sheet from the bed, wad it up and stuff it in my oversized book bag. I will not leave the evidence of what happened here for him or anyone else to mock. I've had enough of that in my life. If he wants to think I'm some sheet-stealing crazy chick then I'm good with that. Better than him knowing the truth. I practically run from the room, down the stairs to the front door but just as my hand grasps the handle, I hear a bark of laughter from deeper in the house. The words "*popped her cherry*" and "*dead lay*" followed by roaring laughter has my face paling and my body starting to shake. I bite back another sob, fling the door open and rush out into the cool fall afternoon.

I hold it all back, every aching emotion that threatens to break me into pieces until I slam the door of my off-campus studio apartment closed and drop to my knees. It all comes out like a raging torrent of self-deprecation. It's just the latest blow in a long line of not good enough, not pretty enough, not popular enough that I've been feeling my whole life. This was supposed to be my year. Everything was supposed to change this year for me. I had spent the summer watching my stepsister shine like the star she is and hardening myself up against my stepmother's comparisons and digs.

I counted every day down to get back to school with the promise to myself that I was going to change...everything. I had a plan! I was going to stop living in Vanessa's shadow, stop hiding behind the mask I wear, and really, really start to live for my junior year of university. I was finally going to talk and flirt with Hunter instead of just mooning over him. I was going to cash in my V card and have ALL the O's the steamy books I read talk about. Go to parties, go to games, talk to people and make friends. THIS WAS MY YEAR! And now, I drag on a shapeless cardigan and wrap it around me, now I'm going to stay hidden in the corner like I have for all of my life and pray no-one will find out how epically I just failed.

I'll do my thing. Hide in plain sight during the day and then hide behind my mask at night and hope that someday...someday things will get better. I mean...it has to, right? Someday, I'll be brave enough to take off my mask and be the woman in the cage.

TATE

I carry the stack of books through the library with a deep scowl on my face. I fucked up and I have no one to blame but myself. Too many game plays studied and not enough literature has left me with the possibility of being benched if I can't drag my mark up. So many schools give their players a free ride when it comes to grades but Coach Garrison doesn't play that way. He's a total fucking hard ass when it comes to riding us about our grades. I'd love to hate the guy over it, but I get it. Too many up-and-comers have been knocked out of the fight with career killing injuries and have nothing to fall back on for the future. Coach might be an asshole but it's only because he cares about us, on and off the field.

My dad, not so much. The only thing he cares about is where I eventually place in the draft and how many zeros I get on my contract. If I fall behind and get benched even for just one game, he'll go ballistic. The last thing I need is to have him fly out here. Holidays are bad enough trying to deal with him and all his big-man bully bluster. So, I need to get my ass in gear and get caught up.

I dump the stack of books on the checkout counter, glance over at the clerk, and frown again. I've seen her before over the last couple of years. We've had a couple of classes together and she's been clerking here ever since we were freshmen. I think her name is... Sara? She's always been smiling and friendly as she scans my books in the past which is why I'm frowning. Sara's staring off at something with the saddest expression. She actually looks... devastated by something. I follow her line of sight and roll my eyes

when I spot that douche, Hunter, caging in a giggly freshman girl against a bookshelf. That guy's a fucking dog.

I turn away, ready to get out of here and get to work on making up my missed assignments.

"Sara, you want to check me out?" I ask her, but she doesn't even glance my way.

"Hey! Sara!" I call a little louder and her eyes slide my way.

The pain in those big baby blue eyes behind her glasses has me sucking in a breath but I can tell she's not really seeing me. Fuck, what happened to this girl?

"Are you okay, Sara?"

She blinks a few times and it's like a mask slips down over her eyes to hide all the emotion that was just in them.

She lets out a sigh and mumbles, "It's Savy, not Sara," as she reaches for my stack of books and starts scanning them.

I bite back a wince. "Sorry. I'm Tate."

Her hands pause in their work and she pushes her glasses back up on her nose as she looks at me with a tilt of her head. Another one of those sad sighs wisps out.

"Tatum Valor. Quarterback, football god, English major, and part of three group assignments with me over the last two years. Yeah, I know your name, thanks," she tells me blandly before dropping her eyes and going back to her scanning.

Well, I'm an ass. I should know her name because now I do remember that we had done those assignments together. She's just always so quiet and reserved that it was easy to overlook her. I search for something to say to try and salvage her bad opinion of me but come up blank so, whatever, I can't be expected to remember every chick's name. When that sad look covers her face again and she looks past me as Hunter walks by with the still giggling freshman, I track him meeting Savy's gaze, check the smirk when he sees her looking and the hand he lifts up in a quick wave.

"Hey, Cathy. Good to see you."

He keeps on walking and when I look at Savy, I see her eyes slam closed tightly as her face turns bright red. She mouths the name Cathy with a shake of her head and her knuckles turn bright white where she clutches one of my books.

“Hey, don’t let that guy get to you. He’s a fucking scumbag,” I tell her, trying to lighten the moment of whatever that just was. I think I hear her whisper “too late” but she takes a deep breath and pastes on a brittle smile and holds up the book she’s strangling.

“One of my favorites! Cathy and Heathcliff, such a profound love,” she tells me brightly with only a small break in her voice.

I just nod so she gets scanning faster. I study her while she works with her head down, her glasses slipping down her nose again. She’s not tall, would probably just come up to my chin. Her dark brown hair is tucked up in a neat bun on top of her head and I try and remember if it’s long or not but come up blank. It’s hard to tell what her shape is with the oversized, navy cardigan she is wearing over a white blouse and corduroy skirt. She’s not a slim girl, she’s got curves but again, it’s hard to really see them under her bulky clothes.

“Here you go.”

She breaks my appraisal of her body by thrusting my student ID card at me with another blush staining her cheeks.

I take it with a nod and grab my stack. I mumble at her to have a good day as I leave. It sucks that she’s sad but I don’t really know her and I’ve got a full plate right now so I push her devastated blue eyes from my mind and head for the door.

SAVY

I arch my back and pop my ass as I bend over and drag my fingers up my fishnets while Lizzo's Tempo thunders through the club. My neon pink wig flares out wide around the butterfly wings on my back when I do a slutty pirouette perfectly thanks to ten years of private ballet lessons. A small, secretive smile spreads my pink-stained lips under the half mask I'm wearing at the thought of my stepmother screeching in horror if she could see how I use all that training now. My hips swivel as I press against the bars of my cage and go down in a deep crouch, the micro mini barely covering the hot pink thong underneath it. I use the bars to pull myself up and blow a kiss to the men watching my every move from the nearest table and then flip my hair back and turn away from them like they're nothing special.

Song after song, I lose myself to the beat and let the bass and lyrics wash away the pain of the last week. It's only here, safe and protected behind my mask and wrapped with bars that I can let go of all my insecurities and be the woman I wish I could be. Here in this cage, I have the confidence to be anything I want.

I've been working as a go-go dancer at Masks since part way through my first freshman semester.

I had been walking across campus, lonely and lost – wondering why I had thought university would be different than high school. For some reason, I had believed that all I needed to do was get away from my perfect sister who was the queen of ev-er-y-thing at our school and I would have a chance to shine. Yeah, sure. Different school, different students...same damn me.

I almost tripped and fell when the music blasted out from everywhere and a flash mob of dancers had appeared as if by magic. I stood in awe as the women wearing masquerade masks strutted their stuff to the sexy music. I was mesmerized by their confident manner and effortless sexuality. When I dragged my eyes from the dancers and looked around to see every single male student and many female ones too, drooling over the dancers, I wanted to BE them with every fiber of my being.

As soon as the song was over, the dancers had spread out through the crowd handing out flyers for Masks, the club they all worked for. At the bottom of it was an open call for dancers. I clutched that paper to my chest like a lifeline and ran to my dorm room. It took me six tries to dial the number before I finally let the call go through and even then, my voice came out in a squeak when they answered and I asked if they were hiring. Two days later, wearing my pink ballet leotard, I chewed my bottom lip ragged as I stood in a line with twenty other girls all waiting for tryouts to begin.

As each girl went ahead of me, my chest got tighter and tighter at how outclassed I was. Those women oozed sex with every move of their routines. I shuffled closer and closer to the door until I finally couldn't stand it anymore and bolted out. I slammed into the nearest washroom and barely made it to the toilet before I tossed up the little bit of food I had managed to force myself to eat that day. When I was finally done heaving, I rinsed my mouth from the tap and lifted defeated eyes to my reflection. I took in my perfectly wrapped bun and pristine costume and barked out a harsh laugh. Once more...not good enough.

The longer I stared at my reflection the angrier I got until I reached down and ripped a gaping hole in my tights. My fingers ripped and tore until my costume was barely hanging on to my body and then I dug into my bag, found a black scarf, and tied it around my hips like the tiniest skirt. I yanked my hair free from the neat bun and shook it out until my dark chestnut curls were wild around my face and shoulders and then just gripped the counter with white-knuckled fingers trying to psych myself up to go back out there and...try. The bathroom door banged open causing me to flinch and send a

panicked look that way to meet the surprised gaze of one of the other dancers.

The woman was gorgeous with that effortless style that screams confidence and I wished for just a fraction of what she's got.

"Wow, did not see that coming," she laughs. "You look like a broken barbie doll that's been played with hard and tossed aside. It's a much better look than what you came in here with!"

I try and form words to reply but they can't get past the ball of nerves lodged in my throat. Her amused expression softens as she walks closer to me.

"What about makeup? Do you have any?"

I shake my head as my breathing picks up. I...I can't do this! This isn't me. They will all just laugh if I try and be the kind of woman they're looking for. I'm a thread away from snapping into pieces and rushing past her out the door when she places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

"You need to breathe. Suck in a deep one, girl."

I do and then I do another and the tight ball in my chest unravels slightly.

"Good. Now, this is make-or-break time. Dig deep and decide. Do you want this? Do you want the job?"

My hands ball into fists. I do. I really, really do want it.

"Y-yeah. Yes, yes!" I tell her and get a nod and a smile in return.

"Alright, then. Let's get you made up."

She dumps her slouchy bag onto the counter and pulls out makeup. She opens a pallet of colors and studies my face briefly before nodding again.

"Yup, gonna make you fierce to match your shred. Straight-up black smudged all around your eyes with thick black lashes. Those baby blues of yours will pop!"

She goes to work painting me like a doll and I let her as a wash of gratitude flows through me.

"W-why are you helping me? Aren't we competing for the same job?"

She tosses her blond waves over one shoulder with a snort.

"Sweetie, I am doing my job. I'm doing every woman's job. Helping you up when you stumble. Instead of competing with each other, we

need to start lifting each other. That's how we all rise. Besides, they're looking for four new girls, not just one."

She turns me to face the mirror and I suck in a shocked breath at what I see. I do look fierce and my blue eyes look electric surrounded by all that smudged black.

My painted lips lift in a grin and she snaps at me, "NO! No smiling! You keep a hard, intense look at all times. You want to burn them with your fire as you dance. The smile comes at the end and it better not be a grin. Make it a smirk that shows you know you got the job and show some confidence. Now, what are you dancing to?"

I chew on my bottom lip. "Uh, I was going to do a Taylor Swift song?"

She tosses her hair back with another laugh. "Yeah, no. The ballerina who came in here might have been a Swifty but this..." She waves me up and down. "This right here is something else. Do you know River by Briggs? Here, give me your phone. You'll want the King Kavalier mix for this."

I hand my phone over with the music app open and she taps away and then hands it back.

"Okay, there's three more girls left to audition so listen to that a few times and go last. You want to think power as you dance. Your power. You want what you want and you will take it. Lots of slamming around and humps to the beat. This is the dance where you take it all, give it all, and leave nothing back. It's just you and the music, got it?"

I swallow down the rest of my nerves and break character to smile at her.

"Thank you! I-I wouldn't have...just, thank you."

She tosses her make up back into her bag with a wink.

"You got this, you just need to get out of your own head." She stops and turns back to me and grabs my arms with a serious look. "Can I give you one more piece of advice? This one is for on the dance floor and for every day after." I nod slowly and she straightens her shoulders.

"That mean, vicious little voice in your head that screams at you, tells you you're not good enough, not strong enough, that you can't do something? Every time you hear that voice echoing in your head,

you scream back...WATCH ME and then do it because, sweetie, that voice is a fucking liar!"

I can't even stop myself from throwing my arms around this beautiful, amazing woman in a hug of pure gratitude. I really, really needed to hear that. She pulls back, bops my nose, and jerks her head at the door.

"Go...go and make them watch you."

And now, two years later, they all watch me as I kick my leg up over my head, brace against the bars, and do a controlled drop. Safe behind my mask, I can smolder, I can sin and I can sell a fantasy. It doesn't matter that outside this club I'm a nobody. It doesn't matter what Hunter took and laughed like it was nothing. It doesn't matter that Tate didn't even remember my fucking name after two years because here, here they know who I am. Here, I'm the fucking Butterfly and they all WATCH ME!

ASHER

I climb the stairs to the second floor of the club, ready to let this day slide off of me. I brush off the girls trying to catch my attention and make my way to my regular table. A dark look has the two guys occupying it moving quickly out of the way. Everyone who comes here knows this is our table. I toss a finger up at a nearby waitress and get the nod so I shrug my leather jacket off and toss it on one of the empty chairs before sliding into my seat. It has the perfect, perfect fucking view. My lips twitch when I see she's got the hot pink wig on tonight. It's my second favorite of the colors she wears.

Muscle by muscle, the tension drains away as I watch her move, my dream girl, my Butterfly. It's been two years now that I've been watching her and I still can't get enough. I've tried speaking to her twice in that time, asking for more, asking for her number, her name. Both times she hit me with those fucking eyes of hers that I can never quite read and with a flick of her hair, turned her back on me to keep on dancing.

Maybe that's why she does it for me so much. The mystery of who she is. There's no drama with her, no games. I don't have to be anything with her but what I am. She dances and I watch. Maybe I'm fooling myself. Maybe I'm just another man with lecherous eyes on her body like all the others but I believe that there's a connection there between us, even if I've never heard her voice or seen her face behind the mask she wears.

All I really know is that I would give her everything for one night in my arms. I tip my head back and watch her sweet peach ass sway in her tight little skirt and imagine those thick thighs squeezing my head

as I feast on the little pussy wrapped in pink satin that peaks out at me when she bends. The best way to describe my butterfly is... luscious. She's got curves that make a man want to dig in and squeeze, bite. Her tits should grace the bow of a ship and her tapered waist has my fingers itching to grasp and lift. I could fucking watch her every night of my life and never get enough and if I got to taste her, touch her, one night would never be enough.

The waitress drops off my drink and I sink deeper into the chair, spreading my legs apart to try and ease the ache of my jeans pressing against my hard cock. The whiskey burns deliciously as I sip and watch. She's on her swing moving those curves when Dirty Thoughts comes through the speakers. It's that TikTok version and I swear to God my butterfly turns and looks straight at me. She dances for me and me alone as she moves on the swing to the song, her hands running up her sweet curves. When it hits the guy's part, she moves faster on the swing. Her hips snap up to meet an imaginary lover doing all the things he sings about and then she flips down off the swing and crashes to the bars in front of me just as that hot fucking line hits – you've been a good fucking girl. Her eyes, those blue orbs of heaven spear right through me, straight to my dick with a challenging look. It takes everything I have not to lunge for the bars to meet that challenge as my cock pulses with need and then with a swish of her hair, a flutter of wings, she's gone.

Some guy at the next table leans over and calls out, "Hey, is that your girl, man?"

All I can do is jerk my head in a nod. Yeah, that's my fucking Butterfly.

Jude and Beck roll in and throw themselves down around the table. It hardly takes a minute for their preferred drinks to be set in front of them. Butterfly's cage is still empty so I turn away from it and look them over. These guys are two of my three best friends and I'm not sure if they're in search of trouble or ass, or maybe both, as they scan the pickings in the club.

"Where's T?"

Jude rolls his eyes with a smirk - his messy, white-blond hair flopping over one eyebrow to hide the silver ring in it.

“Drowning in ink and parchment, man. Coach threatened to bench him if he doesn’t get his marks up.”

Beck scoffs. “Thank fuck I don’t have to worry about that shit anymore.”

His words are glib but I don’t miss the bitter look in his eyes. His football career ended with a bad hit that fucked his ACL at the end of last season. The guy spent most of summer in the bottom of a bottle. It took all three of us to get him dried out and back to school for the new year. He’s been hitting the gym hard in hopes of a comeback but it’s doubtful.

Beck downs what’s left in his glass and then spins in his chair and calls out to the waitress to bring another bottle and then smolders at a group of girls not far away.

“Where’s the Butterfly?” Jude asks me.

I give a half-hearted shrug. “Gone on break, I guess.”

He chuckles at my uninterested tone, seeing right through it. “So, this finally going to be the year you hit that? Or are we going to have to watch you moon over her for the next two semesters again?”

I glance over at her cage with a scowl. Whatever is between us, it’s just getting stronger and stronger. Something’s got to break my way with that girl. I thought not seeing her over the summer break would ease things for me but the blue butterfly tattoo on my chest mixed in with the other ink that I got on a drunken binge one hot summer night tells me that didn’t happen. I shake my head at the empty cage and turn away.

“Just pay someone on staff off to get her name, man. Hit that and then quit it. Get her out of your system already.”

“You don’t think I tried that? Fuck, no one will budge on it. Masks takes the safety of their girls seriously. They come and go by the underground garage by Uber. They’ve got security on that too so I can’t even stake out the exit.” I toss back my drink and pour another from the bottle our server dropped off. “The only way I’m getting in is if Butterfly lets me.”

Beckett pulls a laughing girl into his lap, his fingers going straight to her inner thigh with no complaints from her. The girl’s friends crowd around our table and it doesn’t take long for Jude to have his

own crotch companion. Me, I just sit back and wait for her to come back from break so I can watch some more.

SAVY

I toss the pink wig onto the counter and take off my wings before slumping into my dressing room chair. I tilt my head back and close my eyes but I still see those hard, jade-green eyes framed by long black lashes watching my every move. God, he's intense. I might have swooned like a fool over Hunter for the last few years but this man is the one I burn for. His eyes promise all the dark and depraved things he would do to me if I ever caved and gave him my name.

Except...he wouldn't, because the dancer he wants isn't the woman I am. He wants the fantasy I sell and real-life me would not only fall short but would have him either howling with laughter or looking at me with disgust and disdain. So, I keep the fantasy alive night after night as I dance for him, behind my mask.

A cherry red wig lands on top of my pink one as Stella drops into her chair beside me, shaking out her blond waves. She side-eyes me with a smirk.

"That was a hot fucking move with bar boyfriend. Throwing yourself off the swing against the bars? I bet he almost came in his pants right then and there." She chuckles with an eye roll as a dark blush heats my cheeks. "Damn it, Sav, you kill me! You need to get over yourself and take pity on that man. Throw the guy a bone. What's the worst thing that could happen? He rides you hard, gives you multiple O's, and then you walk away."

I reach for the contact lens case and makeup remover wipes with a shake of my head and mumble, "He doesn't want me, Stel. He wants the butterfly."

Stella unzips her thigh-high boots with a scowl. "It's been two years and I STILL don't get you, girl. How...how can you go out there and make men drool every night and then take off your mask and...disappear into this scared little bird? You could have your pick, babes. And fuck that Hunter guy! If he was a real man, he would have taken his shot to introduce you to all the ways a man's supposed to make a woman burn. I bet bar boyfriend would spend hours and hours worshiping you until you had to beg him to stop."

My blush has gone nuclear at the picture she paints but I know I'm not brave enough to find out so I purse my lips and wipe away the thick pink coating them without replying. Stella huffs out her annoyance and starts to take her makeup off too.

"Fine, forget him. Will you come out with us tomorrow night? We're doing girls' night. No club. Just dinner and drinks at Loco's. You need to come out and have some fun, Savy. Relax a little."

I send her a look of love but shake my head. I've loved Stella from the moment she smudged black around my eyes and told me I could do anything but I just don't fit in with her and her friends. From the way they dress and talk so effortlessly about men and sex to the confidence that shines from them. I just don't fit and I end up feeling even more self-conscious around them. Better I stick to cozy pj's, a cup of tea, and a good book than try to fit in where I don't belong and make a fool of myself.

Once I'm in my street clothes, I drop a kiss on her head and wave my goodbyes, heading for the door. I smile at Carl, our exit security, as he opens the back door of an Uber waiting in a line of them. The female driver is a regular and greets me by name and then leaves me to decompress without small talk. I lean back into the leather and flex my arches to try and ease the ache that comes from dancing for hours in high heels as I watch the buildings go by through the window with a sigh.

It's not that I don't want to fit in with Stella and her girlfriends, it's that I just don't know how to speak their language. For the millionth time, I wish I had a mother growing up. She died giving birth to me and it destroyed my dad so much that he wrapped me in security and kept me tucked away where I would always be safe. He had a very demanding job so I spent most of my childhood surrounded by

nannies, tutors, and staff. I found friends and adventure through books and just stayed in them instead of being out in the real world until he would come home at night and share small pieces of himself with me. He was my whole world for so long until he was gone.

The car drops me off and when I get to the door, I turn and wave my thanks, appreciative of her for waiting until I get in safely. By the time I get up to my studio on the third floor, I'm ready to drop with exhaustion. It's been a hell of a week and pouring my emotions into dance tonight has left me feeling raw and drained. I'm looking forward to the next couple of days when I can hide away and lick my wounds, try to get over the ugliness that was my first sexual experience, and move on.

I drop my bag on the desk chair, pull off my shoes, slide my feet into oversized teddy bear slippers and walk the few paces to my tiny kitchen to turn on the kettle. As I wait for it to boil, I scan the small space that I call home. It's not much, one big room with a double bed squeezed into one corner, a small desk, a cozy love seat and coffee table facing a tv stand, a micro kitchen, and a two-person bistro table. I could have something much bigger and more luxurious if I wanted but I grew up haunting the halls of ten thousand square feet like a lost little girl. The studio is the perfect size for me. It's cozy and makes me feel safe.

As my tea steeps, I strip down and pull on a fuzzy fleece pajama set covered in laughing ducks and crawl into bed, propped up by an abundance of pillows. I snag my e-reader, open my current book, and get lost in a different world where the women are brave and fierce and the men will burn the world down for her. I sip my tea and highlight my favorite passages and wish I could let myself channel these characters. Maybe one day...

The weekend goes by way too fast and I'm shelving books from my cart when I spot Hunter at a table with yet another giggling girl. I try - I really do - to not let it affect me but I can't help it. I'm such an idiot. I fell hook, line, and sinker for his fake charm and interest. I hadn't even made him work for it, I was so enthralled with the fact that he was speaking and flirting with me. All he had to do was show the smallest bit of attention to me and I fucking swooned for him and

followed him back to his place like a pathetic little duckling who had imprinted on him.

I sigh deeply at just how pathetic I am and a bang shatters the silence of the library when I slam the book from my cart into its spot on the shelf. I wince and glance around with an apologetic expression and my eyes meet the amused hazel ones of Tate Valor. I can feel a blush start on my neck and rise to my cheeks to have him looking at me.

God played favorites with this man, giving him the body of a gladiator and a face to make angels weep. His dark blond hair is artfully messed and the few longer locks falling over his forehead just adds to the square jaw and pouty lips he was blessed with.

I blink away the daze of his good looks and scan the table he's sitting at piled high with open books. Tate's not usually a regular in the library. He usually checks out what he needs and leaves. His deep voice has my gaze flying back to his.

"Bad day?"

My head darts around, checking behind me. Is he talking to me? Why is he talking to me?

"I only ask because you seemed sad last time I was here too."

I swallow past my confusion and move a little closer, dropping my eyes to the books to see what he's working on.

"Um, no, I'm fine."

He looks over at Hunter and his fan of the week with a raised eyebrow.

"You sure? That guy seems to be a trigger for you."

I scoff and mumble, "Yeah, triggers my desire for self-immolation."

He huffs out a laugh at that and his smile has my stomach doing a slow flip at how damn beautiful he is.

"Well, you know what they say, the easiest way to get over someone is to...get under another."

I almost choke on my own saliva at that and the dimple that flashes at me. Subject change! I tap at one of the open books.

"This was four assignments ago. Are you behind? Already?"

His smile flips to a frown and he runs one of his big hands through his hair with a groan.

“Yeah, I fucked up. Too caught up with team shit and I let it slide. If I don’t get this in with a decent mark, my coach is going to bench me.”

I chew on my bottom lip, torn. I mean, he didn’t even remember my name after working with him before but...

“I can lend you my annotations if you want. It...it could help speed this up a bit.”

He tilts his head and studies me for a moment, a guarded look coming into his eyes.

“You would do that? Why? What do you want in return?”

I flinch back a bit and then shake my head in annoyance at myself for once again being an idiot when it comes to good-looking men.

“You know what? Forget it. Good luck.”

I turn away and reach for another book from my cart but my hand stills when he speaks from behind me.

“Savy, wait. Listen, I’m sorry.”

He trails off with a deep sigh and the noise is packed full of emotion I don’t understand so against my better judgment, I turn back to him and just wait for an explanation. He runs both hands through his hair again in a frustrated gesture, making the dark green, long-sleeved t-shirt he’s wearing stretch across bulging muscles and then shoves the chair across from him out a bit from under the table.

“Sit for a minute?”

I look at the offered chair like it’s going to electrocute me if I sit in it. I don’t sit at tables with guys of his caliber and after what happened with Hunter, I’m more than a little gun shy. I look into his eyes, searching for the trick but don’t find any so I slide slowly down onto the chair and squeeze my hands together in my lap. Tate looks around like he’s making sure no one is near enough to hear him and then leans that big body of his over the table.

“I’ve been burned before. I get a lot of women wanting to be with me for everything that comes with being my girlfriend. They want the popularity, the prestige, and a shot at the payday after I’m drafted.”

My mouth drops open in disbelief at this guy’s freaking ego. I can’t stop the bark of laughter that flows past my lips as I start shaking my head and pushing the chair back to stand.

“Unbelievable! I offered you my notes, not my freaking virginity.”

As soon as I say that my face goes beet red and my eyes dart over to where Hunter is now looking my way with a frown of confusion. He's too far away to have heard what I said but my laughter must have snagged his attention. I clench my jaw and shoot to my feet but Tate's big hand snaps across the table to grab my wrist causing me to freeze.

"No! Fuck, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant!" His head turns to where I'm looking and a dark look covers his face. "Did that fucking guy..."

I cut him off. "What do you want from me, Tate? I was trying to be a decent human being by offering you my notes to help. That's it. No strings, ulterior motives, or anything else. I don't want anything from you."

He drops his hand from my wrist and I ignore the way my skin burns where he was touching it.

"I get that, I'm sorry. I'm not used to someone offering help just to be nice. I would really appreciate you lending me your notes. Again, I'm sorry."

I push my glasses back up my nose and give him a small nod.

"Fine. My next shift is Friday afternoon. I'll bring them for you then if you want to swing by and grab them."

I don't wait for his reply, just turn away and push my cart to a different section of the huge library wishing I hadn't offered to help in the first place.

TATE

It's game day and even though my head is filled with plays and counter plays I remember to swing by the library to grab the notes Savy said she'd lend me. I really need them, like, a lot. There's a lot of pressure on me this year to perform at the top of my game and it's fucking with my assignments. I can't seem to focus on the work with football taking up so much of my head space. Even putting myself on lockdown at the house and avoiding most parties hasn't helped. The guys are constantly bringing girls over and somehow they've always got a friend with them that has an angle to get with me. I've resorted to locking myself in my room to avoid the clingy girls that want to become my girlfriend in any way possible. It's annoying as fuck.

Last night I had to physically remove a naked redhead who was waiting in my bed when I got home. Don't get me wrong, I'm down for a sweet piece of ass to take the edge off now and again but right now is NOT the time and dropping yourself uninvited in my bed is NOT the place. I left her sputtering her outrage, bare as the day she was born in the hallway when I slammed the door in her face and locked it. There's going to be a house meeting about this shit tonight after the game because I'm fucking done with it all.

Two women are standing at the counter ahead of me so I get behind them and glance impatiently at my watch as I wait for them to be done so I can get the notes from Savy. I'm going over the plays of the other team we are against today in my head when a disdainful laugh from the older woman in front of me steals my focus.

"Really, what have you been eating? I know the freshman fifteen is a thing but you should be long past that by now, Savanna. Honestly,

have some self-respect! I'm sure Vanessa would be happy to share her eating plan with you. Help whittle away all those extra pounds you're carrying."

I frown at the back of the woman's head as the younger one titters in a nasty way. "Savy needs more than a diet to fix..." She waves a finger up and down, "all of that."

Fucking women are brutal sometimes. I lean slightly to the side and catch sight of Savy. Her eyes are downcast and the line of her shoulders is rigid with tension. When she spots me behind them, her face flames red in complete humiliation and her eyes crash closed. I don't know what the fuck I'm thinking but my mouth is moving faster than my brain.

"There's not one damn thing about Savy that needs to be fixed. She's perfect just the way she is."

Both women spin around at my words and I get my first real look at them. They're practically reflections of each other telling me they are mother and daughter. Icepick blonds, the both of them - all sharp angles and pencil thin without an inch of padding on them. The younger of the two gasps with surprised delight as hungry, calculating eyes look me up and down.

"Tatum Valor! Oh my, I'm such a huge fan of yours," she gushes. She skirts closer to me and places a hand on my chest as she simpers, "And a gentleman too. How sweet of you to say that about my sister." She flutters her ridiculous fake lashes at me. "Even if we all know that's not quite true."

I grit my teeth at this bitch's nerve and peel her hand off me. Savy's a nice girl who offered to help me. She doesn't deserve to be treated like this. Especially by her sister and mother. I know a little something about an asshole parent. The fact that this chick put her hands on me uninvited is the last straw of my patience with this type of woman so I go all in out of spite.

"If you think that, then you're blind," I growl out between clenched teeth and circle around behind the counter, going straight for Savy.

Her eyes are owl huge behind her glasses when I reach for her and pull her into my arms and crash my lips to hers. She's stiff as a board against me for a few beats as I nudge her lips open with my tongue and then she flat-out melts against me. All of a sudden, my

arms are filled with her soft curves as I hold her against my body and I can't stop my fingers from digging into them. She starts to kiss me back in a hesitant way and it's so fucking sweet and innocent that my cock goes rock hard between us. The soft little sigh I get from her against my mouth has my hand sweeping lower to cup her round ass through her corduroy skirt. That's a step too far because she goes tense in my arms again. I chuckle and slide my mouth to her ear.

"Just go with it. It'll shut those bitches up," I tell her in a whisper.

She pulls back from me and I catch the slightest nod so I lean into what I'm selling here. I straighten her crooked glasses with a wink.

"I can't wait to see you in my jersey tonight at the game, Savy. Come early? Meet me at the players' entrance an hour before the game and bring that stuff we talked about the other day, alright?"

She just stares at me like I have two heads, making me grin and swoop down for another quick kiss and then let her go. I start backing away, keeping my eyes locked on hers.

"You'll be there? Players' entrance, an hour before game time, right?"

She swallows hard and then jerks her head once so I shoot her a wink and then leave without ever looking at the two alley cats staring at me with shock. I push out through the library doors and pick up my pace even as my grin grows. I think I just figured out how to solve all my problems. I just need to convince Savy to go along with it.

SAVY

My mouth is dry and I'm having a hard time catching my breath. Tate freaking Valor just kissed me...ME. Not only did he kiss me, twice, he stood up for me. I glance around the huge room looking for the portal that must have transported me to an alternate universe because this kind of shit...does...not...happen...to...me! But all I see is the shocked faces of my stepmother and stepsister gaping back at me. Two people that should not be here right now.

"What are you guys doing here? Why aren't you at school, Van?"

Her mouth snaps closed and her eyes go hot with anger.

"What...the hell...was that? Tatum Valor is a god! What kind of cruel joke was he trying to play on us? The Tate Valors of the world wouldn't be caught dead with someone like you!" She spits out at me.

My stomach ties itself in knots of anxiety from the cruel words she so carelessly throws at me. It's not that she's wrong. I don't know what Tate's game is but I will be at that player entrance later to let him know that I'm not fucking playing it. In the meantime, he gave me a gift by doing that in front of them that I don't plan on explaining. I don't know why they're here but I know it won't be for long so they can think what they want for now. I don't bother answering her, I just ask my question again.

"Why are you both here? Is everything okay?"

Vanessa is still too angry to tell me so Celeste fills me in.

"I came to help Vanessa settle in. She's transferred to your school. We thought it would be a better fit for her."

My whole body freezes at that as every fiber of my being screams out in protest. NO! No, I can't have her at my school. Even though Vanessa's a year behind me, she still made every year of high school hell for me. This is mine. This is my safe place away from them. The universe can't be that cruel.

My sister finally finds her voice and a sickeningly sweet, loaded smile curves her perfect lips.

"That's right, Savy. I'm going here now. Sad that it will only be for your last two years but don't worry, I promise to make the most of it."

I see it then. I see in her eyes how much she hates me and the promise to make high school look like a breeze compared to what she's going to put me through over the next two years. Everything inside me just withers. I throw all my walls up and force my expression to go blank. I know how this works. The more I react, the more they see how they can hurt me, the more they feed off of it. My tone is bland as I tilt my head.

"Fantastic. Do you have a student ID yet? I can get you set up in the system so you can check out books."

She smirks and rolls her eyes. "Please! I don't need a library card. I'm going to be way too busy with my new sorority to worry about books. We just wanted to drop by and share my good news with you. Brighten your dreary little life up a bit."

I nod. "Great, thanks for letting me know. I'll see you around, Vanessa. Celeste, nice to see you. I have to get back to work now, so if you don't mind..."

My stepmother looks down her nose at me. Her eyes are keen and calculating like she's trying to figure out my angle but there's nothing for her to find on my face so she inclines her head slightly and hooks an arm into her daughter's.

"Come, darling. Let's leave Savanna to her...work. I'll take you to lunch and then we can do some shopping before I leave."

Vanessa's smile is wide and bright as she lets Celeste lead her away but just before they get to the doors, she looks back over her shoulder at me.

"See you real soon, Savy."

My knees almost give out on me as the doors close behind them so I slump down against the counter and place my head in my

hands. What am I going to do? I can't be at the same school as her! And what the holy hell was that with Tate? Uggg, I can only deal with one thing at a time so I grab my bag and duck out to the staff room where I'll have more privacy and pull my cell phone out. I almost crack the screen, I tap out the number so hard.

By the time his voice comes over the line, I'm holding back a scream.

"Hey, Princess! How are you? I haven't heard from you since school went back in."

His warm, caring tone has some of that scream backing off so I'm able to actually speak without shattering his eardrums but my voice comes out choked.

"Uncle Mark, please tell me this is some prank. I can't be at the same school as her!"

He lets out a deep sigh. "I'm so sorry, kid. I tried to sway them to a different school but got nowhere with them. There was nothing I could do."

I close my eyes to keep the hot tears swelling in them at bay.

"Why did she even want to transfer? All I heard about all summer long was that she ruled her school. Why would she leave that?"

"Vanessa didn't want to transfer at all. She was asked to leave. There were accusations that she took hazing during pledge week too far and one of the girls ended up committing suicide. We were forced to pay the family off to keep it quiet but the school was adamant that Vanessa leave."

My mouth drops open hearing that and my heart squeezes painfully at what that poor girl and her family must have gone through. I've been on the receiving end of Vanessa's bullying for the last twelve years and I know just how bad it can be. My fingers tighten around the phone.

"You shouldn't have paid for it. She's never going to change if she doesn't have to face the consequences of her actions!"

I hear him moving on the other end of the line and then a door closes before he speaks again.

"I completely agree but it wasn't my call."

I scowl and speak at the same time as he does.

"The board."

“The board.”

“I’m sorry, Savy. They didn’t want it to get out and reflect badly on the company. I was outvoted on this one.”

I tilt my head back and let loose a silent scream at the ceiling even as he keeps talking.

“Sweetheart, if you would just step...”

I cut him off. “Mark, we’ve been over this! I’ve got two more years to graduate and then the gap year I want before I’ll be ready for that. I know what my future looks like and I just want these few years to myself before I’m locked into it.”

His sigh comes through loud and clear. “You make it sound like a prison sentence. You know there are other options. We could sell...”

“No! My dad put everything he had into making that company. I couldn’t ever sell. I just...” I pause to pull my glasses off and rub between my eyes.

“It’s okay, princess. You stay focused on school. You know I have everything handled on this side of things. Just try and stay out of Vanessa’s crosshairs as best you can. If it gets too bad, you could always transfer somewhere else.”

I nod sadly even though he can’t see me. “I, I have to get back to work. I’ll talk to you soon, Uncle Mark, and...thanks. Thanks for everything you do.”

I hang up quickly and stare blindly at the wall where a poster hangs. It has a cute little kitten hanging from a tree branch by one paw and the caption is, hang in there! I take in a deep breath and nod. I either have to hang in there or hang myself. With my sister here now, I’m not sure which one will win out.

SAVY

I clutch the folder of notes I promised to lend Tate against my chest and look around nervously as I wait for him outside the players' entrance of the football stadium. I don't know what the hell I'm doing here. I don't know what Tate was thinking, kissing me like that and implying we are together. In the moment, I ran with it, mostly out of shock. But now...now that Vanessa will be going to this school and will find out quickly that it was a lie, I'm screwed. She's going to come at me so hard when she finds out. I've witnessed enough of her bully playbook to know exactly what she'll do with that juicy bit of information. It'll start with nasty rumors about me and escalate quickly to something much worse.

I turn away from the door and start walking away. I don't have a choice, I need to transfer to a different university. I can't spend the next two years under her evil eye.

"Savy! Hey! Where are you going?"

I hear his footsteps running my way but I keep going until he grasps my elbow and turns me back. I take in the football jersey covering the huge pads players wear and the frown on his beautiful face and sigh at one more thing that would never happen to a girl like me. I thrust the folder toward him.

"Here, you can just keep them. I won't need them back." I tell him and try and turn away but he still has a hold on my elbow.

"Whoa, hold up. First, thank you for lending me these. You're really saving my ass. Second, I was hoping to talk to you about another favor."

I shake my head and try and pull away but his fingers aren't going anywhere.

"Sorry, I can't do anything else for you. I'm...I'm transferring to a different school as soon as possible. Good luck with your assignments."

His frown deepens and I see a flash of frustration cross his face before it quickly disappears. "What are you talking about? You can't transfer out in the middle of a semester. Nobody does that. Tell me what's going on."

I finally yank my elbow from his grasp so I can cross my arms across my chest. I can't even look at him. I'm humiliated enough already.

"Why do you even care?" I mumble.

His fingers reach out and tip my chin up so I'm forced to look into his eyes and I can already feel the redness creeping up my neck to my face.

"Savy, you seem like a nice person and you offered to help me so tell me what happened and maybe I can return the favor."

I search his hazel eyes for the mocking look I expect to see from a guy like him but don't find it so I let my shoulders slump and just tell him.

"It's my sister. I just found out she's registered to start here. She's...not a nice person and she...well, she likes to mess with me. She's brutal and after what you did in the library... Vanessa's going to make my life a living hell when she finds out it was just an act. So yeah, I'm leaving. I hear good things about universities in Europe."

There's a range of emotions sliding through Tate's green and gold flecked eyes as he processes what I just told him until amusement finally fills them and a grin spreads across his face. My anxiety flares hard seeing that he finds my misery entertaining and I'm a second from turning to run away when he says the last thing I ever expected a guy like him to say.

"I'll be your boyfriend."

I choke on my own saliva and sputter out, "Huh...wha...uh..."

He laughs like I'm the most amusing alien he's ever met and then steps close and slings an arm around my shoulders.

“Oh, man, you should see your face right now! But seriously, I mean it. That was part of what I was going to talk to you about. I need your help and now you need mine.”

I pull away from him still a little dazed and confused by what he’s saying. I shake my head and glare at him. “Spit it out, Tate. What exactly do you need my help with?”

He looks around to make sure no one can overhear us before meeting my eyes again with a serious look. “Here’s the deal. I need help to get caught back up on my assignments. You’re really smart so you would be perfect for that. I also need some breathing room from all the shallow football groupies that keep throwing themselves at me. That’s the part of the favor that benefits both of us. You help me get caught up with my assignments and pretend to be my girlfriend at the same time. It’s a win-win situation.”

I just blink stupidly at him for a few moments and then I start to laugh because fuck my life, I’m getting played by two hot assholes in one week. What did I do in a prior life to deserve this? What about me screams “fun to fuck with”? I’m still laughing as I turn to walk away but for all his big size, the man can move fast and he gets around me to block my way.

“Savy, come on, I’m serious! This will help both of us out!”

Too far. He’s taking this too far and I finally get mad.

“Screw you! You think just because you... you look like that and, and can throw a ball with some skill that it gives you the right to torment people? Screw you, Tatum Valor!”

His mouth drops open in surprise for a beat before it firms back up and his eyes go hard.

“I think you’re the one who’s screwed if you don’t agree to this deal. I’m not fucking with you, Savy. I’m asking you to help me and help yourself at the same time. And for the record, I don’t go around tormenting anyone. Think about this, as my girlfriend, you would have the whole team backing you up if your sister tries anything against you.”

I swallow hard at those words and feel a tiny spark of hope that he actually means what he says.

“No one’s going to believe that you would date me. Fake dating might work in books and movies but there’s no way we could pull it

off in real life. I'm not the girl who gets the quarterback, Tate. Everyone will see right through it."

That grin of his is starting to tug at his lips again as he holds something out to me.

"Take this. Wear it and leave the selling of us to me. Trust me, I got it."

I take the jersey he holds out and clutch it against my chest. My brain is telling me that there's no way this is going to end well and of course, it will be me who takes the biggest hit from any fallout but if he really thinks it will work, I want to know more.

"How, how will this work? I mean, what are the rules?"

He cocks his head to the side sending a shock of blond hair over his forehead and sort of smirks. "What do you mean? Have you never had a boyfriend before, Savy?"

I bite hard on my bottom lip as my skin flames red again and give a tiny shake of my head, making his eyebrows shoot up. Before he can laugh at me, I rush out, "I meant the fake dating. What do I have to do? Um, what do you expect from me as your...girlfriend?"

TATE

Fuck, this girl. She's clueless but in a cute kind of way. She's all stammering words and blushes when she lets her indifferent mask slip. I'm still a little bit pissed that she thought I was fucking around with her to torment her. It makes me wonder who's been messing with her for her to have such a low opinion of men. Time's ticking and I need to get back into the dressing room so I lay it out as fast as I can for her.

"I expect you to do what all girlfriends do. You come to my games in my jersey and cheer for me. You meet me in the hall after the game and gush about how awesome I played. Then we go to one of the after parties, make the rounds, dance, make out in front of everyone to cement the rumors and then I take you home. It's that simple. People will believe what I want them to."

Her skin is flushed with another blush and her eyes are huge behind her thick glasses as she squeaks, "Make out?"

It makes me laugh again. "Yeah, Savy, boyfriends and girlfriends kiss and make out. It's a thing, trust me." I scan her from head to toe taking in the tan corduroy skirt, thick navy-blue tights, and oversized cardigan covering a white blouse with a frown. "You probably have time to go home and change into something a little more stylish, like jeans or leggings if you want and you could let your hair down too."

She looks down at herself and then hits me with a disapproving look. "No! You don't get to tell me how to dress. There's already enough red flags in this fake relationship as it is. This is me, take it or leave it!"

There is a bite to her tone and I kind of like that she's standing up for herself so I just nod in agreement.

"Right, I got to run. Give your name at the ticket booth and they'll tell you how to find your seat."

I start backing away and I'm feeling pretty good about the deal I just made. I get to keep the skanks off my back for a while and I get a built-in tutor to help me get my grades up. This is going to work out aces for me. I lift a hand in the air and wink at her.

"Make sure you cheer extra loud for me, girlfriend. I'll see you after the game!"

When I hit the door and yank it open, I glance back one last time and see Savy holding my jersey in a white-knuckled grip. She stares down at it and it's hard to see from this distance but it looks a little like fear on her face. The door swings closed, cutting off my view of her so I push it and her from my mind, it's time to get my head in the game.

I catch a dark look from Coach as I slide into the locker room for being late but I take it in stride and drop down next to one of my best friends and roommate Jude Dixon.

"You get her sorted?" He asks with a smirk as his tattooed fingers take out his eyebrow ring. He drops it on the locker shelf with the rest of the metal he has to take out before every game and shuffles his hands through his already insanely messed white-blond hair.

I offer my fist for a bump. "Yeah, she took the deal. Start spreading the word, Tate Valor is off the market."

He bumps me back with a laugh. "Of course, she did. Bitches would pay you for a gig like that. I still don't really get it, man, but I've got your back if this is the way you want to play it."

I give him a sharp nod and then push all thoughts of my fake girlfriend from my head. I've got a game to win and that needs all of my focus right now.

I take a brutal hit in the second quarter that has me walking it off as the defense takes the field. We're up by twelve and I'm feeling good about how the game is going so I take a minute to look up into the stands in search of my new fake girlfriend. I have to bite hard on my lip not to bark out a laugh when I spot her. She looks like a little

mouse surrounded by screaming hyenas. She might be a mouse but she was brave enough to show up so it's a start for now.

Jude runs in two more touchdowns in the second half for the win, making it our fourth victory in a row and putting us at seven to one for the season at the halfway mark. We do our media requirements, Jude more than me with all his endorsements, and then head to the showers.

When we finally make it out to the hall where all the family and girlfriends wait, I'm ready to call it a day and head home but I know that's not an option. I need to hit the after party and flash my new girl around for a bit to make this deal fly. I spot Savy leaning against the wall at the very end of the hall, all alone. I push past a few women that try to get my attention and keep my eyes on her. I catch her eyes going wide behind her glasses when she spots me and flash her a grin.

"Savy! Get over here!" I call out to her and she jerks away from the wall and moves toward me. She's rambling before I even make it to her.

"Tate! Are you okay? That other player hit you so hard I thought for sure you would be carried off the field in pieces! I was so surpris... mpf!"

I cut her off mid-sentence by lifting her up against me with an arm under her ass and slamming my lips to hers. There are enough people in this hall to get the rumor mill started so I go all in and devour her mouth. She's stiff for a half second and then her hands come up and slide into my hair and surprise, surprise, clench into fists to pull me closer. Her mouth opens and her hot little tongue meets mine like we've done this a thousand times. I wanted tongues to be wagging about me kissing her but the crowd disappears when she moans into my mouth and my mind goes blank when all the blood rushes to my dick at the sweet sound. I pull her even closer and my other hand slides down her hip ready to take a handful of her ass when a laughing voice beside us has Savy jerking back from me and pressing against my chest to let her go.

"Damn, man, you didn't tell me you picked Amy from the Big Bang Theory! You're going to have to keep kissing her like that for anyone to believe this is the real deal."

I let Savy slide back to her feet but I'm still looking at her face when I see her completely shut down at Jude's awful comparison. She takes a few steps away from me with a red face and downcast eyes. I shake my head to clear it from the kiss and turn and hammer a punch into his arm.

"Shut the fuck up, you dick."

I turn back to Savy and yank her towards me so I can loop an arm over her shoulders. "Don't listen to him. His brain has leaked out of all the holes he's pierced through his body. How did you like the game?"

She looks cautiously over at Jude before blinking big blue eyes up at me through her glasses.

"It was...extreme. Exciting but I didn't expect it to be so...violent."

My brows furrow. "Savy, was this your first football game?"

She nods, making me laugh. This girl, it's like she's lived in a box her whole life. It's going to make some of this a challenge but I've got all the skills and reputation I need to pull this fake girlfriend thing off. Jude leans into us and winks at Savy.

"What did you think of my moves? I was the one scoring all the points."

She gives him a flat, blank look and shrugs one shoulder.

"Oh, are you a player too? Sorry, I didn't notice you."

His eyebrows shoot up in shocked surprise, causing me to laugh again. The guy is used to women gushing over him. This is probably the first time a female hasn't fallen at his feet in worship and it makes me like Savy even more. I shove him away and guide my new girl down and out of the hall, smirking at all the looks we're getting. Yup, the rumors will be circulating fast and furious after that kiss and it's exactly what I hoped for. We'll hit the party next and I'll put on a show that will guarantee everyone will believe Savy and I are a couple. This is going to work out perfectly for me.

SAVY

This is going to be a disaster for me. I can't believe I agreed to this farce. I know better! Maybe I've read too many fake dating trope books that end with a happy ever after and that's why I let myself go along with Tate's ridiculous deal. Now though, standing next to him at this too-loud party where I most definitely don't belong, I just want to find a corner and hide.

The sneering looks of contempt being sent my way by most of the gorgeous sorority girls have my skin crawling and me wishing the floor would open up and swallow me whole. The irony is that I thought this was what I wanted for this year. I wanted to go to football games and parties and maybe end up with a boyfriend. I just never expected it would be a completely fake one.

I rub the corduroy material of my skirt between nervous fingers and keep my eyes down. I keep thinking about what Tate's friend, Jude, said about me. Amy from that TV show was considered a super geek and often made fun of. I'm not science smart like her character was but I do get really good grades. I pull my cardigan closer around my body as some guy screams a rebel yell while chasing a laughing girl in a bikini past us. Jude must have meant that I look like Amy, dress like her, and...he's not wrong, I guess.

Our housekeeper, Martha, who was probably the closest thing I ever had to a mother, did all my clothes shopping for me while growing up. I never cared about how I looked or if the clothes she picked for me were stylish. I'm now starting to see that maybe I dress a little too much like a sixty-something woman instead of an almost twenty-one-year-old. I have plenty of daring outfits in my

closet but there's no way I could wear any of them outside my cage without my mask on.

I sigh and glance around the party as Tate chats with some of his teammates about the game they just won. He laughs at something one of them says, snagging my attention, and I take a minute to study him while his attention is elsewhere. He's so effortless in his confidence and I wonder what that would be like. To just know that you fit, that you belong.

My gaze drops down to his mouth and remembering the way he kissed me after the game, a warm glow fills my stomach. I know it was fake, but my God, that kiss did things to me that I didn't expect. Granted, I only have Hunter to compare him to and his kisses were kind of sloppy and brief. I tear my eyes away from Tate's mouth and push down the regret of picking the wrong guy to have my first sexual experience with.

I'm lost in thought so I don't realize Tate's talking to me until he slides one of his big hands down my back and pulls me up against his side.

"Savy, have you met Beckett Hart? He's one of my best friends and lives with Jude and me."

I focus on the guy in front of me and have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. The man is freaking huge, his broad shoulders straining the seams of the shirt he's wearing. He's even taller than Tate and I feel like a munchkin standing in front of him. Another man that God played favorites with and I wonder if my fake boyfriend's friends all have to meet the drop-dead gorgeous criteria to be in his circle. That has me glancing around nervously. I've never met Jude and Beckett before but I've seen them and Tate at my bar boyfriend's table at the club. Nerves thrum through me that Asher James might be the next person Tate introduces me to. When I don't spot him in the crowd, I focus back on Beckett.

He has a beautiful gold skin tone that signifies a lot of time outdoors. His brown hair waves back away from his face and has hints of auburn streaks in it but it's his striking blue eyes under thick brows that mesmerize me. He reminds me of a young-looking Henry Cavill but with the adult Witcher's broad build.

The confusion in those eyes as he flicks them between me and Tate and the, “Really?” that comes out of his mouth in a half laugh wipes away any admiration for his looks. This is the second one of his friends that has found me wanting based on how I look and I’m seriously over having my self-esteem gutted for one night so I look away from him with a frown.

“Yes, really. Beckett, meet Savy. She’s my girl.” Tate introduces us.

“Right, got it.” He says in a smooth deep voice that has a hint of the south in it and then holds out a massive hand for me to shake.

I might be socially inept but Martha at least made sure I had manners so I offer him a strained smile and shake his hand in return.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, darlin’.”

The way he says darlin’ in a southern accent has a shiver rolling down my back so I pull my hand from his and look up to Tate.

“I think I’m going to head out. It’s been a long day.”

Tate smirks and shakes his head. “Not yet, baby girl. We still have a show to put on.”

I can feel my cheeks heat up at the casual way he calls me baby girl and when I remember that he said we would make out here in front of everyone to sell the lie. I swallow hard as my eyes flash to Beckett and Jude and see the amusement on their faces.

That’s nice, what a bunch of jerks! This is a big joke to them. I’m a joke to them. Angry at myself for getting into this I snap at Tate, “Fine, let’s get this over with!”

Tate’s arm tightens around my shoulders and his brows go up at my tone but he just chuckles. “Relax, Savy, I promise this won’t hurt a bit. You might even enjoy it if you let yourself.”

I huff out a breath and give him a sharp nod. Yeah, that might be the biggest problem with all this. My head might know that everything he’s going to do to me is for a show, is fake - but my body doesn’t seem to care. I let him pull me over to where the room is cleared for a dance floor and he positions us right in the center for maximum exposure. His hands land on my hips and he pulls me right up against him and starts to sway us to the beat. I don’t know what to do with my hands so I end up just placing them on his chest and right away my fingers want to travel. The hard ridges and planes that

I can feel under his shirt make me wonder what he would look like without it on.

Fake, this is all fake and I need to remember that or I'm going to end up crushing on this guy and making a fool of myself again, so I pull back slightly.

Tate makes a noise of frustration and grabs my hands and drags them up and around his neck. His hot breath hits my ear as he whispers, "Savy, you have to make a little bit of an effort here or this won't look real."

I groan and huff out, "I don't know what to do. I'm not exactly experienced in these kinds of things!"

He chuckles against my neck and it sends goosebumps all over my skin.

"Just follow my lead. Do what feels natural. You need to help me sell the fantasy."

And that right there is exactly what I needed to hear to let go and do this. I might not have my wings and mask on but I'm an expert at selling something that's not real. I push Savy to the side and let the Butterfly out to dance.

I let myself melt into him. Slowly, I drag my hands down over his chest and then back up to circle his neck and slide into all that thick dark blond hair. One of my thighs slides between his and my hips rock and grind against him. I keep my eyes down, fixated on his chest, and dance like I'm behind bars. Judging by the way he groans, I'm doing just what he wanted.

The fingers of one of his hands dig into my hip while the other slides down to cup my ass and pull me even closer. His hard thigh is between my legs and there's no way to stop my traitorous body from grinding down on it. It doesn't matter that my skirt has ridden up; it doesn't matter that there are too many judgmental eyes zeroed in on me. All that matters is the glorious friction between my legs and the way it makes my whole body shudder with pleasure. My head falls back as I gasp out a breathy whine of need and they meet Tate's surprised gaze.

"L-like this?" I ask in a whisper.

The hand on my hip travels up my side until it reaches the back of my neck to hold me still. His head drops down so our mouths are a

breath away from touching.

“Fuck, you’re good. It’s like you just flicked a switch and became someone else. Don’t stop, keep going, Savy.”

His lips take mine and I’m gone. I couldn’t stop if I wanted to. I thought the way he kissed me before was hot but this is next-level heat. An inferno. He doesn’t wait for me to open my mouth for him, he invades it and then conquers it, kissing me ferociously, like he will starve without my mouth. I feel his lips, his tongue...teeth that nip my bottom lip and it does wicked, wicked things to my core. My panties and tights feel soaked with wet heat as his thigh grinds hard against my pussy and I’m seconds from coming right here in a packed room full of people watching us. My fingers make a fist and pull at his hair and the moan that I make is borderline obscene when he finally pulls back. I blink up at him through slightly fogged-up glasses and all the heat I was just feeling turns to ash at the laughter I see in his eyes.

“That was perfect. Now we can hurry out of here and everyone will assume it’s so we can go fuck. Let’s go.”

I’m still dazed as Tate drags me from the dance floor toward the front door but I’m not so far gone that I don’t hear the whispers and insulting jokes from some of the people we pass on the way out.

TATE

Holy shit, for a mousy little thing that's never had a boyfriend, Savy sure stepped up tonight. When I told her to sell the fantasy she did not disappoint. It was like she became someone else for a minute and it was kind of hot. Scratch that, not kind of hot...it was hot. I glance over at her in the passenger seat as I drive her home. She's been quiet and staring out the window ever since she gave me directions to her place. It's almost like she's embarrassed. I park in front of her building and turn to her.

"Hey, you okay? You did great tonight. I know it's out of your comfort zone but you really came through for me and sold it, so thank you for that."

She slowly turns to face me but doesn't say anything for a few moments and then sighs.

"Listen, I don't think this is going to work out. I really don't fit in with your crowd, Tate. Even your friends thought it was a big joke." She rubs her forehead frowning. "You have to understand, I'm...I'm a nobody. People don't notice me and I'm okay with that but being out there as your girlfriend? That puts a huge target on my back that I really can't handle. I...I don't have friends like you do. You have people who have your back. I don't and that means when this all falls apart, I'll be left to face the backlash and ridicule all on my own. I'm sorry. I can't do this."

I get where she's coming from and I feel a tiny bit bad for her but fuck no. I have too much riding on this year for me and I need her to go along with this whether she wants to or not.

“I hear you but it’s too late now. We just put on a show in front of all those people. I know how those dicks work. If you stop this now, you’ll be labeled a slut and your sister will have all the fuel she needs to make your life miserable. Or, you play along, be my fake girlfriend, help me with tutoring and we ride this out till the end of the season and go our separate ways.”

She gapes at me while shaking her head. “I’m screwed either way, aren’t I?”

I shrug one shoulder. “No, play along and I’ll make sure we part on good terms. I’ll play it that you dumped me and I’m heartbroken over it. No one will mess with you for that.” I reach over and grab her hand. “Come on, Savy, work with me here. Being my girlfriend gives you all the protection you need and it really helps me out. Come over to my place tomorrow afternoon and help me with my assignments. Here, give me your phone and I’ll put in my number. I’ll drop you a pin for my place.”

She almost seems to shrink in defeat as she hands her phone over. I punch in my details and hand it back. “So tomorrow, two o’clock. My place.”

Without saying a word, she makes a tiny nod and slides out of my car. I let out a deep breath and knock my head back on the headrest. I know I should feel bad about basically trapping this girl in my plan. I was the one who kissed her in front of her stepsister and stepmother, paving the road for all this and she’s not wrong about having a target on her back now either. The chicks who hang around the team in hopes of snagging a player can be vicious bitches and honestly, some of the guys aren’t much better but I’ll do what I can to shield her as much as possible.

I grab my phone as it chimes...again...and swipe away the fourth text message from my dad ordering me to call him. I’m not interested in going over the game play by play so he can tell me all the mistakes I made. I roll my neck on my shoulders, dump my phone into the cup holder, and put the car in drive.

Sure, Savy seems like a nice girl and all but she’s going to have to suck it up and deal because I need her help with school and as a buffer from all the crazy bitches who keep throwing themselves at

me. If she ends up hurt by it, well, she'll just have to chalk it up as a life lesson.

SAVY

I tossed and turned for most of the night, getting next to no sleep from the combination of anxiety over the situation I've found myself in, Vanessa being way too close for comfort, and my body being wound up from coming so close to the goal line with Tate, only to be left hanging. I finally did some self-care in the early hours of the morning just to get some relief but it was a muted release that didn't give me the satisfaction my body is craving.

I roll out of bed at dawn and head to my kitchen to do what always calms me down. I bake. Whenever I was anxious as a child, Martha would take me into the massive chef's kitchen in my father's house and teach me how to bake all kinds of delicious treats to make me feel better.

By the time my cell chimes with a text from Tate, I've got muffins, cookies, and tarts cooling on every available surface in my small studio apartment and I'm feeling somewhat more centered. I snatch up my phone, smearing it with flour when I swipe open the message. It's a pin to his place and a reminder to be there at two. That gives me two hours to get ready and pack up all the baked goods. I'll take a few boxes to the club tonight for the staff, drop a few off to my neighbors and whatever's left, take with me for study snacks.

With my kitchen put back to rights, I hit the shower and stand staring into my closet afterwards, trying to find something that doesn't scream Amy the super geek. After standing there for twenty minutes and coming up blank I grab one of my standard go-to outfits and say screw it. A fake girlfriend doesn't need to change any more

than a real one. Besides, I like being comfortable and the oversized cardigans are cozy.

I consider leaving my hair down but it always ends up in my face and annoying me so I wrap it up in a tight bun just like every day. I don't need to be anything but me and if Tatum Valor doesn't like it, he can find himself a new fake girlfriend. With my glasses firmly in place, I snag my satchel filled with notes and copies of novels from the last few assignments Tate's behind on. I slide in my laptop, add in a box of baked goods, and order an Uber.

The car pulls up in front of a mid-sized house not too far from campus and I wonder why he doesn't live in one of the frat houses like most of the more popular guys on campus. I ring the doorbell again as I wait and think about texting him to let him know I'm here when the door is yanked open and my soul flies from my body in terror. My face flames hard, my mouth drops open in shock, and I can literally feel my eyes bugging out of my head as Asher fucking James, aka bar boyfriend, glares at me.

"What? What do you want?" he barks.

Words, words, say some fucking words, Savy! But instead, a slow, high-pitched squeak comes out making my tomato face go even redder. Thank all that's holy, Tate shows up behind him and reaches around him to grab my wrist. He drags me in past Asher like this isn't a bomb that will detonate and destroy me if Asher somehow recognizes me.

"Hey, you made it! That's Ash, he lives here too." Tate tells me, pulling me deeper into the house but my head is still turned to stare at the man I've had nightly fantasies about for two years. Ash rolls his eyes and glares at my gawking causing me to snap my head around and stumble after Tate. This is so, so bad. I can't be here with him. If I had known Asher James lived with Tate, I would have taken the slut hit and whatever else Vanessa could throw my way.

"Hey, Amy! Good to see you again!"

Jude's voice distracts me from my internal meltdown and I look over to see Jude and Beckett on the couch with game controllers being worked over by flying thumbs.

"It's Savy, not Amy," I tell him and I can't even put any anger into my tone as I'm now just resigned to having guys call me by the

wrong name but he surprises me with a wink.

“Oh, I know, babe, but watching you and Tate make out last night unlocked a geek kink for me so I’mma just gonna call you Amy.”

I...I have no words for that so I turn away and settle at the dining table that Tate led me to, pulling out my books and notes. I try and block out that there are four devastatingly hot men in the room with me as I go over what Tate has done so far on the assignment. We work together on where he needs to go with his essay and I give him some direction to make it stronger and then I start on some of my work while he makes progress. I’m lost in my work when a big body leans over way too close to me. He smells like soap and some type of citrus and I can’t help but breathe it in.

“What’s this? Did you bring us snacks, Amy?”

I turn my head and come very close to Jude’s face, only inches away from mine, as he reaches for the box of baked goods I brought. His eyes are a light golden brown that pair perfectly with his chin-length messy white-blond hair. I swallow hard and give him a slow nod. He snags the box from where it sits across from me and I swear when he pulls back, he sniffs my hair bun.

Tate mumbles beside me, “Fuck off, Jude. We’re working.”

I turn my eyes back to my computer but seconds later Jude lets out an almost orgasmic moan that has my eyes flying back to him.

“Fuck me, this is amazing,” he moans through a mouth full of butter tart.

It’s nice to see someone enjoy one of my creations so I give him a small smile but it drops away when he yanks the chair out beside me and drops down into it. His arm goes around my shoulders and he pulls my upper body close to his so that our noses are almost touching. I can’t stop my eyes from dropping to his mouth when he licks the crumbs from them.

“Amy, baby doll, I think you should let me put my peener into your peener pocket.”

It takes me a beat to process what he just said and then I’m shoving him back away from me with a scowl. The dick just laughs and grabs another tart.

“Man, will you stop playing with her? We’re trying to get work done.” Tate grumbles as he reaches across and steals a tart for

himself.

After that, Beckett and Ash snag treats for themselves before Jude grabs the box and runs away with the rest so he doesn't have to share. I keep my head down, focusing on my keyboard. I know Jude's just teasing and fooling around but I don't know how to fit in with that kind of vibe. I never had friends or siblings to learn how to have fun with. Even after Celeste married my dad, Vanessa wasn't interested in being my friend so I just try and stay out of it so I don't say the wrong thing.

"You make these yourself, darlin'?" Beckett asks and when I just nod and keep typing, he hums a noise. "Girl's got skills, Tate. Make sure she comes back."

I side-eye Tate and catch him rolling his eyes so I just keep typing. We work through the afternoon and into the early evening. I'm pleased with the progress we've both made but when a group of girls shows up and starts partying with the others I start packing up.

"Where are you going? Why don't you stay and have a few drinks with us?" Tate asks but I shake my head.

He grabs my wrist to stop me from sliding my laptop into my bag, causing me to send him a questioning look. He glances over to the girls doing shots at the kitchen island and then back to me.

"Come on, Savy," he says in a lowered voice, "I could really use some girlfriend backup here."

I look over to the girls and find half of them looking our way with calculating eyes and sigh.

"I'm sorry, I can't. I have to get to work. I have a shift tonight."

My stomach does a slow flip with nerves but I ignore it. I made a deal with him so I lean over and kiss him quickly, hoping it's enough to keep the cats away from him for tonight. Tate must not think it's enough because he pulls me back and hits me with full tongue and lips until I'm breathless. He rests his forehead against mine with a sigh.

"Fine but you should shoot me your schedule so I know when you're available. I know you work at the library but where else do you work?"

I dodge the question by grabbing my phone. "I need to order an Uber. One sec."

He covers my phone with his hand. "Don't worry about it. I'll drive you home. Anything to get out of the line of fire here."

I nod and gather the rest of my stuff up and follow him out.

"Hey! Where are you going, T?" Ash calls after him.

"I'm taking Savy home. She has to work tonight."

"Meet us at Masks, then, and don't say you have to do schoolwork. You did that all day."

Tate just throws a hand up into the air in acknowledgment and guides me out the front door to his car. I spend most of the drive back to my apartment gnawing on my bottom lip and wringing my hands in panic. They're all going to be at Masks tonight and Ash always sits close to my cage. I'm terrified that going to work tonight will be a nerve-wracking ordeal that I might not survive.

ASHER

I toss back the last of my drink with a growl and push away the girl who won't take no for an answer. She keeps leaning against me and trying to climb onto my lap and I keep pushing her away. I finally have enough and snarl at her.

"Fuck off. Take your skanky ass somewhere else. I'm not interested."

She pouts like I just took away her favorite toy and flounces away in a huff. Her friend is grinding down on Jude's lap and snaps at me, "What's your problem?"

Jude laughs and covers her mouth. "Don't bait the zoo animals, sugar. Especially when they haven't been fed for a while." He grins at me. "You can't say happiness without penis and his is covered in dust."

I let fly the one-finger salute at him and turn my chair towards her cage. Something's off with my Butterfly tonight and it's pissing me off that I can't talk to her to find out what. I can't even put my finger on what's different with her other than she's wearing a full harlequin mask tonight instead of the half mask she normally wears. I hate that I can't see her sweet, pouty pink lips.

She's wearing my favorite rainbow wig with all the fat curls falling to sweep gently against her lush ass. An ass that's perfectly showcased in hot pink leather pants. The shiny white leather bustier barely contains her full breasts and my mouth waters just thinking about getting my lips and tongue on those tits. Her wings match the rainbow hair and flutter with every move she makes but she's off somehow. Most nights, it feels like she's almost dancing for me and

me alone but tonight she's mainly kept her back to me. If she was mine, if we were together, I'd say she was pissed off at me for something and was ignoring me.

I wave the waitress over for another drink and when she sets it in front of me, I lean close so she can hear me over the loud music.

"Is everything okay with the Butterfly tonight? She seems...off."

One perfectly sculpted cherry-red eyebrow goes up and I can see the amusement all over her face as she pats me on the shoulder.

"Sorry, Ash. You know I can't share anything personal about the dancers...even if you are her biggest fan. I'll pass along your concern to her, though."

I toss a bill onto her tray in dismissal, cursing to myself. Yeah, you do that. Go tell Butterfly I'm worried about her. Maybe she'll finally crack and open her cage to me. I watch the red-headed waitress drop off a few more drinks and then move to Butterfly's cage and pass her a bottle of water through the bars. She motions her down and speaks into her ear. My eyes are glued to her reaction, hoping for a look, a glance my way but all I see is her shrug one smooth pale shoulder and then she goes back to dancing with her back to me.

Fuck! Fuck this and fuck her. I throw my fresh drink back, slam the glass down and push to my feet. "I'm out!" I call to the guys and make to leave but Tate jumps up and follows me. Whatever, I'm done pining over a chick that doesn't have any interest in me. What kind of idiot waits two years for a woman he's never even talked to? I don't even know her fucking name, for pity's sake. I'm done. Done watching, done waiting. Fuck her and her wings.

"Come on, man, get in. I'll drive us home. We can swing by tomorrow to grab your bike."

I want to tell him to fuck off too but I know he's right. I've had a few too many drinks and that with how pissed off I am right now is not a good combination on a motorcycle. I climb into his car and slam the door, causing Tate to shoot me a dark look filled with warning.

"Take it easy. The door's not who you're pissed at. What was up with her tonight anyway? She barely looked your way."

I slam my head back against the seat and grind out, "I don't fucking know, T. I don't fucking know because she's not my fucking

girl, she won't fucking talk to me and now she won't even fucking look at me either." I scrub at my face as the anger starts to drain away. "What the fuck is wrong with me, T? What am I even doing? I've wasted the last two years waiting for a stranger to acknowledge me in some way. I feel like a fucking fool."

He looks over at me in concern when we hit a red light. "Don't say that, man. Anyone with eyes in their head can see that you guys have a connection. She dances for **you**, brother. That's clear as day. I don't know what her deal is, what she's got going on outside that club but without saying a single word to each other, you two have more of a relationship than I've ever had with any woman."

The light turns green and he looks back to the road. As mad as I was, what he said is true. There is something there between me and my Butterfly and it's something bigger than words. There has to be because if I'm wrong, that means I'm just some fucked up stalker loser. Now I'm feeling shitty for storming out on her like that. Even though she wasn't facing me tonight, I know she knew I was there for her. I shake off my mood and focus back on Tate.

"So, what's with you and the bookworm? She's not exactly the Tatum Valor type."

He glances my way with a frown before going back to the road. "Savy's helping me out. She agreed to be my fake girlfriend to keep the skanks away and help me get caught up with school. Coach is riding my ass about my grades. I can't risk getting benched for the rest of the season. I need the scouts to be looking at me on the field and you know how my dad is. Hell hath no fury like a football dad living vicariously through his son's achievements."

I make a hmm of agreement. "Sure, I get that but what does she get out of it? Why would she agree to fake date you?"

"She gets a shield. She's got a hell-on-wheels sister that likes to bully her. The bitch can't do shit to Savy as long as she's under my protection."

I nod slowly. "Alright, but what happens when she catches a case of the feels for you? A girl like that probably doesn't have a long line of guys waiting to date her so having you acting like her boyfriend might...confuse her."

Tate scoffs. “Yeah, no. Savy didn’t want to have anything to do with this. I kind of forced her into it. She’s not going to be a problem.”

I shrug and look out my window. “Ok, sure. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, though.”

I have to shake my head at what a sorry group the four of us are. Tate’s got a fake girlfriend. I’ve got a girl who won’t even tell me her name and Beckett and Jude will nail anything in a skirt.

We’re less than two years out from graduation and entering the real world and I still don’t know what that looks like for me. I need to decide if I want to continue on to get my MD or just roll the dice with a Bachelor of Science in sports medicine. It’s a huge commitment to go another four years, not to mention the cost involved.

When Jude was scouted in our senior year of high school by multiple universities, I was thrilled my best friend would have a pathway out of the world we were born into. Both of us had been getting deeper into the dark side where our families have lived for generations and I was afraid that the blood would never wash off our hands if we stayed much longer.

I was ready to cheer him on and throw him the biggest send off but that sneaky fucker used his clout to demand a scholarship for me too if they wanted him to sign. Penworth U took the deal and that’s how we got out together. If I keep going after graduation, there won’t be a scholarship and that means deep debt.

I wave off Tate’s offer for another drink once we get home and head up to my room for a shower. As much as I want to shut down and not think about anything, the minute the hot water hits my head, those stunning blue eyes flash through my mind. I close my eyes and picture her perfect curves, her smooth skin, and her sexy moves as she dances for me. My cock is in my hand without a thought and all it takes is imagining her moaning my name to have me coming all over the tiles. Fuck, my Butterfly’s killing me.

SAVY

I pull my sweater tighter around myself to ward off the late fall chill as I walk across campus. I'm going to have to break out my winter jacket soon as the weather gets colder and the forecast is calling for snow any day now.

As chilly as the air is, it is no match to the coldness I felt when Ash stormed out of the club last weekend. I hate that I made him feel that way but I was so wound up about seeing him at Tate's and then knowing they would all be at the club watching me that I just couldn't bring myself to dance for him like I usually do.

A shiver wracks my body as a gust of wind hits me. I hate this so much. I hate that I have to hide who I am from him. I would give anything to be the kind of woman he would want in real life, but I know I'll never be brave enough to be her without a mask.

Why can't I be the Butterfly? When I'm pretending to be her, when I'm dancing for him, I have all the confidence in the world. I know there's something there, it's like there's a tether between us connecting us. If I could just be that woman in real life, I might have a shot at...

"Oh Savy, that is you! That nice brown outfit of yours just blends right into the background. Almost didn't see you, thought you were a big ol' pile of lumpy dirt there for a minute."

I cringe at hearing her voice and the cruel words that fall so easily from her mouth and then slowly turn to face my sister. She's standing with three other blond sorority girls that are just as beautiful and stylish as she is, in their designer outfits, expensive scarves,

and all clutching tall white paper cups that I would bet all the money in my wallet are filled with pumpkin spice something or other.

“Hello, Vanessa. It’s nice to see you’ve already made friends. Are you enjoying the new school so far?” I ask, in as pleasant a tone as I can stomach.

Her blue eyes are flint hard as she smirks at me. “It’s passable but I’m sure it will get better the more I settle in and find my groove. You know how it is at a new school. It takes time to catch up on all the gossip and rumors.”

Her smirk spreads to a grin and I brace myself for whatever she’s about to hit me with.

“Speaking of which, I actually just heard a few about you. Apparently, you’re quite the little slut. I was shocked to learn that you’ve managed to fuck your way through two of the hottest guys on campus and it’s only a few months into the year. I’d love to hear who your next target is.”

The other three women laugh as my face turns red. Before I have a chance to try and defend myself a deep rumbling voice comes from behind me at the same time a warm jacket is wrapped around my shoulders and spicy cinnamon fills my nose.

“Speaking of sluts, why don’t one of you three fill me in on who the new super bitch is? I’d like to be able to tell Tate exactly who’s fucking with his girl.”

The three women with Vanessa go pale while my sister pastes on a brittle smile and holds out her hand to him palm down like she expects him to kiss it.

“Oh, don’t be silly. I’m Vanessa, Savanah’s sister. We were just joking around. That’s what sisters do, right Savy?”

I nod slowly still trying to get over the fact that Beckett just stood up for me. No one has ever done that before besides Tate that one time. “Yeah, sure. Just kidding around. So...much...fun.”

That earns me a look filled with promised retribution but Beckett’s already pulling me away from them with a warning.

“Blair, Mckenna, Britney, make sure your new girl knows the fucking rules or your whole house will answer for her.” He tugs me under his big arm and turns me away from them. “Come on, darlin’, let’s go grab some lunch.”

I have to almost run to keep up with his long legs and when he notices, he laughs down at me and slows his pace. The bright sunshine brings out the red glints in his hair and contrasts beautifully with his icy blue eyes.

“Was that thing really your sister?”

I nod. “Stepsister. She doesn’t like me very much.”

He holds the door to the dining hall open for me. “You got yourself an evil stepmother too, Cinderella?”

I huff out a laugh because, well, facts. “I guess I do.”

“Hmm, that sounds like a story to me. Go sit at that table over there and I’ll grab us some lunch and you can tell me all about it. You have any preference for food?”

I shake my head with a smile. “Nope, I’m not fussy. Whatever you’re having is good with me but nothing with strawberries. I’m allergic.”

He points at the table again for me to sit and then goes and gets in line. I can’t stop the stupid little smile on my face. Not only has no one stood up for me before but in two years of going here, I’ve never had anyone to sit with for lunch. I’m still smiling when Vanessa and her friends come into the hall and I swear the devil comes and perches on my shoulder because when she spots me sitting alone, I lift my hand and give her a cheery little wave. I can practically see the steam billowing out from her ears as she pivots in my direction but she only makes it a few steps when a blond dynamo dashes in front of her.

“Baby doll! There you are!”

I almost choke on a gasp when every head turns my way as Jude swoops down on me and lifts me from my seat in a bone-crushing hug that has my feet inches off the floor. He smells like fresh air and citrus.

“Put me down, you idiot!” I sputter out but I’m also trying not to laugh at the same time when I see my sister turn almost purple and stomp her foot like a toddler.

“Dude, drop the girl and back away before Tate takes your head off for damaging his property,” Beckett growls as he returns with two loaded trays of food.

Jude sets me back on my feet and helps me take off Beckett's jacket and hangs it on the back of my chair with my bag.

"Bah! She's not his yet. He's only taken her for a test drive. They haven't even made it to price negotiations yet. I still have a shot with her. Right, Amy?"

Oh my God, this guy is a total fool but I'm going to circle back to him. I hit Beckett with my darkest look.

"Property? Did you seriously just refer to me as Tate's property?"

He shoves a tray overloaded with food at me. "Uh, can we go back to when you were all smiley? I think that was a safer time than right now."

I shake my head at him in exasperation and turn to Jude. "Stop calling me Amy or I'll make you sorry."

He grins mischievously and I notice the silver and black rings on his hands as his tattoo-covered fingers snag some fries from the plate Beckett brought me.

"That sounds fun! Take your best shot...A-MEE."

I turn in my seat to face him and lean a little closer. I narrow my eyes at him and whisper, "If brains were dynamite, you couldn't even blow your nose, Jude."

His eyes squint a little and slowly the grin drops from his face until it turns into a pout. He crosses his arms over his chest like a toddler and looks at Beckett.

"She's mean," he whines.

I nudge him in the side. "I'm sorry, didn't hear you there. Who's mean?"

He grumbles a little but finally says, "Savy. Savy's mean."

I nod, quite pleased with myself for being able to banter with him a bit and turn to face the table again.

"I like her! Want to go home with me and play Clitar Hero? I have the high score."

The hand holding the fry I was about to eat freezes halfway to my mouth and then I turn slowly to look at him in disbelief.

"There is something seriously wrong with you."

Jude wiggles his eyebrows at me. "Yeah, maybe. but I think you like that a little bit. Don't you?"

I roll my eyes and turn away and mutter “Maybe” under my breath, causing him to shoot a fist into the air in triumph.

Beckett has somehow managed to clear half his tray by this point and he points a rolled-up pizza slice at me. “Alright, storytime Cinderella.”

BECKETT

The little mouse in front of me tears apart the bread roll I added to her tray while shooting looks over at the table a bunch of sorority girls are sitting at, including her sister.

When Tate first told us he was going to fake date some girl to keep the skanks away from him, I thought he was losing his edge. When I met this girl at the party the other night, I thought he was working a con like that movie, *She's All That*. He was going to take this nobody and give her a makeover, turn her into some popular girl just to prove he could. Savage, but also kind of entertaining. It reminded me of how brutal he could be back in our prep school days.

Now I'm not really sure what his game is. Savy came over this weekend, spent hours working with him on his assignments, and never once showed any sign of being interested in him or any of us. It was weird and kind of refreshing. I can't remember there ever being a girl in our house that one of us wasn't nailing.

He asked us to keep an eye out for her and shut down any trash talk we might hear about her. I didn't really give it much thought until I heard that uber bitch calling her a lumpy pile of dirt and a slut. Normally, I'd slide right on past that kind of girl drama but for some reason, I decided to get on board the Savy train. Might as well use the little bit of power I still have for some good before it's gone. It's a bit of a joke how much power the football players wield at this school but I wasn't complaining about it when I was on the team. Now that I'm on the sidelines, who the fuck knows how long my influence will last.

"Come on, darlin', spill the tea."

She bites down on her lip and looks over at the bitch table again with a sigh before pushing her big, black-rimmed glasses higher on her nose.

“My dad married Vanessa’s mom when I was ten. I was nervous but also excited to have a sister. My mom died having me so it had been just the two of us, me and my dad, for my whole life. I was... was homeschooled so I never had any friends and the idea of having a sister was thrilling. Turned out, not so much. Her mom wasn’t really interested in having another daughter and she poisoned that well before we even met. Vanessa was a mean girl right from the start.”

Her forehead furrows and she wraps her sweater tighter around her body like she’s trying to give herself a hug before she goes on.

“My dad...died...two years after they got married leaving me in the care of someone who never wanted me in the first place. It...it wasn’t a great environment to grow up in. I think they both probably resented being stuck with me. Celeste made me go to a real high school with Vanessa and let’s just say she was the queen bee there and made things really uncomfortable for me. We don’t see each other that much anymore now that I’m away at school so it hasn’t been too bad. But now that Vanessa has transferred here, well, she’s got me back in her crosshairs again.”

I look over at the other table and spot her sister glaring our way and smirk. I don’t get women and the way they can tear each other down. From a distance, the sister is the total package. Too many sharp angles for me but she is pretty, blond, thin, and stylishly put together. Sitting there surrounded by other girls of her caliber, she looks good but she’s got that ugly look of superiority look about her too that’s a real turn-off.

I turn back to Savy and give her a closer look. She’s the complete opposite. I think she might be halfway cute but she hides it. Her dark hair is tightly wound up in a bun so I don’t know if is long or medium length. She doesn’t have a lick of makeup on and her large, plain glasses do a good job of dimming what could be really pretty blue eyes. The three times I’ve seen her, she’s been wearing oversized, shapeless clothes that hide her form but she’s definitely not a slim girl. All in all, her appearance screams “Don’t look at me.” But there’s nothing there that would give anyone a reason to target her for

bullying. Savy just appears to be a nice girl with no style and no friends. She's someone easily overlooked and forgotten.

"Hmm, so just an everyday, basic cunt, then? You didn't torment her growing up to make her hate you? Cut all her barbie's heads off? Steal her boyfriend in junior high? Nothing?" Jude asks her with a gleam of mischief in his eyes.

Savy rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "No, and I've never had a boyfriend, hers or mine."

Her eyes go big and a blush fills her cheeks like she didn't mean to divulge that.

Jude makes an exaggerated shocked face. "What! You mean to tell me that your very first boyfriend is..." he whispers, "fake? And you don't even get to do the no-pants dance? That is so not fair." He turns to me with a conspiratorial look. "Beck, come on, we need to step up and be the heroes here and help this little lady out. She deserves to be rewarded for taking on all the shit duties of being a girlfriend. We can give her the peen prizes she deserves!"

I shake my head at him as Savy turns bright red in embarrassment. I love the guy but sometimes I wish he had an off button. I try and take some of the heat off of her by asking, "You going to the game today?"

She makes a face but nods, picking at her food and not really eating anything.

"You don't like football?"

She glances up at me and cringes a bit. "Sorry, are you on the team too? I don't mind watching the game, it's interesting but I'm not a huge fan of the party after it that Tate wants me to go to."

"Of course it's interesting! How could it not be with me leading the way to every victory? You're going to cheer for me this time right, Am...uh...Savy?" Jude asks while hitting her with puppy dog eyes.

I get what he's doing, trying to deflect so I don't have to answer her. He knows how hard it's been for me being out of the game. I stack all my trash and stand from the table.

"Gotta go. See you guys later."

Savy bounces to her feet and tries to hand me my jacket but I wave her off.

“Keep it for now. Just bring it to the house the next time you come over or leave it in Tate’s car when he picks you up.”

I dump my tray on the way out the door and revel in the cold air when I step outside. It helps a little to numb the pain of knowing I won’t be playing with my team.

TATE

The music is practically deafening as I lean against the wall of the frat house with Savy nestled between my legs in front of me. She has her back against my chest and I have an arm wrapped around her waist as I chat with Sam and Grayson about the win we just narrowly pulled off. It was a close call with too many fumbles and my body is sore from getting sacked three times, but we won in the end, keeping our streak alive. Sam chugs whatever's in his red solo cup, crushes it in his fist, and then tosses it over his shoulder where it pings off some freshman pledge who doesn't say shit about it.

They take off in search of more alcohol and I scan the room looking for the boys. Instead, I find ugly smirks and judgment filled eyes from too many people. All it takes is a dark look sent their way for those eyes to slide away but it pisses me off. Who the fuck are they to judge who I date? Just because Savy doesn't fit into their mold of what a quarterback's girlfriend should look like? Fuck them. I'm Tate motherfucking Valor. I'll do whatever the fuck I want.

I gather Savy's bulky sweater at the hem so I can slide my hand underneath it to get to the warm skin of her waist. As my fingers stroke her skin, she stiffens against me so I drop my mouth to her neck and slide my lips over the delicate skin behind her ear. My eyes are on the crowd with a fuck you look but when I feel her tremble and melt back into me, my eyes drop down to the side of her face. I lightly drag my teeth over her earlobe and groan when her ass pushes back against my rapidly growing cock. I let my hand wander over her stomach and up a little further until my thumb brushes against the underside of her lace-covered breast. Her head tilts to

the side giving me more access to her neck and I see her eyes flutter closed behind her big glasses.

Goddamn, for a fake girlfriend, she sure knows how to play to a crowd. I can't stop myself from grinding against her ass and I have to remind myself that this is a show we're putting on here not the real deal. That's getting harder and harder the more I touch her and the more she responds to that touch.

I find myself thinking about this girl way more than I should when we're not together. I want to know if she's really as turned on as I am when we do these things in public or if she's just a really good actress. Savy's so hard to read sometimes. I feel her shudder under my touch but the minute we're in private, all signs that she wants me disappear. It's kind of infuriating the way she can just flip a switch and turn indifferent.

Annoyance flares through me that she's capable of shutting it off like that. She's my fake girlfriend and does exactly what I want her to do but it pisses me off that she doesn't want me for real too. I grab her chin and tilt it my way so I can look into her eyes, trying to figure this girl out but once again, I can't read her so I punish her by slamming my lips against hers. It's stupid and purely ego driven but I want her to feel something real. My cock is throbbing against her ass and I want her to suffer right along with me so I deepen the kiss and tangle my tongue with hers until her hand comes up and threads into my hair and pulls like she needs me closer, deeper.

The cell phone in my pocket starts vibrating between us and that is all it takes to break the moment. Savy flinches and pulls away. I stare into her eyes, searching for the sign that she's as desperate for more as I am but all I see is wariness and then she blinks and turns her head away. Cursing with frustration, I yank the phone from my pocket and then curse out loud when I see it's my father calling. I've been dodging his calls for a week and I know if I don't take this he'll find a reason to come out here and see me in person.

"I have to take this. Stay put and I'll be back in a bit," I tell Savy and ignore the flash of unease I see on her face as she darts a look around the crowded frat house. I swipe to answer the phone and slam it up to my ear as I push my way toward the front door.

"Yeah, just give me a minute to get somewhere quiet, Dad."

What he says is drowned out by the thumping music until I bound down the stairs and out to the front yard. I keep walking, not wanting anyone to overhear this conversation and he must hear the silence because he launches in on the attack immediately.

“What’s going on with you? You barely scratched out that win by the skin of your teeth! I was embarrassed by that play in the first quarter when you...”

I let him run down my errors play by play, knowing that nothing I say, no excuse will matter to him. My shoulders get tighter and tighter the more he picks apart every aspect of my time on the field until I’m ready to put my fist through something.

“Where’s your head at? Because it sure as hell wasn’t on that field tonight. You need to pull your head out of your ass and focus! No scout is going to give you a second look playing like that. Is that what you want? You want to be just another washed out player who ends up selling cars for a living?”

I want to scream back, “Like you?” but I know he would make me pay for it so I just mumble, “No, sir.” He doesn’t sell cars for a living but he did wash out as a player, not good enough to make it to the draft.

“What the fuck’s this I hear about you having a girlfriend now? What’d I tell you about that? You can fuck as much pussy as you want but you leave that hearts and flowers bullshit alone. You can’t afford to have some dumb bitch derailing your future! Next thing you know, she’ll be knocked up and you’ll be on the hook for the next eighteen years paying child support. Fuck, Tate - are you really that stupid?”

I bite back a curse. I don’t even want to know how he found out about Savy. This fucking bastard has eyes everywhere. I need him off my back so with a quick look around to be sure no one will overhear me I give him the lowdown.

“She’s not my girlfriend, she’s a fucking stand-in! I needed some space to keep all these fucking gold digger bitches off my back. We have a deal. She fakes being my girlfriend and has been helping me keep up with my grades. That’s it. She’s nothing and all my focus is on the goddamn game, Dad!”

“Watch your tone with me, son,” he snarls. “You better remember who’s footing the bill for you being there and show some fucking respect! Until you sign a contract for a multi-million-dollar deal, I own your ass and you’ll do as I say. Now drop the fucking girl and get your head back into the game or we’ll be having this conversation in person.”

“I’m...” A quick glance at the screen and I see he’s already hung up and I want nothing more than to throw my phone at the closest tree quickly followed my fist but instead I let out a roar of curses and then slide my phone back into my pocket.

Fuck! April cannot come soon enough. The minute I sign my name to a contract I’m fucking done with him and his controlling bullshit. I scrub my hands over my face in frustration and anger. I make some money off endorsements but not enough to cover everything. Jude rakes in the cash with his deals. I need to talk to him and see if he knows of any more that I can pick up. The sooner I can get out from under that asshole’s thumb the better.

I turn to go back to the party and see Jude come out with an arm slung over Savy’s shoulders and a wicked grin on his face along with a smear of blood near his mouth. Beck’s trailing along behind them and when our eyes meet, I see anger blazing from them. I just sigh and wait for them to catch up to me to find out what else has gone wrong tonight.

SAVY

I pull out my phone and use it as a shield when Tate leaves me alone to take his call. My heart is still racing from that last kiss and the feel of his fingers against my bare skin. This fake deal is getting harder and harder for me every time we're out in public together. I've never been touched by anyone the way Tate touches me and I feel like I'm constantly wound tight, on edge. The brief time I was with Hunter was all fumbled gropes as he stripped me of my clothes like he was in a race to the finish line, his not mine. But with Tate...it's been like a week-long session of what I always thought foreplay would be. I'm so ready for the final act and knowing that will never happen just makes it even worse.

A large presence hits the wall next to me and crowds in close, making me jerk my head up from my phone. It's one of the guys Tate had been talking to earlier. The rank smell of stale gin rolls over me as he breathes out in my space. I try and slide away to put some distance between us but one of his large hands slams into the wall on the other side of me, caging me in.

"You must have a gold-plated pussy under all that Aunt Betty clothing to snag a guy like Tate. Or is it your head game? You suck a good cock, nerd girl?"

My shoulders come up and I can literally feel myself shrinking into myself at his crude words but before I can ask him to leave me alone, another voice chimes in.

"It's got to be that mouth. I've fucked that cobweb-filled cunt. Dry as a desert, man. Thank God she was a virgin so I had a little bit of

blood to lube things up with,” Hunter slurs with a laugh as he slides in from the side.

Humiliation washes over me as tears fill my eyes. I try and duck under the guy’s arm but he grabs me and pins me in place with one large hand between my breasts.

“That right, nerd girl? You got a mouth that does tricks? How ‘bout you hit your knees and show me? Tate’s never minded sharing before. Can’t see him caring for someone like you.”

I’m a split second away from screaming for help when the gin-soaked guy in front of me gets yanked away and slammed against Beckett’s chest. Jude gives me a quick wink and then turns on him while I see Hunter slither away from the corner of my eye.

“Better yet, how about **you** get on **your** knees and suck **my** dick, Sam? Let’s see if your mouth is useful for anything besides running trash out of it?” Jude taunts him while Beckett holds his arms to keep him in place.

“What the hell, Jude? Are you fucking her too? Lay off man, I was just playing with the bitch!”

The dark look that crosses Jude’s eyes has a shiver running down my back and my breathing picking up. All the fun goofiness that I normally see from him is gone. In its place is a man you should... run...from. I should be scared of who this guy just became right in front of my eyes but instead, I lean a little closer to see exactly what he’s going to do. He chuckles a humorless laugh.

“Know what? Changed my mind. I don’t want that herpes tunnel anywhere near my dick but here’s something else for you to suck on.”

Jude’s fist flies faster than I can believe to punch Sam right in the mouth. The sudden violence should be shocking to me but instead, my core clenches and heats up. This guy I barely know just hit another...for me... and it sings to something deep down and dark in me. I swallow hard when he leans in close and swipes some of the blood that’s bloomed on Sam’s mouth with his thumb and he licks it off.

“You don’t look at her, you don’t talk to her, and you sure as fuck don’t touch her. Let the others know. She’s off limits. If I have to have this conversation again...I won’t lick your blood off...I’ll fucking drink

it down. Ya hear me?" Jude tells him in the coldest tone I've ever heard and then swings those cold, flat, golden eyes my way. One blink and they warm back up and he hits me with his usual grin.

"Ready to get out of here, baby doll? We could go back to our place and pretend we're Canadians, do some beaver bashin'!" He jokes, trying to soothe me.

All I can do is nod slowly, take the hand he offers, and let him lead me out with Beckett at my back.

BECKETT

I sit in the stadium stands watching what used to be my team run drills during practice and try not to rage out my anger for everyone to hear. I just had my last meeting with the medical team and got the final answer I've been dreading. My football career is officially over. Too much damage done and too much weakness to be of any use to the team. I drop my head into my hands and try and breathe through the hopelessness that's threatening to consume me at having my last hope snatched away.

What the fuck am I supposed to do now? Football has been the only constant in my life since I first put the pads on. I've got nothing else. My father shipped me off to boarding school a month after my mom died and has barely acknowledged me since. When I did go home for holidays it was often to an empty house with just some woman he paid to watch me while he jetted off with whatever bimbo he was currently fucking. I know the bastard would give me a job after graduation but what's the point of that? Alone in a job I have no interest or passion for sounds like a death sentence to me.

I look up and watch Tate throw a perfect spiral to Jude downfield and slump back into the seat. That's my family down there. How am I supposed to just walk away and never be with them again?

Tate and I met at prep school when we were thirteen. We connected right away both on and off the field. With both of us having shitty fathers and a love of football it was an easy bond and we ended up rooming together until graduation. There was no question of us both going to the same university and playing

together. We knew we might end up on different teams after the draft but we had a plan to do our best to try and go together.

We met Jude and Ash as freshmen and the four of us just clicked. Ash doesn't play but he is involved with the team, interning and volunteering for experience to go along with the sports medicine degree he is working on. The last two years playing, partying, and living together have bonded us into our own little family group where we now spend most of our holidays together too. Now that's all going to come to an end. Ash and I will stay on here for this year and next to complete our degrees but Tate and Jude will be drafted and gone when this year is over and I've never felt so fucking lost.

Ash dumps himself into the seat next to mine and kicks his motorcycle boots up on the seat in front of him. He doesn't say anything, he knows why I was here today. We sit and watch the team run their drills and plays in silence until practice comes to an end and then make our way down the steps to the field. That dick bag, Sam, spots me and throws up a finger flag with a smirk my way and I wish it had been me that got to taste his blood the other night.

"What's that about?" Ash asks with a laugh.

I clench my hands into fists thinking about how satisfying it would be to punch someone right now.

"He went after Tate's girl the other night. Had her pinned up against a wall and was trash-talking her. Scared her a little bit so Jude took a shot at him."

Ash arches an eyebrow. "The fake one?" When I nod, he rolls his eyes. "So why's Sam mad at you?"

I smirk. "Might have been holding him in place for that shot."

Ash shakes his head. "You and Jude trying for your hero boy scout badges? That whole sitch is fucking weird if you ask me. What I don't get is if he was going to do something like that, then why'd he pick a little nothing mouse like her?"

I just shrug. "Don't know, but a girl like her, she doesn't deserve to be thrown to the wolves like that."

He side-eyes me. "A girl like her? What's that mean?"

I roll my eyes at how much of an ass he is. "It means, she's nice. She's not like the regular bitches that flock to us. That girl doesn't want to be around any of us. She just got caught up in a shitty deal."

He doesn't say anything to that but now I'm thinking about scared blue eyes behind too-big glasses.

SAVY

I've been Tate's fake girlfriend for two weeks now and I'm slowly starting to lose my mind. I feel like I have whiplash from the public version of us and the private version. When we're out anywhere, he's constantly touching me, kissing me, and looking at me like I'm the air he needs to survive. The attention has kept my body in an almost constant state of arousal that self-care isn't even touching for relief. Then, in private, he's all business with school work and he barely even looks at me. It's messing with my head.

That doesn't even take the whole Asher issue into account. Just being around him without my mask at their house turns me into a red-faced, sputtering dimwit. I don't think I've been able to string two words together to speak to him whenever he's been around. It's completely ridiculous. I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to do this.

I finish packing my bag with all I will need for a study session and the required baked goods Jude now demands for entrance to the house and order my Uber. At least I didn't have to go to an after-party last night as the team was at an away game. As much as I try and ignore the whispered words and nasty looks sent my way, it's getting old. I don't ever want to go to another one of those parties after what happened with Sam and Hunter. No matter how hot it was to have Jude punch the guy for me.

I step out the front door of my apartment building and immediately feel the hard bite of winter in the air. I wrap my long wool scarf around my neck a few more times and tug the zipper on my long puffy winter jacket up higher to ward off the cold. Thankfully, the car

pulls up shortly after so I don't have to stand out in the cold for too long. When we pull up in front of the house, Beckett and Asher are in the driveway unloading grocery bags from Beckett's truck to carry inside. I quickly hop out and run over to grab a few to help take them in. That gets me an eyebrow raise from Ash and a, "Thank you, darlin'" from Beckett.

I trail along behind them and after kicking off my boots, join them in the kitchen to add my bags to a massive pile.

"Wow, you guys leave anything in the store for the other shoppers?" I joke in Beckett's direction, still not able to speak directly to Ash without making a fool of myself.

Tate joins us and answers me while he starts unloading bags. "Stocking up for the storm and the four of us eat a lot. Did you bring those annotations?"

I give him a tight smile and nod. Right, not in public so he's all business again. I move over to the dining room table to unload my bag and within seconds of me pulling out the bakery box of cookies, Jude is right there stealing it. He flashes me a wink and disappears just as quickly as he appeared. I settle in my seat but I can hear them all talking in the kitchen.

"We should invite some girls over. If we get snowed in, we can ride out the storm by being ridden," I hear Jude say around a mouthful of cookie. "Fuck me, that girl's got some Harry Houdini level kitchen magic in her. You guys have to try one of these."

While I appreciate that he likes my baking, I'm very much not interested in being trapped in this house during sex-a-palooza so I snag my phone and check the weather forecast. There is a storm called for but it's not supposed to start until sometime during the night. I'll be out of here in plenty of time to miss the start of it but I need to check in with work to see if they are going to keep the club open. If it's going to storm, I need to be tucked safely away in my bed with the covers over my head to block it all out. I've made a lot of progress in therapy over the years but I still suffer whenever there's a blizzard. No, the last place I can be is in public if a storm hits.

Tate slides into the seat next to me and fires up his laptop so we can get to work. He passes it over so I can check his progress and I

lose myself to edits and suggestions to firm up his stance on the current assignment.

TATE

I squeeze the stress ball over and over as I try and ignore my fake girlfriend sitting beside me. Something that's getting harder and harder to do. Somehow, this girl has gotten under my skin big time and it pisses me off. Every time I touch her now when we're out putting on a show, it gets harder to pull back. She's fucking clueless about how her little whimpers and moans make my dick weep. I've never touched a woman so fucking ripe for the picking. I can't believe she's faking her reactions when we're making out but she has to be acting to be able to shut it off just as fast and then walk away, doesn't she?

Savy's all I wanted in a fake girlfriend and she's held up her end perfectly. She shows up when and where I say and then leaves to let me do my own thing without a complaint. She's helped me get a handle on the work I've gotten behind on and her prompting for me to dig deeper has made my assignments even better than anything I could have done before.

I glance over at her and my eyes immediately drop down to her mouth and I try not to groan. She's completely absorbed in what she's reading and is mindlessly biting down and sucking on the end of her pen. And I think that's why I'm in this mess.

She doesn't even try to get more from me and that's not something I'm used to. I think I need to just fuck her and get her out of my system. I only want her because she's not interested. That and I haven't banged anyone since summer. That has to be the reason. She's not my type, she's not even pretty in her baggy old lady clothes. I lift my gaze up to her dark brown hair that's always

wrapped up tight in a bun and wonder if it's as soft as it looks. If it's long enough to wrap my fist in it while I...

"Do I have something in my hair?"

Her quiet question has me tearing my eyes away from her bun and meeting her blue eyes behind her thick glasses. I squeeze the stress ball even tighter to keep from reaching over and taking off those glasses so I can get a better look at her eyes. Instead, I shake my head with a frown and go back to my reading. It's gotten dim in the room so I jump up and go over to hit the light switch to brighten things up. When I go to sit down again, I see Savy checking her watch and then her phone.

"What's up? Somewhere you need to be?" I ask her, hoping at the same time that her answer is both yes and no.

She looks toward the huge bay window that faces the backyard but the blinds are closed blocking the view, and then she sighs.

"Yeah, I should head out. I don't want to get caught out in the storm that's coming." She stands and starts gathering up her stuff so I do too.

"For sure, that's smart. Uh, listen, I have that thing on Thursday, that booster dinner. Are you still okay about going with me?"

Her hands freeze as she reaches for a book. It's only for a half second but I notice.

"That's, um, that's the formal event you mentioned, right?"

A thought occurs to me and I curse under my breath. She works two jobs so she might not be able to afford formal wear.

"It is. Do you have a dress that would work? I'm good with paying for one if you don't have the cash for it. That dinner's sort of outside of what we agreed to so you shouldn't have to pay out of pocket for it."

A blush creeps up her neck into her cheeks and it pisses me off how fucking cute I find her blushes now and how I wonder if those blushes will spread all over her body when she's turned on.

"I'm good. I mean, I have a dress that will work. It's fine. I'll be there."

"Good, great. I appreciate it. These types of dinners generate a lot of money for the team but they're boring as fuck and there's a lot of

cougars prowling at them so it'll be good to not have to go to it alone."

Her lips press together in a flat smile as she slings her bag over her shoulder and snags her puffy jacket and scarf. She swipes open the car app on her phone and for some reason, I'm not ready for her to leave.

"Don't worry about that. I'll run you home."

Now that I'm thinking about her working two jobs, it makes me realize how much she probably spends on Ubers here and back. Fuck, I know next to nothing about the woman who's been my fake girlfriend for two weeks and I thought that's what I wanted but now I'm not so sure.

"See you guys," she calls into the living room. "Jude, go easy on those cookies. There won't be any more delivered until the storm passes," she teases, and it annoys me that she seems to have an easier relationship with Jude and Beck, who are flaked out on the couch deep in some zombie game, than she does with me.

"Don't you worry, baby doll. If it goes on too long, I'll hire a sled and dog team and mush my way over to your place. We can snuggle down and you can hand-feed me all of your sweet bakery bits."

She laughs and shakes her head. "Later, weirdo!"

I throw on my jacket while Savy pulls her boots on but when she opens the front door to leave, she comes to a dead stop. I look past her and all I can see is white. The storm has hit early and by the look of it, may be worse than what the forecast was calling for. Snow is already building up and it's falling hard.

Savy makes a tiny sound of distress but it's the bright white of her knuckles clutching at the door frame that tells me something's not right. I pull her gently back away from the door and can feel right away that she's shaking.

"Hey, hey, it's alright. I'll get you home."

When she turns to face me, I see all the blood has drained from her face and her eyes are huge and glassy with terror. Her head starts shaking side to side as her breathing ramps up and I have no idea what the fuck's going on with her but I'm starting to panic.

Ash bounds down the stairs, glances our way, and then keeps going only to spin around and come back. He checks her face,

breathing, the way she is twisting her fingers, and then reaches past her and slams the door closed. Savy lets out a weird moan of relief and then drops her head into her hands.

“What the fuck just happened?” I ask him, feeling completely out of my depth here.

Ash shrugs one shoulder with an almost bored look on his face. “If I had to guess, some kind of trauma response. Looked to me like a panic attack digging in.”

I stare at him like he has two heads. “Trauma? To what? I just offered to take her home.”

He looks at me like I’m a total idiot and shakes his head, turns to walk away while shouting out, “Seriously? It was obviously the fucking whiteout, something about snow or storms.”

Savy drops her hands and blinks up at me a few times and then turns to the closed door and breaths out deeply. “Sorry, sorry...uh... bad experience in a storm. Sorry I freaked out.”

I pull her bag off of her shoulder, drop it to the floor and pull her against me for a hug that I might need more than she does.

“Fuck, that escalated quickly.”

She mumbles another apology into my chest but I just give her another squeeze through her puffy jacket. “Don’t worry about it. You can stay here and ride the storm out with us. Come on, let’s get you out of this and see what we can throw together for dinner.”

Savy doesn’t protest, she just goes straight back to the dining table and sits alone with her head down while fiddling with her phone. I want to ask her if she’s okay, ask her what happened to her to have such a fear of a simple winter storm but I think she’s embarrassed so I leave her be for now. I catch Ash looking her way with a frown now and then as we put together a simple pasta dinner but he doesn’t say anything either. Beck and Jude join us at the table when it’s ready and shoot pointed looks her way but I shut them down with a slice across my neck. I place a bowl in front of her as well as a glass of water but when she doesn’t look up or say anything, I place a hand on her shoulder and give her a nudge.

“Have something to eat. It’ll make you feel better.”

She nods like a robot, picks up her fork, and takes a few bites so I sit down to eat beside her. The guys and I leave her alone while we

chat about the last game and what's coming up and slowly, I see the tension start to leave her shoulders. By the time we've all finished eating, Jude can't take it anymore.

"Savy? Savy doll?"

She slowly lifts her head and I see her eyes have lost that dazed glaze but are now filled with a sadness which somehow I find is worse.

"Don't be sad, baby doll. You can have the last cookie."

A ridiculous amount of relief fills me when her lips tremble into a small smile and she shakes her head.

"Thanks, Jude, but you go ahead and have it."

He throws his head back like he's giving thanks. "Uggg, thank God! I thought I was actually going to have to give it to you."

He plucks a cookie out of his shirt pocket and crams the whole thing into his mouth and that makes Savy burst out laughing.

We all pitch in on clean-up duty and as soon as the last dish is put away, Jude drags Savy into the living room and thrusts a game controller into her hands.

"Thanks but I'm not exaggerating when I say I literally have no idea how to use one of these," she tells him.

"That's perfect! The winner gets to be the big spoon tonight in my bed."

She tries to hand the controller back but Beck swipes it from her hands and pushes her down onto the couch.

"Here, darlin', I'll show you how to use it."

Savy huffs out a laugh. "Fine, but no bet. I'll be sleeping on the couch unless you guys have a spare room I can borrow?"

Beck wraps an arm around her waist so he can hold one side of the controller.

"We do but it's currently filled with gym equipment, sorry."

They show her the ropes of the game with Jude yelling, "Shoot 'em in the head!" constantly.

Ash drops down into the chair beside me and leans close so the others can't hear him.

"Whatever that was, it didn't just go away. Don't let her sleep on the couch tonight. She's bound to have nightmares. Take her to your

room. I don't care if you fake fuck her or not. Just don't leave her alone."

Ash leans back in his chair and we watch Savy get slaughtered over and over again by zombies. For someone who's never played before, she picks it up fairly quickly after the first massacre. After an hour, she's made it up a few levels and she's laughing and getting into the game but when she reaches the big boss, she meets her match. I lean back and watch as she jumps to her feet like that will give her an advantage somehow. Her forehead is furrowed in concentration and she's biting her lower lip in the cutest fucking way as her thumbs fly over the controller. I already know she's going to lose even with Jude and Beck yelling out tips and moves but when the boss takes her out, her whole body droops and it almost looks like she's going to cry.

Savy turns away from the screen and sort of whispers, "He ate my fucking face off."

Jude howls with laughter pointing at her. "Amy just said fucking! I didn't think you even knew any swear words."

She tosses the controller at him and throws herself back down on the couch.

"I know plenty of swear words. I just say them in my head instead of out loud."

Beck leans into her and tilts her chin up. "I bet there's plenty of things you keep locked away in that head of yours. You should say them out loud, darlin'. It would be way more fun that way."

Savy's eyes drop down to his mouth and when her little pink tongue swipes out to wet her bottom lip, I decide the night is over.

"That's a wrap for us. Come on, Savy. I'll get you something to sleep in."

I hold out my hand to her until she takes it and pull her up off the couch and lead her upstairs. I shut my bedroom door behind us and lean against it, watching her take in my room. When she turns to look my way, I push off the door and go to my dresser to get her a pair of boxers and a t-shirt to sleep in. I hand them over and point to the door beside my closet.

"You can change in there, it's a bathroom."

She hesitates like she's going to refuse them but then finally takes them from me and goes into the bathroom without saying a word. I look over at my California King size bed and consider if this is a good idea or not. It fucking isn't and I know that but Ash isn't wrong that she probably shouldn't sleep alone tonight. I just need to keep my hands to myself. Fucking Savy would only complicate everything for me. Things are working out with our deal. The last thing I need is to fuck it up because one mousy girl has gotten under my skin.

I haul off my shirt and strip down my jeans, swapping them out for a pair of athletic shorts, and then climb into bed. I lay on my back with my hands behind my head and wait for her to come out. When she finally does, she freezes in place seeing me already in bed, and then makes a quick jog for the door.

"Thanks for the clothes. I'll see you tomorrow, Tate."

"Savy, you're not sleeping on the couch. Those guys will be up for hours yet with nowhere for us to be tomorrow. You can sleep here. It's a big bed, I won't even know you're in it."

Her hand is stretched out reaching for the door knob and it hovers there while she plays through all the angles of her choices or lack thereof. After a few moments, it drops back to her side and she turns to look at me. She studies my face and whatever she sees there makes up her mind. Her voice is quiet when she says "Okay" and moves over to the opposite side and sits with her back to me.

I watch as she sets her glasses on the nightstand and then reaches up and starts unwinding her hair. I'm practically holding my breath until all that chestnut silk falls down her back in ripples. When the smell of peaches hits me, I have to stifle a groan and force myself to roll away and click the light out. This is going to be a long fucking night.

SAVY

When I wake up my eyes are sore and gritty, telling me I was crying in my sleep again. It's been a year since that last happened and I know it was the whiteout that triggered it. It's been almost nine years since the accident but sometimes it feels like yesterday when I get hit by a reminder of those terrifying two-and-a-half days that changed my life forever.

I snuggle deeper into the heat surrounding me and that's when I realize Tate is wrapped around me from behind. His front is pressed against my back, our legs are tangled together, one of his arms is under me wrapped around my waist and the other is over top of me with his hand holding my...breast.

I stay completely still and barely breathe as I take stock of how fucking amazing it feels to be held like this. Tate's face is buried in my hair and I can feel his hot breath on my neck causing goosebumps to raise all over my body. But it's the hard length pressed against my ass that has heat flaring between my legs. I close my eyes and just let myself feel every inch of his hot skin against mine because I know as soon as he wakes up, he'll pull away.

I don't know how long I lay there lost in the feel of him against me but when his big hand flexes against my breast I suck back a tiny gasp of pleasure. He presses harder against my ass and his lips move over the sensitive skin of my neck as he nudges my hair to the side.

Tate's voice is husky with sleep when he murmurs, "This is a nice way to wake up. I've never had a girl sleep over before."

I don't know what to say so I stay silent, biting my lip as his fingers brush across my pointed nipple through the fabric of the t-shirt I'm wearing.

"You're so warm, so soft."

The hand wrapped around my waist slides under the band of the boxers I'm wearing to trace my hip bone. I try and stay silent and still, afraid to break his sleepy trance as his fingers skate over my skin.

He breathes a low growl against my neck and then his lips close over my skin, sending a tremor through my body and I feel his lips curve in a smile as he grinds his hard length against my ass.

"Wanna start the day off right? We can get each other off, no strings."

When I still don't respond, his fingers slide down and move in slow circles against my lower belly. He's so damn close to where I'm aching to be touched that my hips move the slightest bit to get closer to his hand. His low laugh fills my ear as he bites down softly on my earlobe.

"Gotta say yes if you want more, baby girl. Even fake girlfriends need to give consent."

His low voice is like a secret in my ear. Like this will be just between us. A moment outside the deal we have between us. I'm not stupid, I know this won't mean anything but I desperately want to have it. I want to erase the disappointment I had with Hunter with what I know will be a better memory. Also, my pussy is aching and begging me to say yes so I give in. I give in and press back against him and breathe out, "Yes."

He murmurs "Good girl" as his hand leaves my boxers so he can push them down and lift my shirt higher. I feel his hot bare cock rubbing against me and it feels like the best kind of sin. The hand on my breast slips under the shirt and it's like his hand and fingers were made just for my breasts because they fit perfectly in his hand. My breathing is getting faster and faster but when his fingers brush against my bare pussy and he groans against my neck, it explodes out of me in a moan of desperate need.

There's no teasing here as his fingers slip into the wet heat between my folds and stroke me firm and fast. My hips buck up

against his hand, wanting more of the glorious feeling he's started inside me and Tate matches me with a thrust of his cock against me.

"Jesus, you're so fucking wet, baby. Is this for me? Do you want me, Savy? You want me to fuck you?"

Words aren't possible as he slides one of those thick fingers to my entrance and tries to enter me.

"You have to relax, let me in."

Tate hooks one of my legs with his knee from behind and spreads me wider and I'm panting for what comes next as that finger thrusts deep inside of me. He groans again and nips my neck with his teeth.

"Fuck, you're so goddamn tight. I can feel you clamping down on me. I want my cock in you, Savy. Let me fuck you. I want to feel you come all over it."

Even in my dazed state of pleasure I know that's a bad idea so I rasp out, "No, just this, Tate."

He growls and thrusts his finger in and out of my slick channel, still kissing, sucking, and licking my neck.

"Yeah, you're right, just this. Give me your hand, then."

I reach around behind me and he guides my hand to wrap my fingers around his swollen cock. Right away I'm glad I said no because that monster wouldn't fucking fit inside of me.

"Squeeze it, baby. Slide your hand up and down and squeeze me."

I do as he says and it feels like hot steel wrapped in silk. He's panting just as much as I am and it sends a thrill through me that I'm making him feel just as good as he's making me.

"Ready for another? You can take two. You're so fucking wet, you can take two."

What he's doing between my legs feels so good I would take anything he wanted to give me at this point but I feel the slight burn as he stretches me with two fingers. All I feel is...full...until he crooks those fingers and rubs against a spot inside that sends a jolt of pleasure spiking through me. The heel of his hand grinds against my clit with every thrust of his fingers inside of me and I start to feel out of control as the wave builds and builds to something I'm not sure I'll be able to handle. His hips piston his cock through my tight fingers in time with his strokes between my legs and it's the hottest thing I've ever imagined could happen to me.

“You need to come for me, Savy. You need to come all over my hand, baby girl.”

As soon as he says that he bites down on the soft skin between my shoulder and neck and pinches and pulls my nipple. And I’m done. The wave crashes over me, spinning me in every direction. Pleasure pulses through my core and spreads to my whole body until I’m a quivering mess that can’t quite remember her name.

Tate growls out, “Fuck me!” And then I feel hot ropes of his cum coat the skin of my back as he jerks in my hand.

We lay there together getting our breath back and when he slowly pulls out from inside me an aftershock has me reaching down with my free hand and holding his in place so I can ride out the next two against him.

“God, you’re so fucking responsive to my touch. So ripe for more. Are you sure...hold on, let me get something to clean this up first.”

He cuts himself off from asking if I’m sure I don’t want to do more and I don’t know if I’m glad or not because if that’s how sex is supposed to feel, then I’m more than ready for more of it. He grabs a t-shirt from the floor and wipes my back and hand off and then gets up and goes into the bathroom.

I quickly straighten my clothes and move to sit on the side of the bed. I grab my glasses and gather my hair up to wind it back into a bun just as he comes back out. Tate frowns at me, clearly expecting me to still be waiting for part two but my head has already cleared enough to remember how bad of an idea that is no matter how much I want to. His next words make all the hearts and stars circling my head pop and disappear.

“Feel free to have a shower, I’m going to hit the gym.”

It’s way too close to what Hunter said to me after I had sex with him and it reminds me that Tate Valor is just as much of a player as Hunter is. When I just sit looking down at my lap, I hear him sigh and walk into his closet. He comes back with another set of clothes and tosses them on the bed beside me. I’m feeling off-center now and think we should get back to the balance we had so I look up at him.

“We...we shouldn’t do that again. I, I mean, we should just stick to the deal. It’s not a good idea to blur the lines like that.”

He tilts his head at me and I see the coldness seep into his gaze.

“You can relax, Savannah. That didn’t mean anything to me. Just a hand job between friends, right? You don’t have to worry about blurred lines. I see crystal clear.”

My mouth drops open to say...something but he’s already yanking the door open and slamming it behind him. I lift my hands to rub at my tired eyes but I can smell him on them so drop them back into my lap. I don’t understand what just happened. He wanted a fake girlfriend but I swear I just saw the hurt of rejection in his eyes. Heavy metal music comes on from another room and it jars me enough that I jump from the bed, grab the clothes he threw next to me and bolt for the shower.

BECKETT

I'm leaning against the island drinking coffee when Savy comes down the stairs. She's wearing a pair of too-big sweatpants that are rolled up at the ankles and a hoodie that clearly belongs to Tate. She looks like a little girl playing dress up in her dad's clothes. It's cute as fuck. When she spots me, she offers up a sad little smile.

"Mornin', darlin'. You want some coffee?"

She glances towards the windows at the back of the house but Ash had closed all the blinds tight for some reason.

"You might as well get comfy. The storm is still raging out there. We probably got a foot of snow overnight and it's still coming down. Winter came in with a bang this year."

Her shoulders seem to tense up and she wraps her arms around herself with a sigh.

"Coffee?" I ask again and when she nods, I turn and get a cup down for her. "You don't like the snow, darlin'?"

She takes the mug from me with a little smile of thanks and gives a tiny shake of her head. "I'm okay with snow, just not when it's falling this hard. Bad childhood experience."

I lean back and take a longer look at her, surprised when she doesn't elaborate on that. Most girls I've met would use something like that to play the victim but this girl just eats it all back up inside, so I don't push and just sip my coffee with her until Jude stomps down the stairs. His white-blond hair is standing up in every direction and he looks pissed off at the world. He's not a morning person and it usually takes at least two cups of coffee or a chick sucking his dick to get him back to his usual goofy self. I reach to pour him his first

cup but he slides right up to Savy and sticks his face in her neck with a pouty whine. Her eyes go comically wide as she tries to lean away from him.

“Sa-a-a-a-v-y-y-y, will you make me some pancakes?”

Her first real smile since she came down spreads over her face when he snags her coffee out of her hand and gulps what’s left of it.

“Why should I make you pancakes? I’m the guest here.”

He jerks his body like a toddler and pouts. “Pa-lease? Ash’s pancakes are always flat and boring. Everything you bake is amazing. I just know you’ll make the bestest fluffiest pancakes. Pleeese? I’ll put my man missile in your she shed for a reward!”

Savy groans, spreads out her fingers, and puts her hand over his face to push him an arm’s length away.

“I’ll make you pancakes but only if you give the awful vagina references a break for the rest of the day.”

He hits her with a gleaming grin. “One hour!”

“Five hours!” She counters with a stern, narrow-eyed glare.

“Six hours and that’s my final offer!” The idiot gushes, making her laugh again.

“Fine, but you have to show me where everything is to make them.”

He claps his hands like he’s five years old and points vaguely at the kitchen cupboards. I shake my head at his antics and reach out for her empty coffee cup to refill it.

“Come here, I’ll show you where everything is.”

She’s pouring out the first batch onto a sizzling skillet when Tate comes down and judging by the scowl on his face, he did not tap that ass last night and he’s not happy about it. Strangely, I am. There’s something about this girl that tugs at me in a way I’ve never felt before. I feel oddly...protective...over her. I’m no angel when it comes to women. I like getting my dick wet, often, but Savy doesn’t seem to fit into the pound them and pink slip them category. Something to think about, there.

She hands out plates to Jude, Tate, and me but when Ash comes in, she fumbles the spatula and drops a pancake on the floor. Jude screams, “Five-second rule!” and snaps it up to add to the stack on his plate drowning in syrup.

I glance between her pink, blush-filled face and Ash's scowl with raised eyebrows, wondering what that's about. Tate's chewing his breakfast like he has a vendetta against it while glaring at the cook. He might not have fucked her but something happened to cause this tension.

I finish off my plate and drop it into the sink, take the spatula away from Savy and fix her a plate and one for Ash too and push her over to the dining table.

"Thanks for breakfast, darlin'. It was really good."

She looks up at me with a smile like no one's ever thanked her for anything before and I feel like I just won the Heisman trophy for some reason. I reach out and gently push her glasses back up onto her nose from where they've slipped down.

"Eat up. You're going to need your strength to take down that zombie boss later."

I go back to the kitchen and start cleaning up while trying to ignore the obscene sounds Jude's making as he plows through his stack of pancakes and worry that he's going to whip out his dick and fuck the stack at any moment.

"What's on the go today?" Ash asks us with a glance at the back of Savy's head.

Tate shrugs and grumbles, "Game tape and more fucking school catch-up."

I jut my chin toward the couch. "Probably Netflix."

Jude's head pops up like a prairie dog and whips in Savy's direction. "And Chill! I vote for Chill!"

Tate nails him in the arm with a fist. "Leave my fake girlfriend alone, you whore."

Jude rubs at his arm with a smirk. "If she's not really your girl then you shouldn't mind if I wreak a little clit carnage, right?"

Tate's face boils with thunder but it's Savy that has me chuckling when she calls out without even turning to look, "Jude! Five hours and forty minutes still to go! Don't make me hurt you."

He sighs happily and goes back to his pancakes. "I lurve her. She's got such beautiful fuck off energy. It's like big dick energy...but spi-cy!"

Once everyone is done eating and the kitchen is cleaned up, Ash heads up to the gym and Tate sits at the table to watch game tape on his laptop. Jude and I head to the living room to settle in on the couches. The spaz runs around claiming every pillow in the room and builds himself a pillow fort on the love seat and dives into the center of it.

“What the fuck man? At least give me one.”

“Na-uh, they’re all mine.”

I look back and see Savy kind of hovering between the kitchen and dining room. She looks a little lost and unsure what she should be doing as she looks from Tate to us and back. I decide to mess with both Tate and Jude for a little fun.

“Fine, keep the pillows. That just means I get Savy to cuddle with.”

Her head whips my way and with a grin, I stride over and scoop her up under her ass with one hand forcing her to wrap her legs around me and grab my shoulders or fall.

Tate glares at me, Jude explodes out of his pillow nest yelling “Not fair! I want a Savy pillow!”, and the girl in my arms just stares at me with big blue eyes and her lips in a perfect O of surprise. I carry her over to the couch and get us arranged on it so she’s sitting between my legs with us stretched out the length of it. I pull her upper body down until her back is resting against my chest and then drop my chin on top of her weird bun to anchor her in place. The smell of peaches fills my nose and has my dick waking up. That’s a bit of a surprise but she’s warm and soft and smells good so I just ignore it.

“Alright, hit us with some Tolkien. The Rings - not the Hobbit.”

Jude swipes up the remote with a groan but turns it on to the first movie. I tilt up Savy’s chin until she’s looking at me upside down. “You like The Lord of the Rings, Peaches?”

She rolls her lips in to stifle a laugh but nods. “Yup but you should know that LOTR is a gateway drug to faerie porn so be sure you want to go that route.”

My lips move but no sound comes out as I try and figure out what she’s talking about. Jude lands on top of her with a pillow on her stomach so she’s pressed between us and places his chin on his hands to gaze at her in rapture.

“Oh, wise one, pray tell, what is this faerie porn you speak of? Spare no detail, fair maiden, I beg of you!”

Savy starts giggling and lifts a hand to brush his messy hair back from his face and I check the moment his eyes soften for her. Fuck, this could get very interesting or very messy. Being the middle child of seven siblings has Jude constantly in search of attention and when it's genuine, it hits him hard in the feels. I tighten my arms around her and decide I'm down for the ride.

“Faerie porn, explain.”

Savy tilts back up to look at me and her cheeks are pink but her eyes are sparkling with laughter. I'm struck at how beautiful a look that is on her and shift her slightly so I can see her face better without her having to break her neck.

“It's not porn, porn that you watch. It's steamy, spicy romance novels. Lots of hot, extremely detailed sex, and a lot of the time it involves a reverse harem.”

Jude's eyes go side to side as he works that out and then his eyebrows go straight up to disappear under his hair.

“Harem, like multiple women but reversed? Like, one woman, lots of guys?”

Savy giggles again but nods.

“And you read this stuff? You like it?”

She gives a tiny shrug but the little grin on her face tells me that she does.

“Hot damn, baby doll! Are you ever in the right house.”

Her grin drops away and she starts shaking her head quickly. “That's not...I didn't mean...”

Jude nods knowingly. “Right, books aren't real life. You should **absolutely** NOT text me the links to those dirty, disgusting, filthy books and where exactly to buy them.” He finishes with an oversized wink and then snuggles down onto the pillow he put on her stomach.

She sends me a ‘Help Me!’ look but I just smirk. She's not the first woman we've had between us. Hell, on a good night there's one between the four of us. If she wants him to move, she'll have to make him.

“Uh, are you going to stay there for the whole movie, Jude?”

He answers by grabbing her hand and placing it on his head and grunting, "Woman, play with hair, watch hobbitses."

SAVY

This has been the weirdest fucking day of my life. Scratch that, the last two weeks have been insane. I went from being an invisible nobody virgin to this? I have a fake boyfriend who fake kisses me like I'm the girl of his dreams and just gave me an earth-shattering orgasm that meant nothing to him. I've had two of the most popular guys on campus stand up for me when I was being hassled by bullies and I'm currently sandwiched between the hard bodies of said two popular guys. Not only that but my body seems to be ready for orgasm number two of the day based on how my core is clenching like it's going for gold at the power Kegel event in the vagina Olympics.

Eventually, my vagina settles down and the heat rolling off these two men puts me into a soft and dreamy state as my fingers softly rake through Jude's thick messy hair over and over again. Beckett's got one big arm around my chest just under my breasts and his thumb keeps sweeping against the underside of one of them. It doesn't matter that it's over top of the hoody I'm wearing because the way it feels might as well be skin-on-skin contact.

I'm not a fool. I know I don't mean anything to any of these men. I'm just a toy they're playing with while we're all stuck in this house with the storm outside. But in this moment, I...don't...care. I've never had so much physical contact given to me and I'm soaking it up like a touch-starved sponge. Even as a child, hugs were few and far between from Martha and even less from my father. Nope, don't care if they never touch me again after the storm lets up and we go our separate ways. I'll live on the feel, the glow of this, for years.

As hobbits run away from the ringwraiths on the screen, my eyelids droop in sleepy pleasure and I shift slightly to turn my head and rest my cheek against the hard planes of muscle that form Beckett's chest. His free arm which had been resting along the back of the couch comes down and his big hand cups the side of my head with his fingers sliding into my hair and his thumb sweeping the nape of my neck. I tilt my head back a little to blink sleepily up at him and see him looking back at me with an expression I don't understand. His lips tug up into a small smile and his fingers come around to slide my glasses off.

"It's okay, have a nap," he whispers, and even though I've only been up for a few hours, I'm so warm and feeling cared for that I let my eyes flutter closed to doze off. I'm in that weird state between sleep and awake where your eyelids feel so heavy but you're still sort of aware of what's going on around you.

"Seriously? What the fuck are you two doing?" I hear Tate ask, low and harsh.

Beckett's chest rumbles under my cheek. "Watching a movie, what does it look like?"

"It looks like you're making a play for my girlfriend."

Jude's head turns under my hand as he mumbles, "Fake girlfriend. Our pillow. Fuck off."

I don't hear anything after that for a while until my bladder wakes me up. The elves and men are deciding who will take the ring to Mordor on the screen so I know I missed most of the movie. I stay still but move my eyes around the room and squint through the blurriness of my vision without my glasses on and land on a blur of someone sitting in the deep armchair next to the couch. I blink a few times and vaguely make out Asher looking right at me with a scowl on his face. My stupid fair skin flushes red as I quickly look away. Jude rolls his head on my stomach making my bladder pang in warning so I try and sit up to get out from between him and Beckett but he slides his arms around my thighs to pin me in place.

"Nooo, don't go! You're the softest pillow I've ever had."

I try and push him off. "Let go, I have to pee."

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. "Ooh, I've never done a golden shower before but I'm game to try anything once."

“Eww! That’s disgusting. Get off!” I buck my hips under him but that just makes Beckett groan behind me and Jude laugh even more.

“Yeah, baby, even better, let’s play eight seconds instead!”

Now I really have to pee so I twist and buck harder, flipping him off to fall on the floor. He’s still laughing as Beckett helps me sit up and hands me my glasses and I bolt for the half bath off of the kitchen. When I come back out Asher’s gone and Jude is rummaging in the kitchen for food. Beckett is by himself and has turned to sit forward on the couch. He’s bending and flexing his right knee with a grimace so I go over and drop down beside him.

“What’s wrong? Did I hurt your knee?”

He sends me an amused look but shakes his head. “Naw, you’re good, darlin’. Took a bad hit last year that fucked my ACL. It just stiffens up when I sit too long is all.”

I make a sympathetic face. “It must hurt to play football with an injury like that.”

His hands go still from where he was rubbing the side of his leg. “I don’t play anymore. That was my last game.”

I reach over and place my hand on top of his. “Oh, Beck, I’m so sorry.”

He shrugs one of his big shoulders. “It is what it is. Lots of guys lose their shot at the draft from injuries.”

He says it like it’s not a life-altering thing but I can see how tense his shoulders have gotten talking about it so I search for something to distract him.

“I have a friend who swears by this homeopathic, organic tiger balm she uses. I can get you a tub of it if you want. It, it’s not a magic healing potion or anything but it could help with the pain when it’s bothering you.”

He tilts his head my way and studies me for a few minutes before nodding. “Yeah, sure. That’d be great. Thanks, Peaches.”

I wrinkle my nose at the nickname but nod at him just as Tate comes into the room.

“If you’re done hitting on my friends, can we get some work done?” He asks me in a hard tone that has me snatching my hand back and pulling it away from Beckett’s knee.

I'm giving up on trying to understand Tate at this point. He's hot, cold, horny, and then icy again and it makes my head spin. But his words do serve to remind me why I'm here in the first place. These men are not my friends, couch cuddles or not, they're Tate's and I'm here to be his tutor and fake girlfriend. I need to keep that fixed firmly in my mind or I'm going to start getting attached to them and that's just going to lead to me getting hurt when he doesn't need me anymore. I give Beckett a tight smile and follow Tate to the table to get to work.

We burn the rest of the afternoon off with schoolwork. Tate barely grunts in my direction and I'm so ready to be out of this house and back in mine so I get up from the table, stretch and then go over to the window. My fingers hesitate on the blinds but I need to look so I slowly pull them apart. The visibility is terrible and I can't even see the backyard fence. When a wind gust blows snow against the window, I flinch back and let the blinds snap closed again as a flashback rocks through me.

I shake him over and over again as my cracked voice screams. "Come back, come back! Don't leave me. Please, Daddy, don't leave me here alone!"

A strong hand clamps down on my shoulder and pulls me away from the closed window. My vision clears from the memory to see Ash glaring at me with those jade-green eyes of his.

"Leave them closed. We don't need you flipping out here if that's a trigger for you."

I pull away from him and dart around him to get away from his judgmental tone and look.

"I'm fine!"

Two years, two years I have danced for this man, feeling a connection, a draw to him every night. How wrong I was. There's nothing there at all. It was just a physical response, nothing more - because Asher James is a first-rate bastard that I could never have feelings for. And just like that, all my nerves from being around him disappear.

ASHER

What is it about this little bookworm nobody that pisses me off so much? She's not someone I have a history with and she's not really doing anything wrong, but having her here in my space feels like nails on a chalkboard. The way she practically cringes whenever I'm within two feet of her annoys the hell out of me. So why the fuck can't I stop looking at her? Seeing her spread out on the couch between Jude and Beck had my fingers clenched in anger but that didn't stop me from sitting down and studying her face while she slept. It was the first really good look I've had of her without those big black-rimmed glasses on and without them, she's actually quite pretty.

When she woke up and spotted me watching her, those big blue eyes surrounded by long black lashes had goosebumps rising up on my skin like I had seen a ghost. It's fucking weird and I'm ready for her to get the fuck out of my space, storm or no storm.

I pull the first round of frozen pizzas from the oven and slide in the next two while brooding on it. Who the fuck is afraid of a snowstorm? Like, come on, really? It's probably one of those twisted games girls play to make themselves seem like a victim. Something too many guys fall for. I don't give a shit if Tate said she was crying in her sleep. She was probably faking that too to get her claws into him. I swear every fucking chick that walks into this house has some kind of angle to hook either Tate or Jude. They're going pro and with that comes a fat ass payday. Beck would have been going with them too if he hadn't been injured last season. I've seen some seriously twisted shit from the chicks that come here looking to score a

possible ring on their finger. Some of them even try and hook up with me just to get closer to them.

For the first year it was kind of fun and I was an eager participant in the pussy-fest that came through almost every night but it got old pretty fast when I saw some of the lengths these women would go to. I once caught a desperate redhead picking through the bathroom garbage. I walked in just as she was putting a used condom in her purse. It was her angle to try and knock herself up and tie Tate to her for life with a kid. Fucking skank.

I turn and lean against the counter waiting for the oven timer to go and picture my Butterfly. She's the only woman in two years that hasn't wanted anything from me. It's beautifully uncomplicated. She dances for me and I worship her with my eyes. I just...want her to want...more. I want her to want to be with me outside that fucking cage. I don't want to just fuck the hell out of her, I mean I do want that, but I also want to hold her hand, hold her in my arms on the couch while we watch a movie, wake up and watch her sleeping face. My eyes track over to the dining table where Savy sits reading a book and I let out a sigh. Fuck!

The timer goes off and I holler to everyone that dinner is up as I slice up the pies and pass out plates. I snag beers from the fridge and pass them out but Jude goes straight to the liquor cabinet and pulls out a bottle of Jack and five glasses and brings them to the table.

"I'm bored! Let's play a drinking game."

He fills all five glasses to the brim and slides them to each of us and I see the bookworm cringe slightly and I can't help myself.

"What's the matter, mouse? Too good to drink with us?"

I expect her to stammer and flush red like she usually does but she surprises me when she meets my eyes in a challenge, lifts the glass, and drinks half of it down without even batting an eye.

"Thank you, next."

Jude whoops, "Alright, alright, alright! Baby doll's down to play! What's it going to be? Kings, Flip Cup, Beer pong?"

It's Tate that answers while sending a dark look Savy's way. "Never Have I Ever...sex edition."

Beck and Jude laugh their agreement but bookworm looks baffled as she takes a bite of her pizza.

When she swallows it down, she says quietly, "I don't know how to play that."

Beck leans forward and fills her cup back up. "You've never played Never Have I Ever?"

She looks nervously around at the rest of us and then shakes her head.

"Wow, okay, so each person says never have I ever done something and if you have done it, you take a drink. If you haven't, you don't drink. Tate's called it for sex so all your nevers have to have a sexual bent to them. You good?"

She shrugs one shoulder but her eyes drop and a blush rises on her cheeks. I can't help but smirk. This should be good. Jude goes first.

"Never have I ever...fucked a quarterback."

We all look at Savy but she doesn't reach for her glass telling us she hasn't fucked Tate. Her eyes go wide though when Jude sucks back a healthy gulp and then her head turns to look at Tate in surprise.

"Fuck, NO! It wasn't me!" He sputters, causing Jude to howl with laughter and explain.

"Quarterback for the Dirty Daisies, local lingerie football league."

"Jesus, you dog!" Beck claps him on the back with a laugh and then takes his turn. "Never have I ever...got head in a moving car."

Everyone drinks except Savy and Jude tries to be helpful in his own fucked up way. "Baby doll, that could also mean having your muff tongue-whipped."

She raises an eyebrow at him and slides her glass further away with one finger. "Never have I ever...had that done to me...ever."

We all stare at her in shock and the first thing that pops into my head is to wonder what she'd taste like on my tongue. Jude being his over-the-top self pretends to weep as he slings an arm around her neck and pulls her half off her chair.

"Sweet, sweet, summer child. This must not stand. I volunteer as tribute! Shuck those pants and I'll shuck your clam right here and now!"

She starts giggling and shoves him away. "Yeah, no. No, thank you."

I'm up next and I'm pissed that all I can think about now is what it would be like to be the first guy to go down on her so I lash out.

"Never have I ever played an angle to fuck football players."

My three brothers shoot me confused looks but the mouse tilts her head to the side and glares at me.

"Guess I'm staying sober tonight. My turn...unless, any of you guys are working an angle to fuck your teammates? No, okay." She turns back to look at me and now she's got two bright red spots on her cheekbones and fire flashing in her eyes. "Never have I ever... jerked off to a girl who...won't...even...give...you...her...name."

She sits back in her chair and crosses her arms over her chest and I see fucking red. I'm going to kill whichever fucktard told her about Butterfly. I slam back my entire drink and pound the glass back on the table as Jude bounces in his seat like a toddler on meth.

"Savage carnage on the field! Baby doll just slit...his...throat!" He grabs her hand and kisses it like ten times. "Baby doll, promise me the next time you wake up and choose violence, I can carry your sword?"

Her whole face goes beet red like she regrets what she said. She darts nervous little looks my way and doesn't see the thunder on Tate's face.

"My turn!" he snaps. "Never have I ever, given my virginity to the douchiest guy on campus."

The blood that was just flushing Savy's face drains away, turning her completely white. Her eyes are full of hurt and welling up when she slowly turns them on him. They just stare at each other for a few beats and I see Tate bite his lip like he might feel like he went too far. Savy sniffs, swallows hard, and then reaches out and lifts her cup to her lips and drinks down half of what's in it. Instead of putting it back down, she tilts it at Tate like she's going to toast him.

"Never have I ever then agreed to fake date the second douchiest guy on campus," she says in a quiet voice.

She shoots down the rest of the Jack in her cup and gently sets it on the table before saying "Game over", then gets up and walks

away. I hear the bathroom door down the hall close softly and I turn to Tate.

“Who the fuck was it?”

His eyes are on the table and he doesn't look up when he tells us. “Hunter Miller. He's been bragging about tapping her first.”

Beck growls low in his throat. “When, how long ago?”

Tate finally looks up at us and I see guilt swimming in his eyes. “A couple days before we made the deal.”

Jude narrows his eyes at him which is scary as fuck because when Jude stops joking it usually means someone's going to bleed.

“You're telling me she was untouched, a virgin, two weeks ago?”

Tate nods, looking even more guilty.

“And she gave it up to Hunter of all people? Was it consensual? Did that walking meat sack...”

“No!” Savy says from behind us and we all turn to look at her. Her hands twist and her mouth trembles a little but her voice is firm. “Not that it's any of your business, but it was consensual. I, I just wanted to get it over with. I'm going to be twenty-one soon and it's ridiculous that I waited so long. So yes, I was with him. He gave me a roughly four-minute introduction to un-ecstasy and now it's done. Can we please play a different game?”

I turn around and pour myself another drink and drain it. Fuck, she really is an innocent and I hate how much that makes me want to be the guy to show her exactly how good it should be.

TATE

I fucked up. I never should have said that. I don't even know why I was pissed at her. She was right to try and keep the lines of our deal clear but it felt like she was rejecting me in the moment and I've been punishing her for it all day long. It's not fair to her. I'm not looking for anything more with her than the deal we have and even that might be in jeopardy now thanks to my fragile ego.

I push up from the table and go take her hand and pull her out of the room and up the stairs to my bedroom. I go sit on my bed and rub my hands over my face while she stays close to the door.

"Listen, I'm sorry..."

"I think we should end..."

We speak at the same time and I already know how she's going to finish her sentence so I bounce back up and rush over to take her hands.

"No, don't say that. I'm a dick. I never should have said what I did down there. That was fucked up. I'm so sorry, Savy. What happened this morning was great and I...when you said we shouldn't do that or anything again...it's stupid, I know, but I felt rejected and Hunter's been bragging about being with you and I guess it just pissed me off that you would be with him but not me."

When she doesn't say anything, I lean over and place my forehead against hers.

"You're right, I am the second douchiest guy on campus. You shouldn't be treated that way just because you don't want to sleep with me. I promise I won't be like that again. Please stay, please keep helping me?"

She sighs in exasperation and right there I know she's not going to bail on me.

"Fine, but just until the season is over and stop with the hot and cold routine, it's giving me whiplash. We can be...friends...you know. I mean, when we aren't in public."

I pull her in for a hug and kiss the top of her head.

"Agreed, and again, I'm sorry, and thank you."

I should let her go but Savy just feels right pressed up against me. I flash to the way her pussy clamped down on my fingers when I made her come this morning and that's all it takes for me to let her go. Friends and fake girlfriend...that's all this can be.

"You want some clothes to sleep in?"

She chews on her bottom lip and nods her head. "Um, yes, please, but, I think it would be best if I, um, slept on the couch tonight. Is that okay?"

My hand clenches around the t-shirt I was grabbing for her but I force myself to smooth it out.

"Yeah, of course. That's not a problem. I'll grab you some blankets and an extra pillow."

She takes the clothes I hold out for her and offers me a small smile. "The way we are in public," she says softly, "the kissing and acting like we're together? And then what happened this morning - I...it would be really easy for me to develop, um, I mean..." she looks up at me with sad eyes, "I don't want to get hurt so..."

I reach up and brush the back of my fingers down her cheek. "I don't want you to hurt either. So, friends?"

SAVY

The house is dead quiet as I snuggle down deeper into the couch cushions but my mind won't settle enough for sleep. I'm embarrassed that they all now know how much of a loser I am and I'm never playing that fucking game again, never ever. I'm also feeling a little guilty about what I said to Ash. It was mean and even though he was being a dick and implying that I had some angle for helping Tate, I shouldn't have said that. I'm just as bad as he is with the whole Butterfly fantasy. I need to knock it off and stop dancing for him. It's a little bit twisted the way my Butterfly and him have been dancing around each other for so long.

Besides, he wasn't totally wrong. If I'm honest, I am playing an angle of my own I suppose. Where at first it was just to keep Vanessa off my back, it's now turned into something more, something pathetic. I like coming here. I like not being alone all the time and I like being...kissed and cuddled and yup, I'm a loser.

I throw off the blanket and get up. The bottle we were drinking from is still sitting in the middle of the table so I unscrew the top and take a couple of gulps straight from it and then put it back. I'm not a big drinker but there are times when self-medicating just seems necessary. I turn to go back to the couch but my eyes land on the long blinds covering the patio door and without thought, my feet take me over to them. I stand in front of the closed blinds and take a few deep breaths.

My therapist has harped at me about controlled exposure to lessen the impact and reaction to this trauma. Everyone's asleep, I'm safe and warm here and I know what to expect so I should be okay

to take a look. I reach out and pull the strings to make the long vertical blinds slide to one side. I suck in a breath and slowly let it out as I stare out into the storm. Visibility has increased and I can now see almost to the back fence but the snow is still falling. The storm is no longer a whiteout blizzard. I force myself to stay there for a few more minutes and then close the blinds and go back to the couch. The Jack does the trick and my eyes close as sleep takes me.

“No, no daddy, please, please don’t leave me.”

“Come back, come b-back. I’ll be a good girl, I promise!”

“Someone help me!”

“Daddy, oh, daddy.”

“Savy! Savy, wake up!”

“No!” I gasp as I come awake with a jerk and suck back the pleas that want to cry out of my mouth. My chest is heaving and my breathing is jagged as a warm hand gently brushes the hair back from my face. I swipe the tears from my eyes and face and blink rapidly, trying to make out who’s kneeling beside the couch.

“Easy, it’s over. You’re okay. You should have slept with Tate again so he could take care of you like last night.” Ash tells me without any trace of the usual harshness in his tone.

I swallow down the last of the tears. “He, he did? Was taking care of me I mean? I, I didn’t know.”

“After your attack yesterday, we thought having company would help you sleep. We were worried about after effects.”

He leans over me and clicks on the lamp on the end table causing me to squeeze my eyes closed to adjust to the brightness. When the spots finally leave my eyes and I can see him clearly, I swallow hard again for a different reason. He’s not wearing a shirt and there’s a muscular chest covered in black ink inches from my face.

When I force my eyes up to meet his green ones surrounded by thick black lashes, I catch him studying my face and hair that’s in a huge cloud surrounding me. His hand comes up and captures a strand of it and he rubs it between his tattooed fingers.

“Ash, thank you for waking me up and, um, about what I said, before...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

He smooths my hair back into place and I can’t read his expression but I do get a small nod so I look down and my gaze

goes to the only spot of color in the map of black tattoos on his chest. I suck a breath in and can't stop my fingers from reaching out and tracing the blue butterfly hiding under black ivy that looks like a cage directly over his heart. His head drops down to watch my fingers move.

I already know but I have to ask, "What...what does it mean?"

My whispered question breaks the trance he seemed to be in and his eyes go hard. His hand snaps up and knocks my fingers away as he pushes to his feet.

"It means I was drunk and nobody stopped me. Try not to wake me up again."

I clutch my fingers against my chest like they were burned and hear Ash say something to someone else in the shadows before I hear his feet climb the stairs. Beckett steps into the light and freezes as he too studies me and I realize that none of them have ever seen me with my hair down and glasses off. It makes me feel vulnerable and bare. He moves towards me and bends over to scoop me up, blankets and all. The woman in me swoons a little because I'm not a skinny girl but he doesn't even lose a breath doing it.

"Come on, Peaches, you can sleep in my room for the rest of the night."

I want to protest but I remember how good it felt to be held by him earlier and I know this will probably never happen again so I stay silent while he carries me up the stairs like I weigh less than a feather and gently slides me down into his bed. Warm cinnamon fills my nose as his scent surrounds me and I breathe it in deeply. Beckett climbs into the bed, drags me up against his side and lays my head against his hard chest, and then flips the blankets over the both of us. It feels so good when his big hand slides into my hair and he starts rubbing my scalp that I almost purr.

"Will you tell me what happened? Why the snow scares you?"

I sigh against his shirt and my hand comes up to smooth the wrinkles in the soft material. Other than the police and my therapist, I've never told anyone about the details of those two days. Something about this man though and the way he holds me, even if it doesn't really mean anything, and the steady beat of his heart under my ear makes me trust him enough to share some of it.

“There was an accident when I was twelve. My dad, he...he died.”

“Did you have fun at the bookstore, princess? Get everything you wanted?”

I beam a smile at Daddy from the back seat with the bags of books filling the seat beside me. “Yes! I love going there. I could live in a bookstore. I wish Nessa and Celeste had come with us, though.”

I meet his eyes in the rear-view mirror and all I see is love in them. “Me too, princess, but it’s okay. This is our birthday tradition so I’m good with it just being me and my special girl.”

The wipers thunk back and forth to clear the heavy snow that started falling while we were in the huge bookstore that we go to every year on my birthday. I look out the window and see a perfect winter wonderland. I love that my birthday is so close to Christmas because it feels like the whole month of December is special just for me.

“What type of cake do you think Martha made for...Hold on, Savy! Hold on!”

Everything starts spinning in circles until there’s a jarring impact and the world turns upside down again and again with my books flying everywhere and hitting me in the face. When it comes to a hard stop, my head slams into the window with a crack and then darkness.

“Ow! D-daddy? Daddy! Where are you?”

White is all I can see from every window like the car was swallowed by a snow bank. I fight my seat belt and when I get it off my body falls to the side against the far door like the car is tilted sideways. I pull myself back up using the front seats and lean between them.

“Daddy, we had a crash. Dad? You need to wake up.”

I reach out and pull him away from the steering wheel that he’s slumped over and that’s when I see the blood and the jagged piece of metal sticking into his side. I scream his name over and over, begging him to wake up, begging him not to leave me but he never opens his blue eyes that look just like mine.

“The doors were pinned from the rollover twisting the metal. We... we went over a guardrail down into a gully. I couldn’t get out and I couldn’t find his phone to call for help.”

Beck's fingers slide out of my hair to my neck and he rubs the tension out of it.

"How long, darlin'? How long were you trapped with him in that car?"

I squeeze my eyes closed and whisper, "Sixty-four hours. Two and a half days before someone spotted the broken guardrail and thought to look over it."

His lips hit the top of my head and press down before he asks what everyone asked when they heard about how long I was in that car with a dead man and no heat.

"How did you survive so long in the cold?"

I shake my head against his chest because that's the one thing I've never said out loud. I can never tell anyone that I pressed up against my dying father's body to stay warm and when he went cold and hard, I struggled to peel his jacket from his lifeless body to use as a blanket. It's a weight of shame that never goes away. There have been so many days since then that I wished that I had let go and joined him instead.

Beckett just holds me closer and doesn't force me to answer him and I'm eternally grateful for that. I'm starting to drift to sleep when his voice rumbles out under my ear.

"My mom, she hung herself when I was eight. She always met me at the bus when I got home from school but she wasn't there that day. I found her in their walk-in closet. I wasn't big enough then, but I tried. I held onto her legs and tried to hold her up. My dad found us there two hours later when he got home from work."

My fingers press harder against his chest in support. To let him know I hear him, feel for him, and understand on a level that many couldn't.

His voice gets even lower as he says, "You know how you survive something that tries to take you out, Peaches?"

I make a tiny shake of my head, my fingers clenching and twisting into fists his t-shirt. He's quiet for so long that I don't think he's going to answer but then he tucks his chin down so his face is pressed to my hair and breathes out the words.

"Any way you can."

SAVY

When I wake, Beckett is gone and bright sunlight floods the room. The storm is over and that means this strange interlude I just had with these four men is over as well. Female laughter from downstairs proves that to be true in a way that makes my heart hurt a little bit. It's time for me to leave and go back to my real life. I roll over and bury my face in Beckett's pillow and breath his scent in, trying to hold on to being a part of this group, of belonging, for just a few minutes more but I know I'm just delaying the inevitable. With one last sniff of his pillow, I force myself to get up. I should go find my clothes in Tate's room and change. I need to order a car and get back to my place to shower and check to see if classes have resumed yet. I have a shift later today at the library scheduled so even though I don't want to leave, I know I have to.

I wind my hair back up into a bun, snag my glasses from the nightstand where Beck must have left them for me, and wander out into the hall heading to Tate's room to change. As I'm passing one of the other bedrooms, a grunt has me glancing through the door and my feet stumble to a stop.

Jude is standing next to his bed completely naked and there's no way my eyes aren't mapping every beautiful bulge of muscle across his chest, memorizing each tattoo and spotting the silver bar through one nipple. I track down his torso, taking in his rippling abs straight to the back of the blond head that he's got his hands on holding firm as he thrusts into her mouth. I suck in a breath and for a split second I hate him just a little bit for doing this and worse, I hate myself a little bit for wishing it was me on my knees in front of him.

“Morning, baby doll! Wanna come in and join? We don’t mind sharing in this house.”

My eyes rise up to meet his golden ones for a beat and then I’m turning and practically running the rest of the way to Tate’s room. I force the image of Jude’s naked body out of my mind and quickly get dressed in my own clothes for the first time in two days but at the last minute, throw one of Tate’s hoodies over my blouse instead of my cardigan. I’m taking it as a reminder of this weirdly wonderful weekend with them. I stuff my sweater in my bag and run down the stairs. The kitchen island is filled with takeout coffee cups and bags of breakfast sandwiches that I’m guessing the three girls crowding the space brought with them.

All three of them are perfectly put together with curled hair, flawless makeup, and cute outfits of skinny jeans and tight sweaters that show off thin, toned bodies. I feel like a lumpy glob of clay next to them and based on the sneering looks as they scan me from head to toe, they agree with that assessment. The one with gleaming, long red hair huffs out a laugh in my direction.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

I look past her and spot Ash leaning against the counter further down while sipping from a takeout coffee. He has a stack of black leather bracelets on his wrist that hide some of his ink and some of his dark hair dangles in front of one eye, making my fingers itch to brush it back until his eyebrows go up in an amused look like he agrees with the question.

“She’s my fucking girlfriend. Savy’s supposed to be here. The better question is, what the fuck are YOU doing here, Paisley?”

Tate’s arms slide around me from behind as she pouts prettily and I let myself lean back into his support for a brief moment before turning around to face him.

“I need to go. I work later today and have some stuff I need to get done.”

He glares past me at the uninvited guests and then drops a kiss on top of my head.

“I’ll drive you. Did you get some coffee?”

I shake my head so he reaches past me and snags one of the takeout cups and hands it to me.

“Hey, those aren’t for her. We brought them for...”

He hits her with a look filled with violence and I’m not ashamed of the way it fills me with a glow of satisfaction even though I know it’s all a show he’s putting on. It has her choking back the last of her sentence with a gulp and then she pastes on the fakest, tightest smile I’ve ever seen.

“...all of you. Help yourself...Savanah, right?”

I nod cautiously just as Jude comes bounding down the stairs. He plucks the coffee from my hand, takes a big gulp of it, and then smacks me on the cheek with a sloppy kiss and hands it back to me.

“Mmm, baby doll, your coffee always tastes the best. Will you make me cinnamon buns when you come back?”

I keep my eyes on the three women who are now trying hard not to shoot daggers at me and nod. “Vanilla frosting or cream cheese?”

He laughs and wraps both me and Tate into a three-way hug. “And that is why I’m stealing her from you, brother!”

Tate growls, the girls glare, and I shove Jude off with a hand to his forehead.

“No thank you. One of you is already too much.” I mutter but he hears me and just laughs even more. He pushes my glasses back up my nose with one ring-filled finger and then drags it down to the tip and taps it.

“Savy, Savy, Savy - there’s no such thing as too much and we’re just getting started, doll.”

The snow has already started to melt from the roads making everything wet and sloppy when Tate drops me in front of my building with plans for me to come over for tutoring the next day and a reminder of the formal dinner Thursday night. He hands me a key saying I should let myself in because he might be running late from practice. I clutch it a little too tightly before slipping it on a charm keychain.

I stand under the steaming water in my shower going over every minute of the time I just spent with them and overanalyzing every single thing that was said and happened.

It starts with Tate. He can be so brutal when he’s not pretending that I mean something to him in front of others. I’d love to let myself believe that what happened in bed that morning meant more than

just a physical release to him but I have to be realistic with myself. It meant nothing to him. Just because he's trying to steer all the girls away from him right now doesn't mean he hasn't fucked his way through most of sorority row in the past. I'm just another number for him besides the deal we have.

I accepted his apology for what he said during that stupid game and how harsh he had been to me all day but deep down I know he didn't really mean it. He just wants me to go along with what he needs from me right now. I have to stop letting myself believe there's ever going to be a happy ever after with this fake dating deal. Tate Valor is not the type of guy to care about someone like me and I have to be okay with that no matter how much I wish he would.

I turn and rinse the shampoo from my hair and then work conditioner through it while thinking about Beckett. It would be no effort at all to fall hard for that man. The easy way he lifts and moves my body with his big hands is a total turn on but it's the way he holds me, the way he makes me feel special and cared for, that will sink me if I let it. The fact that he shared such a deep trauma with me only makes me feel like we could have something on a deeper level. My groan echoes off the tiles. I'm an idiot. There is no connection, deep or otherwise. I was just a body to cuddle with while they were bored and stuck in that house.

I rinse out the conditioner and soap my body as I think about Jude and I can't stop the smile that fills my face. He's like a dangerously sexy man-child and I have to admit that the attention he showers on me fills an emptiness in me. I flash back to him this morning, fucking some random girl's mouth, and my traitorous core clenches at how hot he looked doing it. I shut that down hard. He might be nicer than Hunter is but he's still a fuck boy, a dog when it comes to women and one of those was more than enough for this girl.

I shut the cooling water off and push the last of them from my mind. The only place Asher James will ever be is a fantasy in my mind when I'm pretending to be something I'm not. I wipe the steam from the mirror and sigh at my hazy reflection. Seems like my whole life is pretending to be something I'm not. Reaching for something real, I grab my phone and call Stella.

“Hey, Butterfly! I missed you this weekend. How are you?” She answers right away.

“I’m okay. I missed you too. Um, any chance you’re free today? I need to buy a dress and I was hoping you might want to come with me or I might end up with some kind of floral sack.”

“Oh my god! Savy...are you taking off the mask?” She asks me in excitement.

I bite my lip but shake my head even though she can’t see me.

“More like, lifting it a little bit?”

“You bitch! I’m in! Where and when?”

SAVY

We make plans to meet up downtown in an hour and I ignore the seething ball of anxiety rolling in my belly the whole way. This is what I wanted, right? Isn't it? To change, be someone else? To stop hiding behind the masks I wear at the club and outside of it with my bulky, dowdy clothes? The car drops me off in front of a boutique and my hand shakes just a little as I pull open the door. One of the saleswomen scans me from head to toe with an over-plucked, arched eyebrow and I'm already ready to turn around and run away but Stella pushes in behind me with a squeal of excitement.

"This is going to be so much fun! I've wanted to do a makeover on you for so freaking long!" She gushes as she pushes me further in the store past the saleswoman who now looks like she just sucked on a lemon. "I was thinking red for the dress."

"No! I, I'm not ready for red anything, Stella. I just want something low-key nice that isn't..." I wave up and down my body and finish lamely, "Me."

She pouts a little but squeezes my hand. "It's okay, babes. Baby steps, right?"

She turns away and immediately starts pulling gowns from different racks. I follow behind her and trust that she'll find the best options for me. When the dresses are piled so high in her arm that I can barely see her face, she calls over the clerk.

"Please get these set up in the change room."

Stella tries to hand the dresses off but the woman looks down her nose at us.

“Do you have any idea of the costs of these gowns, miss?” She asks in a condescending tone that has Stella’s inner she-cat roaring to the surface and me cringing back.

“Check your attitude and watch your tone. This isn’t Pretty Woman and if it was, she wouldn’t be the hooker, she’d be Richard Gere. That girl right there could buy this entire city block and not even notice the dent in her bank balance. Now...put these in a dressing room and bring us some fucking champagne.”

I turn away as my anxiety flares hard so I don’t see the woman’s response. I know Stella means well and she can be really protective of me but I don’t play that card...ever. Just because I inherited all of my father’s billions doesn’t mean that I feel like it’s mine. Celeste and Vanessa do that enough for me to not want anyone to know and assume I’m like them. I’m not even registered in school under my father’s name. I chose to apply using my mother’s maiden name, St. James, and get in on my scholastic merit, much to my Uncle Mark’s amusement. I wanted to be free to be me when I started university, not the girl whose last name was on two buildings on campus. I didn’t want that kind of attention.

Stella drags me to the next rack and shoots me a guilt-filled look.

“Sorry, I know you don’t want people to know. She just pissed me off thinking you don’t belong in here.”

I rest my head on her shoulder briefly and mutter, “Love you, anyway,” Making her grin and wink at me before pulling another dress.

Stella’s the only person who knows who I am or where I come from. She was so good to me when we first got hired at Masks. She helped me with no judgment and so much support, putting together my butterfly persona that I trusted her with everything. She truly is my only friend.

She decides we have enough options and pushes me into a change room with the first three gowns to try on while she settles into a fancy velvet chair and sips at the crystal flute filled with golden liquid that a new clerk brought to her. As I strap myself into the first dress, a deep purple strapless thing, we talk through the velvet curtain separating us.

“So, what’s the dress for? You have something going on with the company you need to go to?”

I struggle to reach the zipper on the back of the dress so just give up and push the curtain aside. Stella does a quick scan and shakes her head. “Next.”

“No, it’s for a booster dinner later this week. I...I’m...” I sigh deeply and just spit it out. “I’m fake dating Tate Valor and going as his date.”

Stella rears back in her seat almost spilling her champagne with an exaggerated gasp of shock, making me laugh. I go back into the changing area and reach for the next dress as Stella demands all the details of something so out of character for me. I make it through four more rejected dresses as I fill her in on everything that’s happened since Tate kissed me in the library in front of my stepmother and sister.

“So, you’re telling me that you spent the last two days locked away with four stacked men, one of which is hot as fuck bar boyfriend? Quarterback gets you off with his million-dollar throwing hand, and you make a Savy sandwich with two of the others?”

I chew on my bottom lip and nod as I turn to show her the back of the black gown I’m wearing. She swipes a hand through the air to reject it too and shakes her head at me.

“Now tell me why, why are you not picking the reddest, hottest dress in this place and flinging your mask in the trash? Show them who you really are, babe!”

I sigh and reach for a satin blue A-line dress that matches my eyes and turn away from her.

“Because they don’t want me. Not really. Tate’s just using me for what he needs right now and the other two were just playing games with me to pass the time. This will all come to a head soon enough and then Tate will drop me like he never met me before. It’s better that I just disappear again once he’s done with me. It’s easier that way.”

She screeches a frustrated noise but I’m struck by my reflection in the mirror. This is the dress. It’s beautiful, classy, and understated. The color exactly matches my eyes. It has a sweetheart neckline that only shows a hint of my cleavage and the three-quarter-length sleeves are perfect. The waist is fitted with delicate, understated

silver ivy embroidered to look like a low belt and then the A-line skirt flows smoothly to compliment my bigger hips and ends just below my knees. I give my hips a swivel and the hem swirls in a pretty way. I'm smiling when I pull back the curtain and Stella's finger comes up to point at me like a gun.

"There it is. Now take down your hair."

I scrunch up my nose but do as she says.

"Uh-huh, you need to wear your contacts that night, Savy. We'll do pin curls to create that sweet retro wave look. A jeweled comb to lift one side above your ear. Winged liner, fake lashes, and blood-red lips."

I'm already shaking my head. "You had me right up to the makeup, Stells. You can't paint me like the Butterfly! They don't know and I don't want them to. I don't know if Ash will be there as he's not a football player but he's been watching me for the last two years. Paint me like her and he will know right away."

She purses her lips and rolls her eyes. "Fine! Soft, barely-there eye makeup, natural lashes with just a touch of mascara, and baby pink lips." She looks down at my feet. "You can't say no to heels, though. That dress was made for them. I'd say, silver and strappy."

I nod in agreement and pass my black card over to the clerk with only a hint of a blush.

JUDE

We're hanging out in the kitchen catching up on our day as I search the pantry for a snack. Finding exactly nothing that appeals to me, I kick the door closed and look around the area with a frown.

"Where's the baby doll? She hasn't been here for a few days."

I miss her, which is kind of weird. I don't miss girls except maybe my mom but I went most of my life without her attention so maybe not really her either. It was fun having Savy here in the house. She mixed things up in a good way even if she turned down every charming sexual advance I sent her way. I kind of like that about her too, though. I've got chicks lining up to suck my cock in hopes they can ride me all the way to the draft but my doll doesn't fit in that lineup.

I saw the heat in her eyes when she saw me getting my knob polished the other morning but it was the flash of disappointment in her eyes right before she ran away that had me slowing my thrusts and made my dick deflate like a Savy sized pin pricked it, that's stuck with me since she left.

I've never given two shits about what any girl thought of me but somewhere between her magic fingers running through my hair while I laid on her stomach and the hurt I saw in her eyes when Tate outed her V card fiasco, I started to give a shit...just a little bit. Hmm, okay, maybe a lot. It takes me all of three seconds to decide she's going to be my new obsession. I've never obsessed over a girl before, never cared enough to - but Savy...she just hits different, harder, and yup, I fucking want her.

Ash sighs deeply in annoyance and crosses his arms while Tate's eyes drop to the floor with a frown.

"You fucking too, Jude?"

When I just raise an eyebrow at him and spin my eyebrow ring piercing, Ash scoffs.

"What is with all of you and this chick? You want to fake fuck her too?"

I cock my head to the side in consideration and Tate spears me with a dark look, making me laugh.

"What? I like having her around. She's like...like a cute little house elf that smells nice and she brings me treats!"

Ash glowers my way. "We don't DO chicks in the house unless it's to fuck them and eject them. We don't need that little mouse hanging around here all the time." He glares at us all before landing on Tate. "Your little fake experiment is starting to get on my nerves."

Beck shrugs one big shoulder. "To be fair, Savy's not like the skirts we usually bang. She doesn't...cling or ask for anything. She's more like having a pet in the house. Fun to cuddle and play with. I don't see the harm in her hanging out with us. It's not like it'll go any further. She's not hot enough for that." He says but his eyes slide to the side telling me he's full of shit.

Ash reaches out and gives Tate a shove. "And you? Don't tell me you're actually starting to have feelings for the bookworm. Your fake is pretty damn convincing at times."

Tate rolls his eyes. "Cause I'm that damn good! She's nothing, man. A means to an end. My grades are already starting to come up. I just need to play this out a little while longer and then I can drop..."

He trails off with a look of guilty panic on his face as he looks behind Ash. I lean to the side and my eyebrows pop up when I see a pale-faced Savy standing there with a pan of something in her hands. When her eyes flash with anger behind her black-rimmed glasses, I really wish I had found that snack. Popcorn would be awesome right now for the show that's about to kick off.

Ash looks over his shoulder and spots her. His face goes blank but I see his throat move as he swallows hard and then she's stomping toward us. She comes around the island and thrusts the pan into my chest, hard. Her eyes are a snapping bright blue and her shoulders

are tight with tension. I've never seen her angry before. She's fucking glorious.

"Here! Delivery from the smelly fucking house elf. Enjoy it, it'll be the last."

She turns away from me and reaches into her tote bag to pull out a jar of something and throws it at Beck. He snatches it out of the air just before it nails him in the face.

"That organic tiger balm I was telling you about for your big boy owwies. You can rub it on and then go down to the shelter to get a fucking dog to cuddle with!"

Tate's next in her line of fire as she yanks out a stack of papers and tosses them straight up into the air causing sheets to fly everywhere.

"Your next essay, with some edits and suggestions so you can get the best fake mark possible. Also, your fake girlfriend is for real dumping your fake ass!"

Tate's mouth drops open like he wants to say something to her but she's already turning away to face Ash.

"And YOU! Don't think I would forget to bring you something. I have it right here!"

She sticks her hand deep into the bag and rummages around in it before meeting his eyes with her furious blue ones and slowly pulls her hand out. It's empty except for her middle finger, proud and stiff.

"This is for you!" She jabs it hard his way and then punches it toward each one of us. "You don't mind sharing it with your boys, do you?"

Her hand drops to her side as the other one reaches into her pocket and pulls out the key Tate must have given her. It's attached to a plastic pink butterfly that clinks against the counter when she tosses it down. I catch sight of the furious tears that are finally starting to well up in her eyes as she spins around and runs from the room. Tate waits for a beat and then he's tearing after her.

"Savy, wait!"

We hear her voice break with pain when she yells back. "D-don't t-touch me!"

And then the front door slams closed. Tate comes back with his hands digging into his hair. I peel back the foil on the pan she

shoved at me and dig into the cinnamon buns she baked just for me with a grin and then a laugh. They all look my way so I lift one of the treats up like I'm toasting them with it.

"Anybody else find a pissed-off Savy hot as fuck?" I say as I stuff the sticky treat into my mouth.

Tate just stares at me with incredulous eyes while he pulls at his hair and then he finally breaks and roars "Fuuuck!" and turns on Ash, looking to blame someone else instead of taking some ownership of that cock up.

"Thanks a lot, man. What the fuck is your problem, Ash? I *need* her right now! What the fuck has Savy ever done to you?"

I bark out a laugh causing them to both glare at me but I just wave a sticky, gooey bun at them dismissively and say "Carry on!" before hopping up on the counter to settle in with my treats and watch the show as Ash barks back at Tate.

"Me? What the fuck did I do? I didn't fucking agree to fake date her. I also didn't just basically say I was going to use her and drop her. Did you not think that would hurt her feelings at all? All I did was say I was getting sick of her in my space"

Beck shakes his head. "You're both fucking dicks. She didn't deserve that. She doesn't deserve to be used, period."

He tries to reach into the pan to get a bun so I growl my best Seinfeld soup guy impersonation and slap his fingers.

"No soup for you! Mr. She's not hot enough. Bad! Bad, Beck!"

He opens his mouth like he's going to argue his case but then snaps it closed with a furrowed brow like he's just now getting how that might have made her feel.

Ash smirks at me. "What? You think you're any better?"

I lick the frosting off of my fingers as I eye up all these twat-waffles and then lay it out for them.

"I said she's like a cute little house elf that smells nice. I didn't say I was going to use her and drop her, call her a pet, say she wasn't hot enough, or say she gets on my nerves. Also FYI, my dick gets hard for the entire adult cast of that movie, including the elf – so not a bad thing."

I toss the pan down on the counter and hop off to square up to them all, ready to stake my flag.

“Let’s start with you, big T. Do you want her? Not to use and abuse. Do you want her?”

He throws his hands up in the air. “What? No! I never wanted her to be my real girlfriend.”

I nod. “Pretty sure baby doll never wanted you to be her boyfriend either. If memory serves, you kind of forced it on her. **BUT** now you’re getting a case of the feels aren’t you because it sure wouldn’t take much to nudge her into that as well and that’s just going to hurt her if you keep fucking her around.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and his non-answer tells me I’ve nailed it. Time to speak some facts to my bro.

“It’s been what, a little bit over two weeks since you started this shit with her? The free trial is over, dude. If you wanna keep her, you got to pay the subscription fee. Me? I got my credit card ready to lay down for that sweet ass. So move along.”

Tate goes red in the face and starts sputtering. “Wh..uh..fuck...hell no! You can’t do that. That’s against the bro code.”

That starts me off in howling laughter. “Are you hearing yourself right now? I can’t have your fake girlfriend because of a real bro code? Hey Tate, get fucked.”

“Jude, are you for real? You really want Savy? Not just to fuck around with her?” Beck asks me so I spin to him.

“Fucking right I do. You going to man up and stop posturing? Admit you want her too?”

He looks past me at Tate and Ash and then slowly starts to nod. “Yeah, there’s something there. Not sure what exactly but I think I might want to find out.”

Tate’s groaning at that but Ash scoffs. “What the hell is happening right now? You two are the biggest man whores I know and you’re going to turn in your slut cards...for that...?”

Now, up to this point, I’ve been entertained by how blind my besties are being that they can’t see the treasure right under their noses but this shit right here, that will no longer fly. I get right up into Ash’s face and bare my teeth.

“That, what? I fucking dare you to finish that sentence. You probably don’t need a tongue to treat sports injuries, so go on, say whatever’s in that Butterfly deadened head of yours.”

He reels back with a hurt expression but, nope, I called her mine so nobody gets to put my doll in a corner anymore, bestie or not.

He rubs his hand over his mouth and then shakes his head. "I just don't get it, is all."

I lean back, already forgiving him, and grin. "Liar, liar, pants on fire. If you didn't see it and feel it, she wouldn't be under your skin. You're just pissed off that you feel something for someone who talks back. Maybe you're the one who needs to step out of the cage, Ash."

His eyes slide away from mine and ding, ding, ding that's three out of four, folks! I wander back to my sticky squares of heaven made just for me by the most magical girl on earth and bite into another one while staring Tate down. All three of us are looking at him now, waiting.

He's got his head down but I can see his tongue swiping back and forth over his bottom lip like he does when he's thinking hard on a play. While I wait for it to come to him, I take pity on Beck and offer the pan. Ash perks up with a look at it but...forgiven, NOT fucking forgotten yet so just hell no.

"Fuck! Yes, yes, I want her too. I don't fucking know why but I do." Tate finally spits out.

A huge grin spreads across my face. I love it when we're all on the same page. As far as all of us wanting the same girl? Well, sharing is caring in my world.

"Alright, you cuntasauruses, game on! May the best man win."

SAVY

I'm sitting in my advanced economics class and trying to absorb my professor's lecture but nothing he says is sticking. All I can hear is the shitty things Tate and the others had said about me. It goes round and round in my brain like a loopy carousel I can't get off of. I only have myself to blame for this hurt. I knew, I KNEW better! I knew that none of it was real but hearing them say it out loud like that, so dismissively, so carelessly, hurt way more than I thought it would.

It doesn't matter anyway. Better that it ends now than in another month when I really would have grown attached to all of them. I need to put them out of my mind and just focus on disappearing back into my little life. Try and enjoy the time I have left at school until I take over...

The classroom door slams open, echoing through the lecture hall with a boom that makes me jump in my seat. Every head turns toward it and I stifle a groan as Jude struts in, interrupting the lecture. He stops, sends a jaunty salute to the professor, and then scans the risers until he finds me. The idiot is wearing oversized glasses that look a little bit like mine. He's carrying a huge stuffed bag on one shoulder and a notebook and pen in the other and a wide grin on his face as he heads for the stairs that will lead him up to where I'm sitting.

"Mr. Dixon! Is there something I can help you with?" The professor barks out, his voice loaded with annoyance.

Jude just waves a hand behind his back and keeps coming my way. "No, thank you, sir! I'm just here to audit your class."

My professor looks furious and I'm surprised when he doesn't order Jude to get out but just continues with his lecture. I sink deeper in my seat as all the students keep following his progress until he sinks into the seat next to me, leaving a trail of disaster in his wake. The massive bag on his shoulder knocks laptops and books off at least three desks as he tries to shimmy down the aisle to get to me.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss at him, keeping my eyes focused straight ahead.

"Sorry I'm late. It took forever to find you. Had to pay off a clerk at the registrar's office to get your schedule. I didn't know you're doing a double major. That's like next level brain power, baby doll."

I refuse to look at him and try hard to ignore his shuffling around next to me but it's hard to ignore a fuzzy blanket being draped over you. I bat the fabric down and finally look at him to give him my best glare.

"What is this?" I spit out between clenched teeth.

He strokes the pink blanket thing like a pet. "It's a Snuggly! It's half blanket, half hoodie," he tells me with an excited grin. "I know how much you like to be warm so I ordered you one but baby doll, it's seriously big enough to share."

I shove the...snuggly...down by my feet. "You need to leave, Jude. You're disrupting the class and going to get me kicked out."

"Hmm, can't do it, doll. I have major groveling to do. Anyway, you're always bringing me snacks so I wanted to return the favor."

I try not to look at him again but then I'm juggling my laptop as he tries to slide it over to make room for...a bucket of fried chicken? And then a pizza box quickly followed by a carton of ice cream which is melting and seeping out under the lid.

"I wasn't sure what you liked so I just got..."

"Miss St. James!"

I just shove to my feet with a blazing red face and call out, "On it! Sorry, sir!" and start jamming my things in my bag.

Jude jumps up, passes the melted ice cream to another bewildered student, scoops up the blanket, pizza box, and bucket of chicken and trails after me as I practically run up the stairs to the exit.

He calls out a loud “Thanks for the audit!” as the door closes behind us with another boom.

I power walk to the end of the hall and then whirl around to let him have it but choke off my fury when I see the nervous look on his face. I’ve never seen Jude look nervous before and it’s enough to take the wind out of my sails.

“Don’t be mad, Savy, please? I knew you wouldn’t talk to me unless I ambushed you. I wanted to take you to lunch and try and explain but I was afraid you wouldn’t agree to go with me so I brought lunch to you.”

I pull my glasses off and rub at my tired eyes – a victim of not enough sleep and too much crying the night before. When I slide them back on, I roll my lips in and shake my head at him.

“Come on, then. There’s a nook just down here.”

I see his golden eyes light up behind his fake glasses making me frown at him and they dim again when I snatch them from his face but he follows me to the nook with a bench seat under a large stained-glass window. We take a seat but I shake my head when he tries to hand me the bucket of chicken.

“Just tell me what you want to say, Jude. No chicken, no jokes, and no crazy sex offers. I’m tired and I’m hurt. I don’t want another go around with you or the others.”

He nods slowly with his head down as he spins a few of his rings around nervously. This is so weird. Jude doesn’t get nervous and he certainly never looks uncertain like he does right now. It makes me a little worried about what he’s about to say.

“Baby...Savy...”

When he trails off again unable to find words my stomach flips in concern. This is so not like him at all so I grab his hand and squeeze it.

“Jude, what happened? Tell me what happened?”

He brushes his thumb over my knuckles and looks up to meet my gaze.

“You. You happened, baby doll.”

All the concern I felt leaves me and I try and pull my hand away, done with being toyed with but he holds it tighter and then brings it

up to his mouth to swipe hot lips over where his thumb had just been.

“I’m serious, doll. I miss you. I liked having you at the house and not just because you bake for me, either. And yes, I want to strip you down and do all kinds of wrong to that curvy body you keep hidden but it’s more than that too.”

He rubs a finger over his mouth, dragging my eyes to it and making me wonder just what kind of wrong he would do with it. I squeeze my thighs together to try and stop the ache that blooms at the thought.

“I want to spend time with you. I want to know you. I don’t really know much of anything about you but I want to. Like, why are you doing a double major in Business and English? What do you want to do after you graduate? Where are you from?”

He pulls my hand to his chest and flattens it over his heart. “I want to cuddle on the couch with your hands in my hair while we watch movies. I want to read Faerie porn books with you and then act out your favorite filthy scenes. Savy, I want to **be** with you.”

Butterflies take flight in my stomach at words I never thought anyone would say to me but the realist in me also cautions that those butterflies might be my intuition telling me to run. I pull my hand away from him and swallow the “Me too” that wants to pop out of my mouth.

“That sounds nice, Jude, but I’m not real big on watching other girls blow you on a daily basis.”

He groans and smacks the side of his head twice. “Stupid, stupid, peen! I’m sorry! I don’t even know why I let her up into my room. All I got is...habit? As soon as you left my door, my dick sagged like an elderly lady’s tits and curled up to cry. It doesn’t want to play with anyone but you, doll.”

There’s a visual I didn’t need in my head. Nice words and all but trust is earned, not spoken.

“Sure, Jude, whatever you say. What about the others? Tate? How is he going to feel about you chasing his ex fake girlfriend?”

A grin tugs at his lips and he makes a ‘tsk’ sound. “Fuck them kids, baby doll. They can do their own groveling.”

I let out a deep sigh and then push to my feet. “I need to think about it, Jude. I don’t want to be played around with. I just need to think.”

He bounces to his feet and pushes the bucket of chicken at me. “Okay, I get that, but here, eat. A hangry doll doesn’t think clearly. Also...umm... do you think you might still come to the booster dinner tomorrow night? You could be my date. Fuck Tate, get dressed up for me, doll!”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Like I said, I need to think. If I’m there, I’m there.”

TATE

I stand out in front of the library where Savy works and go over it in my mind again. I need to convince her I'm not faking it this time. The very last thing I wanted was a girlfriend and yet here I am trying to come up with the words to convince her to take a shot on the real deal, not the fake one. I scrub a hand through my hair in frustration.

Fucking Jude. Who would have seen that coming? He's dead serious about wanting her for his own and he's like the energizer bunny when he fixates on something. There's no way he'll give up until he gets what he wants. I can't sit back and watch her be with him. It'll drive me fucking crazy thinking about him being the one to make her moan the way she did for my fingers.

What the hell is this? I don't get jealous. I don't get invested in women, ever. I don't get distracted by them and yet here we are. The whole point of having Savy be my fake girlfriend was to avoid all this shit. Now I can't stand the thought of her being with anyone but me for real. Fuck it, I'll just have to wing it and hope I can charm her into giving me another shot.

I find her in the stacks shelving books. She's wearing another one of those dowdy skirts that do nothing to flatter her form and a bulky tan sweater and it makes me want to strip her bare right here to see the curves I got to touch the only time she was in my bed. Like she can sense a predator, her head comes up with a start and her eyes dart around. When they land on me, her pretty pink lips flatten and her eyes go cold and it fucking kills me that I make her feel like this.

"Go...away...Tate."

"Come on, Savy, we need to talk about this."

She glares and pushes her cart further down the row. “There’s nothing to talk about. The deal is off. You’re just upset I ended it before you had the chance to...how did you put it? Oh, right, drop me.”

I trail along behind her as she shelves books from her cart. “I was being an idiot, Savy. I didn’t want to believe that what was happening between us was real. Please, let me prove that it is.”

Savy huffs out a bitter little laugh as we come out of the aisle into the main section of the study area. Half of the tables are filled with students working and I catch the small, mean little smile on Savy’s face as she turns her head to look at me.

“It wasn’t real and I’m done putting on a show for you but here’s a free encore.”

She turns and raises her voice in the quiet space guaranteeing that every student here will hear her.

“Attention! Tatum Valor is a complete ass and I’ve just dumped him so he’s now a free agent. Any of you ladies wanting to take your shot at him...fire away!”

I groan in frustration at what she’s just done as no less than three women start to stand and Savy shoves her cart quickly back toward the checkout desk. I need to prove to her that I’m serious so I do the one thing that will hopefully make her believe. I call out my own announcement in a loud voice.

“She did dump me and I deserved it! But I’m not a free agent because that girl right there owns me and I’m going to do whatever it takes to get her to take me back!”

And then I chase after her. All our yelling has drawn the attention of the librarian who is waiting for us at the desk with a stern look and arms crossed over an impressively large bosom.

“Savanah, this isn’t the place to air out your dating drama.” She points towards a door with a sharp finger. “Take your break and get this resolved. I won’t have my library descending into some badly scripted reality show!”

Savy’s shoulders slump. “Yes, Ms. Vanier. I apologize for the outburst. It won’t happen again.”

The woman harrumphs like we’re in Victorian England as Savy grabs my wrist and drags me to the door that turns out to be a small

staff room. As soon as it closes behind us, she's stabbing a finger into my chest.

"What was the point of that? I'm not going to go along with your fake dating thing anymore. Why didn't you just take the out and be done with this?"

I grab her stabbing finger and try and pull her closer to me but she steps back instead.

"I meant what I said out there. I want to be with you for real. I want you to be my girl in public and in private. Savy, I'm sorry for what I said the other day. I didn't mean it! I just didn't want to face up to how I really feel."

There's not one ounce of give in this girl as she shakes her head. "Your apologies are just pretty lies wrapped in silk so you can get what you want. I fell for the last one but this one means nothing to me. Damn it, Tate, I told you I didn't want to get hurt and I let myself anyway. Just let it go before it's any worse for me."

Fuck, I should. I should just let her go but the hint of tears in her eyes twists me in a way I can't explain so I crowd her right up against a wall and hold her in place with my hips so she can't run away and then lean my forehead against hers. Those glasses of hers have slipped down her nose, giving me an up close look at her gorgeous sky blue eyes and I regret so badly that I didn't get to look into them when my hands were on her body the other day.

"Baby girl, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I hurt you. Give me another chance and I promise I won't hurt you again."

She bites down on her bottom lip and I want to kiss her so bad right now, show her just how much she gets to me.

Her voice is soft and hesitant when she says, "Sometimes, you meet someone and you know from the first moment that you want to spend your whole life...without them. That's you, Tate. I knew I should have run the other way as soon as you first fake-kissed me."

I growl hearing that and my hand comes up to wrap around her throat with just enough pressure to keep her from speaking any more lies.

"That's not how it felt when your pussy was clamping down on my fingers, baby girl. Yeah, I fucked up but don't lie to yourself. We both

know there's something more here between us and, Savy...right now, it's not a show because no one is watching."

And then I take her mouth with mine. I kiss her so hard and so deep that her legs go weak and I have to hold her up against me. My tongue wages war against hers until she's whimpering into my mouth and her fingers are fisted in my shirt. She's so goddamn responsive to my touch that I want to get on my knees right now and taste how I make her feel. Once the thought is in my head, my body takes over and I'm sliding a hand up her thigh, under her skirt, and pulling her tights down far enough to get under them. She arches into my touch when I cup her mound and when she moans my cock throbs. I force my mouth off of hers and tilt her head to get at her neck.

"Do that again, baby girl, but this time, moan my name," I command her and thrust two fingers deep inside of her soaked pussy.

"Fuck...Ta-te!"

Her head drops back against the wall as she grinds her wet pussy against the heel of my palm, taking every stroke I give her with breathy little gasps and when I bite down on her tender skin she pulses around me like a vise, soaking my hand. It's the hottest fucking thing I've ever felt and I'm seconds from bending her over a table and fucking her hard and fast when there's an abrupt knock on the door and the battle ax calls through it, "Five minutes, Savannah!"

Just like that, a switch flips in her, Savy shoves my hand from in between her legs and darts to the side and around me. She's gasping for breath with big wide eyes so I show her just how real this is by bringing the two fingers that were just inside her up to my mouth and sucking them clean, never breaking eye contact. Her hand flutters up to press against her mouth like she's trying to keep another moan from breaking free and I lick the last of her sweet taste from my lips.

"Don't fight this, baby girl. It's something we both want. Come to the dinner with me tomorrow night. Be my girl, all of the time, and I'll give you everything you want and so much more."

SAVY

I stare at my reflection in the full-length mirror and smooth down the light blue satin of the dress's skirt. It's just as beautiful as it was when I tried it on in the store, maybe even more with the matching accessories and my hair and makeup done. I wish Stella could have been here to help me get ready but she had some bar drama she had to cover at the club now that she's management.

Probably for the best. She would have insisted on a heavier look than the makeup I applied. It's very subtle with just a light dusting of silvery blue shadow, light liner, and lashes. Even still, it's more makeup than I ever wear outside the club and without my glasses I feel very exposed. The pin curls I had my hair up in turned out well, especially considering that style can turn out a hit or miss. Thankfully, the ripples in my dark brown hair look lovely and I took Stella's suggestion to anchor one side up and away with a jeweled comb above my ear.

I have to remind myself not to chew on my lip and ruin the pale pink lipstick as nerves thrum through my body. I think I look pretty but the problem is, I just don't look like me and I don't know if I even want to go to this stupid dinner. I'm so conflicted in my head by what happened with Tate and Jude and I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm a little bit scared. I'm scared that they don't mean what they said and they're just playing me for a fool but I'm also scared that they might be telling the truth.

The way Tate makes my body come alive is intoxicating but I could just brush that off as a physical response. My body has been touch starved in so many ways that I'm bound to be overly responsive to

what he's done to me...twice now. My cheeks pink up in the mirror just thinking about the way he licked my arousal off his fingers and everything inside me wants more of that, more of him. But he can be such a dick at times too. I can't help but keep a wall up there for when it turns out he really is just saying and doing those things so he can use me for his stupid deal.

Then there's Jude. He's outrageously charming in his goofy, loveable way. It's hard to deny what I saw in his eyes when he asked me to be his. There was a raw vulnerability there which makes me think that a lot of the crazy he projects is a mask to cover something deeper and if anyone can understand hiding under a mask, it's me. I know there's a physical draw with him as well. I barely have to close my eyes to picture his naked body as that girl kneeled in front of him. He's incredibly cut but not bulky with muscle the way the others are. He's sleeker, like an exotic cat of some kind. Powerful, fast, dangerous, and all his piercings and ink just add to it.

I turn away from the mirror and transfer the important things from my book bag to the matching clutch of the dress and sigh. I guess I am doing this, so I swing the matching cape around my shoulders and order a car.

I join the stream of formally dressed guests climbing the wide stairs nervously and paste on a brittle smile as I give my name to be checked off the guest list and I'm almost a little surprised that Tate or Jude did add me as a plus one. I check my cape with the attendant and then force myself to lift my chin and straighten my shoulders as I walk through the open double doors to the event dining room and pause to scan the crowd. My eyes widen when they land on someone I wasn't expecting to see and I quickly walk across the mostly empty marble dance floor to go to him.

"Unc...um...Mark? What are you doing here?"

He turns to me and almost freezes for a beat but then the usual warmth floods into his eyes.

"I could ask the same thing of you, Princess. I figured you'd be tucked in tight with a good book on a cold night like this. Why aren't you at home? You told me you didn't want to be associated with the Sevan name so I handle these events for us." He gives me a tight smile and scans me from head to toe. "You look incredibly lovely,

though. This is quite a change in style for you. I love it. What brings you here tonight?"

I press my lips together and smooth my skirt. "I, I'm just doing a favor for a...friend. Are we donating to the team?"

He laughs lightly and brushes a hand down my arm. "It would be strange if we didn't, sweetheart. Our name is on two of the bigger sports buildings on campus. Your father was a huge supporter of the athletics departments at his alma mater. He would have been so proud to know you chose to attend here and continue your family legacy."

I offer him a small smile and nod, nervous now that maybe I shouldn't be seen talking to him for too long in case someone figures out who I am in conjunction with one of the school's biggest donors. As if he can read my mind, Mark gently squeezes my elbow.

"Go on then, sweetheart. Go find your friend. I'll call you soon about plans for the holidays."

Gratitude and love wash through me at how my godfather is always there for me so I lean in and place a small kiss on his cheek and whisper, "Thank you, Uncle Mark. Love you."

His eyes go sad at my words and I think he must be missing my dad, who was his best friend, but he nods and lets go of my arm.

"Have a good night, Princess. Enjoy yourself."

I turn away and accept a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and when I look up from my sip of the golden brew, almost choke on it. All four of them are standing across the floor staring back at me and they're too beautiful for words in their tailored suits. I tip back my glass and drain the rest of the fizzy beverage. I think I might need many more to make it through this night.

TATE

And just like that, Savy takes my breath away. Who knew she was hiding a goddess under her baggy clothes and big glasses? The woman walking towards me is absolutely stunning and the cold look in her eyes tells me I need to level up hard if I want to win her, to deserve her. I also want to know who the man she just kissed is. Who is he to her that she would be so forward with him? I cringe at realizing that I know next to nothing about the woman I'm trying to convince to be mine and vow to change that. She comes to a stop in front of us and looks at each one of us with a flat, bland look before landing on me.

"Well, I'm here. Now what?"

"Baby..." I trail off when she narrows her eyes at the endearment and try again. "Savy, you look incredible. You're the most beautiful woman here." Her brow furrows slightly at the compliment and she looks away. I realize she doesn't believe me so I reach for her hand. "Will you dance with me?"

Her eyes slide to the others, pausing a little bit longer on Jude, and then she gives me the slightest nod so I escort her to the dance floor and take her in my arms. I hate how stiff she is and how she keeps her eyes fixed over my shoulder but it gives me the chance to study her. Her eyes are the color of a perfect summer sky and contrast beautifully with all that dark silky hair that ripples down her back. I want my hands in that hair, my face buried in it again. I let the hand holding her waist trail up her back and see her swallow hard but she shows no other reaction. It's driving me crazy that she's not giving this a chance so, of course, I say something incredibly stupid.

“Relax, Savy. Stop being so stiff, people are watching. You’re kind of phoning it in right now.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know it was the worst thing I could say.

Her eyes snap to mine and if anything, she goes even stiffer in my arms.

“I’m NOT phoning it in, Tate. I’m refusing to accept the call at all.” She shakes her head at me with angry eyes. “Pretty lies wrapped in silk so you get your show just like I said. Well, do me a favor Tate Valor, when you leave tonight, be sure to look both ways before you go fuck yourself. Because I sure as hell won’t be.”

She pulls out of my arms as I curse my stupid mouth, stupid brain, and overinflated ego. Savy heads straight for the doors but Jude heads her off and I’m at a loss on how to fix this...again. I go back to Asher and Beckett who can’t seem to take their eyes off the girl I might have just lost permanently.

JUDE

Right now, she's thinking it was a mistake coming here. Fucking Valor. She almost makes it to the doors when I step in her way with a cringe filled expression trying to show her I get it. I can see she's over all of us when she hits me with an icy glare. I throw my hands up like I'm trying to ward off the icicle missiles she's blasting my way.

"Whoa! Baby doll, I come in peace!" A grin starts to form on my face as I lean closer to her and slip an arm around her waist. "Want to blow this off and go play a game? You can be peace."

It takes her a few beats to get it but then her eyes squeeze closed and her mouth fights the smile she's trying to fight off and then loses. There's my girl.

"I don't know what he said wrong so fast but fuck him. Be here with me, baby doll. You're the brightest, shiniest gem in a sea of rocks and I need to be under your light for at least a few hours before you run away from me."

I can't keep my hand from wrapping around the back of her neck and sweeping the delicate skin with my thumb. She's so fucking beautiful. I feel her pulse speed up under my fingers and a small tremor rolls through her.

"Savy, seeing you like this tonight, I have to ask. Why do you hide this from the world? What are you hiding from, angel?"

Her sweet pink lips roll in and then she swipes her tongue over the bottom one to wet it.

"Jude Dixon, you show me yours and I'll show you mine."

She says it quietly, like a promise and a small snarl of possessive need escapes me as I pull her even closer. This right here is the one.

She sees me. Past the jokes, past the crazy, Savy sees me. I move in slow, soft, so as not to scare her, and swipe my lips gently across hers. This is not something to fuck up and rush. This girl needs to be caressed, nurtured. I need to let my baby doll bloom in her own way, her own time, and then when she's ready, I'll show her the animal inside me and I'll bet my NFL draft signing bonus she'll let me meet hers.

When I pull back, I can see in her eyes that she's here, with me, so I gently turn her and guide her back to where the others are standing.

"Come sit at our table, doll. We'll eat bland chicken, listen to boring rah-rah speeches and see if we can guess how many of the big boosters' wives have had plastic surgery. When that gets boring we can take a shot for every one of those plastic cougars who slip Tate their room key."

Savy shoots me a sharp look and I nod. "Yup, I'll get a few too. For some reason, they think they're entitled to fuck the players because hubby writes a check. Like somehow, we owe them for it."

Her cheeks turn my favorite color of pink as she asks nervously, "Did...did you ever..."

I stop us a few feet from the others and run the back of my tatted fingers down her cheek over that pink. "Nothing, nothing matters BBD, angel."

She tilts her head to the side in confusion. "BBD?"

I lean in and kiss those soft lips again gently. "Yeah, BBD, before baby doll. All that matters now is you."

ASHER

“Jesus, is that Savy?” Beck asks with a little bit of awe in his tone.

I scan around us trying to spot her, sliding over the curvy bombshell in the blue dress crossing the dance floor and then do a double take on her with my mouth dropping open. No...fucking...way. That can't be the bookworm. Look at all that rippling dark hair. Screw the hair, look at that fucking ass. There's no way that's her. How could she have hidden all of...that...away under her old lady style?

“Who the fuck is that guy touching her?” Tate grumbles next to me as she leans in and places a kiss on the guy's cheek.

I don't care who the guy is, I want to know who the fuck she is. I feel like I've been punk'd. The little mouse is not who she portrayed herself to be and it's seriously pissing me off for some reason. I glance over at Jude and he looks like he's starstruck. Like Savy's gone nova and he's blinded by her brilliance. I roll my eyes but like a magnet, they go right back to her as she crosses the floor toward us. The closer she gets, the more my gut tightens. There's something, something about the way her hips sway, the way she moves in that dress and heels that's gnawing in the back of my head. Something... I can't quite place.

She comes to a stop in front of us, looks us over with a flat expression, and says, “Well, I'm here. Now what?”

Tate says something to her that I can't hear and then leads her out on the dance floor but within minutes, she's pulling away from him with an angry expression and heading for the door. My fingers clench, annoyed that she's leaving already when I've barely had a

chance to see this version of her or even offer the lame apology I know she deserves.

Jude heads her off and then she's in his arms and I want to punch something, someone. Fuck, why do I even care? She's not my girl. My girl comes wrapped in bars no matter what Jude said the other day. His lips meet hers and I'm turning away so I don't have to watch it.

"Look at that! I bet she's fucking them all. Slut!"

The vicious tone and words catch my attention for their harshness and how misplaced they seem in a room full of elegance and I spot an icy-cold blond in a red dress on the arm of Hunter Miller. I'm not surprised to see him here. His family is old money and are big donors to the school.

"I don't know why they would fuck that. She's got zero bedroom game. She laid under me like a dead fish. I thought fucking a virgin would be more exciting but it's probably more to do with her being such a loser that made it so bad."

There's the someone who I can punch. This slimy fucker...

"That's ironic coming from the guy she lowered her standards for," Beck says, moving to block my view and getting up in Hunter's face. "What was it she said? Oh yeah, I remember - she just wanted to get it over with so she picked you out of the crowd and you gave her a four-minute intro in...un-ecstasy. Probably not something you want to be bragging about, Miller."

Hunter goes red-faced and spits out, "What are you even doing here, Hart? Last I checked you're not on the team anymore. You're nothing but a washed-up, meathead jock going, oh, that's right... nowhere. You should try and stay in your lane."

Tate pushes me to the side and drags Beck back just as he cocks his arm to take a swing at the guy with a murmured, "Not the place, man. Back off."

A group of players and their dates have crowded close like a pack of hyenas ready to descend on the scraps if a fight breaks out and one of the girls titters a high-pitched laugh that makes me want to use a power drill in my ear to get the sound out of it. God, I hate these fucking people.

“Are you all really fucking her? She’s a desperate little nobody. I mean, have you seen how she dresses?”

I want to step in and shut this bitch down as fury coils in my stomach but Tate beats me to it.

“What does that make you, Paisley? Pretty sure you sucked all our cocks last year. If memory serves, you took on half the defensive line at that frat party during spring break, didn’t you? Wasn’t there a video going around? I mean, it was hard to tell if it was you or not with so much jizz covering your face so I might be wrong.”

The girl goes pale and backs further into the forming crowd to get out of his line of fire. It’s the first glimpse I’ve had this year of the savage bastard Tate can be and I don’t not like it right now. I’m not one to slut shame but if you’re going to dish it, you better be prepared to take it in return.

The three of us turn as one when we hear Jude laugh behind us. He’s got Savy on his arm who’s back to having that flat empty stare as she takes in the three of us and then the crowd behind us. When she spots Hunter and his date, her fingers tighten on Jude’s arm and he whispers something to her that has her relaxing slightly. I can’t stop staring at her sky-blue eyes, so much brighter from not being hidden by her thick glasses. I clear my throat and move closer to them.

“Hey, I, um, I’m sorry about the other day,” I tell her. “I was being an ass. I was in a mood and well, I’m sorry.” She holds my gaze but doesn’t respond and it annoys me that I can’t read her. “You look incredible tonight, Savy.”

Those baby blues slide away from me like she doesn’t believe me and Beck moves in for his attempt.

“Darlin’, you take my breath away in that dress.”

That finally gets a reaction from her but not the one I think he was hoping for. A tiny fake smile pulls at her lips as she tilts her head at him.

“Hmm, well, I guess I missed the mark again, then. I was going for hot enough.”

He tries to apologize but she turns slightly away from us when a waiter interrupts.

“Champagne, miss?”

As she takes a glass filled with pink bubbles she hits the waiter with a real smile that has me sucking in a breath at how truly beautiful she is.

“God, yes! Thank you.”

She places a hand on his arm to hold him in place as she tips the glass and drains the entire thing in one long drink, sets it back on his tray with another smile, and takes a fresh one, nodding that he can go. The fact that she needs to pound alcohol to make it through the night is a testament to what assholes we are.

“We should find our table, doll. Rubbery chicken awaits!” Jude teases but the smile slips off his face. “Hey! You okay?” He asks her with a hint of concern making my eyes lock back on her face.

There’s a range of emotions traveling over it as she starts blinking faster and then she sucks in a jagged breath. Her eyes start to widen as fear creeps into them and I’m already reaching for her arm when the glass of pink champagne slips through her fingers and shatters on the floor. Her hand comes up to her throat as panic fills her face and she starts gasping for air. Her other hand clutches at my arm that reached for her. Her eyes latch onto mine as she starts to sway and I know she’s going down so I dart closer and catch her, gently lowering her to the floor.

Jude hits his knees beside us as Tate and Beck start yelling but I don’t hear any of them. I’m locked in on sky-blue eyes filled with terror and panic as she claws at her throat and makes the most horrific little gasps as she tries to suck in air.

“Allergic to...”

“Call 911...”

“Fucking snap your neck if...”

“Didn’t do anything...”

“Her purse...”

“EpiPen...”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I absorb the words being yelled all around us but I can’t break eye contact with this girl that I dismissed as nothing. I can’t break eye contact because I know differently now and I’m about to lose her. Because I see it. I see the moment she gives up, stops fighting. The terror and panic recede and in its place comes resignation and then regret. Her hand

releases its death grip on my arm and shakily lifts up to my face to brush her cold fingers gently over my lips and then fall away when the last of her strength leaves her. Her lips are tinged blue from lack of oxygen and I'm just about to lean down to try and force my breath into her starved lungs when my sight is blocked by blue satin and crinoline as Jude flips her skirts up and slams an EpiPen brutally against her thigh.

I claw the skirts back down to reveal her face but she's gone. Her eyes have rolled back in her head and she lies limp in my arms and all I can do is beg but it comes out more like a prayer.

"Breathe, Savy, please. Breathe."

I lower my head closer to her lips. She doesn't make a dramatic gasp like in the movies but I hear it, I hear that first small intake of air and then another and another and it makes me want to weep in relief. Her breathing comes faster and I pull back to scan her face. Her eyes are open but she's not seeing me or anything right now so I tuck her closer, sliding her head into the crook of my neck, and hold on until the paramedics peel her away from me.

JUDE

I want to rip, shred, stab and paint this whole fucking room in red as the EMTs wheel my doll out. They would only let one of us go with her in the ambulance and Tate barged ahead claiming to be her boyfriend. That's fine, it's fine. We'll follow them to the hospital as soon as I get some fucking answers because somebody in this room is going to pay.

It happened so fucking fast. One minute she's shooting champagne like a champ and the next she's clawing at her throat while Ash holds her in a death grip. Hearing that toxic cunt laughing and saying my doll looked like a fat blueberry as her face turned blue had me almost committing murder in a suit. Better that I didn't, bloodstains are hard to get out of fine fabric, I've tried often enough. The hand I wrapped around her throat was inches away from snapping it when Beck hauled me off of her and yelled at me to find Savy's purse. Precious seconds were lost because some rubbernecker had kicked it under a table after she had dropped it as they tried to get a better look at my girl's trauma.

My head turns to scan the crowd and then the floor where I almost lost her, taking in the puddle of pink-tinged liquid and shattered glass. Ash is still kneeling there and I see the shake in his hand as he picks a piece of that glass up to stare at it. That won't do, Winter Hill boys don't kneel and don't show weakness to circling sharks so I snap my fingers at Beck to get his attention and he helps me pull Asher to his feet. My childhood mate shakes himself and his eyes clear when they land on me. He snarls at me and I catch a hint of the

old neighborhood in it that only comes out when he's extremely angry.

"What the fuck just happened?"

"I don't get it. She's allergic to strawberries but I didn't see her eat anything. Did you?" Beck asks as he plows both hands through his hair.

I reach out and take the broken piece of glass from Ash and bring it to my nose to smell but get nothing. I look to the closest table and see plenty of glasses filled with golden bubbly but none have any pink. I close my fingers around the glass shard until blood runs through them and drips on the marble floor.

"It was the champagne and it wasn't a fucking accident."

Ash's eyes narrow on the puddle but Beck snags a passing waiter and hauls him to a stop.

"Which one of you was serving the pink champagne?"

The waiter tries to pull back but Beck clamps a big hand painfully on his shoulder and bares his teeth. "Answer the question. Who was serving the pink champagne?"

The guy shakes his head as his eyes dart from side to side looking for help but nothing will be able to help him if he doesn't give us the answers we need.

"N-nobody! We only serve the cheap shit. Pink champagne is too expensive to serve at a function like this."

Beck growls and tightens his grip. "Fine, how can the cheap shit be turned pink with strawberries?"

The guy makes a face like we're crazy but answers anyway. "I don't know, you could probably infuse it with strawberries, I guess. Listen, all I do is carry a tray that's already filled with glasses. I'm not in charge of pouring them."

Beck lets the guy go and starts scanning what's left of the crowd. After the EMTs were called, the event wound down pretty fast.

"It had to be the sister. Who else would know about her allergy? She must have paid off someone to serve that tray to Savy, right?" Beck fumes.

Ash gapes at him in disbelief. "You think her sister tried to kill her? Really?"

I throw down the blood-covered glass and pull my pocket square out to wrap around my hand.

“No, she did it to humiliate her. She knew Savy carries an EpiPen. She’s the one who said to check her purse for it when I threatened to snap her neck.” With one final glare around the room, I spot coach headed our way so I jerk my chin at the doors. “Let’s go. Coach wants a word with us and I’m not in the frame of mind to deal with him.”

As one, we turn and leave. My skin itches to be with my doll, to make sure she’s okay.

TATE

“She’s going to be groggy, fatigued, and there may be some dizziness for the next few days. She shouldn’t be left alone until she is recovered. We’ll keep her here for observation until morning but she should recover completely. Make sure you stop at the pharmacy and replace her pen. I’ve already sent down the prescription for her.”

The reassurance from the doctor helps and a heavy weight lifts from my shoulders. She’s going to be alright. I lift her limp hand to my mouth and press my lips against it before setting it gently down on the bed beside her and pull out my phone. Her blue dress and heels are jammed in a plastic bag hanging from the side of the bed and she looks so small in the hospital gown they put her in. I tap out an update to the boys and ask them to swing by the house to grab her some of my sweats to wear in the morning when we take her home.

I drag my hands through my hair and study her sleeping face. She still looks too pale to me and her face is slightly puffy from either the allergic reaction or the medicine they gave her but she’s still beautiful to me. How did I fuck this up so badly?

I had no idea what was happening and at first, I thought Ash was attacking her when he took her to the floor. I just stood there frozen like a jackass as Beck yelled about her strawberry allergy and called 911. Jude was making threats of violence until he got the information about her purse and the life-saving pen inside it. Ash just held her like she was the most fragile piece of crystal.

I’m supposed to be her boyfriend, fake or not. How do they know more about her than I do? Why did they take care of her better than I

could? What the fuck is wrong with me?

“T-Tate? Wher...”

My eyes flash to her confused, hazy ones and I take her hand again as I stand and lean over to brush her hair back from her face.

“It’s okay, baby girl. I’m here. You’re okay, you’re safe now.”

She tries to swallow and makes a face so I grab the cup of water next to the bed and place the straw between her lips. Once she’s taken a few sips her brow furrows.

“W-what happened? Ash, Ash was...” Her blue eyes widen as it starts to come back to her. “Ash...he was scared? For me?”

I blow out a breath and kiss her forehead. “We all were, baby girl. You scared the hell out of us. But you’re okay now. Everything is okay.”

Her confused eyes stare into mine for a few more moments and she whispers, “Jude, where’s Jude?” in a slurred voice before they start to droop and finally flutter closed. I sit back in my seat and drop my head into my hands. Fuck.

Savy doesn’t wake up again before the guys show up. When they walk in, Jude doesn’t even spare me a glance. He goes straight to the bed, drops the side rail, and climbs up onto it, laying on his side to pull her against him. Savy’s eyelids flutter but don’t open as she curls right into him and fists his shirt like she was made to fit exactly there. A pang of envy is quickly followed by the sharp claws of jealousy that I have no right to feel. Out of all of us, Jude’s the only one who’s accepted Savy from the start and never said or done anything to make her feel less. He was the first one to throw down for her so she’s exactly where she should be right now. I can only hope she lets me try and be the man she deserves too.

SAVY

“I want to go home. Please, will you take me home?” I ask Jude once he’s helped me put on the clothes they brought me to wear.

My poor, beautiful gown that I only got to wear for a few hours is a wrinkled mess stuffed in a plastic bag from when the hospital staff stripped me of it to treat me.

“Yes, baby doll. Any minute now they’ll be in with your discharge papers and we’ll take you back to our place.”

I shake my head but groan as the world tilts and spins. Jude eases me back down on the bed but keeps his arm around me when I sway to the left.

“I don’t want to go to your place. I want my bed, my home.”

He sits down beside me and kisses the side of my head. “You can’t be alone for a few days, doll. Someone needs to keep an eye on you until you’re steadier on your stems.”

I make a fat pout and I know I’m being childish but I want my little studio where I feel safe. “I have a friend who can come stay with me. Stella will watch me. Please, Jude, I just want to go home.”

I feel big fat tears start to slide down my face and I hate them but can’t seem to stop them either. I’m always a hot mess after I have a reaction but this one seemed so much worse than any I had before. It’s only happened twice before and the doctor did tell me that each time I have a reaction it can get increasingly severe but this one happened so fast and I’m really shaken by it.

Jude wipes away my tears with a frown and kisses both my cheeks. “Okay, angel. We’ll take you home but only if you let me stay. Please, Savy, you have to let me take care of you. I almost lost

my mind when you went down. I need to hold on to you for at least a few more days.”

I’m too tired to argue so I let my head slump against his chest as the world spins around me again and goes black.

“What the hell happened here? The whole street is blocked off.”

Tate’s annoyed tone has me peeling my eyes open in the back seat of his car. I reach up to straighten my glasses so I can see what’s happening and almost poke my eye out when I find them not on my face.

“Easy, darlin’. I have them right here for you.”

I blink up at Beck who I’m pressed against and sigh. I can’t seem to get away from these boys. He slides my glasses on but another wave of dizziness has me closing my eyes again to stop the spin.

“Savy, baby girl? Wake up for a sec. I need you to tell me what your apartment number is so I can run in and pack a bag for you.”

I huff out a whine. “No, Jude said I can go home. Please take me home.”

Jude’s hand cups my face and I know it’s his even though my eyes are still closed because of the warm rings that rub over my skin.

“I know I did, sweetheart, but there was a gas leak in your building last night that destroyed a couple floors. I just talked to the police. Everything is blocked off and they’re only letting people in to grab some belongings. Tell me your apartment number, doll.”

I think I mumble the number out because a car door slams. Beckett wraps me up in his cinnamon warmth and I think I’m mad at him but snuggle deeper against his warmth anyway because it feels so good, so safe there.

“I know you are, Peaches, and you should be pissed at me but I’m going to make it up to you,” he tells me so I guess I said that out loud.

The car door slams again jarring me but then the engine starts and the hum of the tires on pavement puts me right back to sleep.

I drag my heavy eyelids open and try and focus but I’m not wearing my glasses again so everything is blurry. My mind feels clearer as I search my memories and the last thing I remember is waiting to leave the hospital. Jude said he’d take me home but these aren’t my sheets I’m laying on. I roll over and squint my eyes and

spot a blur that looks like a pair of glasses so I reach out and snag them and slide them on. Judging by my surroundings, I'm in Jude's bedroom. Definitely NOT home.

I sit up and feel incredibly achy and sore and see a glass of water with two pills next to it on the nightstand. I recognize the antihistamine tablets and know I should take them. This isn't my first rodeo, just the most severe. I drain the water after swallowing the pills and it hits my empty stomach with a gurgle. The time on the clock means nothing to me until I look out the window and see darkness. Okay, seven at night then but what day is it? Only one way to find out so I push to my feet and take in the boxer shorts and hoody I'm wearing but have to brace a hand back on the bed as the room shifts slightly. Somebody changed my clothes and I'd like to say I care but, nope. My hair falls into my face when I glance down at the clothes so I wind it up into a bun and then head for the door.

I can hear the TV on downstairs so I head that way, clutching at the handrail when a small dizzy spell comes calling. I must make a noise because Ash darts into view at the bottom of the stairs with a concerned expression.

"Hey! You shouldn't be on your feet yet. The doctor said no stairs on your own for at least a few days."

I ignore him completely because, because he's an asshole, right, and slide down to the next step.

"Dammit, Savy!"

And then he's stomping up the stairs and swinging me off my feet which doesn't help the mild dizziness at all.

"You could have fallen and broken your neck. You should have called out for one of us."

I roll my eyes his way and shoot him a look over my glasses. "Well, that would have solved your "she's in my space" problem," I mutter sarcastically.

He sighs deeply and it ruffles some of the hair that didn't make it up into my sloppy bun.

Ash turns toward the couch but I shake my head and groan out, "No. Food, please. Too many chemicals on an empty stomach. Making me loopy."

He changes direction and sits me on one of the high back stools at the counter. His warm hands land on my bare thighs and then rubs a little as he stares into my eyes with concern. My skin warms under his hands and I get these little flashes of his scared eyes looking down at me when I couldn't breathe and I can't help it, I have to ask.

"Why did you care? I remember. You looked so scared. Why? You don't like me, Ash, so why?"

His hands are still on my legs and his emerald eyes go intense for a moment but then he pulls away.

"How about some toast and eggs? Keep it simple until we know your stomach can handle it."

I turn the stool to face the island and prop my chin on my hand, still too tired to sit upright for long. I'm never going to understand this man so I just watch him scramble some eggs and butter me some toast. I wait until he slides a plate in front of me and hands me a fork before I speak.

"Why am I here? I remember Jude saying he would take me home." I glance behind me to the living room with a frown. "Where is he? Where's everyone else?"

Ash turns his back on me to wash the pan he just used. "They had a game tonight. That's not something they can miss, even for you, Savy."

I frown as I bite off a corner of toast. "I never asked them to miss anything for me but that doesn't answer my first question. Why am I here? Why didn't you take me home?"

He sighs again, sets the pan aside, and turns to face me with a look I can't decipher. "We tried. There was an issue with your apartment and we couldn't take you there."

I swallow down a bite of eggs with a frown. "What kind of issue?"

He rubs a finger over his mouth with a furrowed brow. "There was a gas leak in your building. It...it caused an explosion and it took out a couple of floors...including yours. I'm sorry, Savy, there's nothing left of your place."

All I can do is blink stupidly at him. I can't even wrap my dazed brain around what that means so I try and process it by asking, "My studio? Is...gone? All my...stuff is gone?"

He nods slowly so I look down at myself wearing someone else's clothing because I no longer have any of my own. I tell myself that it's just stuff, just a place I've been staying and I can easily replace it all but...hot tears fill my eyes and drip down onto my eggs. That studio was the first place that felt like home since my dad died. It was...mine. I didn't have to deal with Celeste and Vanessa there. I could just be myself with my things surrounding me. I was...safe there and now it's gone.

"Dude, coach is gonna have Jude's ass. He's texted me like four times in the first half of the ga..." Beck comes into the room from the basement and stutters to a stop when he spots me. I look back down at my plate but I can feel his eyes burning into the side of my face and then he's moving.

"Ah, shit. You told her?"

He comes right up next to me and turns the stool toward him and then lifts my chin so I'm forced to look at him. There's so much compassion and...pity in his silvery eyes that a small sob hiccups out of me.

"No, no, no, don't cry, Peaches. It's okay, everything will be okay." He tells me and pulls me against him so my face is against his chest. Beck talks to Ash over my head.

"You should have fucking waited to tell her. She doesn't need that kind of stress right now."

"What was I supposed to do? She asked. Wanted to know why we didn't take her home." Ash bites back.

I push away from Beck and turn back to my food but any appetite I had is long gone. I push the plate away and swipe the tears from my face with my sleeve.

"Thank you for cooking for me. I think I need to go lie down for a while."

"Hey, come on, you barely ate anything. Just try and finish the toast at least. It will make you feel better." Ash orders.

I don't have the fight in me to disagree so I choke down half of a slice but my stomach is now queasy so I shake my head and slide off the stool.

Beckett's right there with a hand on my back to steady me. "You've been sleeping all day. Why don't you come lie on the couch for a bit?"

Try and stay awake for a while or you'll be up all night."

I let him guide me over to the couch and get me settled but I shiver when my bare legs land on the cold leather. Seconds later, he's tucking a blanket around me and then settling down beside me and reaching for the remote.

"Want to watch Jude and Tate take a beating?"

He asks the question with a chuckle but I'm lost in thoughts of being homeless. Well, locally homeless, anyways. I'm going to need to find another place as soon as possible. I can't believe my place blew up. That thought has me sucking in a breath of concern and grabbing Beck's arm tightly.

"Wait, there was an explosion? A fire? Was anyone hurt? Ash said two floors were destroyed! Was anyone hurt?"

He winces, telling me all I need to know but I ask anyway. "Did anyone...die?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, two people on the floor below your place died. There were some other injuries but I don't know all the details. You were really lucky to not be there, Sav."

I pull my hand away and battle more tears for those poor people when Ash barks out a curse.

My eyes fly to him and then the TV he's glaring at as a pile of football players untangle themselves to reveal Jude at the bottom of the pile. The camera pans in and even though he is wearing a helmet I can see the crazed anger in his eyes.

"He's worried about you, Peaches. His head's not in the game," Beck explains.

I drop my eyes to the score in the corner of the screen and wince at how badly our team is losing. I might not be able to help the poor victims from my building but I might be able to help Jude a little. The clock runs down to halftime and I see him throw his helmet, earning him a roar from the coaching staff.

"You said he's been texting you? During the game?"

Beck shakes his head with a grimace. "Yeah, that's going to earn him a suspension if they catch him."

I drop my head back against the couch as weariness washes over me. "Can I use your phone, please?"

A small grin tugs at his lips as he swipes it open and hands it over. I open his messaging app and hold the phone up to take a selfie. I force my droopy eyes wider and raise one eyebrow in a bit of a stern look even though I look a disaster and then caption it.

Hey weirdo

I'm watching your game on tv

*If you're going to play for the other team
shouldn't you change your jersey?*

I hit send and hand Beck back his phone and turn my eyes to the TV. One of the trainers snags Jude's jersey and pulls him from the line of players heading to the dressing room. He makes him huddle over something and then Jude's swinging around with his familiar grin and searching across the field until he finds a camera pointed his way. He makes a shooting gun motion with his hand, dramatically clutches his heart, and then winks. A warm glow fills me as I watch him jog off the field.

Except for my dad, no one has ever cared enough about me to have it affect them like that. I snuggle deeper into the blanket and end up sliding against the leather until I'm braced against Beck. I try and pull back but he lifts his arm and tucks me against him.

"I'm sorry for what I said that day, Savy. It was a shit thing to say and honestly, I didn't mean it. Sometimes, it's easier to be a dick than admit to something that makes you feel...vulnerable. Something that can open you up to being hurt."

The way I'm leaning against him has me facing away, facing Asher where he's sitting in the armchair. His gaze slides from the commercial on TV to meet mine. I understand what Beck's saying on my own level. It's easier to toss my hair and hide behind my mask. Refusing to show Asher the real me because I'm also afraid of opening up and being hurt. It's sort of the same thing.

Ash's gaze is still locked on mine so I see the small incline of his head and take it to mean he agrees with what Beck just said and maybe, possibly, might feel the same.

My brain is still too tired and fuzzy to process it all right now so I just give a nod and rest my head against his chest. He tucks a chunk of my dangling hair that I missed behind my ear and then just sits with me, holding my hand until the game starts again.

The second half is better than the first half and our team squeaks out the win by three points. I'm ready to go back to bed and I would love a shower but that reminds me that I have...nothing. No toiletries, no clothing, no nothing. Beck lends me his phone again because I have no idea where mine might be and I hit Amazon next-day shipping for the basics to get me through the next few days. I'll have it delivered here but I need to look for a hotel close to campus to move into until I can find another apartment.

I know Stella would insist that I stay with her but it is too far away from school with the traffic. Besides, the hotel will only be for a few days. A week at most. Beck looks down and sees me searching for hotels near campus and snags the phone from my fingers. He brushes a soft kiss on top of my hair and murmurs,

“Don't worry about that right now. We'll get it all sorted tomorrow.”

JUDE

I've never felt this...itch...before. An itch to be with someone, a woman. Somehow, my baby doll has gotten under my skin and set it on fire, flooding my mind until thoughts of her are consuming me. It's fucking weird. Girls are fun, I like playing with them and fucking them but once that's done, I'm happy to have them go on their way.

There's just something about Savy that's latched onto me. She's self-contained. Like, there's a whole room of people but she stands alone in the middle of it and lets it all flow around her. She doesn't try and cling to the crowd or insert herself in it. Savy has this shield around her that she stands behind while she watches and observes and she seems to be totally okay with being alone. She's like an island unto herself. It kind of calls to me. I want to be an island with her.

I've been surrounded my whole life by people. Coming from such a large family with seven siblings, countless aunts, uncles, and cousins, I've always felt like I had to fight for any crumb of attention or affection that someone would toss my way. Then here's this girl who looks at me, focuses on me, and actually sees me. I think she sees past the front I put on for so many, the fight I live, for attention and affection and sees beneath it. I don't know why but I want her to keep looking, to see deeper into me.

I'm grateful that the trip home was a short one and it wasn't an overnighter like some of our away games are. I hated to leave her so soon after she got out of the hospital. Knowing that she'll be waiting for me in my bed, all warm and soft has had my dick hard for the whole flight and the drive home. I know she's not ready for that, even

if she wasn't sick, but that doesn't change how much I want to peel her out of those frumpy clothes to get to the juicy curves I know she hides under them.

I barely acknowledge Tate's goodnight as I race up the stairs to get to her. I pause just inside my bedroom door and listen to her soft breathing with a grin and then strip my clothes off. My thumbs hook into my boxers but I stop and leave them on. No sense scaring my doll...yet. That drinking game that went off the rails let me know just what an innocent she is and there'll be plenty of time to get my girl dirty when she's back on her feet and more comfortable with me.

I slide into the cool sheets and move right up against her warm back, twine my legs with hers, and nuzzle my nose into her thick hair that faintly smells like peaches. Savy wiggles against me as my cool skin meets her warmth and her murmur is thick with sleep.

"Jude? You're back?"

"Missed you, doll. How're you feeling?"

She stretches against me rubbing that round ass I desperately want to bite against my hard cock and it makes her still when she feels it. I sweep my fingers up under her t-shirt and rub small circles against her stomach.

"B-better. Food helped clear my head some."

I can hear the nerves in her voice from me touching her and I bite down on my lip to keep the smile back. I know she's spent the night in both Tate's and Beck's bed but I'm almost positive nothing happened or if something did, it was something small. I don't think I'll mind sharing my doll with the others if they get on board but I want to be the one to give her all the firsts that she's been missing out on.

I groan into her neck thinking about all the things I'm going to teach her, to show her, and that makes me want her to be even closer so I roll her around and settle her on top of me with her legs between mine. Her long hair falls like a curtain to drape over me and without her glasses on, I can see her eyes, big and wide. I rub her nose with mine.

"Like having you in my bed when I get home, baby."

One of her hands comes up and tentatively smooths my hair back and her voice is barely a whisper.

"I like being in your bed when you get home."

I groan at how fucking perfect this girl is as my hands wander up her back under her t-shirt. Her skin feels like warm silk and it makes me wonder why I've never taken the time to touch like this. Sex has always been something fast, hard, lust driven. Never have I wanted to just sweep my hands slowly, to feel all a woman's dips and curves like I do with my doll. My lips brush across hers in a slow, sweet, dance as I feel the tremor run through her from my hands on her back. I want to stroke her, pet her, build her arousal until she's panting with need for me. And then I want to ruin her for any other man but me.

My hands go down to the dip in her back and slide under the boxers she's wearing to cup and stroke her ass and then press her mound to me so my rock-hard cock can grind into her. Savy breathes in a tiny shuddering gasp and I take advantage of it to slide my tongue between her lips to brush against hers. She's so fucking sweet that I have to force myself to not flip her to her back and plow into her. I just keep stroking her with my hands and my tongue until she makes little kitten noises that make my head spin with animal need so I slide her off of me and tuck her against my side.

"You need to rest, baby. You're not fully recovered. Sleep, doll."

"I'm fine. We don't have to stop," she tells me with a slight whine to her tone, making me grin before placing a soft kiss on her hair.

"Nope, I want you in full health before I make you scream my name. Go to sleep, baby doll. I'll be here when you wake up."

It doesn't take long for her breathing to even out, telling me she really does need to rest. Lying here with her sleeping in my arms, so soft, so sweet - something I've never known before starts a warm glow in my chest. It's a fierce need to keep her, protect her, own her, and it only takes me moments to accept it and embrace it. She's fucking mine. I'm keeping her.

Lying here in the dark and listening to Savy breathe I start thinking about who could have done this to my girl and how I'm going to fuck up that cunt of a sister of hers who dared to hurt what's mine.

TATE

When the sun wakes me, I groan as I stretch out my stiff muscles. Everything is sore from the beating I took on the field during yesterday's game. That first half was brutal and reminds me why I don't need women fucking with my head. When Jude showed me Savy's text at halftime, it was like a switch flipped in me and I was able to do my fucking job on the field again. As much as I hate the bastard, my father was right about the distraction.

I roll over and snag my phone from its charger and my teeth clench at how many notifications are on it from him. I can already hear the shit he's going to throw my way for how bad I played. I swipe them all away, in no mood to deal with him until I've woken up and had some coffee and a workout.

I find Jude in the kitchen singing 'Wannabe' by the Spice Girls in a screeching falsetto as he fills two plates for breakfast. When I try and go around him to get to the coffee, he ups the volume and tries to dry hump my hip causing me to check him away but it does take some of the dark clouds over my head away.

"Fuck off or I'll bend you over the counter and make you hit those notes properly."

He spins back to his plates with a wide grin and wink. "You fuckin' wish you could have my ass, T dog. Too bad Savy owns it now."

That has the darkness rolling back in and I slam a mug to the counter and dump coffee into it. Fuck! I need to get her clear from my head but knowing that Jude's staked a claim on what was mine, fake or not, has me wanting to punch his grinning face. Distraction or not, I need to know how she's doing.

“How is she? Ash said she was still unsteady last night when she came down.”

He turns and leans against the counter with a dreamy look on his face. “Like warm, silky butter under my fingers, that’s how.”

My jaw clenches and he spots it and laughs.

“Aha, so you do know how she feels. I know you didn’t fuck her so what did you do with her when you had her in your bed?”

I want to wipe that satisfied grin off his face so I smirk and tell him. “Let’s just say, she’ll make your dick weep when that tight pussy clamps down on your fingers as she comes.”

My words have the opposite effect than what I wanted when his grin just grows bigger. “Alright! Guess I’ll know what to expect when she does that on my tongue.”

I dump my coffee in the sink with a growl and stomp past him back to the stairs, his laughter following me. I need to hit the weights and clear my head of every bit of the girl that’s no longer mine. I go straight to the spare room where we have our gym set up and curse when I find it’s been cleared completely out. Fuck! Fuck, I forgot they were going to move it all down to the basement.

When we went to get Savy a bag from her apartment and found out it was gone, everyone agreed it was up to us to look after her and she would come to stay with us until she could find another place. Even Ash was quick to agree with putting her in the spare room after what she’d been through. Now, all I can think about is the head fuck having her here constantly will be for me and it has me turning from the empty room to march to Jude’s. I can’t have some girl messing with my head. I need to focus. I need...

Her hair, that silky mass of chocolate that I never really got to have my hands in, is spread out over Jude’s pillow. There’s a soft pink to her skin as she sleeps and it makes me remember how pale she was lying in the hospital bed. Without permission, my feet cross the room as all thoughts of pushing her out of my head disappear, until I’m next to the bed and my hand reaches to brush some of her hair back away from her face. Those soft pink lips of hers part as she sighs in her sleep and I’m moving to sit next to her on the edge of the bed as her lashes flutter open and sleepy, sky-blue eyes are revealed.

I have to force my hands not to reach for her, scoop her up, and carry her to my bed where she belongs as she blinks up at me. Instead, I run my knuckles over her cheek.

“Morning, baby girl. How are you feeling?” I ask, my voice low and soft like I’m afraid I’ll scare her off.

She stretches and my eyes drop to the way the t-shirt she’s wearing stretches over her chest making my mouth go dry.

“Better, more myself. Where’s Jude?” she asks and I snatch my hand back from her face, reminded that she’s not mine to touch like this.

“He’s making you breakfast. He’ll be back in a minute.”

She keeps her eyes on me and I see the guarded look in them. The last time we spoke was before she had the allergic reaction and I had fucked it up, again.

“I’m sorry, Savy. I’m sorry you got hurt at the party and I’m sorry I hurt you with my bullshit. I seem to keep fucking everything up with you. I-I don’t want to do that anymore.”

Her eyes soften and she reaches for my hand, giving it a small squeeze. “I don’t want to fight with you, Tate, but I also don’t want to put on a show anymore.”

I lift her hand, uncurling her fingers to place a kiss on her palm. “I don’t want that either. It’s not fair to you. I’m sorry I put you in that position. I get that you’re with Jude now. I just wish...”

Her brow furrows and her eyes slide away from mine. “I don’t know...”

“Hey, roomie! I brought you breakfast in bed!” Jude calls out as he comes in with two plates loaded with food. Savy pulls her hand from mine and scoots up in the bed to lean against the pillows and then starts looking around like she’s trying to find something with a frown on her face.

I snag her glasses from the nightstand and hand them to her. As soon as they slide on to dim her gorgeous eyes, her hands go up to gather all that hair and she begins to wind it up into the bun she always wears. As I watch her do it, I realize that it’s her shield. She hides herself behind her glasses and bun like it will protect her from the world. She shoots me another guarded look before turning her attention to Jude with a small smile.

“Thank you, you didn’t have to do that. I’ll be out of your hair as soon as my packages get here and I have some clothes to wear. There’s a decent hotel near campus I plan to move into until I can find another apartment.”

Jude drops the plates on his nightstand and bounces onto the bed to flop half onto her lap.

“Nope, not happening! You’re staying here with us.”

Savy goes tense and darts a look my way. “Um, that’s incredibly generous of you but...I, uh, we all need our own space, Jude. A hotel is the better choice.”

It doesn’t seem to matter that just minutes ago I wanted her out and away from me as the words pour out.

“We cleared the spare room for you,” I tell her.

“Already ordered you a bed for it,” Jude chimes in, “although, I like you right where you are so it might not get used all that much.”

She’s still shaking her head. “Really, thank you - but Ash doesn’t want me here as it is. Staying here full-time isn’t fair to him. This is his home. He shouldn’t have...”

Jude cuts her off. “Who do you think hauled most of the weights to the basement? He and Beck cleared it while Tate and I were at the game.” He crawls up her body and goes nose to nose with her and I stand, feeling like an intruder. “Stay with me, us, baby doll. You won’t regret it.”

I start backing toward the door. “Honestly, Savy, we want you to stay. That’s what...friends are for. I-I’ll see you later.”

I tear out of there as Jude starts kissing away any more objections and head for the basement to punish my body. It’s the only thing I can think to do right now to try and clear her from my head again.

SAVY

“Have you seen my phone? It was in my purse at the dinner.” I ask Jude once we’re done eating a weird breakfast combo of toast, bacon, and leftover Thai noodles.

He rolls off the bed to take my plate and then crosses the room to his closet and comes back with the small blue purse I had been using that night.

“Hope you don’t mind. Your cell was blowing up when you were loopy. Your friend Stella had heard about the apartment thing on the news and was freaking out so I texted her back from your phone. I just let her know you were ok and filled her in on what had happened. She said to tell you not to worry about your shifts this week, that she’d get someone else to fill in.”

My hand freezes as I reach for my purse when I hear that but he doesn’t notice my hesitation and rambles on.

“I know you work at the library but what’s your other job, doll?”

I dodge his question with a groan. “Oh no! I’m going to have to replace everything for school as well as all my other stuff. I need to email my professors and let them know some of my work will be handed in late. At least most of it is on the cloud so I don’t have to start over from scratch. This is such a mess.”

Guilt swamps me for lying to him even if it is by omission about working at the club. This is all too new, whatever this is with him and I’m not ready to share my other life as the butterfly yet. Jude lays his head on my lap as I scroll through my phone looking at everything I missed in the last two days while I was out of commission.

“I’m sure the building insurance will cover that but it might take a while for it to come in. I can buy whatever you need for now, doll.”

My phone drops to the side so I can see his face and I just stare down at this sweet, sweet man.

“You need to move so I can kiss you,” I tell him in a soft voice.

His eyebrows jack up as a grin flashes and then I’m yanked down from the pillows so I’m laying flat and he’s settling over me. God, his golden eyes do it for me. I brush my lips softly over his.

“You don’t have to buy me anything, Jude. I have my own money but thank you. It’s very sweet of you to offer and thank you for letting me stay here too.”

I kiss him again, and then again, deeper this time - until I feel him thickening against my leg. My stomach starts to flutter and a low ache has begun to bloom between my legs so I kiss him even deeper and let our tongues tangle. When Jude pulls back, breaking the kiss, a different man looks down at me. He’s intense and all goofiness, sweetness is gone from his expression.

His fingers bite into my waist. “I want to fucking taste you, doll. I’m desperate to see you bare, spread out for my eyes, my mouth. I want to know how every part of you feels on my tongue. I want your flavor on my lips. I want you mindless and thrashing under me until you beg me to fucking stop. Savy doll, give yourself to me.”

I’m practically panting from his erotic words and I know the boxers I’m wearing are getting damp. I swallow hard, glance at the door and when I see that Tate closed it on his way out, I turn back to Jude and smash my lips to his, giving him permission to take control. He snags my glasses and tosses them across the bed and then he nips, sucks, and licks at my mouth as his hands run up and down my body. The sensations of contact are flooding me and I want more, I need more... I grab the hem of my shirt and lift it over my head, baring myself to him, asking him to touch me without words. I have no idea where my bra is so he sees it all and I don’t care. Any thoughts of self-consciousness I might have had is washed away by the look of desire on his face as his hot eyes focus on my breasts and the almost animal moan he lets out.

“Fuck, you’re perfect.”

Then my eyes are rolling back as his tongue sweeps over one of my tightening nipples and his lips latch on and pull it gently. His hands cup my breasts and squeeze them as he drags his mouth across my chest to tease the other tightening bud. I whimper and gasp at the sensations flooding through me. This is something new, something I've never had done to me before. Hunter and Tate hardly touched my breasts so I didn't know just how sensitive they would be as Jude makes a meal of them. Everything starts tightening in my core and my nails dig into his shoulders. I arch my back, causing him to suck my nipple even harder, to pull it deeper into his mouth as a wave of pleasure I didn't see coming crashes over me. My thighs clamp together on his leg as pulse after pulse rocks through me and Jude moans and softens his lips against me.

"Fuck me, I just made you come, didn't I?" He asks, but I can't form words to answer. All I can do is gasp for air so he pulls away to sit up between my legs. "Hot damn! Last name Ever, first name Greatest."

I'm still dizzy from the orgasm as he looks over every inch of my naked chest. He licks his lips and shakes his head with a hungry look on his face.

"Damn it, doll. The first orgasm I gave you was supposed to be on my tongue."

He palms my bare thighs and runs them slowly up my legs until he gets a grip on the hem of the boxers and his voice goes thick and husky.

"I'm gonna need to taste that cum so you'll just have to do it again."

He rips the boxers down my legs and tosses them to the side and then pushes my knees apart, fully exposing me. Some of the outfits I wear at the club cut pretty close to my bikini line so I get laser hair removal leaving me completely clean of hair. I'm nervous about being this open with him and part of me wants to close my legs but the way he bites his lip and the look of worship I see makes me brave enough not to fight to close them.

His fingers slide up my inner thigh until he brushes the backs of them over my bare mound, causing me to tremble.

“That’s the prettiest pink pussy I’ve ever seen, baby. I can’t wait to fuck it raw and red.”

My legs tense under his hands causing him to glance up and his eyes soften.

“Nah, baby, we aren’t there yet. I need to level you up first. Don’t worry, I know all the cheat codes.”

He drops down and swipes his tongue into my wet folds causing a jolt of lust so strong to rock me that my back comes right off the bed in an arch. His tongue does things, makes me feel things I never thought possible. It turns me into an animal as I buck against his mouth, wanting more. My fingers slide into his white-blond hair and pull and the moans of approval he makes just encourage me. His tongue is like a weapon of mass destruction that goes from circling my clit to spearing into me and he fucks me shallowly with it, his hands under my ass lifting and tilting me so he can go as deep as possible.

He pulls back but then his fingers swipe through my wetness before one plunges deep inside.

“So fucking tight, doll. So hot and wet. Your cunt’s going to strangle my cock, baby. What a fuckin’ way to go, though, choked and drowning in honey.”

He fucks me with his finger and then adds another and I feel the burn of the stretch but his mouth drops back down onto my sensitive flesh and then all I can feel is ecstasy. This time is like exquisite torture, I can feel the wave building, getting ready to crash. It builds and builds and I dig my nails into his shoulders as I moan his name.

“Jude, Jude, JUDE!”

And then it’s just noise coming from my mouth as my vision splashes with colors and starbursts. I rock and grind against his mouth trying to prolong it until the last pulse comes and my body dissolves back to the sheets.

Jude kisses his way up my body until he’s laying between my legs. I can feel his hardness nestled right up against my pussy and it causes an aftershock to jolt through me.

“Savy, you’re fucking perfect. I can’t wait to do that again. We have to make up for all you’ve missed. Screw the wage gap, we need to fix the orgasm gap you’ve been dealing with.”

I choke out a laugh and bury my face in his neck. He smells like me and that citrusy Jude scent that I love. I run my lips over his hot skin and feeling brave, swipe out my tongue to lick the hollow of his throat. His fingers bite into my hip and he pulls away from me.

“Can’t take much more of your sweet mouth on me, doll.”

I look up at him with a frown. “What...what about...you? Don’t you want...?”

He runs his thumb over my bottom lip and then bends to nip at it.

“I got all I need right here, baby. I don’t need anything else for now.”

He pulls me closer and tucks my head against his chest and I can’t stop the smile. I think I’m in trouble here but...I think I’m okay with that.

SAVY

We spend a good portion of the day in his bed. Jude works on some homework and I write emails to all my professors letting them know my situation. I catch up with Stella by text and we make a plan to hit the mall tomorrow to restock as much of what I lost as possible. There's messages from Mark full of concern and apologies for leaving the event right before I had my reaction. I text him back reassurances that I'm okay and that the doctors cleared me.

My Amazon delivery arrives at the same time the mattress they ordered for my room does so while they haul it up, I take a shower and get cleaned up with the toiletries that came. I ordered the basics for clothing to last me a few days, keeping it to a couple pairs of leggings, thick cozy sweaters, sleepwear and socks, and some underwear. Pants and skirts will have to wait as I need to try those on to make sure they fit right with my bigger hips. The boots, winter jacket, and messenger bag I ordered aren't my favorites but will do for now.

When Jude comes back into the room, I'm clean and dressed in my new clothes and winding my damp hair up on top of my head. He pouts and throws himself onto the bed.

"Not fair! I like you in MY clothes, doll. Strip and get over here!"

I shake my head with a smile and go join him back on the bed but keep my clothes on.

"Well, it's pretty bare bones right now but you've got yourself a bedroom. The good news for me though is, there's no sheets, blankets, or pillows - so you'll just have to stay in here with me again."

He pulls me in between his legs, flips me onto my stomach so my chin rests on his chest and gently pulls my glasses off.

“Need to see those baby blues, doll. I’ll be your seeing eye Jude and just lead you around.”

I can’t seem to stop touching this man so I trace his lips with the tip of my finger and run it down over his chin and across his jaw.

“Tell me something about yourself? All I know is that you’re some kind of football wonder that scores all the points.”

He grins at that. “Yeah, I do. You really don’t know anything about football?”

“Nope. Very little. I’ve been to two games and before that I had never even seen one on TV. Tate said something about a draft but I don’t know what that really means. But I want to know about you the man, not the football player.”

A thoughtful look crosses through his golden eyes and he squeezes me tighter with one hand gripping my ass.

“You know, I think you’re the first girl to ask me that since I’ve been here. I think there might be something wrong with you, doll.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Come on, stop stalling. Tell me about you, Jude. I really want to know.”

“Alright, alright, stop your naggin’, woman.” He hums a noise and then launches into a quick summary of his background. “I grew up in a shitty neighborhood in Boston. I have six brothers, four that are still alive, two that are not in prison. My da’s been in and out of jail my whole life and my ma’s a fucking saint to deal with us all. Ash has been my best friend since we were six and I used my football skills to drag us both out of that place. My story isn’t a nice one, doll, but I’m trying to give it a better second half.”

My brow furrows when I realize that’s all he’s going to tell me. I want to ask for more but I realize how unfair that is of me when I want to keep so much of my own story under wraps. So instead of asking for more, I try to convey my understanding, my compassion, with my eyes and push up to slide my lips gently across his.

“I’m starting to believe we can have any life we want if we’re brave enough to reach for it. I believe in you, Jude. I believe you can have anything you want.”

His fingers flex on my hips and his eyes go dark and intense. “I’m starting to believe that I’m looking at the life I want.”

My heart does a slow flip in my chest, knowing he means me by the look in his eyes so I slowly nod my head because, yeah, I think that’s what I want too.

We stay in bed together for the rest of the day. He tells me how the draft works and I’m shocked at the possible financial levels that and the current endorsements he has can amount to. I tell him about the double majors I’m working toward and how I want to take a gap year after I graduate to travel before going to work. I keep it vague, never explaining that the business degree is for the position I’ll assume in my father’s...mine soon, company and that the English major is just for me because of my love for it. He tells me about the worries that plague him about being separated from Ash, Tate, and Beck once he leaves to go pro and I start to understand just how deep their bond is.

When the light of the day leaves and the room grows dim, we finally roll out of the bed in search of food. Jude sends me down ahead of him so he can use the bathroom and when I step out into the hall, Beckett is leaving his room as well. I suck in a gasping breath of admiration at how he looks. He’s wearing a stylish black suit that compliments his broad shoulders with a dark grey dress shirt under it and a black tie. His hair is slicked back with product making his square jaw look even sharper. He looks dark, maybe a little dangerous, and so fucking hot that I can’t not lick my lips.

His icy blue eyes lock on to me at the noise I made unconsciously and they drag down my body, taking in the leggings, long sweater, and thick socks I’m wearing. I almost gasp again as those eyes heat up with want.

“Y-you look...really nice, Beck.”

His eyes narrow and he strides toward me, backing me up against the hall wall, caging me in with his thick arms on either side of my head.

“Don’t do that. I’ve seen you do that before and I don’t like it.”

I swallow hard against the case of nerves suddenly filling me as a hot throb pulses between my legs at how close he is to me and will myself to speak.

“D-do what?” I squeak out.

“You censor yourself. You don’t say what you really think. You play it safe, Peaches. You hide.”

He’s completely right but no one has ever seen it before and called me on it. I don’t know if what happened between Jude, Tate and I helps to give me the courage or not but with his mouth so close to mine and his warm, spicy scent wrapping itself around me, I say exactly what I thought at seeing him look like this.

“I think, looking like that, you could get me pregnant...with just the tip.”

His blue eyes go electric with lust and a growl of need falls from his pouty lips as he leans even closer to me. One of his big hands drops from the wall to grab the hem of my sweater, lifts it and presses a blazing hot palm against my stomach and squeezes lightly. His voice comes out in a deep growl.

“Not just the tip, all of me. Deep inside you, Peaches, so I could flood you with my cum.”

He drops his head and runs his nose up the side of my face inhaling me and wet heat fills my pussy as my eyes flutter closed.

“I would fill you again and again and when my cum started to leak out of you...I’d push it back in...with my tongue.”

My core pulses and my clit throbs at his filthy words. My face must be the color of a tomato from how hard I’m blushing and thank God for the wall I’m leaning against or I’d be on the floor right now.

Beck pulls back from me with a slight smirk and runs one finger over my bottom lip, tracking it with his eyes. “Stop hiding, Peaches and you’ll get all you could ever want and so much more. Have a good night.”

He leaves me there, a quivering mess against the wall, without a look back. I almost jump out of my skin when Jude’s shoulder hits the wall beside me. Guilt flashes fast and hard that I’m shamelessly lusting after his friend. Jude tilts my chin up and he must read the guilt in my eyes because he grins and bites his bottom lip.

“Remember what I did to your body this morning, baby doll? How good I made you feel?”

I swallow hard and nod, thinking he’s reminding me that I’m his.

“Now imagine how it would have felt...with two mouths on you. Or maybe even more...”

My mouth drops open in shock as he cocks an eyebrow and looks at me like he is daring me to answer. It's only a moment though and I haven't begun to process that bombshell before he tugs me away from the wall.

“Let's eat. I'm starving!”

I stumble after him trying to wrap my head around the fact that Jude just told me I could have all his friends. Fuck.

SAVY

“As sorry as I am that you lost everything in the fire, you have to look at the silver lining, babes,” Stella tells me as she holds up a pair of skinny jeans.

I give her a side-eye and wait for the punchline I know is coming. “Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

She hits me with a wink. “All that fucking corduroy must have burned hot and fast.”

I sigh deeply, mourning all my corduroy skirts and slacks that made up a good portion of my wardrobe and I briefly wonder if I can get Martha to send me a care package. I don’t even know what stores she shopped at to find it all. I chew on my lip as Stella adds the skinny jeans to the pile of clothes she wants me to try on. I don’t think I’ve ever owned a pair of jeans before, let alone a skinny pair. Martha didn’t think jeans were classy on a lady. That reminds me of my extreme lack of ladylike behavior lately and butterflies go off in my stomach. As if she can tell where my mind went, Stella circles us back to everything I told her had happened lately.

“Does it scare you? Being with more than one of them, I mean. You’ve kinda went from zero to a hundred almost instantly. First the quarterback, then his teammate, and now maybe his other roommate.”

I make a face at how that makes me sound like a slut and then stop to consider if maybe I am. I haven’t had sex with any of them... yet...but I have been with both Jude and Tate in other ways. Now I can’t get Beckett’s words out of my head or Jude’s easy acceptance of it either. Maybe I am a slut now. I’m living in a house with three...

four...men that I'm attracted to and having them all touching me, fucking me, doesn't disgust me. It turns me on more than I thought I could be. I grumble under my breath, fucking Faerie porn has completely ruined me!

"Whoa, whoa, Savy! I wasn't shaming you, babe. I was just checking in to see if you're comfortable with all this."

When I won't meet her eyes, she tosses aside the blouse she was looking at and grabs me by the shoulders to face her.

"Listen, I've slept with so many clowns that balloons and cotton candy should pop out of my va-jay-jay when I open my legs. Seriously, I've got a gold-plated body count and I have no shame about it. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you wanting or being with more than one guy. As long as they're all on board and good to you, then go get 'em, girl!"

I roll my lips in and give her a slow nod. "I don't know about Tate. There, there was something there, something building between us but I don't really trust him anymore. As for Ash, well, he's not interested in me, at least, not this version of me so nothing will ever happen there. But Jude, oh my god, Stella, he, he...yes!" She laughs as my face goes bright red. "As for Beckett, the things he said, what he wanted to do to me? Well, I think between them all, if I let them, they would ruin me completely."

She arches a brow and fans herself asking, "In the best possible way?"

I meet her eyes and nod. "In the best possible way."

Other shoppers come close so we move on to another section of the store and gather up a few more items before heading over to the changing room. I sort through the pile and roll my eyes at Stella as I hold up a pink and white plaid schoolgirl skirt that would barely cover my ass cheeks.

"What? It's for the Butterfly! I know you have a few outfits in your locker at work but you'll need more to replace the ones you lost in the fire. Unless..."

"Unless, what?"

She shrugs one shoulder. "Unless you're ready to take off the mask and merge both your identities. It's okay if you want to stop dancing, babes."

I keep my eyes on the skirt as I frown. Is that what I want? Every day I spend with them, every touch, every kiss, brings me more confidence and makes the mask I wear slip a little bit more. I know I'll have to tell them everything eventually but I'm not sure if I trust them enough to do that yet. I got lucky with Stella. She never cared or judged me because of my last name or bank account balance and she was never anything but supportive of me being the Butterfly. But I have first-hand knowledge of how people will look at me differently when they find out just who I am.

Desire-filled green eyes flash through my head. I know I'll never have Ash but for two years he sought me out and watched me like I was desirable, like I was worth something when I felt like no one else saw me. His eyes on me are an addiction I'm not ready to let go of. No, I'm not ready to give the Butterfly up just yet.

"Can you take all the Butterfly outfits to the club for me and put them in my locker? I, I don't think I should have them in the house where they might be found."

She takes the skirt from me with a sigh. "Are you sure? You know I have a stack of applicants waiting to fill your cage. It's okay to take off the mask, Sav."

I flash her a tight smile and reach for the pile of clothes to take into the changing room. "Soon maybe, just...not quite yet."

The back of the SUV I hired for the day is loaded with a massive amount of shopping bags as the driver pulls up to my favorite store and a huge grin fills my face as Stella groans.

"I swear, you're the only billionaire that shops at Target. You're such a weirdo!"

I smack an elbow into her ribs playfully. "Language! You know I don't like when you use the B word. And what's wrong with Target? It was always such a treat when Martha would bring me to one growing up. There's just so much...stuff...to find in them."

Stella rolls her eyes at me. "You mean so much fleece."

I shoot her a dirty look as the doors slide open for us. "Sue me! I like cozy, fuzzy loungewear and this store has the best stuff. I also need to get some baking pans and supplies. Jude promised to do wicked things to me if I start baking for him again."

She barks out a laugh at that. “Well, I guess we better get two carts then if wicked sexual promises are on the line.”

I agree completely and for once, don't even care about the deep blush spreading up my face.

I drop Stella at her place on the way home with her bags and my work outfits. I'm not ready for her to meet the new men in my life even though she's familiar with them from the two years they've been coming into the club. When the driver pulls up to the house, I'm relieved to see all the cars are gone from the driveway. It's a Monday so they should all be either in class or at practice. I skipped my classes today and had someone cover my afternoon library shift so I could do the huge replacement shop. When the driver opens the back hatch, my nerves strum tight at just how much stuff I bought. I know they gave me a room to stay in but this haul looks a lot like an official move-in and I can just picture the anger on Asher's face if he thought I was working an angle to stay here permanently.

I shake my head and grab an armful of bags, fishing out the key Tate returned to me this morning. It's not permanent. I just need a couple of weeks to find a new place and then all this stuff will go with me. Once the driver and I carry everything up and dump it in my empty room, I tip him well and thank him for all his help. It's been a long day of shopping but I dive straight in anyway, wanting to be settled in my own space so I can get back to my normal routine of classes and work tomorrow.

I tear apart the bedding sets I bought and rip tags from the towels and then carry them and most of the kitchenware I got back downstairs to put them away and start a load of laundry before racing back up to start unpacking everything else. A few hours later my bed is made with fresh sheets and piled high with pillows and most of my clothes have been hung up or put away in the plastic storage dressers that I bought.

I'm sitting on the floor in a new, freshly washed pair of fuzzy sleep pants that are covered in dozing cartoon sloths, muttering a lot of extreme curses, surrounded by slats of wood, metal brackets, and a multitude of strange screws and plugs as I try to go over the instructions on how to assemble the cheap student desk I got at Target. You'd think it was a nuclear power plant model made by a

sadistic engineer for how complicated they've made the instructions. The picture of the happy lady on the box standing beside a completed desk is taunting me, claiming that I can put this thing together without any tools except for the Allen wrench provided but I'm thinking a saw and jackhammer are in order when a deep voice has me practically jumping out of my skin.

“What the hell are you doing?”

ASHER

As soon as I walk in the door after classes, I know she's here. The house already smells different. I can smell vanilla with a peach undertone. I stand in the entryway and breathe it in for a few moments and then scowl when I realize what I'm doing. Check that, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing at all. This girl has wormed her way under my skin to the point that she was the first thing I thought about when I opened my eyes this morning.

I can't stop seeing her face, her eyes when she gave up fighting that night after she went into anaphylactic shock. The regret I saw in them as she brushed my lips with her cold fingers has haunted me ever since. I want to know what she regrets and why it feels like it was about me. I don't know her and she doesn't fucking know me so what could she possibly regret? Fuck, I don't need this shit.

I slam my bag onto the counter in the kitchen and spot the drain rack full of baking pans causing my scowl to deepen. I can't even fucking complain. I was fully on board with her staying with us when we found out her apartment had blown up. But what was I supposed to do? The chick almost died for fuck's sake and she was practically unconscious in the back seat when we found out. It's not like I could have said no and dumped her at a hotel. I jam my hand through my hair and yank on the black strands viciously.

I need to go to Masks and give myself over to the Butterfly for a few hours. There's only one girl who gets to live rent free in my head and it's not the bookworm upstairs in my house. I didn't even get to see her this weekend as Beck and I were on babysitting duty while Tate and Jude were at an away game.

“Motherfucking piece of shit!”

It's faint but I catch the rambling curse in her sweet...fuck...her voice, from upstairs. A few more swear words float down to me and there's no fighting the stupid grin that forms on my face. Savy's usually so contained, guarded almost, so to hear her letting loose and cursing a blue streak like that has me heading to the stairs to see what could have ruffled her so much. I frown as I climb the steps. For the first few times she was here, I was the one who ruffled her but then the night of the snowstorm, something had flipped with her and she stopped being afraid or intimidated by me and I got to see her claws come out a bit. This girl is so fucking layered and it infuriates me to no end that I want to peel each layer back to see what she's hiding underneath.

When I get to her open door, I lean a shoulder against the door jam and watch her have a fight and argument with a huge sheet of instructions. I have to bite down on my lip to stop the laugh when she flips the floppy sheet upside down and then sideways, muttering something about a dick-sucking jackhammer.

While she wrestles with the instructions, I take a look around what used to be my fucking home gym. The queen-size bed Tate insisted on ordering for her is no longer just a bare mattress. It's all made up with a thick puffy duvet the soft blue of her eyes and enough fancy pillows on it to get lost in. She has two of those plastic storage dressers and I can see them filled with clothing and a cheap student office chair in the corner. There's a Macbook open on one of them with an e-reader next to it and on the other dresser is a jar candle that's giving off the vanilla scent I smelled. It's not quite a fully moved into room yet, but it's close and it makes my skin feel tight seeing her stuff in my space. I finally take pity on her but my words come out more bark than helpful.

“What the hell are you doing?”

She flinches to the side and jerks her head around to glare at me, making that weird bun thing she always has her long silky dark hair up in bounce and sway. I step into the room and snatch the instruction paper from her hand, folding it to a manageable size. She lets out a frustrated groan and flops backward onto the carpet

dramatically. I ignore the way the shirt she's wearing stretches perfectly over her breasts as they bounce.

"Are your parents truck drivers or dock workers?"

She opens one eye and gives me a what the fuck look.

" 'Cuz you swear like one," I tell her with a smirk as her face screws up into a demonic-looking glare. "What? What does that look mean?" I ask her, amused at how hard she's trying to glare at me and she gushes out another frustrated groan.

"You don't like my swearing so I'm staring motherfuckerly at you instead."

I lift the instructions up to hide the grin that brings. I don't want to admit it but I like this version of bookworm better than the stuttering, red-faced one I first met.

"Come on, I'll help you put this together. Pro-tip - it helps to read the English version."

Savy pushes her glasses higher on her nose with her middle finger as she sits up, never breaking eye contact and this time I can't not laugh out loud. We get to work putting the desk together. She holds the boards in place while I attach the brackets.

"So, it looks like you managed to replace most of your stuff today."

Her glasses have slipped down her nose again and those blue eyes of hers lift to mine with a guarded, defensive look in them.

"Chill, Ash. I'm not staying. I just need a couple weeks to find a new place and then all this stuff in your space will be gone. I do appreciate you all letting me stay here temporarily, though."

I tighten a screw and force myself not to tell her she can stay as long as she needs when she reaches past me for another part and I get a whiff of peaches. Her scent mixed with the vanilla candle burning makes my mouth water for a taste of peaches and cream and my dick stirs. Fuck, not happening.

"You and Jude? You're a thing now? What about Tate?"

Her brow furrows as she lines up the next piece for me to attach. "Honestly, I have no idea at this point. I'm just taking it day by day and seeing where things go with Jude. As for Tate, we never were anything more than a show. It was all fake."

I arch a brow as I lean in close to her to screw in the next bracket. "You sure about that? Seems like there was some heat between you

guys. Hold that tighter so it's not crooked. So, first Tate, now Jude, are you going to bounce over to Beck next? Go for the hat trick?"

Our faces are so close working on the desk and it gives me the perfect view of the pink blush that creeps up her neck to fill her cheeks along with the sharp anger that flashes through her eyes before her shields jerk back into place.

"I'm not bouncing or fucking as that's what you're implying, anyone in this house. But I'll be sure to let you know if that changes, seeing as you're so concerned." She huffs out an annoyed breath. "I asked you before but you didn't answer so again, Ash, why do you care?"

"I don't." I bark back at her. "Fuck whoever you want. I just don't want them getting invested and hurt. There's a history..." I say before she cuts me off.

"I'm aware of how other women have tried to use them for their status. I don't care about any of that, trust me. Money, fame, none of that will ever influence how I feel about someone. As for getting invested, getting hurt? Pretty sure I'm the one with the biggest worry about that. I know how you guys burn through women like they mean nothing more than a temporary good time."

A challenging look comes into her eyes that surprises me but not even close to the way her next words do. "Maybe that's all I want too, a good time. Maybe I will have sex with all of them if they want me. How is that any worse than what you all do with the female population on campus?"

My mouth drops open to dispute that but then snaps closed again. I break eye contact and go back to working on the desk, ready to get away from her and this conversation because, fuck, she's not wrong. The four of us have made getting laid a sport of its own. Not so much me in the last year but there were plenty of nights when we would all be with the same girl together. I'm an asshole but I refuse to be a hypocrite. If Savy does decide to fuck all of them, it doesn't make her any worse than the rest of us, and fuck me, the thought of having her between all of us makes me rock hard. I tighten the last screw and push up to my feet as she moves back out of the way and then flip the assembled desk upright.

"There you go. Where do you want it?"

She points to an area under the window so I get it positioned and roll the chair in front of it, waving her over to sit in it. She slides past me and takes a seat so I rest my hands on her shoulders and nudge her and the chair up to the desk. My thumb sweeps over the delicate skin on the side of her neck and I feel a slight tremble run through her.

“There, a perfect fit.”

And then I turn and practically run from her room.

SAVY

I hum a song that's stuck in my head as I shelve books from my cart. It's been a few days since I set up my room in the house and things have been going fairly well. Jude's been sneaking into my bed for cuddles that turn into heavy make out sessions for the last two nights. He winds my body up and leaves me right on the edge before pulling back to cuddle and then slips away as I'm falling asleep. If this is what he means by leveling me up then I'm so ready for the boss battle that'll take us to the next level. So ready.

Beck has pulled back since we had that moment in the hallway. He's been in a weird mood since then. Kind of dark and sad. Something is weighing on him but I don't know him well enough to guess what it is.

Ash has also been keeping his distance from me but there was a moment this morning between us that made me even more confused about where his head is at.

I had just finished having a shower in the bathroom that I now share with them. I was completely covered head to toe in my fuzzy pink bathrobe complete with prancing unicorns and a towel wrapped around my head when I walked straight out into his hard...naked... chest. If I had been wearing my glasses they would have instantly fogged up from the heat rolling off of all that tattoo covered muscle. His hands went straight to my waist and held me in place against him for a few beats too long. When those fingers squeezed a little too tightly, I had to bite back a breathy moan. Asher James is way too beautiful that close up and it filled my head with all the nights he watched me in my cage like he wanted to devour every bit of me.

When I could finally drag my eyes from his chest to look up, I had to bite my lip at the pure lust I saw in his eyes...for me...not the Butterfly, me.

It was gone quickly and then he moved me to the side with a muttered, "Morning" and shut the door in my face, leaving my head spinning and questioning if I had really seen that or if my newly awakened sex drive had conjured it up as a wish.

I banish thoughts of Ash as I push my cart deeper into the stacks and think about the fourth man I live with. Tate's just been...gone... since I moved in. I'm starting to worry that my being there has driven him out and I hate to think I've done that. It's not fair to him if he's staying away from his home just to avoid me. As if my thoughts have summoned him, Tate comes around the end of the row I'm in. There's a smile like I haven't seen before from him, spreading across his face when he spots me.

"Savy, there you are. I've been looking for you."

"Well, here I am. You found me," I smile back at him. He moves right up next to me and holds out his phone.

"Take a look at this!"

There's so much pride and excitement in his tone that my smile widens as I take the phone and see what he's happy about. My eyebrows shoot up when I see his latest assignment mark. I haven't been helping or tutoring him since the blow-up in the kitchen so this is all his own work that achieved it. My eyes go big and full of excitement for him.

"Oh my God, Tate! This is incredible. I'm so proud of you!"

I move to hug him but he lifts me up against his chest and then his mouth crashes down on mine. A fierce, needy ache throbs through me instantly. No matter how fake things were with us, there was never any doubt about the chemistry between us. His hot tongue tangles with mine and my hands slide into his dark blond hair to pull him closer, deeper. He groans against my lips and pulls back to rest his forehead against mine and I can see the sincerity in those hazel eyes.

"Fuck, I miss you so much, baby girl. I miss this mouth, I miss your taste." He lowers me back to my feet so that my chest slides against his, making my nipples pearl and ache to be touched. "But more than

that, I miss sitting and working with you at the table. I miss the way you would push me to be better and dig deeper. I miss having you at my games, I miss holding your hand.”

I try to step back as if to get away from the conflicted feelings his words give me but he just follows me until I’m pinned between him and the bookshelf.

“Can you tell me you don’t miss that too? Tell me you don’t still think I just want to use you. Fuck, Savy, tell me that you want me as fucking bad as I want you.”

I try and look away from his intensity but the green and gold flecks in his eyes have me mesmerized. His hand slides up my neck to cup my cheek. “Tell me you don’t feel this too, baby, and I’ll back off.”

I manage to choke out, “J-Jude?” as my body goes haywire with the need to have his hands on me, to feel him touch me again like he has twice before.

“Jude would be fucking thrilled if we were together again.”

I push him off of me as sharp hurt flares through me. I step away, needing space to sort my thoughts. “You think he doesn’t care about me? You all just want to pass me around like some kind of...toy?”

His hand flashes out and yanks me against him again, one hand wrapping loosely around the back of my neck. “Fuck, no! That’s not what I meant at all. He does care about you, baby, but so do I and I think Beck does too.”

He sighs out a frustrated breath like he’s trying to find the words to best explain what he means. He lets me go and rakes a hand through his hair.

“Jude, fuck, all of us, are tight. You could say we’re family to each other where our own families have let us down. Having a woman, having you, be a part of that would just add to it, complete it. Baby, we would love to share you. All of you.”

I push away from him again because...whoa! That’s a lot to fucking take in. I turn my back on him and fuss with the books on my cart to give my shaking hands something to do. I’ve sort of gotten okay with the idea of having sex with Jude and possibly Beck. Being with Tate that way isn’t that much of a stretch if I’m going to throw down with this free-love movement thing. But what he’s talking about is something else entirely. He’s talking about a four-way relationship.

My eyes crash closed as I fight the instant yearning of my heart. To be a part of a...family...like that, to not have just one but three people who care about me like that? My heart squeezes with how badly I want it. I've been alone for so long and even though I'm used to it, I've always...wished... Tate comes up behind me and presses against my back.

"I know, it's a lot to take in. Just, think about it? Okay? You get off in about twenty minutes, right?"

I nod my head but don't turn around, not wanting him to see the naked want on my face for what he's offering. He kisses the side of my head and squeezes my hip. "I'm going to wait for you outside in my car. I'll take you home, okay?"

I nod again and keep my head tucked down as he walks away. When I see him turn out of the row, I let out a deep gush of air and press a hand to my mouth and then straighten up and shove all my needy little girl wanting to be loved issues to one side. I take a step back from the emotions and the physical aspects of it all and lay it out in my mind. As much as I like them, these men are dangerous. Every one of them have been careless and inconsiderate with me in the past.

They aren't relationship kind of guys. If I agreed to something like that, something more than just a physical relationship, I know myself well enough to know that I would fall head over heels for them all. Where will that get me when one or all of them tire of me? Right now, I'm a weird girl out of their norm that keeps them at arm's length and doesn't make demands. That's probably part of their attraction to me. When you have plenty of women throwing themselves at your feet, the one that tells you to fuck off is going to look like a challenge, like forbidden fruit in a way. Once they get me, all of me, how can I be sure the shine won't rub off and they'll move on?

I finish emptying my cart, lost in thought. Can I trust them? Should I trust them? Is a little bit of time being wanted and cared about worth the pain of what will happen when they are done with me? Damn! It's not even just that. If I commit to a relationship with them, I would have to tell them who I really am. My last name comes with a lot of weight and baggage. Would I be able to trust them with that? I just don't know.

I place the last book on a shelf and just when I start pushing my cart back to the front desk I hear them.

“Whore.”

“Slut.”

“Disgusting ho.”

I turn my head slowly and see Vanessa and two of her friends at one of the study tables. Their eyes are on me with nasty smirks on their faces. I disregard the other two and zero in on Vanessa, our eyes clashing and holding. I stare her down without ever saying a word. In the past, I would always hunch in on myself for protection from her vicious, nasty words but something in me shifts this time.

It's been over ten years since she became my sister. All I ever wanted in all that time was to be accepted and loved by her and her mother. I've given them so much power over the years. Power to hurt me, belittle me, stab at my fragile lonely heart. Jude told me he thinks it was her that put strawberries in the champagne that set my allergy off but I brushed it off, not able to believe she would do something that dangerous, no matter how much she dislikes me.

The longer the stare-off lasts between us, the more the weight that I carry starts to lift. And when it's her that drops her eyes first, the weight leaves me completely. All the hurt, pain, and longing for her and her mother to be a real family to me goes away. She's nothing, they're nothing and I'm finally free. Maybe Tate's right. Maybe we have to make our own family when the one we're born with fails.

I turn away and push my cart back to the desk without giving Vanessa another thought. My man...men...are waiting for me.

I gather my bag and pull on my jacket, waving to my co-worker that I'm off and leave the building. I search for Tate's car in the huge lot but am distracted when I hear the faint sound of someone being yelled at in an abusive way. I hunch into my jacket, nervously jerking my head around trying to spot whoever it is.

“Fucking useless...waste of my goddamn time and money...never going to amount to anything...such a fucking pussy...do as I say...”

The light wind only brings me snatches of what's being said but it's enough to make me ball my hands into fists in my mittens in anger. How dare someone talk to another that way! No one deserves that kind of abuse. I finally spot the red glow of Tate's brake lights and

move in that direction, ready to ask him to get out and search for the poor person being verbally abused but as soon as my hand touches the door handle, I realize it's him on the phone in his car.

"Someone's here, I've got to go, dad."

I stare in shock through the window at Tate as he hits the button on his dash to end the call that was coming from the car's speakers. Dad? That was his dad saying those things? I rip the door open and almost dive into the passenger seat.

"Tate..."

"Don't! Savy, please, just don't. I...it's none of your business. I don't want to talk about it."

I force myself to swallow the angry words that want to spill out of me and instead, pull off my mitten and reach for his hand with a brittle smile.

"Let's go home. It's my turn to make dinner."

The relief that washes over his embarrassment makes me want to cry for him but I stay silent as he nods and starts driving. We sit in silence with just the radio playing on low volume as he drives until he goes right past the turn to our house.

"Where are we going?"

He darts a look over at me but his expression is still unreadable.

"I'm taking you on a date. A real date, not for show."

I smooth my hands over my plain skirt nervously. I don't know why after this man has had his hands in my most private area, going on a real date with him floods me with nerves.

"I'm not really dressed for that kind of thing. If you take us home I could..."

His eyes dart my way again but this time I see a frown on his face. "No, you're perfect just the way you are. You look beautiful to me, baby."

An astonished, slightly amused gasp shoots out of me. Nice words but this is coming from the man that told me to go change from a similar outfit the first time he wanted me to go to his game. His hand flashes out and he runs a thumb down my cheek.

"I know you don't believe me, Savy. But I mean it and I'm going to do my best to show you I'm being real with you."

I turn my head away and look out the window, wishing with every part of me that he's telling the truth.

SAVY

He takes me to a nice Italian restaurant and asks for a booth in the back where the lighting is dim and the tables around it are empty. When I try and sit across from him, he follows me, causing me to scootch over to make room for him. The waitress shoots me a small smile with a knowing look that has my blush creeping up over my cheeks so I duck my head to study the menu she hands to me.

Once we've ordered and she delivers our drinks and a basket of bread, he drops his arm around my shoulders and pulls me closer until we are hip to hip. I don't know why I'm nervous. We've been out together in public enough times that I shouldn't be but this just feels...different. I still feel the weight of what I overheard earlier between us so I try to change that to something positive.

"I'm proud of you, Tate. That assignment was all you. You've improved so much in your writing."

He snags my hand and brushes his thumb across my knuckles with a soft smile.

"That was because of you. You forced me to stop doing the bare minimum and dig deeper. Thank you for all the help you gave me. I don't think I ever said that before and I'm sorry."

I brush his words away with a smile but that doesn't stop the warm glow in my stomach at hearing he appreciates me.

"Can I ask why you chose English as your major?"

He shrugs one big shoulder, tears a piece of bread from the basket apart, and butters it before handing it to me.

"It wasn't really a passion of mine, clearly. I just needed to declare something at the time and I thought if football didn't work out, if I got

injured, at least I could do something with that degree. Maybe keep going and be a teacher or something. I could coach whatever school I ended up at's football team."

I hum my understanding and swallow the bite of bread in my mouth. "So football is your passion, then?"

He makes a face and shrugs again. "I don't know if passion is the right word. It's just something I'm good at. From the minute my dad strapped a set of pads on me when I was eight, my course was kind of set."

I know he doesn't want to talk about his dad and what I accidentally overheard so I steer away from that.

"Jude told me about this draft thing and how important it is to you guys. He said you're hoping to go play for the same team. How is that even possible with the way the draft works?"

He huffs out a flat laugh. "It's not really. We have representatives working behind the scenes with some pro teams trying to make some deals. It's a complicated dance of possible trades and swaps. We won't know if it will pan out until the very end of the draft."

I think about how close they all are and how hard it would be for them to go to different sides of the country. "What will you do if you can't get what you want?"

"That involves a very dangerous game of chicken if we both refuse to sign, play our last year here, and hope we get another shot at the following year's draft. Or, we take our deals and just go to different teams."

I sit back and take a sip of water. The amount of money Jude was telling me about would be really hard to say no to.

"Would you actually do that? Turn down all that money just to keep playing with Jude?"

He butters another piece of bread and tries to hand it to me but I shake my head so he sets it on his plate. His fingers on my arm brush up and down in soft sweeps that send shivers down my back.

"I'd like to say that I would but...there are outside forces, complications, and consequences that I have to factor into my decision. Jude will also have his own reasons if he ends up signing with whoever picks him. We just have to hope our representatives can work some deals."

The waitress brings our food, ending the conversation, and the scent of the spicy arrabbiata sauce on my penne floats up to tickle my nose. We eat in comfortable silence for a while and it gives me a chance to think about what Jude and Tate going to different teams would mean for me if I do let myself get into a relationship with all of them. In less than a year they will be gone and anything we might have started would be over.

I'm going to have to be very careful about letting anything between us get too deep now that I know that. I don't think my sad little heart could stand having even more people leave me. I do more playing with my food than eating as I accept that I won't be a part of their family after all. It sucks but I've managed all these years on my own so...yeah.

"Hey, what's on your mind? What are you thinking about that's making you look so sad?" Tate asks, breaking me from my low thoughts. I shake my head and paste on a smile.

"Not sad at all. I was just thinking about finals coming up and then the holidays. Do you go home for the holidays? Where is home for you?"

Tate pushes away his empty plate and drops a hand to my thigh under the table tracing small circles over my tights.

"My family lives in Virginia and at best, I'll make it home for a few days. It all depends on where we sit in the rankings and what bowl game we will be playing. What about you, where are you from?"

I'm not about to tell him that dad and I split our time between the brownstone in New York and the estate in Connecticut so I just say, "Greenwich" and leave it at that. I don't want to talk about the pathetic lonely life I have over school breaks and the holidays. He doesn't need to hear how the only presents I get under the tree are a knitted treasure from Martha and usually a first-edition book of some kind from Uncle Mark. I roll my eyes at my poor little rich girl pity party and remind myself that I'm grateful that for the last five years Celeste and Vanessa have gone away to some exotic location.

"Can I get you anything else, sir, madam?" The waitress asks when she clears our plates.

I shake my head so Tate asks for the check. As far as first dates go, it wasn't too bad but we're both holding so much back that it feels

like something is missing.

He turns his big body towards mine and slides one arm up my back to loosely grip the back of my neck. The other slides further up my thigh under my skirt. He's caging me in and I should feel crowded but the intense look in his eyes as he stares down at me has me feeling safe and coveted instead.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I took you for granted and I was careless with you. I had no idea when I kissed you that day to shut your mom and sister up that I would end up feeling this way about you."

His hand around my neck slides to tip my head up so I have to look into his hazel eyes as he speaks.

"Do you know that I can't remember the last time someone said they were proud of me? The last time someone called me on my shit for being a dick? And I've never had a woman fill so many of my waking thoughts."

The hand under my skirt tightens on my thigh, making my core clench.

"Fuck, baby girl. You're the first thing I think about when I wake up and at night...at night, I lay in my bed and think about having my hands on your body again, making you moan, making you beg, screaming my name as you come all over my cock. Savy, you're like a drug I can't get enough of and I'm so grateful you're giving me another chance to prove how real I want to be with you."

His mouth comes down on mine, softly and with a punch of feelings that squeeze my heart. He kisses me as if he cares about me, not like he just wants to have sex with me and my head swims with all the feelings I know I need to guard against. When he pulls back he rests his forehead against mine.

"I want to know more about you, baby. I hated that the others knew things about you that I didn't. I'm so fucking jealous that I found you first but they saw what was right under my nose and stole you away. I want your hair spread out on my pillow as we waste a whole day just cuddling and hanging out. I want to know what your favorite color is, your favorite food. I want to know what flowers you like so I can bring them to you and see you smile just for me. I want to hold your hand as we walk across campus so all those fuckers can see how fucking lucky I am that you picked me. Savy...I want everything

with you. Give me a chance to show you that. Give me a chance to be real with you, baby girl.”

My eyes drop closed, unable to stand the want in his eyes that mirrors my feelings. God, it would be so fucking easy to just fall for him right now. I can't bring myself to list out all the reasons this is a bad idea when he's being so sincere with me and as much as I know them myself, I want all he's offering so badly and so deeply that I throw out my list and just breathe out, “Yes.”

His lips slide against mine again before he pulls away and strands up holding a hand out to me.

“Baby, I promise, you won't regret this.”

When we step out of the restaurant, the cold air is like a slap in the face. It clears the romance of the moment we just had and helps me rebuild a bit of the wall I just let crash down. As he drives us home, I slump back into my seat and watch the snow-covered scenery go by.

There's too much baggage for any of us to have a real relationship. We're all holding back, maybe me most of all. With less than a year until they all go their separate ways, I need to lock my heart down and keep things light with them. I can do sex. I can do all the sex, I think, but feelings need to be guarded or I'll end up worse off than before this all started, alone and broken.

Tate walks me up to my room when we get home but he spins me around before I can go in and pulls me against him. One of his hands cups the back of my head and the other the side of my face as his lips come down on mine. It's a soft, slow kiss that makes my head spin just as much as the passionate ones we've shared because it's a kiss full of those feelings I just swore I would lock away...again.

When he pulls back, his eyes are soft and full of things that squeeze my heart and it's like a punch to the gut so I step back through my door into my room.

“Thanks for dinner. Night.” I rasp out and then swing the door closed and drop my forehead against it.

“That was fucking hot, doll.”

JUDE

Savy spins around with a jerk at my words. She's all pretty and pink with her skin flushed from Tate's kiss. There's surprise and caution in her eyes as they bounce from me to Beck when she realizes he's sitting in her office chair and with a blink, her face goes smooth and blank but not before I catch the way she eye-fucked my bare chest all the way down to my grey sweatpants, though. My doll likes to hide behind an indifferent mask but she doesn't realize how much I like it when I can make it crack.

"What are you guys doing in my room?" She asks calmly while walking over and dropping her bag onto her desk.

"It smells nicer in here and I like all your pillows better than mine. Why don't you come over here and give me a proper hello?"

Those cool blue eyes of hers slide to Beck and I see her swallow before she turns and comes to sit beside me on her bed. I catch her before she can and position her on my lap instead, nuzzling into her neck with a few hot kisses.

"Did you have a good time with Tate? He said he was taking you out for dinner."

She tilts her head so she can see me. "You don't mind? You're not upset?"

I nip at her earlobe. "You know I'm not. I already told you that more is better, didn't I?"

She sighs and lets herself relax against me so I reward her with a hand sliding up her thigh, over her silky tights to play with the hem of her skirt and she turns her focus to Beck.

“How are you? You’ve seemed...off...since I saw you the other night in your suit. Where were you going that night, all dressed up?”

Beck leans back in her office chair, crosses his arms over his chest, and spreads his legs. It’s his defensive pose and I wonder if he’ll tell her, open up to her. While he decides, I rearrange my doll in my lap so her back is to my chest and her legs are over my knees, spreading them. I have plans to play with her tonight and I want her warmed up. I tug her sweater up and force her to lift her arms so I can slide it over her head leaving her in just a thin white blouse. I love how she lets me move her around like she really is a doll.

“Go on, Beck, tell our girl what’s got you so wound up. It might make you feel better.”

He shakes his head with a bitter laugh but his eyes are on my fingers creeping up Savy’s thighs again.

“You don’t have to tell me, it’s okay. I didn’t mean to pry,” she tells him in her sweet voice.

I go a little higher on her leg and start tracing circles on her inner thigh under her skirt. She shifts against me and I know she can feel my hard dick against her ass but she keeps her eyes on Beck and he finally breaks.

“I met my father for dinner. He was in town for meetings and wanted to talk to me about my future now that, according to him, my childish obsession with football is over. He has it all mapped out for me now. After graduation I’ll go to work for his company and be a busy little worker bee. I’ll join his country club, find myself an appropriate wife, and drink my misery away until I retire and then die. In short, I’m fucked.”

I can practically feel Savy’s compassion and empathy for him as she rests in my arms. My doll has a sweet heart and I plan on making use of it tonight to nudge her where I want us to go. I slide my fingers higher to brush over her covered mound and want to shred these fucking tights she’s wearing to get to her heat.

“Jude! Is now really the time?” She rasps out, making me chuckle and rub a little harder.

“Baby, now’s the perfect time. Beck’s sad. Don’t you want to make him feel better?”

The man in question doesn't look very sad as he tracks what my hand is doing under her skirt and slides the back of his thumb over his bottom lip. Nah, he doesn't look sad, he looks fucking hungry. I hook my fingers into her tights and pull until they tear apart. Savy moans and I slip my fingers under the scrap of silk she still has covering her and drag my fingers into her folds. She's already hot and wet for me and when I find her clit and start circling it, her head drops back against me.

I trace my tongue around the shell of her ear and whisper, "Don't you want to make him feel better? Distract him from his problems?"

Her hips lift slightly, trying to get more pressure against where she wants it most but I slide my fingers down to circle her entrance instead until she gives me what I want.

"He looks like he's starving for you, baby doll. Are you going to give him... us... what we want so we can give you what you want?"

A low whine of need leaves her and her head jerks in agreement but I need to hear her say it. I slip into her knuckle deep and make small, soft thrusts and her body asks for more as her legs open wider.

"You ever had a cock in your mouth, angel? You ever bring a man to his knees just with your tongue and lips?"

I see her small tongue dart out to swipe at her bottom lip as she shakes her head.

"Want to learn how to do that while I make you come? I need you to tell me."

Her voice is a breathy moan as she answers. "Yes. I want it. I want to come with a cock in my mouth."

I nod at Beck and slide her glasses off, tossing them to the other side of the bed. He pushes to his feet and walks slowly over to us, his eyes hot and intense as he looks her over. With one hand, he reaches over his shoulder to pull the blue Henley he's wearing up over his head and tosses it to the side. When he comes to stand between our legs, he grabs one of Savy's hands and places it flat between his pecks and then slides it slowly down over his rippled abs to the waistband of his low-slung jeans.

He leans over and grips her chin to lift it up and kiss her. Softly at first and then deeper as I add a second finger to stroke her hot,

dripping center. She's so fucking ready to take us but I'm going to make her wait. That cunt, Hunter, stole what should have been an amazing experience for her so nobody's going to fuck my doll until we've given her all the fun she missed out on and she's so desperate to be fucked that she's begging for it.

My mouth trails down her neck until I get to her collarbone and then I drag my teeth over it while I start unbuttoning her blouse with my free hand.

"Take his pants off, doll. See what you do to him." I order her.

Her small fingers pop the button on his jeans and pull his zipper down and my lips curve against her skin as her pussy pulses around my fingers when she sees he's not wearing underwear under them.

Beck's thick cock springs forward and he takes her hand and wraps it around his hard length, forcing her to slowly stroke him up and down. She's dripping around my stroking fingers but I don't want her coming too soon so I pull them out of her and hold them up to Beck.

"Want to see how she tastes, brother?"

He growls low in his throat and wraps a hand around my wrist to bring my glistening fingers up to his mouth. He sucks her essence from them and groans from the taste of her honey.

"Fuck, Peaches, you taste so fucking good." He tells her and Savy surprises both of us when she makes a move on her own.

Her head ducks down and her tongue darts out to lick the bead of precum from the head of his cock, the movement causing her ass to push against my throbbing dick. Both Beck and I breathe out harshly at how fucking hot our girl is when she tastes more of him. I pull her blouse out from her skirt and slip it off of her shoulders before unhooking her bra and removing that too. There is no resistance when I lean her back so that her perfect, naked tits are on display for Beck. The warm skin of her back flush against my chest feels glorious and I nod to Beck.

"Get her tights and panties off, leave the skirt."

He drops to his knees between our legs and reaches under her skirt to peel her navy tights down and then her pink satin underwear too. His big hands rest on her spread thighs and my hands sweep up to massage her breasts and gently tease her hardening nipples.

“Go ahead, have another taste,” I tell him.

His eyes flash up to hers but her head is back against my shoulder as she squirms against my cock. Her hips are moving in small circles and tiny gasps are coming from between her lips. I can't wait for those gasps to be screams.

“You want Beck to taste you, don't you, baby? Want to feel his tongue dip into your wet pussy? Give you what you need?”

She reaches for his neck and pulls him closer, down to where she needs him most. That's all the permission he needs to dip down, push her skirt up, and slide his tongue in between the lips of her pussy. I roll her nipples, pulling and tugging at them as she jerks her hips up to meet his mouth and the tiny gasps coming from her mouth turn into urgent moans. I let Beck lick and suck at her pussy for a few minutes and then slide my fingers into his hair and wrench his head back off of her. My brother's eyes are blown wide with lust as he licks her juices off of his lips.

“That's enough for now. Baby doll wants to suck you off. She promised to make you feel better. Didn't you, doll?”

Savy's arms are up, wrapped around my neck behind her but as soon as Beck gets to his feet, she drops them to reach for him. I beat her to it and grasp his heavy cock in my hand. I love the way my ink-covered fingers look wrapped around him. I tug him by his cock to pull him closer and lean forward with Savy so that the pulsing red head of his cock is just in front of our faces.

“Watch, baby doll. I'm going to show you how to suck a man's cock.”

She gasps at my words and then moans again as I slide my free hand back down into her pussy and strum her clit. My tongue swirls around Beck's engorged head and then I take his length fully into my mouth and suck with my tongue sweeping against him. He groans savagely, whispering “Fuck, Jude” and reaches for Savy's tits to squeeze and knead them. She hasn't taken her desire-filled eyes off of what my mouth is doing to him and when she pushes her ass harder back against my cock I pull him out of my mouth.

“Open your mouth, doll. Put your tongue out.” I tell her, my tone making it more of a command than a request.

She does as I say immediately, and my cock pulses against her ass at how well she's doing and how much I want her mouth on me too. Beck's hands leave her breasts and go to her hair, unwinding all that silk until it drapes over us. He runs his fingers through it and then grips softly on both sides of her head and thrusts into her mouth. He goes easy on her at first and I love watching him slowly fuck her mouth. She makes little hums of enjoyment. My baby likes sucking cock and it just pleases me even more. His next thrust goes deeper and she gags slightly and tenses in my arms.

"Shh, it's okay. You need to open your throat for him. When you feel that gag, swallow against him."

Beck keeps it shallow and lets her get used to his thickness and then goes deep again. My girl takes it like a fucking dream and he chokes out, "Yes!" when she swallows him down without gagging. I lick the tear that trickles down from the corner of her eye and it tastes so fucking sweet. My fingers dive inside her fluttering pussy and curl as I stroke her hard and fast.

"Look at you, baby. You're our good girl taking his cock so well. He's going to fuck your dirty little mouth until you can't feel your throat and I'm going to make you come all over my fingers." I slam harder into her and she howls her pleasure around Beck's cock. "That's right, angel, fucking come for me. Squeeze my fingers, give me your cream, baby!"

She detonates around me as Beck thrusts hard into her mouth. Her walls clamp down and pulse, suck at my fingers and it's so fucking hot I can't stop myself from biting at her neck and then licking the sting away, marking her as mine for the world to see. Beck pulls back from her mouth with a grunt, fists his cock and strokes it hard, coming all over her chest and tits. His hands go to her face and tilt it up so he can slam his lips against hers in a bruising kiss.

I gently pull my fingers from inside her and move my hands up her body and then massage his cum into her skin so he's marked her too. This woman is ours, one hundred percent ours and now that we have her, we're just getting started.

SAVY

My chest is heaving from the orgasm Jude just gave to me. I'm trying to catch my breath from the lack of air I had with Beck's thick length thrusting down my throat. It was my first blowjob and I'm surprised at how much I liked it. I had no idea that he and Jude were together that way but seeing Beck's cock in his mouth made me a little wild for both of them.

Seeing Beck's expressions change, the unfiltered want and need on his face with what I did to him with my mouth gave me a powerful thrill. I want to do it again. Even though I'm just coming down from the high Jude gave me, it doesn't feel like enough. I want more. I push Beck away, stand and turn around to face Jude and push him onto his back. I reach for the waistband of his sweats but he captures my hands in his tattooed fingers to stop them.

"Feeling greedy, doll?" He asks me with a glint in his eyes and a cocky grin on his face.

"More. I want more, Jude. I want to taste you too." I tell him and his gaze goes hot and intense as the grin on his sweet lips turns fierce. He drops my wrist and shoves his big body further up the bed and then drags me up onto it between his legs.

"You've been a good girl, so yeah, you can have some more. Get on your hands and knees, baby. You can suck me off but Beck's going to eat that sweet pussy of yours while you do it."

Everything inside of me goes liquid and loose and I'm up on my hands and knees in an instant with my ass in the air. I look over my shoulder to Beck and he moves onto the bed behind me flipping up my skirt and palming my ass with a groan.

“Fuck me, this ass. Peaches, I’m going to eat every juicy piece of you, darlin’”

His mouth lands on one of my cheeks and he bites down gently, sending a flair of heat to my clit and making it ache for attention. Jude slides a hand into my hair and pulls until I look back down at him. He uses his other hand to push his sweats down and I suck in a gasp of surprise when I see the row of metal piercings down his hard shaft. I bite my lip, half excited and half terrified of how that would feel inside me. As if he can read my thoughts, he chuckles.

“Like heaven. One day soon when I fuck your pussy hard and deep with my cock, you’ll think you’ve died and gone to heaven, doll.” He pulls my head with my hair and brushes the tip of it against my lips. “Until then, mind the teeth, baby.”

I stretch my tongue out and lick him over each one of those piercings, surprised at how they’re slightly cool against his hot shaft. Just as I take him completely into my mouth, Beck spears his tongue deep inside me from behind causing me to cry out around Jude’s shaft. Together they find a rhythm that turns me into a quivering mess, Beck’s tongue putting pressure on my pussy alternating with Jude’s thrusts to fuck my mouth. It feels fucking incredible and I try to imagine what it would feel like if Beck’s cock was deep inside of me. He pulls back to run a finger through my wetness and then slicks it up between my ass cheeks causing me to jerk and whine for something more.

“Do that again, she fucking loved it,” Jude tells him so he does, but this time he circles my hole with the tip of his wet finger and applies some pressure.

“God, I want to fuck you so bad, darlin’,” Beck grunts out and then goes right back to tongue fucking me. He adds his other hand to the mix to flick my swollen clit and I almost choke on Jude’s cock as another orgasm barrels down on me. Jude’s hands make fists in my hair and his thrusts get harder and faster. His cock goes deeper into my mouth until my throat feels raw and it just makes me wetter being used this way.

I feel him thicken even more in my mouth and Jude is almost breathless as he rasps out, “I’m going to come in your mouth.

Swallow, baby. Drink every drop of me down that tight little throat of yours.”

I feel the hot salty thickness filling my mouth and sliding down my tongue as I swallow again and again and my core spasms as I come against Beck’s mouth.

I flop down beside Jude on the bed, trying to catch my breath all over again. He rolls to face me as Beck moves up and presses against my back. His big hand sweeps up and down my side, over my hip and back as if to soothe me and Jude kisses away the tear tracks from my face.

“You’re a goddess, doll. You did so good. I think you were made for us, baby.”

I swallow the taste of Jude’s release and ask, “You two...you’re together, together?”

Beck chuckles behind me but it’s Jude that answers me with a cocky grin.

“Not quite what you’re thinking. We don’t go for the goal with just the two of us but we’re fluid enough to enjoy the assist when there’s a woman between us. It...amplifies things, don’t you think?”

I nod and brush his hair back, reaching behind me to slide my free hand up Beck’s neck and into his hair to pull him closer to my back.

He buries his face in my hair and whispers, “So fucking perfect, Peaches. So beautiful, thank you for being ours.”

Those words have the last of the orgasm haze clearing enough to remind me that I’m not. I’m not theirs, not the way I wish I could be. This is just sex, that’s all it can be and I need to remember that because the more they pet me, the more they whisper sweet things to me - the more my heart swells and that’s exactly how it will end up shattering when this is all over.

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I lean against the counter in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil for a desperately needed cup of tea and a hot water bottle waiting to be filled. It’s been a busy week since my date with Tate and getting together with Jude and Beck. I’m feeling tired and run down and I woke up this morning with my period so I’m suffering from cramps and moodiness. The house is quiet with everyone in bed and my hormones are messing with me.

I barely slept last night after getting home from the club. I tossed and turned while being haunted by visions of Ash's sharp green eyes watching me as I danced for him the whole shift. I hate that he doesn't know it's me dancing for him. I hate that it's some fantasy woman he wants and that he'll hate me if he ever finds out the truth.

Everyone has been busy this week with finals and I feel like the two I wrote today kicked my ass. After the night I was with Jude and Beck they seemed to back off a bit like they wanted me to have the space and time to make sure I'm okay with what we did together. It's sweet but now that they've shown me just how they can make my body sing and dance to their ministrations, I want more. I flat-out want sex and being on my period doesn't help that at all.

"You going to shut that off or make sure it's really reallllyy boiled, bookworm?"

Ash's annoyed words break me from my funk and I jerk to shut off the stove and move the kettle, mumbling an apology. Feeling a little pissy, I add, "Don't call me that."

He chuckles, "Alright, caterpillar, then. You're always wearing all this fuzzy stuff so that fits better anyway."

I step away from the stove and stretch up on my tiptoes to the top cupboard to try and reach the tea canister. Just as I get my fingers on it, I feel my pants get tugged down on one side causing me to squawk in surprise and the canister pushes further back into the cupboard.

"Wow, never pegged you as a tattoo girl, caterpillar." Ash muses, way too close to me as his warm fingers slide over the small purple and blue butterfly I have on the top of my right hip.

I swallow hard, realizing my stretching must have exposed part of it. I pull away from him and yank my fleecy sleep pants back up on that side as he smirks and reaches to get the canister for me.

"A girl like you branding her skin like that, it must mean something, right?"

I want to throw his words back at him. Tell him it means I was too drunk one night and no one stopped me but my hormones are all out of wack so instead I dangerously say the real reason.

"It...it was supposed to remind me that I could be something ... something that I'm not. It was supposed to mean that if I was brave

enough ... I could fly.”

Hot tears fill my eyes and I spin away from him and wrestle with the canister lid until it pops off and I pull out a tea bag.

“Hey, hey, don’t cry, Savy. Why are you crying?”

I sniff them back and keep my head down. “I’m not, it’s nothing. Stupid hormones.” I whisper the last part but he hears me anyway.

“Ah...crampy?”

My face flushes with embarrassment but I blame it on the steam as I pour boiling water into my mug. Ash takes the kettle from me and swipes the floppy water bottle from the counter and fills it up for me and then sets it beside my mug.

“I’m sorry you’re not feeling good. Come here and let me help?”

I dart a guarded look his way, not understanding why or how he would help me with something like this.

“I have two sisters who’ve trained me in the secret ways of dealing with PMS so that I could survive through a week of them going off in tandem. Trust me? Let me help?”

I shrug one shoulder, still not able to look him in the eye so he gently turns me until my back is to him and lifts my bulky fleece sweatshirt. I suck in a breath when his warm hands go to my lower back and begin to rub. He uses his strong thumbs to dig in with the exact right pressure. My stupid womb pulses and I break. The sobs pour out of me and I have no control at all as the hot tears pour down my face.

Ash’s hands leave my back with one arm wrapping around my chest just above my breasts to pull me back against him and the other sneaks under my shirt and slides under my pants to spread out and cup over my lower belly.

“Hey, hey, shh, it’s okay. You’re just riding the red wave, sweetheart. You’re smart and beautiful and you can be anything you want to be. This is just the hormones messing with you. You can do anything, Sav. You are brave. Think about it, you’re living in a house with four jacked-up dudes. Just spread those wings of yours and fly.”

He has no idea how his words are a double-edged sword for me and they just make my tears fall faster. Ash holds on to me, gently flexing his fingers on my stomach like he can massage the cramps away until I finally suck it all back and swipe at my face. When he

lets me go, there's no way I can look at him, terrified that he'll see the lie I've been hiding from him for so long.

"Come on, up to bed. I'll carry your tea and water bottle for you. I promise, a good night's sleep and you'll feel better tomorrow."

I do as I'm told, not able to speak for fear that all the secrets trapped in my throat will escape, and I go up the stairs with him following me. I slide into bed as he sets my tea down on the stool that I'm using for a nightstand and then tucks the hot water bottle under the covers against my stomach. This is such a different side of Ash from any I've seen before and it makes me wish for all the things I can't have with him. When he brushes my hair back from my face and takes my glasses off to set them on the stool, I grasp his wrist.

"A-Ash...I'm...I'm so sorry."

His brow furrows and he shakes his head a little. "For what?"

I force myself to swallow back the truth I want to blurt out and instead say,

"For being here. For being in your space. I'm sorry."

His hand reaches for my cheek but at the last second he pulls it back and one side of his mouth lifts in a half smile.

"Don't be. Turns out, it's not so bad having you here after all. Go to sleep, caterpillar."

BECKETT

I'm sitting on the floor in my room with my back against the bed throwing a rubber ball at the wall. Finals are done and I need to decide if I'm going to take the offer of a flight home for the holidays that landed in my inbox this morning from my dad. I don't even know why he would send that to me. It's been years since we spent a Christmas together. It has to have something to do with what he told me over dinner when he was in town.

I throw the ball harder and catch it on the bounce and then do it again. He wants to fucking groom me to take over for him one day and the thought of being buried under the weight of a mindless future in corporate America has my soul withering. I squeeze the ball harder at the thought of Jude and Tate going on to the pros and Ash following them to be a trainer – without me - and only seeing them on TV instead of daily. They're my real family and I can't believe in a few short months this will all be over and I'll be alone.

Ever since my mom died, I felt alone until Tate, Jude and Ash connected with me. My father had always been absent even before she left me. He was always too busy with work to show up at my school events and football games but mom made up for it by always being there, always cheering me on. And then she was gone and a small part of me has always wondered if she left because of me. Was I too much? Was I not enough?

The hardest part is that I'll never know exactly why she chose death instead of sticking around for her only child. She left me with a man who was barely in my life before her death and had no desire to

deal with the complexities of a grieving child and his abandonment issues.

When he sent me away to boarding school, I hated him. I met Tate, who also had father issues, and he slid into the gaping hole in my life and together we built a support system for each other. Later when Ash and Jude came into the picture, we all just clicked into place and built our family further. How the fuck am I supposed to walk away from them now? How am I supposed to go live a life I know I will hate and not even have them in my day-to-day life? Fuck! What's the fucking point of that?

Savy walks past the door as I throw the ball again with a scowl and then backs up to peer in at me with a frown. She cocks her head and steps into my room.

"Bad day?" She asks softly as she comes and sits on the bed above me.

I let the ball roll away and slide a hand up her leg, reminding me of how her skin felt under my hands that night. It's a comfort when I lean my head against her leg and her small, warm fingers slide through my hair to massage my head. Savy and I are just getting started with what's developing between us but she's just one more thing I'll have to give up when we all go our separate ways. I push that thought aside with no answer in sight.

"Better, now that you're here, darlin'," I sigh and turn my head to rub my face against her calf and then decide it's not enough. I need her in my arms, pressed against me to drown out all the dark thoughts overwhelming me. I pull her off the bed and position her so she's straddling me.

One of my favorite things about Savy is how she lets us move her body to fit where we want her without protest. It makes me feel like she's mine on a totally different level.

I slide my hands up her thighs to rest on her hips and pull her center to fit tight against the growing bulge in my jeans. Her eyes behind her glasses stay calm and steady on me as she lifts a hand to trace my jaw and then up over my lips. She's so...steady, so present with me. She stares into my eyes as if nothing else matters but me in this moment. We don't speak a word but it feels like we hold an entire conversation just looking at each other. Something

wound tight unfurls in my chest and I have a fierce need to have her pressed closer to me. Not for sex but to have something more, something deeper with her.

As if she can read my mind, she flows forward against me, wraps her arms around my waist, presses her face into my neck, and just stays there. The longer I hold her like this, the more connected to her I feel and the more I never want to let her go. For a moment, everything slots into place and I feel...home.

JUDE

I'm waiting to get into Masks with Tate and Beck but there's a group of drunk freshmen mixing it up in the front entry as the bouncers try and haul them out. I don't even want to be here. Finals are finally over and we've got a free night before we lock back down for the next game. I want to be celebrating with my baby doll but she's got a shift at work and it pisses me off that I still don't know where that is. If I did, I could sneak her some treats and keep her company until she gets off and then... then I could get her off...with my mouth or my fingers or both. She's like a fucking addiction and I'm soooo close to saying fuck it and plowing her sweet, tight pussy with my aching cock. I reach down and adjust myself as I grow hard just thinking about it.

"I want to speak to the manager!" Some chick shrills out, plucking her drink-soaked dress away from her body.

One of the bouncers lifts a mike to his mouth and yells into it over the fighting and music.

"Hey Stella, we need you at the front entrance."

My brow furrows as I frown hearing that but...

"Any of you guys know what was up with Savy this week?" Tate asks, distracting me from the drama in front of us. "She seemed a little moody."

"Did you try eating her coochie?" I ask.

Beck barks out a laugh and high-fives me but Tate just scowls.

"Fuck off, it's not all about sex you know," he spits out, making me laugh.

“You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em. So fold her legs right up to her shoulders and put her in a better mood.”

Beck can't stop laughing and Tate glares at us both. “Is that all this is for you guys? You just want to fuck around with her? Because I want something more than just that.”

That wipes the smile right off my face and I step up to him real close. “Watch your fucking tone, son. That's my girl you're talking about. Savy's end game for me so don't go putting dumb fucking doubts in her head again like you did last time. You really want her? Then fucking make your move. I already told all of you that I'm all in for her. With or without the rest of you.”

Tate throws his hands up to get me to back off but before he can make his case, the bouncers haul the fighters out past us, clearing the way for us to finally enter the club. We climb the stairs to the second level and spot Ash at our table. His gaze is laser locked on the Butterfly like always. As soon as we're seated, the usual flock of bar barbies mobs us and I can't help but grin when every single one of my brothers brushes them off and send them all on their way. I fucking meant what I said about Savy. It might have only been two months since I met her and less than that we've been together but she's a fucking sneaky little thief. My doll's swiped my heart right out of my chest. I'm gonna make her Mrs. Jude one day.

Drinks are dropped off and I glance around the club with disinterest wishing I was at home in Savy's peaches and cream smelling room instead. I've been sneaking her kindle and reading some of her spicy books and I'm dying to act out a few of those scenes with her. Ten minutes in and already bored, I turn to Tate and Beck but they're going over plays against our upcoming team so I turn to Ash.

“Hey! How was your final today? That was your last one, right?” I call loudly across the table to be heard over the pumping music.

Fucker doesn't even give me a blink, he's so fixated on his girl so I swing my chair around to check her out. The Butterfly is looking fine as hell tonight. She's got on this little pink and white plaid schoolgirl skirt that barely covers her ass as she dances and a cropped white blouse that shows the bright hot pink bra underneath it. White thigh-high stockings with pink bows on her thighs go down to pink Mary

Jane high heels completing the slutty schoolgirl look. Her long neon pink wig flies out over her butterfly wings as she spins to the beat.

When she bends over with her back to us and drags her hands up her leg, I get a flash of luscious ass and a peak of white satin between her legs and my dick stands right the fuck up. I jerk in my chair and stare down at my lap in horror. What the actual fuck? I only get hard for my doll now, that's the deal. Yeah, Butterfly is next-level hot but so are a lot of girls that aren't my doll and I have no interest in them.

I glance over at her with a deep frown and just happen to catch her looking back. Electric-blue eyes ringed in black shadow and lashes capture me and my whole body fucking freezes in place as my eyes widen. The seductive look in her eyes that she always has switches to shock and then fear slides into them right before she flips around to put her back to us. I shoot straight out of my chair as my eyes rescan every inch of the Butterfly because now that I've seen it, I can't unsee it and HOLY...FUCKING...SHIT...THIS...IS...EPIC!

My hands shoot straight up into the air like I'm announcing a goal and I bellow out, "GANGSTER MODE ACTIVATED!"

And then I tip my head back and howl with laughter. This is so fucking perfect. The girl my bestie's been loving and lusting over for the last two years is the same girl he's been working so hard to resist. I drop back down into my seat, ignoring the looks and questions I'm getting from the guys and tilt my head back Savy Butterfly's way. I watch her dance knowing she won't be able to resist looking back our way and when she finally does meet my eyes, I discreetly slide a finger over my mouth in a shh gesture and shoot her a wink. Some of the tension in her shoulders loosens but she's not dancing as smoothly as she was before.

I glance over at Ash and see the slight frown he wears now while watching her and burst out laughing again. He's so fucking in tune with that girl that he picked up on that something just upset her. He looks over my way, scowling at me as I laugh but I just blow him a kiss and grin harder. I'm not saying shit about anything. This is way too delicious to blab about. I want to hear all about this from my doll.

I lean back in my chair and turn my head to watch her and pat my cock like the good boy he is, happy he made the right call after all.

I'm not as shocked as I was now that it's settled in. Savy hides a lot of herself from the world. Her hiding behind that mask, tucked away safely behind bars isn't that much of a stretch. I sit and watch my Butterfly doll dance and know that very, very soon, we'll all help her to stop hiding and step out of her cage for good.

SAVY

I slip the second contact lens from my eye, drop it into the solution case and then drop my head down into my hands and try not to hyperventilate. Fuck, fuck, fuck! This is a disaster. I groan in misery at how stupid I am. I should have told them myself. I should have come clean. This is going to blow up in my face, I just know it.

“Babes! What happened? Are you okay? Did some fucker harass you out there?”

Stella rushes over and drops into the seat beside me, turning the chair to face me and grabbing my head to force it up. She’s in street clothes instead of a costume. Stella doesn’t dance very often anymore now that she’s been promoted to management. I gush out a soaked in misery breath and shake my head at her, tears glazing my eyes.

“So, so, much worse, Stell. Jude...Jude recognized me! He knows I’m the Butterfly!”

Her beautiful face morphs through a range of emotions before settling on cautious consideration. “Well...did he freak out?”

I angrily swipe away a tear that trickles out and shake my head. “N-not really? He kinda yelled something and then laughed before winking at me.”

Her brows shoot up and a small smile curves her lips. “So, he didn’t seem mad? What about the others? How did they take it?”

I slump back into the dressing chair and roll my lips in with a little shrug. “I don’t think...he told them. Actually, I know he didn’t because Ash would have been raging against my cage if he did. He’s probably waiting until they get home.” I reach for my glasses

and pop them on with another groan. “Fuck, I don’t want to go home and face that!” My heart gives a pang at that word, home. I’ve been staying at their place for a few weeks now and it already feels like home to me. I’m so fucking pathetic.

“I think this might be a good thing, babes. You always knew you were going to have to come clean with them if things got more serious. I know you’ve been afraid to show them, to tell them who you really are but Jude finding out could be the catalyst you need to lay it all out there. I can already tell you have feelings for these guys so telling them now, seeing how they react, might be for the best. If it doesn’t go well, then it won’t hurt as much as it would once you completely fall for them, right?”

I swallow the notion that I could actually let myself fall for all of them.

“I...I need to tell them but Stella, there’s no future with them. I’m not going to let myself fall in love because they’re all going their separate ways at the end of this year. Tate and Jude will likely be going pro on different teams and Ash and Beck will still have another year of school to graduate. Starting a relationship, something real and meaningful with them all is just not possible. Having that for the first time in my life and then losing it so soon would crush me completely. I...I can’t. This needs to just stay what it is, sex and maybe also friendship. Love can’t be a part of this.”

Stella’s hands land on my shoulders and squeeze. “Oh, Savy, honey...I think it might be too late for that.”

My hand shakes with anxiety as I try and fit the key in the front door lock when I get home. I force steel into my spine with a deep breath and turn the knob to...a dark and quiet house. Some of the adrenaline flooding my body eases off leaving me even shakier as I hang up my jacket and put my boots away in the closet. I stand at the bottom of the stairs for a minute and listen. It’s quiet but I pick up the faint sound of music before I slowly start to climb the stairs to the second floor.

When I get to my closed bedroom door, I can see a faint strip of light under it and I know he’s in there waiting for me. It takes me a ridiculous amount of time to gather the courage to open the door and step in. I close it behind me, let my bag slide off my shoulder to the

floor, and lean back against the door as I meet his golden eyes. Jude's white-blond hair is a sexy, messy disaster as he sits back casually against my mountain of pillows. After holding our stare for a few beats, he cocks a brow and a whisper rushes out of me.

"I...I...can explain."

With a smirk on his face he lifts a hand and crooks a finger at me in a come here motion. I drag my feet across the room to stand by the bed next to him and in one fluid motion, he grabs my hips and drags me onto his lap so that I have no choice but to straddle him and brace my hands on his shoulders.

"Tell me," he says as he traces my lips with a tattooed, ring-covered finger.

He doesn't say anything more, just looks at me and holds me while he waits for me to speak so I try to stop my shaking and swallow hard.

"My whole life, I felt...invisible. I was always alone, waiting for someone to see me, waiting for my dad to come home and see me. That got even worse when my dad married Vanessa's mom. My new sister was perfect in every way. Pretty and popular and stylish...she was everything I wasn't and her shadow over me just got bigger as we got older. When I came to Penworth University, I thought that would change. I thought this would be my chance to finally shine, to be seen. But...that didn't happen. It was a new location but I was still that same small, lonely girl."

I heave in a ragged breath and force myself to keep looking into his encouraging eyes.

"I took a lot of private dance lessons when I was younger and when I saw a flash mob from Masks one day on campus I was awestruck. The dancers were passing out flyers advertising auditions for new dancers. I...I let myself be brave for the first time in my life and auditioned. I could finally be seen as the woman I always wanted to be but even better, I could still hide behind a mask so I wouldn't get hurt." My fingers tremble as I cup his face. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you, Jude. I was..."

"You were scared." He finishes for me and I nod. "And Ash?" He asks, causing me to crash my eyes closed and groan before trying to explain.

“He...no one had ever looked at me like that before. Tate might have been my first boyfriend, fake or not but Ash...he was the first man to see me, to want me in that way and it was like a drug. He will never know what he gave me by watching me like that night after night. Then I met you all in real life and I was terrified that he'd hate me. Jude...” My voice chokes, “It was the first time in my life that I felt...worthy.”

“Ah, fuck, doll. Don't say that. You're so much more than you give yourself credit for, baby. You're fucking perfect in every way and now that I see what you've been trying to hide from us...you're even better.”

He pulls my head down so our foreheads meet and I whisper, “You're not mad at me?”

His lips slide across mine like a promise. “I could never be mad at you. You're my baby doll. I fucking adore you.” He nips at my bottom lip and then smirks. “But I am going to have to punish you, doll. All this time, I could have been lusting over you in that cage too. You'll have to make it up to me. Baby, you're gonna take my cock so deep and hard in your sweet, sweet cunt that every ridge and vein will be branded inside your pussy.”

My core flares hot with heat and I can feel the instant slickness between my legs. It would be so easy to leave it there, let him wash away the guilt of what I've kept back from him, them, but now that I've opened the door to him, it's only fair that I tell him the rest. I push against his chest to give myself some space from those dangerous lips of his.

“Jude, wait...there's more. There's more that you don't know about me.”

His fingers dig into my hips and he rolls up to grind the hardness of his cock against my center, making my eyelashes flutter with pleasure.

“No, baby. Listen to me. I want to read every chapter, every page of your story as it unfolds naturally. I don't want you to be forced to tell me because of some misplaced sense of guilt. You don't owe me or any of us answers about yourself unless you want to share them with us. I don't want to pick and choose a page of your story here and there. I want to read your whole fucking book, doll. You tell me

when you're ready and I'll do the same, alright? And don't worry about the others, either. It's up to you when you share yourself, your story, with them."

And just like that, all my walls, all my shields crash down and I fall completely in love with Jude Dixon so I show him the only way I'm brave enough to. I kiss him like he's the air I need to breathe. I pull and tug at his t-shirt until he rips it up over his head while I grind down against his hardness. He feels it, feels the urgency, the need in me, and flips me onto my back, stripping my clothes from my body. His sweatpants hit the floor and he gazes down at me with hot intense eyes as he fists that beautiful, thick, pierced cock of his. I want it in my mouth again but I want it inside me even more so I reach for him and pull him down until he's kneeling between my spread legs. I reach down and run two fingers through my slickness and then offer them, glistening with my need, to his mouth. He sucks them off with an animal-like groan and then grabs my knees and pulls my legs even further apart.

"Gonna fuck you bare, baby. I need to feel every fucking inch of this pretty pink pussy." He runs his engorged head through my folds and I buck my hips up, so ready to have him inside of me. "You're going to watch, baby. You're going to watch how well your cunt's going to take my cock. How it sucks it in and grips it."

I expect him to thrust into me hard but he surprises and teases me with one inch at a time. Rocking into me slowly, driving me fucking crazy as he stretches me out. Each one of his piercings drags against my tender walls, setting off sensations that have me arching my back and whining for more until he's finally balls deep in me. My eyes flutter open when he stills inside me and when my eyes meet his, I can see how much of the beast he's holding back. He bares his teeth at me.

"Mine...this pussy is mine...these tits are mine...every part of you, everything you are, is fucking mine and you better not forget it."

And then he destroys me. He pulls out, not quite all the way, and then impales me with a powerful thrust. Again and again, getting faster until it's a steady rhythm and we both have a gleam of sweat covering our bodies. My hips rock up to meet his every thrust and when he slides his hands from my hips to under my ass and lifts me,

his cock and those piercings hit a magic place inside of me that has me crying out for him.

“J-Jude! Harder, harder, d-don’t stop!”

He fucks me like he’s going to break me in two and I just beg for more as my channel pulses and squeezes his thickness.

“Say it, doll. Fucking tell me who you belong to!”

My voice comes out raw and broken as the orgasm hits me. “Yours! I’m yours!”

He doesn’t stop fucking me through the waves and it just goes on and on until I can barely breathe. I’m a puddle on the bed when he slides his cock out of me.

“I need to taste your cum, baby. Need your honey cream on my tongue.” He says as he moves down to lick and suck at my throbbing clit, sending me off again.

I’m barely conscious when he pulls back, my juices covering his lips and chin. He flips me like the doll he calls me and orders, “Up! Hands on the headboard.”

I force my shaking limbs to move until I’m gripping the headboard with my back to him and my ass in the air. I turn my head to look over my shoulder at his gleaming body as his muscles ripple and his cock weeps pre cum. His ringed fingers slide down my back, his gaze following them until he gets to my ass and then he...fucking spanks me! My core floods with more wet heat when it clenches hard and I’m shocked that I want him to do it again. I push back into the hand that’s soothing away the sting and he rewards me by spanking my other cheek. I moan with the agony of how fucking good that bit of pain goes with the pleasure that’s rocking through my body.

“That’s my fucking ass, baby doll, and one day soon I’m going to fuck that tight hole of yours while one of my brothers fucks your pussy and your gonna beg us to never stop.”

His chest hits my back, his knees force mine further apart and he winds my hair around his fist and pulls my head back with it to get to my mouth.

“Can you taste how much you want this cock on my lips, baby?”

His mouth crashes against mine and the taste of me just amplifies everything when he lines up and slams back into me. One hand in my hair, the other wrapped tightly around the back of my neck, Jude

uses my body, my cunt, like an animal. He ruts into me hard and so fucking deep I feel him in my womb. Everything in me tightens, clamps down, pulses as my wetness slicks my thighs.

“That’s right, baby, come on my cock, soak me with your pleasure. Be my dirty little baby doll and milk my cum from me,” He grunts in my ears and bites down on my neck.

The pain mixed with pleasure has me exploding and screaming his name as I push my hips back hard to take him even deeper, wanting every inch of him to feel how he’s ruined me. With one last hard stroke, he jerks and thickens inside of me and roars, “MINE!” as he comes.

My head is pressed to the headboard as I struggle to force air past my raw throat but he pulls it back by my hair until I’m forced to meet his eyes. What I see there steals the little bit of air I managed to sip down and he whispers it again but this time with heart, “Mine.”

TATE

I shut the taps off when the bubbles in the deep soaker tub threaten to overflow onto my bathroom floor. I scan the room and nod at the lit candles and steaming cup of tea sitting on the small table next to the tub. Everything is perfect, all it needs now is Savy to come and enjoy it.

She was off for most of the week. Finals are hard on all of us but now that they're over, I wanted to do something special for her. It's important to me to keep showing her that I meant what I said about us being the real deal. I see what she's building with Jude and now Beck and I want that with her too. I've been racking my brain on what I could do for her to make her see that I'm trying and I came up with the perfect gift. I ordered her a complete set of all her favorite classic books that she lost in the fire and I can't wait for them to get here. But I wanted to do something more intimate too so a bubble bath was all I could come up with.

I head out of my room and cross over to hers. The door is open and I stand and watch her back as she types away on her laptop for a few minutes at her desk before clearing my throat. She looks over her shoulder and hits me with the sweetest smile.

"Hey, what's up?"

My feet carry me across the room and I turn her chair so she faces me and cup her face in my hands.

"How are you feeling? You seemed a little off this last week."

A pink blush stains her cheeks as her eyes slide away from mine and she bites her lip. "Yeah, kind of comes with being a female. Sorry."

I brush her cheekbone with my thumb and feel like an idiot. I never even thought about her having her period. Something for me to remember in the future. I don't know a lot about what women go through during that week having no sisters but I think I heard that chocolate is a necessity so I'll remember to stock some of the good stuff next month for her.

"Are you...over, uh, done..."

She laughs softly and peeks up at me. "Yup, coast is clear."

"Cool, so do you have some free time right now? I...um, I wanted to...I made you...fuck, why is this so hard?"

Savy pushes to her feet with a small smile and takes my hand. "I'm free right now. What do you want to do?"

I tug her by the hand and pull her out of her room into mine, shut the door, and steer her into my bathroom. Her brows pop up in surprise as she takes in the full bath with all the frothy bubbles and the candles.

"You...you made me a bath?"

I shrug one shoulder. "Well, I just thought, you work two jobs and with finals and everything, um, I have this big tub so I thought you might like to relax a bit."

Savy moves into me, rises up onto her toes, and kisses me softly. Her eyes are soft and full of something that makes my chest squeeze tight.

"Tate, this is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me. Thank you."

I breathe out my relief and drop my forehead onto hers. "Good, great, I, I just wanted to show you, I mean..." I shake my head at how I've turned into a fumbling teenaged boy and step back toward the door. "I just wanted to do something nice for you. Enjoy your bath, baby girl."

I barely make it halfway across my room when Savy calls out to me. I turn and rush back to see what she needs and find her trailing her fingers through the bubbles.

Her voice is low and hesitant when she asks, "You...you could... stay?"

Everything inside of me shoots off like a firework. I cock my head to the side and try not to grin.

“Yeah? You want me to stay?”

She looks over her shoulder at me and arches a brow. “Well, it is a really big tub and I’m not the best swimmer so...for safety's sake?”

I can’t fight my grin any longer at her sweet teasing so I reach behind my head and drag my shirt up and over tossing it to the floor.

“For safety's sake.”

Her cheeks turn that pretty pink as she takes in my bare chest but she twirls her finger. “You have to turn around while I get in first, please.”

I nod seriously and turn my back for her. I think it’s fucking adorable that she’s self-conscious about me seeing her get undressed when we’re about to be naked together in a tub. I feel like I’ve just scored the winning touchdown at the national championship. I just wanted to do something nice for her so this is a huge fucking win for me, for us.

“Okay, you can turn around now.”

I move slowly around and bite my lip hard at the vision in front of me. My girl is all pink and flushed from the steamy water with bubbles barely covering her perfect breasts. My cock is already getting hard just imagining how her smooth warm skin is going to feel against mine. A grin tugs at my lips and I twirl my finger just like she did.

“You have to turn your head while I get in. No peeking!”

A giggle slips out of her as she turns away and it’s the sweetest fucking sound I’ve heard today. My jeans and boxers hit the floor and I step into the hot water at the opposite end of the tub and slide down into it with a groan of pleasure.

Savy side eyes me with a small little smile so I reach under the water and grab a hold of her calves and start to stroke them. I press her feet against my abs and sink deeper so my legs are on either side of her. She lets out a deep contented sigh.

“This is really nice, Tate. I didn’t know how tense I was. I already feel more relaxed. Thank you.”

I smooth my hands over her feet and take one into both hands and start to rub her arch. Her head tips back and a soft moan slips from between her perfect pink lips.

“I think you could be more relaxed than this.”

She peels one eye open and drags her free foot lower on my stomach until my hard cock brushes against it.

“Maybe, but what about you? You seem...tense.”

I catch the gleam in her eye and I fucking love that she’s flirting with me right now. I lift my hips just enough to rub myself against the side of her foot and flirt right back.

“Hmm, seems like there are parts of me that are a little tense. Maybe I need to be rubbed too.”

She can’t stop the smile as she rolls her head away from me on the lip of the tub. “I don’t know, I thought this was supposed to be for me to relax.”

I set her foot down and sweep my hands further up her legs and then back down again. On my next pass I let my fingers go higher on her thighs.

“Yeah, that’s true. I should probably keep rubbing you then. Can’t quite reach all of you though. You should come a little closer.”

She looks at me through her lowered lashes for a few beats and then lifts a hand out of the water to me. I pull on her so she can slide closer without falling under the water. I pull her up until her legs are over mine and go around my waist. Her bare mound rests flush against the base of my cock and I can’t help the groan that slips out as my eyes close briefly. Fuck, she’s so damn soft and warm against me as our slick, wet skin presses together. I desperately want to be inside her but there’s plenty of time for that so I sweep my hands over the outside of her thighs and around to cup her ass.

Our faces are so close together and I love that I get to stare into her gorgeous eyes without the obstruction of her glasses. I love the feel of her ass in my hands but I want to keep exploring. The two times I’ve had my hands on her body were quick and passionate. I want to touch and savor every moment of this. I want to learn every inch of her. What makes her moan, what makes her breath catch in her throat. I want to map every part of her, every reaction she has to my touch so it’s locked in my brain forever.

I sweep my hands up her back, down her arms, and back to her hips while keeping eye contact. This feels so much deeper than anything I’ve ever had with her but I want even more so I lean that last inch and slowly kiss her. I take my time as my hands go back to

her ass and nudge her a little tighter against me. I explore her mouth with my tongue and nibble on her bottom lip. I keep it slow and soft, waiting for her to show me what she wants and needs. When she presses her mound harder against my cock with a little whine, I give it to her.

I spread her legs a little wider, just wide enough for my shaft to slot into her wet folds and then gently lift my hips up and down. Slowly my shaft rubs against her clit with every pass giving her the friction she wants and she digs her fingers into my shoulders. I tip her head to the side and kiss a hot path down her neck, dragging my teeth over her collarbone to her chest. I keep one hand on her ass to anchor her against my moving hips and use the other to sweep the heavy weight of her breast up to my mouth.

God, I've dreamed of having my lips on these tits for so long. I take my time and savor every inch of them. I suck around the outside of her tit, licking and kissing, never quite moving to her hard, raspberry-colored nipple that's just begging me to suck. Savy lets out a throaty moan that has my cock twitching and I can't fucking wait anymore so I take her pert nipple into my mouth and suck hard. She arches her back, grinds down on my cock and groans.

"Fuck, Tate, please, please!"

I flick her nipple with my tongue and then move to her other breast.

"I fucking love the way you say my name like that. God, Savy, I want so much more of you. I want all of you, baby girl."

I drag my teeth over the top of her breast as the scorching heat against my cock drives me wild. She's going to make me come and that's not fucking happening until I have her screaming so I grasp her hips and lift her off of my cock and out of the water.

"Hold on to the wall, baby. Put your knee on the ledge. I'm starving for you. I need your sweetness on my tongue, filling my mouth. I need you to come all over my tongue so I can lick it all up."

"Oh, God! Tate!"

She cries as I suck her lips into my mouth and then spear my tongue through her heat. Her pussy is the best thing I've ever tasted and I just want more as she rocks her hips against my face. I slide my hand up her wet thigh and slip a finger into her channel and she's

just as fucking tight as I remember. I fuck her slow and steady with my finger, adding a second as my tongue goes to work on her clit. Sucking it, licking it, and circling it until she's almost sobbing for relief. I can't get enough of her taste, her cries and I have to squeeze the base of my cock so I don't shoot off under the water.

Savy's walls start to quiver and flutter around my fingers and I know she's close but before I can take her over the edge, give her the pleasure she deserves, she yanks away from me and drops back down into the water.

She grasps my cock and lines it up, impaling herself onto it until I'm so deep that I yell out, "Fuck, yes!"

She arches her back with her head thrown back and rolls her hips hard and fast twice and then her pussy clamps down on my cock and squeezes so fucking tight that I blow. She milks my orgasm from me and all I can do is hold tight to her hips and ride it out with her. When she brings her head back forward, I grab the back of her neck and knock our foreheads together. Her pupils are blown wide as she stares into mine.

"Baby girl, you look so fucking beautiful coming all over my cock."

She pants out another moan. "C-can we do that again? Only, let's do it on the bed?"

With a splash of water, I lift us up and out of the tub because, yeah, my baby girl can have whatever the fuck she wants.

SAVY

I gather the pages from the printer and stack them neatly together and hope he won't think I'm overstepping. With my last final behind me, I had a little time to do some research. I hate how down Beckett has been lately with the thought of going to work for his dad after graduation. Football was such a big part of his life and it's what he wanted for his future. With his injury, his shot at going pro is over but that doesn't necessarily mean that he has to be done with the sport. Thinking about Tate and Jude going to play in the big leagues and Ash joining them as a sports medic made me start to think about what other avenues Beckett could take to be a part of it, to keep him involved.

Hence the research. He's already got a lot of the course credits he would need to make an easy switch to a sports-based path. I stare down at the papers and chew on my lip. Ultimately, it's going to be up to Beck to decide what direction he takes. I just wanted to show him some options that he might not have considered.

I grab my bag and fill it with what I need. I have a shift at the library in an hour and then my last shift at the club later tonight and then I'm off for the holiday break. I usually go to whatever house Celeste and Vanessa won't be in but with all four of the guys staying here or traveling for Bowl games, I thought I might stay too, maybe travel to where they're playing to watch their game. It would be a lot nicer than wandering around an empty house with just the staff to keep me company.

I leave my room and pop over to Beck's open door but his room is empty. I can hear the shower running in the main bath so I assume

he must be in there. I don't want to be late for work so I walk in and set the stack of papers on his bed where he won't be able to miss them and then back out of his room. On my way to the stairs, I catch something that has my blood boiling in an instant.

"Fucking loser...disgusted that you carry my name...better fucking perform...money riding on that game..."

It's not my business. I have no right to interfere but my little-used temper goes nuclear hearing such foul abuse and I'm pushing open Tate's bedroom door before I even know it. He's sitting on the side of his bed bowed over with his head in his hands. His cell phone is laying next to him on the bed on speaker with his father spewing abuse from it. I stomp over before he even notices I've come in and snatch it up, whirl and stomp out of the room back to mine and slam the door, flipping the lock just as Tate starts to yell.

"Savy! Fuck! Savy! What are you doing?"

I rush across the room, step into my closet, and shut the door behind me in the hope what I have to say to this man will be muffled enough that Tate can't hear it.

"Mr. Valor!" I snap, cutting off the man on the other end of the line mid-rant. "My name is Savannah Sevan, you might recognize my last name. It's the name on the side of the stadium your son plays football in. This is the second time I've overheard you verbally abusing your son and it ends now or I will use my considerable wealth and resources to end your life as you know it. I will force your pitiful little company into the ground and buy it for peanuts and then I will sell it off to the lowest bidder piece by piece and then I will do everything in my power to bankrupt you personally. I will set my dogs loose on you and destroy every bit of your reputation until you are a pariah and an outcast. People will mock, laugh and shun you. Do you believe that the Sevan name and fortune is capable of doing everything I just outlined?"

When all I hear is heavy silence coming through the line, I nod as if he can see me.

"No answer? Good. That means you are taking me seriously. Now let me make myself clear so there's no misunderstanding between us. You will NOT call your son again until after draft day. He is under a tremendous amount of stress and pressure that your version of a

'pep talk' only exacerbates. You are not welcome in my stadium and I will be sure to add your name to the security list so you will be barred from attending any away games as well. When I hang up this phone, you will not call Tate and you will not share this conversation with him or there will be repercussions. You will compose a text message apologizing for your behavior, tell him how proud you are of him and all the hard work he's done to come this far and that you believe he will have an amazing future. Mr. Valor, I need you to tell me you understand and agree to my terms or I will start to make the first of many phone calls about **your** not so amazing future."

My fingers bite into the sides of Tate's phone painfully as I wait to see if his father will accept my bluff. I fucking hate that I had to throw down my real last name, that is something I've always refused to trade on but Tate doesn't deserve any of this asshole's abuse. When he finally speaks, I hold my breath so he won't hear it rush out of me in relief.

"Ms. Sevan, I agree to your terms. I...I apologize for what you overheard. I'm just under my own..."

"That will be all, Mr. Valor. No excuse is valid for what you've done to your child. Apologize to him...not me!"

I stab the red button so hard that the phone flips from my hand to land face up on the carpet showing me the call has been disconnected. The breath I've been holding gushes out of me as I drop my hands down to my knees and gasp for air. My whole body is shaking with adrenaline. I have never spoken to anyone like that and my stomach churns with sickness as I reach a shaking hand down to pick up Tate's phone. I've never threatened anyone before, ever. I might have been bluffing but I know if pushed hard enough, I could make all those threats a reality to protect someone I lov...care about.

A few more deep breaths and I feel steady enough to open the closet and cross to my bedroom door. I give my arms a shake, straighten my shoulders and lift my head and then unlock and open the door. Tate is right there with his arms leaning against the frame and wearing an expression sick with worry. His beautiful hazel eyes have a hint of fear in them as he looks down at the phone in my hand. I step right into him and lift my chin so that I can brush my lips against his.

“You are a fucking star, Tate Valor. I’m so proud of everything you are.”

His brows crash down and he drops a hand to wrap around the back of my neck.

“Baby, what did you do?” He asks in a defeated tone just as his phone chimes in my hand.

I step back, glance down at the display preview long enough to see that his father actually did do as I said and then hold it out to him.

“Here, it’s for you. I’ve got to go. I’m running late for work.”

I slide the phone into his hand, brush a soft kiss on his cheek, and dart past him down the stairs. There will be questions later but I think I’m finally ready to tell them everything.

ASHER

I climb the wooden stairs up to the main floor, wipe sweat from my face, and sling the towel around my neck. It's nice to be off from classes for break so I can have a longer workout than normal. All I've got to do today is finish up my Amazon order to send my sisters their Christmas presents and then just flake out until I can go see my Butterfly tonight. It's the last chance I'll have to see her until the new year. Masks caters mainly to the university crowd so when the school shuts down so does the club.

I think about the charm bracelet with delicate gold butterflies hanging from it that's upstairs in my dresser. I had the idea to slide it into her cage tonight with the hopes that it might crack open a door between us. The problem is the second bracelet I bought that is identical except the charms are little tiny gold books. I don't even know why the fuck I bought it for caterpillar. When I saw it next to the butterfly one, all I could think about was Savy, warm and soft in my arms as she cried and the way she kept apologizing to me.

I shake my head knowing I won't give either of the frustrating women in my life the gifts and head to the kitchen to make a protein smoothie. I find Jude there leaning over the counter and digging into a pan of coconut dessert bars that Savy made for him. With each bite, he's moaning like he's about to blow his load.

"Really, man? Have some dignity." I laugh but it just makes him pull the pan into his curled arms and fake snarl at me.

"My precious!"

He stuffs another bite of it into his mouth, moaning again, and mumbles around the food. "It's almost as good as crème de la

vagina. Come here you dirty little slut. I'm going to eat you out all day until my doll comes back and I can have the real thing."

I might slam the large container of protein power a little harder than necessary onto the counter hearing that. I don't think anyone in this house slept through her screams of pleasure the other night from whatever he did to her in her room. I went to sleep rock hard and woke up the same damn way.

I pull the blender out and start tossing fruits and veggies in it as Tate and Beck come down the stairs to join us. Tate's got a shell-shocked look on his face and Beck's gripping a bunch of papers, staring at it like it's a map to the Holy fucking Grail. I jut my head at Tate while I dump scoops of protein powder into the blender.

"What's up with you? You look like you've seen a ghost."

He just shakes his head, swipes open his phone, and hands it across the island to me. "Read that."

I drop the scoop back into the container and take it from him, my brows popping up in surprise. "This is from your dad? What the hell? Was he body snatched or something?"

I pass the phone to Jude to read as Tate explains. "I had him on speaker with the phone on the bed. He was giving me his usual pre-game rant of what a pussy loser I am when Savy comes barging into my room. She swipes my phone, stomps back out and locks herself in her room with it. I think she even hid in her closet too because I had my ear to her door and couldn't hear a word she was saying. A few minutes later, she opens the door again, tells me I'm a fucking star and that she's proud of me. Then that text comes through so she hands me the phone, kisses me goodbye, and tells me she's gotta go 'cuz she's late for work."

We all share a baffled look as Beck takes the phone to read the message too and Jude bursts out laughing.

"Cowabunga, fucking gangsta girl!"

"But what did she fucking say to him for this kind of turn around?" I ask and Tate throws his hands up, just as clueless as the rest of us.

Beck starts shaking his head as a grin spreads across his face. He holds up the papers he had been studying.

"Do you know what this is? These are three different pathways to a sports management career. All it would take is a few class tweaks

and some interning at an agency and I could be working my way to being an agent. I wouldn't have to go work for my dad. I could try and stay with you guys. Not as a player but in management!"

Jude grunts around another bite of dessert. "Good, you can be mine. My agent's a fucking weasel. Can't stand the prick."

Tate grasps Beck's shoulder and squeezes. "That's fucking awesome, man. I'm glad you figured it out."

Beck spears each one of us with a wide-eyed look. "Except, I didn't fucking figure it out...Savy did." He lifts the papers and gives them a shake. "I found these papers on my bed along with this note."

He lifts the first page and starts to read from it.

"I hope I'm not overstepping. Please don't be mad. I just hate seeing you so down and despondent about your future. I know how much football meant to you and I just wanted to help you see it could still be your life if you wanted that."

"This girl...she's our fucking unicorn. I think I want to marry her."

I roll my eyes and scoff at that. Fucking dramatic enough?

"Flag on the play!" Jude yells. "Too late! I already called dibs on her being Mrs. Jude Dixon."

I've had enough of this shit. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You've barely known this chick for a few months and you're walking around with hearts and little birds floating around your psycho head. This is a little much even for you, Jude."

He throws his fork into the sink so hard that it bounces back out and almost stabs me. His eyes are a little wild when he barks back at me.

"No, what the fuck is wrong with you, Ash? Let me ask you, do you love the Butterfly?"

I rear back and shake my head. "I've never even spoken to her!"

"Alright, say you did, speak to her, I mean. Say you got to know who she is and it's all good. How hard would it be to tip right into loving her after being obsessed with her for the last two years?"

"What's that got to do with you all wanting to marry the bookworm?"

"Just answer the fucking question. Would you fall for her fast?"

I swipe a hand over my mouth and try and picture her but the only thing that comes to mind is big blue eyes, not behind a mask but

behind thick glasses instead. Fuck, fuck!

Jude hums a noise of satisfaction. “You can’t see it. Something else is getting in the way. Or is it someone else? Hey Ash, maybe if you look real hard and see clear enough, you’ll get every damn thing that you want.”

I snarl out, “Fuck you!” but he just laughs at me and turns to the others.

“I forgot to ask her. Does anyone know if she’s staying here for the holidays or going home to her parents?”

Beck’s expression turns down. “She doesn’t have parents.”

That has all of us gaping at him. He rubs his hand across his grim-set mouth before he continues.

“She told me about it the night she was upset by the storm. We talked for a while when I stayed with her after the nightmare. Her mom died giving birth to her and then her dad died in a car accident on her twelfth birthday. That’s why the blizzard triggered her so hard. She was trapped in the car with his body for over two days in a storm. All she’s got is a shitty stepmom and that bitch stepsister.”

Tate jams a hand through his hair with his heart all over his face. “Fuck, we have to convince her to stay here with us. She can’t go spend the holidays alone or worse, with them.”

Jude starts bouncing in place. “Alright, alright, alright! We need to be baby doll’s Santa daddies. We need a tree and all the shit that goes with it. I already have her Christmas present up in my dresser.” His face turns serious as he looks at each one of us. “She’s mine all the way to the end, but we’re a family so I’m good with her being all of yours too. Are you in?”

Beck is the first to chime in. “I want her more than I’ve ever wanted any woman so, yeah, I’m in.”

Tate starts nodding. “All I’ve done is fuck things up with her but I’ve been making progress to fix all of it so if she’ll have me, I’m in too.”

They all turn to look at me expectantly so I do the only thing I can right now. I grab the blender and dump it into the sink before walking away.

I lock myself in my room for the rest of the day and evening, too pissed off to deal with any of my brothers. The two bracelets are laid out side by side on my bed and I’ve been pacing back and forth

trying to sort my messed-up head. Both of those fucking women have me wound up in chains.

I know everything I need to know about my Butterfly. I know when she's having a bad day, I know when she's sad and angry. I can read every line of her body as it moves for me and she can read me just as well. She knows when I've had a day of shit because she spends more time focusing on me. Her body moves for me with a promise that everything will be okay. But I crave so much more from her. I want her to surrender to me and give me all of herself without bars between us.

And then there's Savy. She annoys the fuck out of me but only because I'm drawn to her. I know she wears a different kind of mask. She hides who she is inside, only allowing us to see glimpses behind the mask now and then. And every damn thing I've managed to see so far draws me closer to her. She's so fucking...pure. She doesn't play games that I can tell. She's just as real as she can be with us all and I want to rip her mask off to see all of her just as badly as I want to see behind Butterfly's mask.

I glance at my alarm clock and growl. I've lost the whole damn day on this deranged merry-go-round of eenie meenie miney mo. I hit the shower, change into jeans and a dark blue Henley, stack my leather on my wrist, and turn to the bed to look at the charm bracelets.

Time's up motherfucker...choose.

My hand swipes out to snag my choice and I stuff it into my front pocket. Fuck.

The club is crazy busy as it's the last night before most of these fucktards fly home for the holidays. I'm pissed that Tate, Beck, and Jude refused to come with me so I take shot after shot of whiskey at my empty table and watch my Butterfly with sad eyes. I pull the bracelet from my pocket and swirl it in a circle sending tiny charms flying and glinting under the flashing lights. I'm here to solidify the decision I've come to.

She's wearing red tonight. Red wings, red hair, red heels, a black leather mini with a red thong, and a cropped red see-through shirt with a black bra cupping her gorgeous tits underneath. I think she knows something's off with me because she keeps turning my way. Does she know what I decided? Does she know how much of a

struggle this is for me? How badly I want something real, something more?

Someone blocks my view of her but instead of walking on by, a woman climbs onto my lap and straddles me. Before I can dump her off on her ass, she grabs me by the head and moves right up against me until her lips are against my ear. I can see past her now and spot Butterfly freezing in a deep crouch with her fingers clutching the bars. Her electric blue eyes are locked on mine, full of hurt, and her perfect lips drop open. No! I can't let her think that. I can't hurt her that way so I dig into the woman's hips to push her off of my lap but before I can she whispers in my ear.

"My sister has been lying to all of you. She's been playing a game and turning you all into fools."

I hear her words but I'm so focused on my Butterfly that I dump Savy's cunt sister off of me to the floor and move to step over her so I can get to my girl's cage, leaving the bracelet full of book charms on the table.

Butterfly slams a hand against her bars and turns her back on me just as some drunk fucker reaches in between her bars and grabs her by the skirt and yanks.

Two strides are all I need to reach the cage and I plow my fist into his face for daring to touch what is still mine for a few more hours. My head turns back to her but she's looking over her shoulder down at her skirt so my eyes follow hers and that's when every fucking thing explodes inside of me in rage as I zero in on the pink and blue butterfly that I last saw on Savy's fucking hip.

SAVY

Something's wrong with Ash. I'm not surprised to see him here on the last night the club's open but I am surprised that he's here alone and pounding shot after shot. He seems...sad. Almost like he's resigned about something but his eyes never stop watching me so I do what I always do when he comes in here in a mood. I dance for him and him alone. With every move, turn, and thrust of my body, I tell him I see him and that he's not alone.

A blond girl steps between us but then she drops into his lap and his arms go around her and her lips drop to his. The pain is fierce and instant like a piece of me was just ripped away. My whole body locks in place as I stare at the betrayal. He's never once taken a girl on his lap like the others used to in all the time he's come to watch me. To see that it's her, my sister, the one who hates me the most, who has put me through so much, it devastates me.

I slam my hand against the bars and then spin away and clutch my arms around my waist like I can hold in the damage he's done. I move to leave the cage, this place, but some asshole reaches through the bars and grabs the hem of my skirt, jerking me back. The fabric pulls down exposing a good portion of my ass on that side and I half turn to snarl but the sound gets stuck in my throat when I see Ash lunge up to my cage and punch the guy right in the face. I look down my side to see if my skirt's ripped but land on his shocked gaze, staring right at my ass.

I twist more to see what he's looking at and spot my butterfly tattoo on full display.

Memories of that night in the kitchen slam through me. The night he first put hot, rough fingers on my skin as he traced over the tattoo and it has a choked whine of despair escaping me. I yank the skirt back up but it's too late. The damage has been done. He slams into the bars only inches away from me. The fury and rage I see in his jade eyes has a hard ball of sick forming in my belly. Ash's jaw is rock hard as he growls out between clenched teeth.

"The caterpillar was actually the Butterfly all along. Take off your mask and show me your wings, baby, 'cause I'm going to pluck... them...off."

I gape at him, unable to form words, and then do the only thing a butterfly can do when danger is near, I spin and fly away. I race across the catwalk as fast as I can in my stilettos on my way to the dressing room. I can't stop myself from glancing back once and what I see has me jarring to a stop as I clutch the safety railing. Ash is hauling my sister up to her feet and then dragging her toward the stairs to the exit.

No, no, no, no! Bad enough he found out this way about the Butterfly, I can't let them all find out my biggest secret from Vanessa. It needs to be me. I have to be the one to tell them! I slam into the dressing room, rip off my mask and wings and throw them at the makeup counter. No time to change, I need to beat them home before she starts spinning her carnage all over my life. I yank my jacket and purse from my locker leaving everything else and run to the back exit and slam through the door to the parking garage and stagger to a stop.

There's no fucking line of Ubers waiting for me. Of course, there isn't! It's still two hours from closing time. There's no reason for the cars to be here yet. I screech out my frustration and it echoes back at me as I scramble for my phone and order a car. The closest one is eight minutes out. I consider running around to the front of the club where I know there will be a line of cabs waiting but by the time I do that the closest Uber will be almost here so I just order it and pace. My heels ring out against the concrete and the echo seems amplified as I slowly lose my mind with anxiety and fear.

I was going to fucking tell them! I had already decided that I was going to do it tomorrow before the guys left for their game. I try and

shove my hand into my hair but synthetic strands cling to my fingers so I rip the wig off and toss it down and then pull all the pins from my hair to set it free. I feel like I'm going to puke the stress is so all-consuming. Instead, I scream out, "Fuck!" and it bounces back at me mockingly.

This wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to care about them this much. Walls. I had fucking walls for a reason!

That's when I realize that I lived behind my masks every damn day, in and out of the club. Not just because I was afraid to be the woman I thought I wanted to be but also because I've been terrified of having someone see me. Scared of someone loving me and then having that snatched away. Every person who ever loved me has left me. I made sure I was alone, broken, scared to live life so it can never happen again. And now it is going to happen again. They're going to hate me for lying to them, for all the secrets I've kept hidden and they are going to leave me too.

By the time the car shows up, I'm a mess but also resigned. This is my life. I don't know why I ever thought it could be different. I ignore the driver's attempts to chat with me until he gives up and I just focus on the snow that's started to fall as we turn onto my...their street. I ask the driver to wait, knowing they won't want me here for long.

The front door is wide open, almost as if Ash couldn't wait to get to the others to tell them what a fucking liar I am. I walk straight back to the kitchen, not bothering to remove my jacket or stilettos. They're all there lined up with their arms crossed as my sister lays out all my secrets with her back to me.

"...could buy and sell each one of you. Her name is literally on the stadium you play football in! She's been making fools out of all of you this whole time!"

Jude spots me first and his arms drop as he cocks his head at me. There's a faint look of hurt in his eyes but it's not the fury I see still raging in Ash's so maybe all isn't lost. That thought blows away like the snowflakes falling outside when Vanessa spins around and sees me. She takes in my outfit with wide eyes and starts laughing maliciously.

“There you are, sister! I was just letting your fuck boys in on your little scam. I thought it was only fair to tell them that you’re an heiress to billions and that you’ve been playing them all along.”

I try and shake my head as my mouth opens to deny that but she turns back to them and plows on with her lies.

“She’s not who she pretends to be! It’s all a game to her. Savy acts like this lonely little nerd to suck guys in so she can play her sick twisted games with them. She’s done this before with other guys. She even managed to convince Hunter that she was a virgin! She’s a slutty whore who will fuck anyone to satisfy her sick mind.”

“No! I’ve never...”

“She’s an embarrassment to our family. She has mental issues. That’s why we make her use her mother’s maiden name. There were even rumors that she had something to do with her dad’s accident!”

I suck in a shocked breath that she would stoop so low, hate me so much to say such a horrific lie.

“No, no, no, none of that...” I whisper.

“She’s a fucking fake! Everything about my sister is a fake and you are all fools for falling for it!” Vanessa screeches over me and that breaks Ash’s control. He roars and takes a menacing step toward me.

“Yes, she is! You are a fucking fake. Two fucking years you’ve been conning me! Everything that comes out of your mouth is a lie.”

I shake my head violently and tear my gaze from his to look to Tate but he’s just shaking his head with a look of disgust. Beck stares back at me with dead flat eyes like he’s daring me to try and deny what she’s saying but it’s Jude that rips what’s left of my heart from my chest.

He narrows his eyes at me with a dangerous look, cocks his head and says, “You been playing me, doll?”

And with his loss of faith in me, a switch flips and I go blank. The pain drains away, the shakes go away and all the feelings - the love I felt for them, because I did... I’ll admit it now... I loved them, disappears. My hands that I was holding up, as if I could stop this somehow, drop to my sides, and with one last look at each one of them I turn and walk to the door. Vanessa laughs loudly and then gets in her final shot to my back.

“Oh, Savannah, I almost forgot...Happy Fucking Birthday!”

That almost breaks me. This day...this goddam day. This day that I refuse to acknowledge. This day that I try and ignore every year. This is the day my mother died. This is the day my father died as I huddled my small body next to him in the cold. I stumble in my heels but press a hand to the wall to keep myself upright, sliding against it the rest of the way until I make it out the front door. The yelling and fighting happening behind me dims even as I hear Jude screaming my name but I keep going down the walk to the car waiting for me. Snowflakes land on my pale face and melt, trickling down my cheeks like the tears I refuse to let fall.

It's not until the car drops me back off at the underground parking garage at the club that I finally break. I drop to my knees on the unforgiving concrete as the storm of pain, anguish, and betrayal whirls around me, battering me, breaking me into pieces. When I can't take one second more, I open myself up to it all, suck it down and let it reform me.

Broken pieces fit together as something else, something new - and when I open my eyes...I am the storm. They want to believe Vanessa? Believe that I'm a fake, that I coned them, that I'm a player? She wants to play with me, fuck with me?

I stand up straight and square my shoulders and sniff back the tears. Okay, I can do that, I can play. I've been dancing to their tune long enough. Now it's their turn to dance, to burn, to mine. I'll wear a new mask for the world and this time no one will ever tear it off of me.

I swipe open my phone and tap to connect the call.

“Uncle Mark? I'm ready...ready to sign the papers. I'm twenty-one today and I've put it off long enough. Send the jet, please. I'll come to New York.”

To be continued in Burn Butterfly Burn

Please take a second to click a rating and if you can take a minute to review it would mean the world! Thanks, Reese

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Also By Reese Rivers

Unbreak Me

There's ninety-two dollars and fifty-seven cents hidden in a Ziploc bag in the lining of the couch along with a double stack of polaroid pictures that might buy me some time. Every person who has met my husband thinks he's the most charming man and would never believe what he does to me behind these four walls. And now, I see my five-year-old daughter's arm in a cast. Something I vow never to let happen again.

Ninety-two dollars and fifty-seven cents. It's not enough, but it will have to be.

This sweet and steamy, contemporary romance standalone has references to domestic abuse that may cause triggers. The main heroine finds love with all three men as they heal each other and become a family.

On the run, living in their car as winter sets in, Avery will do whatever it takes to hide from a monster and keep her daughter safe. One good deed on a snowy night, changes everything.

Three former military men and one German Shepherd with their own damage take the mother and daughter in. They fall hard for Avery and Chloe and will burn the world down to keep them safe.

Easton – carries the guilt of failure at losing half his unit in their last engagement. He sees too many parallels to his own childhood trauma with Avery and Chloe. His honor demands that he cares for and protects them. He fights his attraction to Avery with an iron will.

Zack – The charming playboy had his self-esteem gutted by the scars his body carries and the loss of his leg. One tiny girl has him changing his perspective on his injuries. Avery sees the man not the injury and the hole inside him slowly begins to fill with a love he never thought he'd have a chance at again.

Ryker – His sheer size and bulk intimidate and keep a safe distance between him and others. A man of few words,

his main forms of communication are long drawn-out growls and grunts. The tiny wisp of a girl cracks all his armor with her sweetness and her mother feels like a missing piece of his soul when she's in his arms. When he finds the man who hurt them, he will annihilate him in the most painful way possible.

Kanga (dog) – The lady makes his pack happy and her female pup reminds him that there's fun to be had, dimming the memories of bullets and bombs that took him and his pack out of the fight.

[Dying To Love](#)

662 – Days since the dead rose up

413 – Days since I've spoken to another living human

4 – Men who have climbed my fence looking for safety

1 – Last chance for Love

Kelsey survived the start of the apocalypse and thrived in the new world with help from her friends but now they're gone. Alone for over a year and mentally broken with high anxiety, she pushes through every day trying to find the will to keep going. Until three sweet, sexy men and one hot a**hole climbs her fence looking for sanctuary.

With her best friend, Tara, haunting her with outrageous antics, she needs to decide if she wants to keep dying a little bit day by day or if she can grab on to what these sexy men offer her and maybe find love.

Also, zombies make a few cameos.

This isn't a blood and gore zombie novel. It's full of comedy, overprotective men that just want to take care of her, and a ton of sexy steam that happens behind a set of double fences.

Enjoy this great standalone RH here:

[Dying to Love](#)

[Time After Time](#)

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Eden Kelly's life is in ruins. Traumatized and alone, she struggles to keep living every day until she stumbles through a magic mirror that sends her hurtling back in time to 1667.

Sebastian, Luca, Finn, and Cade are completely captivated by the woman that appears in front of them as they go into battle. Her modern ways, smart, sassy mouth and stunning beauty have them entranced and filled with desire. They recognize the damaged soul and anguish she tries to hide as they all have similar pain that they live with. It has them aching to tend, care and soothe her as she unknowingly does the same for them.

Can a modern woman find love and happiness with these men or will time end all things and suck her back to her desolate modern life?

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